

IRAQ: YES TO NONVIOLENCE, YES TO JUSTICE

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Despite the Western media's biased coverage and tendency to only focus on violence, we are learning that nonviolent resistance continues in Iraq. Following the tragic bombing of the Golden Shrine of Samarra on February 22nd, 2006 (which the Western media blamed on the Sunnis), Sunni and Shia across Iraq used acts of nonviolent solidarity in an attempt to calm the storm. According to independent journalist Dahr Jamail, "Demonstrations of solidarity between Sunni and Shia went off over all of Iraq: in Basra, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah, Kut, and Salah al-Din.... Baghdad had huge demonstrations of solidarity, following announcements by several Shia religious leaders not to attack Sunni mosques.... Attacks stopped after these announcements." Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's office stated, "We call upon believers to express their protest... through peaceful means. The extent of their sorrow and shock should not drag them into taking actions that serve the enemies who have been working to lead Iraq into sectarian strife."⁽¹⁾

The Iraqi people who participated in these marches said "no" to retributive violence, religious strife, and civil war. No amount of violence could ever remedy the pain of the bombing of the Golden Shrine, but these kinds of displays of solidarity help the people to remember the humanity of their neighbors. While the rage many Iraqis feel against the US and Israel (according to Dahr Jamail) is understandable, they may eventually be able to find ways to channel these strong emotions into the kind of intense, confrontational, nonviolent obstruction that would be necessary to undermine the occupation and constructive work to rebuild their society.

So, as Mr. Bauer appropriately asks, how would nonviolence succeed? Effective use of nonviolence requires as much (actually, much more!) preparation, discipline, planning, strategy, training, and knowledge as the use of violence. For instance, a broad-based movement of non-cooperation that enables people everywhere to participate can be a key element in reducing a regime's hold on power and undermining its sources of support. In the case of Iraq, perhaps people and/or shopkeepers could refuse to pay the US-dictated "flat tax" until the law is rescinded, and begin a process of rolling back the economic violence of the occupation. Nonviolence tacticians could

generate many effective strategies that could impede the occupation's ability to function (or impose its will over the occupied people).

Some assume that the US and coalition forces are "too brutal" to be influenced by the power of nonviolence. A look at history reveals that nonviolence has succeeded against opponents at least as ruthless as the US. The Shah of Iran, whose secret police were legendary for their brutality, was deposed by a nonviolent people power movement that was willing to accept serious loss of life on its side and remain relatively disciplined in its commitment to nonviolence. "No degree of brutality, assassination and torture carried out by the Savak, or secret police, could blunt the people's revolutionary fervor... It was as if the Shah and his underlings were continually striking their swords on a body of water. Their arms became exhausted and their strength was rendered powerless."⁽²⁾

Mr. Bauer says: "It is false to think that, if only Iraqis could make a clear, moral, 'legitimate'

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case, the world would come to their rescue." One thing a disciplined, massive nonviolent movement could do is motivate international activists to escalate nonviolent resistance in their own countries (including the US), which could help to end the occupation. While the media is biased and is on the

hunt for violence, if the Iraqis were to halt the violent resistance and replace it with disciplined nonviolence, their calls for the occupation to end might get much more media coverage (if past media coverage of nonviolent movements is any indicator). When resisters use violence, the media covers the violence. When resisters use nonviolence, the media is more likely to cover the issues. A recent case in point is the Palestinian resistance to confiscation of their land in the West Bank village of Bil'in. As a result of largely nonviolent demonstrations, Israel's mainstream Channel 2 aired a 15-minute exposé on the land confiscation.

While nonviolence might or might not succeed, violence similarly carries no guarantee of success. Violence might eventually drive out the US, or it might not – and at what cost? A recent Freedom House survey shows that nonviolent insurrections lead to higher levels of freedom and democracy than violent insurrections.⁽³⁾ Proponents of armed struggle cite Algeria as a "success story," but over 300,000 Algerians (and perhaps close to one million) lost their lives in order to drive out French colonialists.⁽⁴⁾ Additionally, that nation has suffered from coups, a civil

war, and ongoing hostile relations with the French some 30 years later. Compare this outcome to India and its relatively stable democracy and friendly relations with the British. As Gandhi said, “Means are after all everything.... Violent means will give violent swaraj [self-rule].”⁽⁵⁾ He didn’t mean this was true sometimes, but always.

In a conflict where the level of dehumanization is as high as it is in Iraq, the question is not whether some of the resisters will die, but how they will die. It is indeed true that unarmed protestors have been killed in Iraq. This is not a sign that nonviolence is impossible (unarmed protestors have been killed in many successful nonviolent revolutions), only that the level of sacrifice required is high. Historical episodes demonstrate that well-planned and organized nonviolence requires much less loss of life on the part of the resisters than violent resistance inevitably does. This would be exceedingly difficult to implement in Iraq, but not necessarily impossible.

As important as it is to say no to the occupation, we must be able to say yes to something else. For alternative thinking, refer to our Winter 2006 issue, and Johan Galtung’s six-step proposal: US out, an international conference, security by the UN and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, dual passports for Kurdistan, and a quota system for the oil revenues.

We have to take it a step further. We can’t continue to lurch from one war to another, we have to end the war system and replace it with a nonviolence system. For starters, we could withhold the portion of our tax revenues that funds the military and instead donate it to “third-party nonviolent intervention” organizations that one day could replace the military altogether, like Nonviolent Peaceforce, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and Peace Brigades International. As Stephen Zunes said, “Where active nonviolence is most badly needed [is] here in Western democracies.” Let us see if Cindy Sheehan’s



Over 100,000 Shia Iraqis marched in protest of Paul Bremer’s attempt to delay the election in January 2004. photo by Dahr Jamail, <http://www.dahrjmailiraq.com/gallery/>

call for civil disobedience (*PeacePower*, Winter, 2006) will be heard.

Returning to Mr. Bauer’s original question of whether we are qualified to advocate nonviolence to an Iraqi resister (which could also be asked of a Westerner who advocates violence), we affirm that our main job is to tell our government what to do. But we disagree that in doing so, we must offer “unwavering support” for the Iraqi resistance regardless of their tactics. What we actually must offer unwavering support for is justice. No amount of nonviolence or violence by Iraqis will make the military occupation any more or less just. The occupation is unjust, it is immoral, and it must end, if that is the will the Iraqi people. On this we are in agreement.

Resources

- Nonviolent Peaceforce: www.nvpf.org
- Peace Brigades International: www.pbi.org
- Christian Peacemaker Teams: www.cpt.org
- Dahr Jamail in Iraq: www.dahrjmailiraq.com

1 <http://dahrjmailiraq.com/weblog/archives/dispatches/000365.php>
 2 Summy, Ralph: “Nonviolence and the Extremely Ruthless Opponent,” in *Legacy & Future of Nonviolence*, True and Addams (1996).
 3 “How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy,” www.freedomhouse.org.
 4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algerian_War_of_Independence#War_dead
 5 M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, July 17, 1924.