

## Pointers for Non-Violent Action in Iraq

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### Abstract

Herein is reproduced the text of the address of Jean-Marie Muller during the General Assembly of Iraqi groups dedicated to non-violence which took place in Erbil on 9 and 10 November 2009. Jean-Marie Muller defines six prospective forms of action for the non-violent movement in Iraq: training, information, sensitization, education, protest, and non-violent direct action.

After having listened attentively to your presentation of the programme of activities for the groups dedicated to non-violence for the two years to come, I will try to give you some clear indications of criteria which may allow you to plan and organize your actions.

The aim of your movement is a dual one: to develop a culture of non-violence and to construct a democratic space at the heart of civil society in which peace, justice, and reconciliation might prevail. These two objectives are closely bound up together, and they both share the ultimate goal of promoting respect for human rights within Iraqi society, which is still torn by multiple instances of violence. Your conviction in effect is that non-violence is the only possibility for the reconstruction of Iraqi society.

In the sphere of the modalities which you can engage in in pursuit of these goals, I will distinguish several: training, information, sensitization, education, protest and non-violent direct action. As always, it is important to distinguish these so as not to confuse them.

### I. Training

Training should initially involve the members of the non-violence groups who need to become familiar with the principles of the philosophy of non-violence and the methods for pursuing the strategy of non-violent direct action. Its philosophy as the basic wisdom which gives a meaning to life, the strategy as a method for giving effectiveness to the action. This training should take place principally during sessions which alternate between theoretical talks, workshops, role-playing,

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and exercises on dealing with emotions. In the first instance it has seemed useful that international trainers take part in leading these sessions, but the moment will soon come when it will fall to Iraqi trainers to entirely take over this task. That is why it is appropriate to organize training for trainers. I note in passing that you have already brought in a number of first-time sympathizers interested by the concept of non-violence, whom you refer to as first-time people.

The training must also include a programme of reading essential texts which present the philosophy of non-violence, the history of non-violent campaigns, and the strategy of non-violent action.

## 2. Information

Non-violence is a new idea in Iraq, which up until now has struggled to find a place within the culture of violence which dominates Iraqi society. As a consequence, the greater public perceives the idea of non-violence as something ambiguous and poorly understood. ‘In the Iraqi political context,’ says Ismaeel Dawood, a founding member of the *La'onf* network (*Non-violence* in Arabic), ‘if you talk about resistance, you are accused of supporting the terrorists and advocating violence; but if you talk of non-violence, you are accused of being in favour of the occupation. *La'onf* is trying to create a third way with its message that non-violence is a tool which allows resistance to both the occupation, to terrorism and to corruption.’

The very word ‘non-violence’ thus poses questions. Certainly it poses good questions, but to these we must bring good answers. One of the first tasks of a non-violence group is to disseminate as broadly as possible information which allows the confusion surrounding the idea of non-violence to be overcome so that its true meaning may become clear. Essentially it is through written documents that this information can be spread. There already exist a relatively large number of texts in Arabic which lay out the base principles of non-violence which can be made available to the general public. Your programmed creation of non-violence resource centres is particularly appropriate for drawing in those who would like to be informed about non-violence.

Your Internet site needs to be a fundamental tool for spreading information to as wide a public as possible. That is why it is important to put up on the site not only the reports of your activities, but also texts which present the basis of the non-violence philosophy.

## 3. Sensitization

To sensitize the general public to the potentialities that non-violence offers, it is important to go out into the public domain to encounter citizens. In this area you have the experience of the organization of the ‘Week of Non-Violence’ and of the celebration of the ‘International Non-Violence Day’ on 2 October (Gandhi’s birthday). A whole range of communication materials can be used: banners, posters, leaflets, magazines, books, films, tee-shirts ... Cultural and artistic activities can also be organized.

Now such an occupation of the public space may lead to a confrontation with security forces (police and army). It is therefore important to plan how you will manage this confrontation following the principles of the non-violent resolution of conflict. The soldier and the policeman are human beings who need to be respected in their persons. They are at once the accomplices and the victims of the violence of the social and political system.

## 4. Education

The education of children is one of the essential tasks for the construction of a culture of non-violence. In order to educate children in non-violence, the first condition is that the education

system itself is governed by the principles, rules, and practices of non-violence: education in non-violence begins with non-violence in education. Any form of corporal punishment must be radically excluded. It must be a rigid principle that an adult is never permitted to strike a child or to submit her or him to a humiliating treatment on the pretext of better educating him or her. Violence inflicted on children provokes grave psychological trauma which will durably impact upon their emotional and mental wellbeing. Certainly, in developing their personalities, children must come up against adult authority. But that authority is properly exercised without violence.

The educator must teach children how to manage in a non-violent way the inevitable conflicts that will arise among them. Learning to deal with conflict is more important than learning mathematics, history, or geography.

## 5. Protest

Protest actions against a characteristic injustice constitute the first active step for non-violent resistance. The goal is to break the silence through which citizens themselves become complicit with injustice. But a protest action against injustice must also incorporate a proposal for the re-establishing of justice.

By speaking out in the public domain to demonstrate their indignation and their revolt against denials of the fundamental rights of human beings, men and women of civil society in fact assume their responsibility as citizens. They are exercising their power as citizens. Participation in such actions is definitively the best school for the training in non-violence.

Most often, these actions can be undertaken within a collective which has brought together several organizations from civil society (for example, non-governmental organizations and trade unions) which are in accord concerning the goal sought and the methods to be applied. The non-violent character of the action must be clearly publicized for everyone to take note of: both participants, public opinion and the public authorities. It is essential that any language used in the protest be itself non-violent and exclude all insults and verbal abuse of opponents. Violence of expression is already an act of civil war. Expression must become action, and action must become expression. Such protest actions must aim at engaging both public opinion and the public authorities.

It is important to clearly target the particular injustice protested against by establishing a dossier which provides a precise and rigorous analysis of the facts. You excellently followed this precept when you organized demonstrations to denounce all forms of violence which destroy innocent lives (*Stop the Hemorrhage of Iraqi Blood*), the actions committed by police, the detention conditions of prisoners (particularly with respect to torture), the violence against women (*Stop Violence against Women*), the laws limiting the freedom of expression and freedom of association (notably for NGOs and trade unions), the manufacture and sale of war-toys, and others. However, increasing the number of different protests risks weakening their impact and dissipating the action.

The ways of directly intervening in the public arena are many: open-air meetings, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, an hour of silence, limited hunger strikes ... These actions can be programmed over a period and repeated every week or every month.

These protest actions are useful to develop a weight of public opinion which is capable of bringing pressure on to the decision-makers. However, by itself, protest action is rarely sufficient to build up a shift of power that is capable of suppressing the injustice. In all probability, when the protest ceases, the injustice will remain intact. Protest cannot have direct bearing on the particular injustice, as it does not act directly against it. That is why injustice remains generally indifferent to protest.

Protest actions, even more than actions of sensitization, are likely to lead to a direct confrontation with security forces. As a result, such actions risk being prohibited. In every case, it is

important to assess what form of repression they risk provoking in order to decide whether to maintain them or to call them off. Prudence should demand that excessive risks should not be taken which cannot be assumed.

## 6. Non-violent direct action

Protest actions are necessary and beneficial for rousing public opinion and the public authorities on an issue. They assist in the development of the non-violence movement and in building up citizen power. However, they do not properly speaking constitute a 'campaign of non-violent direct action'. When the right moment has come, that is, when the conditions have been met, you must consider the possibility of organizing no longer only protest actions, but a campaign of non-violent direct action. But you should certainly not precipitate the moment as you must leave it for time to decide. Your movement has all its future ahead of it. You must have the patience to work calmly towards its development and maturity. That is what you are in fact doing here, and doing it well. You have certainly not been wasting your time.

Ultimately, only a campaign of non-violent direct action can create a new shift in power that can bring about the suppression of an injustice. This sort of campaign does not have the goal of protesting against an injustice, but of combatting it until it is overcome. The analysis of the situation must be broad-ranging, but it is essential to choose an objective that is clear, precise, limited, and realizable. It is important that the chosen objective be within the reach of the social movement that the action may arouse. And the action campaign must make a long-term commitment: it will have to be pursued until victory is achieved.

To combat injustice, a non-violent action campaign must not only express an opposition, it must initiate a proposition. It must put forward a 'constructive programme' whose aim is to inscribe in reality the respect for those human rights which are often denied. Thus, faced with an unjust law, it is not only necessary to obtain its repeal, but to achieve a law that is just.

A campaign of non-violent direct action will openly defy the established power. Very rapidly, those involved will find themselves held to be breaking the law. The public authorities will not fail to apply the means of repression which they have at their disposal. Those resisting must be prepared to face severe penalties. Prison is the natural gathering-place of the militants of non-violence. Repression is an integral part of a campaign of non-violent action. Imprisonment of those militants is likely to reinforce the movement's audience within general public opinion. But it can also break the resolve of the resistance. It is therefore important to assess in advance how much the power of the resistance has grown, to the extent where it might be capable of bearing the repression it will suffer without breaking. If the movement is able to stand strong against the forces of repression, then it is close to achieving victory.

How great a challenge to public authorities can be made through a campaign of non-violent direct action depends directly upon the degree of democracy within the society. The ruptures which Iraqi democracy is still suffering make the organization of such a campaign difficult. It will be your responsibility to decide what moment will be opportune to take such a risk. For the moment, the essential task is to carry on the building of your movement by bringing together more and more citizens who share the conviction that non-violence is the best path to follow to construct Iraq's future.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson