



## A Quiet Revolution by Mary Elizabeth King

Twenty years ago, in December 1987, Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem launched a massive nonviolent social mobilization against the Israeli military occupation that had begun in 1967. A pivotal moment in contemporary world history, new political thinking manifested itself in nonviolent action despite the ever-present threat of Israeli reprisal.

A decades-long spread of knowledge about nonviolent strategies throughout Palestinian society shaped the uprising. It was not a spontaneous rebellion as many perceived, but a movement by virtually an entire society working to lift a military occupation with the same nonviolent methods used in India by Gandhi, by the U.S. civil rights movement, in the Czech and Slovaks' velvet revolution, by the Serbian activists who brought down Slobodan Milošević, and by Buddhist monks with upturned alms bowls in Burma.

In this struggle within a struggle, a history until now untold, for more than two years the Palestinians refused to use firearms against the Israeli soldiers and armed settlers in their midst. From the 1987 uprising would emerge the most cogent pressure to date to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel, with implied acceptance of the latter's permanence. Following the incarceration or deportation of the activist intellectuals who had helped bring about the new political thinking that nurtured the intifada, the movement disintegrated into violence. Yet reclamation of such nonviolent strategies is the key to enduring peace in this conflict.

The intifada manifested highly significant shifts in organization, political thinking, leadership, and purpose. The Palestinians inside the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 determined in essence to discard a tradition of armed struggle—which included some of the twentieth century's most notorious attacks on civilian and military targets—in favor of nonviolent methods of struggle last utilized in the 1920s and 1930s. These changes also explain how, for a period of more than two years, Israeli actions and reprisals failed to alter the fundamental decision of the Palestinians not to use weaponry against the Israeli soldiers in their midst.

Joint Israeli-Palestinian committees were the first harbingers of an important political evolution. Starting in the 1980s, joint committees used banners, boycotts, documentation, denunciation, demonstrations, lobbying, marches, news releases, petitions, picketing, speeches, and vigils to argue for lifting the occupation. This stood in stark contrast to the military doctrine of "all means of struggle," promoted by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

A new politics developed as an entire society under military occupation unified its members based on changes in popular thinking about how to transform their situation, including cooperation with the occupation.

The term *intifada* is linguistically nonviolent, meaning "shaking off." It is similar to the catchphrase "take back," as in "take back America," to restore, not destroy.

More than four hundred Israeli solidarity groups organized themselves to support the first intifada.

In the nonviolent social mobilization, Palestinians employed more than one hundred classic nonviolent methods, or nonviolent sanctions, from December 1987 to March 1990. Within the intifada's first month, harmonized actions could be seen in different geographic settings: marches, general and local strikes, ringing of church bells, civil disobedience, renaming of streets and schools, fasting, unfurling of flags, public prayers, and resigning from jobs. Tax resistance in the village of Beit Sahour revived

an ancient method of nonviolent action, an action step of economic noncooperation, and was precisely enacted.

Women-led popular committees made possible survival of the Palestinians despite harsh reprisals. Within the first month of the uprising, Israel placed 200,000 Palestinians under curfew in the West Bank and Gaza. By December 1989, one million were confined to their homes. The intifada's ability to continue despite reprisals and crackdowns relied on hundreds of "popular committees," often started and run by women. Noncooperation with the occupation—a form of power at the heart of nonviolent struggle—was possible because these committees sustained communities under curfew or on strike. From December 1987 to March 1988, women alone held more than 100 demonstrations.

The Unified National Leadership Command was a leadership collective that remained clandestine to evade arrest by Israeli authorities. Despite its name, the group, consisting of representatives from the four main secular-nationalist factions in the occupied territories, had the role of *coordinating* actions, rather than directing the population. Local committees also made independent decisions on actions. The Command moved the center of action from one location to another and prevented fatigue by choosing different nonviolent methods from an international repertoire. The Command communicated with the population of approximately 696,000 in the West Bank and 545,000 in the Gaza Strip through appeals for action published in bi-weekly leaflets.

None of the Command's leaflets, which were dated and numbered, bade the destruction of Israel or death to the Jewish people. Rather, they presented the Palestinian strategy as one aimed at peace through negotiations and revealed an uprising built on three political aims: acceptance of Israel in its pre-1967 borders; removal of Israeli authority from the occupied territories; and establishment of a Palestinian state. Study of the leaflets also sheds light on internal strategic deliberations, including a protracted eighteen-month-long strategic debate on whether the more than one million Palestinians should adopt "total" civil disobedience. Under military occupation, not only did Palestinians not have normal institutionalized political activities, it was not possible for them to meet in assemblies, conventions, or congresses, so the debate on whether to embark on across-the-board civil disobedience effectively took place in the leaflets.

The relationship between the Command inside the territories and the PLO in Tunis was fraught with disagreement. The PLO grew out of a 1964 summit meeting in Cairo, and its charter of the same year called for opening military training camps for Palestinians, to prepare them for a liberation battle to be waged by armed force. In 1968, it revised its charter, stipulated armed struggle as policy, and insisted upon armed resistance as the *only* way to liberate Palestine. Subsequently, most of its attacks were directed against civilians. Banned by the Israelis, until 1970 the PLO's main base was in Jordan, after which it moved to Lebanon, from which it was routed by Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982, ending up in Tunisia, in remote North Africa. Thus the PLO was distant from the evolutions and developments inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the eyes of the generative activist intellectuals, the confidence held by the far-off PLO in armed struggle was misplaced and had injured the potential for appeals to be made by Palestinians on the grounds of injustice and rectification of historic losses. Military command structures of the guerrilla units could not protect Palestinian communities from the repressive violence of military occupation, a form of dictatorship, and did not generate democratic leadership. Few democracies have resulted from militarized national liberation struggles. Furthermore, and important for the ultimate betrayal of the first intifada, the PLO did not understand nonviolent strategies or civil disobedience. To view this home-grown movement as controlled by exiles is to misunderstand its consequentiality. A number of experts have written that the leaders of the first intifada were "subordinated" to the PLO abroad. This is not true; they were determinative.

Paradoxical effects resulted from Israeli curfews and school closings. In February 1988, Israel imposed curfews and closure of six universities. This helped to spread ideas about nonviolent struggle and knowledge of the theories and methods of how to fight for human rights nonviolently. Virtually every other account of the intifada has missed the fact that 14,500 students and professors were sent home to their villages and refugee camps. There, the baker sat with the physics professor to plan distribution of bread. Students worked with refugees to discuss the next nonviolent action steps against the occupation.

Weren't stones thrown? Indeed, thrown stones aroused Israeli fears—instead of reassuring Israelis of the absence of arms—and this expression that cannot be considered appropriate in the technique of nonviolent action would ultimately lessen the achievements of the uprising. Yet posing this question also requires examining the deaths of Israeli soldiers, thousands of whom were on active duty in the territories. According to Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Yehuda Weinraub, four Israeli soldiers were killed in the West Bank and none in Gaza in 1988; two soldiers were killed in the West Bank and two in Gaza in 1989. In sum, twelve Israeli soldiers were slain in a four-year period in the West Bank and Gaza. During this same period, according to the IDF, Israelis killed 706 Palestinian civilians.

In the context of the intifada, Hamas and Fatah were able to find common ground. In September 1990, Fatah and Hamas signed a thirteen-point "pact of honor." Hamas had endorsed armed struggle and refusal to recognize Israel—stances contrary to the intifada's framework of nonviolent struggle and desire for negotiations with Israel. In this pact, however, and not for the last time, Hamas softened its position to the lifting of Israel's military occupation, reversing its position on partition of Palestine.

The nonviolent template held for more than two years. The Command survived four waves of arrests, but eventually Israel imprisoned or deported the activist intellectuals who had helped to forge the new thinking that underlay the uprising and who had guided it. Given what appeared to be the meager fruits of nonviolent discipline, chagrin began to spread among the Palestinians. The core group of activist intellectuals that had been rebutting the ideologies of armed struggle, which had been formulated in the refugee camps of the diaspora in the 1950s, received no reinforcement. The consensus on nonviolent strategies would eventually collapse because of three-fold opposition:

- It took years for the Israelis to recognize that the uprising had political rather than military goals;
- The PLO was more concerned with preventing a new leadership from arising in the territories than in supporting the nonviolent mobilization;
- And the international community failed to seize the significant openings for peace that had been presented in 1987–90.

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News media gave major coverage to the intifada, but missed the story of how a mostly peasant or refugee Palestinian society unified itself to work to lift the Israeli military occupation with classic methods from an international repertoire of nonviolent action. Based on documents from archives and private collections, and more than a hundred interviews with firsthand participants and members of the clandestine leadership collective, it is possible to discern three decisive developments that led to the first intifada and made it possible:

**1)** Over two decades, movements and networks of committees relied on popular participation and nonviolent means as they built a Palestinian civil society under occupation, which became the organizational basis for the intifada. Women, students, youth, and prisoners played critical roles.

1969 marks the origin of the nonmilitary Palestinian mobilization, as the Palestine Communist Party broke the Israeli ban on Palestinian political activity in the occupied territories and began popularly based organizing through small institutions and services, completely shunning militaristic strategies. The emphasis by the communists on local governance and the organizing of community institutions as the best preparation for independence meshed with the necessity for covert organizing to safeguard against disruption by Israel.

Girls, boys, men, women, university students, labor unionists, and prisoners became involved in collective nonviolent action, as nongovernmental political space opened, and institutions developed that were not under official purview. Armed revolution had never been alluring for the Palestinians under occupation, not so much because of a moral revulsion against violence, but because they had since 1965 taken the brunt of Israel's retaliation following raids and militarily equipped sorties by exiled Palestinians and *they* would suffer from any retaliation to cross-border military strikes from the exiled armed cadres.

Thousands of nonmilitary committees in this movement of movements grew, both despite and because of military occupation. Popular agencies and societies, local sports and youth clubs, and women's and professional federations organized networks based on a consensus for self-reliance, popular participation, nonmilitary strategies, and willingness to compromise. Out of this extended process of civilian mobilization, the popular committees of the intifada burgeoned in December 1987 as if instantaneous, providing necessary infrastructure while strengthening the influence of the local leadership, often unknown beyond a neighborhood circumference.

As authority fragmented, the accompanying diversification of centers of authority allowed persons who proposed ending the occupation by means other than armed struggle to rise to positions of leadership, also producing flexible organizational leadership structures with pluralistic outlooks. Those who were proposing armed insurrection through the PLO-related military cadres continued to represent some hubs of power, yet they were no longer monopolistic.

In this germination of Palestinian civil society, thousands of civilian organizations were nonviolent, distinctly nonmilitary in ethos, involved large numbers including women, operated democratically, and functioned with comparative openness—despite and because of military occupation.

Palestinians from all walks of life assumed the responsibility of ridding themselves of occupation. As the committees proliferated, they offered leadership opportunities to Palestinians who would not or could not have joined guerrilla units in any instance. Organizers prepared for incarcerations and leadership diversified, anticipating the survival needs of communities under harsh reprisals. Diffusion of power led to tiers of leaders ready to manage the committees, no matter the number of jailings.

In this development of a new politics, the internal processes were egalitarian, cooperative, and democratic. Elections became the conduit for selecting leadership, groups learned democratic self-governance and made decisions of the whole, and tiers of leaders stood ready to assume loads as their leaders were locked up.

In the 1970s and 1980s, distinctly nonmilitary movements, consciously envisaged as civilian struggle, roiled the territories, manifesting the fragmentation of authority and dispersal of the loci of power. Insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that the voluntary work committees, youth movements, student and faculty struggles against Israeli Military Orders 854 and 947 that affected academic freedom, and the "prisoners' movement" were conspicuously based upon strategies that relied for their success on broad civilian participation and nonviolent means. Women's organizing, which had stood at the forefront of the various efforts to get the British colonial powers to honor their promise to the Palestinian Arabs as they had to world Jewry in the 1920s and 1930s, took a quantum leap in Ramallah in 1978, when the first women's committee of the contemporary era joined the roster of those surviving from earlier in the century. In 1979, Palestinian clinicians began establishing formal associations of health professionals, many of which still exist.

During the 1970s and 1980s, individuals, among them Aziz Shehadeh, risked themselves to pave the way for compromise on a two-state solution as an alternative to the liberation of all of Palestine. Shehadeh's influence, was significant for both Feisel Hussein and Jonathan Kuttab, and through them affected the images, tonalities, and constructions of the intifada. In 1979, the young Palestinian lawyers Raja Shehadeh and Jonathan Kuttab embarked on the first and only prolonged challenge by Palestinians to the thousands of legal restrictions imposed by the Israeli military administration, when they organized the first Palestinian human-rights monitoring organization.

**2)** A group of intellectual activists pushed for compromise and negotiation, a second critical development to the building of civil society. They introduced innovative symbols through the joint Israeli-Palestinian committees, ideas of coexistence, and a view that both Israelis and Palestinians have rights over the land they contest. As they and their writings advanced alternative ideas on political compromise and negotiations with Israel, it affected outlooks and approaches concerning how to reach such parleys. Rebutting the ideologies of armed struggle, they argued against the pursuit of liberation and in favor of independence. Perhaps two dozen organizer intellectuals—academicians, professionals such as physicians, lawyers, editors, and journalists—stated limited, achievable political goals, and scorned the threatening, oblique, grandiose, and cryptographic language of military cadres.

Feisel Husseini, as early as 1968 began advocating in Hebrew to Israeli audiences the pursuit of a solely nonviolent course. Ziad Abu Zayyad, a lawyer, also began publicly asserting goals of co-existence in Hebrew at approximately the same time. The activist intellectuals spoke with metaphors and symbols of coexistence, and used the imagery of two states side by side. Israelis and Palestinians sat in committees and marched together in opposition to the occupation, their placards written in Arabic, Hebrew, and English.

A series of Palestinian-Israeli committees brought Palestinians together with Israeli counterparts, representing the political metamorphosis underway and manifesting the first clear-cut enunciation of the adoption of nonviolent methods after 1967. Beginning in 1980, the Committee Confronting the Iron Fist and other committees that antedated it were brought together by Feisel Husseini with Israelis such as Gideon Spiro and Michel Warschawski, in campaigns that relied for their effect on the exposure afforded by news media. Another shift was in progress, namely a reliance on the news media to promote strategies based on public disclosure and appeal. Loaded terms such as "deprivation," "retaliation," and "revenge" were abandoned. The committees—with Husseini and Spiro acting as spokespersons—developed powerful symbols in which a shared solidarity between the Israelis and Palestinians was imagined. The committees referred to both the occupied and occupier as defiled and humiliated by the military occupation. They were probing at a deep level the nature of power and the role of their own consent in the shared degradation of two suffering peoples by the military occupation. In contrast to the PLO's military doctrine of "all means of struggle," the joint committees used banners, boycotts, documentation, denunciation, demonstrations, lobbying, marches, news releases, petitions, picketing, speeches, and vigils to argue for lifting the occupation. Both the message and the media were nonviolent.

The philosopher Sari Nusseibeh throughout the 1980s wrote to redefine the stock Palestinian nationalist concepts. Publishing in Arabic and English outlets, he deconstructed revolutionary military dogma and ideology. He proffered a right of return in which the person as a human being returns and is granted citizenship in a state, rather than retrieval of the precise parcel of land owned by one's ancestors. Inspired by the South African pattern in which people have lost their ancestral land but are able to participate freely in the economies and institutions of the future anti-apartheid state, citizenship in a Palestinian state, he said, can substitute for lost land. The entitlements about which he penned pertained not to land titles, but to universal claims of human rights, fast on their way to becoming international norms after the 1975 Helsinki accords. Nusseibeh would write three of the germinal documents of the intifada: "Fourteen Talking Points of West Bank–Gaza Palestinians" (January 14, 1988), the Jerusalem Paper (8 February 1988), and the Husseini Document (a text for a declaration of independence, ca. July 31, 1988).

**3)** Knowledge was transmitted from nonviolent movements elsewhere in the world through workshops, as thousands of copies of translations, including the works of the Boston scholar Gene Sharp, circulated among Palestinians. Self-reliance was a key motif of the intifada.

Four years prior to the start of the first intifada, Mubarak Awad and Jonathan Kuttab held workshops starting in East Jerusalem. 1983 marks the point in time at which a catalogue of theories and methods from other popular movements began to spread in the West Bank. A booklet of the same year by Awad, *Nonviolence in the Occupied Territories*, circulated widely. It shows a search for methods that might resonate with the target group, Israelis, thus potentially splitting their official position. In 1984, Awad and Kuttab set up the Center for the Study of Nonviolence, in East Jerusalem. From the center poured reprints, translations, and pamphlets. The often mimeographed materials spread Sharp's analyses in the vernacular. Dog-eared copies circulated hand to hand and were deliberately left lying on public buses. Mimeographed translations, pamphlets, and lectures were distributed by the thousands, imparting information on how peoples elsewhere living under oppression had employed nonviolent action.

In forty to fifty villages, volunteers from the center—including Haj Abd Abu-Diab and Abd al-Jawad Saleh—demonstrated how collective nonviolent action can work. In towns such as Qatanna, and the city of Hebron, they offered experimental trials manifesting the theoretical argument that the submission of a populace to a belligerent occupation is required for that occupation's sustenance was enacted, and showing how the Palestinians themselves had the power to refuse to cooperate with the

Israeli occupation. This insight, derived in large part from the center's handouts and interpretations of Gene Sharp's work, and which appears in literature of the uprising as "disengagement," is the single most significant change in thinking that galvanized the uprising. The activities of the center always included Israeli proponents of nonviolent action, such as Amos Gvirtz, and often were co-sponsored by the Israeli branch of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Awad disputed the blind faith in armed struggle espoused by the military factions. In writing and in person, he said that accentuating the asymmetry of the unarmed Palestinians vis-à-vis the State of Israel was a better way to stand up to a heavily militarized occupier and the indifference of the international community. He argued that the Palestinians could prevent Israeli authorities from accomplishing their goals through collective nonviolent action and in the process create a more equal bargaining situation. He urged the Palestinians to differentiate the antagonism from the antagonist, as had Gandhi.

In early 1986, the villagers of Tqu regained ten dunums (approximately one quarter of an acre) of their land by nonviolently resisting its expropriation by Israeli settlers. In perhaps the first actual reversal of land loss—a central fact of Palestinian experience—this relevant if modest success came about not through armed struggle, but by three hundred farmers and villagers standing their ground, unarmed, and refusing to flee at the sound of Israeli settlers' bullets.

Concrete knowledge from external sources explains how, once the intifada erupted, Palestinians employed more than one hundred methods from an international repertoire of nonviolent sanctions to withdraw cooperation from the occupation or evince opposition to it. It also accounts for how such methods filled the leaflets of the Command: renaming streets and schools, defying school closures, refusing to fill out forms, refusing to carry identity cards, conducting symbolic funerals, ringing of church bells, unfurling of flags, boycotts, general and local strikes, applying pressure for prisoner releases, and reclaiming agricultural land.

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One of the tragedies of our contemporary era is that none of the outside forces that could have capitalized on the massive nonviolent mobilization in the occupied territories in order to press for a permanent settlement had sufficient background in nonviolent struggle to understand the full parameters of this movement and appreciate the new politics that had engendered it. This applies to Israelis, exiled Palestinians and the PLO, and the international community, including the United States.

Even so, the accomplishments of the intifada were significant and the lessons profound. The Palestinians' success coincided with the two and a half years of their most disciplined use of collective nonviolent action. Their nonviolent strategies realized more than had years of some of the twentieth century's most notorious killings in attacks on civilian and military targets. The intifada's achievements include the 1991 Madrid conference, and the opening of political space for the Oslo Accords, notwithstanding the latter's subsequent invalidation by all parties to the conflict. No one would today describe the Oslo Accords as a success, yet the psychological barrier had been broken in Madrid against direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians, without which no permanent settlement can be achieved.

The implications of the first intifada are seismic. The intifada's role in hastening the growth of civil society and the popular understanding of the power of noncooperation are both linked to the development of democracy and statehood for the Palestinians. Indeed, the civil society developed by the Palestinians is a prerequisite for the evolution of coexistence and peace in the eastern Mediterranean. The intifada and work by the popular committees has done more to advance a model of authentic democratic governance in the Arab world than has any other force. The leadership that emerged during the birth and life of the uprising is the most egalitarian and committed to democracy in the Arab world.

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In 1988, she won a Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Award for *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*. In 2002, New Delhi's Indian Council for Cultural Relations released the second edition of *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which chronicles nine contemporary nonviolent struggles, originally published by UNESCO in 1999.

Her work has taken her to more than 120 developing countries. As a presidential appointee in the Carter administration, King had worldwide oversight for the Peace Corps and other U.S. volunteer service corps programs. In the U.S. civil rights movement, King worked alongside the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (no relation) in the student wing of the movement, an experience which defined her life. She co-authored "Sex and Caste" with Casey Hayden, a 1966 article now viewed by historians as tinder for the second wave of feminism. King's doctorate in international politics is from the University of Wales at Aberystwyth. In 1989, her alma mater Ohio Wesleyan University honored her with its highest award, and in 2003 in New Delhi she received the Jamnalal Bajaj International Prize for the promotion of Gandhian values.