



COMBATANTS FOR PEACE:

A New Path to Peace and Justice in Israel/Palestine

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It's one thing for combatants locked in battle to set down their guns and refuse to fight. It's a whole new reality when those refusers, from both sides, work together to untangle the mess that got them onto the battlefield in the first place.

That's exactly what Combatants for Peace (CFP) is attempting to do. The organization grew out of the Israeli *Refusnik* Movement (covered extensively in *PeacePower*, Summer 2005). Dozens of former Israeli soldiers, pilots, and reserves associated with the Israeli Defense Force, as well as Palestinians who had fought for organizations such as the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, founded the new group. Their mission is to use exclusively non-violent means to end all forms of violence, end Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, and establish a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. They seek to provide a productive alternative for young people, in place of militarism and violent strife, and work for reconciliation between the two peoples. Without reconciliation, a political, elite-driven "peace agreement" can never bring sustainable peace.

FROM SUSPICION TO TRUST

The group started tentatively with secret meetings. According to YNet, "Some members couldn't speak, they just stared at each other - the Israeli side wary it was a trap and the Palestinians suspicious that the men facing them were undercover agents from the Israeli security services. However, when they were ready to speak, they did so with complete honesty, sharing stories that ultimately led them to mutual trust."¹ Meeting and talking to 'the other side' helped everybody understand how much they share in common as human beings. The organization went public with a "liberation gathering" in East Jerusalem in April 2006, which coincided with both the Jewish Passover holiday and Palestinian Prisoners Day. CFP's members now travel around the holy land and the world to spread the group's message.

CHANGING HEARTS AND POLICY

CFP's work to engage the public is effective both on a person-to-person level and at the political level. Palestinian Osama Karsh says that he now believes the two sides "should educate the next generation for peaceful coexistence, so

as not to repeat the mistakes of past generations.”² For Karsh’s daughter, one of the meetings was the first time she’d met Israelis “other than soldiers at checkpoints, who she had learned to



Souliman al-Khatib Palestinian member, Combatants for Peace

“We dream of living together, Palestinians and Syrians and Israelis and people from all over the Middle East. I was born in 1972 – same as Yonatan. I grew up under the Israeli Occupation,

in a village between Jerusalem and Ramallah surrounded by four Israeli settlements. It was important for us to challenge the occupation, to raise the Palestinian flag inside our schools. We want to live a normal life.

We created a student group to struggle, to throw stones and Molotov cocktails, to take weapons from the Israeli soldiers. I went to jail at age 14, and spent 10 years and 5 months. I participated in a hunger strike for 10 days when I was 15 years old. It was really difficult for me. They tried to kill the spirits of the prisoners, but we became even stronger. We think our stomachs are stronger than their weapons and we feel that we are right and they are wrong. They don’t follow the Geneva Conventions regarding prisoners’ rights, and they don’t even respect Israeli law in the territories occupied in 1967.

After I was released from jail, I went on a trip to Antarctica to live with Israelis and other Palestinians in a small ship for 35 days. The organization that sponsored the trip wanted to know ‘Can they live together without fighting?’ It was not fun, but a political excursion, and it was good to talk about all the issues with an open mind. Afterwards, we established the Palestinian Center for Peace and Dialogue.

I read about Yonatan and the pilots’ refusal letter in the newspaper, and met with this new group. The initial meetings were the most difficult of my life. We met soldiers we know from the checkpoints.

The problem is not just politics – we don’t know about the needs, background, and culture of the other side. We have to find a way to share the country, there’s no other solution to the conflict.”

hate while her father was sitting out his jail sentence.”³ The Jerusalem Post reports that the Israeli refusniks had a “telling effect” on the thinking of former prime minister Ariel Sharon, and influenced his decision to withdraw settlers from Gaza in 2005.⁴ (Although many say the increased rate of settlement growth in the West Bank rendered the Gaza withdrawal of minor import).

It’s hard to say if CFP has the potential to ever achieve its goals, but the recent history of military refusal indicates it’s possible. Perhaps the most profound achievement of historical combat refusal occurred in the early 1970s, when objectors may well have ended the Vietnam War (documented by the film “Sir! No Sir!”). U.S. pilots refused to bomb the Vietnamese people, and the government pulled the plug on the operation.

OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES, ACTION

Although CFP currently consists of nearly 150 members from both sides, Israeli CFP member Yonatan Shapira speculates that number could be much larger – “dozens or hundreds of thousands” -- if they can attract the “gray refusers” to join. Gray refusers are those who privately agree with the sentiments of Israeli refusniks, but “don’t want to suffer the consequences of speaking out,” and simply find an excuse to avoid military service. Israeli philosophy professor Assa Kasher estimates that for every declared draft resister, there are 10 draft-dodgers or gray refusers.⁵

Shapira and Palestinian CFP member Souliman al-Khatib personally advocate boycotts to help end the occupation, although they make the distinction that boycotts should be targeted against Israel’s government, military, and corporations that support the occupation, not the Israeli people. In a truly nonviolent campaign, one always “separates the oppressor from their behavior.” Al-Khatib mentions the struggle for justice in South Africa for inspiration, and Shapira describes conditions in the occupied territories as “Apartheid.”

Shapira also emphasizes the importance of U.S. citizens, especially Jews, pressuring the U.S. government to change its foreign policy. He states emphatically, “Israel is like the 51st star on your flag. We get three to five billion dollars every year, much of which is military support, and we need to cut this immediately. It is harming our lives.”

Both agree that a two-state solution is necessary, with the Palestinian state consisting of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. However, they hope that in the future, the land will someday be one state of all of its people—in the words of al-Khatib, like South Africa.

Both emphatically stated that “Dialogue alone without the commitment to struggle for change only serves the occupation, it can make you part of the occupation and the system that’s causing so much suffering to so many people.” Members of CFP have taken concrete steps by participating in Palestinian-led nonviolent direct action against Israel’s wall that confiscates Palestinian farmland (see PeacePower, Winter 2006 and Summer 2006, for more details on the anti-wall struggle in villages such as Budrus and Bil’in). Perhaps CFP could draw on the history of successful nonviolent movements to engage in other creative actions, such as organizing a massive march from one end of the West Bank

to the other, en route refusing to cooperate with any of the checkpoints that are internal to the West Bank and accepting the full consequences of the action.

A REAL ALTERNATIVE?

Shapira says, "We want to create an alternative, so that young people on both sides can join us instead of army or militia groups." Shapira's idea is both a challenge and opportunity—what will CFP do that will provide people with a comprehensive alternative to military activities?

As Tal Palter-Palman proposed in her initial report on the refusnik movement, CFP members could organize a binational "nonviolent army," modeled after Gandhi's "Shanti Sena" peace army, to protect the civilians of both sides of the conflict (with more attention to the Palestinians as the oppressed/occupied party). Recently (November 2006), Palestinian civilians managed to halt Israeli air strikes in the Gaza Strip by surrounding the targeted homes with their own bodies.⁶ If CFP members were to practice such direct nonviolent intervention, not only might it "succeed" in stopping attacks, but it also might work on a deeper level to persuade skeptical "extremists" such as Israeli settlers and militant members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad of the power and righteousness of CFP's vision.

TOWARD A NONVIOLENT FUTURE

Some members of CFP are "selective refusers" who would fight in a war under certain conditions, and others joined the group because they have concluded that violence will solve nothing. For others, their work within CFP may represent a deeper and more conscious commitment to the principles of nonviolence. Shapira says that the struggle is not only for Palestinian liberation, but also "liberation for Israelis from being occupiers." This is highly reminiscent of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who famously said that he was struggling for freedom for both blacks and freedom for whites from oppressing blacks in the U.S.

According to Palestinian Mohamed Asayad, "God has written that this land was given to two peoples to live on it side by side."⁷ As more Palestinians and Israelis come to realize they have no choice but to live together, perhaps like Yonatan and Souliman they will even decide that they want to live together—and be willing to do the hard work and make the sacrifices for it to happen.

Resources and References:

Combatants for Peace: www.combatantsforpeace.org
Webcast video of Yonatan and Souliman (RealMedia):
Visit <http://webcast.berkeley.edu>, click "events" and search for Combatants for Peace. (Edited transcripts of their remarks appear in this article.)

1 Ines Ehrlic, "Close Encounters of a Third Kind," Ynet News, 9/14/06, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3303768,00.html>

2 Ibid. 3 Ibid.

4 Larry Derfner, "Brothers in Arms?," The Jerusalem Post, 8/17/06, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1154525891585&pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull>

5 Ibid.

6 "Human Shield Deters Israel Strike," BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6162494.stm

7 Ehrlic.

Yonatan Shapira Israeli member, Combatants for Peace



"In my childhood, I learned about Israel's beautiful democracy with peace, equality, justice, and freedom. But I wasn't aware that at the same time, three and one half million Palestinians were living without all these beautiful values. I eventually realized it was impossible to want peace and to continue to oppress millions of people, to put them in prison, to kill them and to stop them at checkpoints and to do all these horrible things.

Everything we (Souliman and I) do is out of love for our country, out of our connection to our Jewish and Muslim and Christian traditions. Everything I say is out of love and real concern for the Israeli and Palestinian people.

I was born on an Air Force base, my father was a squadron commander in the Yom Kippur war, and I became a pilot. But I didn't know the whole story. If you learn about the Israeli Independence Day but not about the *Naqba* [the "Catastrophe" of 1948 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians became refugees--ed], it is biased history, it's half true, it's indoctrinating you to think in a certain way.

I flew Black Hawk helicopter rescue missions, to take injured civilians to hospitals. When I wasn't in uniform I protested the occupation. But eventually I realized that we are part of the occupation. During the second Intifada, the Israeli government started the policy of 'targeted assassinations,' and in one such operation they sent an F16 in the middle of the night to drop a one-ton bomb on the home of a Hamas commander in the Gaza Strip. Fourteen innocent civilians died, including nine children. These are war crimes. Dropping bombs on a densely populated area is as terrible as suicide bombings on buses.

We are facing a catastrophe. People are being killed every day. We want and need you to join our struggle. Nonviolent actions achieve nothing without the participation of the public and the international community."

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