

THE INVISIBLE GANDHI IN PALESTINE

Long history of non-violent resistance by Palestinians

Were Gandhi alive today he would be in Palestine. I know because I had the privilege and honor of meeting him and talking with him. I had gone to scoff but ultimately stayed on to admire. I attended his prayer meetings and public addresses, studied his views on many subjects, read his writings, listened to his radio talks and ultimately became his disciple. About Palestine he was very clear. Gandhi's position was that Palestine was Arab territory and if Jews settled there they should not expect the protection of a colonial power. He was completely against the creation of an Israeli state in Palestine. Supporters of Israel tried very hard to make him change his view, but he remained firm.

Gandhi is now dead. He cannot be in Palestine physically. However, he is there in spirit. And there are literally hundreds of "Gandhis" in the Occupied Territories, carrying on non-violent resistance in the finest tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Yet, people bemoan the lack of a Gandhi in Palestine! Even those who should know better plead for a Palestinian Gandhi. And responsible leaders, including President Obama, claim that if only Palestinians renounced violence, peace would come. This ignores the non-violent resistance that goes on daily in the Occupied Territories.

While in Australia I attended a forum, organized by Students for Palestine, on the history of nonviolent struggle in Palestine. One of the speakers at the forum was Samha Sabawi, a Palestinian writer and poet. Her presentation was later published in the form of an article under the title "Truth, Non-violence and the Palestinian Hills". It gives valuable insights and brings out the fact that the problem is not that there are no "Gandhis" in Palestine but that the media has made them invisible. It is reproduced here by special permission from the author

Gulamhusein Abba.

Truth, Non-Violence and the Palestinian Hills

Samah Sabawi

Based on a presentation given at Melbourne University Australia on April 30, 2010. The event was sponsored by Students for Palestine.

Where is the Palestinian Gandhi? I get this question at the end of almost every presentation I've given on Palestine. This fascination with finding a Palestinian Gandhi has been reflected time and again in newspapers commentary, and political discourse. Obama has promised in his Cairo speech^[1] that should Palestinians renounce violence peace will find its way. Singer Bono wished with all his heart for Palestinians to find their Gandhi or their King^[2]. A slew of bleeding hearts said it, wrote it, preached it and insisted on it.

The search for the Palestinian Gandhi even manifested itself in well-intentioned projects that end up being incredibly patronizing and condescending to the Palestinians. Take the Gandhi Project^[3] for example; an initiative by the Skoll foundation that aims to teach Palestinians non-violence by translating the movie Gandhi and projecting it in cities camps and villages throughout the West Bank. This project - as well meaning as it appears to be - reflects an almost insulting level of ignorance of the existing Palestinian culture of

non-violence and the challenges Palestinians face when protesting non-violently against the brutal apartheid State.

For generations, Palestinians have adopted in their daily lives a culture of non-violent “Sumud”, an Arabic word that means to be "steadfast" and to "persevere". Through Sumud, Palestinians have been able to protect their identity and to refuse not to exist. After all, since its inception, the Zionist project denied Palestinians their existence. Who can forget the false claim that Palestine was “a land without a people”?

Although Sumud was always part of the Palestinian story, it came to a full bloom as a distinct feature of Palestinian life during and in the aftermath of the six-day war in 1967. Having learned from their 1948 experience, more Palestinians were urged to show Sumud and chose to be steadfast remaining on their land regardless of Israel’s war and occupation. Many believe that Palestinian steadfastness and Sumud and their refusal to leave in huge numbers during and after the 1967 war contributed to the reason why Israel wasn’t able to annex the West Bank and the Gaza strip as they had a very high Arab Palestinian population^[4] which could have undermined the purity of the Jewish state.

Palestinians exhibit Sumud in their daily lives as they perform what would amount to normal everyday tasks in other places. Palestinian children resist succumbing to the will of their Occupiers non-violently as they make their daily journey to school despite the long waits at the checkpoints and the harassment by Israeli illegal settlers^[5].

Palestinian men and women non-violently challenge their occupiers when they continue to go to work even if it means riding a donkey using back mud roads because they are denied access to the main streets in their villages as well as denied access to the Jewish only roads^[6] which Israel has built illegally to connect the settlements. It is worth mentioning here that to build these Jewish only roads Israel has confiscated and carved up pieces of Palestinian land fragmenting and isolating hundreds of communities.

Palestinian families non-violently resist the imposed isolation by the occupiers when they insist on doing their family visits, even though what should be a 10 minute walk at times can take an entire afternoon of waiting for permits, submitting to body searches, waving IDs and waiting and waiting and waiting.... ^[7]

Even when Palestinians get married and have babies under occupation they are challenging their oppressors in a place where birth registration, family reunification, marriage certificates and building permits are controlled by a state that has one thing in mind – reducing the number of Arabs and paving the way for Jews to colonize their land.

But Palestinians still persevere not only as individuals, or families but also as organized communities! Palestinian NGOs today play a big role in helping the people deal with these issues. Through the method known as Reverse Strike – a non-violent method of resistance that focuses on community building - Palestinian civil society has created alternatives for the people to help lessen their dependency on their oppressors. Palestinian civil society has also successfully built an infrastructure of resistance. Inside

the Occupied Territories, non-violent resistance shines through as villages and various Communities take on direct action to protests Israel's continued assault on their rights, their freedom and their dignity. The protests of the communities of Jayyous, Budrus, Bil'in, Ni'lin and Umm Salamona have now become known as the white intifada. The organization of these protests reflects a healthy and determined Palestinian Civil Society.

Palestinian Civil Society initiated the calls for the BDS campaign and is also working closely with international organizations and individuals to support the Free Gaza campaign. Both campaigns aim at engaging international solidarity groups giving them an important role to play in the liberation struggle. This month, the latest BDS victory was Elvis Costello's refusal to play in Israel. This happened while the Freedom Flotilla's three cargo ships and five passenger ships set sail to Gaza. The ships are carrying 5,000 tons of construction materials, medical equipment, and school supplies, as well as around 600 people from 40 countries. They will once more challenge Israel's illegal hold over Gaza's borders, air and sea. We are seeing a fantastic rise in a people to people movement that is inspiring hope for a better future.

In Diaspora as well as inside the OT, Palestinian academia, artists and human rights activists do their part in Palestinian Sumud as they document Israel's atrocities, write about the injustices, paint pictures, publish articles, sing traditional songs, write books and recite poetry that keeps the Palestinian narrative alive. People like Sari Nussiebeh, Ramzy Baroud, Ismael Shamout, Rima Bana, Mazin Qumsiyeh, Sam Bahour, Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Dr. Sari Makdisi, Ali Abunimah and thousands of others who are hard at work non-violently protecting the Palestinian narrative. They have built the pillars of resistance that have kept the Palestinian identity and culture alive.

As I have shown so far, Palestinian culture of Sumud and non-violent resistance has encompassed direct action, reverse strike and civil disobedience over decades of oppression. There is so much evidence to show that the Palestinian non-violent resistance is and has always been central to the Palestinian struggle. But if that was the case, then where is that Palestinian Gandhi? The answer to that is simple: You are asking the wrong question.

There is no shortage of Palestinian Gandhis in Israel's jails, at checkpoints, and in refugee camps. There are even Gandhis as young as five years old walking to school, holding on to their backpacks, to their pride and to their dignity while they get stoned and showered with settler garbage. There are scores of Gandhis in Palestine, young, old, men and women. The problem is how to make these Gandhis visible to a world blinded by ignorance and by prejudice. The correct questions to ask are how do we make the work of the Palestinian Gandhis effective and visible? Can non-violent Sumud ever fulfill its goals of liberation and justice? What are the challenges facing the Palestinian non-violent movement and how can we help overcome these challenges?

There are two major challenges to Palestinian non-violence; the first is Israel's reaction to peaceful protest. Israel is a country that views itself as being above international universal laws rights and jurisdictions. It often reacts violently to non-violent protests,

spraying protesters with chemicals, rubber bullets and tear gas, at times claiming their lives. Israel crushes political dissent by arresting political activists, even those who hold Israeli citizenship. Israel holds activists on administrative detention without a fair trial for indefinite periods of time. In short, Israel doesn't respond and is not phased by non-violent protests simply because it views all Palestinians, peaceful or not, as a threat. The minute a Palestinian baby is born, it is automatically a dangerous threat to the nature of a state that defines itself by its Jewishness. All Palestinians are seen as demographic bombs, they are enemies of the state and therefore no matter what methods Palestinians use - violent or non-violent - Israel will not change its course. It will still view them as enemies that must be fought, crushed and ethnically cleansed.

The other challenge to the Palestinian non-violent movement is that it remains invisible to the international community. Palestinian daily hardships in going to school or work or visiting relatives are all daily acts of non-violent resistance that go by completely unnoticed by Israelis and by the International community. The media is hungry for blood...a peaceful protest that occurs on a weekly basis with civilians sprayed with sewerage water or injured or even killed doesn't make the news. A child's journey to school, head held high as Jewish settlers' children throw garbage and stones at him, never makes the headlines.

This pattern of Palestinian invisibility feeds into Israel's impunity. Soldiers and settlers are not held accountable for their actions and rarely, if ever, has any soldier been punished for degrading, humiliating, or taking the life of an innocent Palestinian. Even when Israel's impunity reaches extreme levels, as it did when they attacked Gaza, committing a long list of war crimes and human rights violations, there was not enough international outcry to hold it accountable and to change the course of its actions.

So, where do we go from here? It is clear that the Gandhis of Palestine cannot succeed in their liberation struggle without the help of the international community. Palestinian civil society has called on people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel. This idea was inspired by the South African struggle against apartheid. BDS has been endorsed by over 170 Palestinian parties, organizations, trade unions and movements representing the Palestinian people in the 1967 and 1948 territories and in the Diaspora. I urge you to visit the Global BDS website www.bdsmovement.com for ideas on how any one of you can help.

Finally, I'd like to say that it is a fallacy to assume that non-violent resistance is not a natural human reaction to oppression, especially when you're dealing with unarmed civilians, families and communities. Non-violence is not a doctrine that has to be taught, preached, projected on large screens and stuffed down the throats of an indigenous people trying to survive and to have normal lives. Gandhi himself has refused to be seen as an inventor of the methods of non-violence, saying [8]. "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills." If Gandhi was to visit the West Bank and Gaza Strip today, I am sure he would agree that truth and non-violence in Palestine are indeed as old as the Palestinian hills.

Thank you.

NOTE: Samah Sabawi is a Human Rights and Social Justice advocate. She was born in Gaza and shortly after her birth her family was displaced as a result of Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1967. She has lived and worked in many countries around the world and is currently residing in Melbourne, Australia. In addition to numerous articles and poems (published in as many publications and web-sites), she has also co-authored with her father, Abdel-Karim Sabawi, a play "Cries from the Land" which was sponsored and produced by Friends of Sabeel and <http://www.canpalnet-ottawa.org/>. She has also produced the play "Three Wishes" based on her adaptation of Deborah Ellis's book "Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israelis Speak Out". Samah Sabawi is also former Executive Director and Media Spokesperson for the National Council on Canada Arab Relations.

[1] www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-by-the-president-at-cairo-university-6-04-09/

[2] *Ten for the Next Ten* by Bono Guest Oped
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/opinion/03bono.html?pagewanted=all>

[3] "As part of its vision to empower people to create a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world, the Skoll Foundation has partnered with the Global Catalyst Foundation to sponsor the Gandhi Project in the Palestinian Territories." <http://www.skollfoundation.org/tvfilm/gandhiproject.asp>

[4] Waleed Mustafa, Former Dean of Arts Talking About the Concept of Sumud to Palestine-Family Bethlehem University http://www.bethlehem.edu/archives/2010/2010_024.shtml

[5] AT-TUWANI: Settler youth harass Palestinians and international human rights workers *CPTnet*

23 April 2010 <http://www.cpt.org/cptnet/2010/04/23/tuwani-settler-youth-harass-palestinians-and-international-human-rights-workers>

[6] B'tselem The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights: Restrictions on Movement
http://www.btselem.org/english/freedom_of_movement/20080428_so_called_lifting_of_restritcions.asp

[7] Palestine Monitor: Exposing Life Under Occupation.
<http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article7>

[8] *Brief outline of Ghandhi's Philosophy - by Stephen Murphy*
http://www.gandhiserve.org/information/brief_philosophy/brief_philosophy.html