

Journey to Palestine: Report

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Background and preparation

This journey, which took place from April 10 to 14, 2002, was prepared from one day to the next. It was the response to a call launched by the Brazilian Organizing Committee of the World Social Forum (WSF) to join a Brazilian delegation of parliamentarians and members of Brazilian organizations active in the WSF, which was getting ready to go to Palestine. The call was sent to approximately one hundred members of the WSF International Council on April 4. The next day, two member organizations of this network had given a positive answer: Alternatives, from Canada, and the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation (FPH) in Paris. The two organizations also support the networks of the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World. On the weekend of April 6 and 7, Gustavo Marin of the FPH and Robert David of Alternatives were ready to start out for Jerusalem on Monday, April 8, as the Brazilian Committee had requested in its call.

The Brazilian delegation, however, was not ready to leave and we had to wait for answers from other members of the International Council to enlarge the group. A Brazilian group, organized by the Movement of Landless Farmers (MST), was able to start out on Tuesday the 9th. It comprised José Arbex, a journalist, Paulo Suess, a theologian, and Ronaldo Zulke, a parliamentarian of the state Rio Grande do Sul. Robert David and Gustavo Marin, accompanied by his FPH colleague Karine Goasmat, thus left to join the Brazilian delegation. In addition, Christophe Aguiton of Attac-France arrived on the same day and (Mrs.) Nicola Bullard of Focus, based in Bangkok, arrived the following day. We were therefore able to constitute a small delegation of the member organizations of the WSF Committee and participate in the different initiatives that were taking place in Palestine. (The Israeli army had begun its intervention on March 29 in the Palestinian cities and camps and had surrounded the headquarters where Yasser Arafat was locked up along with about forty internationals, including Paul Nicholson, leader of Via Campesina, and Mario Nill, leader of the MST).

A significant fact that needs to be strongly underscored is that since the very beginning of the Israeli army intervention, several hundred persons, active in the new civil-society organizations and movements manifesting their refusal of capitalistic globalization and asserting that a different world is possible, had gone to Palestine. The presence of the so-called "internationals," not only in the big street demonstrations initiated in Seattle then in Genoa, in Barcelona, etc., as well as in Porto Alegre, is a singular fact in the scenario of the conflicts marking this period. These groups, each with their own profile, implementing various and plural actions, are fighting for peace where warriors have only aggravated the suffering of the peoples and where diplomats have demonstrated their helplessness.

We were able to enter Israel, then to reach East Jerusalem, at a moment when the airport police were turning back foreigners who were coming in large numbers and were being suspected of wanting to enter the militarized zones.

We were able, however, to enter individually without any incident and were welcomed by

our Palestinian and Israeli friends who were waiting for us at the airport or in East Jerusalem.

We should mention that our projections, even though all based on a common solidarity with the Palestinian people and on the equal search of possible ways to peace, were not precisely the same. Some of the Brazilian members had come mostly to manifest their solidarity with Mario Nill, the MST leader shut in with Arafat; others with Marcos Koneski, a Brazilian priest who was in the Church of the Nativity. Others wished most of all to go to Ramallah, to Jenin, or to Bethlehem as far as the army-controlled road blocks, to show their solidarity. Finally, others placed the accent on listening to and reflecting with the Palestinian and Israeli partners united in solidarity to think, together, about how, while trying to meet the emergencies, to prepare the medium and the long term, starting now, in this context of war.

Of course, our common objective was to manifest our solidarity with the Palestinian people and to try to define, with the help of our Palestinian and Israeli partners, the way to make of this first trip the starting point of a long-term joint effort.

It was difficult for some of our interlocutors to stop for a second and ask questions such as: Why has Israeli society reached a point where a major part of the population backs Sharon's war? The pacifist demonstrations in Tel Aviv and the march toward Jenin to stop the war assembled two to three thousand people, which is of course notable, but they did not succeed (have not yet succeeded?) in changing the policy of the Sharon government. Overwhelmed by the emergencies of survival, it is understandable that the Palestinians do not have time to ask questions such as: How did we get here? and especially: How can we, right now, start building a new path, implementing a different strategy, and not be condemned to repeating a tragedy, each new chapter being more painful than the last?

We should say, however, that the various international solidarity groups presently active in Palestine are seeking, each in their own way and with their own priorities, to connect the emergency actions with a longer-term vision. There are those riding in the Palestinian ambulances in Ramallah to try to provide emergency care, others are participating in marches to Jenin or in demonstrations in Ramallah itself, and others yet are taking part in pacifist demonstrations in Jerusalem, or organizing meetings with Palestinians and Israelis to think about and prepare the medium and long term. Of course, links are woven among all these groups and we tried, insofar as possible and in such a short time, to participate in all of these initiatives.

In spite of the quite natural difficulties we had in achieving a better coordination among ourselves, the WSF group participated in many activities in connection with another delegation of Brazilian parliamentarians accompanied, among others, by Michael Haradom, coordinator in Brazil of the organization Shalom-Salaam Paz, a very active Ally of the Sao Paulo Group of the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World, and a member of Cives, an association of company managers that is part of the eight organizations of the Brazilian Organizing Committee of the WSF.

Chronicle of the meetings

The following description is not complete. We are eager, however, to inform you of what we were able to do in such little time.

Several civil-society organizations in Palestine and also in Israel are especially active at the moment. We would like to stress that without their presence we would not have been able to do anything much. In Jerusalem, which lies just 15 km away from Ramallah, it is possible to talk to people and to circulate without any major problems. We should nonetheless not forget that in Jerusalem itself, on Friday, April 12 at the end of the afternoon, a bomb carried by a young Palestinian girl exploded in a market on the very centrally located Jaffa street, killing eight persons and injuring about sixty.

Following is a non-exhaustive list of the organizations we met with:

The physicians and the staff of the hospital in Ramallah. It is important to show solidarity in Ramallah itself close to the building where Arafat and the internationals remain under siege. It is also important to be able to show such solidarity with the physicians, the injured, and the patients who also remain under siege in Ramallah's hospital. We were able to have a long meeting with the hospital's Director and other physicians, who told us in detail of the suffering of the Palestinians of Ramallah since March 29.

Today, there are not many injured in this hospital, contrary to the first days of the Israeli offensive, when the injured flooded in. A lot of people died during those first days, not only those injured but also people who came to the hospital for reasons of serious illness or even childbirth and who were not able to receive proper care (diabetics in particular). The hospital's physicians are not allowed to leave the building except in ambulances. They are given fresh supplies by the local population when the curfew is raised for a few hours about every three days.

When we asked them: How much time can you hold out? Do you have enough medicine and material to last through a long occupation of the city? Their answer was clear and precise: "For the emergencies we can hold out for two months; in terms of resistance, our people have already been holding out for at least a hundred years." Then we asked another question (each time we asked a question we also asked it to ourselves): What should we do to prepare ourselves to not suffer a new tragedy? We have to say that the answers are far from obvious, but we found that the very fact of asking questions about the future helped us to breathe a little ... as if thinking of the long term helped to face the short term ...

Jerusalem Media Communication Center. This center publishes a daily press release and a weekly analytical report on the situation in Palestine. It is also an especially valuable center for research and opinion analysis because it has already issued many publications on subjects as varied as the analysis of the political forces, water management, the demographic situation, the urbanization of Jerusalem and other Palestinian cities, the situation in the rural zones, etc. Their Web site is very rich: www.jmcc.org

Law Society. The Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment. This is one of the most active Palestinian organizations for the defense and the legal protection of the Palestinians. It unceasingly attempts to enter the Palestinian camps destroyed by the Israeli army to find the dead and the survivors. It organizes delegations to enter these camps as well as meetings and press conferences in connection with Amnesty International, Lawyers without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Doctors without Borders, the IFHR, and other international networks for the defense of rights. www.lawsociety.org

We also met a similar organization on the Israeli side: **B'Tselem**, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

SHAML, Palestinian Refugee & Diaspora Center. A Ramallah-based organization that works among others on the question of the return of the Palestinians in the refugee camps in the surrounding countries and of the Palestinian Diaspora. This organization focuses on all the questions related to making the Palestinians' right to return possible, including such questions as the economic viability of such a return, the need to organize reception structures, and the resolution of political and legal issues. www.shaml.org

Cultural Service, French Embassy. It is significant to observe how this service, faced with the need to get emergency aid directly to the Palestinians in the camps destroyed by the Israeli army, does everything it can to continue to support, in addition, the initiatives of Palestinian artists, cultural groups, and academics to safeguard the artistic and intellectual wealth of Palestine. It can seem out of place to also care, in this time of distress and survival of the Palestinian people, for the artistic and cultural dimension. Yet such action is indispensable, not only to preserve hope and to enable as much as possible the cultural expressions of resistance, but also to weave new links with the Israeli people and to contribute to making Israelis understand that it is intolerable to try to build one society on the ashes of the extinction of another one.

We would like to underscore the importance of the role played by the French Cultural Services because it is likely that the contributions of other services of other embassies can play a significant role, as well as the representatives of multilateral organizations, UNICEF in particular.

Peace Now, la Paix Maintenant. This is the movement that has mobilized, since the war of 1967 and within Israeli society itself, the sectors in favor of Peace. We were also able to meet a few coordinators of **Gush Shalom**, another very active movement in the mobilization against the war, against the occupation, and for peace. Another group also places the accent on the demonstrations joining Palestinians and Israelis: **The Peoples Peace Campaign**. There are many groups like these in Israel, one of the more important ones being the group of refuzniks and conscientious objectors.

Needless to say, there are tensions between these various movements and they have not always joined their efforts in the past, some accusing others of not following the right direction. They are aware, however, that their efforts are still very embryonic and that all initiatives are good to try to mobilize the Israeli society against the war launched by Sharon.

AlQuds University, a Palestinian university of higher studies, which also works with the **Center for Jerusalem Studies** and the **Community Education Center**. More than 5,000 students are involved in the educational activities facilitated by these two institutions. www.jerusalem-studies.org

Meetings with Palestinian and Israeli parliamentarians. With the delegation of Brazilian parliamentarians as well as other parliamentarians from Belgium, France, and Italy, we were able to meet with some Palestinian and Israeli parliamentarians. These meetings are also very important: they establish contacts and strengthen connections among actors who are likely to meet again to work on the questions of governance and the renewal of the democratic representation systems, whereas the armed conflicts have done nothing but block the search for peace.

Otherwise, the Brazilian parliamentarians had a meeting with, among others, Shimon Peres and some Red Crescent officers.

Indymedia and some youth networks in Tel Aviv. Indymedia in Tel Aviv is part of the international network of alternative information centers on the Internet. The team that we met, with scarce technical means, publishes information on the Internet, in particular via radio, to try to reach a broader audience. The meeting with Israeli youth was very meaningful. Christophe Aguiton, Nicola Bullard, and Gustavo Marin attempted to do some

in-depth thinking with them, observing that they have two enormous challenges to face: to back the resistance of the Palestinian people and, at the same time, to get Israeli society to become aware that it must not back the warmongers in power. The gigantic nature of this task is overwhelming. We tried nonetheless to encourage them; we told them that these two challenges were also our own, and that we had to remain in contact to see how we could carry on together. Looking at these young people, we noted both a great weakness, and at the same time some signs of hope.

Alternative Information Center. This is a particularly active organization to maintain the connections with the internationals and the various delegations arriving in Palestine. It plays a key role in the information flow and in the reinforcement of links among Palestinians and peace-seeking Israelis.

The march toward Jenin on Saturday, April 13. It is important to stress that since March 29, various demonstrations have taken place in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and even in Ramallah. They have been viciously repressed by the Israeli army, with tear-gas bombs, sound bombs, and also some shooting. Some have only gathered a few dozen demonstrators. The one on Saturday, April 13 to Jenin was especially meaningful because it assembled close to 3,000 people, with a majority of Israelis, and it headed toward Jenin, which has become the city symbolic of the barbarism of the Israeli army.

So far the army had not shot at the demonstrators and caused a massacre. The organizers were very careful to keep things under control and avoid provocation. However, according to the same organizers, the danger of a massacre is real and must be avoided with great care so as not to paralyze peaceful resistance.

Press conference. On Sunday April 14 in Jerusalem, we held a press conference. Those present were: Dennis Dyn-Hansen (United States, International Solidarity Movement), Christophe Aguiton (France, Attac), Nicola Bullard (Thailand, Focus on Global South), Robert David (Canada, Alternatives), Gustavo Marin (Chile-France, FPH), and José Moraguès of the International Campaign for the Protection of the Palestinian People. The Brazilian delegates, as well as other Italian and Belgian delegates, could not attend the press conference; some had gone to Ramallah at the time of Colin Powell's visit to Yasser Arafat.

We had transmitted a joint press release to the attendees, among which were journalists from the *Jerusalem Post* (Israel), *le Nouvel Observateur* (France), the *Financial Times* (United Kingdom), and *la Repubblica* (Italy).

Proposals for further action

The least one can say is that the crisis opened by the Israeli army intervention in Ramallah and other Palestinian cities on March 29, 2002 will be long-lasting and treacherous.

After the second and last meeting of Colin Powell with Yasser Arafat on Wednesday, April 17, we were able to see that diplomacy is powerless. Neither the government of George W. Bush, nor the European Union, nor the Princes and leaders of the Arab States, nor the United Nations have been able to get the Israeli government to change their policy. Arafat remains imprisoned with the Palestinian leaders and the internationals in Ramallah.

One of the main leaders of the Palestinian resistance, Marwan Barghouti, has been arrested. The Israeli army will not soon withdraw from its present positions and if it does, it will only be to intervene again immediately.

The suffering and hate accumulated within the Palestinian population are immeasurable. New human bombs will certainly explode in the region and elsewhere. It is likely that some Palestinian groups will start the Intifada again and others will try to launch guerrilla-warfare operations on the Israeli checkpoints. The great majority of Israelis will continue to live in fear. Some will question, consciously or unconsciously, the intolerable condition of an Israeli society based on a people's oppression, the Palestinian people, which is surviving on the same land.

This crisis will be long and complex. Is it possible to act for the long term and to do so now, when we are in this crucial and painful short term? Will the so-called international community, despite the many first street demonstrations organized everywhere in the world in solidarity with the Palestinian people, be condemned to helplessness, then to indifference? Will the new international civil society, which is taking shape and growing stronger and stronger in this beginning of a century, be capable of facing the challenges represented by the search for peace in the region and the recovery of the rights of the Palestinian people, starting with the right to live on their own land? Will the Israelis themselves be capable of refusing the war policy of the present government and of backing a process aiming for sustainable peace with the Palestinians and the peoples of the region?

Despite the difficulties in finding a short-term solution, our Palestinian and Israeli partners insisted on the necessity of extending outside mobilization through educational campaigns, demonstrations, and lobbying actions, especially in the Western countries, with the objective of pressing Israel, through the implementation of sanctions and other means of action, to put an end to the occupation and to accept to draw up a durable solution.

The challenges opened by this crisis constitute an unprecedented challenge for those who continue to fight for living in peace in a world of diversity.

In spite of the considerable difficulties that we are currently undergoing, an essential conviction was confirmed during and after this short journey that we are reporting on here: the paths to persevering in the search for peace in the region are still open. Even more importantly, we met with Palestinian partners and Israeli ones as well, some of which we already knew, who are still willing to move forward. Truthfully, without them any attempt to take up these paths would be practically impossible.

One of the key difficulties, however, which was expressed by our Israeli friends in solidarity with the Palestinians is that they often feel isolated, not only with regard to the Israeli society, but also to the Palestinians themselves. For the Palestinians who are trying to work with the Israelis, it is also difficult to do so, because they can easily be accused of being traitors. According to our Palestinian and Israeli interlocutors, a social grassroots alliance between the various sectors of the Israeli society and the Palestinians is an indispensable condition to reducing the social and political support of a government incapable of providing the Israelis with safety.

There are various tasks:

In the short term, the answer to the call launched by the internationals who decided to remain in Arafat's HQ, requires an urgent presence in Palestine. In spite of the fact that the possibilities of entering Israel will become difficult, the ever-greater presence of people trying to meet with the Palestinians, and also with the peace-seeking Israelis, is inevitable. Similarly, the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the redeployment of the Israeli army in other cities and Palestinian camps requires permanent attention to try to avoid the pursuit of the violation of basic rights.

The search for the dead and for survivors, aid to the populations displaced by force to the surroundings of some of the camps, and sending emergency aid, all remain, precisely, emergency tasks.

In the medium term, it is important to organize many actions in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and in whatever cities it is possible, in order to facilitate the participation of various components of the international civil society wishing to contribute to the search for peace and solidarity with Palestine and also with peace-seeking Israelis.

It is here, on the number of medium-term initiatives that need to be taken, and which can be started now, in this short and crucial term, that the various Workshops of the Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and United World can play a key role. A debate on the Charter of Human Responsibilities and the most relevant Proposal Papers certainly constitutes an essential contribution to begin to build a new future in this deeply broken region.

The partners that we met say they are ready to organize seminars and meetings on a number of crucial themes for the future of the region such as, for example:

- the reconstruction of the cities and villages in the territories controlled by the Israeli army,
- the implementation of an economy of solidarity in the urban and rural zones,
- the need for a renewal of the political structures and of the élite so that they are capable of giving new energy to the struggle of the Palestinian people,
- the conditions of a social alliance between the Palestinians and the Israelis,
- experience sharing among the various social movements fighting for peace, with the participation of Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans to reinforce the presence of North Americans and Europeans,
- appreciation of the various forms of artistic expression of Palestinian artists and their circulation within the Israeli society,
- the implementation of an interreligious dialogue capable of contributing to overcoming the cleavages that divide the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian peoples, as well as the evaluation of the conditions likely to make a multi-religious society viable, etc.

Finally, we must pay particular attention to backing the various pacific demonstrations and the innovative forms of expression of the movements fighting for peace. It is certain that the peace partisans will meet enormous obstacles, due mainly to the repression of a government that will not hesitate to crush this movement. It will also be necessary to generate the conditions for a constructive dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis fighting for peace through pacific means and the Palestinian groups favoring armed opposition to the occupant.

However, it is to be hoped that the great majority of Palestinians will succeed in reinforcing the side of those who will continue to fight for peace. With this aim in view, it is not only desirable, but indispensable that they should succeed in weaving a social alliance with the Israelis who are expressing solidarity with them. We shall then see the emergence of a vast social movement, articulated with an international civil society, which will be reinforced in its search for a different globalization, one where men and women will be able to live in peace in a world of diversity.

