

ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

By David Hartsough 3/8/10

When people think of Palestine and Israel, they often picture Palestinians as suicide bombers and terrorists while the Israeli military are seen as bombing whole neighborhoods in Palestine. The violence and counter-violence and endless war has created a hopelessness about any peaceful future for the Holy Land.

However, during a month-long stay in Palestine and Israel recently, **I found something else. I found something very positive and hopeful and perhaps the key to a peaceful resolution of this tragic conflict -- and a possible path toward a peaceful future for both peoples.**

I found that violence is not the whole story. Endless checkpoints, 26-foot high walls, and the great fear and mistrust between many Israelis and Palestinians are grimly persistent features of life there. But there is also an alternative to this cycle of destruction being forged on both sides. There is a larger story beyond the script of retaliatory violence - a story of a growing nonviolent movement that both Palestinians and Israelis are building. It is this larger story that I would like to share.

Active Nonviolence is alive and well in Palestine and Israel! The interfaith delegation I co-led to this region witnessed, first hand, many Palestinians who are engaged in active nonviolent resistance to the occupation of their lands in the West Bank. Weekly nonviolent demonstrations have been held in many villages, including Bil'in, Nil'in, Al Ma'sara, Walaja, as well as in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, some for more than five years. Israelis (including Combatants for Peace and Anarchists Against the Wall), and Internationals, (including Christian Peacemaker Teams, Ecumenical Accompaniment Program and Michigan Peace Teams) actively participate in these weekly actions. There is a deeply inspiring commitment by Palestinians throughout the region to keep struggling nonviolently even when Israeli soldiers shoot powerful tear-gas canisters and grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets, concussion bombs and even live ammunition at the unarmed villagers..

On December 17, 2009 our interfaith delegation visited one of these sites, Bil'in, an agricultural village of approximately 1,800 residents west of Ramallah about 2 miles from the "Green Line" marking Israel's boundary before 1967 and near the settlement, Modi'in that straddles the former border. We joined other internationals, Israelis and about 200 people from the area, and marched from the center of Bil'in to the electric separation fence. Palestinian activists say that some 56% of the villagers' farmland is unreachable because of that barrier, about one kilometer down a dirt road.

The Israeli Supreme Court actually ruled in favor of the Palestinians, saying that the wall must be moved to be closer to the original green line, enabling the farmers to get to their fields. For two and a half years the Israeli military did not comply with that ruling, saying

they could not afford to move what is actually just an electrified chainlink fence topped with concertina wire!

As we approached the barricade, the Israeli soldiers launched dozens of tear gas canisters; our eyes burned and our exposed skin seared with this gas that was much more powerful and potent than anything I have ever experienced before. They also exploded concussion bombs, and the sound of the loud explosions were very frightening. Our delegation abruptly turned around and stumbled over the rocks and back down the hill to get away from the blinding teargas which scorched our lungs and made us totally nauseated.

The locals, exposed to this toxic gas every week, continued the nonviolent protest quite close to the barrier. Some of them had face masks or plastic bags to help keep out the noxious fumes. One, in a wheelchair, stayed the longest, able to leave, but unwilling to surrender his place on the line.



The leaders of the weekly demonstrations are building a model of a powerful nonviolent movement which is already being replicated in other communities across the West Bank. Mohammad Khatib, secretary of the village council, says this “experimental” tactic of “nonviolent demonstrations by the grass roots is changing history,” and indeed it is! In February, 2010, after five years of nonviolent actions in Bil-in, Israeli bulldozers have finally begun to move the barrier!back toward the green line. It gives the Palestinian people great hope for the possibilities in the future if they persist, nonviolently.



Nil'in

Four miles west of Bil'in is the village of Nil'in where residents, joined by Israeli and international activists, have been staging weekly demonstrations against a nearby expansion of the Israeli West Bank barrier there. This barrier has appropriated approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of Ni'lin's land-similar to the percentage in Bil'in. On July 28, 2008, 10-year-old Ahmed Moussa was fatally shot by Israeli soldiers during one of these anti-barrier protest demonstrations

Then, on March 13, 2009, U.S. Citizen Tristan Anderson, of Oakland, California was critically injured when he was struck in the head by a gas canister. It was fired by Israeli soldiers after the weekly protest had already ended! One year later he remains in an Israeli hospital near Tel Aviv, and is beginning to talk and walk with the help of a walker.. Tristan's only "weapon" was the camera he was using to take photographs of the demonstration.

Other peaceful activists have been killed in these protests, and more than 11,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned for nonviolent resistance. However, the commitment of the Palestinian people to continue the struggle nonviolently is unwavering. They use an Arabic word "**Al-Samoud** (الصمود)" which means perseverance or steadfastness. Palestinians practice Al-Samoud daily by refusing to leave even in the face of heavy intimidation by armed Israeli military and settlers who are trying to confiscate their lands and remove them from their homes.

Al-Samoud motivates them to replant their olive trees when they are uprooted, to rebuild their homes when they are bulldozed, to refuse blank checks from Israeli settlers trying to "buy" their homes or land, and for Palestinian children to keep walking to school even when settlers taunt and throw stones at them.

The Palestinians are steadfast even when they can't reach their fields, when their homes are raided in the middle of the night and members of their families are arrested, and in so

many other ways. Their perseverance is an amazing model of nonviolent resistance and relentless persistence...

al-Ma'sara

On another Friday, we joined the demonstration in al-Ma'sara south of Bethlehem where approximately 200 villagers, with Israeli and international supporters, marched peacefully to the edge of town. Although there is already a large wall which separates the Palestinians from their fields, the Israeli soldiers erected a large barbed wire bulwark even closer to al-Ma'sara, as part of their ongoing acts of intimidation.. In addition, behind the barbed wire fence were more than seventy-five well armed Israeli soldiers, supported by six military vehicles—all for a peaceful, nonviolent demonstration.



Mahmoud Zwahre, Mayor of al-Ma'sara,
Head of the al-Ma'sara Popular Committee, and
a leader of the nonviolent resistance..

When we reached the barbed wire barricade, we stopped; leaders of the march, villagers, and a former Israeli bomber pilot spoke passionately about the apartheid wall. One local woman, accompanied by her two young children, held up a photograph of her older son. He and her husband were arrested by the military and are being held indefinitely in an Israeli prison. This woman's home has also been bulldozed by Israeli soldiers in their ongoing aggression towards the villagers.

She shared her anguish over the loss of her family members and her home, and her determination to continue the nonviolent struggle to end the Israeli occupation of their fields and their country. She spoke of her hope that the apartheid wall be torn down. Her commitment to nonviolence was truly remarkable in the face of such deep grief and ongoing violence towards her family.

After the rally was officially ended, people slowly began walking back down the road into al-Ma'sara . The soldiers crossed the barbed wire, and began aggressively pushing the crowd back toward their village. A couple of young boys threw small stones at the military; the soldiers immediately rushed toward them, and shot off sound grenades which exploded like a bomb. The blast was both deafening and frightening,

The soldiers continued to force the crowd back into the village, and attempted to arrest the young boys. They were backed up by six military vehicles roaring their engines, jerking forward and threatening to run down any nonviolent demonstrators who did not retreat quickly. It was very scary, especially when the soldiers and the army vehicles invaded the village.

Finally, Sami Awad, Executive Director of Holy Land Trust (HLT) , spoke with the commander of the troops regarding this provocative action. Sami told him that the army's invasion of the village could end up with a major confrontation, and their aggression certainly had nothing to do with security for the people of Israel! Once they concluded this show of force, the troops and vehicles finally retreated back out of the village, and people returned to their homes.

Some of the internationals were asked to stay in al **Ma'sara** to protect the leaders of the Popular Committee in case the soldiers returned during the night.. None came, but several nights later, armed military did come and arrested one of the leaders of the nonviolent movement. He still sits in an Israeli prison.

The villagers are well versed in the practices of nonviolence. HLT works with their community at both the grassroots and leadership levels in developing nonviolent approaches to resolve this conflict. They aim to end the Israeli occupation and build a future founded on the principles of nonviolence, equality, justice, and peaceful coexistence. www.holylandtrust.org

Tent of Nations

In another community, the Tent of Nations, outside Bethlehem, I met Daoud Nasser and his family. His father bought their land back in 1924 when the area was under Turkish rule. Now, the farm is surrounded on all the hilltops with new settlements (part of the 500,000 Jewish settlers who have moved into the West Bank).

Fully armed Israeli soldiers broke into his home several months ago and told him that he and his family had to leave, but Daoud refused to go. He has the deed to his home and believes he has a right to stay on the land which his ancestors bought more than 80 years ago. They are still on the land, but could be forcibly evicted at any time.

Recently, settlers raided his farm and uprooted 400 olive trees which gave his family much of their income! However, committed to a nonviolent response, Daoud and his family have planted 500 more trees, which will take many years to mature.



Daoud's family was refused building permits from the Israeli authorities for his house, for the greenhouse where they start new seedlings, and for the cistern where they collect rain water since they are not allowed to dig a well. So, at any time the soldiers could come and bulldoze his house, force him and his family to leave, and destroy their greenhouse or cistern.. Daoud and his family are a remarkable example of **Al-Samoud** (الصمود) – steadfastness and perseverance, or relentless persistence, in their nonviolent struggle to survive.

Daoud questions, “Why can't all the religions, all the children of Abraham, understand that the basis of all our religions and religious teachings are the same....That we love one another, that we treat others as we would like them to treat us, and that we are all children of God?” He does not seem to have an ounce of hatred toward the settlers or the Israeli soldiers who continually threaten his family with eviction from their ancestral land. Their faith that justice will prevail, and that nonviolence is a more powerful weapon than the gun, sustains them.

Daoud and his family organize camps for young people of all religions, and from many countries around the world to come and live on their land. It provides a wonderful opportunity for these young civilian diplomats to learn how much we all have in common – and that we need to treat one another as we would have others treat us. When they return to their home countries, they take the message that building friendships and understanding one another are important parts of nonviolent social change. They have learned that there are other ways to challenge injustice, oppression and violence than responding with more violence. The website for this valuable project is:

www.tentofnations.org

al-Walaja (Arabic: الولجة) – West Bank

al-Walaja, four kilometers northwest of the city of Bethlehem, is another example of a community which is nonviolently resisting being evicted from their land. During the Israeli-Palestinian war in 1948, they were forced to leave their ancestral lands across the

valley where they had lived for centuries. Those fields were fertile and had natural springs.

While many villagers fled to refugee camps in Bethlehem and Jordan, others continued to live on the land. While their lands had been seized within Israel, they continued to live on and farm an area across the valley from their former community, on the Palestinian side of the “Green Line”. After the 1967 war, they tried to get permits from the Israeli authorities to build homes for their families, and a school, at this new location. They spent decades, and tens of thousands of dollars, unsuccessfully submitting permit applications. Finally, in deep frustration, they went ahead and built their homes without permits. The Israeli authorities have bulldozed many of these “illegal” homes, but each time the houses have been leveled, the families have rebuilt them, sometimes many times.

The families in **al-Walaja** also wanted a school for their children, and they sought the assistance of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The UN said they could not help build a school if Israeli authorities had not granted a building permit. After several years of unsuccessfully trying to get the permit, they gathered money from the members of the **al-Walaja** community to build a school on their own.

Several more years later, the UN finally agreed to help in providing funds for books and supplies for the school, but the Israeli authorities could still come any day with their bulldozers and completely destroy the school.. Such is the state of “justice” in the West Bank.

We were there on a Friday morning, and several hundred villagers, Israeli Combatants for Peace, and Internationals, had a peaceful march. The demands of the people of **al-Walaja** were echoes of those in so many Palestinian villages who are being encroached upon by Settlers: (1) the right to continue to live on their land, (2) to live in their homes without threat of demolition, (3) for their children be able to get an education without fear of their school being leveled..

In addition, the community opposes plans for the building of a 26 foot high apartheid cement wall which could totally surround their community! A tunnel under the wall would be the only way in or out of Al Walaja , However, this tunnel would be controlled by the Israeli soldiers, and could be opened or closed by them at will, without explanation. Although the people in al Walaja feel threatened from all sides, their commitment to al Samoud keeps them struggling for a peaceful future for their community.

Sheikh Jarrah (Arabic: الشيخ جراح)

Sheikh Jarrah is a beautiful old Palestinian neighborhood in Occupied East Jerusalem. In 2001, Israeli settlers broke into a sealed section of a Palestinian family’s house and refused to leave, claiming the property was owned by Jews. Many contested evictions have occurred since that time, including one on August 2, 2009. Following an Israeli court decision, two Palestinian families (al-Hanoun and al-Ghawi), consisting of 53 persons, were evicted from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah. Jewish settlers moved into the

houses immediately. These brutal house seizures by the Settlers were supported by armed Israeli soldiers and police. The Palestinian's belongings and furniture were destroyed, and tossed out on the street, and now a community of these evicted families are living in tents on the street in front of their own homes.

Some have been there for months, and are often harassed or even forcibly removed from the street. The United Nations coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert H. Serry, said the evictions were “totally unacceptable actions contrary to the provisions of the Geneva Conventions related to occupied territory.”

One Friday afternoon when we joined their regular vigil, perhaps 30 Hasidic Jewish settlers arrived in their long black coats and broad-rimmed black hats, and curls (payos) down the sides of their faces. They were honoring Shabat, the seventh day of the Jewish week, and a day of rest in Judaism, by celebrating their brutal take-over of Palestinian homes. They were dancing the Horah, and enthusiastically singing in the street in front of the homes they had seized!

There was a frenzied spirit as a large group streamed into one yard where 4/5ths of the house is now occupied by Jewish settlers, with the Palestinian family living in the other 1/5. A lone, elderly Palestinian woman held silent vigil in a tent in the side of the yard, while Shabbat prayers were interrupted by shouts of “Death to the Arabs,” by the Hasidic settlers. Later, they graffitied this slogan on the walls of the houses, and invaded another home, beating up two young Palestinian children who had to be taken away in ambulances.. This was the tragic way they honored the Sabbath..

Amazingly, despite this continual harassment and violence, we did not observe the Palestinians using any violence – in word or deed – against those who have forcibly taken their homes. For months they have lived in the street in their small tents with hope and quiet determination, or **Al-Samoud** (الصمود), and continue the struggle to get their homes back. Other Palestinians on the block are fearful that they will be the next victims of this violence by the settlers who are supported by the Israeli Supreme Court which has ruled that the Jews own the land.



Members of the Sheik Jarrah community and international supporters gather at this tent.

I was shocked by the settler's determination to inflict violence on "the other" – even throwing them out into the street. Horrified, I could not even begin to fathom what this kind of hatred has to do with religion. I do know that I am deeply touched and impressed with the willingness of the Palestinians to keep struggling nonviolently for justice, and a peaceful resolution to this tragic conflict over land and homes.

MEND Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy

Another important part of the Palestinian Nonviolent movement is MEND (Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy) which is offering nonviolent training to hundreds of young Palestinians throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Their goal is to help educate and nurture a new generation of Palestinians with a deeper understanding of nonviolence and nonviolent action. (www.mendonline.org)

Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center

The Wi'am Center is working to support active nonviolence among Palestinians. They aim to improve the quality of relationships by addressing injustices rather than avenging them; dignifying persons on both sides of the conflict; promoting human rights and advocating for peace among all people. (www.alaslah.org)

Israeli Peace Movement

There are many hundreds of Israelis who are refusing to serve in the Israeli armed forces in the occupied territories and/or are total conscientious objectors. Many of them have served time, or are currently in prison, for taking this position.

We were deeply moved by the Israelis and Palestinians who have formed Bereaved Families for Peace (<http://www.cjre.net/bereavedfamilies.htm>) and Combatants for Peace (<http://www.combatantsforpeace.org/>). Recognizing that their shared pain unites them, they are speaking together in schools and community groups. "We refuse to let our grief harden into hatred and actions of retaliation. Instead, we are turning, in compassion and reconciliation, to each other - Palestinians and Israelis - with the hearts of parents who want to join our voices and hands so that there will be no more bloodshed and no more lives of children wasted..".



We had not known how many Israelis are also working for the peaceful, and nonviolent resolution of the Occupation. These include:

- 4,000 Refusers-- Israeli military who are refusing orders to serve in the illegally Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza, and hundreds of high school students who are being jailed for defying Israel's compulsory military service. (Israeli law says that once you leave high school you are technically required to serve in the army. For men that can be up for three years, for women it's 18 months.)
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- 73 Israeli pilots are known to have refused to fly military missions over the Occupied Territories.

Other courageous groups of Israelis working for peace and justice include **New Profile** (www.newprofile.org/english/), **Rabbis for Human Rights** (www.rhr.org), **The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions** (<http://www.icahd.org>) and **Women in Black** (<http://coalitionofwomen.org/home/english>) who have been demonstrating every week for twenty-two years.

Conclusion/What Can We Do?

Throughout our time in Palestine, and later in Gaza it became very clear that the security of the Palestinians and the Israelis is inextricably linked. There is such significant interdependence between these two peoples, in an ancient and Holy Land, that they must work together to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Peace in the region can only be achieved through nonviolence, not more rockets and bombing and killing one another..

Unfortunately, in the short time since we were in Palestine and Israel, the harassment at these nonviolent demonstrations, and especially of the leaders of the Popular Committees in the villages, has significantly increased. The Israeli soldiers are using live ammunition more frequently, and are coming into the villages in the middle of the night, raiding the homes of the leaders and taking them off to jail for indefinite detention. Some have even been killed.

As former President John F. Kennedy once said, “Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable.” We in the peace and justice movement need to strengthen our support of this powerful nonviolent movement in Palestine, and help make peaceful change possible.

We can:

1. Keep the courageous Palestinians and Israelis resisting the Israeli occupation and Apartheid state in our thoughts and prayers.
2. Help get the word out, to our friends and the broader public, about these weekly nonviolent demonstrations and this amazing nonviolent movement in Palestine <http://www.internationalpopularstruggle.org/>
3. Join an Interfaith Peace Builders, or a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation. going to Israel and Palestine to meet peace and human rights workers working for a peaceful and just resolution to this tragic conflict. (www.ifpb.org) and www.cpt.org I encourage you to join Scott Kennedy, of the Resource Center for Nonviolence, who co-led the delegation with me in December of 2009. He will be co-leading a IFPB delegation October 31-November 13, 2010 during the Palestinian Olive Harvest.
4. Send people to accompany the Palestinians in these nonviolent demonstrations and when requested, stay in their villages to help offer nonviolent protection. The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) (www.palsolidarity.org), Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org), and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program (www.eappi.org) have long-term delegates in the region.
5. Get moral, practical and financial support to this nonviolent movement –for legal support of those arrested, and for minimal support of some of the leaders of this movement who can no longer get to their fields to grow their crops and tend their animals. (Financial support for this movement can be sent to Peaceworkers at 721 Shrader St., San Francisco, CA 94117 and 100% of your contributions will be forwarded to the nonviolent movement in Palestine.)
Popular Struggle Coordination Committee (www.popularstruggle.org).
6. Promote the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israeli occupation of Palestine, and companies that profit from the occupation and apartheid policies, being called for by over 200 Palestinian and Israeli organizations. The goal of this campaign is to boycott companies that profit from the occupation and apartheid policies; this action will help bring economic and political pressure on the Israeli government to end the occupation of the West Bank, end the Siege of Gaza and end the Apartheid system in Palestine and Israel. (www.bdsmovement.net)

7. Work to help end the American blank check to the Israeli government of over \$3 billion a year in military aid to the Israeli government, It condones the continued Israeli occupation of Palestine, subsidizes the building of the Apartheid wall between Israel and the West Bank , perpetuates the Siege of Gaza, and supports the violence being used against nonviolent demonstrators in the West Bank. Please contact your Congressional representatives and the President to voice your concern..

For more information on the nonviolent movement in Palestine and Israel, check the following links:

Popular Struggle Coordination **Committee** www.popularstruggle.org.

International network for the Palestinian Popular Nonviolent Resistance
<http://www.internationalpopularstruggle.org>

- American Association for Palestinian Equal Rights (<http://www.aaper.org>)
- International Middle East Media Center <http://imemc.org>

Friends of Freedom and Justice, Bil'in www.bilin-ffj.org

Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions www.icahd.org/eng

- Highly recommended work:
Refusing To Be Enemies: Palestinian and Israeali Nonviolent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation, by Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta. , (Ithaca Press, UK -2010, ISBN13: 9780863723421,)

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