

A 'Freedom Summer' of Non-violence

In a compelling turning point, a group launches peaceful campaign to protest the Israeli barrier

By Gary Fields



Israelis and Palestinians Demonstrate Against Israeli Security Wall in Ar-Ram, June 26th. Photo by Gary Fields

Among the questions raised in the aftermath of the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Israeli Wall, one that remains hidden but is no less critical for understanding the next phase of the conflict is the impact of the decision on the Palestinian resistance movement against the Barrier. The fact that Palestinians have organized nonviolent protest against the Wall is rarely, if ever covered by the American media preoccupied as it is with Palestinian violence and corruption. Yet, Palestinian resistance against the Wall is already embedded in a landscape of nonviolent protest operating in the shadow of the Barrier that promises to change the nature of the conflict this summer.

For the past 18 months, nonviolent demonstrations have proliferated in West Bank localities where the Wall threatens to isolate residents from their land and undermine their livelihood. Concurrently, this period has witnessed the growth of a fledgling political movement operating outside both the Palestinian Authority, and the various Islamic parties.

Spearheaded by prominent Palestinians such as human rights activist, Mustafa Barghouti, this movement known as the “Palestinian National Initiative,” is seeking to forge a secular, democratic

resistance to occupation. Together, local organizers of nonviolence against the Wall along with numerous other Palestinian organizations, and the Palestinian Initiative are planning an ambitious campaign of nonviolent resistance to Israeli occupation with a focus on the most poignant metaphor of occupation, the Wall.

Dubbed “Freedom Summer” to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the celebrated events of the American civil rights movement, this campaign represents a compelling political turning point in Palestinian efforts to end 37 years of Israeli military rule. Organizers of Freedom Summer are contemplating a nationally coordinated series of nonviolent actions at selected sites in the West Bank comprising Palestinians, Israelis and Internationals, along with a mass march from Jenin in the North, to Hebron along the route of the Wall.

As a new and largely untested political force, however, the Palestinian Freedom Summer campaign confronts two critical issues: first, whether Palestinians will respond in numbers sufficient to make the nonviolent campaign successful, and second whether Israelis will respond to the campaign of nonviolent resistance with lethal force.

Mass action needed

Ghassen Andoni, Director of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement Between People and a central organizer of Freedom Summer, acknowledges the importance of a large Palestinian base for the campaign. Mass action is needed, he explains, to overcome the limitations of circumscribed demonstrations in individual localities. For this reason organizers are aiming their efforts more broadly, modeling the nonviolent campaign this summer on the historic events in Mississippi.

As to how Israeli army and police units will respond to the events planned for the Palestinian Freedom Summer, perhaps the best indication was given June 26th during a demonstration against the Wall in the West Bank town of Ar Ram near Jerusalem.

When on that day Israeli army and police units fired an initial volley of concussion grenades at the Ar Ram demonstrators, they were clearly sending more than a warning to the 3000 peacefully protesting the expansion of the Separation Wall. Indeed, the explosions that cracked through the afternoon air, and the violent onslaught unleashed against the marchers by Israeli forces over the course of the next two hours were intended as an unambiguous message. Peaceful protest against the Wall in the Territories occupied by Israel, whatever the outcome of the World Court decision, will not be tolerated.

Much like the actions coordinated by Palestinians against the Barrier in other localities, the march in Ar Ram was organized as a peaceful protest against what has come to be the most overt symbol of Israeli control over Palestinian society. The event in Ar Ram, however, had three distinguishing elements.

Firstly, Ar Ram marked the initial day of activity against occupation and the Wall associated with Freedom Summer. Secondly, organizers aimed at numbers not in the hundreds typical of recent demonstrations against the Wall, but in the *thousands*. Finally, this march was to have a larger presence of Israelis and Internationals joining in common cause with Palestinians against the Barrier.

I came to the Ar Ram demonstration with five busloads of Israelis and Internationals, who would link up with a contingent of roughly 2000 Palestinians. Arabic and Hebrew chants could be heard accompanied by a Palestinian bagpipe band of 50 musicians.

The march had been going fifteen minutes when Israeli soldiers, without provocation, charged toward protestors and unloaded the initial volley of stun grenades at the crowd. In the next instant they fired the first of hundreds of teargas canisters as peaceful protest gave way to the sounds and smell of violence.

I had been photographing the demonstration near the Israeli barrage and became engulfed in the initial volleys of tear gas. As I began my escape, I ran into a shocked bagpipe player from the march and can not forget the bewildered and dispirited image he presented, his bagpipe still in hand. I also heard all around me what sounded like rocks hitting the nearby buildings. They were bullets. Israel army and police units were firing live ammunition at peaceful demonstrators!

I watched Israeli forces pummel the crowd for the next two hours with tear gas, concussion grenades, and live fire. I witnessed Israeli special forces, identifiable by black ski masks, move alongside Israeli army and police personnel, seeking out demonstrators to beat and arrest. I captured on film the beating and arrest of Mohammed Mansour, one of the lead organizers of the nonviolent resistance campaign against the Wall in the town of Biddu. After the arrest of Mansour and injuries to 50 demonstrators, the Israelis finally ended the siege. The air was thick with tear gas.

Response to force in question

Based on the day's activities and the aims of Palestinian organizers, it promises to be an intriguing summer. Whether Palestinians will heed the call by organizers of Freedom Summer to engage in nonviolent resistance in sufficient numbers when confronted by Israeli force to make the campaign a political success is an unanswered question. Palestinians have a difficult task ahead. They confront an occupying power with one of the world's most formidable military arsenals, backed by the world's lone superpower, the U.S. There is hardly a more classic case of David and Goliath.

On the other hand, the World Court Opinion creates an enormous opening for Palestinians to build a mass based nonviolent resistance movement to the Wall and occupation. The Opinion unambiguously states that the Wall is illegal and calls upon the International Community to enforce the decision.

As it confronts this new reality, however, Palestinian society hovers in a pattern of political uncertainty, poised between on the one side a Palestinian Authority in disarray, and on the other side the various Islamic parties. Barghouti insists, nevertheless, that between these poles is a huge constituency for a third political force. How the leadership of this new movement can use the opening created by the World Court to galvanize a Palestinian public trampled upon for the last four years by Israeli occupiers, and mobilize this public for a campaign of nonviolent protest will be something to watch closely in the weeks ahead. The whole world will be watching.

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