

Role of Nonviolence in Israeli-Palestinian Relations

Talk by Rajmohan Gandhi at an event organized by the Urbana-Champaign Peace Initiative at the Champaign Public Library, Champaign, Illinois, at 2.30 pm on Sunday 19 September 2010

I look at the title for this conversation and hasten to clarify. Yes I am a research professor but this afternoon I am not offering an academic paper on nonviolence. In fact I am not a scholar of nonviolent actions. I have a fair awareness of such actions, I have taken part in such actions, I believe in nonviolent actions, but ‘nonviolent strategies’ is not my field of research. If I am anything in the scholarly world, that would be a historian and a biographer.

Why this event then? For the simple reason that I was recently in Palestine in the company of participants in nonviolent action, saw their work and spoke about it and spoke also about the situation in Palestine. The media – in the Middle East, in Europe and the USA, including the New York Times and the BBC – reported what I said. One result is I get this invitation from the community in Champaign and Urbana.

I might add that **there was** a tiny nonviolent direct action in which I took part during the visit to Palestine/Israel. I will describe that later, but, to repeat, I request all present not to expect a scholarly paper on nonviolent possibilities in Palestine’s struggle. Instead I ask you to bear with me while I relate what I found on the visit, including as regards nonviolent actions there. “Experiences and reflections on a recent visit” is a necessary subtitle for this conversation.

As mentioned, I am currently – until the end of this year – president of Initiatives of Change International. In this capacity I traveled to an amazing variety of countries in the months between February and June this year. My wife Usha accompanied me throughout this Voyage of Discovery and Dialogue, as it was called, as did a wonderful British colleague, Edward Peters. We were also joined by a changing team of four or five young people associated with Initiatives of Change, who hailed from the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Lebanon, Ukraine, Australia and India.

The countries visited were Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Kenya, Palestine, Israel, Norway, Romania, Ukraine, Japan, the US, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.

I took unpaid leave from the university to do this exercise, which was undertaken for discovery and dialogue and for supporting dedicated Initiatives of Change teams in these different countries. In almost every country we were the guests of local teams. Travel was made possible by donations from individuals and from two small trusts.

The visit to Palestine and Israel was part of this unforgettable exercise. I should add that both Usha and I had long wanted to see that situation in the Holy Land for ourselves, a desire probably shared by many here this afternoon.

We hear of struggle and frustration there, we are aware of what the area means to much of humanity, we puzzle over the irony of bloodshed, oppression, hardship and anger in the land where the prophets and Jesus were born, we want to experience the place, we want to make some sense of what is going on. That was a strong part of our motivation for visiting Palestine and Israel.

I should say a word about Initiatives of Change. This is a work that has taken over from an earlier effort that went by the name of Moral Re-Armament or MRA as it was often referred to. There was a time when MRA was fairly well-known in the USA and many other countries. Founded by an American from Pennsylvania called Frank Buchman, it believed in two simple and yet not so easy ideas, which Initiatives of Change also believes in. One, if we want to change the world, we should start with ourselves, rather than with the politicians or that “other lot.” Two, if, taking time to be silent, we seek wisdom, or direction, or correction, useful ideas may come to us that can help in our lives, and also perhaps in restoring relationships.

I should add that I have been associated with MRA or IofC for 54 years. When two years ago good friends and colleagues asked me to become international president – it is an honorary job --, I felt I should repay the honor by offering to assist in countries where local teams wanted assistance.

The visit. A word about the person who invited us to Palestine. Dr Mustafa Barghouti is currently an independent member of the Palestinian authority’s parliament. More than that, he is the chief executive of the Palestinian National

Alternative that he helped found in 2002 – an alternative to the PLO and to Hamas. In 2005 he ran for president and obtained 19% of the vote, not a small tally. A doctor by training and profession, educated at Stanford among other places, Dr Barghouti is also the head of the Palestinian Medical Relief Association, an impressive organization with a wide reach and a dedicated staff.

Because of his stand for nonviolence, Mustafa Barghouti has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Because of that stand, he was invited in October last year to appear here in the US on the Jon Stewart show. You should watch what he said and what was also said by the Jewish woman who appeared with him. Later I can give the internet link for that Jon Stewart appearance to anyone interested.

Some basic numbers: Population (rough, approximate, but probably not distorting the demographic facts):

Israelis Jews (including nearly 300,000 in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem) 6.5m

Inside Israel Jews 80 %, Arabs 20 %

West Bank: 2.4m; Gaza 1.6m (all Arabs)

Jews and Arabs almost equal in numbers in the two territories combined

Area: Israel 22,000 sq km; WB 5,800 sq km, Gaza 360 sq km. Less than one fourth of the territory marked as Israel.

We spent three nights in Ramallah and one in East Jerusalem, and visited Jerusalem, Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem, Bil'in and Ni'lin, two villages west of Ramallah where nonviolent resistance to seizures of land have taken place regularly.

We found that people from India are on the whole liked in both Israel and the West Bank. The first impact was a wholly positive one: Signs at the airport in Tel Aviv and on the roads we rode through were in 3 languages: Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

Very soon, however, there was another, and much stronger impact. Seeing the settlements with our own eyes bowled us over. They are not a bunch of huts or temporary structures but cities, in some cases large cities. They are overwhelming in size, location, and number (about 130 of them as of now). They surround and

intimidate; they occupy the mountain tops and the high ground and a good percentage of the West Bank's land area. I don't know how much, perhaps 20-40 %. They are connected to one another and to Israel by settler-only roads; and protected from the Palestinians by walls of enormous length and impressive height and thickness.

The West Bank's Palestinian towns and villages seem secondary and subservient to the settlement towns. Frankly, it felt worse than what President Jimmy Carter described in his well-known book.

Right now, as all are aware, talks are taking place, initiated by President Obama, steered by Secretary of State Clinton, and facilitated by George Mitchell, evidently on the basis that an independent Palestinian state can be created on the ground. Frankly, I am skeptical.

A year ago, speaking in Cairo, President Obama said: "Let there be no doubt: the situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable ... They endure the daily humiliations, large and small, that come with occupation," he said later in the speech. Then, in a sentence he repeated at the UN General Assembly, he said: "America doesn't accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements."

After that speech the President seemed to go silent. It has been reported however that he has again conveyed to Israeli leaders (we do not know how strongly) his thought that the "freeze" on settlements that Israel had announced should not end as scheduled. The 10-month building freeze on construction in the settlements is due to expire September 26 – a week from now.

But the freeze has only existed on paper. Settlement activity has been taking place all these months – in East Jerusalem we saw it taking place.

But back to the talks. Here is a UPI story. JERUSALEM, Sept. 16 (UPI) -- Hoping to prevent a breakdown in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, the U.S. Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) suggested Israel extend the building freeze on West Bank settlements for an additional three months, a report in the London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* said Thursday. During that period both sides will attempt to reach an agreement on final borders.

Once new borders are set, Israel will be able to resume its settlement activity in the areas remaining under its control, and will cease all activities in areas it is expected to withdraw from, the newspaper said.

Another report, this one from *msnbc.com news services*: PM Netanyahu said at a meeting last Sunday with Tony Blair, who represents the Quartet in Israel/Palestine: "We will not build all of the tens of thousands of housing units in the planning pipeline."

He added: "On the other hand, we will not freeze the lives of residents of **Judea and Samaria** or freeze construction."

Many Israeli politicians of course think of the West Bank, the supposed future Palestinian state, as a portion of Israel -- Judea and Samaria.

The *Jerusalem Post* had this a few days ago: "The Council of Jewish Communities in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip changed its tactics when it decided to shift pressure to end the 10-month construction moratorium in Judea and Samaria from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to US President Barack Obama.

Activists will begin their effort with ads in English-language newspapers, including *The Jerusalem Post* and key American media outlets. The ads will ask for a complete and unconditional end to the 'building freeze.'"

The planned ad includes a quote from Netanyahu, who said in December, "I want to make this clear – this freeze is a temporary, one-time affair. We'll resume building as we did before."

Let us ask ourselves. On that mountainous area of less than 200 miles by 30 miles, containing 130 settlements, many of them large towns, plus the roads linking them and the walls enclosing them converted into no-go areas for Palestinians, what sort of independent state can be created? Yes, there can be a network of Palestinian functionaries with a police force safeguarding a labyrinth of crisscrossing borders lined with innumerable Palestinian and Israeli flags and

charged above all, and understandably so, with preventing any infiltration of terrorists from a Palestinian enclave to an Israeli one.

This “independent Palestinian state” will be neither independent, nor Palestinian nor a state, though it will undoubtedly have, as it has even now, a president, a prime minister and a parliament. It may be granted UN membership. It will have a national anthem, a flag, and a motto. In some eyes, it will have dignity.

But it will not be able to decide who enters or leaves the numerous enclaves of the supposed state. The relations of these enclaves with one another and the relations of the “state” as a whole with the world will be subject to Israeli permission and veto.

Rather than an independent Palestinian state, it will be an agency that manages some no doubt important issues relating to a hundred or more pockets, most of them cut off from one another, where Palestinians live – will “manage” these subjects in close teamwork with the Israeli state, will manage them, in effect, on behalf of the Israeli state.

Whether we look at it in political, legal or physical terms, the possibility of a genuinely independent and viable Palestinian state seems to me to be close to zero.

Nonviolent protests. In Hebron, Bil’in and Ni’lin and elsewhere we saw evidence that nonviolent protests were occurring in an impressive manner – against a wall, or the takeover of a tree, or the extension of a new settler-only road, or a new takeover of land, or a barrier with soldiers present preventing people from crossing a street to buy something or meet someone.

We learnt of and saw the video of a street play on nonviolent resistance where three actors enacted Gandhi, Mandela and King and made persuasive speeches for nonviolent resistance. The video can be seen on YouTube.

Two of these three actors – these leaders in nonviolent resistance -- were Palestinians. The third was a young Jew from Tel Aviv. We saw evidence of sustained Israeli participation in nonviolent protests on behalf of Palestine.

Martin Luther King III also visiting Palestine around the time of our visit, the media recalled the messages of King and Gandhi. Wrote Heather Sharp of the BBC:

But (Mahatma) Gandhi's message has nevertheless penetrated far-flung corners of the West Bank. Najmadeen al-Husseini, 62, lives squeezed between the West Bank barrier and an Israeli settlement near the Palestinian village of Qatana. He can only access his land through a huge military gate. Without Israeli permission to build (*another form of nonviolent resistance*), he lives with his children and grandchildren — 17 people in all — in a three-bedroom house.

He is an example of a concept in Palestinian culture, known as “sumud” in Arabic. It translates as “steadfastness” — and is usually understood to mean staying put on your land, living with dignity despite adversity. “I was born here. My parents are buried here. I will stay on my land even if they kill me,” he says. In his view, two decades of negotiations have yielded little, yet “military resistance will get us nowhere what are Kalashnikovs against tanks?”

“If the world supports us, peaceful resistance will get us something back,” he says. “Whatshisname... Gandhi... the world supported him, and he kicked the British out of India,” he says....

The numbers attending protests remain relatively low, and advocates of total, Gandhi-style non—violence are even fewer. But Ahmad Lazza of Bet Jala still sees huge potential: “We believe that non-violence is stronger than militant action, once we have a big mass of people. Once people want something, nothing can stop them.”

Our own little nonviolent action occurred in Hebron. Stopped by Israeli soldiers from crossing the street to greet people on the other side, we asked what was wrong with our wish. Then we simply walked across.

You defeat a barrier. Defeat it decisively, courteously, lovingly. It is in such moments that independence is felt in your heart. You know that you will soon face other and bigger barriers. But you have sensed the possibility of victory. It is fuel for the spirit.

It is natural to ask whether Palestinian nonviolence fully corresponds to Gandhi’s or King’s nonviolence. Would those two have condoned the use of stones? No. Did Gandhi fight relentlessly to challenge attitudes of hate amongst those who

were on his side? Yes. I can give interesting stories of how and when he did that. Do Palestinians need people who challenge fellow-Palestinians the way Gandhi challenged Indians? You bet. Is it easy to find such people anywhere? No.

But let me point out what is easily forgotten. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance was all of that. It was strictly nonviolent and it was resistance. He was passionate about ending British imperialism, more passionate in fact than his Indians critics who advocated violent resistance.

And he wanted genuine independence and equality, not a show of independence or equality. He was proud of the Indian flag, and took a deal of interest in its design, but he found more dignity in a dark prison cell than in a parade with flags and a band to celebrate a bogus independence.

I wonder if many here know that among the rights that Gandhi the symbol of nonviolence demanded for Indians was the right to bear arms. He could not accept the law that said that only the British in India could obtain a gun. He wanted Indians to adopt nonviolence as a willing choice, not under orders, or from bondage, or from incapacity.

Why did he inspire people all over the world, MLK Jr, Native Americans, Africans, people in the Balkans, Tibetans, people in the Philippines, Indonesians? Because he said he would not kill, but also because he stood up to oppression, and because he was ready to be killed while opposing a wrong. Because he was meek before the helpless and tough before the strong.

Gandhi's nonviolence was for the brave. Not just the innately or naturally brave but for all, the humble, the meek, the average person, who feel fear but feel too the tug of conscience and allow that tug to overcome the fear.

To return to Palestine. Another thing we saw was that **constructive work**, work to build civil society, was proceeding quite well: solid work was being done for education and public health.

We saw several Palestinians who held both weapons in their hands – in one hand the weapon of nonviolent resistance and in the other the weapon of constructive work, of strengthening civil society.

We saw that no matter how small, the victories achieved through nonviolent struggle and in strengthening civil society had enhanced Palestinian confidence.

And we were struck by their ability to laugh amidst hardship.

What I said to the Palestinians in a public meeting in Ramallah: At a well-attended public meeting, I said that I respected their commitment to nonviolence. I informed them of the message of Gandhi's close Pashtun colleague, 21 years younger than him, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the nonviolent leader of the Pashtun country for 69 years from 1919 to 1988, whose wife lies buried in Jerusalem – the two visited there in the 1920s. Ghaffar Khan always said that the virtue most frequently mentioned in the Qur'an was patience, which he interpreted as nonviolence. And I asked them to appeal to the sense of justice in Judaism. I said I saluted the many in Israel, and the many Americans of Jewish origin, who fight for Palestinian rights.

I offered suggestions for Palestinians fighting for liberation: 1. Be patient. 2. Never give up your faith. The Soviet Union crumbled, apartheid in South Africa crumbled, the occupation of Palestine will also crumble. 3. Be appreciative of one another. Instead of blaming a colleague for what is not done, appreciate what is done. Live to make the other person great. Then your team will become stronger, your cause will prosper, and your greatness will also be seen. But if your concern is to make yourself great, your team will weaken. 4. Continue the constructive work. Build the Palestinian home. Make everything you do of the highest quality. 5. Continue to laugh amidst hardship. 6. Enlarge the nonviolent struggle. 7. Strengthen the friendship and partnership of Palestine's Muslims and Christians. Let Palestine become an example of a country where the rights of all minorities are fully respected.

We met only a few Israelis: a Switzerland-based Holocaust scholar/activist from a leading political family, an army officer, a peace activist, President Shimon Peres, some members of his staff, and a few others.

I was surprised by one thing. What I had said in various West Bank places was widely and prominently featured in the Arab media, print and electronic. There were front-page stories. The story of the visit to Hebron and the little conversation at the barrier was the lead story, complete with a photo, on the front-page of *Al Quds*, the largest Arabic language newspaper that sells in Jerusalem and all across the West Bank. Even so, the Israelis we moved amongst seemed unaware of and uninterested in what we had said or done.

Arabs stopped us in place after place – ‘Please have coffee or tea with us,’ they would say, or ‘Next time please come to our home for a meal,’ but Israelis were blissfully unaware. Their priorities were different. Perhaps the economy, their careers. The conflict or Palestinians were not uppermost on their minds. Perhaps they thought the situation was beyond repair and not worth thinking about.

Here **let me address two simple opinions to Palestinians**. One, killing the innocent is morally indefensible. It is political folly. Terrorism has injured the Palestinian cause.

Two, Israel has the right to exist and flourish. Israelis having lived there all these years, they have every right to continue to live there. Time, usage, UN resolutions and world opinion have given the Israeli state the right to exist.

Unfortunately, Palestinian voices in the past have asked for the removal of Israel. Fortunately these voices are rarer than before. But Israelis too should ask whether they are as interested in the future of Palestinians *as people* as they seem to be in *the lands* of Judea and Samaria. Are they willing to allow Palestinians to live in their minds as human beings like themselves, God’s children like themselves? Are they willing that Palestinians live as equals on the land that Jews and Arabs share? The questions of the Israelis’ right to exist and the Palestinians’ right to exist are interrelated and I would say equal in value.

I puzzle over two other things. Devoted to Jerusalem for compelling and stirring reasons, Israelis seem unwilling to recognize a similar attachment to Jerusalem from the Arab side. And though exile is perhaps one of the most powerful images in their memory, Israelis seem unable to concede that exiled Palestinians also yearn for their homeland.

The meeting with President Shimon Peres. We had 50 minutes with him. Usha and Edward Peters were with me. A member of his staff was present and took notes.

He was gracious and courteous. I gave our visit’s background (IofC president, voyage, visit to the West Bank as the guest of Dr Mustafa Baghrouti). I asked if I could say something to him. “Go ahead, this is a free country.” I said: “The recovery after the Holocaust of the Jewish people is one of the noblest, most stirring chapters in the story of humankind. I pray for another chapter in this

story, a chapter where justice is provided to the Palestinians.” For a split second he appeared to be thoughtful. Then he said, “I have no problem with that.”

He explained Israel’s policies: the need for security after the intifadas, the terrorist attacks, the shelling from Gaza etc. “We who experienced the Holocaust need to survive.”

I mentioned how large the settlements and the walls loomed everywhere in the West Bank, and the humiliation the Palestinians felt they were living under.

He spoke also of anti-Semitism (Elders of Zion) in Arab countries including Egypt and in Palestine. I said the Palestinians we met revealed no trace of such thinking. In fact, I added, they expressed gratitude for the support their cause was receiving from many Israelis.

At the end I asked if he foresaw an eventual Jewish/Arab partnership. He said, “Absolutely.”

A policy option. Given my reading that an independent West Bank is only a rhetorical construct, given also that US backing for the Israeli position is apparently unalterable, I wonder whether Palestinians would consider another option, the option that includes giving up on a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza.

This option is for Palestinians to say to Israelis: “You win, you have foiled the creation of a Palestinian state. We cannot defeat a modern efficient prosperous nuclear state supported by the world’s most powerful country. We accept second-class status in all of Israel-cum-Palestine. You do the policing, why should we do it? We recognize that we are your colony. But you should give equal rights to the natives, you should not have certain areas for Arabs, and other areas for Jews, for that is apartheid.”

If such an acknowledgment is articulated, it may create a healthy turmoil in the Israeli conscience, which sits very close to a force from history that should not be underestimated, the Judaic conscience.

Such a policy option might be today’s fitting nonviolent action. Gandhi said and showed that nonviolent struggle turns weakness into strength, the lack of a gun into a forceful weapon. The policy option spelt out here, allowing the spotlight to

fall on the humiliation forced upon the Palestinians, could turn Palestinian indignity into images that stir the Judaic conscience.

Palestinians could add: “We give up the fight for a Palestinian state, but we will never give up our fight for equal rights and for democratic rights in a state where Israelis and Palestinians jointly live. Our acknowledgment of defeat in one battle is also a call for struggle in another battle.” I would like them to add, “And it will be a nonviolent struggle.”

They could continue as follows to the Israelis: “We Palestinians may gain from this joint existence, for even though you don’t seem to acknowledge Palestinian human rights, we envy the rights you give to fellow-Israelis – we envy your democracy, exclusionary though it is, even as we envy many aspects of the democracy of your good friends, the Americans. We will profit from our serfdom and fight to become equals.”

If this is only a dream, let it be. Dreams and dreamers have their little place. But the option may not be as fanciful as may appear at first sight. And a question may be posed which does not have an obvious answer. Between two exceedingly hard goals, which is more likely, an eventual coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians in a single state, or the creation of a genuinely independent and viable Palestinian state in the West Bank? You can guess what my answer is.

Do I have a thought for today’s audience, for what you can do? Yes, two thoughts. One, if possible go there and see the situation for yourself. Two, **demand transparency.** Find out what precisely was offered to the Palestinians during the 2000 Camp David talks and then decide for yourself if it was generous or acceptable. Even more important, demand a detailed map of today’s West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza, inclusive of all completed and planned settlements, settler-only roads, and walls. Study that map and ask yourself if a West Bank state is a practical idea.

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