

Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire on Palestine, Political Prisoners and Nuclear Weapons

By [Mairead Maguire](#)

Global Research, December 02, 2011

[Middle East Monitor](#) 1 December 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

“Israel started the nuclear arms race in the Middle East, it’s the only country that has them, and we all know they have them. Israel has the power to start the whole movement for Middle East nuclear disarmament. The choice is between nuclear disarmament or nuclear proliferation. If we have nuclear proliferation we will never turn the clock back. Every Tom, Dick and Harry and everyone with a back garden will want a nuclear bomb! It’s absolutely crazy. So I think that we need to challenge those who are in power, who can make decisions. Peres is a Noble Peace Laureate. He has a responsibility to do something for the world that gives us hope. Nuclear weapons don’t give anybody hope, they are a fearfully distrustful weapon that we must abolish.”

Mairead Maguire is a peace activist from Northern Ireland who was on the panel of the Russell Tribunal for Palestine which met in Cape Town, where she gave some time to speak with MEMO’s Hanan Chehata.

Hanan Chehata: You were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for your efforts to help end violence in Northern Ireland. Do you think that lessons can be learned in Palestine from the Irish example, either in terms of relations between Fatah and Hamas or between Palestinians and Israelis?

Mairead Maguire: I believe most certainly that lessons can be learned. I think the most important lesson we learned in Northern Ireland was that ethnic political conflicts cannot be solved through militarism, paramilitary activity or armed struggle because violence only perpetuates itself. We found that the only way to solve our problem was saying to everyone, “we need all-inclusive dialogue; we need to sit down and begin to solve this problem together”. That was the main lesson; that non-violent conflict resolution can work, and it did work in Northern Ireland.

I think another important thing to remember is that in Northern Ireland it was an ethnic political conflict. There was a lack of civil rights for the minority community in Northern Ireland. It was not a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, we were not fighting over theology, though you can’t take religion out of the Irish question because it does play a role, but the essential problem in the mid-60s in the North of Ireland and the essential conflict was that you had a minority nationalist, Catholic community – we’re only one and a half million people – who didn’t have basic civil rights. We didn’t have one man one vote, we didn’t have fair housing, and we didn’t have equal employment opportunities so it was discrimination, domination and a lack of real democracy. You had a majority Unionist people who held total power. Now the majority Unionists in the North of Ireland believed they were

operating democracy and would have argued that they were a democratic society but the reality is, in a society where you have a minority who have no chance of having any political rights, “majoritarianism” is not democracy. Similarly, when you look at what is happening in Israel proper where Jews would argue that there is democracy but the minority Arab community does not have full civil liberties and human rights then Israel is not a genuine democracy.

So there are those comparisons you can look at. You can further ask well how did Northern Ireland begin to solve its problem and I think in the North of Ireland when the civil rights movement started in the mid-60s it followed the example of Martin Luther King in America. The first civil rights activists in Northern Ireland were the first generation of educated Catholics who were saying “we want our vote, we want our rights” and with more liberal Unionist Protestants they began to work for basic human rights. That could have moved into solving the problem but sadly what happened is that we did not have real political leadership and the guns came into the situation with the IRA usurping the situation and saying, “the problem here is about Irish unity; unite Ireland and all will be well”. Now that was a simple slogan that a lot of people bought into but the reality of the situation was that it was not true, because the vast majority in Northern Ireland were calling for civil liberties and human rights. They weren’t calling for a united Ireland because we were seventy years into partition, things had changed, identities had changed, people were coming together but they were demanding that if we were going to live together we wanted to live in equality with no discrimination. Very much like what you hear now from the Palestinians.

You can also talk about this in many areas of the world where a minority community gets educated and politicised and they want equality and they want jobs too. So we are challenged in these situations to rethink a whole lot of concepts that we thought were right like, what is democracy? Is it majoritarianism? No it’s not. So really in the North of Ireland, when we began to look at these problems we had to look at new political structures of power sharing. The ethnic nationalist minority had to be brought into power sharing so that their vote mattered. It was not just a matter of them having a vote but that their vote actually mattered. Really that was a whole process of beginning to move towards building communities that could live together and that could share power.

The most important thing is about relationships. If people live apart and think of each other as separate, think of each other as enemies, you have to really work on the relationship, on building trust, because nothing happens without trust. So in Northern Ireland we had to really begin to reach out to each other beyond the labels.

HC: The European Union has designated Hamas as a terrorist organization and refuses to speak even to its political wing. Do you think this is a reasonable policy, especially as in your own country the Good Friday agreement was signed before the IRA disarmed?



MM: Hamas is an elected party and should be recognised as such by all. It has the democratic vote and should be recognised. You have to talk to all parties. When we went to Gaza in 2008 on the Free Gaza boats we went to the Hamas parliament and I was actually invited to speak at the Parliament. [During that visit we also] went to the Church of the Holy Family and the Catholic priest there had organised for all of the political parties in Gaza to come together and they were there one night in the Church of the Holy Family: Hamas, Fatah, all of them, and the women members of Hamas who had been elected to the

parliament. They were all there talking about peace and moving forward and sending representatives to Egypt so that Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas and Fatah, could come together to move into peace. So when we left Gaza we were very hopeful because there is a passionate desire among the Palestinian people for peace, and then Operation Cast Lead started the following week. That was horrific. It was devastating because when we had been in Gaza we went to the hospital and [even before all the bombing] we saw the awful situation there. We saw medical machines lying unused; they could save lives but spare parts were not allowed into Gaza. We went to the electricity plant which had been bombed so that people's electricity was constantly being switched off. We went out to Gaza airport which had been bombed flat. We went down to the Gaza beach, where we had come in, and the fishermen were being attacked [by Israeli gunboats] only two miles out to sea while trying to fish for their families. The Israeli navy were shooting at them and killing the fishermen. They're killing the fishermen and killing the farmers. This is a policy of destruction of a people. So I come back to the absolute belief that the Israeli government does not want peace. It wants land and until Israel makes a choice for peace there won't be peace.

There is also an Israeli policy of divide and conquer; Israel has Palestinians divided so that the Palestinians in Gaza and the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Palestinians everywhere else are totally separated. Families are divided. When we were in Gaza in 2008 Dr Mustafa Barghouthi from the West Bank had gone in by boat too to meet his colleagues in Gaza, because the people of Gaza can't just travel to the West Bank or vice versa; they are in a prison. Dr Barghouthi met his colleagues in Gaza after two years.

HC: You were a co-founder of the Peace People in 1976 and you have been a vocal and active advocate of the peace movement ever since, inspired, you say, by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Palestinian resistance in the last few years has, by and large, been extremely peaceful made up of weekly demonstrations, hunger strikes and the like (which don't make the headlines), and yet Israel continues to occupy, imprison, torture and kill Palestinians on a daily basis. It seems that Israel is trying to provoke Palestinians to break away from their largely non-violent forms of resistance in order to justify an ever more oppressive onslaught against them. What advice would you give to the Palestinians trying so hard to enact your principles of non-violent resistance in the face of such vicious Israeli hostility?

MM: I have been greatly inspired because I have been going into Palestinian areas and have seen in villages like Bil'in, where Muhammad Khatib comes from [Muhammad was an eye-witness at the Russell Tribunal], and I have seen the non-violent resistance of the people there and it is very, very inspirational. The Palestinians' non-violent movement has deep roots. It's not a new movement and within the Muslim community generally there are deep roots of non-violence. I remember as a young woman being inspired by the story of Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan from Afghanistan. He was Afghanistan's Gandhi. He was totally non-violent. He organised millions of Afghani tribes-people to resist the British occupation. His life was extraordinary and he was totally non-violent. So I think when you look at people in the Muslim community or elsewhere, it is up to each of us to identify our own traditions of non-violence and offer them to our young children to emulate.

Jesus was totally non-violent. But the Christian tradition in the third century sold out on Jesus. For the first three hundred years of Christianity the Christians truly loved everybody and they didn't kill. In the first Christian writings a soldier said, "I am a Christian, I cannot be

a soldier and kill; I follow Christ.” Our earliest traditions are of total non-violence. Then in the third century we bought into the system. Constantine realised that all these Christians were non-violent and he started to offer them money, positions and power, and Christians started to become soldiers. In a hundred years in the third century they moved from total non-violence – “I will not kill” – to becoming soldiers with the cross as a sign of killing. So those of us who come from the Christian tradition have to reaffirm that our true tradition is one of absolutely no killing. Can you ever imagine Jesus with a machine gun; or early Christians having an “armed wing”?

So that is where we are, if we are to teach non-violence and try to solve our problems without killing each other we start with the children because this generation is very much into the whole militarism thing; we have to start with the children. I don’t think I have anything to teach the Palestinian people. I think they have taught me how it is possible to live dignified lives in the middle of persecution and suffering. I have learned that from them.

HC: You have joined the call for global nuclear disarmament. Israel is believed to be in possession of hundreds of nuclear weapons; it has chemical warfare capabilities and an offensive biological warfare programme and yet Israeli officials still refuse to confirm or deny when questioned about their weapons of mass destruction. Do you think it is time for Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and open up its Dimona nuclear plant to inspection?

MM: I remember visiting Shimon Peres – the father of the Israeli nuclear bomb – in his office and asking him if Israel would sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). I would still appeal to Shimon Peres to encourage Israel to sign the NPT and to open the Dimona Nuclear installation for inspection because I think Shimon Peres, as the man who started it, has the power to stop it because he is such an influential figure. Can you imagine what that would say to the whole of the Middle East, if Shimon Peres said, yes we have nuclear bombs and yes we will sign the NPT? That would be an amazing signal to the whole Middle East. Don’t give in to the nuclear arms race, because if the Middle East gets into the nuclear arms race... Israel started the nuclear arms race in the Middle East, it’s the only country that has them, and we all know they have them. Israel has the power to start the whole movement for Middle East nuclear disarmament. The choice is between nuclear disarmament or nuclear proliferation. If we have nuclear proliferation we will never turn the clock back. Every Tom, Dick and Harry and everyone with a back garden will want a nuclear bomb! It’s absolutely crazy. So I think that we need to challenge those who are in power, who can make decisions. Peres is a Noble Peace Laureate. He has a responsibility to do something for the world that gives us hope. Nuclear weapons don’t give anybody hope, they are a fearfully distrustful weapon that we must abolish.

HC: Around 25 years ago, whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu was brave enough to tell the world about Israel’s nuclear weapons programme. He was punished by Israel with 18 years in prison (12 of which were spent in solitary confinement) and is today subject to stringent conditions about who he can and cannot speak to, travel restrictions which prevent him from leaving Israel – which he wants to do – and so on. It speaks volumes about how seriously Israel takes its nuclear programme that this is how the government treats one of its own citizens. You have called for Vanunu to be freed by Israel but to no avail. What is his situation like at the moment as far as you know?

MM: Mordechai Vanunu is in his twenty-fifth year of being held within Israel. He’s not allowed to speak to foreigners and he’s not allowed to leave Israel. He’s under strict

supervision. Watched constantly, he has no real freedom of movement. He has no real ability to make a living. He is now in Tel Aviv and every year on 21st April Israel puts on another year to his virtual imprisonment. He appeals but they reject the appeal, so his situation is really very, very poor. We need to keep challenging the Israeli government to let Vanunu go. He did his 18 years and now they just keep extending it. But we must ask why Israel is doing this to Mordechai Vanunu. I believe that the Israelis are doing this to him because they don't trust their own citizens and Mordechai's treatment is a way of saying to the populace, "if you step out of line, this is what will happen to you". So he's there as a reminder to the Israeli people that they must not criticise their government. This is what is so appalling; that this man who is totally non-violent, totally peaceful, who believes in global nuclear disarmament, is being punished for following his conscience. We must never forget what we owe Mordechai because he did it [became a whistle blower] because he wanted to save the Israeli people from a nuclear Holocaust. He followed his conscience and now he is paying a very high price. He is a brave man. He is one of our heroes in the world today. We have to keep remembering him, be grateful to him, and keep pressurising our own governments to say to the Israeli government that it's time to let Vanunu go.

HC: You've been involved in many campaigns on behalf of political prisoners worldwide, including trying to get into Myanmar (Burma) to protest against the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi. Why do you think that more is not being done by the international community to campaign for Palestinian political prisoners, especially the hundreds of children being held in Israeli jails in blatant violation of international law?

MM: I really do think it comes down to education. I think that the Palestinian voice has been silenced and that the Israeli narrative has been predominant and Israel has the PR machines, the money, and the lobby in America, even here in South Africa. We see it everywhere we go. Israel has been able to silence governments and if people have spoken out against Israel they get called anti-Semitic and so Israel has had the power to put out its narrative and to silence the Palestinian narrative. So when people don't know the truth, how can they operate on it? Our work is to tell the truth, to put the facts out there. Stephan Hessel says that governments are "shy" to speak out against Israel. Well I think that governments are cowards. That's the word I would use. They are cowards because governments do know the facts. Politicians know the facts but they don't tell Israel that what it is doing is wrong. I think that governments need to have more courage and to say to Israel, "Look, there are international laws and you have obligations, you cannot carry out partition either in Israel proper or in the Occupied Territories. You cannot persecute these people and think that we will continue to remain silent because we can't do that." We need to keep on with the education and put pressure on our governments to make them have more courage.

Moreover, I do think it is very important that we highlight the plight of the Palestinian prisoners. There are Palestinian children in prison. There are sick Palestinians in prison, people dying of cancer, old people. They are not under due process. Many are being held under administrative detention. The whole system of military courts being perpetrated against the Palestinian people where they don't have rights has got to be changed.

HC: As a Nobel Prize winner, how do you feel about Obama receiving the peace prize? Given his now infamous track record as a war monger, doesn't it sully the name "Nobel Laureate" to have him amongst your ranks?



MM: I think that it was premature. I think they gave the prize to Obama in the expectation of what he might produce because he said “yes we can” and he raised their spirits and he gave people hope that we could have a different world. The Nobel Committee probably thought that they were helping him but I really think that the whole thing was premature. I also think that the Nobel Committee has a responsibility to look at who is getting the Nobel Prize. Alfred Nobel said distinctly in his will that the prize should be given to people who are working for disarmament and for a world without armies. Look at Nobel’s will. I think we have to go back to that again because we need people who are saying we don’t need armies, we don’t need militarism, we don’t need war and these are important messages for the world today.

HC: How would you respond to people who say that that is a utopian ideal, not one based in practical realities? Is a world without war a practical reality?

MM: That is a myth. Throughout history the vast majority of men and women fell in love, married, had children, looked after their families but did not go to war and they didn’t want war. But there has always been a minority of people who trained people to go to war, to kill. But if you look at history we have a whole tradition of non-violence where people have just lived their lives and solved their problems without killing each other. Why can’t we go back to non-killing societies? Why not? I am an idealist but I’m also a realist. What use are nuclear weapons to us today? What use are drones when all they are doing is killing people on the ground? They’re scandalous. My hope is with women. I think women have a different agenda. Women’s idea of security is being able to have a house, to keep their family safe, to get an education for their kids, to feed their kids. That’s what basic human security means to a woman. Now if we have that agenda as women then we have to challenge men and the agenda of war and militarism and battleships and drones and nuclear weapons. That is a big challenge but I do believe that if women start thinking like that it can change our lives. Change your thinking to change your life. Women must unite together and refuse to be divided along religious and political lines. Move above these things.

HC: You’ve called in the past for Israel’s membership in the UN to be revoked. Do you still stand by that and if so, on what grounds?

MM: Yes. They are committing the crime of apartheid, the crime of persecution and the crime of unjust war.

HC: If unjust war is the criteria would that not also disqualify the USA and the UK from membership of the UN?

MM: I do believe that Britain and America carried out war crimes against the Iraqi people. They killed over one million people. I was in Iraq before Iraq was attacked and I saw the suffering of the Iraqi people under sanctions where one and a half million children under the age of five died because of sanctions against them. The Iraqi people suffered dreadfully. When we visited Iraq in 1998 we were told that Iraq had dismantled its nuclear weapons and that it was not a threat to anybody outside its own borders. If we knew that, then the intelligence community must have known it. So we were taken to war on a lie. Now those who take the world to war against its wishes – millions of people around the world said no to war – they have to be held accountable. Now it is the same with Iran today. This threat against the Iranian people must not be carried through. The Iranian people don’t have nuclear weapons. They should not be attacked, and if governments, be it America, Israel or the UK, if they attack the Iranian people they are war criminals. We have got to say it very

clearly. Who is giving them permission? I don't give the UK government permission to go and declare war against Iran. It's time we remind these governments that there are international laws and that if they breach them they must be held accountable. If we don't take a stand for international law and human rights we are going to go further down the road of war. We have got to take a stand for human rights and international laws and to take those who commit war crimes to the International Criminal Court.

HC: Many Irish people in particular seem to feel some sort of kinship and affinity with those suffering in Palestine. Why do you think this is?

MM: Ireland has a tragic history; it was colonised and divided and Ireland has a lot of suffering in its history. In 1976 one of my younger sisters took four of her children for a walk and three of the children were killed in a clash between the IRA and the British army. Six weeks old Andrew; two and a half year old John; and Joanna aged nine, were all killed. My sister was dangerously ill, not expected to live. She had brain bruising and was absolutely, physically and mentally wrecked. It was a miracle she lived. She did not even get to see her children buried. When she eventually recovered she went on to have two more children. She then went with her husband to New Zealand to try to find a different way to live, but she came back home and on 21st January 1980 she committed suicide. My sister Anne suffered tremendously.

We started our peace movement in 1976 and our message was, we have to do this non-violently. We must struggle against violence and militarism. Look at all the suffering of these people. That is why I am passionately committed to working for peace, no matter where I can do it, because I know that Anne's suffering was terrible and she didn't need to suffer. Ireland indeed has a history of suffering but when I go to Palestine and Gaza and I see the people suffering there, I just think, by God, these people don't need to suffer.

The original source of this article is [Middle East Monitor](#)
Copyright © [Mairead Maguire](#), [Middle East Monitor](#), 2011

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Mairead Maguire](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca