

# MUST PROTEST BE VIOLENT?

BY NETA LAVY

From the Basque region to Ireland, nationalist aspirations are almost always accompanied by terror and violence. The history of non-violent protest movements shows that there simply is no other way.

From early on, we are educated that violence is not a solution. We have been urged to use our mind and not force, to be patient and tolerant, and of course do not unto others what you wouldn't like done to yourself. However, in international relations and nationalist struggles it seems that very often the solution is forceful. Nationalist protest movements often opt for violence to promote their goals. There are however, several movements, most of which are insignificant, which try to prove that there is another way.

Violent protest movements usually object the regime physically, for instance guerilla war and anti-civilian terror. Contrary to these, non-violent movements use strikes, demonstrations, marches, hunger strikes and establishment of alternate regime institutions. Throughout history, movements who chose the path of violence succeeded more often in achieving their goals, whereas the few movements that chose non-violent protest almost had no influence. It seems only one case of non-violent protest brought independence: India. Few people have never heard of Mahatma Gandhi and his heroic struggle to free India from the British.

Violent POs have a big advantage over the non-violent in two areas: breaking into the oppressor's consciousness, and more important, changing the oppressor's priorities, to encourage withdrawal. Violence is a simple, quick and efficient way to attain awareness to the struggle. When a terrorist group commits a suicide bombing, the media immediately arrives on scene and reports the incident. The violent act itself raises the awareness of the oppressing regime and its citizens. Even if the terrorists are not portrayed positively, at least they are reported, in the sense that "act without advertising and you have not acted at all". Non-violent actions can also draw attention, although not automatically.

At times we witness a situation where a non-violent struggle occurs in parallel with a violent struggle, both aiming to achieve the same targets. In such cases, the chances of the non-violent struggle achieving coverage are close to nothing. At the height of terrorist acts that harm civilians or violent actions against the armed forces, a non-violent movement will find it hard to attract attention and convince that it is the true representation of the oppressed nation. It is likely that a government would prefer to deal with finding a solution to the terror before facing the claims of the non-violent movement.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a good example. The Palestinian terrorist groups are well-known to the Israeli people, and the terrorist acts are intensely covered in the media. In parallel with groups such as the Tanzim and Hamas, there are other Palestinian movements which you have probably not heard of, whose goal is to end the Israeli occupation in a non-violent manner. One of these organizations is "International Nonviolence", founded by Palestinian Mubarak Awad. The organization's goal is to promote non-violent acts in the whole world as well as in Israel. The organization's influence on the Israeli public opinion is minimal. The Israeli media, which extensively covers terrorist acts, almost never reports the non-violent acts. Coverage time is limited and at times it seems that the public is tired of hearing about the conflict, and so if there is no violence or discrimination to report, the media is uninterested. The protest movements' fate is predestined before they have even managed to penetrate public awareness – they simply don't manage to get into the eye of the media, and through it to the public.

Still, even if the occupying power would be aware of the non-violent protest, it is highly questionable whether it would influence it in any way. Occupying power often dominates for reasons of prestige, or economic and defensive interests. Such a government would not change its policy because of acts which don't directly harm it or decrease its gains from the occupation. In order to compel the

occupying country to withdraw its forces, the protest movement must bring about a situation where this option is an interest of the occupier. Violent acts can achieve this relatively easily, due to their immediate and harsh effect.

This does not mean that the non-violent independence movement has no chance to begin with – the way is simply much harder. A non-violent act can be successful indirectly, if it manages to raise international awareness and pressure on the occupier. Economic or diplomatic international pressure can be powerful enough to change a country's interests. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi started his "Salt March" with 78 of his followers in hopes of canceling the British fines on salt. They marched over 380 kilometers for many days, until they reached the beach, where, in protest, they boiled the salty water to create their own salt. The financial losses that the British suffered from this illegal salt production were not great. However, the damage to their image was enormous. The pressure of public opinion in Britain and around the world initiated changes in the British policies in India. This case is an example of how a non-violent struggle can best serve its people if it captures the world's attention, and not just that of the occupier.

Non-violent struggle has several advantages, in the international sphere for example. It is easier to identify with a rightful cause which is not followed with violence than with violence, even for a rightful cause. Supposedly, a non-violent struggle can create more empathy with the occupied people. In reality, this is not the case. However, past experience shows that empathy and support of the goals of the struggle are not enough. It is much harder to shift the world into action, as in two non-violent struggles of the last few decades.

Kosovo is a district of Serbia, one of the former republics of Yugoslavia. The population is mainly Albanian with a Serb minority. In the late 1980s, Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian president, revoked the autonomy that was granted to Kosovo in 1974. Many Albanians

were dismissed from their jobs, universities were closed to Albanian students and teachers and they lost their stand within the Kosovan government. The Albanian reaction was a non-violent protest. They established institutions in parallel to the Serbians': health services, schools and an Albanian parliament. The elected Albanian president, Ibrahim Rugova, led a non-violent policy and ordered the Albanians not to react to the Serbian police's violence towards protesters. The non-violent protest in Kosovo, which included demonstrations, strikes and hunger strikes, continued until 1998. the reason it lasted a whole decade was simply that no one was interested in the Albanian struggle. The Albanians thought the world would support them and apply pressure on the Serbian government to change its policy, but this never happened. This failure made some Albanians doubt Rugova's ways, thinking these were too passive. Eventually, an Albanian group called KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) launched a violent struggle against the Serbs. Only at this stage did the world get involved in the conflict, and NATO forces were sent to the area. In June 1999, the Serbian army withdrew, the KLA agreed to disarmament, and NATO took control of Kosovo.

Another attempt to achieve national independence occurs in Tibet, which has been under Chinese occupation since 1950. The Dalai Lama heads the Tibetan government in exile in India, and leads a non-violent struggle. He claims that the use of violence will only result in counter-violence, and not a solution. The Dalai Lama is very popular world-wide and many leaders he has met have expressed their support. In 1989 he received the Nobel peace prize in recognition of his efforts to achieve an agreement with China. However, it seems that despite international awareness to the Tibetan struggle, serious steps have yet to be made towards freeing Tibet from Chinese occupation. According to the Dalai Lama, one of the most important factors in the Tibetan struggle is international pressure on China, although he is aware of the fact that at present, there are no leaders in the world to take on such a challenge. His belief in the non-violent way will probably aid in preventing any further deterioration of the Tibetan struggle into a violent conflict, however it seems that his way will bring about results in the near future.

The difficulty in encouraging leaders is rooted in the fact that countries usually prefer not to adopt policies that could endanger them



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in the interest of a foreign people. A classic example is the words of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, when he conceded with Hitler's territorial demands: "How terrible, fantastic and preposterous that we are digging trenches and trying on gas masks because of a fight in a foreign land between people we know nothing about!" Chamberlain's statement may seem shocking at first, especially when we account for what preceded to come (there are those who say that the complacent policies of European leaders contributed to Hitler's power in the second world war – N.L.). Nevertheless, when we rethink his words it does not seem so unjustified. Consider this: suppose genocide is taking place in Rwanda, would you support sending in Israeli armed forces? Not money or medication, but soldiers. Would you be willing to jeopardize your and your friends' safety for the people of Rwanda?

Even though some factors within the international community, such as the UN or the powerful countries in the world, eventually do intervene in conflicts around the world, they do so many times out of concern to their own interests rather than those of the oppressed people. The interests of the international community, like those of any country, are harmed more often from violence than non-violence. For instance, a violent conflict could deteriorate to an all out war, affecting local and global economy and influence international public opinion. When these types of interests are not in danger, it is not worth-while for the country to interfere in the interests of another,

as acting against another country can damage the economic or diplomatic interests. Also, the more powerful and influential the occupying country, such as China, the more likely interference in its policy will harm more interests.

I have put forth quite a pessimistic presentation of the chances of non-violent protest, but there are historical precedents. In the 1940s, such a struggle, led by Mahatma Gandhi, took place. Satyagraha, Sanskrit for "the path of truth", summarizes Gandhi's way, mainly the non-violent resistance through civilian disobedience to the occupying forces. However, even the Indian struggle deteriorated to violence at some stages, and Gandhi expressed his own contempt by not attending the celebrations when India was liberated. It is also true that the struggle took place at a time when the British economy was being revived after the Second World War, and its colonies became a burden. Britain's international prominence was descending under the rise of two new empires: the United States and the U.S.S.R., both supporting an anti-colonial ideology. These factors no doubt affected Britain's decision to withdraw from India and other colonies, no less than Gandhi's non-violent struggle, and perhaps even more.

Does this mean that the non-violent struggle for independence is doomed to failure? Not necessarily. Perhaps under certain conditions, non-violent protest could affect the interests of an occupier or other countries. For example, if it were prevalent and transpired simultaneously in several countries, or if international priorities were to change and non-violent protest were to achieve the same attention as violent protest. This possibility does not seem very probable, especially at a time when terror against the western world is one of the top issues on international agenda. Unfortunately, we probably will not witness the success of a non-violent independence movement in the near future.

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