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Palestinian Nonviolence Relies on Global Non-Silence

The world cannot expect Palestinians to abandon violence while remaining silent on Israel's repression of nonviolent activists

by Yousef Munayyer

When will there be a Palestinian Gandhi? I'm often asked this question by people who sympathise with Palestinian suffering but are uncomfortable associating themselves with resistance movements that they see as violent or terrorist.

The reality of course is that Palestinian nonviolent resisters are not only active today but have a long and storied history in the Palestinian struggle. The real question is: why haven't we heard about them?

Like many resisting oppression, Palestinian Gandhis are likely to be found in prisons after being repressed by Israeli soldiers or police or in the hospital after being brutally beaten or worse.

In recent years, the Israeli repression of Palestinian nonviolent dissent has increased significantly and Israel is showing signs of transforming into a fully-fledged police state. Even Israeli citizens, both Palestinian such as [Ameer Makhoul](#) and [Jewish](#), have faced intimidation in one form or another for being critical of Israel's policies. Surely, Israel has realised that its ongoing occupation, continued colonisation of Palestinian land, and its bombardment of civilian-packed Gaza have significantly and negatively impacted on its image abroad. The images of nonviolent Palestinian protests against the Israeli occupation aren't helping Israel's reputation either.

Perhaps that is why recently many nonviolent activists and initiatives have been shut down and repressed. Jamal Juma, Muhammad Othman and Abdallah Abu Rahman [may not be household names](#) like Gandhi or Mandela but they have been just as consistent in resisting Israel's illegal segregation wall in the West Bank by organising nonviolent demonstrations for years. And, like Gandhi and Mandela they have paid a price by being arrested on multiple occasions.

The Israeli repression efforts extend far beyond the arrests of nonviolent demonstrators against the wall. Last month, Palestinian and international activists sat in front of Israeli bulldozers about to confiscate more Palestinian land for the expansion of a settlement. Soldiers quickly dispersed the crowd and thoroughly pummelled and pepper-sprayed an organiser at point-blank range.

Most recently, several leaders of human rights organisations advocating Palestinian rights have been arrested and thrown into jail for allegedly posing security risks to the state. One of them, [Izzet Shahin](#), is a Turkish national whose

crime was organising boat shipments of humanitarian aid to the besieged people of Gaza. During past attempts to bring supplies to the blockaded strip, the boats were commandeered by the Israeli navy and the nonviolent activists were arrested before being deported even though they had never entered Israeli waters.

The list goes on, and despite the increase in Israeli repression, Palestinian nonviolent resistance is nothing new. While some have adopted an Israeli narrative that identifies nonviolent Palestinian dissent [as something new](#), the reality is that Palestinians have consistently chosen nonviolent resistance before arms – from the general strikes of 1936, to the consistent appeals to international legal bodies, to the weekly demonstrations against the wall. It has been the continued dispossession at the hands of Israel, and the silence of the international community despite these nonviolent efforts, that has led some Palestinians to view violence as the only option.

Alas, it is often the major explosions that make headlines and not the nonviolent demonstrations or their violent repression by Israel's secret police or its military occupation. That's why some still wait for a Palestinian Gandhi despite the fact that they have taken many a beating and seen the inside of many a jail cell.

When an Iranian protester – Neda – was shot and killed last year, the world knew her name – [so did President Obama](#). But most would be hard-pressed to name one of the many nonviolent protestors in Palestine who have been arrested, beaten, shot or even bulldozed to death.

The international community has an obligation to Palestinian nonviolent activists. Leaders cannot simply call on Palestinians to abandon violence in the face of Israeli occupation and remain silent when the nonviolent activists are politically repressed. This only reinforces the idea that the use of force reigns supreme and that Palestinians have no choice but to accept hardships at the hands of their Israeli lords.

Sadly, the same leaders who call on Palestinians to abandon violence have been silent in the face of Israeli repression. By condemning violent Palestinian resistance while remaining silent in the face of Israeli crackdowns and political arrests, they are simply endorsing violence against civilians by one side instead of the other.

The United States should take the lead in condemning Israeli repression of nonviolent dissent, just as they would in Iran, Burma or apartheid South Africa, because nonviolent dissent is not only a critical part of the Palestinian struggle but it is an American value as well.

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