

“Sand in their shoes”

AFSC staff in Chicago and Jerusalem talk about their work for peace and justice

An interview with Sahar Vardi and Jennifer Bing
January 22, 2014

Q: Would you please describe the work you do for AFSC in Jerusalem?

SAHAR VARDI: The Israel Program focuses on demilitarization. Most of our work is done on the social level and is done with partners, working with different local organizations working with youth to expose them to the idea that you don't have to serve in the army in the context of mandatory military service – to both show alternatives to military service, but also start putting question marks around the default that is military service in Israel.

And also support people who refuse to serve in the army. And that support can be technical in explaining the different ways to get out of military service, or through public campaigns for people who decide to publicly refuse and are imprisoned as a result of that. Right now we have [two Druze refusers](#); the Druze are a religious ethnicity, and they are the only Palestinians inside Israel conscripted to the military. And so two refusers in the Druze group are in prison, and we're supporting them with public campaigns.

That's part of our work. What we're now starting to develop further is research into the connection between the arms industry and the occupation and militarization. This connection is very obvious, but there are a lot of details missing. So what we're trying to do is take a specific military action, something like the separation fence or drones, something that's very concrete, which we know the human cost for, which is well documented, but to be able to say what the economic cost is, both for Israeli society and the United States. Because the U.S. is in effect funding this.

The U.S. gives Israel about \$3 billion worth of military aid, but at least 75% of that has to be bought from the U.S. So in effect Congress is giving a lot of money to U.S. arms contractors. So you have all these economic ties which are very clear, that have an economic cost for both Israel and the U.S. societies, but also very high social costs in Israeli society – that has to have conscription in order to maintain the use of these weapons and obviously the human costs on the Palestinians.

So we're trying to frame it around that while asking who makes a profit out of all this – in many cases the private companies who make a huge profit from wars or military action.

Other than that, we're trying to raise awareness regarding the cost of militarization to Israeli society to military-aged youth. How does it affect the education system? How does it affect the language that we speak, Hebrew, which is full of military terms, and how does that affect society, as well?

Q: The connections between AFSC's work in the Middle East and work in the U.S. seem numerous. Is civic engagement work still going on in the Middle East?

SAHAR: Not so much. AFSC's Palestine Program was doing that, but it's now phasing out of it. It's starting new work on Palestinian cohesion, trying to get Palestinians together, that we're divided by Israeli borders - Gaza, West Bank, East Jerusalem and inside Israel - to try to get them to mobilize together toward a common goal. So that's shifted a bit their form of work.

Q: As you listen to Sahar, what do you see as the connections between AFSC's work in Israel-Palestine and our work in this country for peace and justice in the Middle East?

JENNIFER BING: Part of it is that our work in the U.S. - it depends on our audience. Part of our audience is Americans who see the Middle East as one big mess. They don't want to have anything to do with it, and they don't think they could have any impact on cleaning it up. They feel like they don't have much responsibility, either.

So, being able to make some of the ties, show them that the taxes that you pay, the blind support which our government gives to the Israeli government perpetuates the conflict and the militarization of the Middle East. So making the connections - that's important.

Why I'm excited that Sahar is on a speaking tour in the U.S. and Canada - even though it's freezing cold - is that a lot of people are unaware that there are Israelis who are also protesting their government's actions, who are challenging militarism within their society.

Sahar is a very modest person, but I think she inspires so many people in this country. I know Daniel Kaplan, who was a fellow here at AFSC, and other people who look at the refusers in Israel like Sahar - that inspires their activism. If these people are speaking out and putting themselves on the line, going against their society's trends toward militarism, then we need to do the same in this country.

Both about our own government, the U.S. government, calling it out on its militarism abroad and its skewed priorities, that we've seen in its budget cycles and so forth, but also to speak out about the military occupation and how that impacts the Palestinians and Israelis and perpetuates the conflict.

I was asking Sahar about Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and how those strategies that we use in our work now to organize divestment campaigns on college campuses or among faith communities to look at their pension funds and so forth.

Or the more popular boycotts we see to boycott Israeli settlement products such as SodaStream – or companies that are perpetuating the wall and the security apparatus that maintains the occupation, such as Hewlett-Packard or G4S or some of these big corporations.

So I was thinking about – is this having any impact in Israel? I ask that of Sahar. What does standing on the street corner in freezing temperatures in front of Target telling people, “Don’t buy Israeli settlement products” – how is that related to what she’s doing.

SAHAR: I think there are a lot of different levels in which that relates. First of all, the most important thing for me is understanding how the structure of these things works. Trying to target here the economics of occupation is putting the focus now on what is the strongest lobby to continue it, which is the profit made out of it. People keep saying it’s about religion, or whatever. But in reality, the forces which are continuing it now are making a huge profit out of it. So to put it in this structure is very important.

It gives people here a responsibility to do something about it. But also because that is a very important thing for Israelis to understand. When we take that message back home, people who are protesting the occupation are not protesting against you, but against the people who are making a profit out of the suffering which you suffer, as well. So that’s a very important framework to work out of.

Adding to that, if we look practically at what effect have the different BDS campaigns had, and different ones have had different effects. In the Israeli media today you constantly read stories about, “There’s a boycott of this.” An artist who’s thinking of canceling their show, all these kinds of things, different forms of boycotts. And it’s not that the reactions to these boycotts are very supportive.

Usually the first reactions are very much saying, “It’s a terrible thing.” Accusations of anti-Semitism and things of the sort, but it’s interesting to see how in many cases it’s impossible to even make that claim.

I remember several years ago, the Norwegian pension fund decided to divest from an Israeli company that makes military technology, among other things surveillance for the fence between Israel and the West Bank, but also surveillance for the fence between the U.S. and Mexico. Because after they proved it could work in one place, it was much easier to sell it in another.

And so the Norwegian pension fund decided to divest from them. The same year, the fund divested from companies involved in Burma/Myanmar and so on. When it’s put in that context in Israeli society, I mean, you can say it’s anti-Semitism, but that begins to sound a little ridiculous. If we’re in the same box as with whatever’s happening in Burma, and that was a time of mass killings and protests and so on, then there are a few red lights that go off.

That said, politicians and the right wing are taking us to a place where, “The whole world is against us and we have to become stronger because of that, and defend ourselves more.” And that’s a very problematic discourse.

The counter to that, even in mainstream Israeli political system, there’s a prominent Israeli politician called Tzipi Livni, she’s the Minister of Justice now but she’s also responsible for the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

She’s been saying for the past several years, the reason we need to continue the negotiations and find some kind of solution is that we can’t afford to have this external pressure through the boycott campaigns, etc. that will eventually hurt the state. In order to protect our interests, we need to have these negotiations.

So it is a very strong power that -- at this point, the negotiations are not being taken very seriously by the Israeli authorities at all, but there are politicians that are seeing that and understanding the importance of it.

Q: What are the challenges, similarities and differences of organizing along these lines and toward these goals both in the U.S. and in Israel?

JENNIFER: I was just thinking this morning, because it’s freezing cold here in Chicago and it always seems like things happen in the world when it’s cold – the Gaza attack five years ago, the first Gulf War in 1991. Pretty much, you name it.

SAHAR: For us, that’s good weather.

JENNIFER: Right. Or the inauguration of a new president. January is often a time we need to mobilize people in emergency situations and have to go out in the cold, and people look at us like we’re crazy. “Why are you flyering when it’s five degrees out?”

But we’re hindered by the cold, maybe, or trying to get media attention is a challenge – particularly in the past, though I think social media has now changed that. There certainly are challenges in mobilizing people to come together, but we’re not facing soldiers firing tear gas at us, or rubber bullets, or live ammunition.

We are in a context that is totally different from Palestinians and Israelis. I said earlier that Sahar inspires us here. Part of that is, we don’t have to have the same level of bravery that they do. It doesn’t take so much for us to go out; we might be uncomfortable, but there’s not the physical risk.

Even though we might have people who argue with us on the street, I can say it’s totally different from there. It’s not an argument there – it’s someone with a gun facing someone protesting nonviolently. And that’s totally different.

What I think that we share is that we both have to remain optimistic in our work. We have to believe that freedom is going to come. That we have to be rooted in this optimism and belief. We see the small changes in the individuals willing to speak out, whether it's on the college campuses in the U.S. or in a community in Israel or Palestine.

It's small changes. Sometimes we overblow our victories. We think it's really terrific when our pension fund takes Caterpillar Corporation out of its social choice account. We consider that a huge victory because we've been trying to educate people about Caterpillar and how it sends militarized bulldozers to Israel and how that perpetuates the Separation Wall and the destruction of Palestinian olive groves and all that.

In the big picture, Caterpillar is still doing it. The pension fund victory is small. Both of us are in it for the long haul. We believe it's going to happen. We're not like the Americans who say it's all hopeless, they'll just kill each other – we don't believe that.

I won't speak for Sahar, but we're inspired by each other. It's good to see creativity in our movement. It's good to see our steadfastness, even when we're called names. We both understand each other's challenges, and admire each other for that, even though the context is very different.

SAHAR: I definitely agree. And I think there's something about feeling that there's this community. Not just locally, but globally. Not just in the U.S. and Israel and Palestine, but also other places in the world, working towards the same goals and exchanging information. Seeing the different flash mobs that we're done in Chicago and then we see them back home, and we're like, "Oh! We really need to do this." That's the kind of energy any movement really needs. It's very much through social media now and the Internet. It's really easy to be able to share that.

Another thing we have in common, which sometimes surprises me, specifically with Israeli society, not Palestinian, is how much work needs to be done to get Israelis to understand how relevant it is to their lives. Today, the lives of most Israelis are very comfortable, you don't really feel the occupation. It's not really there.

So this constant attempt to get Israelis to know what's happening, and to understand, and understand their responsibility for it, and that there's something they can do about it. That's something I hear a lot from U.S.-based activists, as well. It sounds a bit ridiculous, but it's true in Israel, as well. I live in a city in which 40% of the people are Palestinians, and yet most my friends in school have no idea what's going on around them. You can see the same efforts.

If we go back to the things that are different, one of the big challenges we have in mobilizing is that many times Israelis feel that working against the occupation, especially because they don't exactly understand what the alternative would look

like, feels like they're working against themselves. That's hard. Israelis have a very strong existential fear, it's very hard to step out of that and actually see what's going on around you. So that's something we're challenged with.

When you look at Palestinian mobilization, Palestinians don't have to be convinced the occupation is bad, they know that better than anyone else. But then the challenges are, for instance, taking the risks, to take a huge risk, Palestinians can be arrested for days before trial. I can't be held for more than 24 hours before seeing a judge. Palestinians can be held for seven days. We can get arrested at the exact same demonstration and have that difference.

For Palestinians, it's much more about, what can you actually tell them, that what you're doing, this attempt to mobilize will change something and is worth taking that risk.

Q: What motivates you both to do this work?

JENNIFER: I'm trying to think of an abbreviated answer. I'm trying to not sound cliché. The people and the work motivate me. Of course, knowing people in Palestine and Israel, having personal relationships. I'm in my 25th year at AFSC, I've had the time to meet a lot of amazing people, Palestinians and Israelis, who are giving their lives to making a better future for their children and future generations, and taking risks and celebrating life.

If I ever feel like I want to give up, I just think of all the people I've known over the years. Sahar noticed I have a picture of my colleague from Gaza in my office. And if I ever felt like I don't have it in me anymore – one more speaking tour, one more e-mail to respond to, to explain the situation.... I think about Amal and the people living under occupation. I can't just set that aside. I could say similarly in this country, I've seen the lack of understanding about people from the Middle East, about Muslims, and anyone of Middle Eastern background, and the lack of appreciation for the culture, which leads to Islamophobia and racist attitudes.

I do feel a responsibility as a person who has connected with this community for so many decades, to share my experience and challenge those misconceptions. So I stay motivated by knowing there's still a need to do the work. But it's the people who you meet along the way who keep you at it.

People joke about, if you go and live in the Middle East, you'll get sand in your shoes which you'll never get out. And that sand is those relationships.

SAHAR: I think there are two levels. On the small scale, what I've found for me that's most important, is not getting depressed, because things can be rather depressing, is to find those small victories which Jennifer mentioned. And to be able to say, OK, I do a certain activity and I can see the result of it.

The simplest thing that I get to do on a daily basis is when people want to get out of the army. You're addressed by this 18-year-old kid who's supposed to join the army in two weeks, doesn't want to, can't even think about being in that situation, but has no choice, in a sense, and has no idea what to do. And you work with him for a while and eventually, you get the phone call saying, "I got the card, I'm out, I don't have to do military service." It's really small, on the one hand, but on the other, for that person, you literally gave them another two to three years of their life. Something that's very important for them.

So finding those kinds of things, even if they're small, feeling like you're actually making a difference.

On the larger scale of things, I'm not even sure that "motivation" is the right word for me. I don't think I have a choice. I'm from Jerusalem, it's where I feel at home, is the only home I've known, I want to continue living there, but I can't continue to live there as things are now and just ignore it.

The reality is such that, again, over one-third of my city doesn't have the same rights I do. Even legally, on the most superficial level, we're living completely different realities. For me, that's not something I can just ignore. So even if I'm depressed and not motivated at all, to continue to live where I want to be, it forces me to take a stand to try to change the place into what I want it to look like.