Palestinians have consistently used strikes, appeals and demonstrations – all standard non-violence tactics – since the beginning of the struggle, 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 farm their traditional fields. Most Palestinians practise forms of active non-violence every day, simply by managing to survive, or going to 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 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.

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 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...
nonviolence has become my way of life and I am proud of it

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 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 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 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 Awayis, 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
Civil society responds to protection gap

by Vivienne Jackson

In the absence of mechanisms to protect the population of the OPT, and the reluctance or impotence of the ‘international community’, global civil society activists and human rights campaigners – working with Palestinian and Israeli actors – have stepped into the breach.

The Fourth Geneva Convention, which came into effect in October 1951, represented the post-World War II aspirations of the international community to offer permanent protection to civilians living under military occupation. The breadth of Israel’s derogation in relation to Palestinians living under occupation is comprehensive, with most key Convention articles sporadically or systematically breached. Arguing that the land it calls Judea and Samaria is ‘disputed’ and not ‘occupied’, Israel does not consider the Fourth Geneva Convention as a legal impediment to implementation of policies which have transformed the areas’ physical and demographic landscapes.

The Israeli government violates international humanitarian law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Fourth Geneva Convention and decisions of the International Court of Justice with the passive acceptance of much of the ‘international community’. While the UN and its members clearly view the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza as ‘occupied’, the UN Security Council has barely urged Israel to uphold its human rights obligations. The UN General Assembly has been more vocal, expressing world opinion when it overwhelmingly endorsed the International Court of Justice’s ruling on the Wall – only Israel, the US, Australia and three micro Pacific states voted against. However, the General Assembly is unable to compel Israel to uphold its responsibilities as an occupying force since Assembly resolutions only have moral and symbolic weight and are not legally binding.

As noted in earlier articles, UNRWA is not mandated to work with non-refugee victims of occupation. Lucie Nusseibeh is the founder and director of Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy (MEND www.mend-pal.org) and was formerly director of the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence. Email: nusseibeh@yahoo.com.