

# ADVOCATING NONVIOLENCE IN IRAQ?

Shane Bauer

*A reader's response to "Could Nonviolence Succeed in Iraq?" • PeacePower, Summer 2005, <http://www.calpeacepower.org/0101/iraq.htm>*

**A**s the war in Iraq presses on with no foreseeable end, I hear more and more from the American "Left" about their qualms about supporting the Iraqi resistance because of its use of violent tactics, putting themselves in the position of deciding what the best strategies are for those living under war and occupation. Much of the Left's categorical opposition to violence comes from the deepest desire that we share to end violence in our world. The notion of countering violence with violence seems like a blatant contradiction and provokes knee-jerk responses like "violence only leads to more violence," or "using violence makes you just as bad as them." At first glance these arguments make emotional sense, but the reality is that the power of crushing, overwhelming force unfortunately cannot be transcended through good feelings or spiritual integrity. Arguments for nonviolence rarely address the practical issues of how it would ultimately succeed, seldom getting past absolute claims about the superiority of nonviolence.

It was never the right of the US to invade and occupy the country and it's not our right (in the Left or otherwise) to decide how Iraqis will achieve their freedom. Suggesting that we are in the position to decide how Iraqis should deal with the occupation or that we could even understand what it's like to be in their position is both elitist and arrogant. It demonstrates the same colonial mentality that got us there in the first place -- that we know what works best for them. Advocates of nonviolence nowadays are usually privileged members of the oppressor group, in this case mostly white middle-class American citizens who are far removed from the constant brutality of living under war and occupation. This implied moral superiority doesn't happen the other way around; you will never hear an Iraqi self-righteously advocating what tactics are "legitimate" for activists to use in the US.

One of the most arrogant arguments that advocates of nonviolence use is that, as Chelsea Collonge stated in the first issue of *Peace Power*, "it makes an armed power less powerful by provoking an obviously illegitimate use of force, thus eliciting outside support and pressure." In

Iraq though, vulnerable provocation of force means getting killed, as unarmed protesters have been in Baghdad, Falluja, and Karkuk. She argues that nonviolent demonstrations in Iraq send a "clear message that is likely to be heard as moral and legitimate," but to whom are they supposed to be proving their legitimacy? The US will not withdraw its troops because of the moral strength of Iraqis' arguments or some kind of sympathy that Iraqis engendered in the US administration by "behaving themselves." Suggesting that the world's reaction to the situation in Iraq is dependent upon the behavior of Iraqis shifts responsibility away from the international community and puts the blame on the Iraqis for the crisis they are in.

It is false to think that, if only Iraqis could make a clear, moral, "legitimate" case, the world would come to their rescue. Throughout modern history, people in dire circumstances (as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Liberia, Palestine, etc.) have counted on the fact that if the world understood their misery they would be saved, but rarely, if ever, has the world reacted in time or even at all. To think that other nations or the UN would seriously (and nonviolently) challenge US presence in Iraq to the degree that it would make them withdraw

---

**It is false to think that, if only Iraqis could make a clear, moral, "legitimate" case, the world would come to their rescue.... The nature of US military domination leaves no room for nonviolent resistance.**

---

is preposterous. No matter how many people or nations verbally demand that the US leave Iraq, it can still say no. And it will.

Many advocates of nonviolence predictably cite Gandhi's success in removing British rule in India and ask "Why can't it work in Iraq?" Gandhi's strategy worked well in the context of the British Empire's situation at the time, but nonviolent resistance in India cannot be viewed in a vacuum and it's not a model that can be emulated throughout the world. When Britain finally left India in 1947, it was seriously weakened by WWII and violent anti-colonial movements around the empire. The empire was in serious decline, and Gandhi used that to his advantage, and rightfully so. The US today however, wields military might that the British Empire could never have dreamed of. Meanwhile, its stated project of global hegemony is going almost unchallenged, except for the violent resistance it's meeting in the countries that it is occupying, especially in Iraq.

The nature of US military domination leaves no room for nonviolent resistance. In the last issue of *Peace Power* Dr. Stephen Zunes mentioned that nonviolence has worked to topple tyrannical regimes in Sudan, Bangladesh, Mali, and

Indonesia (although violence did play a large role in many of these resistances too). Unlike those situations though, where the governments had to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens, in Iraq the US is a foreign occupying military that has no need to maintain the consent of those it is occupying. As Zunes pointed out, “in Iraq, it has been the US, Great Britain, and other Western nations that may have made the emergence of such nonviolent movements impossible.” The US proved that it could care less about nonviolent tactics when it unconditionally refused any method of reconciliation other than military invasion. And

Iraqi resistance has learned from history when he asserted, “I hope we will see the Americans fleeing Baghdad with the Iraqis right behind them just like they did in 1975 in Ho Chi Min City.”

For Iraqis, the issue at hand isn't one of human rights; it's an issue of freedom. The goal isn't to win concessions; their goal is self-determination and freedom from occupation. Nonviolent actions might prove useful under the right circumstances to meet specific goals, like Iraqis' protection of the Shrine of Ali in Najaf with their own bodies or the work of foreign human shields. Foreigners

serving as human shields are certainly commendable in drawing attention to the bombing tactics that their countries were using and for using their privilege as Westerners to save Iraqi lives. The shields however, made the understandable decision to quit their project just before the US invasion, probably realizing that the power of nonviolence wouldn't stop American bombs. Other parts of the resistance, including doctors, religious and secular activists, women's rights groups, providers of food and clean water, etc. help make life bearable for Iraqis, but they want more than just survival; they want independence. As pure as the intentions are behind these tactics, whether by Iraqis or internationals, and despite the particular successes they achieve, they will never put an end to the war and occupation. To achieve that, armed struggle is unfortunately unavoidable.

Instead of demanding that Bush withdraw while discrediting the struggle in Iraq itself, it would be much more powerful for people in the US to march in

protest while voicing our unwavering support for the Iraqi resistance. Although the resistance isn't up to us, it is empowering for Iraqis to know that we in the US support their struggle to drive the American military out. It is the violence of military aggression that is wrong, not the violence of resistance. As I once heard an Iraqi say to a crowd of mostly Western activists, “If the occupation is ugly, how can the resistance be beautiful?”

*Comments can be sent to [shanebauer82@hotmail.com](mailto:shanebauer82@hotmail.com) or [letters@calpeacepower.org](mailto:letters@calpeacepower.org).*



Boy showing bullet damage from when occupation forces roamed the city of Samarra in November 2003. How could using nonviolent tactics succeed against this brutal occupying power? photo by Dahr Jamail, <http://www.dahrjamailiraq.com/gallery/>

if people were still unsure, it confirmed its lack of concern for the Iraqi people by killing an estimated 35,000 civilians to date.

When we look at the history of US capitulations, the Vietnam War is the prime example. Despite the antiwar movement's claim that they ended the war, it would never have ended without the ability of the Vietnamese to bring a highly advanced military to its knees through a war that cost 50,000 American lives. In an antiwar conference I attended in Beirut, an Iraqi resistor illustrated what the