International campaigning for a free Jerusalem

It seems we hear nothing but bad news from Israel and the occupied territories – from East Jerusalem in particular. So let me be the one to give you some really good news. So good that it is provoking the Zionist camp to paroxysms of rage – and vast expenditure.

As a campaigner working with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in the UK for over 10 years, I have witnessed a massive shift in public opinion, especially over the last few years. Few people had heard, or cared, about what was happening in the region. When we launched the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign at the House of Commons, in 2001, it was considered an almost taboo topic. Nowadays our membership has increased tenfold; from a handful of branches we have 42 nationwide. And BDS is attracting more and more support, not just among the general public, but from Trade Unions, local councils, church groups and companies that refuse to support Israel’s illegal and brutal policies. In Britain the TUC has joined us in a supermarket campaign, calling for a complete ban on settlement goods, the Church of England has divested from Caterpillar, and the Methodist Church has policies of divestment and boycott. The solidarity movement is growing even in the US, and in countries like Australia, Canada, Ireland, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and – of course – South Africa, organisations and individuals are standing up for Palestinian rights.

How did this happen, and what can we do to build on this momentum?

Our campaign is based on the belief that once people know the facts their innate sense of justice will impel them if not to action, at least to withholding what was once automatic, unthinking support for Israel. Hence much of our work involves spreading information, by all means at our disposal.

Apart from our quarterly magazine we publish fact sheets on all key aspects of the situation – from refugees to Jerusalem to political prisoners – all available on our website. We email weekly roundups of the news relating to Palestine, and make use of Twitter, Facebook and You Tube to transmit our message as widely as possible. We provide films on Palestine for our branches, and most important of all, send Palestinian speakers to participate in their regular public meetings, around the country. Our branches very often have a special relationship with a Palestinian community or organisation, which they help to support, inviting Palestinians to the UK to tell of their own experiences – which lends a very direct and personal dimension to the political and social issues. Branches seek to educate and involve their local MPs and councillors, who are often woefully ignorant of the facts. At the national level, we have an annual lobby of parliament, again inviting MPs to learn about the situation directly from Palestinian spokespersons, and from those fellow MPs who visit the region regularly.

This firsthand experience of the situation is crucial. Time and again, when we have taken delegations to see the Wall, the checkpoints, the settlements, and to talk with Palestinians affected by them, the effect is dramatic. They return outraged, and determined to oppose these horrors. For instance, when we took a group from the British fire fighters union to visit the West Bank, on their return they wrote about their experiences, talked to fellow members, and were inspired to donate equipment and invite their Palestinian colleagues from Nablus to the UK for specialised training.

For many years, Israel had a virtual monopoly of ‘fact-finding missions’, inviting thousands of influential visitors on lavish, very carefully orchestrated trips, showing how Israel is constrained to
extremes of violence and dispossession, as a form of self-defence. (You may remember Golda Meir’s famous rebuke to the Palestinians: “We will never forgive you for making us kill your children.” ) The trips are very effective, by all accounts; I expect we should learn from them. But I’m sure there are certain phrases that are never heard on such visits: “UN resolutions”; “Fourth Geneva Convention”; “international law”; “collective punishment” etc.

Our one great advantage is that the facts, and all aspects of international law, are on our side. They have the funding, and the political leverage with western governments; we have the truth. The question is, how to best exploit this.

Here is my wish-list: monthly delegations to the Occupied Palestinian Territories of MPs, candidates for election, councillors, TU leaders, leaders of faith groups, teachers, students, journalists: i.e. all the decision-makers and opinion-formers, present and future. They will come home and become what Mustafa Barghouti has called ‘multipliers’. The Palestinians on the ground, and Israeli human rights organisations, are very well organised to receive them. In the UK we may not have the funding, but we do have the experience and the human resources to channel visitors to the OPTs and to Israel.

Also on my wish-list is a much more coordinated, worldwide movement. In the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara attacks PSC called a meeting of 33 organisations, faith-based, or with a specific political or charitable stance, involved in these issues. We formed a loose coalition, all agreeing to focus on raising the siege of Gaza, and on strengthening the BDS campaign. In 2011 we should also focus, I believe, on the dire situation in Jerusalem, which epitomises all the worst aspects of Israel’s efforts at ethnic cleansing, from eviction to house demolitions to pseudo-legal tactics. An agreed strategy should be global, not just national.

Forming such a global network does of course have funding implications; but it can and must be done. Cooperation and leadership is needed from the Arab states, and Christian and Islamic leaders need to be more vocal especially when it comes to drawing attention to the forcible Judaisation of Jerusalem that we are witnessing on a daily basis.

A third, vital item on my wish-list is to make inroads into the domination of the Israeli version of history and current events in our media. Israel is devoting huge amounts of money to setting up propaganda organisations, such as BICOM, Honest Reporting and Camera, which aim at influencing the media and intimidating individuals and institutions. I’m ashamed to say that the BBC, among others, has been very disappointing in this respect: we need to keep raising with them their factual inaccuracies, their reluctance to give space to Palestinian voices, or to challenge Israeli spokesmen.

As an organisation we have of course been subject to widespread vilification in the Zionist media, like the Jerusalem Post, or the Jewish Chronicle in London. A recent report of the Reut Institute (an ostensibly independent body, in fact answerable to the Israeli government) devoted six pages to PSC; apparently we are “a catalyst of the delegitimisation campaign” and we are accused of both “sophistication and effectiveness” in our campaign to uphold international law. In particular they warn that “a trade union embrace of PSC-led campaigns can substantially impact the British mainstream.” We agree!
Finally the report recommends acts of 'sabotage' against us. It's interesting how this mirrors the response of the Israeli government to any form of opposition: not reasoned argument, but brute force. Such reactions from Israel and its supporters encourage us in the belief that we are absolutely on the right track.

I have said little about the lamentable position of my own government, which by and large remains silent in the face of Israeli atrocities.

But we take heart from the example of South Africa. Our government, like those of most western countries, backed the Apartheid regime 100%, while the anti-Apartheid movement was growing and gathering momentum at grassroots level. When the tipping point came, after mounting international pressure from large organisations like the trade unions and the churches, the government switched its policy almost overnight. From being considered a terrorist, by people like Mrs Thatcher, Nelson Mandela became a national hero.

We are not at that point yet, and none of us has a crystal ball to see the future. But it will come — bi 'izn illah — and with the combined efforts of all of us here today.

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International Campaigning for a free Jerusalem

Abstract

It is clear that 2011 will be a critical year for Jerusalem and all the Occupied Territories – and for the hopes of peace in the region.

The framework of international law is crucial in the battle for hearts and minds; it brings together people of all faiths and from all walks of life and sends the message: defence of Palestinian rights is defence of the law. A broad coalition of organisations has been created in the UK and an even broader one – still embryonic – is being created worldwide.

As a thirty year old grassroots campaigning organisation, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign has seen a major shift in public opinion nationwide. We are using a wide variety of methods to get our message across, from traditional publications to use of the internet to making sure that Palestinian voices are heard directly, around the UK.

The campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions is proving the single most effective tool in raising the issue of Palestine with the general public. Increasingly, Trade Unions, companies, church organisations and individuals are boycotting Israeli institutions and products, to make it clear that there is a price to be paid for Israel’s policies of settlement and dispossession.

Israel’s reactions to this campaign – the creation of innumerable propaganda organisations, intimidation and penetration of the media and attempts to smear campaigners with the label of anti-Semitism – show that it is working.

We must learn from Israel’s own tactics. They know the media battle is vital. They also know that nothing beats firsthand experience of a situation – hence their lavish funding of ‘fact-finding’ delegations, which are effective in promoting their point of view. For our own part, we have seen visitors to the Occupied Territories return, deeply shocked and ready to commit themselves to the Palestinian cause. This year we must make sure that many more MPs, trade union leaders, church leaders, teachers, journalists, see the reality on the ground.

All campaigns need a focus. Ours is twofold: Jerusalem exposes the worst of Israel’s diverse methods of ethnic cleansing, while Gaza shows the brutal lengths to which Israel will go to suppress any form of resistance.

Western governments are unfortunately out of touch with the groundswell of public opinion. But we are heartened by our recollections of the South African struggle: there, a tipping point was reached, when the pressure of public opinion forced a change. With concerted and sustained efforts from all of us here, that point can be reached in 2011.

Dr Hilary Wise