

A SUCCESS FOR NON-VIOLENCE IN GAZA?

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✘ By Jonathan Power, [The Toronto Star](#), 2 June 2010

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Selma, a small town in Alabama, was where Martin Luther King based his campaign to win voting rights for disenfranchised blacks. Attempting to march to the state capital, Montgomery, the marchers were set upon by baton-wielding police as they tried to cross Pettus Bridge. It provoked a nationwide outpouring of disgust and anger. The march continued, joined by tens of thousands of people from all over the United States, until it reached Montgomery. When King spoke it resonated around the world. Shortly after, president Lyndon Johnson rammed through Congress legislation ensuring there would be no longer impediments to blacks voting. The election of Barack Obama as president can be directly traced to that legislation.

Will the creation of a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict be the outcome of this high seas clash? Is this the turning point when Israel is stopped in its tracks after having seized 80 per cent of the land that early in the 20th century belonged lock, stock and barrel to the Arabs? It well could be.

Hardly any reasonably informed person outside Israel believes what the Israelis are now saying — that the ships were carrying terrorists, were shipping arms to Hamas and that Israel, despite its embargo, was making sure that the inhabitants of Gaza had the materials to reconstruct their bombed-out towns and the medical facilities and supplies to succour a wounded population.

Many of us for decades have been trying to persuade the Palestinians and their supporters to drop the sword and use non-violence as their tactic of struggle. As King showed, any state that prides itself on its moral foundations and purports to be guided by a spiritual creed, when confronted by unarmed legions of protestors will find it counterproductive to use the hammer of armed suppression. It will compel division among the majority ruling group and it will alert outsiders more than violence ever could to the sheer wickedness of those who hammer down the hatchet rather than construct a dwelling with room for protagonist and antagonist to live peacefully side-by-side.

In the last two years under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinians have turned increasingly to non-violence. Although the leaders and shock troops of the breakaway faction of Hamas (an organization partly created by Israel) which rules the Gaza Strip do not support this, a majority of Palestinians appear to. Years of war and violent confrontation produced very little. Rather than driving Israel to agree to a reasonable division of the land of Palestine, it provoked fear among the Israeli population and fear, as it often does, supported a hard-line politics of suppression.

It is this history that has convinced many Palestinians to support non-violent action — of which the flotilla carrying much needed supplies to Gaza is but one manifestation. Organizers of non-violent action inside Palestine have organized boycotts of Israeli produce, besieged and isolated Jewish settlements and confronted and blocked Israeli military convoys with row upon row of protestors who sit peacefully and do not throw stones or brandish weapons as did their predecessors and as Gaza-based Hamas still does. All this has unsettled Israel, and the government has been relieved to be able to confront the rocket-firing and stone-throwing of Hamas cadres. Those tactics have secured the voters behind Israel's right-wing government while drowning out the impact of the non-violent protestors.

The Israelis and some American politicians are saying, with video evidence to prove it, that the Israeli commandos were attacked by militants wielding staves and knives. Just as Martin Luther King's non-violent brigades were infiltrated by militants, there are always fringe elements in most demonstrations of this kind who have other ideas. But on this ship they were both a tiny minority and only modestly violent. They didn't succeed in killing a single soldier and could have been restrained by means other than shooting them dead. The ship was 98 per cent peopled by non-violent activists, including women and children, parliamentarians and even a former American ambassador. Moreover, their cause was just, should have been acceptable and, as the British Conservative party foreign minister pointed out, was merely aiming to make a hole in an unacceptable embargo.

The world is mad at Israel, as the Security Council debate and resolution make clear. Even the U.S. went along with its unequivocal language.

The drama has a long way to play out. But in five years time we could well look back and see this was the moment when the world united to compel Israel to seriously compromise and allow the Palestinians to rule over a viable and sizeable state.

Jonathan Power is an international affairs writer based in Britain. He is the author of Conundrums of Humanity: The Quest for Global Justice.

