

The price of resisting the occupation in Israel: "leftists aren't allowed..."

Written by Reggie

Tuesday, 18 November 2008 23:36

Several weeks ago, while on a solidarity visit with Ta'ayush (www.taayush.org) in the South Hebron hills region of the West Bank, we were stopped by a makeshift Israeli Army roadblock and told that we could not pass into a closed military zone. Having all traveled that road many times before with no problem, and watching settlers whiz by us, we asked to see the military order. Before producing it, the soldier said, "I am very happy for any Jew to visit the Land of Israel, but leftists aren't allowed."

This provoked a great deal of incredulous laughter among us, but we never did get through that day. And for me, it was one of the gentler reminders of the level of repression faced by Israeli activists against the occupation. Of course the repression faced by Israeli activists cannot compare to the repression experienced by Palestinian activists, and in fact much of the strategy of Israeli activists is to use their privileged status to ratchet down the level of violence employed by Israel. But for the purposes of this column specifically, the focus is on the Israeli side of the movement.

There is a kind of conventional wisdom among anti-occupation activists, especially in the United States, that in Israel there is a wider and more honest range of viewpoints regarding the occupation. This perspective is part of the strategy to sell Israel as the "only democracy in the Middle East" to the rest of the world. To a certain extent it is true. Activist NGOs receive coverage in the press and ideas are discussed on the Op-Ed pages here that are not yet acceptable in the U.S. For example, the word "apartheid" which is still anathema in the United States, has become common enough to be unremarkable when found on a front page here in Israel.

On the other, less obvious hand, however, the level of repression against activists in Israel is multi-faceted, violent, and effective. There are so many examples that it is hard to choose only a few, but consider just a handful of examples from recent months:

--New Profile (www.newprofile.org) a feminist NGO that challenges the role of the military in society and counsels youth about alternatives to joining the Israeli Army, is currently under state threat to rescind their NGO status as well as a criminal investigation. Although at least half of eligible 18 year olds choose not to enter the army by exercising religious exemptions or for psychological or physical reasons, in addition to Palestinian citizens of Israel who are not eligible, the state is conspicuously threatening the legitimate activities of an NGO that pointedly looks at draft resistance as an option. This action neatly doubles or even triples down its impact, by simultaneously threatening the organization itself, the youth who are considering alternatives to Army service, and other NGOs who understand that they are being monitored and could face charges at any time.

--More times than can be counted, settlers have physically attacked Israeli, Palestinian, and international activists who attempt to protect Palestinian land. At best, the Israeli Army/ police stand by and watch, at worst, they arrest the protesters "for their own protection." (for just one

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example check out this video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihZutsgssag> by machsom watch <http://www.machsomwatch.org/en>)

--the group Shovrim Shtika ("Breaking the Silence" http://www.shovrimshtika.org/index_e.asp) had to bring a case to the Supreme Court when the Hebron Police stopped allowing the group to bring tours to Hebron to see what is really happening inside that city, because they couldn't guarantee the safety of the participants on the tours. Instead of the settlers being punished for their violent attacks, tours were forbidden for months, and have now started again in a much more limited manner. The settlers, aided by the Israeli security apparatus, are rewarded for their violence while journalists, diplomats, activists and the general public are punished.

--In September, Zeev Sternhall, a respected Professor, Holocaust survivor, and member of Peace Now (<http://www.peacenow.org.il/site/en/homepage.asp>), was injured by a pipe bomb planted at his home (<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1024632.html> for article), and his neighborhood was leafleted by flyers offering an award for killing members of Peace Now. As Sternhall himself noted, this development should not be a surprise, given the tolerance of violence by settlers by the Israeli Police, which has historical antecedents, including the murder of Peace Now activists Emil Grunzweig in 1983 and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

Although all the mainstream politicians condemned the attack, it was noted by many activists that lip service to the rule of law rings hollow given the impunity with which settlers can attack activists and Palestinians.

This list is in no way comprehensive. The Israeli government (whichever party may be in power) and its security apparatus use the settlers, the courts, the jails and violent methods of their own to place limits on the non-violent resistance movement in solidarity with Palestine. While trying to maintain an image of a democratic state, and using that image as one of its arguments for its exceptionality and need for support, it constantly strives to place limits on the bounds of acceptable legitimate dissent while trying to make the price of being part of the movement too high for activists to pay. It is truly a testament to the moral courage and dedication of Israeli activists that they continue to work as tenaciously as they do, but I fear that these tactics have contributed to keeping the movement smaller and further from the mainstream than it should be.

This strategy also has a price inside the Green Line, where violence has become a legitimate way of promoting policy arguments. For example, for several years now, Jerusalem's Gay Pride parade has been severely curtailed due to threats of right-wing violence, when police declare that marchers' safety cannot be guaranteed. Settlers have learned, both inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories, that rather than prosecuting open threats of violence and enforcing the rule of law, the government will accede to their demands.

It is hard to tease out cause and effect between the settlers and the government. Do the settlers enforce the will of the government, or is it the government that enforces the will of the settlers? By mutually reinforcing each other, the impact on the anti-occupation movement is that beyond just the need to heroically resist and relearn the childhood lessons that begin here in kindergarten about the Army, the occupation, and the Palestinians, activists must make a conscious decision to risk not just social marginalization, but their freedom and even their lives

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as well.

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