



Internationaler Versöhnungsbund österreichischer Zweig

Statement

International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People

by Pete Hämmerle (International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Austria - IFOR)

I am addressing you on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People as the Executive Director of the Austrian branch of IFOR, but the representation of our international organisation to the UN in Vienna and in the NGO Committee on Peace is included in my tasks as well. IFOR was founded during and after World War I and has been working for a just and sustainable peace through active nonviolence for more than 100 years.

I'd like to say a few words on solidarity from a non-governmental, "grassroots" perspective which tries to combine words with deeds in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many years. IFOR Austria is in regular contact with various organisations, groups and individuals on both sides of the conflict line which share the goals of a just peace, e.g. through solidarity tours, invitation of activists and information about their work. We also have organised olive harvest support groups for some years and are one of the members of the Austrian coalition for the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (WCC-EAPPI). Backed by the reports and experience of this work, we also try to do political advocacy in Austria for a just solution of the conflict and an end to occupation, always keeping in mind our nonviolent principles as well as our historic responsibility as Austrians towards the Jewish and the Palestinian people.

What are – in our view - the main challenges for solidarity in present times? On the one hand, occupation and oppression on the ground are ongoing, and many developments in the past year are proof of this: President Trump's "peace deal" without participation of Palestinians, Israeli annexation plans for the Jordan valley, new settlements in the Westbank and East Jerusalem, ongoing house demolitions etc. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting both societies and the whole region, but in different ways, as can also be seen in other parts of the world: the "poor" are suffering more than others, health protection and medical facilities are not equally accessible, and measures to control the pandemic are sometimes also instrumentalised politically for control and further restriction of movement. Special attention has to be given to Gaza in this regard, as the catastrophic humanitarian situation there becomes even worse for its inhabitants under Corona conditions.

In light of this situation, it becomes even more obvious that solidarity is not primarily a matter of sympathy or sentiment, but a matter of justice and equal rights – globally and in the region!

Despite these negative trends, is there also some reason for hope in the middle and long term? In many instances, the pandemic has also led to acts of personal support and solidarity across conflict lines, because many people believe in and act on values of human dignity, human rights and peaceful behaviour. In IFOR we believe in the power of active nonviolence, which can change oppression and violence to cooperation and peace in the long run. This includes nonviolent resistance to injustice and oppression as one side of the medal, thus empowering "the poor and the less powerful" to become active

– and there are many who already act in this way, Palestinians as well as Israelis, whom we can support in their struggles. There is sufficient research and evidence that nonviolent struggles have been more successful in overcoming violent structures and injustice, as well as achieving autonomy and self-governance in the last 100 years. The other side of the medal shows us that active nonviolence in the end is not about “winning over the other side”, but about finding lasting solutions in which the interests of all conflict parties will be met – through dialogue, negotiations and mediation. Until we get there, we shall uphold solidarity with the Palestinian people, and with all those in the region who are truly working towards a just peace!