

The Possibilities and Limitations of Nonviolence: the Palestinian Intifada 1987-1991

by Andrew Rigby

The title of this seminar is 'The possibilities of nonviolence' and I was asked to make a presentation analysing the Palestinian uprising or intifada of 1987-1991. Looking at the situation in the Middle East today I feel my presentation should be re-titled 'The limitations of non-violence - the case of the intifada'.

It is impossible to look back on that episode in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without some reference to the slaughter that is being perpetrated in the re-occupied territories of the West Bank (and the Gaza Strip to a lesser extent) and in the streets of Israeli towns and cities at the present time. We do not know what the death toll is since the current intifada started in September 2000. Somewhere near 1500 Palestinians must have been killed. Israeli fatalities are in excess of 400. This carnage was not what was anticipated by those who invested so much hope in the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s. What informed that process was the belief that over a period of time, and through a series of graduated mutual confidence building measures, trust between the parties would grow so that by now, the year 2002, there would be two states alongside each other in the historic land of Palestine. Instead we have a situation where a large proportion, probably a majority, of the Israeli Jewish public support the government's war against the 'Palestinian terrorist infrastructure', and a large proportion, probably a majority, of the Palestinian public support suicide bombings inside Israel. Both sides have been hardened by fear and despair. In such a climate I think it is important that we acknowledge the courage and integrity of those who dare to go against the mainstream - the Palestinians who persist in arguing for mass unarmed nonviolent struggle as the path to liberation; and the Israelis who continue to campaign for withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza and express their solidarity with the just cause of the Palestinians, especially those conscripts and reservists who have followed their conscience and refused to participate in an army of conquest and occupation.

Whether or not we talk about the relative success or relative failure of a particular nonviolent movement depends not just on the nature of the outcomes brought about by such a movement but also upon the point in time when we make our judgement. From where we are now it seems possible to detect a causal relationship between the relative failure of the first intifada, the subsequent frustrations with the Oslo Peace Process as it unfolded, and the violence of the current intifada/war. But for now I will turn my attention to the first intifada - its strengths and its weaknesses.

In looking at the first intifada from the perspective of someone interested in the potentialities of non-violence in the struggle for justice, it is useful to distinguish two phases - from late 1987 through to early 1990, and the subsequent period through to the Madrid Conference of October 1991.

Phase one: December 1987 - 1990: Horizontal escalation of the struggle: mass civilian-based unarmed resistance against occupation

Unarmed versus nonviolent resistance

In early December 1987 riots broke out in the Gaza Strip and there were violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces. The confrontations spread from the refugee camps to the cities, from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank, and developed into a sustained attempt to throw off the burden of Israeli occupation by means of mass protest and non-cooperation. During this phase the mode of Palestinian resistance could not be characterised as nonviolent - those who throw stones do so in order to inflict violence on the targets. However it could be characterised as 'unarmed' insofar as the weapons used were in the main not lethal in the sense of being designed to maim and kill.

Horizontal escalation of the struggle

The outbreak of the uprising came as a surprise to the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) whose headquarters at that time was in Tunis. They were even more surprised by its scale and its coordinated nature. This was achieved through the creation of a 'Unified National Command' (UNC) representing the different political factions. This

clandestine body attempted to coordinate the resistance through regular communiqués and leaflets, the content of which was usually agreed beforehand with the PLO leadership in Tunis. The UNC was supported by an organisational infrastructure of popular committees, and together they took on the character of an embryonic state - coordinating activities, administering the provision of basic services and seeking to control the use of force within its territorial boundaries. The goal was to create a counter-authority to that of the Israeli occupiers, thereby undermining the Israeli capacity to command obedience.

With such an organisational framework, organically linked to the different sections of Palestinian society, the months following the outbreak of the intifada saw a mass social mobilisation - a horizontal escalation of the struggle which embraced all sectors of society.

Different forms of unarmed resistance

In his study of resistance in occupied Europe during the Second World War Werner Rings identified four main types of resistance. I have modified his framework slightly in order to indicate the breadth and the range of Palestinian resistance during the first intifada.

Symbolic resistance ('By various means I display my national identity and allegiance as against that imposed by the occupier.')

Whilst stone-throwing and other direct confrontations with the occupiers was primarily the preserve of young males, the majority of Palestinians bore witness to their resistance by less drastic yet symbolically powerful means. They boycotted Israeli products as much as possible. They wore clothes in their national colours, women wore pendants and jewellery incorporating the outline of historic Palestine. People followed 'Palestinian time' by switching between summer and winter time a week earlier than the Israelis.

Defensive resistance ('I resist by assisting those in danger or on the run.')

Each neighbourhood and community had its own 'strike force' of young men engaged in direct confrontations with the occupier. Rarely would they spend more than one night a week with their families. They moved from house to house (and cave to cave) in order to avoid arrest and

imprisonment, depending on a network that also included medical relief and other support services.

Polemic resistance (I resist by various means of protest which demonstrates to the occupier and to others my determination to maintain the struggle.)

The authority of the UNC and the popular committees was revealed during the first phase of the intifada by the solidarity of the response to strike calls and the instructions to merchants to restrict their opening hours to the mornings on non-strike days. Moreover, as part of its attempt to undermine the authority of the Israeli occupiers the UNC called on all those Palestinians who worked for the Israeli administration to resign. Those who ignored such instructions faced sanctions - Palestinians referred to this process as 'cleaning out our national home'.

Offensive resistance (I resist by directly confronting the forces of the occupation.)

Whilst the closure of shops and work-places at mid-day represented a powerful display of the authority of the UNC and the solidarity of the population, it also meant that by mid-afternoon the streets and public spaces were clear of 'civilians' and could become the domain of the strike forces in their direct confrontations with the Israeli occupiers. This was the dimension of the intifada that lent itself most to the world's media - stone-throwing youths with keffiyahs wrapped round their faces clashing with Israeli soldiers armed with tear-gas grenades, rubber-bullets and other weaponry. This was the visual representation of the 'David versus Goliath' conflict that the Palestinians sought to communicate to the rest of the world.

Constructive work

Less visual than the confrontations was the constructive work that was integral to the first phase of the intifada. As people began to suffer economic hardship as a consequence of the calls to disengage from the Israeli economy, the loss of income through strikes, and the boycott of Israeli produce, so families began to develop their household economy in their efforts to become more self-reliant, cultivating vegetable plots and rearing poultry. Women's committees were particularly active in promoting new forms of home-based economic activity. Homes were also the base for the clandestine education classes that were held as a means of countering the Israeli closure of schools and colleges.

Dimensions of the Intifada strategy

Underpinning the different dimensions of unarmed resistance and constructive work were a number of strategic goals.

Regeneration of a spirit of resistance

One of the main targets of the different forms of resistance was the Palestinians themselves. The verb from which the term intifada is derived refers to the action of 'shaking off' or 'shaking out'. It can also refer to recovery or recuperation. This expresses the fundamental aim of generating a national spirit of solidarity necessary for the liberation struggle to be sustained. The strikes, the boycott of Israeli goods, the efforts to disengage from the Israeli economy and state, the different forms of symbolic resistance, the constructive programme - they were all symbolic of the 'shaking off' of subservience and dependency and the restoration of communal and national pride.

Increasing the costs of occupation

Through the various forms of resistance the Palestinians sought to inflict pain upon the Israelis, causing them to question whether the costs of occupation outweighed the benefits. These costs were not so much the loss of lives and physical injuries suffered as the impact on the economy, the erosion of morale within Israel and within the Israeli Defence Force itself, and the damage to Israel's standing in the world and in the eyes of significant sections of world Jewry.

Shame power and links in the chain of nonviolence

Gandhi laid considerable emphasis on the transforming power of self-suffering in the struggle for justice. He believed that through a preparedness to suffer in the 'firm holding on to truth', satyagrahis might convert the oppressor, revealing to them the shameful consequences of their actions and offering up the possibility of mutual liberation in the creative struggle for a better future.

Such was the belief, but in practice we know that oppressors can remain immune to the suffering of their victims so long as they see a significant social distance between themselves and the 'other'. Aware of this, Palestinians adopted a step-by-step model for influencing the Israeli public and decision-makers. They developed a dialogue first of all with Israeli peace groups opposed to the occupation. These Israeli sympathisers were then able to exercise a greater impact on their fellow-citizens closer to the mainstream of Israeli politics, and so on link by link along what Johan Galtung has depicted as the 'great chain of nonviolence' towards decision-making centres and significant opinion leaders.

The intervention of third parties

The combined impact of these different forces and pressures would, it was hoped, bring about a situation in which significant third parties - the United States in particular - would intervene to exercise pressure on Israel to agree to begin peace discussions leading to its eventual withdrawal from the occupied territories.

The second phase of the Intifada - post 1990 deterioration

Over the Christmas/New Year of 1989-1990 thousands of international peace activists joined Israelis and Palestinians in a series of demonstrations in Jerusalem under the banner of 'Time For Peace'. In retrospect this was the high point of the intifada as an unarmed mass-based civilian resistance movement. The months following were to see a deterioration in the 'health' of the movement. There were a number of reasons for this weakening of the struggle.

1. The relative failure of disengagement and non-cooperation

It is one of the axioms of nonviolent resistance that if sufficient people, especially those in strategic institutional positions, withdraw their cooperation then they will thereby undermine the sources of the oppressor's power. One of the goals of the intifada was to raise the costs of the occupation to such a level by means of their direct opposition and the withdrawal of cooperation that the Israelis would consider withdrawing. The weakness was that whilst Israel desires the territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it does not want the people - the Palestinians. Therefore it was prepared to carry the costs of the intifada whilst increasing the screws of repression on the Palestinian people. In a nutshell, the Israelis did not require

Palestinian cooperation to maintain the occupation, and this seriously weakened the impact of the unarmed resistance.

2. The escalating costs of resistance

Furthermore, it turned out that in many ways the Palestinians were more dependent on the Israelis than the other way round. The Israelis could find replacements for the Palestinians who withdrew their labour, the Palestinians could not find alternative sources of employment and income. Moreover, Israel remained the only source of many of the basic necessities of life within the occupied territories. Therefore, as the months passed the costs of resistance borne by everyday Palestinians rose, whilst Israel showed no weakening of its resolve. People began to question the commitment to unarmed resistance - Was it causing the Israelis sufficient suffering to force them to consider withdrawing?

3. The weakness of 'shame power' and the appeal of 'vertical escalation'

There were two dimensions to the Palestinian leverage power in relation to the Israeli public - the attempt to convert and persuade by means of their preparedness to suffer for their just cause (shame power) and the attempt to force the Israelis to consider withdrawal by increasing the costs of continued occupation. Unfortunately these two dimensions - conversion and coercion - do not rest easily together. Thus, the vulnerability to shame power of the many liberal Israelis uneasy about the morality of occupation could be (and was) negated by any act of Palestinian violence resulting in injury and death for Israelis. The dominant emotion within Israel, then as now, was fear - and any act of violence triggered that fear of a people surrounded by hostile neighbours who believe that their very survival as a nation and a state depends on the maintenance of their physical/military strength and to show signs of weakness would be suicidal.

Therefore, as the months passed and Palestinians became frustrated with the lack of tangible achievements realised through unarmed resistance, so the appeal of armed resistance grew - a 'vertical' escalation of the struggle. As the incidence of violent attacks on Israeli targets increased, so the gains achieved through 'shame power' were eroded, sympathy for the Palestinian cause being replaced by a fear of Palestinian 'terrorists'.

4. The fragmentation of resistance and the weakening of political control

One of the strengths of the intifada lay in the coordination between the different political factions achieved through the UNC and the popular committee structure. However, by 1990 not only were the tensions between the different factions increasing in the light of the perceived weaknesses of the unarmed struggle and the temptations of vertical escalation, but the majority of the experienced cadres who had been able to maintain cohesion in the struggle had been apprehended and imprisoned (or deported) by the Israelis. Their places were taken by relatively inexperienced young men from the ranks of the strike forces.

5. Third parties and the impact of external events

That the Palestinians lacked the resources to affect the self-interest of the United States, and thereby prompt it to intervene constructively in the conflict, was revealed by the American response to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. Within days the build-up of American troops in Saudi Arabia was under way. Inexcusable as the invasion was, Saddam Hussein's actions were popular in many parts of the Arab world, including Palestinians who felt that here was a man who refused to be intimidated by American power and hence restored some pride to the Arab nation. The result was that financial support for the Palestinian cause from the Gulf States dried up, and the subsequent war against Iraq (Operation Desert Storm) meant that Palestinians were subjected to lengthy curfews - the hardship and the suffering intensified and so did the bitterness. By mid-1991 more Palestinians were being killed by their fellow Palestinians than by the Israelis as anger and resentment turned against those suspected of collaboration and betrayal of the uprising.

Conclusion: 'Let Israelis experience something of our suffering!'

This is not the time to trace the way in which the Madrid Conference of 1991 was convened or how the Oslo Accord, the historic 'Declaration of Principles' was arrived at in September 1993. Nor is there space to detail the growing frustrations with the subsequent 'peace process'. However, the link between the first intifada and the current uprising is clear. Those who are driving it forward are primarily the generation who confronted the Israeli occupiers in the strike forces of the first intifada. They were the youths who bore the brunt of Israeli repression and from whose ranks most of the young 'martyrs' were drawn. They were the young men who

came to believe in the need for 'vertical escalation' to increase the costs of occupation for the Israelis. They became the 'intifada generation' who felt ignored when the old generation of PLO leaders returned and proceeded to rule and administer the West Bank and Gaza Strip as if it was their personal patrimony or fiefdom. All this added to the bitterness which drives the current conflict on the Palestinian side.

Of the many memories of the first intifada, one in particular stays in my mind. It was 1991 at the time of the war against Iraq. A friend of mine told me later how he used to go up on the roof of his house and cheer as the Scud missiles flew over on their way to strike at Tel Aviv. Why did he cheer, when he knew there was a possibility they were armed with chemical weapons? The answer was clear - he cheered because the Israelis would begin to feel something of the pain and the fear that was such a part of the everyday life of Palestinians! I felt that the conflict had poisoned his spirit - and I continue to believe that the wound and the shame that is Palestine will continue to fester and poison the lives of us all unless the Palestinians are fully acknowledged as a people with fundamental human rights like everyone else. As Michael Ignatieff remarked in the context of the 'war against terror' being waged by the American administration: 'To ask what victory in the war against terror means is to ask what peace between Palestinians and Israelis requires.'