

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Dr. King Can Help Build the Palestinian Nonviolent Resistance Movement**

### **The Color of Law**

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There is a straight line linking the human rights struggles around the globe, and the movements of the past with the movements of today. And those who have lived through the U.S. civil rights movement, the teachings of King and Gandhi, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa believe they have much to teach Palestinian civil society and their nonviolent resistance movement in the occupied territories.

Just weeks before the recent violent conflict in [Gaza](#) that left 166 Palestinians and six Israelis dead-and more than 1,230 Palestinians injured, mostly women and children - a group of civil rights veterans and a new generation of human rights leaders led a delegation to the West Bank. The delegation came from the [Dorothy Cotton Institute](#) in Ithaca, New York, named after the colleague of Dr. King and education director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The institute trains leaders for a global human rights movement, and is building a network of civil and human rights leaders. And it was the first group of civil rights leaders to meet with leaders of the Palestinian movement.

Their goals are to increase the visibility of a nonviolent Palestinian movement that is unknown to many in the U.S., share lessons between the Palestinian and American movements, connect Palestinian leaders with their Israeli allies, and educate the American public about this movement and the need for social justice and change in the region.

In the U.S., the human suffering experienced by the Palestinian people is rarely acknowledged and often ignored, with the victims often dehumanized and scapegoated.

Recently, I had the pleasure of speaking via Skype with [Kirby Edmonds](#), one of the members of the delegation in Ramallah. Mr. Edmonds, program director of the Dorothy Cotton Institute, shared what he was witnessing and experiencing in the West Bank.

"One of the things I've been impressed by is their analysis of the situation," he told me of the sophistication of those he met, also noting the Palestinians have learned lessons from the struggle against Jim Crow and apartheid. "They have made adaptations," he added.

"They've landed on BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] as a most promising strategy. The mistake they've made is not shaping the narrative of who they are, and how important it is they have rights. The idea that they're thugs and terrorists is just wrong," Edmonds noted. "Humiliation provokes a violent response."

Edmonds views the Israeli occupation as a global human rights issue. "The Dorothy Cotton Institute sees the need to put our shoulders to the wheel for a global human rights movement. Because the state involved in it defines itself as democratic, and so there is a great deal of moral ground on which to stand," he said.

"The other issue is the place is important to two-thirds of the human population." He concluded that resolving the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis will help resolve conflicts around the world, making the implications much larger than the people who live there."

And Edmonds characterized the Israeli policy of occupation as a humiliating one, with laws promulgated to justify certain things. And Palestinians are sick and tired, echoing the days of the Jim Crow South or South African apartheid.

"Palestinians are barred from building in certain areas, their houses are demolished," Edmonds told me from Ramallah. "All the Palestinians in a certain area get an order saying their houses will be demolished and they don't know when. 2:00 in the morning, 3:00 in the morning, and they blow the house down. It is clearly a violation of international conventions. And clearly a violation of human rights," he said.

"The situation in East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem, what exists is a caste system that is more discriminatory than what happened in South African apartheid," Edmonds noted of the Israeli system of class distinctions. A Palestinian's citizenship status can be lost when traveling abroad, perhaps if they are studying in the U.S. for 4 years. They have to be able to prove Jerusalem is the center of their lives.

"People in the West bank are barred from entering Israel and East Jerusalem unless they get permits to do so. They have to pass through checkpoints to show their papers," Edmonds said. "It is an example of policies that seem designed to provoke violent responses. Depending on what checkpoint it might be another 2 or 3 hours to get back home. It is extremely humiliating."

Even more serious and problematic are administrative detentions, in which Palestinians have no access to lawyers, and are not told why they were arrested - a practice which can be imposed for up to 14 times without charges ever being made.

Then there are the [arrests of children](#), particularly in areas in the West Bank where nonviolent demonstrations take place every week to protest the occupation. "The Israeli army will show up, enter the house and say who they're after, take the teen out of house, blindfolded, put them in a HUMV, take them to an interrogation facility, and keep them for 4 days," described Edmonds. "They will do things, they may say they have a right to an attorney, and after the course of hours intimidate the child into a confession. As a result, adult leaders end up arrested. This is a violation of the International Convention of Rights of the Child."

Moreover, the policies of the occupation are changing the demographics of the area, with the goal of substantially reducing the Palestinian population in certain places. "The goal is reducing the Palestinian population from 30 percent to 12 percent" Edmonds argued.

"The task becomes making life so uncomfortable for people that they just leave, not just in Jerusalem but also in the West Bank. Herd them into four areas so that if there is some closure on the issue, Palestinians are unable to manage their own state. That is the policy behind creating Bantustans. The goal is to make Palestinian life so unbearable they can only live in certain places," he offered.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians have nearly a century of nonviolent resistance to oppression. "The people we've been meeting with are not saying Jews shouldn't be there," Edmonds told me. "What the Palestinians are calling for is for people of conscience to put pressure on Israel so that this does not continue. ...It is what gives people hope," he said.

Ultimately, according to Edmonds, the Palestinian people lack the political strength to do it alone. The Israeli government, he said, is able to behave as it does because it is a client of the U.S. "It is unlikely we can persuade the U.S. government to shift its policy because of civil society. It was civil society in South Africa that made change happen, it was not U.S. policy."

Through their journey to the occupied territories, Kirby Edmonds and his colleagues are acting in the proudest tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, stayed true to the fight for civil rights at home *and* spoke out against the war in Vietnam. He railed against the triple, interrelated evils of militarism, racism and economic exploitation, and understood the linkages between violence and oppression in America and our promotion of war abroad.

And just as King condemned the billions spent on burgeoning defense budgets to mutilate and incinerate Vietnamese children - all at the expense of the war on poverty - then surely those who act in the spirit of King today can decry the billions spent on America's militarization of Israel, the occupation, and the [killing of innocent babies](#).

Of war and violence, King said "The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars?"

Meanwhile, in Israel and Palestine, a nonviolent resistance movement seeks peace-and justice. Part of that process includes tearing down the walls that separate people, and building bridges instead.

"Israeli society can no longer see what is happening on the other side of the wall," Kirby Edmonds said of the current state of affairs. "The narrative that this is a land without people is easy to perpetuate."

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