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30 Years to the AIC

A Speech at Beit Sahur

By Shimshon Bichler
October 5, 2013



Dr. Shimshon Bichler speaking at the AIC

The following is the text of a presentation delivered by Dr. Shimshon Bichler at the 30-year celebration of the Alternative Information Center (AIC), on October 5, 2013. Dr. Bichler is political economist and veteran member of the AIC Board of Directors.

I came fairly late to the AIC. It was around 1990, after Mikado got out of prison, in the midst of the First Intifada. Actually, I came because of the Intifada.

During the dark days of Shamir, in the 1980s, I was rather pessimistic. I saw the Israeli occupation deepening and becoming entrenched. I saw Israel transforming into the backyard of the U.S Empire's dirty work in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. I saw Israelis becoming increasingly closed-minded, racist, religious, parasitic, and smug. I saw their politicians growing increasingly stupid, arrogant and ignorant.

In 1980, I returned from a long stay in France. Upon my return, I was immediately drafted into reserve service. I didn't avoid it – but that service introduced me, first hand, to the occupation, oppression and dispossession of the Palestinian people, to the settlers, and to Israeli hubris.

I should note here that from my perspective as an occupying soldier, the Intifada didn't start in 1987. It was always there.

In my first reserve service, in Nablus in 1981, every one of the patrols in the Kasbah quickly turned into a violent incursion. There were manifestations of all kinds of defiance; the Palestinian threw stones, Molotov cocktails and grenades. At that time there were no rubber bullets, so Israeli soldiers used live ammunition. They fired in the air, at water boilers, and at people. What amazed me was the fact that almost nothing of these daily fights was covered in the mainstream press, whether Israeli or foreign.

The Palestinians resisted and their resistance grew and developed until, in December 1987, it became a widespread and official uprising. It was then that I first saw Israelis baffled and embarrassed – if only for a brief moment, which made me somewhat hopeful.

From then on, I refused to serve in the occupied Palestinian territory. I discovered that I wasn't alone, that there were many others like me, and I felt some optimism.

As I said, the Palestinian resistance of the early 1980s received little to no media coverage; beyond the news of "terror" and "terrorists", Palestinian national politics, their internal dialogues, debates and political history were absent from Israeli discourse. I don't think it got more than marginal attention in the mainstream Western press either.

Indeed, Israeli reporters and foreign correspondents began to sense that something new was developing. But all of them were so deeply tied to military spokesmen and restricted by military censorship that they were largely held hostage to Israeli propaganda.

Consequently, their reporting was very limited and one-dimensional. There was no alternative media at the time – in Israel or anywhere else – to report on Israel's occupation, oppression and dispossession. The net result was that the Palestinian viewpoint was nowhere to be found.

During that time, I was writing my PhD dissertation at the Hebrew University. My thesis dealt with the political economy of military spending in Israel and the United States. In my research on the subject, I was unable to find any serious or independent studies on the Palestinians.

There were plenty of monographs on Orientalism, the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire and the superpower confrontations in the region. But strange as it may sound today, back then there were no serious materials on the 20th century history of Palestine, the Zionist colonization, Israeli occupation, and the political-economic underpinnings of the process.

Moreover, institutional academia was strongly opposed to any attempt at integrating Zionist and Palestinian histories. It was as if the Israeli regime, its economy and society, grew and developed in a closed hothouse, disconnected from their immediate environment.

I can think of many examples of this closed mindedness. One that I recall in particular is that of my writing partner, Jonathan Nitzan. In the mid-1980s, Nitzan submitted his M.A. on the Israeli economy to the economics department of McGill University. His work dealt with Israel's growth and inflation cycles although instead of approaching these cycles from the conventional perspective of macroeconomics, he offered a novel analysis that focused on the leading holding corporations which dominated Israel at the time, and whose redistribution of income and assets transformed the performance of the overall economy.

In his thesis, he explained that the initial boost to this redistribution – a process that Marxists call 'primitive accumulation' – was driven by confiscation of the properties of the 700,000 Palestine

who were expelled and/or escaped between 1947-9. The external examiner failed his thesis. One of the reasons she cited for this mark was that the number of “700,000 refugees was concocted out of thin air.”

It was around this time that I first encountered a publication by the AIC – I think it was *The Other Side*, or *The Other Front*. The publication offered alternative information: it covered the occupation from the political viewpoint of the Palestinians. The news and facts it contained – as well as the ways the news and facts were reported and expressed – were all new to me.

Despite my deep pessimism, I found myself encouraged. I wanted to get involved and participate in the work of the AIC. I imagined that we could try to develop a new political organization with aims to transform the Zionist version of Israeli capitalism, one that would change Israel from a submissive vassal of U.S. imperialism into a society in which one can breathe freely.

Who knows, I thought: maybe this was the embryo of a real political organization? Maybe we had the beginnings of a process that would end the occupation, lead to a federal state – or two integrated states – create open borders in the Middle East, initiate joint projects and most importantly, lead to the resettlement of the Palestinian refugees.

When I joined, the AIC was still a relatively unique project. It was only a few years later, after Oslo and neo-liberal globalization, that this uniqueness was drowned in a flood of newly created NGOs and similar outfits.

The AIC had several distinct features, however. It was the first to offer alternative analysis in English and Arabic in which Israel and Palestine were treated as political equals. Secondly, it was the first to be managed by a joint Palestinian-Israeli crew, located both in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and operating according to the same organizational structure. Third, it initiated a series of projects that nowadays seem obvious but back then were new and innovative: it helped prisoners; protested and fought against torture; offered new research on refugees; organized alternative political tours in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem; it mounted courses for political activists and engaged in anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian information campaigns around the world.

The AIC hosted international conferences on the occupation and Zionist colonization. One of the most successful of these, I remember, was held in Beit Sahour during the Second Intifada. We were surprised by the large number of people in attendance – mostly from abroad, but also from Palestine and Israel. There were also cultural projects and political workshops, a political café, a research centre for studying the political economy of the occupation, published studies on the militarization of Israel, Israeli settlements, the Wall, refugees, Jerusalem, and more.

When I joined the AIC, I could still see remnants of the old, volunteer-based structure. There was some financial support from abroad, but much of the work was conducted, somewhat amateurishly, by a group of keen volunteers.

It was only later that circumstances forced us into the capitalist mode of operation. We started to raise funds and do so professionally. We became organizationally transparent, and started to follow the standards and norms for accounting, pensions and insurance.

I think that the best years – the years in which we were very active and received plenty of money - relatively of course – were during the 1990s, before the Oslo bubble burst. The centre also

worked well during the Second Intifada and the dark age of Sharon, when we engaged in a number of creative projects.

I don't want to dwell too much on the difficulties, the internal conflicts and inner divisions.

I think that these difficulties were – and remain – reflections of the broader conflicts and questions that besiege Palestinian society – for example, whether to give up on the idea of one federal state solution in favour of two independent and integrated states.

There were also financial difficulties – promised money that never arrived, months of unpaid salaries, projects that were curtailed or cancelled for lack of funding, and ideas that were shelved because we didn't have enough people. Finally, sometimes there was despair when we faced the corruption and racism of Israeli politics, and the bickering and divisions of Palestinian politics.

It is important to remember the many Palestinians, Israelis and internationals who contributed to the AIC and its path. In particular, I wish to remember those no longer with us: board members Maha Nassar and Abdel Rahim Natsche and staff members Elias Jeraysi, Inbal Perlson and Yohanan Lorwin, who were killed in January 1999 in a flash flood in the Judean Desert.

I think I should end here, but before closing, I have one last comment. The AIC was founded and initially operated in the vacuum that existed in print media. This vacuum helped the AIC stand out, despite its limited resources and personnel. Paradoxically, it was the centre's success that created the influx of strong competitors that eventually undermined its leading position. However, the most important negative force at work here is the changing nature of capitalist communication; the massive shift from printed to audio-visual media has disadvantaged the more intellectual tools that previously made the AIC stand out.

Nonetheless, I am not discouraged. The so-called "American Empire" has been in decline since the 1970s, and the process, which forty years ago was still in its inception and not altogether clear, now looks irreversible. The demise of American power spells the beginning of the end of the Israeli occupation, and perhaps a lot more.

I do think that there is a future for a free Palestine, federal or otherwise, and for the rehabilitation of the refugees within a non-Zionist state.