



# On Breaking Bread and Stones

## A Review of the Literature of International Peace Teams in Palestine

Alain Epp Weaver

Internationals march with Palestinians in Birzeit, 2 February, 2002. The demonstration was broken up by the Israeli military with tear gas and sound bombs. *Source: CCMEP*

*Peace under Fire: Israel/Palestine and the International Solidarity Movement.* Edited by Josie Sandercock, Radhika Sainath, Marissa McLaughlin, Hussein Khalili, Nicholas Blincoe, Huwaida Arraf, and Ghassan Andoni. London: Verso, 2004.

*Searching Jenin: Eyewitness Accounts of the Israeli Invasion.* Edited by Ramzy Baroud. Seattle: Cune Press, 2003.

*Operation Defensive Shield: Witnesses to Israeli War Crimes.* Edited by Muna Hamzeh and Todd May. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

*Live from Palestine: International and Palestinian Direct Action against the Israeli Occupation.* Edited by Nancy Stohlman and Laurieann Aladin. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2003.

Gish, Arthur. *Hebron Journal: Stories of Nonviolent Peacemaking.* Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2001.

*The Morning After: Nablus and Jenin Residents Talk about their Devastation in the Wake of Israeli Incursions March-April 2002.* Bethlehem/Jerusalem: United Civilian for Peace and Christian Accompaniment Team, 2002.

Eva Balslev and Sune Segal. *Security or Segregation? The Humanitarian Consequences of Israel's Wall of Separation.* Geneva: World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, 2003.

“Few of us are used to being rendered irrelevant so quickly,” wrote Trevor Baumgartner, an activist with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in a December 2001 email to supporters. Baumgartner, fellow ISM activists, and Palestinians had been digging away at roadblocks in Deir Istya, Yasuf and other villages in the Salfit region in the northern West Bank, opening up the villages for a fleeting moment to ambulances and everyday traffic. But, Baumgartner noted, “these roads only stayed open as long as we stayed out there,” and Israeli army bulldozers soon moved in to construct the roadblocks anew.<sup>1</sup>

Were the actions of Baumgartner and his fellow activists thus for naught? Baumgartner appears to be of two minds. “For non-violence to be relevant,” he argues, “it has to have some clearly visible successes”.<sup>2</sup> If success means dismantling the apparatus of control represented by the roadblocks and checkpoints that hem in scores of Palestinian villages, then the success of the actions of Baumgartner and others must be judged to be fleeting and ephemeral at best.

But Baumgartner also appears to believe that other criteria should be marshalled to judge the relevance of ISM’s non-violent actions. “Though we may only be able to open a road for a few hours,” he argues, “the relationships that we make with the locals can’t be buried.” That Baumgartner evaluates non-violent action not only in terms of *realpolitik* effectiveness is suggested by the almost religious description he gives to working alongside the villagers of Deir Istya and Yasuf. “Each day people from the villages would come out with tea and piping hot flat bread and *zaatar*, to break bread and stones with us,” he writes.<sup>3</sup> Is it reading too much into Baumgartner’s account to view this description of Palestinians and international activists eating and working together as a portrayal of a secular Eucharist? If the machinery and military might of occupation render non-violent action “irrelevant,” replacing roadblocks almost as quickly as they are dismantled, Baumgartner is at least comforted by the ties that have been forged in the action itself, with the action becoming a sign of a future and fulfilment.

ISM is part of an alphabet soup of acronyms (CPT, EAPPI, and UCP are others) that designate some of the more prominent international peace teams that have operated in the Occupied Territories during this second Intifada. (The Christian Peacemaker Teams or CPT predates the other groups, having become involved in Palestine during the first Intifada. With the killings by the Israeli military of Rachel Corrie

and Tom Hurndall, ISM activists in Rafah, the role of international peace teams in Palestine received world-wide attention. Mustafa Barghouti has called these teams (“organizations” seems too formal a word for groups with as decentralized structures as these) “the positive side of globalization”.<sup>4</sup>

Primarily originating in Europe and North America, but also attracting activists from the rest of the world, these groups come to report, observe, bear witness, show solidarity, and join Palestinians in non-violent direct action. Their motives for coming to the occupied territories vary. Some are secular, some religious, some are committed pacifists and some are tactical proponents of non-violence, but all of them rely on email distribution lists, websites and blogs to disseminate their reports. The internet and email technology allow for the rapid transmission of reports ‘from the front’, reports that serve both as alternative news sources and as spurs to advocacy and action. The immediacy of email reports, however, results in a certain ephemeral quality, with the report lasting only as long as it is kept in one’s inbox. Ignore the prophets of a paperless future: people will continue to demand the (seeming) permanence of books.

It should therefore come as no surprise that over the past couple of years book-length collections of reports, testimonies, and essays by international peace activists, most of which originally appeared in electronic form, have been released. An examination of these publications highlights the promises of and challenges for international peace teams operating in the midst of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: faced with ‘being rendered irrelevant’ by the machinery and bureaucracy of military occupation, what sustains international peace teams? What narratives of hope give them comfort?

The books under review here differ in style and substance. *Peace Under Fire* provides a history of sorts of ISM, primarily through a chronological ordering of email reports and testimonies clustered around specific events (the sieges of Arafat’s headquarters and the Church of the Nativity; the killings of Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall and the maiming of Brian Avery) and around types of action (helping Palestinian farmers threatened by Israeli settlers bring in the olive harvest; dismantling checkpoints; protesting the construction of the separation barrier). *Live from Palestine* also promises (on its back-cover) to give “the inside story of the unprecedented International Solidarity Movement”, while also incorporating email reports from Palestinians (mostly written during Israel’s “Operation Defensive Shield”) and reflections on the role of internationals in the struggle for Palestinian rights.

The first half of *Operation Defensive Shield* consists of the testimonies (again most of them originally distributed in email form) of internationals, Palestinians, and Israelis, interspersed with day-to-day descriptions of the events of the Israeli military invasions of West Bank cities during the spring of 2002; the second half, written by the editors, assesses the humanitarian, economic, and social impact of the military operation, discusses the responsibility borne by the United States and European and Arab countries, and presents the invasions as a “prelude to ethnic cleansing.”

*Searching Jenin*, a project spearheaded by Palestinian-American journalist Ramzy Baroud, and *The Morning After*, an undertaking of United Civilians for Peace (UCP), a group sponsored by Dutch church-related organizations such as Cordaid and Novib, differ from the books above in that they are compilations primarily of Palestinian rather than expatriate testimonies, fitting more into an oral history or human rights case study genre than the other books. As its title suggests, *Searching Jenin* presents the testimonies of residents of the Jenin refugee camp - taken by Palestinian reporters - who describe the Israeli invasion of the camp (a shorter second section of the book does provide “international observer testimonies”), while *The Morning After* presents testimonies (taken by UCP members), structured as “case studies,” of Palestinians from different parts of the occupied territories speaking about the spring 2002 invasions of West Bank cities.

*Security or Segregation?* and *Hebron Journal* differ from the other volumes under consideration in that they are the works of one or two authors rather than compilations of reports and testimonies from multiple people. *Security or Segregation?*, written by Eva Balslev and Sune Segal while they were with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) of the World Council of Churches, examines, in the form of short booklet, the impact of the Israeli separation barrier/wall in the occupied territories, with analysis and description built around ‘diary’ entries recorded in the northern West Bank village of Falamiya. Art Gish’s *Hebron Journal*, meanwhile, presents the diary reflections of one member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams, a primarily North American venture with roots in the historic peace churches (Quakers, Church of the Brethren, Mennonites), about his time in and around the city of Hebron in the southern West Bank. While both CPT and EAPPI (which claims CPT as inspiration and model) send out email reports and testimonies and maintain websites on which these documents are posted, neither group has (yet) produced a compilation of these documents similar to *Peace under Fire* or *Live from Palestine*. Gish’s book of journal entries is also distinguished from the others in that it is the only one that is self-consciously Christian in vocabulary and aimed primarily at a Christian audience.

The first thing that must be said about these books is that they all contain moments of arresting poignancy. Reflections such as “The Boy Who Kissed the Soldier”,<sup>5</sup> by the US-based activist Starhawk, “Muhammad’s Killer”,<sup>6</sup> by the Israeli peace worker Neta Golan, and the email diaries of Palestinian academic Islah Jad<sup>7</sup> transcend the immediacy of their original electronic format and achieve an enduring poignancy; these, and the compilation of testimonies from Jenin camp in *Searching Jenin*, articulate a tragic reality that defies easy hope and that will haunt most readers long after the books have been closed.

Most of the writers whose emails, reports, and testimonies are anthologized in these books are admirably sensitive to the politics of representation. Miriam Ferrier, quoted in a *New York Times* article about ISM, might claim that “we are a voice for the Palestinian people”<sup>8</sup>, but on the whole the international writers in these collections

speak for themselves and of their own experiences. Their voices carry a welcome humility and health sense of humour and irony about themselves, rather than setting themselves up as spokespersons for Palestinians. As the electronic diary entries written by Palestinians included in these collections make clear, Palestinians can clearly articulate their own realities and experiences themselves. Arjan el-Fassed, organizer of an electronic diaries project for the Electronic Intifada website, observes that “We do not need permission to narrate; it is our duty”.<sup>9</sup> The oral testimonies Palestinians from Jenin camp included in *Searching Jenin*, moreover, narrate the Israeli invasion of the camp in much greater breadth, depth and power than the testimonies of international observers included in the book’s second half. These testimonies of camp residents, editor Ramzy Baroud asserts, testimonies that are made “not by a third party, but by the survivors,” serve to “remind the world that the Palestinian voice has not been silenced and continues to long for freedom”.<sup>10</sup>

International peace activists from Europe and North America might sometimes use their ‘privileged’ position as Westerners to facilitate for Palestinians a hearing in Western circles, but this does not obscure the need to listen to Palestinians narrate their own stories. That anthologies such as *Peace under Fire* and *Live from Palestine* include Palestinian testimonies indicates that the editors are aware of the danger: that those who presume to be a ‘voice for the voiceless’ end up inadvertently silencing (or drowning out) those for whom they advocate.

In addition to containing moments of lyric beauty and tragedy, these volumes, read together, give the reader a detailed picture of international peace teams working in the Occupied Territories. A cursory reading of these books will show that the motivations of international activists for coming to Palestine are varied. The International Solidarity Movement, for example, is a secular group that describes itself as “a Palestinian-led, non-violent” movement. Attracting many activists from the anti-capitalist, anti-globalization left and operating with a fairly loose, “decentralized,” “consensus-based structure,” ISM builds itself around “affinity groups” clustered in different parts of the Occupied Territories.<sup>11</sup> Christian Peacemaker Teams, meanwhile, is an explicitly Christian organization, “a faith-based group, rooted in the non-violent gospel of Jesus, and acting out of a spiritual center.”<sup>12</sup> Yet whatever the motivations for coming to Palestine, these various groups (or “movements”) engage in many of the same activities and share many of the same objectives.

Art Gish summarizes the goals of CPT as seeking “to be an active non-violent presence in the midst of the conflict,” supporting “local non-violent groups, both Israeli and Palestinian,” and acting “as international observers”.<sup>13</sup> Such goals would be shared by others groups like UCP and EAPPI. In all, international peace teams appear to share several common objectives. First, these groups all seek to be an ‘alternative’ to the mainstream media. Dissatisfied with the news coverage of Palestine/Israel by major news outlets, activists release their own news reports via their email networks. Second, these peace teams frequently understand themselves as international human rights observers: in a context in which the international community has

failed to hold Israel accountable for its violations of the Geneva Conventions in the Occupied Territories, teams of civilians must take up the monitoring and reporting responsibilities that states and international bodies shirk. Third, they seek to show solidarity by joining Palestinians (or sometimes, more specifically, Palestinian and Israeli peace activists) in their daily lives and struggles. And finally, some of these peace teams (ISM and CPT, certainly, and to a lesser extent EAPPI and UCP) seek to use the tools of non-violent direct action to counter the violence of military occupation (e.g., dismantling roadblocks, staying in Palestinian homes slated for demolition).

Reading the literature of international peace teams also uncovers several recurring struggles. First, are international peace teams joining an existing Palestinian non-violence movement? Or are they jumpstarting, encouraging, or strengthening such a movement? Or both? Second, is non-violence understood as a lifestyle, part of one's fundamental commitments? Or is it an expedient tactic? Or both? Finally, what sustains these actors' hope in the tools of non-violent direct action?

## **Joining and Modelling, Not Preaching, Non-Violence**

Several of the writers in these volumes are keenly aware of the danger of international peace teams functioning as 'peace colonialists' who seek to impose a non-violent model on Palestinians and thus disempower Palestinians by assuming the locus of change lies not with Palestinians but with outside actors. International peace workers, it is stressed repeatedly, are not *imposing* but are rather *joining* Palestinian efforts. The authors resist images of Palestinians as passively awaiting outside redemption. Palestinians have not, Art Gish of CPT writes, accepted "the role of powerless victims".<sup>14</sup> Palestinians are understood to be active agents involved in various forms of resistance, resistance that international peace teams seek to support. The stated ISM goal is thus one of "complementing Palestinian resistance, not replacing it".<sup>15</sup>

Edward Mast of ISM emphasizes the need to "avoid heroics or romantic notions." Reflecting on the first ISM campaign in 2001, Mast underscores that "we were there not to show Palestinians how to be non-violent, we were going to join as foot soldiers in a Palestinian non-violent campaign".<sup>16</sup> Huwaida Arraf, one of the founders of ISM, concurs, arguing that "we're not showing Palestinians a new way to resist".<sup>17</sup> While the claim by Abdel-Jawad Saleh of Birzeit University that "history will show that Palestinians responded to the Israeli occupation with an energetic and well-organized non-violent resistance movement that was threatened at every turn"<sup>18</sup> is probably overstated, Saleh and Arraf both helpfully highlight the indigenous character of non-violent direct action in Palestine: from commercial strikes to defiance of curfew, non-violent resistance has been a component of Palestinian struggle for decades.

Yet even as international peace groups emphasize that they are coming to join a Palestinian initiative, they understand international involvement to be a crucial element of at least strengthening - if not jump-starting - a Palestinian movement

of non-violent direct action. Ghassan Andoni, one of ISM's co-founders, writes of the "need to find a way for the Palestinian masses to join in [resistance], in an active way".<sup>19</sup> The phrase "in an active way" bears underscoring. On the one hand, the desire for "active" resistance reflects a critique - which goes more or less unstated throughout most of these books (except for Gish's *Hebron Journal*) - of the disempowering character of most armed resistance. Armed resistance in practice invariably involves only a small portion of the community, whereas non-violence can be practiced by young and old, by men and women, by all sectors of society. Other critiques of armed struggle are also implicitly and explicitly at play in these books. Armed struggle against Israel is arguably doomed to be ineffective, proponents of non-violence might contend, given Israel's overwhelming military superiority and its control of the terrain that makes waging a traditional guerrilla campaign difficult at best. For members of CPT, meanwhile, recourse to violent struggle appears as a failure to worship God properly. Convinced of the inadequacy or the wrongness of armed struggle, international peace teams seek to make non-violent action persuasive through demonstration. While ISM recognizes that "preaching [non-violence] is out of the question." Given the respect accorded by many Palestinians to the *fedayeen* (self-sacrificers) and the *shuhada* (martyrs) who have followed the path of armed struggle, non-violent direct action will not gain traction among Palestinians if it is framed as a critique of armed struggle; ISM therefore believes that it can succeed in making non-violence an attractive option for Palestinians by 'modelling' non-violent resistance, rather than preaching against armed struggle.<sup>20</sup>

In some communities threatened by the wall that Israel is building in the West Bank, such as villages like Budrus, east of Ramallah, ISM has been successful, as communities have found non-violent resistance a relatively effective way of protesting the confiscation of their lands. In villages like Budrus, organized non-violent demonstrations have succeeded both in raising international awareness of the impact of the separation barrier on average Palestinians and in occasionally delaying the barrier's construction and in slightly altering its path. That the barrier continues to be built indicates that success in these matters is very much relative.

The yearning for a more "active" form of resistance also reflects a desire to counter the apathy that spread among many Palestinians during the Oslo period, when the political capital they had gained through the first Intifada was by most accounts squandered. And today, as emotional and physical energies are focused on survival, on negotiating checkpoints, curfews, and roadblocks to get to work, to school, to hospital, little energy remains for communal political activity. Writing from Nablus in 2002, Eric Levine described an "amazing spirit of resistance combined with zombified carrying-on-with-life".<sup>21</sup> Average Palestinians might resist occupation in a wide variety of ways using what James Scott calls the "weapons of the weak" (e.g., exaggerated deference to soldiers at checkpoints, or finding ways around roadblocks), but Andoni highlights the need for more active resistance: in addition to the hidden transcripts of everyday resistance to military, social, and political mechanisms of control, Andoni argues that Palestinians must "challenge the occupation by dismantling its ability to

control people,” by, for example, organizing mass defiance of military curfews or the physical dismantling of roadblocks and checkpoints.<sup>22</sup> The display of *sumud*, of an obdurate steadfastness on the land, a dogged determination to carry on with life despite the obstacles, is, of course, a form of resistance, but one that simply helps one cope with the mechanisms of control rather than dismantle them.

Several writers express the hope that international peace teams, by providing the protection of their expatriate status, might encourage and strengthen active Palestinian non-violent resistance. “Our goal,” according to ISM co-founder George Rishmawi, “is to help Palestinians do non-violent resistance because when they do it without international accompaniment they are met with terrible violence”.<sup>23</sup> Mark Schneider, also of ISM, echoes the hope that “if we shared some of their danger, Palestinians could share some of our safety”.<sup>24</sup> The killings of Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall sadly demonstrate, of course, that the restraint the Israeli military will show around international peace activists is limited. Nevertheless, international peace teams, Mustafa Barghouti believes, have “contributed to the ability of Palestinians to demonstrate peacefully”.<sup>25</sup>

## **Non-violence as Lifestyle or Strategy**

For Ghassan Andoni and others in ISM, non-violent direct action is a tactic, a means of resisting the occupation. “Palestinians,” Andoni and others in ISM insist, “have the full right to resist the Occupation with means that they think are suitable.” ISM models non-violent resistance in the hopes that Palestinians will come to view it as an effective tool, but makes no judgment about other forms of resistance.<sup>26</sup> For a group such as CPT, however, non-violence, while certainly viewed as a potentially effective technique of resistance, emerges from a style of life shaped by fundamental religious commitments incompatible with the use of violent force. Non-violence, Art Gish of CPT insists in his diaries, is not a science, but is rather an art, or, better yet, a form of prayer.<sup>27</sup> Non-violent direct action, for CPT, unfolds within the broader framework of a life shaped by religious actions and commitments. The evil of occupation and killing, Gish claims, “will not be overcome without much prayer and fasting”.<sup>28</sup>

Among pacifist Christians the distinction between faithfulness and effectiveness is often made. Christians are called to lives of non-violence because they are to be faithful to the God revealed in Jesus Christ; if non-violent action is sometimes also politically effective, then that is a grace to be welcomed with thanksgiving, but the potential effectiveness of non-violent action is not the reason for its adoption. Christian pacifist commitment also means a call to love one’s enemies, and so in Gish’s *Hebron Journal* (unlike any of the other books under review) one finds Gish seeking to understand Hebron’s settlers, to interact with them to the extent possible, to pray for them, even as he and other CPTers gently oppose the violence inflicted by the settlers on the Palestinians of Hebron and its surrounding villages. “I do not want to act out of anger,” Gish writes, “and I want to love the oppressors”.<sup>29</sup> When

non-violence is gauged solely in terms of effectiveness, love of enemy is an irrelevant category. While different activists who join up with ISM might be motivated by different religious or ideological pacifist commitments, ISM as a movement, in contrast to CPT, makes only a utilitarian argument for non-violence.

## **A Dream on Its Way to Becoming Reality: Grounds for Hope**

What happens, however, when non-violence ‘fails’, as judged by the standards of effectiveness? As noted at the beginning of this review essay, narratives of hope must be constructed to sustain non-violent action even as it is rendered “irrelevant.” (And certainly, those who engage in armed struggle also construct such narratives of hope in the face of repeated setbacks and failures.) Trevor Baumgartner of ISM sounds a commonly heard refrain when he insists that “in the end the power of right will win out over the power of might”.<sup>30</sup> Art Gish of CPT, meanwhile, finds hope in “the power of love and truth, that no army can conquer”.<sup>31</sup> Even when “success” is momentary and fleeting, it is viewed as a sign of a future on its way to fulfilment. Ghassan Andoni, celebrating ISM success in helping Palestinian villagers access their olive groves for the harvest, proclaimed that “what was a dream is on its way to becoming a reality”<sup>32</sup>: the eschatological future incarnated in a sign in the present.

Reading these confessions and promises of hope, one is reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s conviction that “the moral arm of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” For Christian pacifists, such as Gish and his fellow CPTers, convictions like this about the direction of history are shaped theological convictions about God’s defeat of the powers of sin and death in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For secular peace activists, the conviction that the power of right will in the end defeat the power of might appears rooted in a confidence (or perhaps a desperate hope) that history (or History, with a capital H), despite all appearances, is moving towards greater freedom and justice. A brief review essay such as this is not the place to assess which foundation for hope is more secure. Intriguingly, these anthologies of reports from the field are strongest when they don’t move too quickly to words of hope, but linger instead on the tragic. “There is no happy ending to this story, no cheerful resolution,” the ISM activist Starhawk writes near the end of “The Boy Who Kissed the Soldier.” Asked by a friend about the source of her belief in what can make for peace, Starhawk replies, “I have no answer. Every song is tainted; every story goes on too long and turns nasty”.<sup>33</sup> Whether acting out of secular or religious convictions, many international peace activists have undoubtedly gone through a similar dark night of the soul, for in a world where the power of might routinely and repeatedly triumphs over the power of right, the hope that right will, in the end (even if only eschatologically), be victorious can feel all-too-frail.

*Alain Epp Weaver is the Mennonite Central Committee’s Representative for Palestine, Jordan and Iraq.*

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> *Peace under Fire: Israel/Palestine and the International Solidarity Movement*, 37.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 41.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 37.
- <sup>4</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 13.
- <sup>5</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 89-95.
- <sup>6</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 94-95.
- <sup>7</sup> in *Live from Palestine, and Operation Defensive Shield: Witnesses to Israeli War Crimes*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 52.
- <sup>9</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 23.
- <sup>10</sup> *Searching Jenin*, 32.
- <sup>11</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> *Hebron Journal*, 15
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 15.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 174
- <sup>15</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 65.
- <sup>16</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 24.
- <sup>17</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 74.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 51.
- <sup>19</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 12.
- <sup>20</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 184.
- <sup>21</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 157.
- <sup>22</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 181.
- <sup>23</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 7.
- <sup>24</sup> *Live from Palestine*, 87
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 13.
- <sup>26</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 12.
- <sup>27</sup> *Hebron Journal*, 112.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 277.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 90.
- <sup>30</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 40.
- <sup>31</sup> *Hebron Journal*, 117.
- <sup>32</sup> *Peace under Fire*, 189.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

