

-Rania Masri*

Talk given in Washington DC in November 2003

Good evening. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you, and thank you also for choosing the title of the talk: 'I'm gonna stay on the battlefield.'

I'm going to stay on the battlefield. This battlefield.

Why?

I get asked rather frequently why I chose to become an activist, and how I made such a decision. The question becomes all the more inquisitive when people discover that I obtained a doctorate in forestry, a field which is not perceived as a 'human rights' field or one that leads individuals to a life of activism.

Ah, but such is a narrow view. It is not one's degree – or lack of degree – that directs one's life towards activism. It is simply the calling of the heart, the mind, and the eyes. It is a natural direction when the mind allows the eyes to see what is happening, and the heart opens itself up to the strength obtained from hope and the energy derived from anger.

It takes only an open eye to see the injustices that surround us – whether it is the poverty that is in (almost) every neighborhood, the classism, racism, and sexism that pervades our lives, or the arrogant, greedy doctrine accepted by too many of us that allows our government (yes, unfortunately, it remains – thus far – 'our' government) to commit war crimes, massacres, and other human rights violations on an all-too regular basis against all-too many people worldwide. One doesn't need a degree to see those injustices; only a mind that allows the eyes to see; a mind that is not cloaked with racism; and a heart that is not cloaked with defeat. A heart not cloaked with defeat. We need not only open eyes, but also an open heart. We need to recognize that our history is filled with stories upon stories of individuals and communities that did succeed in changing their world – and thus changing our world. Every social change – every positive one that is – has been built by people who have believed that their actions would make a difference. When we read our history not only as the stories of the rich, manipulative, and greedy emperors, but more powerfully as the stories of the hopeful, committed organizers – who fought for the right to unionize (and continue to fight for those rights), for women's suffrage, for the abolition of slavery (and continue to fight) – we find our own hearts are then able to throw off the cloak of defeatism we are implicitly taught, the defeatism that tells us – directly and indirectly – that the violence is too large to be countered, the injustices too deep to be overcome; the defeatism that keeps the injustices alive.

Hope. Hope is the spirit of every activist. And anger is its passion, its fuel. And, yes, I am angry. I do not shy away from my anger. How can I not be angry when regularly people treat others as if they weren't human? Sometimes all I feel is anger. Sometimes the hope itself has difficulty burning. On those days, I find that I am no good. My anger eats away at my spirit, darkening the already difficult world, interpreting everything around me as futile. I have those days. We all have those days. Hope needs to be actively kept alive, just as with any fire that is within us. I keep mine alive with the words of Howard Zinn, Ella Baker, Eduardo Galeano, and others, and, more powerfully, with the every day actions of those believers in our world, those individuals who stay on the battlefield.

As for anger, that is (rarely) an emotion that I lack. The seeds for anger are all around us – on every corporate news channel and mainstream newspaper and in most of the voices of the politicians.

Iraq. A country that has been deliberately – yes, deliberately – destroyed by both the Democratic and Republican administrations. The reign of Saddam Hussein, a dictatorship supported vehemently by the US government. The Iraq-Iran War, a disgustingly-destructive ten-year massacre that was also supported by the US government.¹ The

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¹ *How the US armed Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons.* Norm Dixon. Green Left Weekly, August 28, 2002.

1991 Gulf War, in which Iraqi cities were destroyed, Iraq's infrastructures deliberately bombed and then bombed again, Iraq's wastewater treatment plants demolished.² And then 13 years of the strictest, most suffocating sanctions in world history. Sanctions that, according to United Nations reports, directly led to the deaths of more than half a million children under the age of five. And then the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a sovereign country, an invasion that was built upon layers of lies. And now? The military and economic occupation of Iraq.

And all the while, the government and its allies in the press talk to us of liberation, democracy, and human rights. What has happened in the past year and a half of this occupation?

The Congressional General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report one year after the start of the 2003 invasion. According to the report:

“In several key areas such as electricity output, overall security and the health of the judicial system, a report by the United States General Accounting Office says the US-led occupation has left Iraqis worse off than they were before the US invasion last year. Among the report's findings: the number of significant attacks by resistance groups skyrocketed from 411 in February to 1,169 in May; the new Iraqi civil defense, police and other security units are suffering from mass desertions, are poorly trained and ill-equipped; Iraq's court system is more clogged than before the war, and judges are frequent targets of assassination attempts; and in 13 of Iraq's 18 provinces, electricity was available fewer hours per day on average last month than it was before the war.”³

The GAO, which serves as the investigative arm of Congress, also reported that only \$13.7 billion of the \$58 billion pledged and allocated worldwide to rebuild Iraq has been spent, most of it going to run Iraq's government ministries.”⁴

All the while, let us remember every time they talk about the occupation that they have found No Weapons of Mass Destruction. None. Zero. And that even President Bush acknowledged to us, in the press, that, despite his previous remarks, they have found no evidence to support the claims that Saddam Hussein supported terrorism. The media reported it and then ignored it.

No weapons of mass destruction – though, even if they were found, that, in no way, would justify the brutality of the bombing and the illegality and arrogance of the invasion and occupation. No links to terrorism, even the terrorism so arbitrarily defined by the government. And no liberation. No real democracy. The government's plan, the one they call ‘liberation,’ is only the ‘liberation’ of Iraq's economy from any protections and rights, the opening up for the Iraqi market for foreign – primarily US – consumption. Here is their plan: ‘First, transform their economy. Give them the economy that we want them to have. Then set up their government, and make sure that all their ministers are under the ‘guidance’ of Americans. Then have that appointed-government set up elections, and there is no need to allow everyone the right to the vote or the right to run for elections. And that, that we shall **call** a democracy.’

And they have sold us this war, and they continue to sell us this war, by wrapping it all up in a yellow ribbon and telling us to silence our minds and ‘support the troops.’ What does that mean – ‘support the troops’? Does that mean that we give a blank check to the government to do with those soldiers whatever it chooses, to have them kill – and be killed – in an illegal, brutal occupation? Does that mean that we also give a blank check to this same government that cuts the veterans benefits of those same soldiers whom it sent to kill and be killed, so that the men and women come back not only psychologically traumatized but also lacking the health benefits to help them heal? And the men return committing higher levels of domestic violence than those men in civilian jobs, and we remain

Iraqgate: Saddam Hussein, U.S. Policy and the Prelude to the Persian Gulf War, 1980-1994. Digital National Security Archive. <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/igessayx.htm>

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² *The Fire This Time: US War Crimes in the Gulf.* Ramsey Clark, former US Attorney General. Pub Group West. 1994.

³ Chris Shumway, *The New Standard.* July 1, 2004.

⁴ The GAO report. ‘Rebuilding Iraq.’ <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04902r.pdf>

silent about the higher number of animal shelters than shelters for battered women? And, all the while, does 'support the troops' mean that we not ask why the troops are majority from rural communities who are under-represented, and from people of color communities, also under-represented, and most significantly from Indian Nations, a community not only under-represented, but one whose lands have been stolen – and continue to be stolen, and against whom a genocide was committed by the very ancestors of those in the government? Does 'support the troops' mean that we not question the hypocrisy of calling this military a 'volunteer' army when too many men and women are given a false choice of 'unemployment' or 'the military'? Does 'support the troops' mean the silencing of the heart and the mind, and the closing of the eyes, and cloaking of our spirits with the red, white, and blue? No. Hell No!

We refuse to separate issues. To examine issues without context. To absorb whatever rhetoric we are given by politicians and journalists. We refuse to silence our own rational mind.

And we also need to refuse to forget.

To refuse to forget the number of 500,000. 500,000 dead Iraqi little children killed by sanctions, a policy supported by Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr.⁵

To refuse to forget 240,000. 240,000 cluster bombs dropped on Iraq in this latest invasion.⁶ Cluster bombs. Bombs that explode into smaller bombs which explode into smaller bombs... Bombs not designed to destroy structures, but designed to kill and maim human beings.

To refuse to forget 100,000. 100,000 killed Iraqis. As reported by researches from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and as published online by The Lancet medical journal, 'making conservative assumptions,' 100,000 Iraqis have died because of the 2003 invasion.⁷

How can we not be angry?

And all the while, there is another occupation, also funded by our tax dollars, funded with our spineless Congressional representatives: the occupation of Palestinian lands, the dispossession of 5 million Palestinian refugees from their homes. Regularly, all-too regularly, Palestinian homes, Palestinian villages, Palestinian refugee camps – refugee camps – are invaded by Israeli military troops and destroyed. Palestinian youth are killed every day, in their homes, in their streets, in their schools, in their towns and cities.. Every day. Their names are not reported in the US press. Their stories not heard. Their voices ignored.

Iman al-Hams was a 13-year old refugee schoolgirl who was executed -- after being wounded -- by an Israeli platoon commander on the sad sands of Rafah, in occupied Gaza, on October 25, 2004. According to Israeli soldiers in the same platoon, the company commander, the soldiers testified, "approached her, shot two bullets into her [head], walked back towards the force, turned back to her, switched his weapon to automatic and emptied his entire magazine into her."⁸ After a bullet hit her leg, Iman, who was wearing her school uniform, fell. Then, they said, the officer went over to her, saw that she was bleeding from her wounds, but still shot her twice in the head to "confirm the killing," an Israeli euphemism for the practice of executing a wounded Palestinian. A cursory army investigation later cleared him of any "unethical" conduct, as is customary, and suspended him only because of "poor relations with subordinates."⁹ Three other children, almost the same age as Iman, were killed while sitting in their classrooms in UN-run schools in Gaza in the past few weeks. They were not caught in crossfire. They were not mistaken for adults. As Omar Barghouti notes, these children "were shot to death as part of Israel's overt plan to collectively

⁵ 'Results of the 1999 Iraq Child and Maternal Mortality Surveys.' UNICEF. August 12, 1999.

www.unicef.org/newsline/99pr29.htm and www.unicef.org/reseval/iraq.htm

⁶ 'U.S. using Cluster Munitions in Iraq.' April 1, 2003. Human Rights News.

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2003/04/us040103.htm>

⁷ 'Study puts Iraqi toll at 100,000.' CNN. October 29, 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/10/29/iraq.deaths/>

⁸ Chris McGreal, 'A schoolgirl riddled with bullets. And no one is to blame,' The Guardian, October 21, 2004.

⁹ BBC News, 15 October 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/middle_east/3748054.stm

punish Palestinian civilians for acts of resistance committed from their localities, in order to incite internal rifts and resentment aimed at the resistance movements.”¹⁰

The killings. The theft of their land. The constant denial of the most basic of human rights. The dehumanization of Palestinians - even Palestinian children – in the US corporate media. And the building of an apartheid wall. Paid for by us.

Yes, an Apartheid Wall. The Berlin Wall, of which we are familiar, was 96 miles long (155 km) with an average height of 12 feet (3.6 m). This wall – which Israel refers to as its ‘security fence’ – has a projected length of 403 miles (650 km) and a maximum height of 25 feet (8 m).¹¹

“The word ‘fence’ is too paltry to describe the matter,” wrote journalist Meron Rappaport in the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot. “On the eastern side, the Palestinian side, there is a barbed wire, then a deep ditch, then a dirt road, the fence itself, eight meters high, and then another dirt road, then an asphalt road (‘wide enough for a tank,’ the Defense Ministry explains to me later), and then more barbed wire.” When completed, the Wall will de facto annex approximately 50% of the occupied (Palestinian) West Bank into Israel, thus further isolating communities into cantons, enclaves and ‘military zones’. The Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including almost 1.5 million refugees, will be living on only 12% of historic Palestine. Nearly 16% of Palestinians in the West Bank will be “outside” the Wall in the de facto annexed areas by Israel, will suffer unbearable living conditions —the loss of land, markets, movement and livelihoods— and will be faced with expulsion – from their own lands and homes. This includes over 200,000 residents of East Jerusalem, who will be totally isolated from the rest of the West Bank. The Wall is built on Palestinian land. It snakes through the West Bank on Palestinian land, basically following the water line, and leaving Palestinians on one side isolated from their land, extended families, jobs, hospitals, schools, ... ¹²

And all of this

Rachel Corrie - The American peace activist who went to the occupied territories and stood in front of a Caterpillar bulldozer, those bulldozers which are custom made in Illinois for the Israeli army, to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian home. The home was saved. Instead, the Israeli soldier killed her. Drove over her once, took the bulldozer in reverse and drove over her again. Since then, the ambulance driver who took Rachel Corrie to the hospital has been shot and killed in an Israeli invasion into Barakah refugee camp. And, since then, the Palestinian home that Rachel died to save has been demolished. (The Rebuilding Alliance is now working to build the home that Rachel Corrie stood to safeguard. For more information, refer to: www.RebuildingAlliance.org)

We are paying for both occupations. The one in the Palestinian territories, and the one in Iraq.

I am reminded time and time again of the words of June Jordan. In 1982, when the Israelis orchestrated the massacre in Sabra and Shattilla in occupied Beirut -- a massacre that killed thousands of Palestinians, mostly women and children, June Jordan wrote:

“I need to speak about living room, where the land is not bullied and beaten into a tombstone.
I need to speak about living room where the talk will take place in my language.
I need to speak about living room where my children will grow without horror.
I need to speak about living room where the men of my family between the ages of 6 and 65 are not marched into a round off that leads to the grave.
I need to talk about living room where I can sit without grief, without wailing aloud for my loved one.”

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¹⁰ Omar Barghouti, ‘Iman: Executing another child in Rafah’, The Electronic Intifada, October 29, 2004. <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article3260.shtml>

¹¹ ‘Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign Fact Sheet.’ The Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign. <http://stopthewall.org/factsheets/64.shtml>

¹² For more information on the wall, refer to: www.stopthewall.org

When they ask me why I remain on the battlefield, it is simply because I am looking for a living room. I am looking for that language. I am looking for that breathing space. And I understand and recognize completely that this is not a journey that any of us can make individually. It is a journey that we make together, recognizing how racism is destroying all of our communities, recognizing how the privatization of public service is destroying all our lives, recognizing how militarization on both sides is making us into canon fodder -- and recognizing that hope is the soul for our anger, and that hope and anger together -- kissed by love -- will be the mixture that will lead us to victory.

We say clearly and loudly, we're not gonna take it anymore. That's why we remain on the battlefield..