

# **Nonviolence in Palestine – using IWPS-Palestine as an example.**

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*Unarmed Resistance:  
the transnational factor  
13-17 July 2006*



**Centre For Peace and Reconciliation Studies**

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## Nonviolence in Palestine – using IWPS-Palestine as an example.

In the face of the total military control that Israel has over Palestinians, and the level of violence and trauma that ordinary Palestinians face every day, it is not surprising that you can find three conflicting strands in Palestinian society.

There are the vast majority of Palestinians who have managed to survive so far by keeping their heads down. They try to keep out of any conflict, try to prevent their kids from throwing stones at the tanks that come through their towns and villages, just try to survive. They do not want to demonstrate or protest because they have seen too many demonstrators killed, injured or imprisoned without charge for literally years on end. Mohammed, a friend of mine in a Salfit village, when asked to support a neighbouring village in their nonviolent protests against the building of the Wall that would take their best farm-land away, said, ‘We are a small village, of only a few thousand people, we cannot afford to have anyone else killed’.

Then there are the very, very few, who engage in armed resistance, feeling they have to fight for their lives and who are involved in acts of terror and are not supportive of nonviolence and with whom nonviolent activists have an uneasy relationship.

Finally, there are also a few who are doing all they can to organise nonviolent resistance. And this is our space. This is where internationals can help and support and they do so. And the space expands and contracts depending on the quality and quantity of the nonviolent resistance and is heavily dependent on local characteristics.

The project I founded and have been associated with in Palestine is called the International Women’s Peace Service – Palestine, or IWPS, and there is a website at [www.iwps.info](http://www.iwps.info) where you can read our volunteers’ reports and surveys. It is now into its 4<sup>th</sup> year but as I am no longer able to enter Palestine, I am not involved intimately with it anymore. It was set up in order to:

Support nonviolent civil resistance by Palestinians and Israelis, and to create space for people to become more involved in resistance.

Monitor human rights abuses, provide accompaniment and intervene to non-violently prevent human rights abuses.

Alert the world community to human rights abuses in the Salfit Governorate and to effect change in world opinion about the occupation.

Provide an experiential model that can be used to create international women's peace teams in other areas.

After, 4 years we have learnt a few things:

**The violence and control by the Israeli military is such that it is difficult to organise and sustain nonviolent civil resistance, let alone support it.**

The IDF is expert at using tear gas, sound bombs, rubber bullets and live ammunition to break up demonstrations; they raid villages and towns and arrest anyone known to be organising the demonstrations; create closed military zones; they use administrative detentions to enable them to keep those arrested behind bars for years

without charge or trial and the use of torture in prisons is endemic. Internationals are merely deported – it is the Palestinians who bear the consequences of any form of resistance.

And the deportations and the many thousands of internationals being refused entry into Israel/Palestine is a deliberate policy of the Israeli authorities who understand how important international support for Palestinians is. It makes it difficult to provide any continuity and means that it is that much harder to build and sustain relationships or to gain a deep understanding and knowledge of local circumstances.

When the frequent infrastructural damage to buildings, computers, libraries, resources generally are factored in then you can begin to understand how difficult any kind of organised resistance is. And various lines have been crossed by the Israeli military that would have seemed impossible a few years ago – for instance the killing of internationals and now the serious injury of Jewish Israelis.

**Poverty.**

The Israeli stranglehold on the Palestinian economy has turned a relatively self-sufficient community into a malnourished, dependent on food-aid and desperately poor community. People's energies are sapped by the struggle to survive and feed their families. Internationals are inundated with requests for money and resources for development and the vital need for money skews and sours relationships and encourages in-fighting, corruption and fraud as well as making it much more difficult for energy for nonviolent resistance.

**There is little or no recourse to a fair legal system.**

The Palestinians know this and thus mostly do not even bother to try to get justice. Those internationals who try to get the Israeli legal system to deal with crimes against them or against Palestinians face intimidation, high legal costs and even lack of access into the country to get to the court. When I managed, with the help of the British Consulate, to get a well-known violent settler from Hebron into court for assaulting me and destroying my camera that held film of his teenage followers attacking an old Palestinian man who later died of his wounds, I was denied entry into Israel for the Court Case where I was appearing as a witness. I was imprisoned and deported after the settler pleaded guilty to the trivial crime of destroying my camera. He was never questioned about why he had destroyed the evidence of a murder...When Palestinians are shot and wounded, or their property destroyed, or their water sources poisoned or any number of crimes committed against them, there is little recourse to the legal system which is stacked against them. IWPS has tried on several cases to take evidence in the form of photos and signed witness statements to the Israeli police but none of their cases have been prosecuted through the courts, even when Israeli human rights groups have helped.

**Factionalisation and difficulties in uniting in a national nonviolent movement.**

Imprisonment of the Palestinian population by the use of frequent curfews, road blocks, imprisonment and now the Wall has led to huge tensions within the villages and towns. There is much internal fighting and often-violent confrontations between different clans and different political factions. Some villages have a history of killing suspected collaborators. Although there is a great experience and wealth of examples of nonviolent resistance by Palestinians, there have been no effective calls for a national nonviolent struggle and little national leadership. In some extraordinary

cases, there has emerged good **local** leadership – for example Abu Ahmad of Budrus, a village in the Ramallah District, managed to unite families and different factions in the Budrus Popular Committee against the Apartheid Wall, and they held many successful demonstrations and managed to stop the work on the Wall from proceeding on quite a few occasions. Internationals and Israelis helped by providing a presence and getting press coverage but could do little to prevent the IDF shootings nor to prevent the IDF entering the village at will to arrest Abu Ahmad and other leaders. And the Wall, though delayed, has been built.

Cultural insensitivities, lack of Arabic speakers, and tendency to interfere in local politics by Internationals are all problems that have emerged and that have added to tensions rather than relieving them. One well-known Palestinian Christian who leads a Palestinian nonviolence resistance movement once told me that he valued the work and solidarity presence of internationals but wished they would only come for a few months at a time and then go home. The ones that stayed longer began to think they understood everything and started to interfere in local politics making things much worse. Groups like IWPS and ISM may like to think that they are Palestinian led but they do often tend to initiate nonviolence campaigns and they have their own agendas. A valid question that needs to be asked but is very hard to answer is whether the international and/or Israeli peace movement presence actually prevents the emergence of a vital nonviolent resistance or whether in fact it has helped it?

For nonviolence to work I believe that there needs to be:

**A clear exposure of the crimes being committed by Israel.**

The reality of the Occupation, numbers killed and wounded, extent of property destruction and human rights abuses, is continually distorted by government officials (especially in the US and UK) and by the media. The added complication of European guilt over the holocaust and the Israeli use of the anti-Semitism label make people scared to raise their voices over Israeli crimes. The ‘organised’ harassment of anyone who criticises Israel as being anti-Semitic is very hard to deal with. I wrote an article for a local free magazine in Aylsham, a small rural town in East Anglia. I explained in graphic terms what it would look like in Aylsham if all the things I had seen in Palestine were taking place locally. I described where the tanks would be, where the settlements, where the road blocks were and how local inhabitants would not be able to get to the hospitals, schools or visit people living in other villages and towns, how the crops from their farmland would be left to rot through delays at the military blocks, how many people would be arrested and imprisoned without trial. The small magazine was inundated with hundreds of letters from angry Jewish people who accused the magazine and me of anti-Semitism and created such a furore that the editor decided he would never again print anything ‘political’. We need to be strong to resist this pressure and we need to be especially careful of our language so it is not rationally capable of being interpreted as anti-Jewish but anti-certain Israeli state policies and actions. We must not be scared of writing and publishing the truth as we see it even if we will be attacked in these ways. But unfortunately it does have an effect and does diminish the number of reports.

There also needs to be some kind of powerful outside international moral authority that can be appealed to and that will then pressure the Israelis to stop their war crimes

and human rights abuses, their blatant ethnic cleansing and their theft and colonisation of Palestinian land and water resources. However, the major funder/backer of Israel is the USA and they have a strong geo-political reason for backing Israel. Even with many Jewish people speaking out against the cruel and illegal occupation there is little pressure on Israel. Unfortunately all the major powerful states, those that could have some influence over Israel, are committing their own war crimes in their various areas of strategic interest...thus a major element in the workings of nonviolence is missing...

There also needs to be international support for the nonviolence movement. This is happening – when IWPS started work in 2002 we were the only international solidarity and nonviolence NGO based in a rural Palestinian village and hardly anyone wrote about or knew what life was like there. We now have a series of village profiles and a record of the kinds of human rights visited upon the people. Most internationals were based in the more secular towns and only stayed in the villages for short periods of time. Our presence was important in helping provide sustained support and space for nonviolence, in encouraging women's involvement in the nonviolent resistance and in helping to set up some of the anti-wall protest camps that helped in bringing the Israeli and Palestinian movements together. However, there is very little international coverage of the brave nonviolent resistance by thousands of Palestinians as they try to resist the building of the Wall and the imprisonment of their families. Nor is there coverage of the brave Israeli peace movement actions.

Nonviolence also needs to exploit the internal divisions in the Occupying Nation i.e. Israel. This is happening with a growing Israeli peace movement including the Refuseniks, Gush Shalom, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and the Anarchists. Nevertheless there is still too small a percentage of Israeli society that actually knows, understands or cares about the reality of life in the Occupied Territories and they are often too scared to even try to find out. A good example of Israeli nonviolence that is having an impact is Machsom Watch – an Israeli based organisation that organises monitors and interveners at some of the major checkpoints. IWPS used to do quite a bit of checkpoint monitoring but can now leave this work to the Israeli group. The monitoring provides a good learning experience for Israelis who can then use this understanding back inside Israel to break down the ignorance and encourage empathy.

#### **So what is our role in Palestine and Israel?**

By 'our' I mean the international peace and nonviolence movement. Maybe our most important role is witnessing and monitoring and the writing and distribution of reports, articles and presentations to counteract the US/UK media distortion. To help more internationals to experience and see for themselves what is going on and to encourage them to write and protest about it when they get home so that the mainstream view of the Israelis as being the victims of terrorism is countered by accurate reports of the state terrorism of the Occupation. Providing this direct experience is enabling more and more people to feel empowered about confronting the lies and distortions and to lobby and pressure their foreign offices and decision makers when they get home. For instance, a group of returned IWPS volunteers are now engaged in regular lobbying of the UK Foreign Office and in letter writing to the Press and their MPs, as well as direct action at the Israeli Embassy and other places.

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The level of knowledge in the UK, Europe and in the USA is much higher than even 4 years ago and to some extent this is because of the quantity of volunteers who have gone over to Palestine and on their return have spoken at small local meetings.

Another under-estimated role for Internationals is to empathise and listen – just being there and witnessing and hearing, makes Palestinians feel less alone and less cut-off from the outside world and brings hope. Similar sharing with Israeli activists also lessens their sense of isolation and supports them in their vital work.

Then there is a role in supporting nonviolent resistance, being a calm and steady presence, helping out with international media contacts, and discussing ideas and strategies, bringing a wealth of experience of struggles from all over the world. The women that IWPS brought over were from South Africa, The Philippines, Columbia and India. These provided some useful insights for the Palestinian women in Salfit.

And finally, there was and maybe still is, a role for enabling a safe space for the Israeli/Palestinian dialogue/co-operation. Certainly when we first arrived in Salfit 5 years ago there were few Israelis who felt able to go into the villages alone. We helped provide safe spaces where the two sides could meet more easily and now we are more usually redundant.