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# The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle

Gene Sharp\*

The intifadah has thus far been distinguished on the Palestinian side by predominantly nonviolent forms of struggle—perhaps 85 percent of the total resistance—along with certain types of “limited violence,” such as stone throwing and petrol bombs, and occasionally more serious violence. The nonviolent methods have taken such forms as commercial shutdowns, economic boycotts, labor strikes, demonstrative funerals, the hoisting of Palestinian flags, the resignation of tax collectors, and many types of political noncooperation. The development of self-reliant educational, social, economic, and political institutions has also been very important.

## *Nonviolent Struggle as a Strategy*

Nonviolent struggle is a technique of great power potential. It is important to recognize that each technique of struggle—conventional war, guerrilla war, and nonviolent struggle—has its own requirements for effectiveness. These requirements need to be adhered to in order to produce the maximum impact of the chosen technique, and must be considered in the strategic and tactical planning of the next phases of the struggle being

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waged. An understanding of the basic nature and requirements of nonviolent struggle is therefore highly important to the Palestinians if they are to conduct their activities wisely.

It should be clear that in speaking of nonviolent struggle we are *not* speaking either about passivity or pacifism, but about “nonviolent war” which can lead to both justice and peace. Nonviolent struggle is a means of wielding power, a technique that is designed to fight a violent opponent willing and well equipped to wield military force. It is also designed for use against opponents who cannot be defeated by violence.

Nonviolent struggle is a technique of conducting conflicts using psychological, social, economic, and political weapons. The technique includes three classes of methods: (1) symbolic forms of nonviolent protest (such as vigils, marches, and flying flags); (2) noncooperation (including social boycotts, economic boycotts, labor strikes, and many forms of political noncooperation ranging from repudiation of legitimacy to civil disobedience and mutiny); and (3) nonviolent intervention (ranging from hunger strikes to nonviolent occupations and blockades, the creation of self-reliant institutions, and the establishment of a rival parallel government).

Nonviolent struggle has had a long history in all parts of the earth, including the Arab and Muslim world. (Examples include noncooperation with the British in Egypt in 1919–23, the Pathan movement in the North West Frontier province of British India in the 1930s and 1940s, resistance to military dictatorship in the Sudan in 1964 and 1987, and the Arab oil embargo.) Nonviolent action is not always successful regardless of how it is applied, (nothing is), but it has produced major victories which are often too little known. Success sometimes has come through changing the minds and attitudes of the opponents, but that is rare. More often, partial success has been achieved through accommodation (gaining some objectives and giving up others), as in most labor strikes. Nonviolent struggle has also demonstrated its capacity to produce nonviolent coercion of the opponent so that no alternative remains but to capitulate (as in forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Salih Jabr in Iraq in 1948). At times, the opponent’s regime has even disintegrated in face of massive repudiation and paralyzing noncooperation (such as the shah’s regime in Iran in February 1979).

The technique of nonviolent struggle has its requirements for effectiveness, including persistence in the face of repression and nonviolent discipline. Wise strategy and careful implementation are as important here as they are in military campaigns.

Since nonviolent struggle wields significant power in conflicts if applied courageously and skillfully, it is likely to be met with serious repression by the opponents. That response is a recognition of its power, not a reason for abandoning it. In fact, the brutalities of repression against nonviolent resisters trigger a process of “political *jiujitsu*,” which increases the resistance, sows problems in the opponents’ own camp, and mobilizes third parties in favor of the nonviolent resisters.

Since, as mentioned above, conventional military war, guerrilla warfare, and nonviolent struggle all have their own distinct requirements for effectiveness, the methods they employ are not easily mixed to advantage. For example, if in a conventional war 15 percent of the soldiers at the front decide that one day they will not use their guns but instead will picket and carry protest signs against the enemy, that action will drastically weaken the military effectiveness of the war effort of their side.

Similarly, if in a nonviolent struggle, 15 percent of the resisting population decide that they will not continue to struggle by use of that technique and abide by its requirement of nonviolent persistence and discipline, but will instead use guns and bombs, the results can be catastrophic for their whole cause.

Thus, for maximum effectiveness, it is essential that nonviolent struggles be conducted with adherence to the requirements of the technique of nonviolent action, just as is the case with conventional and guerrilla wars.

This understanding of nonviolent struggle has great relevance to the Palestinian uprising.

## *The Intifadah and Palestinian Goals*

Before getting to the matter at hand, two major facts must be recognized:

First, Israelis who have for so long sought a homeland and a haven from persecution and worse are not going to pack their bags and return to the countries where they or their ancestors once lived. My impression is that most Palestinians recognize this and do not demand it. They are willing to live peacefully in an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel.

Second, the Palestinians are not going away either. They, too, want a country where they can live in peace and security, not as refugees and not as an inferior underclass ruled by Israelis. They are going to continue the intifadah for as long as it takes to get their independence and respect, the same as the Israelis enjoy. The question is, how they will conduct the

intifadah so as best to achieve their goal of an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel.

In pursuit of this ultimate goal, Palestinians at this stage of the intifadah probably have six major strategic objectives in the coming months:

- (1) to continue developing within the territories “parallel” social, economic, and political institutions (“the infrastructure”) aiming toward the establishment of an internal parallel government capable of operating Palestinian society despite the presence of Israeli troops—in other words, parallel institutions leading towards *de facto* independence;
- (2) to continue mobilizing Palestinian nonviolent resistance in the territories so that the people are “unrulable” by the occupiers. This can be done by the continued application of various forms of nonviolent protest, noncooperation, and intervention, and their expansion despite predictable repression;
- (3) to split further Israeli public opinion on the issues of continued occupation, repression, and willingness to recognize an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel. This includes finding ways to deal with extremist settlers;
- (4) to contribute to splits within the Israeli political establishment by encouraging opposition to present occupation policies and support for accepting an independent Palestine. This should also entail contributing to undermining the reliability of the Israeli army to conduct the repression. With acute political splits and with unreliability in the military forces in the territories, the Israeli government would have to adjust to the new reality;
- (5) to contribute to the partial split between the Israeli and United States governments concerning the “problem of the Palestinians”;
- (6) to encourage world public opinion and diplomatic efforts to help settle the conflict and assist in establishing recognition of *de jure* Palestinian independence. However, it is important to recognize that the basis for a satisfactory resolution through diplomatic means lies primarily in accomplishing the first five strategic objectives.

The first two objectives, which focus exclusively on action by Palestinians, are clearly the most important. The second two, which focus on desired reactions within Israel, come next. The last two, dealing with international responses, are also significant, but can not be seen as independent goals to be strived for in and of themselves: their realization is directly influenced by and dependent upon efforts to achieve the first four objectives (especially the first two).

## *The “Limited Violence” Component of the Intifadah*

Considering their lack of preparation for disciplined nonviolent struggle, and given the severity of Israeli repression in the form of beatings, shootings, killings, house demolitions, uprooting of trees, deportations, extended imprisonments and detentions without trial, and so on, the Palestinians during the intifadah have shown impressive restraint. Specific instructions have been issued by the Palestine Liberation Organization and the leadership in the territories *not* to use firearms; with few exceptions, the order has been respected. The 15 percent or so of the uprising that is constituted by low-level violence involves chiefly stone throwing. Palestinians see the stones as ways of expressing their defiance and rage about the injustices and sufferings they have endured for decades. But while it is true that compared to shootings and beatings, the limited action of stone throwing is very mild, it is necessary to state that stones are not merely symbolic as most Palestinians intend—or explain—they to be; rocks of significant size are also thrown, and petrol bombs (Molotov cocktails) have been used against—and have killed—Israelis.

Stone throwing is also almost guaranteed to produce high Palestinian casualties—as indeed it has. Although Palestinian victims have ranged from infants to very elderly men and women, most of the dead and severely wounded are stone-throwing boys and young men. I have found it extremely difficult to find a Palestinian justification of this heavy price in terms of *the instrumental effectiveness of that form of action*.

My perception is that even as very low-level dangers to Israeli troops, the stones and petrol bombs are counterproductive to achieving the third and fourth strategic objectives outlined earlier (those relating to Israel’s public opinion, political situation, and troop morale). The Israelis can almost never see a stone thrown at them as a relatively nonviolent expression of rage and a cry for justice. The stones are instead seen as more threats to the lives of Jews, calling up memories of past persecutions, pogroms, and the Holocaust and hence triggering highly disproportionate and irrational responses. In Israeli minds, because of the stones, petrol bombs, and killings, the intifadah becomes yet another attempt to kill Jews, proof that the Arabs’ real objective is to drive the Jews into the sea. These perceptions block the message that Palestinians want the Israelis to hear, help arouse support among Israelis for harsh repression, and promote greater willingness among the soldiers to carry out (or exceed) orders to beat or shoot.

Much of the international impact of the uprising has derived from the contrast between the limited actions of stones by Palestinians and the beatings and shootings by Israelis; the ratio of Israeli to Palestinian deaths demonstrates unequivocally from where the preponderant violence comes. Otherwise stated, it is the relative nonviolence of the Palestinians that has been most effective in achieving the gains already made. To this outside observer, it appears clear that, at this advanced stage of the conflict, the Palestinians would be even more effective if they replaced the use of the stones and petrol bombs—as well as deliberate killings—with challenging types of nonviolent action. Unfortunately, there are signs that the pull is in the opposite direction.

### *Present Dangers of Escalation*

Indeed, my most recent trip to Israel and the occupied territories during the summer of 1989 showed a propensity to greater violence on both sides. On the Israeli side, recent opinion polls show that youths of high school and university age have become far more anti-Arab since the intifadah began. There is far more fear and hatred of Arabs than previously found. The youth opinion in this respect is more extremist than that of the adults, but most Israelis see the intifadah as a security crisis and many believe that the way to end it is by using greater repression.

On the political front, the peace groups, including Peace Now, appear to be in a state of weakness and uncertainty (although some Israelis challenge this). A vacillating and split Labor party is unwilling or unable to take a strong peace-for-territory position, while it has lost significant support from the public, and many of the Labor supporters are hawkish. The Likud, meanwhile, appears to be becoming more hardline, as evidenced from the strict conditions the Likud Central Committee imposed on Prime Minister Shamir's already very limited plan for elections in the occupied territories.

On the ground, many Israelis now stone or damage cars of Palestinians (as Palestinians have stoned cars of Israelis). Following the 6 July bus tragedy near Jerusalem caused by a Palestinian from Gaza in which fifteen Israelis and one American were killed, some Palestinians were threatened or attacked by Jews in West Jerusalem. Although the Israeli police took prompt action, the potential is obvious. Settler extremists have continued hostile attacks on Palestinians and their villages in the West Bank, and have extended their heavily guarded "walking tours" to assert their "right" to go where they please. Secret organizations for carrying out violence

against Palestinians (and now even against Israelis with whom they disagree) are growing: a secret group called “Dov” has recently issued leaflets giving instructions on how to treat guns so that bullets fired from them can not be traced through ballistic tests.

Within the military, while there has been a very modest increase in the number of explicit conscientious objectors (with probably thousands more who have made informal arrangements not to serve in the territories), other reservists have become more willing to fire upon Palestinians. There has been clear brutalization of on-duty troops. I was told that soldiers on their first tour of duty in the territories are often unwilling to use violence against Palestinians. By the second tour, after exposure to being spit at and stoned, the soldiers are quite willing to beat Palestinians. Come the third tour, reportedly, they are just looking for someone to kill.

On the Palestinian side, the absence of concrete gains from the intifadah and the Palestinian peace initiative has given rise to deep frustration that is already showing signs of increasing pressures to greater violence. I was told by some Palestinians that stone throwing was becoming boring. There have been a number of attacks on the lives of Israelis, both civilian and military, with the occasional use of knives and more recently of firearms—not to mention the bus attacks with loss of life near Jericho and Jerusalem. There have been calls for violence in the leaflets issued by the Unified National Command of the Uprising, beginning with #40 in May of 1989. Although one of those was withdrawn and the references to killing were later muted, the potential for greater deliberate violence against Israelis is there.

Meanwhile, there has been a sharp increase in killings of suspected Palestinian informers and collaborators; earlier, the emphasis in dealing with these individuals had been on social pressure, public apologies, and social boycott. These killings may also not always be without ulterior motives: reportedly some noncollaborators have been killed, and it is suspected that the situation is being aggravated by personal animosities and perhaps Israeli intelligence. The growth of such intra-group violence has been cited as a significant factor in the final collapse of the 1936–39 Palestinian uprising—also a mixture of nonviolent and violent methods.

### *The Need for a New Approach*

The present situation, then, is highly dangerous and unstable. If the trends mentioned above continue, there could be rapid escalation of violence by Israeli settlers and Jewish terrorist groups on the one hand and



by Palestinians on the other. It would not be difficult for a situation to emerge that would be comparable to, or worse than, Lebanon. This would be a long-term crisis which everyone but the perpetrators of violence would regret, and which would leave most Palestinians and Israelis looking back with longing to the first eighteen months of the intifadah.

What is beyond dispute is that the threshold of violence has been lowered on both sides, and that the situation can not long continue in the pattern of the past months. It will change. The only question is whether the direction of the change can be consciously influenced.

The current situation, in addition to carrying the threat of greater violence, is not advancing the Palestinian cause. Even the "David and Goliath" image earlier so powerful on Western television screens is no longer there. Outpourings of pain and anger are not good enough if a struggle is intended to do more than express feelings. The action, to be strategically wise, must contribute to achieving the objectives of the conflict.

The commercial strike, too, is more effective in expressing feelings than it is in contributing to the achievement of Palestinian independence. Ironically, this activity—as the Israelis repeatedly have pointed out—does little or nothing to harm the Israeli economy or change government policy. (Boycott of Israeli products is a different matter.) Instead, it is the Palestinian merchants and businessmen who suffer, as well as their (often poor) Palestinian employees who now can only be employed for limited hours or not at all. Already these factors are causing some slippage, with opening hours slightly extended in the commercial strikes. In the present context, this could lead, sooner or later, to a major collapse of a main pillar of the intifadah.

In short, if the Palestinians want to advance the main objective of the intifadah—to end the Israeli occupation—then in my view a dramatic shift of strategy is required.

That shift must be announced and initiated in a dramatic way. It must be accompanied by a clear statement of the new strategy and direction of the uprising. It is better to announce this change publicly to everyone—the Palestinians, Israelis, other Arabs, and the world at large. The strategic shift should be so well thought out that publicity would increase its strength, not the reverse.

One suggestion has been to initiate the shift with a major hunger strike. It was the hunger strike by Chinese students in June 1989 that had such a positive dramatic impact on China and the world. Palestinians with better knowledge of nonviolent struggle should be able to do it still more

effectively. It could be, as in China, a fast by large numbers of unknown individuals. Or, it could be a fast by prominent Palestinian Muslims and Christians, political, social, and educational leaders, and other individuals. There is, I have been reminded, ample Palestinian experience in the practice of hunger strikes so that the idea is familiar and could meet a positive response.

In order to make a significant impact without causing death, the fast could be called for an extended but limited time, such as 21 days. The announcement could clearly state that the strike period is a time of purification, commitment, and preparation for the second major phase of the intifadah, which is to build upon—and go beyond—the positive gains of the first phase. The new phase would be strictly nonviolent: the Palestinians, it could be stated, are now strong enough to be able to dispense with the stones. The new phase would emphasize building the institutions and self-reliance of an independent Palestine, with the goal of living in peace side by side with an independent Israel.

During the fast, no stones would be thrown. Instead, there could be religious services in mosques and churches or in public. Some special symbol(s) or color(s) might be displayed everywhere. The Palestinian flag might or might not be flown. There could be voluntary Palestinian curfews to demonstrate peaceful intent and the seriousness of the work of the coming months. The emphasis would *not* be on public demonstrations, but on a disciplined quiet transition to the work of institution-building and developing self-reliance.

While some Palestinians are very skeptical about the viability of a fully nonviolent movement, others think it would be highly advantageous. For example, one Palestinian leader put it roughly this way: “By our use of nonviolent resistance and the limits we have placed on violence, we have neutralized the Israeli atomic bomb, the airforce, the tanks, and even machine guns. Now we should act so as to neutralize even the rifles.” Against strictly nonviolent resisters, the use of rifles, he reasoned, would be so counterproductive that the Israelis would use them less and less. And if they did, the international outrage would grow louder and louder.

Obviously, after the hunger strike ended, the Palestinian youths who would have stopped throwing stones could not simply do nothing. Some substitute activity would be required. Actions used in the past include whistling or wailing at night, especially in dark streets, as has been done in Hebron and on at least one occasion in East Jerusalem. Another idea would have the youths standing peacefully, not fleeing, holding small Palestinian

flags, their right hands outstretched in a gesture of friendship. There are doubtless other options.

The content of the second phase of the intifadah would need to be carefully planned. One suggestion has been to concentrate on building and conducting a Palestinian-operated and controlled educational system. Whatever validity the idea retains in the light of Israel's recent permission to reopen the schools, it illustrates the need for a strategically-selected combination of noncooperation with the occupation authorities and the creation of self-reliant institutions. In these latter activities, only a few components of society should probably be attempted at the same time: a concentration of effort would permit those sections of the population not directly involved in the particular undertaking to rest for a time, continuing their normal social or economic activities until it is their turn again to bear the brunt of resistance.

This strategy means that the commercial strikes could be called off and the merchants and their employees given a chance to recover somewhat economically so as to be able to continue as an important part of Palestinian society and the intifadah. This would not prohibit the later use of commercial strikes and economic shutdowns as short-term symbolic expressions of strong opinion or mourning in case of major massacres. But it would spread the responsibility and price of resistance more widely throughout Palestinian society, and enable the various occupational and professional groups to play their roles for specific purposes and at particular times rather than continuously. Even then, future actions should always be carefully scrutinized in terms of their efficiency and intended results with respect to the overall strategy.

None of this would prohibit boycotts of Israeli products or limitations on the supply of labor to Israeli companies, although the latter might need careful analysis as to the specific type of work involved and the role of the work (or its prohibition) in advancing or weakening the Palestinian resistance and the Israeli policies.

A strategy of nonviolent struggle and increasing Palestinian self reliance, if chosen, would certainly have its problems and would meet with Israeli countermeasures: indeed, nonviolent defiance might initially be met—out of frustration or from recognition that it constitutes a greater political threat to continued occupation than stones—by *increased* Israeli repression and brutality. For despite Israeli rhetoric against Palestinian violence, there are various signs that the Israeli officials prefer to deal with Palestinian violence rather than with nonviolent struggle. It is highly significant that the person most effective in urging the exclusive use of

nonviolent struggle—Mubarak Awad—was deported, and recently two Palestinians were refused exit visas specifically because the conference in Canada at which they were to speak was on “nonviolence.” (They were told, I understand, that they would have been allowed to attend had the topic been anything else.) There have also been reports that Israelis have been taking actions to provoke the Palestinians to greater violence—which, in line with Napoleon’s strategic principle “Never do what your enemy wants you to do, if only because he wants you to do it,” should be sufficient reason for the Palestinians to exert all efforts not to be provoked.

By making the struggle 100 percent nonviolent, the Palestinians would both remove the “justification” for Israeli repression and increase their actual and relative power capacity in the conflict. The new strategy would arouse a new spirit of dedication and hope among the Palestinians. It would make it more possible for sympathetic Israelis both to oppose their government’s repression and policy and to support the Palestinians’ right to independence. This is in part because the new strategy would not be as likely to arouse Israeli fear and rage (and hence brutality) but instead would appeal to very different human qualities, which Jews have often demonstrated elsewhere and in which they have believed.

This second phase of resistance, introduced by an extended fast, could bring the Palestinian cause back to the television screens and to the front pages of the world’s newspapers. The shift to fully nonviolent struggle would also make possible more active support for Palestinian independence in Western Europe and the United States.

While this shift to strictly nonviolent means was taking place, other changes would also be occurring. The popular committees seeking to meet the needs of Palestinian society would continue to develop toward *de facto* Palestinian self-rule. At the same time, the Palestinian refusal to submit to and cooperate with the Israeli occupation and the practice of massive civil disobedience (called by one Palestinian leader “national disobedience”) would increase. The combined result would be that, irrespective of Israeli and international developments, Palestinians would have become unrulable by occupation administrators and troops and instead governed by themselves. With that combination of forces, relying on fully nonviolent struggle, the aim of Palestinian independence—recognized by Israel and internationally—could not long be denied.