

Resisting Fear: the Iraqi Week of Nonviolence

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From April 29 to May 6 in Iraq not only the rumble of bombs will be heard. A network of associations of the Iraqi civil society, belonging to different political and religious affiliations, will carry on peace initiatives on the whole national territory within the **Iraqi Week of Nonviolence**. This event will take place while the Iraqi government meets in Sharm el-Sheikh (May 3-4) representative of the neighbouring countries, plus the G5 and G8, in the ministerial meeting that aims to restore security in Iraq. But is a top-down peace process feasible in a country traumatized by violence and insulted by military occupation like today's Iraq? The Iraqi civil society asserts to have the duty and the capability to bring its own contribution. Given the high danger faced by those who organize public events in these times, this is a courageous venture that the international community must know about, an act of civil resistance to terror and militarism.

Tens of associations and more than a hundred activists have agreed to hold initiatives in schools, theatres, public spaces of the main cities in Iraq. Events are scheduled in Kut, Baghdad, Basra, Diwaniya, Dohuq, Erbil, Faw, Kirkuk, Maysan, Mosul, Najaf, Salaheddin, Sulaimaniya, Tikrit. The organization is coordinated by the network LAONF (nonviolence, in Arabic), created in 2006 by associations that participated in training programmes on **Active Nonviolence**: a philosophy and a means of peoples' liberation that envisages full respect for life, and rejection of any form of oppression, exploitation and violence.

Many of the initiatives are managed with children and students, that are now preparing paintings and banners to be fixed at the entrance of their schools and universities to ask for an end to violence against civilians. At Al-Mustansiriyya University in Baghdad - where in January 2007 the explosion of two car bombs killed 60 and wounded 110 among professors, students and personnel – olive and palm trees will be planted to commemorate the victims of violence. In front of school buildings people will bury remnants of bullets and splinters, because the sons of Iraq should not grow between symbols of violence. Instead, they must learn to bury its bitter fruits and build another society with other means. In a village close to Mosul people of different ethnic groups and sects will play together a football game; in Kut teenagers of secondary schools will free white doves and make white balloons fly; everywhere posters and calendars will be distributed to be hanged at the walls of people's houses and remind them that violence is not the solution but the cause of their suffering.

Besides ceremonies, there will be seminars and conferences to present to civil society and local authorities principles and methodologies of nonviolent action for social and political change. The activists of LAONF will not limit themselves to speaking in universities, indeed they will participate in the events organized by trade unions on the 1st of May, Workers Day. They will animate public debates on the strategy of nonviolent action with the Syndicate Union of Workers in the Baghdad National Theatre, with the unions that fight against privatization of Iraqi oil at the Oil Union Centre of Basra, with fishermen's unions in the Fao peninsula, the first zone that opposed a fierce resistance to Anglo-American occupation in 2003.

Lastly, the associations involved in this event have chosen a symbolic campaign that unites them all. At a time when the opinion of anybody who takes a stand is distorted to be accused of sectarianism, the network LAONF asks that all people commit themselves not to transfer the thirst for vengeance and violence to Iraqi children. In every city they will collect signatures and they will finally present a petition to the Iraqi Parliament asking for a ban on imports of toys that push children to violence. After a thirteen-years long embargo, Iraq needs medicine and books, technology for development of its civilian economy, not toys that induce children and teenagers to

assign a positive connotation to violence. It is necessary to protect the youngsters from the culture of death and destruction that has already been imported in Iraq by foreign troops and combatants.

According to the organizers, the **Iraqi Week of Nonviolence** pursues three significant objectives. Firstly the Iraqi civil society proves to its own people and to the international community that it is still able to organize national unitary events unbounded by political and religious powers. It is an important testimony of their willingness and capacity to refuse the logic of civil war and carry on common initiatives defying the overpower of armed groups and armies. Secondly, they aim to initiate a process of conscientization of civil society on the possibility of renouncing hatred and vengeance, in order to pursue the common objective of peaceful coexistence. The constructive message is directed especially to young generations that risk to forget how strong was till recently the sentiment of unity of the Iraqi people. Fighting for self-determination and for peoples' rights is fair and dutiful, but there are other means than weapons to promote a just society, nonviolent means that are coherent with the ends assigned to them. They allow us to shape since the beginning, during the fight, the model of society that we aim to promote, where women and men, youngsters and elders, have the same dignity. Finally, during this week the activists will encourage individuals and associations to join LAONF, to increase the number of those who accept this commitment.

The **Iraqi Week of Nonviolence** takes place for the second year, and hopes to begin a fixed appointment for cultural and political promotion of nonviolent action, of making peace by peaceful means. Nonviolent means of fight have been used in recent history by Iraqi trade unions and social movements, but often without explicit and conscious adhesion to a reference model. The network LAONF aims to articulate in the Iraqi culture the universal values and methodologies of action that assigned political and spiritual victories to the movements of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, feminism, and many others. The training process of LAONF activists is supported by the Catalan association *NOVA - Centre for Social Innovation*, and by the Italian *Un ponte per...*, that have been organizing for two years training programmes on the culture of nonviolence, by explicit request and invitation of the Iraqi associations.

Information on the initiatives already undertaken are available on the website www.launf.net managed by NOVA-CIS and on the website www.laonf.org managed by members of the network LAONF from Baghdad.

Details on the **Iraqi Week of Nonviolence** will be constantly published on the blog (in Spanish language) of the documentary-maker Alberto Arce (albarce@gmail.com, cell. +9647504435478), that is following this event from Iraqi Kurdistan.

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