

A Palestinian Experience with Nonviolence

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1. Introduction and Context

It may not be an exaggeration to say that there is no greater challenge to issues of nonviolent resistance other than that of the Palestine/Israel context. The framework of this conflict is one of injustice, violence and a struggle for freedom. As it was in Biblical times, the Palestinian reality is one of oppression, the abuse of religion, distortion of history and appropriation of culture. On top, the fierce regional and international geo-political interests have plagued the country for centuries.

The situation for Palestinians today is further exacerbated with the recent rise in local and regional extremism and violence and the absence of any perspective of peace and reconciliation. Most importantly the Palestinian context suffers longstanding Israeli policies to dispossess and expel Palestinians and push them constantly towards despair.

In spite of the above, the Palestinian struggle evolved towards compromise and acceptance of Israel since 1988, when Palestinians agreed to establish a state on 22% of their homeland, i.e. in the territories Israel occupied in 1967. Though Palestinian resistance over decades did feature bouts of violence it was mainly a long history, and it still is, of nonviolence, a history well described in the book of the human right activist/scientist Mazen Qumsiyeh entitled “Sharing the Land of Canaan – Popular Resistance in Palestine”.

2. Nonviolence as Strategy

The lessons of history taught us how violence is an obstacle to peace regardless of the reasons. It is an aberration to human nature and is a result of anger, endless suffering and the incapacity to manage violence. But Palestinians suffer the double injustice where in addition to Israel’s occupation and injustice Palestinians suffer the brunt of guilt of the western world toward the Jews due to centuries of oppression.

As elsewhere in the world, the challenge of nonviolent resistance in Palestine faces two main challenges: First, how to succeed a popular resistance that calls attention to injustice and second, how to successfully empower individuals to learn to live in respect of the other, including the aggressor, and with our fragile environment. This is proving to be a daunting task, especially in a world dominated by the power of might and greed.

The Palestinian struggle for liberation is known for its **resilience (sumud)** in the face of aggression and hardships. This has helped keep the cause alive with all its symbols from the Palestinian Inalienable Rights in international law, to steadfastness of life in the refugee camps, to holding on to our land and taking the brunt of dispossession, detentions and expulsion policies.

The first Intifada also proved an effective modality of nonviolence, social cohesion and internal solidarity. Israel fought it ferociously but could not prevent its gaining of world attention and eventually the signature of ***the Oslo Peace Accords, where a strategy of peaceful negotiations*** was firmly adopted and still remains the official position of the Palestinian leadership.

The gains of peace were soon lost, as Israel became adamant to dispel and weaken Palestinian cohesion through more colonial settlements, geographic fragmentation, tearing up the socio-economic fabric of society, denied accessibility to resources and reduced mobility of goods and people. But Palestinians kept their 'Sumud' by insisting on (international) rights and refusing to disappear from the political stage of resistance.

The first Intifada, a successful example of popular nonviolence action, remains alive in the minds and spirit of Palestinians. People gained dignity through collective resistance, hope replaced despair, moderation replaced fanaticism, inclusiveness and social cohesion became the norm, sharing and pooling of resources saved the economy and people found contentment in the shared struggle.

Though thwarted through an aggressive Israeli settlement policy and violence with no deterrent from the international community, the Palestinians paid a devastating price for the ***violent turn of events during the Second Intifada*** in the year 2000. Political developments, both internal and international, led to an escalation of the conflict where people decided to resist the illegal occupation and settlement expansion with violence. Apart from the argument, that the right to resist your occupier is legitimate according to International Law, the nonviolent movement in Palestine remained active though media has not given appropriate attention to it due to the violence which was going on.

More recently, with excessive Israeli incitement and as it has thwarted all peace efforts; Palestinians continue to reject occupation and oppression. Facing an Israeli government which publicly announces that there won't be a two-state solution, little hope remains for Palestinian freedom. A new generation of Palestinians is again in revolt. On the one hand we have ***the violence from despairing and angry youngsters*** facing death by confronting one of the strongest armies in the world. On the other hand we also have an ongoing, broad popular movement calling for ***Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)*** against the occupation and injustice.

The BDS popular resistance movement is proving every day its capacity to mobilize a growing international support and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This kind of nonviolence, which succeeded against South African apartheid policies, holds an important promise to Palestinians. It overcame the geographic fragmentation and dispersal, made use of modern means of communication and created a positive energy for a growing solidarity around the world.

Under pressure from Israeli authorities, it is again the Palestinian nonviolent movement that is targeted mainly by Western countries. So to speak, ‘the free world’ is neglecting the Palestinian right to resist oppression by demonizing BDS and other non-violent strategies which Palestinian civil society is trying to promote in this situation of hopelessness.

4. Strengths and opportunities created by active non violence

Somehow though, the promise of peace and reconciliation remains strong in and for the Holy Land. Israel/ Palestine, the place that witnessed the birth of Christianity and the cradle of monotheism, is the place where human love and active nonviolence should be the overriding force and with no doubt should also be the focus of Christian transformational work with people and societies.

From a Palestinian perspective: nonviolent resistance, if allowed to succeed, is promising:

- a. Nonviolence can reverse the abuse of religion and put the focus on values. It will dampen polarization and extremism that is ailing our world.
- b. It is a contagious force that can mobilize masses around ethical issues. As a matter of fact, in the Palestinian context, nonviolence stimulates better lobbying; it challenges diplomatic efforts and pushes for sound politics. It can also lead to more transparency and responsibility in government decisions.
- c. Nonviolence can uplift societies toward mutual respect and tolerance of the other. It confronts a deadly culture of fear and of hatred with a culture of justice and love.
- d. It transforms and empowers individuals to be active and positive citizens and changes relationships from adversarial to cooperative.
- e. It leads to respect of pluralism and inclusiveness and hence the principles of democratic societies.
- f. It will lead to justice, the rule of law and durable peace. It will allow the emergence of a post-colonial world where human beings are all equal in rights and responsibilities. It will be a fulfillment of what God requires from us all.

While the Middle East and especially the situation in Palestine may seem hopeless, it presents an opportunity for those who really want to contribute to peace.

5. A Role for the Catholic Church

The Church has the power to transform and empower people through the Christian message of love and redemption. The Catholic Church, in particular through the leadership of Pope Francis and his voice for the poor and oppressed, is already taking important steps in this direction. The Catholic voice needs to be prophetic and righteous without any ambiguity. For Palestine, a Christian message of love and solidarity will help to face the ongoing suffering and support the Palestinian struggle against the pro-longed occupation in respect of the tenants of our faith and of international law.

While the Middle East is facing destruction and devastation through barbaric violence and extremism, there will be no peace without a solution for the Holy Land. The Catholic Church should be forthcoming in a careful review of the KAIROS PALESTINE document, which is a call of Palestinian Christians from the heart of Palestinian suffering. It calls for a contextual theology and calls upon the churches of the world, to realize that occupation is sin. It is the duty of every Christian to raise his or her voice against this injustice and promote equal rights for all people living in this Holy Land. The Kairos Palestine Document is an example of non-violent resistance thus promoting a culture of life rather than a culture of death. So far, our call remains unheeded by the Catholic Church, though accepted and responded to by many other churches around the world.

V. Concluding words

As Christians and people of conscious, we face an overbearing question: Shall we choose to be true builders of peace to bring justice, stability and prosperity to all, or shall we remain enslaved to the forces of might, greed and political convenience and hence sustain and encourage more violence and extremism? This is the choice we face today; this is why it is a Kairos moment for each one of us to act in favor of justice and goodness in the world.