



### **Nonviolence: The Only Rational Choice**

Is the road map going to get us anywhere? Can we trust in anyone involved in this process? Can we overcome the find a way out towards a more livable future? What kind of a future do we want and what are we going to get?

At the time of writing (mid-June) the answers to these questions are impossible to fathom, although the outlook remains bleak, but whatever turns out for the time being, the fact remains that there cannot ever be a military solution to the conflict. The military imbalance is overwhelmingly in favour of Israel, but it has nevertheless proved unable to stop Palestinian resistance. Palestinians can never win militarily against such odds; all that can happen is that each side will continue indefinitely ratcheting up the pain and the violence (including the institutional violence), multiplying the evil and adding to the darkness, sucking more and more people into the vortex of despair.

The only way to break the cycle of violence is through active and highly strategic and public nonviolence. We are now at a pivotal juncture, which can either be a way towards a real and ultimately self-sustainable peace, or a condemnation to many more years of waves of increasing frustration, violence and fear, which will be even harder to

undo. The terrible toll on Palestinians, adds up to one essential thing; that for the vast majority of Palestinians, life has become unliveable, and despair dominates. The frustration and anger can be channelled into a national movement for non-violence and peace, or they can be left to explode with more and more expressions of despair in outbursts of random violence.

Every single Palestinian is affected every day by the current harsh measures of the Israeli occupation, by the institutional or the military violence. The continuing tension and pressure are unbearable. The official casualty figures show only the numbers killed or wounded by Israeli soldiers and settlers, but they don't show all the people who have simply fallen ill and died from sheer misery and lack of hope. Such an abnormal life fraught with difficulties and dangers has nevertheless become normal. There is an increasing need for a way out of this terrible situation and a return to a life where it is possible to make plans for the future, to send one's children to school without fear and to live like normal human beings, without humiliation or danger lurking everywhere.

This life is only possible in a state of peace, and there is a need for preparing the ground for peace at all levels. Without peace, the current situation is only going to get worse, as it undoubtedly can. Peace is not one-dimensional, it is a fabric that need to be tightly woven and it is essential to weave it well, to give depth and breadth to the work which is going on at the political level to make sure it is a tough fabric that will hold together even when governments run into difficulties; this means working for a self-sustainable peace, which completely ends every form of Israeli control over all Palestinian lives and lands occupied in 1967; a peace that provides security, space and a viable

future for both peoples.

A viable future essentially linked with nonviolence. One broad definition of violence, which covers its many manifestations, is "the cutting off of potential" (whether in the physical, emotional, or psychological sense. In its most extreme form it takes away the potential for life; in the form of humiliation it warps or stunts emotional growth, destroying the emotional completeness/well-being of the person. If violence destroys potential, it also therefore destroys the future. Nonviolence is the opposite of violence, in the most positive sense of the word. Nonviolence is a form of strength and dignity and standing up for one's rights; it is reasserting one's potential and capacities for rational choices in the face of all the obstacles. It is also hanging onto one's humanity and onto the humanity of one's enemy across all conflicts and boundaries. A solution brought about through nonviolence, will usher in a future which allows for the development of potential.

In fact most Palestinians practice forms of active non-violence every day, simply by managing to survive, or go to work in spite of the innumerable obstacles and dangers. The steadfastness throughout the long years of occupation, the many efforts to disengage from the tentacles of the Israeli system during the first intifada, the resilience and continued humanity in the current political, economic and military nightmare; all of these are constant examples of Palestinian nonviolence. This Week in Palestine is a good example of active nonviolence, filled as it is with news about the positive goings on all over the country; one of the most extraordinary was a report about a rowing team that recently began in Gaza; the caption saying "proudly printed in Palestine" is a fine assertion of active nonviolence in the face of those who would crush everything

Palestinian and deny every Palestinian the pleasure of being proud or of being creative or courageous. Now after two and a half years of fighting, there is a serious degeneration into terrible dehumanisation and demonization. Wars nowadays are different from the past, as we see all too often, they tend to be against society and to target civilians specifically. Occupation is even worse than war, in so far as the occupied population are not only adversaries, but also adversaries in the control of their enemy. All levels of society are affected and all therefore are demonized, the women and children are all the enemy, too. Included in this war against society is the media war, and even the non-violence war. But again, just as there are new wars, so there are new mechanisms for peace, and one of these that has been acknowledged as crucial in shaping peace movements after the end of the Cold War has been the informed solidarity of civil society- working with universal values, such as defence for human rights as the basis for the politics of solidarity; in other words, working with the media and with nonviolence.

If Israelis would allow themselves to see Palestinians as human beings they would find it much harder to do the things they do, preventing sick people from medical care, shooting at children, bombing and bulldozing houses full of people etc. So dehumanization is a serious problem, but there is also a fundamental difference in the way most Palestinians and Israelis relate to each other by now – there tends to be far more equality; a recognition that was not very much there during the peace process that we are all in a mess together and we have a joint responsibility to find a way out of it. There is also a growing commitment on the part of some courageous Israelis to really take risks for peace, such as by refusing their military service (which not only send them to

prison but blacklists them for life) and risking army roadblocks to take food or provide medical treatment that Palestinians are unable to do because of travel restrictions. They are prepared to suffer to make a difference.

There is in fact a shared need to return to a liveable life, the Israelis also have their economic and social problems and they live with fear, even under the domination of fear; fear of Palestinians as potential terrorists and destroyers of the state of Israel. Fear is a terrible master, which deafens people to reason and allows for any amount of acts of violence and cruelty in the name of protection from fear. The road map's emphasis on security is ample evidence of this as an overriding concern of Israelis. If there is to be a sustainable peace it is essential to address the fear of the Israeli people; it is essential to break the (completely inaccurate and unfair) stereotype of the Palestinian as a terrorist and destroyer of Israel and to work to give the Israeli public a human perspective again regarding Palestinians. This is part of the media war and the non-violence war.

For a peace process to work between Israelis and Palestinians, it has to work at the popular level and therefore it is not enough to call for security via the governments; Israeli fears need to be dealt with at the popular level as do the Palestinian sufferings and fears. Palestinians can do this by working with non-violence. The man who is pinning down someone who he is afraid will attack him the minute he lets go is in as difficult a position as the man he is pinning down; both are locked into their positions. But the man on top, who has force on his side is locked into his position by fear only – the man underneath is locked in by force and fear. Paradoxically it is the man underneath who can unlock them; as he can release the man on top from his fear;

if he also tries to use force he will simply increase the fear and make him pin down even harder; if he shows that he will not use force, then the man on top can let go without fear and they can start to solve their problem rationally.

Polls show encouraging numbers of Israelis who favour peace along the lines of the 1967 borders. Polls taken in August and November of 2002 show that the basic problem by now in relation to peace process is lack of trust (e. g. 72% of each side believing major problem is lack of trust; other figures from polls on non-violence...) If civil society can strengthen non-violence among Palestinians, then maybe the Israeli public will start to be able to hear them; maybe they will start to be able to overcome their fear enough to understand that with the end of occupation there would be a real peace that would answer their needs on security and community.

There needs to be a multifaceted approach to break the mindset of mistrust, fear and violence; there also needs to be active engagement by the international community, both the inter-governmental and the NGOs to make the road map and the way to peace succeed by allowing the voices of Palestinian non-violence to be heard even when they are in danger of being drowned by the rejectionists, both in the government and outside; to raise an outcry at the attacks on ISM activities and others coming with their courage and their humanity to aid and protect Palestinians.

Once again this is a crucial time; the onus is on Palestinian civil society to work to strengthen and develop non-violent approaches to assuage Israeli fears and thereby end the cycle of violence; the onus is then on the Israeli civil society to respond to this opportunity and humanity on the part of their enemies, and to understand that there is no other way;

militarism doesn't work; Sparta did not survive, it is Athens which is now the capital of Greece.

Finally the onus is on the international community to give active and concrete support to help Palestinians and especially to open the ears of the world to the humanity of the Palestinian people. This is a crucial time, and if we do not work now with this opportunity for peace, the angry and excluded will only make themselves heard in their desperation in ways that will perpetuate and exacerbate the violence.