

Who is the ISM?

By Starhawk

Since mid March of 2003, the Israeli authorities have targetted the International Solidarity Movement, a human rights organization which brings internationals to support the nonviolent resistance in the Occupied Territories of Palestine.

In March and April, three members of our group were killed or nearly killed. On March 16, Rachel Corrie was run over by an Israeli military bulldozer as she attempted to stop home demolitions in Gaza. On April 5, Brian Avery was shot in the face by a soldier in an Armored Personnel Carrier as he stood on a street in Jenin. On April 11, Tom Hurdall was shot in the head as he attempted to rescue children who were being fired upon from a sniper tower in Gaza. He is now in a coma, being kept alive on life support, a fate more painful than death for his friends and family who cannot either hope or let go and mourn.

It is clear that these attacks were not 'accidents'. The bulldozer operator who killed Rachel knew she was in front of him and had been speaking with her just a few moments before. In Brian's case, the Armored Personnel Carrier drove up and opened fire on a group of ISM volunteers who were clearly visible as internationals, in fluorescent vests, and who were standing in a street where there was no resistance activity. Tom ran to the aid of a group of children who were being terrorized by warning shots from the sniper tower, and the sniper lowered his sights to shoot Tom in the head. His wounds were characterized by the surgeon who examined him as consistent with a deliberate assassination shot.

These attacks represent a policy on the part of the authorities that internationals are fair game for the kind of treatment that is already the norm for Palestinians, who suffer far more than we do from the endemic violence of the occupation. Moreover, the attacks seem to be part of a program of witness elimination, ominous in what it portends for the Palestinian civilian population. The Israeli army has also assassinated two journalists this spring: Nazeem Darwazah, a Palestinian, and James Miller, a Briton. They have banned journalists along with human rights workers and internationals from Gaza.

Before the outright ban, the military authorities were requiring internationals to sign a declaration absolving the Israeli army from responsibility in the event of their death, and stating specifically that they had no connection to the International Solidarity Movement.

The Israeli authorities have also moved to clear internationals from the West Bank. On May 9, they raided the offices of the ISM in Beit Sahour, confiscating all the computers and files and arresting three people. They have also arrested ISM volunteers, witnesses to Rachel's death and Tom's shooting, who were attempting to legally enter the Gaza strip. Other volunteers have been arrested in Tulkarem, and the army has announced a policy of arrest and deportation for all ISM volunteers.

What does the ISM do that so threatens the fourth largest military power in the world?

First, we support the nonviolent resistance among the Palestinian people, which is rarely noticed by the world's media. By our presence, we extend some minimal protection to Palestinian groups seeking to demonstrate peacefully or engage in nonviolent actions such as removing roadblocks or challenging curfew. We also participate in joint actions such as the peace camp in Mas'Ha, where we responded to a call for help from a village which is losing 98% of its land to the so-called 'security wall' Israeli authorities are building. The village asked internationals and Israelis to join them in opposing the wall, which has confiscated the farmland which provides their livelihood with no compensation, destroyed ancient olive groves, and cut off their freedom of movement. Israelis are told the wall is being built on the 'Green Line', the pre-1967 border, but in reality it strays far into Palestinian territory to enclose the illegal settlements which have been built continuously throughout the Oslo years, and will eventually take sixty per cent of the land designated for a Palestinian state, making a true, two-state solution impossible.

Second, we attempt to accompany and protect Palestinian civilians. We stand with Palestinian farmers who are attempting to harvest their olives or work their lands under threat of attack from armed Israeli settlers. We accompany medical personnel during Israeli army incursions to help they reach their patients. We ride in ambulances to help them get through army checkpoints. We sleep in homes at risk of demolition. We sit with families while the Israeli army breaks down the walls of their homes in order to search them, and attempt to intervene with the soldiers. We stand at checkpoints to help students get through to reach their schools or villagers return to their homes after a day's work.

Third, we witness and report what we have seen of the impact of the occupation on the daily lives of the Palestinians. We put names and faces on the Palestinians. We can tell you about twenty three year old Hanin, six months pregnant, who went into shock when soldiers destroyed the three rooms of her family's home in the Balata refugee camp in the process of searching them, and would have lost her baby had not an ISM volunteer negotiated with the army to allow her to get medical care. We can describe the old woman who is weeping with pain and exhaustion as she climbs a mountain each morning in order to get from her village to the clinic in Nablus, because road blocks and checkpoints make it impossible for ambulances or cars to transport her. We can introduce you to Abu Akhmed, a sixty-one year old farmer on the border of Gaza and Egypt, whose olive trees have been cut down by the army, or take you into the home of his sister's family, to sit with the six beautiful children as they do their homework to the sounds of bullets and tank shells firing all around their home.

Who are we? We are a diverse group, truly international. We come from the United States, Britain, France, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Australia, Germany, Canada, and Israel itself. We range in age from eighteen to seventy-six. We come from a wide variety of careers and political affiliations: computer programmers and carpenters, ex-Marines and lifelong pacifists, professors and students, artists and doctors, deeply religious Christians and atheists. About a third of us, on average, are Jewish.

What we share in common is a commitment to justice in Palestine and a belief that the

nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King and Gandhi can play an important role in bringing that goal about. We are concerned for the safety and human rights of all people in the region, Palestinians and Israelis, and we maintain that justice for the Palestinian people is the only way to assure real security in the area. We have seen firsthand how 'security concerns' are being used to justify a policy of land confiscation, Israeli expansion, and ongoing attacks on the lives and livelihoods of Palestinian civilians that produces a level of rage and despair that fosters a violent response in turn.

The Israeli government, who holds the overwhelming military, political and economic power, could easily end this conflict by relinquishing its policies of expansion and dealing fairly and justly with the Palestinians. We call upon them to do so, beginning by withdrawing from the West Bank and Gaza, and upon our own government to stop funding and supplying the Israeli military. We demand accountability, not just for the deaths and shootings of internationals but for more than two thousand deaths of Palestinians since the beginning of the intifada; over two hundred and fifty - forty five of whom were children - in Rafah alone, the city where Rachel and Tom were killed. We demand that the attacks and defamation of the ISM stop, that internationals, human rights workers and journalists be welcomed in the occupied territories as the necessary eyes that can inform the world of the true conditions of the occupation.

-- *Starhawk*

For more information on the International Solidarity Movement, check the website at www.palsolidarity.org (will open in a new browser window).

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