

The Influence of Ghandi's Ideals in Some Current Islamic Experience: Tahrir Square and Palestine

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In my presentation I will recall the positive approach Ghandi had toward Islam, underlining what he considered particularly relevant to his doctrine. In the second section I will point out some Islamic values close to Ghandi's ideals and present Muslim leaders and intellectuals influenced by the Mahatma. In the third part I will describe some examples of practical nonviolent activity in Egypt and Palestine.

1. Ghandi and Islam

Ghandi's ideals had considerable impact in the Islamic world since he courageously faced British Imperial power with his peacefully inspired non-violent protest.

Ghandi was used, from his childhood on, to sharing part of his life with his Muslim neighbours; later in South Africa and then back in India, he came into close touch with Muslim brethren and he learned their habits, thoughts and aspirations. He understood from his Muslim friends that sometimes courage means throwing the whole self into struggle. For the Mahatma this attitude of struggling "is characteristic of a certain Muslim understanding of the original jihad, struggle, namely that sometimes bearing witness to God requires that the whole self must make conscious choices and decide to act. The essential struggle of Muhammad's lifetime, in Ghandi's opinion was the struggle to create a new form of civilisation, the Prophet mission could be equated with the mythical struggle of Rama against Ravana as portrayed in the epic, the Ramayana. The Qur'an and the Ramayana,

as he understood them, conveyed images and symbols that could illuminate the spiritual meaning of everyday life.”¹

The Sufi aspect of Islam, for Ghandi was a teaching of patience and self-discipline, which Indian Muslims should learn to practice. In his opinion the Holy Qur’ān stresses mercy and patience as essential human virtues, therefore He refused to believe that irrational violence was a particular characteristic of the Muslims or the Hindus. He always interpreted irrational Muslim violence as corrupt understanding of Islam, as Hindu violence was equally a corrupt understanding of Hinduism.

Gandhi considered the Caliph ‘Alī bin Abū Tālib as a model of restraint, and thus a model for those who would take up the method of satyagraha (utter insistence upon truth; when a man insists on truth, it gives him power). In Gandhi’s opinion, dharma meant firmness in upholding the truth, and he saw as similar to the Quranic imperative to remain on the straight path, and not be led astray (in Sura Fātiha).

Another similarity he discerned was the moral teaching in the Qur’ān that one should respond to evil with good. This seems to have been one of the earliest affirmations that he took very seriously to heart when he learned it from a Vaishnava hymn.

Education was the tool to emancipate people under foreign domination; it was needed to master knowledge and self respect. Gandhi called upon educators to design a new system of basic education for Indian Schools, and thus supported the foundation of a new institution of learning for Muslims, the Jamia Millia Islamia, and asked the poet Muhammad Iqbāl to direct the University (1920). Iqbal refused but he shared with Ghandi the idea that poetry and law should be at the core of education.

1 As we will see in the following pages, this understanding was taken from the Sunni tradition, as the meaning of Jihad has been taken in a different sense between the Shiite and Salafites. The following passage is from “*Ghandian responses to Islam*” by Prof. Sheila Mcdonough, ed. D.K. Printworld, 1995, also available online as was mentioned by the former Director of the Islamic Foundation in Bangladesh, Sied Ashraf Ali, *Ghandi and Islam*, <http://www.iviews.com/articles/articles.asp?ref=IC1008-4258&p=1>

see also <http://www.thedailystar.net/forum/2010/august/gandhi.htm> last consultation 18. november 2012

He earned the full support of Muslims, intellectuals and masses alike, when he himself lent full support to the Khilafat movement and tacked the 1921 Civil Disobedience movement on to it². Even though the Muslim movement later opened the way to the partition of Pakistan, at the very beginning of Ginna's political activity they built an important alliance against the British. Gandhi called off non-cooperation after violence broke out in Chauri-Chaura. Many Muslims felt, as did some Hindus, that Gandhi had betrayed their revolution by calling it off just when they had some hope of success. Still the Mahatma maintained good relations with many Muslim groups to his last days.

2. Ghandi's Ideals and anti-colonial reactions in the Middle East

In the early 20th century the Egyptian intellectual Salama Mūsā (1887–1958) wrote positive articles on Ghandi's ideals, considering Civil Disobedience a useful form of protest against the British occupation. His appreciation was rather isolated as most Muslim intellectuals at that time had different approaches. The main leaders of the fight against British occupation were divided between those who chose to cooperate (like Sa'ad Zaghlūl (1860–1927) in Egypt) and those who refused the British occupation and worked to prepare a more radical form of protests, such as Hasan al-Bannā (1906–1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. The National freedom movements in the Islamic world were often violent and their strategies were mostly inspired by the European revolutions of the 19th century, as was the case of the Young Turks³.

When Atatürk abolished the Caliphate (1923), numerous political parties emerged all over the Arab world. These were expressions of different political approaches: liberal, nationalist, Islamic and socialist, all calling for independence, some calling for a secular state, others for re-establishment of the Islamic institution of the Caliphate. For some time Ghandi supported this latter idea, as he believed that a religiously inspired government would guarantee more

2 G. Endress, *Islam. An Historical Introduction*, NY, Columbia UP, 2002

3 G. Endress, *Islam. An Historical Introduction*, cit.

social justice. A new vocabulary was created, translated or adapted to interpret the new ideologies. The political debate was heated and eventually led to violent clashes and riots; at one time the traditional meaning of *Jihād*⁴ in the sense of the daily personal effort to behave as a good Muslim was interpreted as action to defend the nation from occupiers.

Poets and intellectuals contributed to the evolution of the political discourse, attributing new sense to the words. In Palestine, for example, after the Balfour declaration (1917), a famous poet, Ibrāhīm Tuqān (1905–1941), used the term *shahīd* (martyr) for those who were killed while fighting to defend their freedom. In his poems the term *jihād* expressed the need to fight to defend the occupied land. We read in his poem “Homeland”, the present Palestinian hymn, the following lines:

The youth will not get tired/ Their goal is your independence/ Or they die/ We will drink from death/ But we will not be slaves to our enemies/ We do not want/ An eternal humiliation/ Nor a miserable life/ We do not want/ But we will return/ Our great glory/ My homeland/ My homeland/ /The sword and the pen/ Are our symbols/ Not talking nor quarrelling/ Our glory and covenant/ And a duty to fulfil it/ Shake us/Our honour/ Is an honourable cause/ A raised flag/ O, your beauty/ In your eminence/Victorious over your enemies/ My homeland/ My homeland⁵.

In this poem pride in the homeland and the call to defend dignity and freedom are evoked within a violent framework of battle. This tradition was rooted in classical Arab poetry: for example, the verse “The sword and the pen” is quoted from the famous Arab poet al-Mutanabbī (9th century)⁶. This general feeling of revenge against

4 This definition of the great *jihād* had been given by the Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and was still in use before 9/11. According to the Shiite community the *Jihād* was one of the Pillars of Islam, and meant “to fight” non-Muslims and corruption.

5 “Mawtani”, in I. Tuqān , *Dīwān Ibrāhīm Tuqān*, Dar al-’Awdā beirut 1988, pp. 264–5. See also in the poem “Fitiyat al-maghrib hayya ilā ‘l-ḡihād”, <http://www.adab.com/en/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=76>.

6 M. Larkin, *Al-Mutanabbi: Voice of the ‘Abbasid Poetic Ideal*, Oxford, OneWorld 2008.

the enemy also conveyed the warlike spirit of the Bedouin tradition.

By the mid-20th century there had emerged a non-violent trend among the Muslim reformers. It is worth mentioning the role of the Sudanese intellectual Mahmūd Muhammad Tāhā, who considered the need to reform the Shārī'a law with a more spiritual approach. His profound respect for human dignity urged him to divide the Quranic revelation and distinguish the more spiritual, hence more universal, Meccan Sura, from the Medinese one because of the latter's links to historical events—making it, he deemed, more difficult to apply to modern times. His spiritual understanding of Islam fostered the need to respect all human beings and abolish violence. For these reasons, his radical interpretation of the Islamic tradition and other political considerations spelt his death sentence (1985). His disciple, Abdullah al-Naim, kept on promoting Islamic reform open to accepting the universal principles of Human Rights and the international conventions⁷. The inspiring principles of Mahmūd Muhammad Tāhā's Islamic reform were the same as those that Ghandi appreciated in Islam.

On the political scene the Egyptian leader Anwār al-Sadāt gave a non-violent turn to his international political strategy when Egypt came close to economic collapse. When the leader decided to sign the peace treaty with Israel he explained it in more spiritual terms. In his speech at the Knesset on the occasion of his visit to Israel he mentioned Ghandi's respect for human dignity as the guiding principle to solve an endless conflict (1978)⁸. He underlined the need to respect human beings regardless of faith, race and nationality, stressing the sacred value of human life. The Camp David treaty was signed, but it was still too early for this ideal to spread and Egypt was expelled from the Arab League, paying a high price for its peace policy .

In the Middle Eastern region political contention had degenerated into violence as from the Black September in Jordan

7 A. al-Naim, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990.

8 F.M. Corrao, G. Gervasio, M. Masullo, *Le parole e la guerra* (Anthology of prose and essays on war literature), Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" press, Napoli 2010, pp. 81–5.

(1970), and the migration of the armed Palestinians and civilians to Lebanon of armed groups in Lebanon degenerated into civil war (1975–1991) followed by the Israeli invasion, responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982); terrorist attacks at the Olympic Games in Germany (1972); later, the Syrian occupation of the land⁹. In Israel the coexistence between Christians, Muslims and Jewish became increasingly shaken by violence, and degenerated into the kamikaze explosions against Israeli civilians. In this general climate of terror Palestinian students reacted against daily repression (schools closed for the curfew) throwing stones at Israeli soldiers; their movement, Intifada, became known worldwide and praised by intellectual politicians and poets (1987)¹⁰.

3. Toward a pacific interpretation of Islam: Egypt and Palestine

In this general atmosphere dominated by the transformation of secular military states into military dictatorships, different trends emerged in conservative Islamic reformism. Meanwhile Abdullah al-Naim developed a more spiritual reading of his master Mahmūd Tāhā. An-Naim indicated that at the core of the Islamic spiritual message all human beings have equal dignity notwithstanding their anthropological, cultural and religious differences. An-Na'im was sure, and still believes, that the Islamic values of justice, equality and dignity, as the prophet Muhammad's behaviour witnessed, indicate the need to reform some aspects of the Shari'a¹¹ in a more universal sense.

If we look at the Quran it is evident that the word peace, Salām, is mostly associated with the human condition in paradise. "Peace" is the word to welcome people to paradise, hence it is evident that a

9 William L. Cleveland—M. Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 12th Edition, Westview Press, 2011.

10 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra dedicated a poem to the Palestinian boy throwing stones at the enemy; the poet compares the young vigorous courage to that of David fighting Goliath, in the sculpture by Michelangelo. F.M. Corrao, "Lettera a Michelangelo di Giabra Ibrahim Giabra", in *Oriente e Occidente e dintorni. Scritti in onore di Adolfo Tamburello*, a cura di Franco Mazzei e Patrizia Carioti, Università di Napoli "L'Orientale", Napoli, vol. II pp. 683–691.

11 An-Na'im A.A., *Towards an Islamic Reformation. Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Laws*, Syracuse Univ. Press, New York 1990, last chapter.

peaceful condition is the ideal state for the Muslim. A historian of Islam like Montgomery Watt, in his “Muhammad at Mecca” and “Muhammad at Medina”¹², underlines the prophet’s penchant for compromise rather than fighting. As we read in the following verses of the Quran when talking of enemies who offer peace:

“Therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (Guarantees) of peace, then God hath opened no way for you (to war against them). (Qur’an 4: 90)

These verses show how detailed the Quran is indicating the right behaviour according to a given situation. It is also true that other verses can be interpreted, and applied aggressively as some terrorist groups have done. This can be considered an extreme and radical interpretation of a stricter interpretation of the Sunna. Some Islamic reformers had in fact reacted against secular corrupt governments calling for more literal interpretation of the Sunna. A tragic example was that of a group of extremists who murdered the Egyptian president Sadat (1981). It is clear that this group interpreted *jihād* in terms of war. On the other hand, other religious groups responded to the violent repression and mass imprisonment shifting from political commitment to social activity.

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, there was a growing interest in human rights and non-violent movements. In Egypt, for instance, Hasan Hanafi dedicated two volumes to the study of Human Rights in Islam. The philosopher, ideologically close to the Muslim brothers, educated numerous generations of young people who later organized ONGs active in social assistance and the defence of civil rights.

In Egypt there was an important change in Egyptian protest strategy after the foundation of the “Centre for trade unions and workers’ services” (Dār al-khadamāt al-niqābiyya wa l-ummāliyya) and the Egyptian organization for human rights (1995). These associations

12 *Montgomery Watt, Muhammad at Mecca, Oxford University press, Oxford 1953; id., Muhammad at Medina, Oxford University press, Oxford 1981.*

became the training ground for socially committed young people, supporting them in their peaceful protest from the early 2000s until the Tahrir revolution (25 January 2011)¹³.

News of the Egyptian workers' peaceful strikes was circulated by the bloggers, thus creating a movement of solidarity. The web soon became the virtual square where people could discuss and share opinions; furthermore this possibility gave them the chance to win growing consensus. Secular sympathisers, intellectuals and Muslims were now calling on the Government to respect rights and justice. A peaceful movement emerged in 2004; Sa'ad Bahar, Hisham Mursi and Wa'il 'Adil translated some documents on non violent protest and trained a small group of people. Later they created an "Academy of change" in Qatar. They were inspired by Gene Sharp ideas and influenced the Kifaya (enough) group which coordinated the more general discontent with Mubarak's endless regime. One year later the Muslim brothers were able to obtain 88 seats in the parliament (as independent in another political group), proving that their attitude towards modern institutions had also changed. In the following years, as the non-violent protest movement grew the government reacted with violence and violation of human rights, culminating in the killing of the blogger Khālīd Sa'īd in June 2010. Even the terrorist attack against the Coptic church in December 2011 was exploited as a pretext for unjustified imprisonment. A massive non-violent protest took place on the 25th of January 2011: millions invaded the Egyptian squares united by one slogan "Silmiyya" (peaceful), demanding justice ('addle) and dignity (karama); note that "Karim" (noble, munificent) is one of the attributes of God in the Qur'an¹⁴. Solidarity and non-violent action

13 Corrao F.M., "Arab Revolutions: the Cultural Background" in www.archivioantropologicomediteraneo.it year XII/XIII (2011), n. 13 (2) pp, 9–17.

14 Egyptian pro-democracy protestors in Tahrir Square. In the occasion of the Nonviolent protest started the 25 of January 2011 in Cairo the "Academy of change" spread a 6 pages pamphlet "How to protest intelligently" with informations concerning the organization of the Nonviolent resistance see <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2011/04/the-role-of-the-academy-of-change-in-egypt-uprising/> and <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/egyptian-activist-action-plan-translated/70388/> last consultation 18. november 2012. See also G. Anzera, La strategia della non violenza nelle rivoluzioni arabe, in Stefano Rizzo (a cura di) *Le Rivoluzioni della dignity*. EDIESSE, Roma, pp. 67–98.

was now the right solution, as the Mahatma indicated inspired by his Quranic readings.

In Palestine a non-violent movement, the “Women in Black”, backed the dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women, inaugurating a new strategy of cooperation rather than aggression. A positive international climate favoured the signing of the Oslo agreement (1993), paving the way to a short season of agreement and growth. Radical fringes on both sides soon moved to undermine the stability achieved: the failure of a new Camp David agreement and the provocative presence of Sharon in the square of the sacred Mosque of Jerusalem (2000) triggered the explosion of a second Intifada, this time supported by the Palestinian political leadership. The international climate worsened after the 9/11 attack, leading to the Afghanistan military campaign and Israeli massacre in Jenin (2002).

While the situation dramatically worsened in Palestine some pacifist groups became more active in their efforts against the general trend of terror. With the help of foreign non-violent associations, such as “Greenpeace”, some unknown heroes like the founder of the “Library on wheels”, the “al-Mubadara”, and more recently the “People’s Committee for the Non-Violent Resistance of Nabi Saleh in West Bank” developed their activity among the victims of these acts of violence¹⁵. The courage of simple people is slowly but steadily spreading a different strategy; they abandoned the violence inspired by the old leadership to launch non-violent actions such as boycotts or civil protest, showing their determination to live free, in justice and peace in their land.

Mustafā Barghūti, the founder of “Medical relief” and “al-Mubadara”, declares that in his daily activity he is inspired by Ghandi’s ideals as he quotes:

“We must become the change we want to see in the world”.

Barghūti’s ideas are the results of the political failure of the OLP and Hamas. He believes that the Palestinian leadership living

15 [www.mubadara](http://www.mubadara.com), Medical relief, Palestinian Monitor.

abroad had lost contact with daily life in the occupied territory; it's easy for them to talk of fighting and resistance—affirms Barghūti—as they live far away, safe from the daily Israeli repressions¹⁶.

The Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence was created in 1986; in order to offer educational programmes it organized the Library on Wheels for Nonviolence and Peace, which became independent in 1994. It is located in Jerusalem and Hebron, and serves as an active library pursuing the interest of promoting nonviolence and peace for Palestinian children¹⁷.

Some of the declarations by Palestinian Christian leaders also come close to Ghandi's ideals; they have issued a call for an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory declaring that: "Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance, for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy."¹⁸

A more practical answer to this call was given by a West Bank group of women. They believe that since the Israeli occupation of their land, world opinion has become convinced that the Palestinians are violent and terrorists. The movement consists mainly of women; they want to bring their children up to live free and in mutual respect, and to this end decided to provide them with cameras so they can take photos and post them online to prove the aggressiveness of the Israeli soldiers. They want to live a normal life, to cultivate their land in opposition to an Israeli law that expropriates abandoned land—the apartheid laws

Manāl Tamīmī, one of the founders of the "People's Committee

16 The UNRWA was active in the Palestinian camps but in Israel and in the occupied territories there was no social and medical assistance; for this reason the Muslim brotherhood spread its network of charity associations that paved the way to the political emergence of Hamas.

17 <http://www.lownp.com/portal/>

18 The initiators of the statement, made public at on 11 December meeting in Bethlehem, have referred to the text as the "Kairos Palestine" document. "Kairos" is a Greek word used in the Bible for a God-given time of challenge, grace and opportunity. http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2009pdfs/Kairos%20Palestine_En.pdf

for the Non-Violent Resistance of Nabi Sālih”, affirms¹⁹:

“We want to leave in peace, and we have found that non-violent behaviour is giving results. This has already been the case in the village of Bi ‘l’any, where women were reacting peacefully to the provocation of the Israeli soldiers. They finally obtained solidarity also from the Jewish families and now they are cooperating together against violence and injustice. We want peace, we want to live in peace with other religious communities, as our religion forbids us to kill. Non-violent reaction is much better than the use of violence” .

The negative upshot is that many of these groups have been arrested, but an initial positive result is that both the Palestinians and the Israelis have learned to view their enemies with new eyes; they have started discovering their human side and begun cooperating against a wall of inhuman violence.

Elsewhere in Arab culture a Ghandian approach is spreading fast, as was evident during the last Arab revolt in 2011. Of the Arab intellectuals the Syrian poet Adonis is the most prominent in developing the spiritual dimension of human feelings in his poems. The poet strives to create a new form of civilisation starting from the personal revolution which for him consists in purification of the heart, as in the mystical approach. He believes that the people of Middle East will be able to transform the present humiliating situation only by going through a personal revolution first; then it will be possible to speak of a real change in the realities. It is interesting to note that Adonis’s position is not far from president Daisaku Ikeda’s idea:

“Peace is not some abstract concept. It is a question of how each one of us plants and cultivates the seeds of peace in the reality of daily

19 A group of women of the “People’s Committee for the Non-Violent Resistance of Nabi Sālih” held a conference at the Istituto Per l’Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino in Rome on 13th February, 2012. Some photos of peaceful women protesting are available on <http://occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com/2010/10/29/mothers-of-palestine1/>

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living, in the depths of our being²⁰”.

Adonis, furthermore, affirms that violence cannot change the situation, it can only make it worse; therefore he would like to see the Arabs rid of their weapons, because only new ideas and thoughts can make revolutions²¹, as he says in a verse:

First commandment: fight, don't make war. Imagine, don't dream.

This verse sums up his belief that the artist's creativity can help find new solutions to conflicts; an intellectual fight against an oppressive and violent mentality can bring hope and a positive ending, opening new horizons to apparently hopeless situations.

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20 <http://www.sgi.org/sgi-president/activities/peace.html>

21 Adonis, *Le regard d'Orphée*, Fayard, Paris 2009, pp. 302–303. Adūnis, *Ashgār tattaqi' 'alā 'l-daw'*, Dār Bidāyat, Dimashq 2010; Id., *Alberi adagiati sulla luce*, transl. F.M. Corrao, Feltrinelli, Milano 2008, six scene.

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The Influence of Ghandi's Ideals in Some Current Islamic Experience: Tahir Square and Palestine

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Arab Revolutions are the result of a long process of cultural growth: a jobless generation of educated young peacefully protested against an inadequate political leadership. The events that occurred in 2011 show that the new generation has learned a different way to protest, even if the repression is rude. The so called Arab spring has been in both Egypt and Tunis a non-violent movement, and the main slogan was "Silmiyya" (peacefully). The Ghandian principles inspire a large part of the new generations that refuses the violence of the extremists.

This paper examine the non violent approach in Islamic culture, it also gives some evidences of the important change occurred in the behaviour of some groups of the civil society in the last period in particular in Egypt and Palestine.