

Honouring Martin Luther King Jr.

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Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, January 22, 2020

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

[The Jordan Times](#) 20 January 2020

*Thirty-two years ago this month, I was arrested sitting-in and blocking the entrance of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC. The embassy was hosting an event that evening in honour of **Martin Luther King Jr.** Looking back at what we did that day, I'm confident that it was the right way to remember Dr. King's legacy.*

There were a number of concerns that prompted our protest. In the first place, we were in the beginnings of the first Palestinian Intifada, the mass protest movement which witnessed tens of thousands of young Palestinians, armed with nothing more than stones, confronting Israeli military occupation forces. In response to this youth protest and the nationwide Palestinian boycott of Israeli products that accompanied it, then defence minister Yitzhak Rabin cracked down using, what he termed, an "Iron Fist". He imposed crippling curfews, demolished homes, expelled dozens of Palestinians and ordered his troops to "break the arms" of the protesters "to teach them a lesson".

It was confounding that despite carrying out this brutal repression, the Israeli embassy, nevertheless, saw fit to celebrate Martin Luther King Day together with making an announcement that, in Israel, they were dedicating a Martin Luther King Street in Jerusalem. What rubbed salt into that wound was when, shortly before the event, I was informed by Israel Shahak, head of the Israeli League for Civil and Human Rights, that the century old olive trees that Israel had planted along this street had been uprooted and stolen from Palestinian landowners by the Israeli occupation authorities. That was too much to bear.

Because, at that time, I was serving as an appointed member of the Washington, DC, Martin Luther King Holiday Commission, I took my concerns to my fellow commissioners and asked them to join me in a protest against what a number of them agreed was an Israeli insult to the legacy of Dr. King and not in keeping with the meaning of the day. Three other commissioners demonstrated and were arrested with me. The banner we carried read, "Dr King Taught Non-Violence and Justice, Not Occupation and Repression". After blocking the front gate of the embassy for a time, we were arrested, brought before a judge, charged and released. Later the charges were dropped, since our demonstration was determined to be a legitimate expression of political speech.

I mention this story and my pride in choosing this way to commemorate Dr King's holiday because, like many others who fought for King's birthday to be celebrated as a national holiday, I have been concerned that almost from the first year, our celebrations did not do justice to the day, the man, or his legacy. Instead of honouring the fierce fighter for racial and economic justice, the critic of US militarism and the corruption and greed of our economic/political order, the King we have come to remember is a fuzzy and benign shadow of the original.

It is important to note that well over one-half of all Americans were not alive or living in the US during King's lifetime. They have no recollection of segregated lunch counters, of dogs and fire hoses being turned on children simply protesting for equality. And they do not remember the disgusting racist rhetoric used by senators, governors and others seeking to maintain the old segregated order that King and his colleagues sought to tear down.

What we hoped for then, and still hope for, is that King's Day can be one in which we recall our racist history, recall the sacrifices Dr King and so many others made in their efforts to bring needed change, and commit ourselves to using, if necessary, the non-violent tools he used to fight injustice, poverty and war.

And surely King and his legacy are not to be abused by those who practice the very policies he gave his life fighting to end. That is why I was proud of what we did 32 years ago today and why I believe that Dr King would have been proud of us too.

So this year, on Martin Luther King Day, here are some things to do. First make an effort to learn more about America back in the 1950's, the world which King gave his life fighting to change. It would also be important to try to understand what has changed and what has not, and to assess the danger that we may be back-sliding in areas of racial and economic justice. Then look at the broader world and American foreign policy and understand how King would have dealt with the many challenges we are facing. And then finally pick one issue of economic, social, racial, environmental injustice and resolve to spend the year fighting to bring justice where it is lacking. That, I believe, is the way to honour King.

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