

Defending Christian Peacemakers

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At the time of writing, the fate of the four members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) kidnapped in Iraq by a previously unknown group 'Swords of Truth Brigades' is unknown. While we pray that they are released unharmed, it is also worth examining the events surrounding their capture and the international response, since they suggest a positive way of challenging those who perpetrate injustice in the name of religion.

The men held hostage, including the British man Norman Kember, plus two Canadians and an American, are a part of CPT actions around the world, where members pursue projects of peace and justice in conflict-stricken towns and neighbourhoods. The CPT presence in Iraq goes back to 2002, when they began their work of providing independent information, monitoring human rights abuses, and facilitating non-violent intervention training.

Arguably CPT's most high-profile location after Iraq is Palestine, where they have maintained a presence in Hebron and the surrounding area of the occupied West Bank for ten years. Whether it is escorting Palestinian children to school, or standing alongside Palestinian farmers determined to plough their own land, CPT in Palestine has consistently resisted attacks on Palestinians by the Jewish settlers and Israeli occupation forces.

CPT is not just involved in the Middle East – its projects past and present cover the world, from Columbia to Canada, Bosnia to Puerto Rico. But it is the solidarity shown by CPT members with occupied Palestinians and Iraqis that has proved crucial in the last few weeks. The courage of those in Iraq is a natural outworking of the organisation's core values and aims, articulated on their website and in their founding documents.

Founded in 1984 by a group of Christians in North America, the central tenets of the organisation can be found in a statement released during the founding conference. "We believe", the CPT announced, "that the mandate to proclaim the Gospel of repentance, salvation and reconciliation includes a strengthened Biblical peace witness... that faithfulness to what Jesus taught and modelled calls us to more active peacemaking", and, "that a renewed commitment to the Gospel of Peace calls us to new forms of public witness which may include nonviolent direct action".

From the very beginning, therefore, the organisation viewed the Christian faith as central to its actions, a personal and corporate expression of "the willingness to give life instead of taking life", and in this, "Christ is the example".

As news of the kidnapping of the CPT members in Iraq spread, and fears for their safety mounted, a concerted effort by friends and family, CPT, and diplomats got under way to try and secure their release. Quickly it became apparent that highlighting CPT's track record of solidarity with the Palestinians, and opposition to the policies of their members' governments, could be vital to the four men surviving the ordeal.

However, in order to obtain as much influence and credibility with the kidnapers as possible, it was perhaps not sufficient to merely point to the CPT's anti-occupation stance. So began a stream of messages of support from Muslim organisations, Islamists, and resistance groups in Palestine, all calling for the release of the hostages in common cause with those fighting US-occupation.

The Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), in coordination with Stop the War Coalition and CND in Britain, sent Anas Altikriti to Baghdad to tentatively explore contacts with Muslim groups on the ground that could lead to pressure being applied to the group responsible for the kidnapping. Meanwhile, in Palestine, where the CPT were well-known for their work in the Hebron district, groups such as Hamas, Fatah, PFLP, and the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, as well as Ikram al Sabri, Chief Mufti of Palestine, all released statements in support of the CPT members. The National and Islamic Forces of Palestine issued a press release, declaring:

Based on our profound knowledge of their principles and attitudes, we bear witness that CPT members translate their faith in God into action in support of oppressed and persecuted people. This they undertake with utmost dedication and sacrifice as well as maintaining a frugal and simple way of life.

The following day, a statement came out with signatories including Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the head of Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq Sheikh Harith Al-Dari, Dr. Azzam Tamimi from the UK MAB, and representatives of Hizbollah in Lebanon. This impressive list put their weight behind a declaration that recognised CPT's faith-based work for peace:

We have come to learn that the Christian NGO to which these four activists belonged is a peace-loving organization that is well-known for its support for the just causes of oppressed nations around the world and particular for its sympathy with the Palestinian and Iraqi peoples and its support for their struggle for emancipation from the shackles of occupation.

In what was perhaps the most surprising development, the British government allowed Abu Qatada, held prisoner without trial under anti-terrorism legislation, to appeal to the kidnapers directly for the release of the CPT team. Shortly after, there were further entreaties from ex-Guantanamo prisoner Moazzam Begg and Mohammad Mahdi Akef, President of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

What distinguished this show of solidarity from previous kidnappings was the sheer volume, and in many cases, the Islamist credentials of those voicing support for the CPT

in Iraq. A friend of Norman Kember and president of the Baptist Peace Fellowship Mr Betteridge, described these statements as "unprecedented", and went on to add that "whatever the outcome, something good is happening. The future can build on that sort of understanding, that this is the way that the West can talk to the other parts of the world".

Throughout history, political barriers have been erected between Muslims and Christians, preventing a genuine, mutual understanding of the two faiths. In today's world, the impact of both Western Christians who offer unconditional support for Israel, and the dangerous conflation of Christian rhetoric with nationalism and empire, has meant that improving Muslim-Christian relations can appear daunting. Yet the example of the CPT provides practical and attainable models for how Christians can overcome the negative impact of Christian Zionism through sacrifice, love, boldness, and prophetic honesty.

At the same time, the chorus of high-profile Muslims, Islamist organisations, and localised resistance groups, asking for the release of the hostages, is an implicit rebuttal of those who seek to indiscriminately attack in the name of Islam those who in fact, oppose the actions of the Western governments. Answering questions on their website, CPT make the following observation: "There is a consistent tendency for organized religion to make 'calculated' alliances with the state, as it often did during the age of imperialism. Christians can be free of worldly confinements and eager to witness for truth in difficult times and dangerous places". This is a message that can not be stifled, whatever the outcome in Iraq.