

Marches Against Slavery

Statement Arab Educational Institute about Gaza

Bethlehem, 12 April 2018

Also in Bethlehem we observe the Gaza demonstrations: the large demonstrations, the many cold-blooded killings and the injured but also the plans ahead for the coming Fridays, inspired by traditions of peaceful resistance.

Apparently, each time there will be a different theme of challenging nonviolence. One plan circulating is a 'Shoe Friday' when shoes would be thrown at the Israeli sharpshooters. The nonviolence reminds of the weekly demonstrations against the Separation Wall that happened in the village of Bil'in in the West Bank, from about 2005 on. There each Friday a different theme from daily life was chosen to support and give color to the demonstrations.

Thus, demonstrators wore blue Avatar clothes, from the film, or locked themselves up in a cage with children toys, or played football during World Cup matches. At one point a leader told an AEI conference in Bethlehem that the Bil'in demonstrators even *sang* in front of the army. These actions are not much known but important to remember for future non-violence. They also resonate with the beginning of the Arab Spring when popular mobilization unlocked creative energies.

The energy brought out in Gaza is that of an anti-slavery movement with peace as its weapon.

This despite the frame of violence customarily put on the demonstrators by the Israeli army and government and also evoked in some of the reporting and headlines of international media speaking about 'deadly protests' or 'the violence' or, even more misleading, 'violent clashes'. Such expressions associate the violence with the demonstrators rather than with the soldiers-sharpshooters who from a safe distance of hundreds of meters choose their human targets, usually outside the photographers' or filmers' views. Walking the Great March of Return, which is also a march of freedom out of closed-up Gaza, the young people show great courage as they have to fear for their lives.

Yet an observer like Nathan Thrall of the *International Crisis Group* commented that “You had huge numbers going on their own initiative.” “People didn’t feel they were at a protest, they felt they were at some kind of a celebration” (quoted in the *New York Times*, 7/4/2018). An article by Amira Hass of the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (1/4/2018) described a festive, civilian atmosphere during the first Friday march just before the shootings and killings started. The tens of thousands of demonstrators have been chanting, singing, shouting, and creating a joint human voice.

The need for humanity stands out. One Gaza website with ongoing news about the demonstrations is significantly named *wearenotnumbers.org*. During the previous onslaught in Gaza, in 2014, the Israeli human rights group B’tselem wanted to put ads on Israeli radio in which the names of the daily Palestinian victims were to be read. The ads were refused, humanization was too controversial.

But while communities can unfortunately be locked up as in Gaza, a story cannot be locked up. In the present marches the demonstrators want clearly and simply to convey the human Palestinian story against slavery. They make use of the Palestinian political calendar that annually starts in spring time with Land Day (30 March, protecting the land against expropriations), followed by Prisoners Day in April, and especially Nakbeh Day on May 15/16, when the eviction of over 700.000 Palestinians in 1948 from their homeland is commemorated. By their very marching the Palestinians live the story of return, in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 194 from 1948 that acknowledges the right of return. The demonstrators liken the marches to those of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, recently brought back in the news with the commemoration of Martin Luther King’s killing 50 years ago.

Much of the demonstrators’ motivation comes from a sense of despair after the political marginalization of Palestinian rights, especially in Jerusalem. The US administration says it offers Palestinians the deal of the century. But putting Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty, the deal in fact starts with a new injustice, supported by some Arab states such as Saudi Arabia presently conducting a charm offensive towards the West.

But the demonstrators send a signal to the Palestinian political factions too which until now have been unable to reach national unity. The participants and organizers actually come from a range of Palestinian political factions, while many, if not the majority, are from outside the established political parties. It seems that the energy of the actions is broadly, nationally based: most flags carried are the Palestinian-national ones. Nonetheless, Hamas is massively present and doing much of the actions' management.

In line with a call of the Palestinian civil society organizations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which it supports, AEI calls for international initiatives and campaigns against Israel's racist practice in confronting Palestinian peaceful resistance with violence and the cold-blooded killing of Palestinians, and pressing Israel to stop this violence and enter the real road to peace. If the "deal of the century" will once take place, it must begin with the recognition by Israel and the American administration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinians and from there to start negotiations.

If Israel with the support of others wants to keep us in slavery, we will stand up and say no to slavery. The march of injustice, however long, will weigh upon their conscience day after day. Instead of the march of injustice we will continue with peace marches, strong in being unarmed, and demanding life, freedom and equality. More so, we call for thousands of peace marches to continue in Gaza and throughout the West Bank, and internationally to strengthen the boycott movement against the Israeli occupation, and put pressure on governments to wake up from their silence and move to compel Israel to respect international resolutions and treaties, end occupation and accept a just peace.