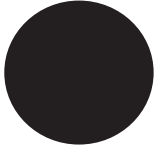


REFLECTIONS

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Mohandas Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and the Middle East Today

Rajmohan Gandhi

The clouds have parted, at least for the moment, in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A newly elected Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has reached out to a hawkish Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, now reborn as a cautious peacemaker. Jails have emptied, Israel has ceased destroying homes of alleged terrorists, and Islamic radicals have heeded calls for an armed truce. One may reasonably hope that antagonists on both sides will seize the moment to think afresh about the cycle of violence and reprisal that has deepened and prolonged their conflict. In that spirit, I have tried to answer the pertinent question: How might India's great apostles of nonviolence—Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu, and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Muslim—expound the benefits of a farewell to arms to today's tired and bloodied belligerents? The provisional truce and fresh interest in passive resistance for addressing the Palestinian-Israeli question justify a reminder of the arguments advanced by two South Asian leaders who not so long ago practiced effective nonviolent strategies.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988), the Sunni Muslim from the subcontinent's Northwest Frontier Province who won more than one battle against British power in his region and then, after Pakistan's independence, fought against difficult odds for autonomy for the Pashtun people, is less well-known than Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), the Gujarati Hindu from the

trader caste who led India's battle for independence. Yet his thinking is as relevant as Gandhi's.

Before we look at the arguments of the two, it is important to recall that the subcontinent's independence was won chiefly but not solely through passive resistance. Indians believing in violence also contributed to it, as did British fatigue after the Second World War. Moreover, it is also true—the efforts of Gandhi, Ghaffar Khan, and their allies notwithstanding—that bitter Hindu-Muslim violence marked the subcontinent's independence-cum-division.

The efficacy, nonetheless, of the nonviolent movement of Badshah Khan (“badshah,” or “king of kings” being the honorific the Pashtuns, or Pathans, attached to his name) is captured in a recollection by a British officer called Bacon of the 1930 struggle in the Northwest Frontier Province when thousands of Pashtuns nonviolently stood up to the British. Eight years later, when Badshah Khan's followers, known as the Red Shirts, had won power in provincial elections Bacon talked about the 1930 events with Ghani Khan, Ghaffar Khan's son, who relates:

[Bacon] told me, “Ghani, I was the Assistant Commissioner in Char-sadda. The Red Shirts would be brought to me. I had orders to give them each two years rigorous imprisonment. I would say, ‘Are you a Red Shirt?’ They would say yes. ‘Do

you want freedom?’ ‘Yes, I want freedom.’ ‘If I release you, will you do it again?’ ‘Yes.’” [Bacon] said, “I would want to get up and hug him. But instead I would write, ‘Two years.’”¹

In that same year, 1930, soldiers of the British Raj belonging to the Garhwal Regiment, famously disobeyed orders to open fire on nonviolent rebels in Peshawar’s bazaar. Even more striking were the psychological victories that Ghaffar Khan and Gandhi won over the British. These were arguments that inspired nonviolent resistance:

Triumph over fear. That passive resistance could overcome fear was the first argument. Around the time that Bacon was talking with Ghani Khan, his father, Ghaffar Khan, said to Gandhi:

We used to be so timid and indolent. The sight of an Englishman would frighten us. [Our] movement has instilled fresh life into us and made us more industrious. We have shed our fear and are no longer afraid of an Englishman or for that matter of any man. Englishmen are afraid of our nonviolence. A nonviolent Pathan, they say, is more dangerous than a violent Pathan.²

The victory over fear is what Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi’s political heir and India’s prime minister from 1947 to 1964, singled out as the chief accomplishment of Gandhi’s nonviolent strategy. “Fearlessness—yes, I would say fearlessness was his greatest gift. And the fact that the weak, little bundle of bones was so fearless in every way, physically, mentally, it was a tremendous thing which went to the other people too, and made them less afraid.”³

Beating the revenge code. If nonviolence overcame fear, it was an antidote to the revenge code, the curse of Pashtun society. As

Gandhi put it in the summer of 1940, when he and Ghaffar Khan were defending a non-violent strategy (“Satyagraha,” in Gandhi’s phrase) before colleagues tempted by the route of violence:

[Ghaffar Khan] is a Pathan and a Pathan may be said to be born with a rifle or a sword in his hand. But [Ghaffar Khan] deliberately asked his Khudai Khidmatgars to shed all weapons when he asked them to join the Satyagraha.... He saw that his deliberate giving up of the weapons of violence had a magical effect.

It was the only remedy for the blood feuds which were handed down from sire to son and which had become part of the normal life of a Pathan. They had decimated numerous families and nonviolence seemed to [Ghaffar Khan] to have come as longed for salvation. The violent blood feuds would otherwise have no end and would spell the end of the Pathans.⁴

Forestalling reprisals. Since a nonviolent strategy did not invite unbearable retaliation, it won enthusiastic support from a general populace spared the brutal reprisals that violent attacks provoked. Harold Gould has contrasted the methods of Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan that “brought down empires” in South Asia with the “walking bombs” in the Middle East and Kashmir “whose self-detonations invite devastating retaliatory assaults on their innocent fellow citizens.”⁵

Remembering the violent upheavals that destroyed life in the Northwest Frontier during his boyhood in the late 1890s, Ghaffar Khan spoke with justifiable pride in his autobiography of the contrasting results of the movements he led in the early 1930s:

The British crushed the violent movement in no time, but the non-violent movement, in spite of intense repression, flourished.... If a Britisher was killed, not only the culprit was punished, but the whole village and entire region suffered for it. The people held the violence and its doer responsible for the repression. In the nonviolent movement *we* courted suffering, and the community did not suffer but benefited. Thus, it won love and sympathy of the people.⁶

Stunning, and winning, the foe. While a nonviolent movement could baffle and even “stun” the adversary (as Ghaffar Khan claimed⁷), adhesion to a nonviolent approach attracted support in the adversary’s camp. When, in February 1922, demonstrators shouting “Victory to Mahatma Gandhi” went berserk in a remote corner of India and hacked to pieces 22 police constables fleeing from their burning shelter, Gandhi called off an entire nationwide campaign that had aroused India and frightened the British.

Days earlier Gandhi had issued an ultimatum to the Viceroy, which was to be followed by an intensification of the campaign. But he stopped the campaign, even though, as Gandhi would say, he was tempted not to be seen as a “coward” who backed off after issuing “pompous threats to the government and promises to the people....”

When Gandhi called off the campaign, thousands of his fellow fighters already in prison for their passive resistance were aghast at what they saw as a retreat. For a time, the Indian people as a whole seemed demoralized. However, critics of the suspension later acknowledged that the movement was slipping into unreliable hands, and that by his temporary suspension Gandhi had managed to salvage its prestige among Indians and Britons.

Thus in 1931, when Gandhi went to London for talks with His Majesty’s Govern-

ment, Britons welcomed him enthusiastically, even though a year earlier he had led an India-wide nonviolent movement that, in Churchill’s words, “inflicted such humiliation and defiance as has not been known since the British first trod the soil of India.”⁸

After the 1857 mutiny of the Bengal Army, which witnessed cruelty from the Indian side and horrific reprisals from the British, the sentiment in the United Kingdom raged against Indians. In 1931, by contrast, and despite even greater defiance in India of British rule, the popular mood was friendly to Indians, thanks to Gandhi’s nonviolent approach. He had spelled out the secret of success in remarks uttered in 1919, a year that saw the worst incident in the annals of British rule in India, the Amritsar massacre, in which civilians were slaughtered by the Raj’s infantry, as well as violence by Indian mobs: “The Government went mad, but our people also went mad. I say, do not return madness with madness but return madness with sanity, and the situation will be yours.”⁹

Protecting the future. The fifth benefit of a nonviolent strategy was that it made it harder for the nation to slide into the sinister habit of violence. After a bomb hurled at a British official in Bihar by Indian revolutionaries claimed the lives of two Englishwomen in 1908, Gandhi predicted: “The bomb now thrown at Englishmen will be aimed at Indians after the English are there no longer.”¹⁰

Gandhi saw that it was in the nature of violence to beget more and more of itself, and less and less of freedom. Thanks to him, it was Satyagraha rather than the bomb that was aimed at the British, a fact that may have helped reduce violence in independent India.

Tellingly, groups such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and some Naga tribal insurgents in northeast India, engaged in violent bids for independence, have probably eliminated as many of their own people

as of their adversaries. Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan realized that the merciless elimination of dissent was integral to violent bids for power, while nonviolent strategies offered room for debate.

Defining the enemy. Finally, Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan realized that only a nonviolent struggle could affirm the unity of humanity or ensure that injustice was being opposed, not a rival race. This was powerfully brought home in one of Gandhi's earliest challenges to the Indian brand of violence, following the assassination in London in July 1909 of Sir Curzon Wylie, an aide to Lord John Morley, the Liberal secretary of state for India.

Invited to a reception hosted by the National Indian Association in a South Kensington Hall, Wylie was shot by an Indian student, Madanlal Dhingra, who was influenced by militant Indians based at the time in London. Also killed was an Indian doctor called Cowasji Lalkaka, who tried to interpose himself between Dhingra and Wylie.

Gandhi happened to arrive in London, on a mission on behalf of Indians facing hardships in South Africa, eight days after the killings. Finding that many Indians studying in England supported Dhingra's deed, Gandhi commented in *Indian Opinion*, the journal he was editing in South Africa:

It is being said in defense of Sir Curzon Wylie's assassination that... just as the British would kill every German if Germany invaded Britain, so too it is the right of any Indian to kill any Englishman.... The analogy...is fallacious. If the Germans were to invade Britain, the British would kill only the invaders. They would not kill every German whom they met.... They would not kill an unsuspecting German, or Germans who are guests.

As Gandhi saw it, those who incited him were guiltier than Dhingra, who may

have been courageous in inviting death, but the courage was the "result of intoxication." He added:

Even should the British leave in consequence of such murderous acts, who will rule in their place? Is the Englishman bad because he is an Englishman? Is it that everyone with an Indian skin is good? If that is so, there should be [no] angry protest against oppression by Indian princes. India can gain nothing from the rule of murderers—no matter whether they are black or white. Under such a rule, India will be utterly ruined and laid waste.¹¹

Misgivings about passive resistance. More Palestinians and Israelis are passively resisting the occupation of Palestinian lands through prison hunger strikes and in other ways than is commonly appreciated. But arguments questioning the efficacy of nonviolent resistance against Israeli occupation have also been advanced.

Writing in Cairo's *Al-Abram Weekly* (September 2–8, 2004), Jonathan Cook, for instance, argues that Palestinian citizens living in Israel think that "if non-violent protest gets you killed, better not protest." In the occupied territories, Cook adds, "Palestinians say if non-violent protest gets you killed, either better not protest or better go down all guns blazing."

The assumption here is that passive resistance invites death at Israeli hands, and incidents from the first *intifada* are offered as proof, yet it needs asking whether this evidence is firm.

Claiming that "specific circumstances that have followed the Palestinians' dispossession and dispersion" render passive resistance unsuitable, Cook lists six. Unlike the British in the subcontinent, first of all, Israel has installed a settler population "committed to [the Israeli] project and to the occupied territory in a way that...British army

officers on a tour of duty could never be.” Second, “it has exploited Western guilt over the Holocaust.” Third, “its strategic Middle Eastern alliance with the US remains strong,” with Washington seeing Israel “as an effective bulwark against Arab nationalism and the threat that poses to the oil supply.” Fourth, whereas South Africa’s racism directly offended African Americans, no large U.S. group feels a sense of kinship with the victims of Israeli occupation. Fifth, with its network of walls, curfews, checkpoints, and Arab informers, Israel has cut off Palestinian neighbors from one another and successfully prevented the coming together of Palestinians for collective action. Sixth, instead of aiming to involve the world against the occupation, Israeli critics of occupation speak in Hebrew to fellow Israelis for internal consumption.

I cite these misgivings so that Arab, Israeli, or other proponents of a peaceful resolution may address them, and as well to speculate on how Gandhi or Ghaffar Khan might have responded.

I think they would say that death in a peaceful Satyagraha in Israel/Palestine would be more dramatic, effective, and indeed glorious, than death-and-murder through suicide bombing. They would also ask for hard thinking to discover means of passive resistance less likely to invite death at Israeli hands, and more likely to attract global participation. They might point out that the salt tax was neither a volatile issue nor a predictable one, and yet it was passive resistance against that tax that produced the remarkable results of 1930.

But they would be unlikely to confine the onus for action to Palestinians or Israelis. A Gandhi who had said, while commencing the defiance over the salt tax, “I want world sympathy in this fight of right against might,” would today ask all peoples, and Americans above all, to involve themselves in the unceasing plight of the Arabs and Jews of Palestine/Israel.

During his 21 years living in South Africa, Gandhi received support from numerous Muslims and Jews. He would not have gone to South Africa if Abdullah Sheth, a Sunni Muslim trader from Gandhi’s hometown, Porbandar, had not sought his legal services. Two of Gandhi’s closest friends and allies in South Africa were Henry Polak, who came from a rabbinical family in Britain with Polish roots, and Hermann Kallenbach, a gifted Jewish architect born and trained in Germany. As for Ghaffar Khan, who, unlike Gandhi, had visited Jerusalem, where his wife Nambata died in an accident and was buried, he was aware that some scholars linked the origins of the Pashtuns to the Jews.

The two would have been unreserved in their opposition to the occupation. In a relevant message to W.E.B. Du Bois for his journal, *The Crisis*, Gandhi said in 1929 that there was no dishonor in being “the grandchildren of slaves,” adding, “There is dishonor in being slave-owners.”¹² With respect to Israel/Palestine today, he would undoubtedly say to Israelis, “There is dishonor in being occupiers.” And he would add that to be permanent occupiers would be unbearably costly, and futile.

In dealing personally with Gandhi, the British Viceroy and his senior officers were almost always courteous and even respectful, but even before 1920, when Gandhi finally abandoned his belief in the British Empire’s usefulness to India, he was outraged if the British treated ordinary Indians as suspected “subjects.” In his view, the Raj could “remain in India only as India’s trustee and servant.”¹³ Writing to Mahadev Desai, his longtime confidant, Gandhi said in 1918: “The first thought that rises up in the mind is that the British should be driven out of India bag and baggage; but a feeling deep down in me persists that India’s good lies in [the] British connection, and so I force myself to love them.”

As for Hindus and Muslims, Gandhi conceded that they could not be thought of

as “being brothers right today,” but added: “In this matter also, something within tells me that there is no other course open to them, and they have but to be brothers. If we go on remembering old scores, we would feel that unity is impossible, but at any cost we ought to forget the past.”¹⁴

It was in March 1947 that the British as well as colleagues of Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan in the Indian National Congress agreed to the demand of the Muslim League, first raised in 1940, for the separation from India of a Muslim homeland called Pakistan. In sadness, and only because no other solution seemed in sight, Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan acquiesced in a division they had stoutly opposed.

On March 16, 1947, Ghaffar Khan spoke in Bihar, where he and Gandhi sought to heal wounds from Hindu-Muslim violence:

I find myself surrounded by darkness, which increases the more I think of the future of India. Indeed I see no light. India is on fire. If India is burnt down, all will lose, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. What can be achieved through love can never be achieved through hatred or force.... The Muslim League wants Pakistan. They can have it only through love and willing consent. Pakistan established through force will prove a doubtful boon.¹⁵

A few days later, Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan made their daring final bid to avert division, proposing to their Congress colleagues to offer the first premiership of an independent and united India to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Muslim League president. Their colleagues turned down the proposal, which was never put to Jinnah, but Gandhi and Khan had wished to involve Jinnah with all of India’s residents, not just its Muslims.

Years later, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela emerged as a man for all races, breaking from his past as a militant anti-white radical. Israel/Palestine, too, cries out for persons prepared, irrespective of past history, to address the fears and hopes of both sides, Arabs as well as Jews.

The fact that the initiatives of Gandhi and Ghaffar Khan did not quite achieve their purpose on the subcontinent in the 1940s does not invalidate their relevance to today’s Middle East. ●

Notes

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