

Resistance in Israel  
A Study of Solidarity Groups and Nonviolent Resistance to Israel's Occupation

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This study examines aspects of nonviolent resistance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly those involving Israelis and internationals, to examine the dynamics at work and the potential benefits of this involvement. Our findings have been sorted into three areas; methods, interactions and ideals/solutions. First, it would appear that the potential utility of international involvement lies both in the relative safety that their presence provides for Palestinians, and the awareness that is raised across the world as a result of their involvement. Second, it seems that relationships between Palestinian and other activists are generally good, with some tensions due to cultural insensitivities, and that the main tensions come between activists and society more broadly. Third, we observed that, whilst some activist groups propose a two-state solution, some others refused to articulate a solution, believing that such positions lie beyond their remit as an organisation which exists to support Palestinians.

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## Resistance in Israel

### A Study of Solidarity Groups and Nonviolent Resistance to Israel's Occupation

#### Introduction

The conventional image of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of inexorable violence. The popular assumption that the Palestinian community is incapable of moving beyond terrorism and stubborn posturing pervades mainstream discourse, epitomised by Abba Eban's famous claim that Yasser Arafat 'never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity' (commonly extended to refer to the Palestinians as a collective). Naturally, such black and white perspectives obscure the complex realities of on-the-ground situations. This study examines an increasingly relevant and influential reality of the Israeli occupation, that of Israeli and international nonviolent solidarity resistance.

There are a number of groups engaging in nonviolent resistance in the Occupied Territories (hereafter OT); run by Palestinians, such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and Israelis, such as Gush Shalom and Anarchists Against the Wall (AATW). Their methods, ideals and mutual interactions are varied and sporadic; nonetheless they appear to have some level of impact on the situation in the OT. Significantly, in late 2007 the Israeli Supreme Court ordered that the route of the West Bank Wall<sup>1</sup> be redrawn to avoid appropriating too much of the land around Bil'in, a small village East of Ramallah.<sup>2</sup> Bil'in has held weekly demonstrations against the pathway of the Wall over the past few years, often involving ISM, Gush Shalom, AATW and other similar groups. Whilst the Supreme Court claimed that the decision to redraw the map was motivated by the humanitarian concerns of the villagers, this does not appear to single it

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1 There is considerable debate on the issue of definition here. Many in Israel call the wall a 'fence', whilst supporters of the Palestinians often use the term 'apartheid wall'. We have employed the term 'wall', recommended by the International Court of Justice, in a possibly vain attempt to employ an objective definition. International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, Advisory Opinion (The Hague, July 9, 2004).

2 Isabel Kershner, "Israel Court Orders Separation Barrier Rerouted," *New York Times*, September 5, 2007.

out from the many other villages and communities which will lose considerable portions of their land to the Wall.<sup>3</sup> We thus move with the reasonable assumption that the weekly nonviolent action, which has occurred with more regularity, more involvement and more publicity than at many other villages, was a significant factor in the Court's decision, and that the action which motivated it, and which has had impacts in other areas, is worthy of considerable attention.

The issue has of course not been ignored in the past, and a large and useful amount of literature exists. *Live from Palestine*, Stohlman and Aladin's collection of testimonies from participants, gives a valuable (if now slightly dated) overview of the groups and emotions involved in the struggle, and *The New Intifada*, edited by Roane Carey, contains some useful oversights (particularly Andoni's comparison of the First and Second Intifadas).<sup>4</sup> We feel, however, that there has been an absence of academic insight into the motivations and utility of the nonviolent action of recent times. Certainly there has been nothing to rival Mary King's seminal work on the First Intifada.<sup>5</sup> There appears to be a need for detached study free from the constraints of potentially nonreflective membership which, in our experience as activists, can exist within a movement. Alongside the importance of the nonviolent movements, and the need for detached study, our motivation for research comes from our own experience and identity as activists, both in supporting the Palestinian cause and in the wider field of resistance against capitalism and state-power. Academic research forms an important part of the toolkit of contemporary activism, which, in our experience, tends to be more intellectual and focussed than is assumed in mainstream

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3 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *The Humanitarian Impact of the West Bank Barrier on Palestinian Communities* (Jerusalem: United Nations, July 30, 2007). In an interview with the Washington Post, the official who set the route of the Barrier said that he had lost only three of the legal challenges to the path, out of 120 complaints. Scott Wilson, "Touring Israel's Barrier With Its Main Designer," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2007.

4 *Live from Palestine: International and Palestinian Direct Action Against the Israeli Occupation*, ed. Nancy Stohlman and Laurieann Aladin (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2003). *The New Intifada: Resisting Israel's Apartheid*, edited by Roane Carey. London: Verso, 2001.

5 King, Mary Elizabeth. *A Quiet Revolution, The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance*. New York: Nation Books. 2007.

wisdom. Our motivations are therefore threefold: to study the movement and its importance within the broader situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to explore the possibilities for academic research on the situation, and to add to the toolkit of activists everywhere seeking to understand their position and the experiences of others like them.

### Methodology

Our methodology is best characterised through the tension between our own (detached) experience of nonviolent Palestinian activism, including ISM training sessions and personal contact with activists, Palestinians and Israelis, and the formal interviews we undertook specifically to further this research. Drawing on the former is inevitable and useful, as it gives context and an underlying understanding of the issues. However, we have sought to minimize our use of such experience where ethical concerns, particularly concerning lack of informed consent, may compromise those with whom we have worked. Where the engagement has been in the public domain (such as a public talk by AATW and ISM volunteers organised by Chris in 2007) we have been more liberal, although not at the expense of revealing personal information. When interviewing subjects, we have explained the purpose of our research, and have sought and gained express consent to publish any findings. The position of nonviolent resistance in the OT is a sensitive one, particularly within Israel, and even more particularly at Ben Gurion International airport, where suspected activists are routinely detained and deported. We have thus taken care to ensure that any details which may identify individuals involved are absent, unless the information is publicly available.

We chose to conduct interviews for two broad reasons. The first was the difficulties we encountered in attracting research subjects. We initially contacted a large number of groups in Israel and Palestine, including groups which support young Israelis planning to

engage in draft resistance, groups which publish reports used extensively by activists, including Peace Now and B'Tselem (the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), and Israeli Arab activist groups. Whilst a number responded with some interest, most did not. Some, such as B'Tselem, declined to be involved out of a desire to keep activism and advocacy separate. Others directed us to personal testimonies that they have published online, which will be drawn on later. We thus concluded that a small number of in-depth interviews was preferable to a broader questionnaire-style study which may not attract sufficient responses. We also felt that, in a study of the aims, methods and dynamics of the resistance, deeper understandings from a few subjects may yield more complex and insightful (if less universal) results. It enabled interviewees to explore tangents, and to expound upon their own areas of interest and expertise. Whilst the response rate was low, those who responded were generally very enthusiastic, and so this approach seemed appropriate. Nonetheless, it is important in considering the results to allow for the possibilities that many other positions exist within the diverse subculture of nonviolent activists.

The research was planned in the Spring of 2008, initially with plans to travel to Israel and to make a documentary on the subject. Understandable ethical concerns and our relative inexperience as researchers rendered such a project unfeasible at the present time. Instead, we decided to conduct the research from the UK, with face-to-face interviews where possible and e-mail interviews where not. The bulk of the data collection was carried out during the Summer (although, as indicated above, this is better characterised as a more formal and focussed period of our long term engagement with the issues discussed).

## Results

Our findings are categorised into three principal areas; methods, interactions and ideals/solutions.

– Methods

A recurring theme throughout our inquiries was the notion that nonviolent resistance, undertaken on the behalf of the Palestinians, should occur at the behest of the Palestinians. ISM and AATW volunteers have stressed that they are *participating* in Palestinian nonviolent actions, and warned against the common assumption that they are going to 'teach' the Palestinians about such methods. The locus of perceived utility of international and Israeli participation appears to be their relative immunity in situations where Palestinians would be in mortal danger. One 'ISMer' noted that "it is a fact, often documented in the Israeli media, that the racist standard of the Israeli army means that there are different open-fire regulations against Palestinian demonstrations when there are Israeli or internationals present as opposed to when they are not." This position underpins the ISM's principal reasons for joining in Palestinian demonstrations (such as at Bil'in), accompanying children to school in Hebron (where settler violence against Palestinians is common), accompanying ambulances through checkpoints, and helping farmers during the Olive harvest. In *Live from Palestine*, Huwaida Arraf, one of the founders of the ISM, notes that this was one of the original motives in setting up the group.<sup>6</sup> The task here is not simply to resist as internationals and Israelis, but to enable the Palestinians themselves to resist without risking their lives. Simon Assaf, a Lebanese journalist who we interviewed in London, situated this within a cultural spectrum which characterises much of Arab nonviolent resistance, that of 'steadfastness'.

Methods sometimes take on a more active flavour; cutting the fence (where it is fence and

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6 Huwaida Arraf and Adam Shapiro, "The Uprising for Freedom is an International Struggle," in *Live from Palestine*, ed. Stohlman and Aladin, p.67.

not wall) is particularly popular, partly because it physically enables Palestinians to access more of their land and is thus of tangible benefit. These actions are usually linked to the AATW, although ISMers have occasionally mentioned their involvement. 'Margaret', who directed us to her reports on the Glasgow Palestinian Human Rights Campaign website, describes one incident of fence cutting:

*We went to a small village outside Bethlehem where there is a fence erected and the villagers can only gain access through a gate which the Israeli Army have control of. The action was to cut the fence.*

*We sneaked along to a part of the fence where we attacked it with wire cutters and also a cutting machine, which of course made a fair bit of noise. We managed to dismantle the fence and cause quite a bit of damage. SORRY MUM. This fence is illegal and should never have been put in place.*

*We must have worked for approx three quarters of an hour, when all of a sudden the Border Police arrived. They ran over to us and shouted for us to stop. We kept cutting and the next thing I knew was that I was hit really hard with a rifle butt on my left side, the next day I still have pain on that side.*

*We were dragged to the army jeep and taken to a Police Station. Luckily enough I gave my passport to one of the Israeli activists and I refused to give my name. The Police can only detain you for 24 hours and either press charges or let you go. I was lucky enough to be let go, although they took my picture. I am afraid 3 Israeli activists were still in jail when I was let out.<sup>7</sup>*

Another fundamental aspect of the resistance provided by internationals and Israelis is the use of the media. Margaret sums up the ethos, claiming that “the Palestinians have told me that the only answer they see is for more Internationals to come over here and witness and talk about it.”<sup>8</sup> The ISM has a dedicated media office, which aims to publicise the situation in the OT, as well as the actions of its members. It also provides video evidence and testimonies to mainstream groups. One member told us that the video released to the world by B'Tselem, which showed an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldier shooting a detained prisoner in the foot, and which received extensive mainstream coverage, was in

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7 Margaret, “Israeli Anarchists Carried out an Action,” Glasgow Palestine Human Rights Campaign Website, <http://www.gphrc.org/Israeli%20Anarchists%20carried%20out%20an%20action.html> (accessed October 26, 2008).

8 *Ibid.*

fact discovered and distributed by the ISM.<sup>9</sup> The same member philosophically acknowledged that had the ISM attempted to break the story by itself, it would probably never have had the impact that it did; “in the eyes of the international media that fact that it came via B’Tselem probably made them more likely to air it.”

The work of publicising activism and bearing witness is not confined to the OT. Gush Shalom's founder Uri Avnery publishes regular articles within Israel, and Peace Now, an activist-cum-advocacy group, produce influential reports on the expansion of settlements.<sup>10</sup> In addition, every single ISMer we have talked to has emphasised that the work of ISM does not stop in the OT. Giving talks, writing articles, blogging, training new volunteers and providing support for returned volunteers is all considered to be integral to the organisation and it's project.

Our research suggested two broad themes in the methods of nonviolent resistance against the Israeli occupation. Firstly, the increased safety created by international and Israeli presence enables safer protests by the Palestinians, although some international and Israeli activists have been more directly involved in actions such as fence-cutting. Secondly, activism focuses on increasing awareness of the situation in the OT. This can happen simply to due their presence, but also is done more actively by returning ISM participants.

#### – Interactions

Very little work has been done towards examining the interactions between the different resistance groups, and examining their relationships with wider society. The small scale of

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9 James Orr, “Israeli Soldiers Charged Over Shooting of Palestinian Prisoner,” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/07/israelandthepalestinians.middleeast> (accessed October 26, 2008).

10 Peace Now, “Settlements,” <http://www.peacenow.org.il/site/en/peace.asp?pi=51> (accessed October 26, 2008).

our project, and the low response rate, made a full exploration difficult, however some interesting dynamics became apparent.

One such dynamic has been the almost universal respect for the AATW amongst activists, of significant interest to us in our own capacity as Anarchists. Margaret notes that “they have the same passion for a Free Palestine as the Palestinians themselves have” and remarks that they “are some of the bravest people I have met here in Palestine”. An ISMer explains that they “are in it for the long haul, speak excellent Arabic and have many Palestinian friends in the West Bank,” adding that “this has to be viewed in the context of a wider Israeli society in which visiting Palestinians in the West Bank (when not acting as a soldier or settler) is tantamount to treason.” This is a markedly different perception of the group to that manifested in Israeli society. When asked how the group are received in their country, one AATW member replied simply “ignorance or aggression”. Whilst the AATW are often present at the same demonstrations and actions as internationals, the working relationship with the other groups appears to be limited. Several people we talked to remarked that the group often trades on the 'Jewish' nature of the group and its resistance. Israel is founded upon, and derives its legitimacy from, the need to provide a homeland and a safe space for the Jewish people. The tensions at play here were demonstrated in 2003, when Gil Na'amati, a member of AATW, was shot in the leg, triggering significant mainstream debate in Israel about the legitimacy of the security structures in place in Israel.<sup>11</sup>

When asked about how the Palestinians relate to the international and Israeli activists, most reply that the relationship is positive. The internationals are invited to

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11 Margot Dudkevitch, Gil Hoffman and Nina Gilbert, “IDF Probes Shooting of Fence Protesters,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 28, 2003. High profile leaders such as Shimon Peres, then Labour Party leader, expressed their shock at the incident; former minister Yossi Beilin, went so far as to say that the soldier who shot Na'amati should have refused his commander's orders.

demonstrations, and many Palestinians are keen to tell their stories and to help educate the wider world about the situation on the ground. In his comic-book style recollection of his times in the OT, Joe Sacco recounts how eager people were to recount their experiences,<sup>12</sup> and ISMers have often told us that being 'a listening ear' is a fundamental part of their work. There do appear to have been some tensions in the past, particularly concerning cultural differences. 'Immodest' clothing in culturally sensitive areas such as refugee camps and Hebron has caused concern, although the ISM provides extensive training both before volunteers travel out, and once they arrive, to avoid these problems. Where they find it harder to control such situations is when 'adventure tourists' might arrive and join in demonstrations without the training, or when non-ISMers are seen as ISMers and the movement judged accordingly.

Reaction to the ISM is as mixed as one might expect. Whilst they are perceived within the UK activist scene with respect and admiration (our talk last year attracted over 100 people with relatively little advertising), they are generally ignored in the media, and generate some level of anger from their opponents (as the website <http://www.stoptheism.com> makes clear).

As may be expected, the interactions between Palestinian's and non-Palestinian's have both strengths and challenges. Relationships between different activists seem generally positive, although there have been problems when the behaviour of international activists has been culturally insensitive. The main areas of tension would seem to come between activists and wider society, as can be seen by the Israeli response to AATW.

– Ideals/Solutions

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<sup>12</sup> Joe Sacco, *Palestine*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2000.

Most groups studiously avoid articulating a 'solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly those such as ISM and AATW who explicitly work at the behest of the Palestinians. "ISM is against the Israeli occupation, period." This does not mean that individuals will not have their own opinions about how the conflict could and should be resolved, simply that the movement has no collective position. The focus is on enabling the Palestinians to move forward in the way they see fit. Other groups, such as Gush Shalom and Peace Now, have an explicitly two-state direction. The Post-Zionist ideology of Peace Now informs their focus on the illegal settlements and their expansion, and may explain how they are able to impact upon mainstream Israeli discourse in a way the AATW are not.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as ideals are concerned, the prevailing opinion amongst those we have engaged with has been that nonviolence, being Palestinian-led, and working collectively, are central. Beyond this, the groups are composed of pacifists, anarchists, socialists, students, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and many more. Some groups within Israel, such as the Physicians for Human Rights in Israel, are defined by their professional interests, whilst others, such as Rabbis for Human Rights, are motivated by religious concerns. The message appears to be that the groups are hugely diverse in their general character, although we are not in a position to make any claims as to the diversity of the specific memberships beyond our own experience.

Although groups do tend to focus on the importance of Palestinian ideas and enablement there is diversity in discourse around solutions. Some groups go no further than opposing the occupation and supporting the Palestinians, whereas some advocate a two-state solution. An interesting area for further study may be the impact that a two-state proposal

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that the AATW would have any interest in impacting on the mainstream discourse in this manner.

has on affecting mainstream Israeli discourse.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the ways that international and Israeli activists can and do work with Palestinians effectively. There appears to be a dual purpose; the enabling of safer Palestinian resistance and the increasing of awareness of the situation in the rest of the world. Cases like Bil'in suggest that the activism is having some effect, although further study is needed to determine how much. Such research could provide significant assistance to the movement, both in terms of helping to encourage more international activists to become involved, and in terms of clarifying the utility of the various tactics and strategies at play. Due to the nature of this project, we have been unable to gather all the information that we may have desired. Whilst the above discussions exhibit some of the important lines of activism and protest currently ongoing, it falls far short of the broad study necessary to fully understand the situation. Even within the small sample to which we had access, there were important tensions and relationships – the complexity of the issue can only increase when additional groups and factors are considered. An understanding of this complexity is vitally important if the aim of researchers is to move beyond the simplistic representations of Israeli and Palestinian activism. We see this project as an initial exploration into the issues surrounding nonviolent activism in Palestine. Hopefully, it has highlighted the existence of a positive, nonviolent solidarity movement, which may in the future evolve into a effective and successful force for the change desired by so many.

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