Book Review

Palestinian Non-Violent Action —
A Strategy to Be Taken Seriously


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The timeliness of the publication of this book need not be pointed out, given the ongoing nonviolent protests in the Arab world, which have already led to regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt. Moving to the Palestinian-Israeli arena, the question now is to what extent the sustained efforts of small Palestinian groups and even smaller groups of Jewish activists can have an impact on the struggle against a foreign power in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, now that Gaza is no longer under Israeli control? The first intifada (uprising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 1987) was a nonviolent protest, and a major contributing factor in the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) decision to announce an end to terrorism and the recognition of Israel — pending, of course, the acceptance of an adjacent Palestinian state. The second intifada, however, was heavily militarized, included suicide bombings against the Israeli civilian population within the 1967 borders and was a serious setback to Palestinian goals. At the time of this writing, there is speculation within Israel as to the violent or nonviolent nature of a possible third intifada following an impasse that may occur after the Palestinian application for full membership in the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011.

Reading this book, which is mostly about Palestinian advocates of nonviolent action and their Israeli supporters, there is little doubt that the potential of such a strategy needs to be taken seriously. The compiler
and driving force behind this work does not hide the book’s prescriptive characteristics. Although aimed at the general public, and though not a detailed manual with instructions for “active nonviolent resistance,” the book provides both theoretical and practical considerations that should be widely discussed in society, and primarily within Palestinian civil society itself. For this reason a translation into Arabic should be welcomed. Nonviolence is an effective tool in an asymmetrical conflict where the stronger side has military superiority: When using nonviolent action, both sides eventually become equal, and the excessive use of force by the stronger side becomes costly in a number of ways. This point does not exclude the potential benefit for Israeli readers, but as Kaufman-Lacusta explains, their role is mostly supportive, and not that of main actors. The author does dwell on the relevance of joint Israeli/Palestinian organizations in Part II Chapter 4, but the primary focus remains the prospects of waging such a struggle by the Palestinians.

The book is divided into four parts with 13 chapters; the first three parts include opinions expressed either publicly or in interviews, with a total of 115 contributors. Many of the participants are not mentioned or listed by name, but we can probably assume that most, if not all, are sympathetic to the idea behind the book. While the book’s advocacy of nonviolent resistance is not hidden, playing the devil’s advocate and showing its shortcomings as seen by hawks and perhaps even Jewish settlers could have been a warning of the obstacles ahead. The bulk of the book moves from personal endorsement of

\[\text{For the sake of transparency, although I share the same name, I have no family connection with this book’s author.}\]
nonviolent struggle into its more theoretical and strategic aspects, and then to speculation about the future.

The publication of this book preceded the current wave of popular revolts commonly referred to as the Arab Spring of 2011. Clearly there is no longer any need to assert that there is a cultural or political barrier inhibiting a Palestinian uprising of this kind. One could actually argue that Palestinian nonviolent protests may have been a source of inspiration for the wave of revolts. The potential impact on Jewish society, the Israel Defense Forces, and other so-called “law enforcement agencies,” has yet to be fully explored. I have personally researched the impact of the first intifada on the occupier’s side and concluded that even with so-called “limited violence” (i.e., lots of stone-throwing and fewer Molotov cocktails)ii, confined almost exclusively within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the positive effect was strong. Ultimately only a recognition of the legitimacy of a Palestinian right to self-determination and the establishment of a two state solution will bring about a wind of change in Israeli electoral politics and enable a readiness to negotiate with the PLO. Furthermore, upon updating and deepening my early research together with a colleague from the University of Maryland, we have come to a similar conclusion when facing the present situation more than two decades later.iii

Choosing from the long list of tactics and strategies for nonviolent action, a non-confrontational, peaceful resistance can deeply divide Jewish-Israeli society, perhaps not into equal parts, but with a substantial minority refusing to kill or actively condone such practices vis-à-vis unarmed civilians, and this could be enough to change policies. The energy of the large protest against the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila during the First Lebanon War of 1982 — during which murders were carried out by extreme Christian militias with the passive acquiescence of the IDF — are an important reminder. A massive peaceful revolt in the West Bank, with thousands marching toward and perhaps bypassing the restricted checkpoints, could possibly create deep ideological divides within the Jewish population and mobilize its Arab population, even if such a protest is initially confronted with the use of lethal weapons by Israeli soldiers. Such a series of events would make the price of occupation — both domestically and internationally — too high to maintain.


In Part IV, the analysis of the two main Palestinian contributors (Jonathan Kuttab and Ghassan Andoni), veteran practitioners of peaceful resistance, provides direct historical experience on the potential of such a struggle on the Israel side. Prof. Jeff Halper’s growing alienation with the mainstream, as understandable as it may be, makes his strategic planning more difficult to connect with for pragmatic Israelis — including those in the military establishment — who can see a Palestinian nonviolent struggle as a blessing in disguise, but would perhaps be more motivated to separate themselves from the Arabs next door than to provide moral or ideological support to such a form of struggle.

The final chapter, by “Starhawk,” an international activist with strong Jewish roots, is evidence of how experience in direct action is a strongly motivating factor for continuous solidarity with the oppressed. In her epilogue, Kaufman-Lacusta sides with Kuttab by quoting him and stressing that “a radical break with Israeli and Zionist norms is required before Israeli Jews with a conscience” will be able to “really work for peace with any integrity” (p.442). Yet she recognizes that this would exclude the vast majority of liberal human rights-, democracy- and peace-oriented groups and individuals in Israel. I tend to differ, not only because of my personal knowledge of many of these people, but also from historical evidence which shows that the need for support from large sectors of the ”stronger” part of society is vital for the success of a nonviolent rebellion. The bibliography of this volume is short, and from an academic standpoint, not fully comprehensive. At the same time, the main author provides a useful list of websites of Palestinian, Israeli and other supportive organizations and/or participants in nonviolent action.