

# Nonviolence in Palestine

By Arun Gandhi

**N**o one would dare go to a battlefield without proper training, equipment and plan of action. Yet, when it comes to nonviolent action it is widely presumed that anyone can simply walk into a struggle without any training, equipment or plan of action. It is also assumed that so long as one does not wield a gun, or resort to physical fighting that one is nonviolent. Nothing is further from the truth.

Most people around the world, including many in Palestine, feel that Gandhi succeeded in India because the British were kind and compassionate, implying that against Hitler or Israel he would have been killed even before he started his campaign. This could, perhaps, be true but only in situations of crisis management. Unfortunately, in the culture of violence we only take note of a situation when it becomes a crisis and urgent action becomes necessary. The power of nonviolence as practiced by Gandhi lies in its capacity to function both proactively and reactively. Gandhi would have done against Hitler what he did against the British – first build a relationship based on respect, understanding, acceptance and appreciation – making it difficult for the opponent to take ruthless action.

Because nonviolence is practiced without proper understanding administrations all around the world, determined to preserve the culture of violence, have decided to take ruthless action to quash a movement. When Gandhi said: “No one can oppress us more than we oppress ourselves” he was talking about the fear that inhibits us from taking bold and sensible action.

Liberation from fear is the first step in the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. The second step is not to wait until a situation becomes a crisis before launching opposition campaigns. Third, Gandhi was astute in reading his opponent and modified his struggle accordingly. At all times, the important thing to remember is that provoking the opponent is totally against the philosophy of nonviolence. In short, one must do nothing that would cause anguish or hurt in any manner. The purpose of a nonviolent action is to appeal to the goodness in the opponent. This comes from the ancient

belief that every individual is endowed with an equal measure of “good” and “bad” and a person reacts according to the provocation.

When someone talks to you politely, one responds kindly. On the other hand if one is aggressive then the response too is aggressive. Two people under Gandhi’s training once had an argument that progressively got more and more heated. Finally, one of them was so frustrated that he spat on the other man’s face, provoking him to slap the culprit. Both went to Gandhi to resolve the issue.

“I wasn’t violent,” said the man who spat on the other’s face, “whereas he slapped me.”

“Both of you were violent,” Gandhi admonished. “One was physically violent and the other passively violent.”

In 1919 when Major-General Dyer, the military governor of the State of Punjab, ordered indiscriminate firing on a nonviolent gathering and killed 387 men, women and children, and injured 1605 others, Gandhi did not ask the Indians to pelt the British with stones or to react in anger. Instead, he organized a boycott of all British merchandise and non-cooperation with the authority.

I admit the political situation in Palestine is different. In India the British came to colonize the country and plunder it while in Palestine the Jews have come to conquer the country and set up a Jewish nation. I also agree that Israel has a dual policy – talk peace, provoke violence and act aggressively. It is clear Israel has no intentions of giving Palestine statehood. In fact, they wish to make life so intolerable for the Palestinians that they would leave and allow Israeli to usurp the land.

Precisely for these reasons, it is important to understand, that Palestine must not fall into the trap. The Israelis know how to provoke the Palestinians and the Palestinians, on their part, have played right into the hands of Israel giving them justification for ruthless oppression. Suicide-bombings, stone-throwing, other acts of violence involving civil society, though for a good cause, do not lead to better relations. In a world that is mortified by recent acts of terrorism all the violent actions taken by Palestinian youth get clubbed into acts of terrorism and, therefore, counter-productive.

At the Peace in Palestine Conference in Malaysia early this year an eminent Israeli peace activist accused me of being patronizing towards Palestinians because, as he explained it, I was talking to the Palestinians about the value of nonviolent action without knowing the difficulties they faced. In some ways he is right. I have not lived in Palestine so I really don't know anything about living under the kind of oppression unleashed by Israel. For that matter, my knowledge of the struggles periodically launched by Palestinians is limited to what I read in the friendly and hostile media.

But, when I read reports like eight Palestinians and five Israelis who recently tied themselves to the olive trees to stop the Israeli Army from uprooting the trees to build the apartheid wall I wonder why were there not several hundred, nay thousand, people involved in this action?

When I read about the young American woman peace activist who stood in front of the bull-dozer to stop it from destroying the Palestinian homes and was brutally crushed by the Israeli soldier I wonder why was she alone? Why were there not thousands of people standing with her? If young Palestinians can sacrifice their life and become suicide-bombers why can't they sacrifice their lives with dignity and stop bull-dozers?

When Gandhi organized campaigns they were massive. They usually started with a few hundred but quickly involved thousands. He trained people not only in how to be nonviolent under all kinds of provocations but also how to be aware of infiltrators who could be sent to sabotage the struggle. In spite of all precautions there were saboteurs who sometimes disrupted Gandhi's nonviolent action but, Gandhi quickly regained control by suspending the movement and removing the saboteurs peacefully.

Throughout the nonviolent campaign in India which lasted for 27 years Gandhi never lost respect for the British, he treated them with the same dignity that he expected in return. Even when the British were violent and ruthless he never permitted any angry retort. He would say: "If we do to them what they do to us then we all become like animals." Wisdom lies in making them realize their mistake. This is why the eminent British historian Aldous Huxley wrote that Gandhi not only liberated India from British Colonialism but he liberated the British from their own Imperialism.

The greatest disservice done to the philosophy of nonviolence in modern times is to project it simply as another "strategy" for conflict resolution.

When nonviolence is used as a weapon it sometimes works but mostly it does not because nonviolence is as much about attitude and long-term relationships as about resolving conflicts.

In the “Culture of Violence” that dominates human societies everywhere people’s attitude towards one another and relationships at all levels have become meaningless and even worthless. Society has become selfish with a false sense of nationalism and patriotism. The concept that we must safeguard and preserve our own at whatever cost has become an obsession. Nationalism, patriotism and the need for security, all rooted in materialism, have warped our thinking makes us feel that as long as we preserve our own we don’t need to worry about the rest of the world.

Gandhi’s nonviolence is positive because it encourages positive thinking; helps build positive and more compassionate relationships. Can you imagine what this world would be like if the many trillions of dollars that we spend on weapons of mass destruction were spent on improving the quality of life of all the people of the earth? There would be no poverty and ignorance and diseases would be under control; there would be greater harmony in the world and we could truly claim to be civilized. A true measure of civilization is not how rich a country is but how compassionate and considerate its people are. Gandhi’s nonviolence is about purging our minds and our hearts of all the negativity – hate, prejudice, anger, discrimination etc – and replacing it with positive attitudes – love, respect, compassion and so on. To say that this is unattainable and a pipe-dream is to say that people are incapable of positive thinking and positive attitudes. If it can be said that it is impossible for citizens to be good people then all I can say is God help human civilization.

During my visit to Palestine and Israel in August 2004 many irate Palestinians told me to go and speak to the Israelis about nonviolence because they were the ones who used excessive violence. True enough. But the point that the Palestinians missed is that nonviolence is the weapon of the victim and not the oppressor. If the oppressor believed in nonviolence he would not be an oppressor and there would be no conflict.

It is clear that small, isolated nonviolent campaigns against Israeli oppression will not work. Such campaigns can easily be crushed and forgotten. What is needed is massive, peaceful demonstrations. This needs bold and fearless initiative.

Since this book by Ramsey Baroud is about people living in refugee camps around the Arab world one hypothetical situation that needs consideration is a mammoth march. If, for instance, all the 500,000 men, women and children in the refugee camp in Amman, Jordan, were to march peacefully back to Palestine to be able to live among their own people with dignity what would Israel do? Would they shoot down 500,000 innocent men, women and children? Perhaps, they may attempt to frighten the marchers; perhaps they may even kill a few to intimidate the others; but if the march remained nonviolent and resolute Israel would be at a loss. Can one imagine what an international media event such a march could become? It would awaken the conscience of the world.

In 1930 Gandhi marched 247 miles to make salt and defy the British monopoly. He started with just 79 people but by the third day he had millions walking with him and the whole country was fired up as never before. Throughout the campaign the British were treated with utmost respect. Gandhi always emphasized we are not fighting the British but fighting their oppression.

Nonviolent action needs three things – discipline, compassion and fearlessness. Again, at the expense of being branded as patronizing, I must say that from my brief visit, many discussions and reading I found a great deal of fear and a lack of discipline in Palestine. The culture of violence seeks to control through fear and when we succumb to fear we surrender our dignity. It is through lack of discipline that the opponent seeks to goad us into acting rashly giving them justification for violent response.

In the 57 years of forcible occupation Israel has gained strength, they have won violent battles, they succeeded in convincing the world of their “righteousness” and they have gained powerful friends. All this became possible because the Palestinians succumbed to the culture of violence. Israel deprived the Palestinians of their freedom; are now attempting to destroy their dignity and, will finally seek to crush their humanity. When this happens Palestine will have lost everything.

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