

Nonviolent force

From the Editors in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

With the horrifying results of Palestinian car bombings and suicidal bombers regularly displayed in newspapers and on television, Americans are not likely to associate “nonviolent protest” with the Palestinian cause. But in fact nonviolent protest has been and continues to be the Palestinians’ primary weapon. In this issue, Tom Getman of World Vision focuses on the possibilities of intensifying that nonviolent protest, though he also notes that significant hurdles stand in the way of such a witness.

The first sustained Palestinian protest, the intifada of 1987-88, which was tremendously successful in presenting the Palestinian cause to the people of Israel and to the world, was primarily nonviolent. Though protesters regularly threw stones at Israeli soldiers, this was largely a symbolic gesture—a conscious dramatization of their David-versus-Goliath situation in the face of Israeli military might. Many protest organizers realized that armed resistance was futile: it played into the hands of Israel’s hardliners and undermined the Palestinians’ case in the eyes of the world.

The intifada was conceived not as a revolt but as an effort to “shake off” the Israel occupiers through a series of symbolic and concrete gestures—demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, a refusal to pay taxes. One of the leaders of the intifada was Mubarak Awad, who founded a center for the study of nonviolent action.

In their study of nonviolent movements, *A Force More Powerful*, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall call the Palestinians’ leafleting campaign during this time—a campaign that called on the populace to engage in nonviolent direct action—“one of the most ambitious mass education efforts in nonviolent action in the 20th century.” The authors compare the intifada to the nonviolent movements led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Like those movements, the Palestinian protests were a profound challenge to those in power not because they posed a physical threat but because they questioned the legitimacy of Israeli occupation and exposed its brutality.

But, as Ackerman and Duvall note, the intifada of the late ’80s was punctuated by acts of violence that allowed Israelis to feel justified in striking back, and which

undermined the nonviolent movement. A similar dilemma afflicts nonviolent activists in Israel/Palestine today. Only a small group of Palestinians engages in terrorism. The vast majority of Palestinians resist Israeli occupation in measured and disciplined ways, hoping that Israelis and the rest of the world will recognize the justice of their cause. The Rapprochement Centre in Bethlehem, led by Ghassan Adoni and George Rishmawi, has carried on the work of Awad's center on nonviolence. Groups like the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, led by Naim Ateek, are committed to achieving peace through nonviolent means. Tragically, the courageous acts of the nonviolent protesters are too often ignored and discounted, and one suicide bomber has more impact on public opinion than thousands of nonviolent demonstrators.