

# DIPLOMACY FROM BELOW IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL DURING THE SECOND INTIFADA

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## ABSTRACT

During the Second Intifada (2001-2002), Italian post-autonomy collectives carried out direct actions in Palestine and Israel, seeking to influence the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a diplomacy from below perspective. These actions reached the full potential and limits of such theoretical practice. Using a qualitative approach based on political ethnography, the history and identities of the protagonists of these events are reconstructed. The conclusions underline that it is unfeasible to maintain active diplomacy from below in protracted armed conflicts, offering an original reconstruction of some key moments of the Second Intifada from the perspective of a non-state civil society political actor.

**Keywords:** Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Diplomacy from below; Paradiplomacy; Biopolitics; Political movements.

## DIPLOMACIA DESDE ABAJO EN PALESTINA E ISRAEL DURANTE LA SEGUNDA INTIFADA

## RESUMEN

Durante la Segunda Intifada (2001-2002), colectivos de la post-autonomía italiana llevaron a cabo acciones directas en Palestina e Israel, buscando influir en el conflicto entre israelíes y palestinos desde una perspectiva de diplomacia desde abajo. Esas acciones alcanzaron el máximo potencial y los límites de dicha práctica teórica. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo basado en la etnografía política, se reconstruyen la historia y las identidades de los protagonistas de esos eventos. Las conclusiones subrayan que es inviable mantener activa la diplomacia desde abajo en conflictos armados prolongados, ofreciendo una reconstrucción original de algunos momentos clave de la Segunda Intifada desde la perspectiva de un actor político no estatal de la sociedad civil.

**Palabras clave:** Conflicto palestino-israelí; Diplomacia desde abajo; Paradiplomacia; Biopolítica; Movimientos políticos.

**Fecha de recepción:** 27/02/2025

**Fecha de aprobación:** 30/05/2025

## INTRODUCTION

The article reconstructs diplomatic actions from below by Italian post-autonomy groups in Palestine and Israel. The research focuses on the period immediately following the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, which was attributed to and later claimed by Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the Islamist group Al-Qaeda. These events prompted an urgent reevaluation of priorities and political actors on the global stage by the International Society, led by the United States of America, which initiated a worldwide offensive against terrorism. Within this context, transnational actions by civil society political groups also intensified. The article is structured into three main sections: a concise methodological introduction, the theoretical framework, and a reconstruction of the events.

## METHODOLOGY

This research constitutes a political ethnography (Aronof, 2006; Joseph et al., 2007; Schatz, 2009) or even an “ethnografeel”, as defined by Vrsti (2010, pp. 288-290), characterized by its interpretative nature (Weeden, 2010, pp. 260-264). The study involves deep immersion (Schatz, 2009) and the personal participation of the author in the events under analysis. Both primary and secondary sources have been utilized to reconstruct these events. Among the primary sources are the documents housed in the Ya Basta! Association archive,<sup>1</sup> as well as the author’s diaries. Additionally, nine narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) constitute part of the secondary sources.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Diplomacy from below (DFB) is a theoretical practice embraced by civil society political actors who establish networks of reciprocal cooperation, sometimes parallel to and sometimes in opposition to official state diplomacy. It represents a form of paradiplomacy (Butler, 1961) and what Constantinou (2006) terms as “Homo-diplomacy” (Ghilarducci, 2020a). This practice encompasses both moralizing/consensual and ethological/dissensual dimensions (Opondo, 2012, p. 98), leading to increased complexity and redefined subjectivities, thoughts, and action strategies. The first form of DFB revolves around seeking points of convergence with counterparts, relying on common semantic dimensions that already presume a certain consensus. In contrast, the second form involves active engagement in a process that redefines reciprocally interacting identities. Rather than merely relying on shared principles or values, this approach aims to redefine the subjects themselves who engage in diplomatic interactions. Ethological/dissensual practices do not necessarily reaffirm a shared value horizon; instead, they introduce more challenges and complexities, treating the subject as an integral part of the problem (Opondo, 2012, p. 114).

<sup>1</sup> Ya Basta! is the organization around which the diplomacy from below campaigns of the Italian post-autonomy collectives are structured (Ghilarducci, 2020b). The references to the Ya Basta! archive are cited in parentheses with the following indication: Ya Basta!, year.

When activists test DFB in the context of Palestine and Israel, they confront a situation that problematizes the very essence of this theoretical practice, impacting their personal and collective subjectivities. This process leads to a transition – albeit attempted – from a moralizing/consensual Homo-diplomacy to an ethological/dissensual one.

## ACTION FOR PEACE

Launching a political campaign on Palestine in 2001 involves reactivating networks of contacts that have existed since the 1970s. Approaching this reality with fresh perspectives compels moving beyond the traditional framework of international solidarity.

Domenico Mucignat, alias “Meco”, explains: “How did Ya Basta! become involved? Italian movements had maintained robust relations with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)<sup>2</sup> over time” (Interview with Domenico Mucignat, Ya Basta! activist, Bologna, Italy, June 29, 2017).

However, shifts in the political stance of Italian post-autonomous groups, coupled with changes in international dynamics, compelled them to seek additional references beyond the political and armed groups—such as the PFLP—that Italian organizations had previously supported. New conditions and evolving subjectivities demanded novel ways of thinking and acting, transcending the proletarian internationalism prevalent in the 1970s. Official international cooperation, which often operates as the flip side of war operations, also needed reevaluation.

Giovanna reflects on internationalism from previous decades:

The difference between the internationalism of the 1970s and 1980s lies in the fact that those were solidarity associations (for instance, Italy-Cuba). Fundraisers were held here to send money there. Nevertheless, that isn't true politics; it's solidarity. Unlike large delegations, they merely supported Cuba's struggle from Italy, the idea now is to actively participate in the territories—to engage with the struggle. It's not just about supporting a cause elsewhere; it's about appropriating certain discourses and mechanisms to inform our own struggles here (Interview with Giovanna Gasparello, Ya Basta! activist, Padua, Italy, October 17, 2017).

The distinction between old internationalism and DFB lies in the bidirectional nature of the political relations among interested parties. Rather than one-sided acts of solidarity, this approach emphasizes exchange and reciprocity. It challenges the conventional flow—from center to periphery (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979; Wallerstein, 1979)—characteristic of support operations. At the same time, DFB, which also involves constructing cooperation networks, seeks to distance itself from the conventional modes of cooperation and official state diplomacy. The latter is often perceived as a mechanism perpetuating contemporary forms of domination in constructing a new international order (Hardt and Negri, 2002, p. 50).

<sup>2</sup> The PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) is one of the leading groups that composed the old PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), with a Marxist-Leninist ideological stance.

In a similar vein, Giuseppe Caccia asserts:

This endeavor aims to transcend two models: firstly, the model of anti-imperialist solidarity committees that operated alongside Central American guerrilla movements or during the First Intifada. The context of the mid-1980s First Intifada was vastly different. Secondly, it challenges the model of NGOs and traditional cooperation. The years of globalization's *belle époque* witnessed significant development in the humanitarian dimension, playing a pivotal role in conflicts. The distinction between DFB and parallel diplomacy lies in the divergent experiences of *Ya Basta!* and, for instance, the Community of Sant'Egidio<sup>3</sup>. Behind this distinction lies an interpretation of the crisis faced by the nation-state form and the assertion of imperial dominance. Additionally, a theoretical-practical critique of the humanitarian dimension and its alignment with dominant forms emerging on a global scale exists. This experience also emerges from the inadequacy of state diplomacy in addressing contemporary crises and the criticism of the humanitarian function's alignment with state policies (Interview with Giuseppe Caccia, former City councilor for social policies of the city of Venice, Venice, Italy, November 6, 2017).

Caccia's words sharply contrast DFB with official cooperation, often seen as an integral part of the war machinery, perhaps as its humanitarian *façade*. Fabio Galati further underscores the distinction between official cooperation and the cooperative approach promoted by *Ya Basta!*:

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In an international hotel in Jerusalem, we encountered a patrol of aid workers affiliated with various organizations. They treated us with a top-down approach, living luxuriously. However, DFB is NOT mere cooperation. The international cooperation dimension in Jerusalem was business-oriented, which is evident in their demeanor, actions, and lifestyle. These aid workers formed a distinct caste detached from our endeavors. Their focus lacked politics and a genuine desire to improve the conditions of the local population. For them, it was simply a job (Interview with Fabio Galati, *Ya Basta!* activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

Fabio's words position the world of international aid workers in Palestine and Israel in direct opposition to the theoretical practice of DFB. Moreover, these same official aid workers inadvertently place activists in open contradiction with their approach. The top-down perspective presupposes a hierarchy that categorizes even the internationals in these territories: those who derive their livelihood from work related to the armed conflict and its perpetuation versus those who aspire to challenge it. While the former view the conflict as a source of employment, the latter see it as a political testing ground even amidst the long and bloody Arab-Israeli conflict.

The inaugural delegation, aimed at exploring conditions in Palestine, comprises three activists from the Roman social centers. These individuals were carefully selected from local institutions in Rome to ensure enhanced security and political coverage. The delegation embarked on its journey in October 2001 with the primary goal of engaging Palestinian

<sup>3</sup> The Community of Sant'Egidio is a Catholic organization coordinating international cooperation projects based on solidarity and Christian charity principles. For more information, please visit their website: <https://www.santegidio.org/> [March 05 2025]. All the links were last checked on March 05, 2025.

interlocutors. However, their encounters were predominantly with Israeli organizations.

Fabio recounts their experience:

Upon arriving in Palestine, we had already been shaped by events in Chiapas, which contributed to our evolving framework of thought, practices, and knowledge. Our approach to the Palestinian dimension was rooted in the seventies, and we felt compelled to confront it directly and gather firsthand information. We organized an initial trip for the three institutional representatives from Rome.<sup>4</sup> With the assistance of Luisa Morgantini,<sup>5</sup> we established contacts with the PLO,<sup>6</sup> a group of doctors working in refugee camps, and an association of rabbis advocating against war (comprising three members). Interestingly, the young Israelis felt akin to our youth. However, we were like Martians on the other side of the territories—foreign and unfamiliar. While we intended to engage with Palestinians, it was the Israelis who truly comprehended our mission. Despite encountering challenges—such as a guide abandoning us midway through the journey—we returned from our initial visit with the realization that more work lay ahead. Establishing relationships with Palestinian organizations proved particularly demanding, especially when compared to the ease of communication and collaboration with Israelis who opposed the occupation (Interview with Fabio Galati, Ya Basta! activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

This initial re-engagement with the Palestinian situation underscores an additional layer of difficulty within the existing complexity of armed conflict and violence. Enormous cultural differences separated Italian activists from Palestinian organizations, while shared political and communicative codes facilitated interactions with Israeli counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, organizing a subsequent delegation became imperative – continuing the quest for political contacts to foster discussions and collaborative initiatives.

The second delegation emerged from the social centers in the Northeast, a direct evolution of the old collectives associated with the Paduan post-autonomy movement. For decades, these centers have been pivotal in the political analysis of the Italian extra-parliamentary left. Notably, the cities of Padua and Venice serve as the primary geographical references for the network affiliated with the Ya Basta! Association.

Silvia Foffano, who was associated with Radio Sherwood at the Rivolta social center on the outskirts of Venice, recalls the formation of the second delegation:

I embarked on the journey to Palestine without fully comprehending its reality. During a general meeting in the Northeast, we deliberated which campaigns to support. The decision was made to revive the Palestinian campaign, which had received various forms of backing

4 With this expression, the interviewee refers to some activists chosen from local institutions in the municipality of Rome as representatives of the social centers area elected on the lists of the Communist Refoundation Party.

5 Luisa Morgantini, an Italian trade unionist, politician, and pacifist, was elected as an independent member of the European Parliament on the Communist Refoundation Party's lists. She has been committed to human rights and the Palestinian issue for decades.

6 Here, Fabio refers to the Palestinian National Authority, formerly the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

7 These debates have been raised in various collective discussions, as recalled in a statement by one of the writers from the Bolognese collective Wu Ming (Wu Ming 4, 2002).

since the 1970s. Naively, I volunteered to participate in the initial mission. This meeting occurred in October-November 2001, marking the first delegation of seven people from Ya Basta! as part of a larger group.<sup>8</sup> International delegations were periodically organized, with some initiatives attracting greater global attention. Throughout the year, ongoing activities included protecting olive trees and intervening to safeguard homes. When international presence increased, additional initiatives—such as demonstrations at checkpoints<sup>9</sup>—were carried out. [...] I witnessed the inception of the Palestine campaign. Initially, we aimed to understand existing international campaigns' social and political landscape and identify like-minded partners for cooperative efforts. We needed to navigate this complex terrain and determine the most effective actions. Remarkably, the Palestinian population, accustomed to conflict and periodic reconstruction, didn't require financial assistance. Our task was to comprehend how best to support them, and the Palestinians generously guided us. This initial mission was purely exploratory (Interview with Silvia Foffano, Ya Basta! activist, Venice, Italy, October 21, 2017).

While the first delegation from Rome consisted solely of activists holding institutional positions representing their respective municipalities, the delegation was directly organized by Ya Basta! comprised grassroots activists from the association. This composition was made possible through a larger delegation involving other organizations, including Italian political representatives such as Euro-MP Luisa Morgantini.

Riccardo Varotto, one of the militants who participated in the first Ya Basta! delegation, reflects:

I joined because of my longstanding connection to the movement: from my university days as an activist in student collectives, disobedient groups, and white overalls. It was a coordinated network spanning the entire Northeast. The trip to Palestine marked a political milestone, allowing me to experience firsthand the apartheid conditions faced by my peers in East Jerusalem. Action for Peace facilitated Ya Basta!'s entry into Palestine alongside the Association for Peace and the CGIL<sup>10</sup> (Interview with Riccardo Varotto, Ya Basta! activist, Padua, Italy, October 17, 2017).

The delegation unfolded within the broader framework of the international Action for Peace network between December 27, 2001, and January 3, 2002.<sup>11</sup> During these days, activists engaged in marches and direct actions. However, most importantly, they reconnected with the network, reestablishing direct political contacts and laying the

8 The larger group Silvia refers to is the international network "Action for Peace".

9 Checkpoints are Israeli military control points that divide territories nominally under Palestinian control from Israeli territories.

10 The CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) is the Italian General Confederation of Labor, one of the largest national confederal trade unions. For more information about the CGIL, visit <https://www.cgil.it/> [March 05, 2025].

11 Action for Peace had been structured as an international network of organizations and individuals in solidarity with the Palestinian civilian population and Israeli pacifist organizations opposed to the occupation. It organized an international presence that, through peaceful intervention, served as human shields and the eyes of the international civil society to continue denouncing the conditions, especially in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The overall objective of the initiative was to reopen peaceful channels of communication and negotiation between the State of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority in the pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.



groundwork for a joint campaign spanning Israel, Palestine, and Italy.<sup>12</sup>

On the first day, the delegation accompanies a Palestinian march to Yasser Arafat's headquarters. For several weeks, the headquarters had been surrounded by Israeli tanks, effectively confining the Palestinian leader and his guard and creating an escalating militarized isolation. During the march, participants gain firsthand experience of the reality of checkpoints and their profound impact on the daily lives of Palestinian civilians who traverse between their territories and those of the State of Israel.

As documented in Meco and Neva's diary: "With the Israeli occupation of part of the Palestinian National Authority's territory, numerous new checkpoints have been established within the areas administered by the ANP. These checkpoints exacerbate mobility challenges for Palestinians, effectively transforming ANP zones into South African-style *bantustans*" (Ya Basta!, 2001).

After passing through the Kalandia checkpoint, which divides Jerusalem from Ramallah (where the ANP's headquarters is located), the delegation proceeds toward Arafat's headquarters with the peaceful intention of overcoming the Israeli military blockade. However, the Israeli soldiers respond forcefully, firing tear gas and stun grenades, obstructing the peaceful advance of international marchers, Palestinian civilians, and Israeli pacifists.

The second day unfolds with a morning march followed by initial meetings with various organizations in the afternoon. The first one is New Profile, an Israeli feminist group committed to the cultural demobilization of Israeli society.<sup>13</sup> The organization, among other initiatives, supports conscientious objectors to military service and active-duty soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories.<sup>14</sup> Next, there is a meeting with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition.<sup>15</sup> This group engages in direct intervention, often with the support of international activists, positioning themselves between Israeli bulldozers and Palestinian homes in the occupied territories. They also collaborate on legal advice and actions for rebuilding demolished buildings. The day concludes at the hotel with a brief training session involving American activists from the International Solidarity Movement (ISM),<sup>16</sup> preparing for the next day's action at the checkpoint that prevents Palestinian students from traveling to Birzeit University near Ramallah.

12 The author of this research is part of the mentioned delegation, along with four activists from the city of Padua, two from Marghera, and two from Bologna. The following reconstruction of the delegation's events is based on the author's memories and a travel diary kept by the two militants from Bologna, stored in the Association's archives in Padua. The delegation comprised nine people, of whom only seven were actively involved with the Ya Basta! Association at the time of the trip.

13 From their internet site: "New Profile is a feminist movement which opposes militarism. Striving toward an Israel which ceases to be an army with a state, we act to decrease the influence of militarism on daily life, and make Israeli society more civil, tolerant, and peaceful". In <https://newprofile.org/en/> [March 05, 2025].

14 In Israel, military service is mandatory for both men and women. Only ultra-Orthodox Jews have the right to conscientious objection; for others, it means imprisonment. Soldiers who refuse to serve again in the occupied territories are also subject to penalties, in addition to strong social stigmatization that labels them as traitors and renegades.

15 More information about the history and activities of the Committee can be found on their website: <https://icahd.org/> [March 05, 2025].

16 Further information about the history and activities of the ISM: <https://palsolidarity.org/> [March 05, 2025]. During one of their actions in Gaza in 2003, North American activist Rachel Corrie was killed by an Israeli soldier driving a bulldozer to demolish a Palestinian house.

On the following day, when the activists arrive at the Birzeit checkpoint, they find it deserted, devoid of Israeli military presence. Palestinian students, assisted by passing truck drivers, begin physically dismantling the checkpoint. Suddenly, a tank and an Israeli military vehicle appear from above, firing tear gas and stun grenades. Despite this, the Palestinians successfully dismantled the checkpoint. The Israeli military's reaction is to install another blockade a few hundred meters down the same road. Civil disobedience and direct boycotts may seem futile in the context of open warfare experienced daily in the Palestinian territories.

On December 30, the delegation traveled to the city of Hebron, which is home to approximately 80,000 Palestinians and a community of around 400 Israeli settlers residing in the city center. The delegation navigated bypass roads—notable routes connecting Israeli settlements in the occupied territories—disrupting connections between small Palestinian rural villages. Despite passing through territories nominally under the control of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Palestinians are prohibited from using these roads, which are exclusively reserved for Israelis.

Upon arriving at the Hebron checkpoint, the police and military informed the delegation that the city had been under curfew since the previous day, rendering passage impossible. As Action for Peace members attempted to negotiate entry, a group of armed Israeli settlers approached, expressing gratitude to the authorities for preventing the friends of terrorists from entering. Undeterred, American delegates lined up, brandishing their passports and requesting entry. However, the police officers swiftly warned that they could no longer guarantee the delegation's safety due to the presence of armed settlers.

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With no other recourse, the delegation decided to stage a sit-in before the Orient House in Jerusalem—a historic venue associated with political and cultural exchanges linked to the PNA. The Orient House had been evacuated and closed by the Israeli government since August 2001. Lacking banners or visible symbols of protest, someone raised a Palestinian flag. In response, Israeli soldiers abandoned their guard posts and forcibly removed the flag. An Italian activist sustained a fractured foot, and two activists—one Belgian and one French—were arrested and later released after an hour. This incident highlighted the immediate arrest penalty for displaying the Palestinian flag on Israeli territory.<sup>17</sup>

On December 31, international participants, Palestinians, and Israeli pacifists marched for peace from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Various religious and civilian communities organized this interfaith event, including the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Bishop of Bethlehem, and representatives from Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran churches and Islamic institutions. The international participants, wearing sashes, vests, and caps labeled International Observers, encircled the procession, serving as an unarmed security. The day ended in Ramallah with speeches from Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian physician and political leader, and Yasser Arafat at the PNA headquarters. The participants then joined Palestinian youth in Al-Manara Square to welcome the new year.

<sup>17</sup> This event became particularly significant, especially during the Easter week delegation in 2002. Further details are provided later in the article.



On January 1, 2002, the Ya Basta! group split. One group stayed in Jerusalem for planning and evaluation. The other group, led by Israeli pacifist Neta Golan, visited rural Palestinian villages in the Selfit area of the West Bank, near Nablus, to understand their situation.<sup>18</sup>

As per representatives from other organizations in Action for Peace, the Jerusalem group pledged to continue promoting the campaign in Italy and participate in a new delegation in April 2002, during Easter week. The second group observed the early stages of wall construction in the Selfit area, which the Israeli government officially approved on June 23, 2002. Even before the official approval, the isolation of Palestinian villages was noticeable. Entrances to rural roads connecting these villages were often blocked by debris from Israeli bulldozers. Attempts to clear these entrances were met with armed retaliation from the Israeli military. The group then moved to Tel Aviv to meet with activists from Indymedia Israel.<sup>19</sup>

At day's end, the second group had two options: return to their Jerusalem hotel via a slower, safer route through Palestinian territories, avoid Israeli bypass roads, or take a faster but riskier bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem via these bypass roads. The latter option, chosen after a brief discussion, was quicker but posed risks, especially during the Second Intifada, due to potential attacks on the bus.

The choice was taken for two reasons: the shorter travel time and the opportunity to experience the daily risks faced by Israelis.<sup>20</sup> This experience was part of Homo-diplomacy practice, an attempt to understand the complexities and disagreements of others, moving beyond the Italian activist identities. Most bus users on these bypass roads were Israeli settlers, the same ones who confronted the Action for Peace delegation at the Nablus checkpoint, accusing them of supporting terrorists while continuing to occupy Palestinian territories (Farer, 1991; Berry and Philo, 2006, pp. 53-59; Carmon, 2010; Tilley, 2012).

The Action for Peace delegation officially ended on January 2. However, the Ya Basta! group and some others continued to the Gaza Strip to understand the area's reality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Gaza Strip, a territory of about 140 square kilometers, has been under Israeli occupation since 1967 despite nominal administration by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) (Roy, 1988, pp. 59-60). In early 2002, the situation was dramatic due to Israeli settlements in strategic locations blocking Palestinians' sea access in some cases. These settlements occupied the most fertile lands and controlled most water resources. The area, a stronghold for radical groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, was under their political control. Since the second Intifada's start, Palestinians could not enter or leave the Gaza Strip. Permits for 25,000 Palestinian workers in Israeli territory were revoked, about 150 students at Birzeit University near Ramallah could not

18 The author of this research is part of this group.

19 The Indymedia network is a network of independent media outlets that emerged after the Seattle mobilization. It aims to build a new type of grassroots information and communication.

20 What the author of this account—along with his fellow travelers—witnessed and experienced in that episode was the complete normalization by Israeli civilians of the atmosphere of fear and exceptional circumstances. While the delegation members lived under constant tension, heightened with each new passenger boarding the bus, for the citizens of Israel, everything appeared entirely normal.

visit their families, and the sick could not leave for medical treatment.<sup>21</sup>

The Gaza Strip's situation is more severe than other territories visited by the Action for Peace mission. The international community has largely abandoned it, and Palestinians here are unaccustomed to foreigners. The influence of extreme Islamist factions has significantly radicalized the population. European delegates quickly felt unwelcome,<sup>22</sup> but they continued to Rafah and Khan Yunis, cities on the southern border with Egypt. These cities are war zones, with buildings showing signs of gunfire and bombings.

On January 3, the Ya Basta! delegation returned to Italy, filled with a mix of helplessness, anger, and a firm resolve to influence the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They aligned themselves with civilians from both sides, mainly the more affected Palestinian civilians, advocating for a peaceful, negotiated solution. The challenges of practicing Homodiplomacy became clear, especially in finding Palestinian counterparts and considering alternative actions in the complex context of a decades-long war.

### ACTION AGAINST GLOBAL WAR

In early 2002, violence in Palestine and Israel escalated despite the increased presence and peaceful efforts of international activists. Concurrently, Italy saw the peak of the alter-globalization movement, highlighted by the European Social Forum events. By the year's end, these discussion and training forums had attracted over 50,000 participants (Pleyers, 2010, p. 34), and around a million people marched in Florence from November 6 to 10 (Pleyers, 2010, p. 30).<sup>23</sup>

For activists, particularly those associated with Ya Basta!, the focus was on Palestine. Despite other ongoing national and international campaigns, the Palestine campaign took center stage. Efforts were concentrated on organizing a delegation in April in collaboration with the international network of Action for Peace. Concurrently, there was a rise in awareness activities among Italians, including boycotts of Israeli products and marches, like the national one in Rome on February 2 (Ya Basta!, 2002).

From handwritten notes in the archive of the Ya Basta! Association in Padua:

We began to transform Palestine into a topic of action on two fronts: first, reaffirming a DFB based on international protection that institutional bodies fail to provide, and second, boycotting Israeli activities as a real practice condemning the occupation. By the end of March, an international presence coordinated by Action for Peace in the occupied territories

21 The information mentioned comes from data managed by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza during the meeting between this organization and the delegates from Ya Basta!. For more information about the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, visit their website: <https://pchgaza.org/en/> [March 05, 2025].

22 As the delegates exit the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in the city of Gaza, numerous elementary schoolgirls from a Quranic school approach the bus, shouting *Allah Akbar* (Allah is great) and other phrases that the delegates do not understand, and no one bothers to translate. In Khan Yunis, during a short symbolic march toward an Israeli settlement that prevents Palestinians from accessing the sea in the area, the international delegates are pelted with stones by Palestinians who shout their support for Hamas.

23 Regarding the 2002 European Social Forum in Florence, see Pleyers, Geoffrey, (2013), A Brief History of the Alter-Globalization Movement, June 20 2013, in <https://booksandideas.net/A-Brief-History-of-the-Alter.html> [March 05, 2025].

is planned, and we have decided to participate *en masse* (Ya Basta!, 2002).

The DFB action in Palestine and Israel was built up significantly through the campaign in Italy and the direct participation of hundreds of activists in the delegation. Hardt and Negri referenced this experience in their work “Multitude”, discussing it as an example of biopolitical resistance. These resistances are termed biopolitical because they involve direct nonviolent action to defend life in conflict zones, where life is often denied through armed and violent actions (Hardt and Negri, 2003).

On the night of March 28, a delegation of about 350 Italian activists traveled to Tel Aviv, changing planes in Malta. While waiting for their flight, news broke of another suicide bombing in Israel, resulting in two civilian casualties. The bomber was later identified as an eighteen-year-old Palestinian woman, Ayat al-Akhras, the youngest in the history of such attacks (Ambrosio, 2004). As reported by several international media outlets—among others, The Telegraph, The Guardian, and BBC News – tensions had been high since March 5 due to a bombing near Haifa that killed fifteen Israeli civilians, most of them students, and injured dozens. This attack escalated the cycle of violence between Palestinian armed groups and the Israeli army.

Upon arrival in Tel Aviv, the delegation found the city on high alert. The possibility of carrying out any political or symbolic action was severely limited. Some delegates managed to pass through Israeli border controls posing as tourists and started to leave the airport. However, military personnel soon identified them and escorted them back inside the airport.

As Manila Ricci from Rimini recalls about the trip to Palestine:

“It has been a very intense experience with a suspension of civil and democratic rights, beginning with our detention at Tel Aviv airport. Everything has been influenced by a major attack in the city of Haifa. We have been able to move very little within the territory” (Interview with Manila Ricci, Ya Basta! activist, Rimini, Italy, December 7, 2017).

After approximately 8 hours of detention at Tel Aviv airport, the Israeli authorities allowed the entire delegation to enter the State of Israel, albeit with a limited visa valid for seven days. The delegation members soon learned that the situation was unblocked because no airline was willing to receive the activists; apparently, there were no available flights.

As Israeli military retaliations intensified in the Gaza Strip, Yasser Arafat, the President of the Palestinian National Authority, found his headquarters in Ramallah under siege by Israeli forces. It forced Arafat and his guards to retreat to the most secure parts of their bunker.

Amid this, a delegation arrived in Jerusalem on March 29 and tried to enter Ramallah. However, they found the city under siege and the Kalandia checkpoint closed. Despite their peaceful attempts to cross the Israeli military blockade, they had to return to Jerusalem. Around this time, they learned that French delegates, led by José Bové, were

already in Ramallah.<sup>24</sup>

The next day, while the delegation members were deliberating their next steps in their Jerusalem hotel, Tano D'Amico,<sup>25</sup> a photographer linked with Italian movements since the seventies, arrived. He had managed to enter Ramallah despite the military curfew, using a secondary road that Palestinians use when the main checkpoint is closed. This prompted the delegation to plan a small group's entry into the city, still under military curfew.<sup>26</sup>

As Fabio Galati, who participated in this initial group entering Ramallah, recalls:

In Jerusalem, an assembly was underway where various factions were already at odds. The part primarily associated with political parties was cautious and sought official diplomatic channels. The *movimentisti*<sup>27</sup> wanted to take action. Representatives from *Rifondazione*<sup>28</sup> argued that our attitude endangered the safety of all delegates. During the discussion, photographer Tano D'Amico returned from Ramallah. A delegation within the delegation was organized to enter Ramallah. Mauro Bulgarelli, a Green Party deputy, was proposed as the entry point. We weren't exactly sure what we were going to do. We lived DFB as something instinctive. There lies the conflict; there is where we must go (Interview with Fabio Galati, Ya Basta! activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

DFB is characterized by instinct and improvisation during a crisis. Unlike institutionalized political organizations, it does not strictly adhere to strategic calculations and includes civil disobedience in its action repertoire. This approach encourages to think beyond legal constraints. Within the same delegation are different positions: those linked to the Party of Communist Refoundation and the post-autonomous activists, referred to as the *movimentisti* by Galati. Even among the *movimentisti*, there is disagreement about the decision to form a sub-delegation to enter Ramallah during curfew. Most members of this smaller group are from the Roman social centers. Despite the majority opposing this risky action, the delegation splits into two. The larger group heads to Jerusalem's Damascus Gate to distract Israeli forces, provoking them using Palestinian flags, while the smaller group attempts to enter Ramallah through a secret entrance. Notably, despite differing views, the entire delegation quickly regroups to form a joint strategy, remarking on the existence of a collective political entity that

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24 José Bové, a French farmer, activist, and later politician, is among the prominent figures of the alter-globalization movement. He gained notoriety for physically dismantling a McDonald's restaurant under construction as a protest gesture. See Northcutt, Wayne, (2003), "Jose Bove vs. McDonald's: The Making of a National Hero in the French Anti-Globalization Movement", *Journal of Western Society for French History*, vol. 31, 326, in University Press of Colorado. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/wsfh/0642292.0031.020?view=text;rgn=main> [March 05, 2025].

25 Tano D'Amico is the most prominent activist photographer in Italian left-wing circles since the 1960s. Some of his publications include: D'Amico, Tano (1998), *Storia fotografica della società italiana*, Rome: Editori Riuniti; D'Amico, Tano (1998), *Gli anni ribelli: 1968-1980*, Rome: Editori riuniti; D'Amico, Tano (2000), *Il giubileo nero degli zingari*. Rome: Editori riuniti; D'Amico, Tano, (2008), *Volevamo solo cambiare il mondo*, Naples: Intra Moenia.

26 The group comprises ten Italians and a Basque musician, Fermin Muguruza, accompanied by Israeli peace activist Neta Golan. The author of this research enters Ramallah with this group. The actions undertaken throughout the delegation are documented in the video of Mariani, Federico, "Con la Palestina negli Occhi", YouTube, January 5 2017, video, 29:34, in [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_0G-OAVze28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0G-OAVze28) [March 05, 2025].

27 Fabio refers to those activists who were less inclined to participate in official party politics.

28 Communist Refoundation Party.

can accommodate and defend diverse proposals and actions. During the Palestinian-Israeli crisis in Easter 2002, their common denominator was nonviolent opposition to occupation and war.

Regarding the delegation entering Ramallah, Fabio continues:

“Roberto Della Strada would peer around every corner with an improvised white flag made from a scarf, checking for snipers or tanks. We were instructed to go to the hotel where the thirty-nine French delegates were with José Bové” (Interview with Fabio Galati, Ya Basta! activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

Upon entering Ramallah, the activists’ primary goal was to meet José Bové and the French delegation at the Ramallah Hotel. They navigated the city's empty streets, punctuated by sporadic gunfire and the noise of Israeli tanks. After hours of searching for the Ramallah Hotel, they found a small Palestinian hotel as evening fell. The owners gestured for them to come in through the closed curtains. As soon as the activists reached the door, they were quickly ushered inside to hide just as an Israeli tank drove by.

The following day, the delegation found the French delegates at the Ramallah Hotel. Together, they decided to perform a symbolic act: donating blood at the local hospital. The hospital was in a dire state, filled with Palestinian casualties, many injured, and facing a severe shortage of supplies, particularly medications and blood for transfusions.

Fabio continues to recall:

We decided to carry out symbolic actions,<sup>29</sup> like donating blood at the hospital, but that was too little for us. We proposed (either Mauro or Federico, I don't remember) organizing a march toward Arafat's headquarters. The next morning, we set out to do just that, and José Bové joined us. We arrived at the central square, Al-Manara Plaza. On one side were Israeli soldiers, on the other were journalists, and in the parallel streets, Palestinians were firing. Everyone was astonished; they didn't know what to do. Photographers approached us, preventing the Israeli military from intervening. RAI interviewed us, but the segment was never aired in Italy. Monica Maggioni interviewed us<sup>30</sup> (Interview with Fabio Galati, Ya Basta! activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

A group of international activists, joined by Palestinian volunteers from Palestinian Medical Relief and two ambulances, marched towards Yasser Arafat's besieged headquarters. Despite being stopped by Israeli soldiers, they managed to get close to the headquarters, thanks to the international press coverage. They tried to break through the military blockade to reach Arafat and his guard, who had been completely isolated for days. Later, negotiations allowed

29 The original idea was to bring flowers to the place where just a few days earlier – on March 13 – the independent Italian journalist Raffaele Ciriello had been killed by Israeli bullets. However, that action was never carried out. For more information about Ciriello's work and his “postcards from hell,” visit the reporter's still-active website, which he left shortly before embarking on his final journey to Palestine: <http://www.raffaeleciriello.com/> [March 05, 2025].

30 Reporter and ex-director of the Italian television RAI. She is also President of the Italian Group of the Trilateral Commission, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. For a complete list of the Italian Group of the Trilateral Commission members: [http://www.trilaterale.it/Elenco\\_Soci\\_TC\\_Gruppo\\_Italiano.pdf](http://www.trilaterale.it/Elenco_Soci_TC_Gruppo_Italiano.pdf) [March 05, 2025].



a joint Italian and French delegation and an ambulance to deliver essential supplies. Mauro Bulgarelli, an Italian Green Party deputy, and José Bové and two other French delegates represented their respective countries.

Mauro Bulgarelli recalls:

I was in Palestine as a spokesperson for a movement, specifically the social centers. We achieved incredible things with a group of French activists, including José Bové. We broke the siege around Arafat and brought water, cigarettes, and cellphone batteries. We could do this because behind us was a movement that allowed us to make decisions collectively. We moved through a war zone, hearing gunfire, and all the world's television cameras followed us. In this way, DFB created a safe zone in a war-torn area (Interview with Mauro Bulgarelli, former Deputy and Senator of the Italian Republic, Rimini, Italy, December 6, 2017).

Despite his high-ranking position, Mauro Bulgarelli identifies himself as a “movement spokesperson”. His role as a deputy serves a political agenda separate from the Italian state, including the possibility of working outside established institutions. Mauro highlights the collective aspect of DFB, even when actions, like entering Arafat's headquarters, are performed by an individual. The focus is not just on the individual action but also on its collective intent, giving this practice political importance.

In addition to creating the “safe zone” Mauro mentioned, the activists are breaching the most restricted area globally. They play a communicative and political role, indirectly pushing for the resumption of dialogue between the PNA and the Israeli government. It became possible because, as Fabio recalls:

“In an ambulance, an Al-Jazeera team entered. Later, Arafat's statement was broadcast on Al-Jazeera, breaking the siege” (Interview with Fabio Galati, Ya Basta! activist, Rome, Italy, October 9, 2017).

The diplomatic action of international, Palestinian, and Israeli activists through civil disobedience does not solve the conflict, but it does reopen communication between leaders of different factions. Arafat's death, as he often stated, would make him the first of many Palestinian martyrs (CNN, 2002).<sup>31</sup> This statement serves both as a testament and a command. Suicide militants are seen as martyrs in the interpretation of holy war, or *jihad*, advocated by radical Islamist groups like Hamas, especially during the Second Intifada. Arafat's death would be a signal to all armed Palestinians, indicating their readiness to attack the Israeli population by any means necessary.

Silvia recounts:

I don't consider myself pro-Palestinian, but in Israel, I was afraid; in Palestine, I wasn't. In neutrality, I realize that a weaker side needs a voice. All initiatives were also carried out with Israeli pacifists, such as Indymedia Israel, the committee against the demolition of Palestinian homes, and a group advocating for the demilitarization of the State of Israel. We stand on

31 “Arafat: ‘I hope I will be a martyr’”, (2002), CNN, 29 March, in <https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/03/29/arafat.reaction/index.html> [March 05, 2025].



the side of the civilian population; DFB enters that dimension. Initiatives favored the civilian population (Interview with Silvia Foffano, Ya Basta! activist, Venice, Italy, October 21, 2017).

Silvia's words align DFB with the civilian population, acknowledging that some civilians are more impacted than others. This stance creates a relationship of opposition and continuity with the states. In Israel's case, there is clear opposition, while in other countries that merely condemn violence without taking concrete actions, the relationship is complementary.

Breaking the curfew and siege around Yasser Arafat does not imply support for the PNA leader's person or politics. Instead, it is about fostering hope by amplifying civilian voices to drown out the sounds of warfare. This hope, stifled by official international procedures, diplomatic labels, and numerous strategic considerations, becomes complicit in the escalating cycle of destruction affecting that region and its people.

In a phone interview with "Il Domani" newspaper, Mauro Bulgarelli shared that during their bunker meeting, Arafat told him that this group of internationals were the only ones to reach him in this difficult time. DFB accomplished what ministers, governments, and ambassadors had yet to attempt or manage to do. Once again, DFB positions itself in complementarity with the majority of International Society members (the states), who, despite their declarations, still need to take concrete actions to facilitate dialogue between the conflicting parties.

As Silvia recalls:

Official diplomacy condemned the attack on Arafat in words, but in practice, no one lifted a finger. DFB works: 1) it seeks to understand the other side; 2) it establishes political and relational contacts and networks; 3) it abandons neutrality to take direct actions of interposition; 4) it maintains a very high and transparent level of communication (Interview with Silvia Foffano, Ya Basta! activist, Venice, Italy, October 21, 2017).

Silvia's words reiterate the ethological/disensual nature of DFB, which aims to understand the other side. It is a theoretical practice that builds political networks through direct action, forgoes neutrality, and uses transparent public communication channels.

After collaborating with the French and Italian activists and communicating with the rest of the delegation in Jerusalem, they opposed the entry of more delegates into Ramallah due to the dangerous and complicated situation. Despite the curfew imposed by the Israeli army, which made anyone on the streets a potential target for snipers, many decided to enter Ramallah in small groups to protect the hospital and ambulances.

Most Italian activists stayed in Ramallah for several days, defending the hospital and ambulances. They witnessed the brutality of a conflict that ignored basic international humanitarian laws (like the Geneva Convention of 1949, Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6), attacked civilians and ambulances, and blocked essential supplies for healthcare facilities. With the Ramallah hospital left without electricity and the morgue's refrigeration units not working, it became necessary to bury the dead in a mass grave in the garden. The activists assisted the hospital staff in this task, along with religious authorities and a few relatives of

the deceased who defied the curfew to attend the funerals.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Recalling the experience, Mecò comments:

It was a strong frustration: the worst situation I've ever known due to Israel's impunity. For the first time, I understood why someone becomes a kamikaze. A lady leaves the hospital, and a sniper shoots and kills her. We watched helplessly, and that's where I understood how desperation can drive someone to become a kamikaze – an action I still consider wrong, especially when directed at civilians, but I understand it (Interview with Domenico Mucignat, Ya Basta! activist, Bologna, Italy, June 29, 2017).

Mecò's words highlight the peaks and valleys of DFB, a form of ethological/disensual Homo-diplomacy. Mecò states clearly: I understand but do not justify or share, showing that while DFB can empathize with suicide violence, it distances itself from it once it understands it. The direct experiences of Ya Basta! highlight both the potential and limitations of DFB. Its strength lies in the communicative power of direct action and the political relevance gained by the interposition of bodies and wills in an ongoing conflict. During their last delegation, after just two days in Palestine and Israel, the activists were considering how to make more impactful actions. They shifted their focus from coordinating "Action for Peace" to constructing an "Action against global war", emphasizing the communicative impact of their actions:

The assessment of two days in Palestine leads us to discuss not only what to do but how we can describe what we are experiencing. More than Action for Peace, it is about inventing a way of being Action against global war by practicing it in those blood-soaked lands. The word peace cannot be applied where it is synonymous with armed peace and injustice. It is time to recognize the inadequacy of the categories of initiative and discourse regarding Palestine to insert that shattered piece of the world into our search for how to sabotage and desert global war (Ya Basta!, 2002).

This text reflects a collective realization of reaching the limits of analysis and action in the complex Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It questions how one can reject neutrality while aligning with those who resort to violence, albeit understandable but unacceptable. It asks how discourse can be redirected against global neoliberalism. The answer lies in taking an active stand against an assumed ongoing global war that manifests in various forms worldwide. It means standing with humanity against brutality and avoiding talk of peace amidst evident structural violence, as seen in Palestinian and Israeli territories. Consequently, the approach of DFB shifts from merely expressing identity attempts with a supposed peace front to openly opposing war. This stance is especially significant in communication, driven by activists' actions and discourses.

Claudio Calia, who was then in charge of communication at Radio Sherwood in the city of Padua, remembers:

32 As shown in the documentary, Mariani, Federico, "Con la Palestina negli Occhi", YouTube, January 5 2017, video, 29:34, in [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_0G-OAVze28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0G-OAVze28) [March 05, 2025].

I ended up in Palestine almost by chance. I was responsible for managing the internet and communications at Radio Sherwood, and a last-minute seat became available on a flight. They asked me to travel and do my work directly in Palestine. I'm one of those who stayed longer but saw fewer places. My role was to maintain communication with the official press while uploading audio and photos to the website using a proto-technology that was cutting-edge at the time. I stayed longer and ended up being expelled from Israel because my visa expired. The seat that opened up on the flight was originally meant for my current partner and my daughter's mother. I discovered it years later purely by chance. [...] DFB played a role related to communications. My commitment was to allow what was happening there to emerge. 90% of my involvement took place in a hotel room, but it was very significant in terms of global media. It was direct communication, unfiltered, unlike how official diplomatic communication works. We communicated directly from those places, which is rarely possible. Today, technology helps a lot, but it was pioneering work back then. CNN even linked to Radio Sherwood's website, which became the sole genuine source of news for the entire world. At one point, our server even crashed due to the high number of visits. [...] My role was to keep an open channel outward, and in that sense, it was a glorious experience. We became a reference point for all press agencies. At the same time, we needed a direction to pass on information; today, everything happens in real-time. The difference is that now everything is fragmented among individual subjects. In our delegation, there were over a hundred people with a clear focus on the communicative dimension. Organization and structure matter—it's a collective dimension. I spoke as a spokesperson, not in my name. Managing the political communication of a large caravan could be more complicated today. In our case, we were a cohesive group with a clear purpose (Interview with Claudio Calia, Ya Basta! activist, Padua, Italy, October 17, 2017).

Claudio elaborates on the power of communication, which, along with ethological/dissensual Homo-Diplomacy, forms the pinnacle of DFB as a collective political experience. However, its limitations mirror those of official diplomacy, especially in war and conflict, when violence becomes the dominant form of communication.

Activists comprehend forms of resistance and aggression that diverge from their envisioned political actions. The concept of suicide bombing contradicts their belief in biopolitics, which is rooted in the history of autonomy and post-autonomy and advocates personal and collective self-defense. Understanding suicide action as a political practice is a paradox for a (post)autonomous activist, marking at once the zenith and limit of DFB.

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