

Breaking the cycle of violence

by Lucy Nusseibeh

For much of the past hundred years the hallmark of Palestinian resistance has not been violence but non-violence. In light of the victory of Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections, Palestinians risk more than ever being collectively dismissed as violent and impossible to talk with. In fact, new forms of active non-violence are alive and growing.

Palestinians have consistently used strikes, appeals and demonstrations – all standard non-violence tactics – since the beginning of the struggle,

farm their traditional fields. Most Palestinians practise forms of active non-violence every day, simply by managing to survive, or going to

also be viewed more broadly as an assertion of humanity and as the development of potential in spite of the odds against it. Just as violence breeds hatred and leads to a vicious and inhuman cycle, non-violence can be used to break that cycle. Non-violence, therefore, is a form of assertiveness and empowerment that enables people to stand up – even in the face of overwhelming violence – and retain their humanity.



Paul Jeffrey/ACT International

Non-violence training

Increasing numbers of local organisations are specialising in non-violence training and/or non-violent action. Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND) has trained activists in eight major cities in the West Bank and others await training.

In early 2002, a group of military commanders from the Fatah movement came to MEND to ask for non-violence training in order to break the vicious cycle they had grown up with – a cycle

first against the British and later against the Israelis. Now, with the country so starved of basic necessities that children cannot take exams for want of writing paper, and with ever-palpable tensions between political factions starting to crack into civil war, Palestinian non-violence may seem a contradiction, yet nevertheless is a vibrant reality.

More than anything else, Palestinians simply want to get on with living normal lives in which they can work and provide for their families, send their children to school without fear, move freely from one place to another, see the sun rather than the Wall, look after their livestock and

work in spite of the innumerable obstacles and dangers. As the constraints on movement and on daily life have become increasingly harsh and the political situation increasingly hopeless, there has been a corresponding growth in Palestinian interest in alternatives to violence both as a way of life and as the only form of resistance that could work.

Non-violence in its classic sense involves transforming one's opponent's conscience so that the opponent perceives that his/her actions are immoral and therefore stops them. When this does not work, outsiders (from another country) can play a role. Non-violence can

of activism, prison, more activism, more prison – and to give their children a future. Since that time, their numbers have been growing. The head of Fatah in Qalqilya (one of the most conservative of all Palestinian towns) is also the head of the MEND active non-violence group there. Tulkarem, Nablus and Hebron – all major Palestinian towns – now have mainstream community activists organising workshops, trainings and youth camps that promote democracy (although in some of these places democracy is equated with heresy) and alternatives to violence. Youth across the nation listen avidly to a MEND-produced radio soap opera focusing on



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Palestinian issues which promotes non-violent choices in relation to every aspect of life, from gender issues within the family to non-violent resistance to the occupation.

For the past three years MEND has also been training school counsellors in non-violence and conflict resolution and developing a curriculum for them. The conflict has created a huge need for counsellors yet there are only two for every three schools. MEND is also involved in 'Core Values' curriculum development in a joint project with the Hebrew University, focusing on promoting core values within the education system. Some of the curriculum workshops will be run with Israelis doing parallel work.

The Israeli occupation use of excessive force against Palestinian people, and being born at times of occupation, has made me absorb many violent actions. I was among the most prominent leaders of the first intifada; it strengthened my concepts of violence even when it came to my relationship with other people. During the second intifada I was introduced to MEND. At that time I did not believe in non-violence. However, I joined a training course, run by MEND, about alternative resistance. I had rows with the trainer. As time went by and as I became familiar with the concepts of non-violence, I was convinced that I had been wrong. I apologised to the trainer

violence but to no avail. The [Palestinian] use of violence made us violent deep inside; this is a threat to the state-building phase because we need a democratic state. Now non-violence has become my way of life and I am proud of it.

Noor al Deen Shihada, coordinator, Tulkarem MEND Centre

I used to run away from school. My family would beat me so that I would go to school. I used violence against my classmates, especially those whom I felt were better than me. Since the community where I was born and bred sanctifies individual acts of heroism, I unconsciously aspired to become one of the heroes. When I became a teenager, politics, or rather political violence, became part of my life. I threw rocks at the occupation vehicles patrolling the streets of my city. I was arrested for three days when I was 14. I was badly tortured during incarceration. I became more violent against the occupation. My violence developed as a vengeful reaction. During the first intifada I was subjected to the policy of 'bone-breaking' and I was shot and wounded several times. I was almost killed in one incident. And yet I achieved what I wanted at the time: I was my people's hero. This went on and even had an impact on my social life. I would solve all my problems using violence.

Violence continued to be an important part of my life during the second intifada until I had a new experience. I joined a MEND training course in Nablus and learned about the values

and started absorbing the concepts of non-violence. Now they are part of my life. I have realised that I have to change the life I lead. Now I know that we, the Palestinians, must seek a new way of struggle especially as we have spent more than 40 years using

of non-violence. I did not expect a change to happen so fast due to old experiences. But when MEND opened a centre in Nablus, I was appointed as its head. Questions about social and political conflicts rained on me. It was the first time in my life to contemplate causes of conflicts. Since then, I have worked hard with children and the steering committee to promote democracy and non-violence in my community. Since I was a victim of violence, I do my best to help people, especially impoverished children, to avoid what I went through. I have become a role model for many young people who want to know more about me and why I chose non-violence.

Qais Aawayis, coordinator, Nablus MEND Centre

Women's voices

The history of the involvement of Palestinian women in non-violent actions within the Palestinian national struggle is almost as old as the struggle itself. As the Middle East and the world react to the violence created by men, the need for women's voices to be raised and to be heard is greater than ever.

Although there are some non-violent activities (such as marches) and some organised protests and petitions from women's organisations, it only seems to make a difference if there is international involvement and media coverage. If women from outside the Middle East could come as international observers to witness the plight of Palestinian women and talk about what they see, perhaps their voices would be heard. They might then encourage Israeli women to help vote into power a more conciliatory government. Moreover, if the media were to focus on Palestinian women far more than it does, and if women became prominent in decision making and in conflict resolution exercises, there might be hope for a viable Palestinian state and the just solution that has so far eluded men.

Role of public opinion

For a peace process to be successful, public opinion has to be encouraged to see the reality of what is happening in both societies, and to relate to the others as human beings. Negative

Summer camp for Palestinian youth from all over the West Bank – the beginning of a national non-violence youth movement of 'Menders'.

public opinion on either side feeds the conflict and perpetuates the cycle of violence. Conversely, public opinion that favours a just solution to the conflict can help encourage leadership to support a peace agreement. Given the balance of power that so strongly favours Israel, Israeli public opinion is one of the keys to peace – and is itself strongly influenced by its perception of Palestinian public opinion. The Israeli public needs to be convinced that there is a genuine and overwhelming desire for peace among the Palestinian public.

As the restrictions of movement in the West Bank and Gaza effectively prevent any contact between all but the most determined Israelis and Palestinians, the media has a crucial role in both the broadcasting and the manipulation of perceptions and public opinion in this conflict. When all one side reads is angry statements by the other, fear and

polarisation are increased. The media must report on the common desire for peace, giving credibility to the voices that speak out against violence and exploitation of the conflict.

Shared humanity

Israelis also have economic and social problems and live with fear. If there is to be a sustainable peace it is essential to address their fear, to break down the stereotyping of Palestinians as terrorists and to work to restore to the Israeli public a human perspective regarding Palestinians. If more Israelis would allow themselves to see Palestinians as human beings they would find it much harder to shoot at children, bulldoze people's houses and prevent sick people from accessing medical care.

There is a growing commitment on the part of some courageous

Israelis to take real risks for peace, such as by refusing military service (which not only sends them to prison but blacklists them for life) and risking army roadblocks to take food or provide medical treatment for Palestinians constrained by travel restrictions.

For a peace process to work between Israelis and Palestinians, it has to work at the popular level. Commitment to working with non-violence is a way to achieve this. What is needed now is support of every kind to nurture non-violence and give it the means and the space to grow.

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