

# **Nonviolent Action in the Islamic World**

**Dr. Stephen Zunes**

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# Overview

- **Introduction: What is a Jihad?**
- **Key Nonviolent Campaigns of the Islamic World:**
  - *Iran*
  - *Golan Heights*
  - *Palestine*
  - *Western Sahara*
  - *Pakistan*
  - *Mali*
  - *Aceh*
  - other examples
- **East-West Solidarity**
- **Resources**

# Introduction

- The Islamic world: an area of violent conflict?
- Impressive and growing tradition of nonviolent resistance and unarmed challenges to authoritarianism.
- The term “nonviolent action” connotes passivity in Arabic. Thus, it is not widely used; even to describe campaigns that clearly fall under the rubric of nonviolent action.

# What Is a Jihad?

- Islam spread rapidly in the seventh century from a lack of formidable opposition, rather than from militarism.
- *Jihad* primarily refers to one's internal struggle for righteousness. It is a concept distinct from *Qital*, "the fight."
- Islamic cultures believe in a social contract between a ruler and subject. (For example, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq – successor to the Prophet Muhammad – said, "*Obey me as long as I obey God in my rule. If I disobey him, you will owe me no obedience.*")

# Bringing Down the Shah

- With U.S. arms, the Shah – re-installed in a 1953 CIA coup – builds one of the most powerful armed forces ever seen in the Middle East.
- The Shah’s American-trained secret police, the SAVAK, use torture, detention, and execution to intimidate domestic opposition.



*Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (1979)*

# Bringing Down the Shah



*February 1979: Iranians rally behind Khomeini*

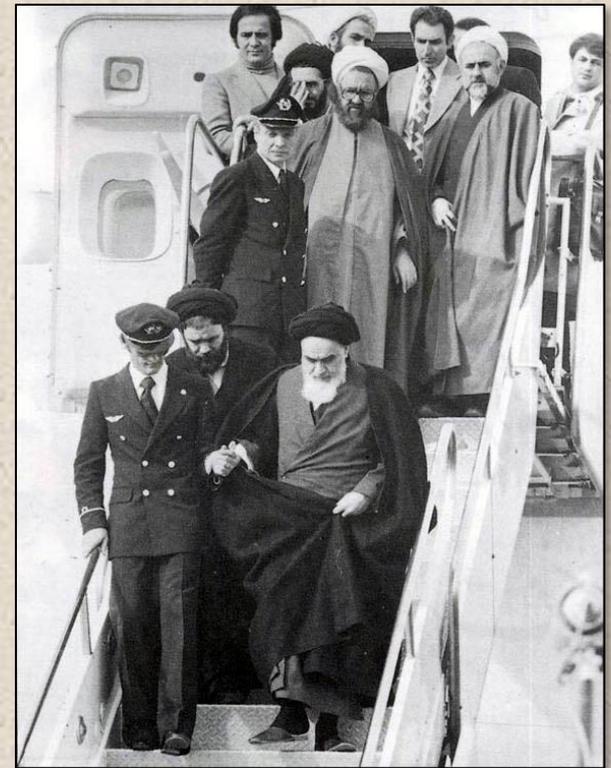
- 1977: Open rebellion breaks loose when exiled opposition leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calls for strikes, boycotts, and tax refusal.
- Threatened regime responds with brutal repression: civilians are massacred.
- Repression backfires, causing demonstrations to grow.

# Bringing Down the Shah

–Nov. and Oct. 1978: Hospital workers, journalists, oil workers, and others strike, creating a national crisis. Electrical workers cut power during the Shah's national address.

–Dec. 1978: Protests fill Iranian cities despite savage repression. Thousands of troops abandon duty.

– Jan. and Feb. 1979: The Shah flees Iran January 16. Khomeini arrives two weeks later and appoints a parallel Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, to challenge the Shah's appointee, Shapur Bahktiar. Bahktiar resigns Feb. 11.



*Khomeini returns from exile*

# Other Major Nonviolent Action Campaigns in Iranian History

- Strikes against tobacco and other concessions to British and Russians, 1896
- Constitutional Revolution, 1906
- Green Revolution, 2009-

# Druze of the Golan Heights

- Druze are members of an Islamic sect and ethnic group who also live in southern Lebanon and northern Israel
- Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967. Most of the affected population fled.
- Five villages populated by Druze remained.



Map of the Golan Heights

# Druze of the Golan Heights

- Israel formally extended direct administrative authority over the Golan Heights in Dec. 1981 and attempted to impose its citizenship and identification card system on the Druze.
- The Druze resisted Israel with a nonviolent action campaign, including:
  - A General Strike
  - Peaceful Demonstrations
  - Systematic Violation of Military Restrictions
  - Curfew Violations
  - Voluntary Arrest
  - A “Reverse Strike” (i.e., installing a sewer pipeline that the occupation forces refused to support)

# Druze of the Golan Heights

- Israel laid siege to the Golan Heights for 43 days. 15,000 troops leveled homes, arrested hundreds of people and shot suspects, but to no avail.
- The Druze won a number of concessions from Israel, such as:
  - No forced Israeli citizenship
  - No conscription into the Israeli Army
  - Renewed ability to engage economically with Syrians
  - Greatly expanded autonomy in local land, water, and civil matters
- *“The [Israeli] soldiers were really being torn apart, because they couldn’t handle that type of nonviolence.”* -- Jonathan Kuttab (Palestinian activist and attorney)

# Palestine: The First Intifada

- Both armed struggle (including terrorism) against Israel and international diplomacy had failed to end Israeli occupation, repression and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip
- Beginning in December 1987, civil resistance campaign was initiated



*Map of the Occupied Territories*

# The First Intifada

- The Palestine Liberation Organization, after having deemphasized armed struggle for a number of years, formally renounced it in 1988.
- The first intifada involved confrontations between stone-throwing against occupation troops and the murder of collaborators, but the bulk of the resistance was nonviolent, such as:
  - Peaceful Demonstrations
  - Strikes
  - Boycotts
  - Occupations
  - Tax Refusal
  - Blockades
  - Creation of Alternative Institutions

# The First Intifada

- The first Palestinian intifada:
  - Forced Jordan to give up its nominal administrative authority over the West Bank and endorse Palestinian self-determination to an unprecedented degree
  - Exerted substantial influence on public opinion throughout the world
  - Compelled the PLO to take such political initiatives as the declaration of independence in December 1988, which led to diplomatic successes, including recognition of the PLO as a negotiating partner by Israel and the United States
  - Mobilized the Palestinian population
  - Created alternative institutions that emphasized participatory democracy and empowerment of the people

# Ongoing Palestinian Resistance

In more recent years, there have been growing protests, blockades, and other nonviolent intervention, often with active support of Israelis and internationals, against:

- The illegal separation barrier
- The expansion of Illegal Israeli settlements
- Checkpoints and related blockages of free movement
- The siege of the Gaza Strip

# Western Sahara

- 1975 invasion by Morocco results in flight of refugees, 170,000 of whom live in camps in the desert of southwestern Algeria
- The nationalist Polisario Front engages in armed struggle until a 1990 cease fire
- Polisario declares Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, eventually recognized by nearly 80 countries
- Rules refugee camps



*Map of Western Sahara*

# Polisario of Western Sahara

- SADR created and administered projects that won recognition from international development agencies, including:
  - Health Centers
  - Cottage Industries
  - Agricultural Projects
  - Distribution Systems
- Despite these structures, which insured a high degree of social democracy, political democracy was limited.

# Polisario of Western Sahara

- Work stoppages and protests in 1988 pressed for liberalization. Hardliners resisted, arresting democratic opposition leaders. Nonviolent action caused SADR to go through several governments that autumn.
- Major victories were won in 1990 and 1991. Today democrats essentially hold power:
  - The large June 1991 Polisario Congress, which was the first to substantially include outside camps, was dominated by democrats
  - The executive committee and Politburo were replaced a national secretariat in which key positions were held by democrats
  - A more democratic constitution and a human rights commission

# Western Sahara

Meanwhile, in the occupied territory:

Failure of both guerrilla war, broken Moroccan promises to allow for a referendum, and a stalemate in UN-led negotiations led to the emergence of nonviolent resistance campaign in the 1990s, which included:

- Hunger strikes by prisoners
- Protests
- Strikes
- Participation in banned cultural celebrations.

## *A second Sahrawi intifada (“intifada of independence”) began in 2005:*

- Thousands of women and youth in the streets of the Hay Maatala quarter of al-Aliun demanded independence, resulting in severe repression and disappearance of activists
- Students organized hunger strikes, sit-ins, and protests, resulting in release of some political prisoners
- Actions often synchronized with high-profile international visits to the territory to maximize visibility of the Sahrawi causes
- Despite surveillance, the internet and cell phones became vital tools of the movement; chat rooms called “Sahrawi CNN” by leading activists brought international attention and made connections to external actors, such as activist organizations inside Spain
- Hunger strike by leading activist Aminatou Haidar in late 2009 brings international attention to the struggle

# Western Sahara

Such nonviolent action in support of human rights, self-determination, improved educational policy, and the release of political prisoners has thus far achieved some limited political gains, such as:

- *Mobilizing new generation of Sahrawis in resistance activities*
- *Raising the cost of the occupation*
- *Bringing international attention to the Sahrawi cause*
- *Gaining the support of international NGO's and support groups*

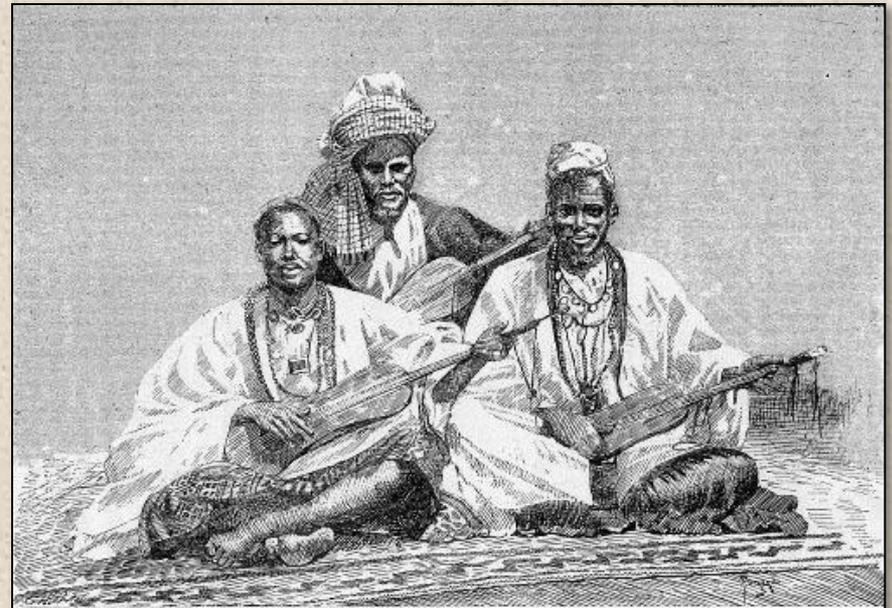
# Mali

- Opposition to General Mousa Traore grew during the 1980's; a time when austerity programs were imposed to satisfy the IMF.
- A student-led opposition movement emerged, called the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADM), which was suppressed by the regime.



# Mali

- The ADM maintained a decentralized and democratic structure that contributed to its legitimacy
- *Griots* (hereditary oral historians) supported the ADM and were essential to the nonviolent movement by framing the transition to democracy as a return to tradition



# Mali

The ADM contributed to and organized mass protests and strikes:

In January 1991, peaceful student protests were brutally suppressed by the regime, including mass arrests and torture

Scattered acts of violence and vandalism ensued, yet the movement remained mostly nonviolent

March 22 through March 26, 1991: *les evenements* (“the events”):

Mass protests and a nation-wide strike are held in urban and rural areas

In Bamako, soldiers fired on nonviolent demonstrators; riots briefly followed

Traore declared a state of emergency

Protestors built barricades in self defense

Soldiers refused to fire on nonviolent crowds and mutinied on March 26

Lt. Col. Armadou Toure announced the arrest of Traore by radio

ADM transformed into a representative political party two months later during the election.

# Pakistan

- 11 Pakistani political parties join to form the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1983 to pressure the dictatorial regime of Muhammad Zia-ul Haq to hold elections and suspend martial law
- Strongest Sindh Province among supporters of the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) (founded by the former Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was tried and executed following Zia's 1977 coup).



*Map of Pakistan: Sindh province in yellow*

# Pakistan

- February 1981: 11 parties formed the original MRD coalition, which dissipated during its first campaign. The MRD reasserted itself on Pakistani Independence Day, August 12, in 1983 by calling for voluntary arrest and mass noncooperation
- MRD supporters avoided military personnel and selectively channeled aggression toward government property. Millions participate in boycotts and thousands in demonstrations. International news media were used to offset local censorship
- Zia painted the MRD as an Indian backed conspiracy and brutally crushed the Sindh-based movement: 45,000 troops kill dozens of people and detain as many as 15,000 in makeshift prison camps. Zia's troops were highly effective at short-circuiting the MRD strategy of provoking arrest by avoiding leadership and focusing on mid-level movement workers.
- Formed basis of broader movement which led to temporary restoration of democracy in the 1990s

# Other Pakistani Resistance

- 1930-34: Pashtun resistance against British colonialism
- 2006-2008: protests by lawyers and other civil society groups results in downfall of Musharraf dictatorship and restoration of independent judicial system

# Aceh



*Aceh in relation to Jakarta*

- Aceh, rich in resources and strategically valuable for shipping, is the northern most province of the Island of Sumatra
- An independent kingdom prior to Dutch colonization, Aceh regained independence in 1949 after many years of nonviolent and violent struggle
- Aceh was incorporated into the Indonesian Republic in 1950 despite local opposition and suspicion of the central government in Jakarta

# Aceh

- Open rebellion breaks loose in 1950 (with clandestine support from the U.S. military), mostly in response to the siphoning-off of Acehnese resources by Jakarta, but the conflict was resolved through negotiations granting Aceh expanded autonomy in matters of education, religion and local governance.
- The agreement was not honored by the left leaning President Sukarno or the right-wing dictatorship of Suharto that came to power following a mass anticommunist purge in 1965
- From 1967 to 1998, the Acehnese suffered greatly under the U.S-backed Suharto regime, who was repeatedly “elected” in rigged elections and violently suppressed Acehnese aspirations for greater autonomy or independence.

# Aceh

- A militant group, known as the Free Aceh Movement (Gerkan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), emerged in 1976 to fight for Acehnese independence. Led by the exiled Hasan de Tiro, the GAM received weapons from Iran, Libya, and still undisclosed Southeast Asian nations
- The Indonesian Military (the TNI) responded by declaring a “free fire zone” and employing savage repression, such as the torture, rapes, disappearances, and the cynically named “shock therapy,” which involved placing the dead bodies of suspected GAM by the roadside
- TNI repression backfired, greatly expanding the power base of the GAM

# Aceh

- Nonviolent action for Acehnese independence emerged on the heels of a financial crisis and the East Timorese referendum of 1999.
- Student organizations, such as Aceh Student Action Front for Reform (FARMIDA), Student Solidarity for People (SMUR), and Coalition for Reform Action of Acehnese Students (KARMA), led the way with the Islam-based “Peaceful Action,” which involved the following:
  - Created banners, signs, posters, denouncing Jakarta
  - Built movement infrastructure facilitating village and inter-village level communication, defense, conflict resolution, and justice
  - Organized a mass boycott of the June 1999 parliamentary elections
  - Staged an unprecedented demonstration that astounded the Indonesian military and government officials (TNI ordered to remain in barracks)
  - Facilitated a province-wide strike that shut everything down for two days
- Troops withdraw at the end of the year, leading the way for eventual peace agreements that extended Achenese autonomy

# other examples of nonviolent struggle in Muslim world

There has been a long history of nonviolent action by Muslims in the Middle East, North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Southeastern Europe

Like elsewhere, some have not yet succeeded, such as the pro-democracy movements in Niger and Azerbaijan

Others, however, have been successful:

EGYPT: 1919 Revolution in Egypt, consisting of months of civil disobedience and strikes, leads to independence from Britain

SUDAN: Civil insurrections in 1964 and 1985 overthrow dictatorial regimes and lead to brief periods of democratic governance

LEBANON: Cedar Revolution in 2004 forces Syrian to withdraw troops from Lebanon and end domination of Lebanese government

MALDIVES: Years of protests against the 30-year Gayoum dictatorship regime forces free elections and downfall of regime in 2008

INDONESIA: Student-led movement in 1998 forces the resignation of Suharto, one of the world's most brutal dictators, after 33 years in power

KOSOVO: Nonviolent independence movement against Serbian occupation in the 1990s creates parallel governmental and education system (until eclipsed by emergence of armed resistance movement and NATO military intervention.)

## There are thousands of other smaller cases of nonviolent direct action, such as:

- Muslim and Christian women in Lebanon during the 1980s nonviolently protest their country's sectarian violence
- Saudi women drive through city streets in open defiance of the kingdom's ban on female drivers, 1992
- 30 million Turks turn of lights at a given hour in a series of protest of endemic corruption, 1997
- General strikes in Ramadi, Iraq against siege by U.S. occupation forces, 2005
- Refusal by Moroccans to cooperate with Vichyite French authority demands for deportation of Moroccan Jews, 1942
- Occupation of Sudanese government offices in protest of shutting down opposition paper, 2007
- Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" mobilizes hundreds of thousands of young pro-democracy demonstrators in January 2009
- Bedouins in the Negev Desert resisting Israeli forcible resettlement schemes

# West-East Solidarity

- Even among nonviolent activists in the West, too little is known about these and other nonviolent struggles.
- It is necessary to familiar ourselves with the impressive and growing tradition of nonviolent action in the Islamic world
- Solidarity with Muslim peoples will help them resist the temptation to resort to violence and will help free us all from the threats of terrorism, fundamentalism, repression, militarism and imperialism
- The need for nonviolent action in the Islamic world is no less than the need for nonviolent action in the United States to oppose those U.S. policies that help sustain the region's violent and undemocratic status quo.

# Resources

- Zunes, S. (2002). Nonviolence in the Islamic World. *Nonviolent Activist: Magazine of the War Resister's League*. January - February.

[www.stephenzunes.org](http://www.stephenzunes.org)

includes additional articles on Iran, Western Sahara, Maldives, Pakistan, Kosovo, Palestine, and other nonviolent struggles

*Just published:*

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