

Peace paradigm: Nonviolent protest in Palestine

by [Tom Getman](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

What? Do you want them to commit suicide?" That was the response of Sis Levin, a Columbia University specialist on finding alternatives to violence, when asked if Palestinians should be encouraged to engage in nonviolent demonstrations against the Israeli military occupation.

But the reality in Palestine is that the Israeli government is more afraid of nonviolent action than of more forceful forms of resistance. Within a paradigm of violence, Israel can portray its brutal repression as self-defense against bombs, gunfire or even children throwing rocks or old men throwing shoes. Usually the objects that children and the elderly throw at "clash sites" in Ramallah, Nablus or Hebron, or indeed at the Al Aqsa mosque, fall far short of the heavily armed soldiers and their bulletproof vehicles. Yet the Israeli military responds as though these actions were shots fired at the heart of Israel.

When hundreds of Palestinians and their international friends march toward a barricade or one of the ubiquitous checkpoints, soldiers open fire first with toxic tear gas, then rubber-coated steel bullets and finally live ammunition. They withhold lethal force against peaceful protest only when Israeli citizens from organizations such as Peace Now and the Rabbis for Human Rights are clearly in the front rank with kippas, Hebrew banners or other signs of their Jewish identity.

Even before the recent escalation of violence, it was not uncommon for local police or military commanders to use dangerous counterforce against unarmed protesters. For thousands of Palestinians simply going to work each day or traveling to their families through checkpoints, siege barricades and over rural agricultural roads has become a courageous act of nonviolent resistance. An unknown number have been arrested, wounded and killed while performing these simple acts.

Two years ago a man rushed into the East Jerusalem World Vision office to report tension a few blocks away on the main street of the Palestinian section of the

“eternally and undivided capital of Israel.” A group of Palestinian junior high girls had been denied a permit to hold a three-block silent march to commemorate a historical event. When I arrived at the scene I was stunned to see 40 heavily armed police and soldiers, some on horseback, facing the girls. The horses have been trained to kick, bite and drive people into walls and windows. This phalanx of riot police was arrayed against a frightened clump of schoolchildren intent on a peaceful demonstration. It would have been laughable if it had not been so dangerous for the children.

Horried, I approached the Jerusalem police commander, Yair Yitzaky, and asked him to withdraw the provocative horses and riders. He immediately acknowledged the humor in this contrived confrontation and said he was about to send at least the warhorse unit away. But then someone threw a stone at one of the frightened young soldiers and the situation spun out of control. The front row of soldiers sank to one knee and fired into a business corridor at girls trying to duck behind cars. The remaining troops rushed into the fray. The soldiers beat and shot at the children, while horses and riders drove the crowd up steps and into a plate glass window. Journalists, too, were trampled and beaten. Only the courageous actions of unarmed people from the Palestinian business and political community, some of whom gathered the girls into their arms while others negotiated with the police, kept what the girls had meant to be a nonviolent protest from becoming a bloodbath.

How can one ask people to engage in nonviolent action in such a context? As this incident illustrates, the violent force under the thin veneer of civility with which Israel sets out to meet such protests almost always results in turbulence.

This incident happened during a more “peaceful” period under the watchful eyes of foreigners and the press. Worse things have happened on rural roads or in isolated barricaded cities unreachable by outside witnesses. For example, on August 5 the Israeli military reported that Mahdi M. Abdil Fattah Mazeed had died from gunshot wounds he received after he had attacked Israeli soldiers. In fact, as the Red Crescent has now revealed, the report by the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights makes clear that the soldiers shot him while he was sitting with friends and then tortured and beat him to death with their rifle butts.

The Israeli government admits that it has insufficient crowd-control equipment such as water cannons, foam machines or trained dogs and negotiating teams. So its slide toward using heavy weaponry is swift, not only when suicide bombers up the ante

but even when benign schoolgirls and international humanitarian workers protest. One thing is certain; when there are Palestinians involved there will be a more forceful reaction by the Israeli military and more humiliating practices by the occupation soldiers.

On August 9, the Rapprochement Centre in Bethlehem announced it was sponsoring ten days of nonviolent resistance. The activities scheduled for these days included training people in alternative methods of resisting violence; holding demonstrations at roadblocks and checkpoints; working with farmers in fields that have been declared “closed military areas”; harvesting and transporting crops from closed villages; protesting the closure of Jerusalem to Palestinian workers; and playing soccer on a playground in close proximity to an Israeli military post. The Rapprochement Centre hopes these acts of alternative resistance will spark a nonviolent resistance movement that will counter the deadly and unconscionable bombings by extremist Palestinian organizations, which only serve to deepen Israeli fear and assure another escalation of violence. But the record so far shows that nonviolent resistance here is extremely dangerous for those engaged in it and so far ineffective in bringing about change.

I was barricaded in my office next to East Jerusalem’s Orient House as I wrote this article. In the middle of the night of August 9 and 10, Orient House, the unofficial Palestinian “city hall” owned by East Jerusalem’s late “mayor,” Faisal Hussein, was seized by Israeli police and soldiers as a response to the deadly attack by the Hamas suicide bomber who had killed 15 people at a Jerusalem pizza restaurant. That bombing was itself a response to Israeli assassinations of Hamas activists and seven other bystanders, including two children, earlier in the week.

The World Vision office is 50 meters from the front door of Orient House. The whole block was under military siege as the Israeli government exerted its invalid and fragile sovereignty over East Jerusalem. Along with many businesses, six international humanitarian agencies and at least eight Israeli and Palestinian NGOs were denied access to their offices, in violation of the Geneva Conventions. A number of expatriates and progressive local Jewish activists peacefully protested this unnecessary occupation of one of the last moderate Palestinian strongholds. The State Department and Jerrold Kessle of CNN called this a “provocative escalation.” The horse unit was used to roughly dispersed the crowd. A number of internationals were arrested and carried away in police vans. Undeterred by the TV cameras that recorded the event, Israeli soldiers brutally beat and kicked bound demonstrators.

To comprehend why peaceful protests are generally ineffective and very difficult to organize, and to understand why some groups of Palestinians resort to desperate terrorist activity, it is necessary to recognize the power imbalance in Israel/Palestine. A military occupying force, vastly superior in arms and training to the indigenous population, and supported by the most powerful nation on earth, is seeking to solidify its sovereignty over a territory and its people through state-sponsored violence and terror. Israel has the fifth largest army in the world. The Palestinians have stones, a few light arms and desperate, humiliated young men, some of whom are willing to become suicide bombers. Israel's far greater power is exerting a monumental cost on the Palestinians. To understand Palestinian anger, one must realize that every Palestinian, in Israel as well as in the West Bank and Gaza, is under the control of a powerful occupying government acting in violation of international law.

It has become routine for Israeli soldiers to humiliate and abuse Palestinian citizens of all ages, destroying their homes and crops, polluting or diminishing their water supplies, blocking their access roads to work and essential institutions like hospitals and schools, and separating Palestinian towns in Gaza and the West Bank from each other with hundreds of miles of "bypass" roads reserved only for settlers. The occupying army protects illegal and extremist settlers who confiscate Palestinian land and harass and kill civilians, while indiscriminately detaining, torturing and obstructing the movement of Palestinians in their own neighborhoods. This matrix of control robs people of their time and energy and creates chaos and difficulty for everyone, including humanitarian agency staff and diplomats. It becomes nearly impossible to accomplish urgent health, welfare and consular work.

Those of us dedicated to nonviolence believe that the love and power of nonviolence will eventually bring even those ruthlessly imposing military control to a new understanding. We believe that people can cross the partitions of race, religion and politics to learn to work together and care for one another, a process of transformation that began in another apparently hopeless situation when Nelson Mandela emerged from prison in South Africa. (But we also must remember that 3,000 people were killed there between the time Mandela left prison and the time he took office. No liberation struggle is entirely nonviolent.)

Under what conditions can the transformation from violence to nonviolence come about here? It can happen only if there is a strong international condemnation of the occupation and an exposure of the roots and abuses of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. No matter how much human rights activists, faith communities and humanitarian agency staff protest against the state-sponsored violence of assassinations, collective punishment and wholesale human rights abuses, they can do little to bring about change without stronger support. Alternative peaceful means for resolving the conflict have little chance for success in the present atmosphere of mistrust.

Military occupation is one of the worst forms of violence because it can be rationalized in a Machiavellian way as necessary “for security.” As a result of this rationalization, the international community fails to speak out against Israel’s excesses. At the same time, Palestinians are condemned in the court of public opinion for acts that were deemed acceptable when American colonists or South African blacks under apartheid performed them in their struggle for freedom.

Palestinian violence is a reaction to Israeli military brutality. Unless oppressed people have an alternative, they will use violence as their tool for liberation. International law encourages and the human spirit demands the throwing off of colonial rule—by whatever means necessary—in order to stop the suffering of innocents and as a step toward reaching full human rights. But violent means create massive suffering. Fortunate are the nations in which nonviolent protest erodes the foundation of oppression, and allows change to come from within. By whichever means, colonialization and oppression are eventually defeated. Every day that Israel uses disproportionate force against lightly armed or unarmed Palestinians, it sets the stage for more mutual destruction.

What can those who support a shift to nonviolence do to increase the chances for Israel’s transformation and the just resolution of the Palestinian situation? Here are a few suggestions:

- We must ask the following questions loudly and effectively: “What is violence?” “Who is perpetuating this violence?” and “How are they violent?” Biblical reflection and candid social analysis are part of the process of answering such questions. In other words, we must destroy the myths upon which the violence of both Israelis and Palestinians is based. The pathology of victimization that flows from the arrogant use of power is vitriolic because it does not allow anyone else to be a legitimate victim. Each side sees itself as the absolute victim, the innocent party that is the sole target of “violence.” But of course neither side is innocent, and there are many victims on both sides.

- We must redefine the ideal of the nation state. The international community must find the will to shake off its paralysis and move to redress the injustice in the Holy Land in a spirit of concern for what is best for the oppressor as well as the oppressed. When liberation comes it frees not only the oppressed but also those who structured and maintained the untenable and incalculably costly systems of oppression.
- We must devise a strategy based on the experience of the American civil rights movement, the protests that led to the ending of the Vietnam war, and the antiapartheid movement. The mass nonviolent action that is so difficult to bring about in the Middle East could begin in communities in the U.S., which could act as a voice for the voiceless of the Middle East in the American corridors of power.

This must be an ecumenical interfaith movement. Muslims, Christians and Jews must act together. It is time for a new generation of social activists to take on one of the worst apartheid systems in the world through a mobilization of faith communities, local governments, schools, universities, media centers and service groups. The universal values of the three monotheistic religions in regard to human rights cry out for space in the Middle East for nonviolent protest.

- The message that nonviolent sympathizers can begin to implement this alternative paradigm must be spread. Once support for nonviolent protest in Israel/Palestine is gained in the capitals of the world, then those committed to reducing violence can come to the Middle East en masse, as many came to South Africa, to encourage the locally led nonviolent protest movement. We cannot ask our compatriots here to do anything we are unwilling to do. The risks must be shared. Our methods of teaching nonviolence must be incarnational rather than rhetorical, consistent with the emboldening restraint of the Sermon on the Mount.

A new generation of leaders is needed in Israel/Palestine. Such leaders seem to be developing within the progressive Jewish communities. They must be aware that without addressing core justice issues there can be no peace in the Middle East, and the birthplace of our faiths will continue to be a place of abomination. Father Manual Musallem, the Latin-rite pastor and school administrator in Gaza, has said, "The mental violence that is exercised by Israel in its practices against Palestinians has in the final analysis no power. It is like bugs or worms that consume the brain [and the spirit] of those who do the violence." More and more Israelis perceive this truth and are taking risks to be part of the slowly emerging consensus for mutual healing. For

its part, the Palestinian Authority has made very clear in recent days that the use of guns and suicide bombs is unacceptable and has appealed to its people to find less violent means of resistance. But the tragic bombings by extremist groups will surely continue until the counterforce of consensus takes hold.

The best illustration of a communitywide, moderate approach to resolving conflict and living together was the recent funeral of Faisal Husseini in Jerusalem. The Israeli government wisely opened all the 17 checkpoints leading from the West Bank to Jerusalem so that mourners could walk peacefully and unobstructed first to Orient House, and then to accompany the body to its grave near the Al Aqsa mosque. Palestinian flags flew over the Old City and people of different ethnic and religious communities marched together and greeted each other warmly, bound together by mutual grief over the loss of one of the most effective bridge-builders. There was not an Israeli soldier to be seen. The police helped arrange the event rather than block it. As a result there was absolutely no violence.

Events like this give one hope. Former Israeli minister Yossi Beilin wrote recently in a private correspondence, "We are not alone. I am convinced that if we keep striving, then we can make a change and that sanity, although it seems as if it has left the region, will return and lead the way again."

In this time, as bad as any during the past 53 years in the region, we are called to be the hands and feet and body of Jesus, to bear this suffering with him. The strategy of nonviolent action to achieve liberation can be put into effect—the moral suasion, theological underpinnings, historical precedents and energy are available. If we fail to reverse the paradigm of violence, it is because we did not seize this moment. As in South Africa, a nonviolent liberation movement won't come about by miracle but will require maximum effort, substantial biblical reflection and the courage to face those who insist on a more brutal way.

South Africa's Roelf Meyer and Jan van Eck, writing in the *Bulletin of the Regional Cooperation in the Middle East of Search for Common Ground* (Spring 2001), summarized the lessons the Middle East can learn from the South Africa experience:

South Africans of all persuasions gave a collective sigh of relief, knowing that the expected disaster had been averted—by one man who thought before he spoke [referring to Mandela's moderate voice after terrorist bombings]. Contrary to what the South Africa transition has been termed, a so-called "miracle," it has been a successful transition because of sheer hard work, strategic thinking and real

statesman-like leadership. This does not have to be unique to South Africa. Any other country and its people can do the same, on the condition that they first take a deliberate decision that talks, dialogue and negotiations are, by far, a preferable option to the ongoing conflict and war. Israelis and Palestinians have the same ability—even if they think they do not.