

The Different Options of Struggle

(Published at Al-Quds Newspaper, 23 September, 2002)

I accept that my article will cause great differences of opinion and perhaps objection. I respect these differences in that they are normal and natural given that it is nearly impossible for all Palestinians to agree on one opinion. Every one of us has our own thoughts and explanations on the matter; this is normal and legal.

Resisting occupation is a legal issue; it is a right for every nation under occupation. Resistance, as a right, has been recognized by all nations. It is inconceivable that a people would accept conditions of occupation and military rule that systematically separate according to race, religion, nationality, or color. As each struggle takes on its own form it also passes through different phases of conflict. The methods of response vary as greatly as the conflicts themselves but resistance generally tends to fall into one of two main categories: armed struggle or nonviolent action. Both forms are highly debated.

Historically the Palestinian people's legal resistance began decades ago against the British occupiers. Along with the transference of control to the Israelis, the regime also inherited its predecessor's opposition movement. As a result of the long march of struggle by the people, the world has acknowledged the Palestinian existence along with their rights to self-determination, and some states have come to recognize the right of return for refugees.

Opposition is a legal right recognized by all religions and national laws. For the Palestinian people, resistance has taken on many forms. Important to note are the groups committed to nonviolent action by ways of, among other things, civil disobedience, education, and boycotts of Israeli products and services. Additionally, an international support network has been created to ensure the success of these measures. This network has succeeded in exposing the occupation, organizing large-scale demonstrations in their respective countries, and encouraging the spread of the boycott on Israel. This movement (the Palestinian nonviolent faction) has been especially active lately in its efforts to counter the media campaign against the Palestinian people in which the Israeli government in cooperation with the United States government and the Jewish lobby in the U.S., and encouraged by U.S. supporters and European media portray the Palestinian population as a terrorist organization targeting innocent civilians. This has created an inaccurate and damaging image of the Palestinian struggle over-time. Even more wrongful, this process has transformed the victim into the criminal and the perpetrator into the victim. In their narrative, the occupier is a weak lamb faced with an unjustifiable wave of violence. In reality, the opposite is true.

The idea for this essay was generated from these tensions. This is an invitation to expand the campaign of Palestinian nonviolent action. It is a call to consider demonstrations, sit-ins and sit-downs, objections, organized civil disobedience, and boycotts of Israeli goods and services. Excuses for inaction are no longer viable while alternatives are available. By refusing the authority of the occupation and not accepting their permits or VIP's, we are turning their tools of oppression back on them.

I would like to emphasize that no one can deny or erase the history of the Palestinian people's struggle. In all methods employed against the occupation, it maintains its legitimacy and legality. This is an appeal to revise these measures to reflect the changes occurring in the population on the national, political and media fronts. Nonviolent combat is not a new phenomenon; it has been effectively practiced in India, South Africa, and the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. successfully led the African-American struggle for equality and all the while advocated nonviolent means. For the Palestinian people a nonviolent strategy does not diminish the claims to self-determination, the end to the occupation, the right of return for refugees, and the establishment of an autonomous state with Jerusalem as its capital.

By implementing this approach, the world will rally behind the Palestinian people to defend peace, justice and democracy. Incorporating an effective media campaign and joining forces with democratic organizations will enhance the exposure to the Palestinian situation. An umbrella organization should be built integrating the various religious and political forces within the Palestinian society. Each party would function in unison under the democratic leadership of the organization. A cohesive Palestinian entity true to its goals will fulfill the political leadership.

Looking into Islam for an example one can cite the prophet Mohammad when he negotiated the Al-Hudaiba agreement with the nonbelievers. He signed the agreement because he recognized that in that context he would not be able to achieve his goals by war, and to save the lives of the believers. This known agreement has been referred to throughout Islamic history and is called HUDAYBEYYAH. The success of this experience guaranteed his right to the pilgrimage to Mecca the following year. One can glean from this example that alternatives to violence exist and not to commit to one form of struggle. A prudent consideration of the applicability of these methods to the time and place, national circumstances, and power structure does not negate the objective.

Another example of a leader dedicated to the realization of national goals through nonviolent means is former President Nelson Mandela. His unrelenting resistance

liberated the people of South Africa. As a great supporter of the Palestinian right to self-determination, he would be a potential ally in our campaign and should be invited to join our efforts. Other Nobel Laureates for peace who support the Palestinian plight are: Pierce Ishkavil from Argentina, Rigoberta Manchu from Guatemala, and Mary Maguire from Ireland.

Nonviolence, in the Palestinian context, is a proactive philosophy and not simply a reaction to occupation. It recognizes the struggle by defying the occupation and using all methods of resistance within nonviolent expression. The Palestinian people have practiced many forms of civil disobedience throughout their history. One well-known example is the strike of 1936 against British colonialism. In its refusal to cooperate the people confronted the authority of the occupation. More recently, in 1987 during the Intifada, the Palestinian people refused to pay taxes or to acquiesce to the demands of the occupier. An effective expression came from the internal agricultural sector which substituted for the Israeli products. Together with other actions, these determined protests aroused international public attention and support. In contrast to the bone-breaking policies of Yitzchak Rabin, the Palestinian people stood firm and unbroken.

Recently, supporters of the Palestinian people (members of the solidarity groups) showed their commitment during the curfew on the Church of the Nativity. By breaking through barriers to enter the church and bringing food in an effort to stand with the strugglers they supported nonviolently. Others have defied the occupiers by accompanying President Arafat in his office during his closure.

I think that many of our people share my opinion that this kind of struggle only stands to expose the Israeli government's policies for what they really are, and will serve them only in their own embarrassment. It will positively impact our cause especially if we go to the negotiating table. It will also be embarrassing, in light of Ariel Sharon's policies, for the supporters of Israel, primarily the United States and Great Britain.

The following are some of the applicable methods practiced by, among others, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr.: nonviolent demonstrations, sit-downs in public streets, joint prayer (Muslim and Christian) in the streets, silent periods and stoppage of all movement in the streets and work places, boycotts of Israeli products of all kinds, reject all VIP services (an illegitimate source of earnings), joint Israeli-Palestinian nonviolent peace demonstrations on both sides of check points (this is dependent upon the Palestinian National Council's decision calling for cooperation with Israeli peace movements), petitioning and signing letters of protest to every embassy and international

organizations (e.g. the United Nations, the Red Cross, and other human rights groups) demanding their action to end the occupation while explaining the Palestinian peoples decision to use nonviolent forms of struggle, holding national and public press conferences explaining the principals behind this expression, working in coordination and cooperation with Israeli peace organizations in addition to international groups, using technology to spread the message (websites dedicated to the human rights violations committed by the Israeli military occupation), broadcasting over the media interviews with experts and analysts in the Palestinian cause (dissemination of Palestinian rights to live in dignity without violence and hatred).

In order to ensure the success of this plan and to maximize its efficacy, we must increase our masses by joining forces with as many organizations as possible. We must reach out to those individuals who have not yet entered the arena of political work.

Yours in peace & reconciliation,

Noah Salameh