

CELEBRATING NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

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POUR UNE FORCE INTERNATIONALE D'INTERVENTION CIVILE

EN ISRAEL ET EN PALESTINE

It is important to distinguish between nonviolence as a moral principal and nonviolence as a political strategy. As a moral principal, and here we could also talk about a philosophical or spiritual principal, each person may choose the expression they consider most appropriate, nonviolence invites us to respect all human beings, respect the humanity of all human beings and respect the dignity of the humanity of all human beings, and this also means even respecting the adversary confronting us, or our enemy. This involves taking into account the evidence concealed by the very harshness of conflict itself: the enemy is also a human being. Therefore, this respect for the adversary, which is one of the key principals of nonviolence, does not allow compromising our fundamental rights. Gandhi tried to combine personal respect for each British citizen with an outraged criticism of the British colonial occupation of his country. (...) Respect for one's adversary, far from weakening resistance against injustice, lets us channel the struggle towards those objectives that make justice effective.

How can we apply this respect for the enemy to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ? First of all, I would like to try to identify who are the enemies confronting each other in this conflict. Essentially, there are two peoples confronting each other for the possession of one land. Both peoples affirm the legitimacy that forms the basis of their right to possess the whole of this land. However, the confrontation of these

two justifications provides no solution to the problem. It only leads to a fight for life or death in which both sides seek to win and eliminate the other. Both sides confine themselves to a logic of exclusion that renders any peace process impossible. It is therefore because of this that, slowly, the idea has surfaced in both societies that, for reasons not based on legal requirements but on the imperatives of history, it is essential to reach a compromise to share this land so that both of these two peoples can live in peace in a free and sovereign state. The “principle of reality” has been imposed and has showed what is possible and what is impossible. The two peoples are condemned by history to live together. It needs to be pointed out that we are dealing with a specific characteristic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that cannot be found in hostile actions in other conflicts. In the Franco-Algerian conflict it was never a question of whether a part of Algerian territory would remain under French sovereignty.

At no point was it a question of sharing the land in some way. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that extremist dialogue that rejects all compromises with the adversary still exists on both the Palestinian and Israeli side. Groups that support this are without a doubt in the minority, but they run the risk of creating an obstructive minority that blocks the peace process. On this piece of land there is no symmetry at all between the situations of the two peoples. On the contrary, there is complete asymmetry. A people without state and without an army feels occupied, oppressed and humiliated by the state and the army of the other people. The state of Israel has the monopoly of the military power; it uses this and abuses it with complete impunity. The Israeli army is all-powerful and, despite this, it cannot obtain political victory because it cannot defeat a people that claim its right to liberty and dignity. On the other hand, the Palestinians find themselves in the impossible situation of establishing a relationship of force in favour of pursuing violence. Palestinian violence only provokes Israeli oppression. Violence not only supports no solution, but it distances the chance of any solution, increasing resentment, hate, fear and suffering for both parties. Violence is not the solution for either of the two sides: it is the problem. The two adversaries are prisoners of the same rhetoric for which both, imitating defending themselves against the adversary’s violence, and rejecting their responsibility towards the other side. Both use the murders committed by the other to justify their own murders, arguing for

their right to legitimate defence. Both deem their motives as worthy and in this way they try to be right. Even so, both are mistaken and have to pay the price dearly for their error. The two peoples shut themselves away, crippled in a suicidal process and, in short, we have two losers. Let us not be mistaken: Israeli child soldiers (many of them are little older than 20 years old) are the first victims of the violence that they exercise against the Palestinians. He who commits an outrage against the dignity of another commits an outrage against his own dignity, and he himself ends up severely wounded.

In a similar context, how can the moral principal be applied to the nonviolence that invites us to respect the enemy? To answer this question, I would like to refer to the text written on a placard held up by a Palestinian in a demonstration against the wall: "Peace needs bridges, not walls". A similar affirmation is offered by two suggestions for action: destroy the walls and build bridges. It must be highlighted that violence only destroys bridges and builds walls. It must also be pointed out that the architecture of a wall is the most absurd and cruel there is: it is kept standing by nothing more than the force of gravity. The architecture of bridges requires much more intelligence and skill: the force of gravity must be overcome. Walls that separate men are not walls of cement that divide the land that could be shared. There are also walls in the hearts and minds of men. They are the walls of prejudices, of contempt, of stigmatisations, of bitterness, and of resentment. It is here that the principal of nonviolence comes into play, inviting us to respect the adversary. It destroys walls and builds bridges, allowing men to meet each other, meet each other again, talk, and start to understand each other. These bridges should not allow conflict; they should overcome the obstacles that make any solution to the conflict impossible. Obviously, peace is only possible with justice and in this sense justice comes before peace. But how can we negotiate peace that will support justice if it is not with the actual enemy? It is with the enemy that justice must be built, just as it is with the enemy that peace needs to be made. Justice can only be built recognising and respecting the humanity of the actual enemy. Now, and this is the clearest sign of hope in this conflict, there are networks of citizens in both societies which have the presence of mind and the courage to want to destroy walls and build bridges, opposing the logic of war and involving themselves in a dynamic of peace. It is important that these networks benefit from

international solidarity, above all citizen networks, that, in all parts of the world, are pushing for a just peace in the Middle East.

Until today, despite the existence of these networks, both communities have not been capable of creating a peace process that allow them to get to know each other (and keep doing so), respect each other, and talk. They have remained prisoners of a bipolar confrontation that leaves no space for meeting and negotiating. It is for this reason that we must study whether mediation from the international community could feasibly break this binary confrontation and open an intermediate political space where the two communities can meet and talk. In the current context, international diplomacy is incapable of implementing a peace initiative to foster trust between the two civil societies that can be put into practice. At the end of the day, two or three international diplomats that go back and forth between political authorities of the two sides are no more capable of making peace than two or three generals are of making war. Even when they reach a “peace agreement”, this is only an “agreement on paper” that does apply in practice.

It is therefore important to be innovative and imaginative. From this perspective, MAN, in association with other organisations of the civil society in France, has taken the initiative and started a campaign to study if it is feasible to deploy a civil peace intervention force in both the Palestinian territory and the Israeli territory at the same time. At the present time, this campaign is also being organised in Italy and Spain, and other European countries will take it on too. This force would comprise unarmed international volunteers that would have received training in nonviolent conflict resolution in advance and whose mission would be carrying out local observation, insertion and mediation activities in the heart of civil communities. The aim would be for Palestinian and Israeli peace actors to once again take on the challenges of conflict (today dominated by the logic of violence) and to create conditions for a political conflict resolution that is acceptable for both parties. It would involve deploying on the ground and locally, dozens, hundreds and thousands of unarmed diplomats. Their presence in the heart of civil societies would aim to quell fears and decrease feelings of insecurity, as well as creating methods for trust between the perpetrators of conflict.

The unarmed presence would also aim to dissuade armed perpetrators on both sides so that they do not commit acts of violence. Whatever the explanations and justifications given, these acts are counterproductive. This civil intervention should not be conceived as a human shield that is placed between armed perpetrators, but as an unarmed presence of volunteers that share the risks in which civilians are involved. It would be, in short, building a bridge between the two civil societies so that they can meet each other and continue to do so. To build this bridge, an architectural necessity, a political obligation, and a strategic demand must all be present at the same time in the two territories to solidly build the two pillars that will support the arch. The presence of international citizens in the Israeli community will want to clearly demonstrate to the Israelis that their fear and suffering are being taken into account, that their desire to live in safety is recognised, and that it occupies a specific place in the peace process, provided that to be the master of their own destiny.

It is worth mentioning that the members of civil intervention, as well as going unarmed, find themselves “undefended” before the ever-present threat of armed perpetrators. From a purely theoretical point of view, armed perpetrators technically have an unlimited capacity for violence against unarmed actors. However, putting violence into practice does not only depend on technical factors. Often human, psychological, social and political factors impose limits on those that make decisions, which cannot easily be ignored. Violence without limits is “blind”, in all senses of the word. It represents an escape forwards that does not correspond with any rational political objective. It runs the risk of sharing consequences that bring with them a political, diplomatic, and economic cost, such that politicians are interested in denouncing it. Situations therefore exist which, all being technically possible, are not politically the most probable. Volunteers would not have any other protection than their vulnerability, and their unarmed presence would aim to encourage of disarmament.

The missions of civil intervention could not attempt to be proof of “neutrality”, at least if we interpret this word, according to its Latin etymology (*ne*, *ni*, and *uter*, one of the two), as “not one, nor the other, neither of the two”. Thus, in cases of international conflict, a neutral country is one which does not take sides with either

of the two adversary sides, and that does not support nor offer help to either of them, and stays out of the conflict. However, it is precisely the members of a peace mission that search, not for reconciliation, but at least the conciliation of the two parties involved in the conflict. Their job is not to take sides with “neither of the two” adversaries but to take sides “with both”. They commit themselves to one and to the other: they commit themselves twice - take sides twice. Taking sides twice is never, however, unconditional: each time it is taking sides using judgment and equity. In this sense, it can be said that the members of civil intervention are not neutral, but “fair”: they strive to give to each what is relevant to them. It is in this way that they can earn the trust of the two adversaries and help dialogue between them.

Equity does not mean simply removing adversaries without obeying reason. This is particularly true in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which - this should never be forgotten – there is no symmetry between the situations of the adversaries. Let us repeat it once more: on the ground, there is an occupied community and occupying community. In the lowest extreme of the country, the presence of a civil intervention force should not mean the end of the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. On the contrary, it should favour the development of a nonviolent resistance, whose legitimacy should be recognised. At the same time, we affirm our strong belief that wanting to help the creation of a peace process based on respecting the Israeli’s right to live safely on their territory does not show any less solidarity with the Palestinians.

Limiting oneself to a one-sided solidarity with one of the sides only exacerbates the tricky aspects of the conflict when what it tries to do is dispel them. A one-sided solidarity that excludes the other party from the peace process reinforces the solidity of the walls and does not allow the building of bridges. We believe that this stance, at the same time ethical and political, aims to create the space for mediation between the two communities, and is the only way to eliminate the causes of violence and establish the bases of a just and lasting peace. We believe that this stance is the basis upon which the two communities, currently separated by walls and a lack of understating and exclusion, can be brought closer together. The

possibility of putting into practice this mediation force continues to be uncertain, but we think that this fragile hope is the only one possible.

An intervention force of this type cannot be put into practice by way of non-governmental organisations. Only an intergovernmental organisation can implement the methods of a similar mission. This is therefore why we are initially asking the political authorities of the European Union to study the feasibility of an intervention of this type. For this reason, we need to assess the difficulties that today act as obstacles for putting in place on the spot an intervention force of this nature. It is obvious that we do not have the political conditions needed for thinking about carrying out what I shall call the “high hypothesis” of our project - the deployment of hundreds of international volunteers in the two territories with the political mandate of an intergovernmental agency. This is why it is therefore premature to want to pinpoint from now on the concrete ways to implement this intervention force, even if the principles of action are clearly defined. Even so, from now on, it is a case of acting in such a manner that, when the moment arrives, when the political conditions allow it, the international community has available the means for proposing an intervention force of this type. It is also prudent to consider whether it is possible to start with “low hypotheses”. This could consist, firstly, of the deployment of an intervention force only in Palestinian territory.

A first test run could be carried out with a non-governmental organisation. We are conscious that various NGOs have now been present on the ground for some four years and that their experience is very useful. I would like to thank our friends from the Christian Peacemaker Teams that have been guaranteeing an international presence in Hebron for more than ten years, and that support our campaign, having wanted to support their testimony. What would be fundamental is the ethical, political and strategic stance of this intervention force that would clearly proclaim their desire to be a mediation force between the two sides and not a support force for just one of them. From this perspective, the MAN and the other organisations that support this campaign try to work in close contact with Nonviolent Peaceforce. In other words, it should not be considered that my reasoning contradicts those that my friend David Grant will address you with in the very name of Nonviolent Peaceforce.

This mission would aim to bring to the international community's attention, and more precisely the attention of the various opinions within national communities, the truth about conflict, the realities and challenges, something which the media generally shies away from. More exactly, it will deal with making the Israelis aware of the reality of life for Palestinians in occupied territories. The first objective to achieve is to organise a training programme for nonviolent conflict resolution that allows volunteers to prepare for participation in civil peace missions in the best conditions. In this sense it also applies to public powers and institutional organisations, not just military associations, signing up to a programme of this nature.