

Civil Resistance and Alternatives to Violent Struggle

Working Group Final Paper

Inaugural Conference – January 2008
International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence

The use of extreme violence by radical groups is a tactic of political conflict, to the extent that its perpetrators claim to have political goals. If the costs of violence as a means of conflict are higher than its adherents realize, and if another, lesser known strategy would produce greater benefits, there is reason to believe that promoting the alternative and diverting the followers of a cause from the use of extreme violence can be successful.

At the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence in London, Dan Benjamin of the Brookings Institution declared that any strategy to deal with these twin threats “has to counter the narrative of groups using extreme violence.”

The Violent Narrative

In 1998, Jamal Ahmidan, a young Moroccan man, emerged from a Spanish prison obsessed with the Palestinian struggle. By 2003 he couldn't sleep at night, knowing that women and children were being killed by Americans in Iraq. A year later, he was one of the ringleaders behind the Madrid train bombings and committed suicide as the police closed in. A statement was found in his papers denouncing the “tyrants” who had humiliated him.¹

Hatred of political oppressors is explicitly enjoined by leaders of violent groups. In a video released in July 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri of al Qaeda vilified the Egyptian regime's torture of prisoners and reviled the Saudi regime for corruption, citing princes who had taken bribes from British defence contractors.² In April 2007, al Qaeda's commander in Afghanistan, Sheikh Abu Laith Al-Libi, said that while establishing Islam throughout the world was their long-term goal, the short-term goal was “to rescue the Muslims from the oppression to which they are subject.”³

Terrorists hype the treachery of the enemies which they identify, in order to make their extreme methods appear to be proportionate – and necessary. “Oppression cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets,” Osama bin Laden has said.⁴ Al-Zawahiri has even quoted Malcolm X: “If you are not ready to die for [freedom], take the word ‘freedom’ out of your dictionary.”⁵

While essential in justifying terror, the argument of the necessity of violence has crucial vulnerabilities – its explanatory value and credibility – which can be exploited in curbing the appeal of violent groups. In a word, the violent narrative isn't true. “Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it,” said Hannah Arendt.⁶ Yet in the 46 years since Frantz Fanon recommended “red hot cannonballs and bloody knives” as the means of overthrowing colonial oppressors, no violent struggle has led to a government that enforced the rights of the people.⁷

In research for a forthcoming article, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Political Conflict,” Dr. Maria Stephan and Dr. Erica Chenoweth compared the outcomes of 285 nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns in the 20th century and found that “major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 55% of the time, compared to 28.4% for violent resistance campaigns.”⁸ Violence is neither more effective in overturning oppressors nor likely to benefit the people on whose behalf it is used – though few who hear exhortations to take up violent struggle know that.

Since the discourse of justification suffuses the rationale for extreme violence, the process of radicalisation is insupportable if that rationale is undercut in the mind of its prime audience – civilian populations that are the source of potential manpower. “The way to deprive them of their ability to recruit,” said Ashraf Mohsin, an Egyptian diplomat specializing in counter-terrorism, “is to attack the message.”⁹

Whatever creates civil space for truthful information enables this approach. Cass Sunstein of The University of Chicago argues in his forthcoming book, *Extremism: Its Causes and Cure*, that radicalisation is driven by what he calls the “outrage heuristic,” which occurs in “segregated dissident spaces which create social interaction that intensifies group-polarized extremist opinions.” This happens most easily, he notes, in the “echo chambers” of repressive societies where the state is always dispensing false information that isn’t trusted.¹⁰

It is therefore not accidental that terrorist groups depend almost symbiotically on authoritarian regimes, not only as rhetorical targets that help them construct a political rationale for their struggles, but also in producing the conditions that fuel radicalisation. Any global strategy aimed at interrupting this process is unlikely to succeed if it tolerates or overlooks opportunities to weaken locations of authoritarian power.

Countering the violent narrative therefore requires offering an alternative strategy for overturning oppression. To frame that alternative, the argument against instrumental violence should have higher priority than the argument against political radicalisation -- since there have been radical political changes driven by *nonviolent* struggles and revolutions. Means, not ends, are the urgent problem.

The Counter Narrative

A proven force for shifting political systems from oppressive rule to democratic consent is that of civil resistance, involving the systematic use -- by broadly representative, civilian-based movements -- of disruptive tactics such as strikes, boycotts, protests and civil disobedience. “People power” can shred the legitimacy of the existing system, drive up its costs, and divide the loyalty of those who enforce its orders.

In the 20th century, civil resistance forced the Russian Tsar to convene a new parliament in 1905, helped Germans stymie the French invasion of the Ruhr in 1923, enabled Mohandas Gandhi to vitiate British control of India, sapped the foundation of the German occupation of Denmark and other European nations in World War II, gave African-Americans a way to shatter segregation in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s, powered the Solidarity movement in Poland and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia which helped unravel communist control of Eastern Europe, collapsed the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines and Pinochet’s rule in Chile in the 1980s, became the decisive factor in the fall of apartheid in South Africa, toppled Slobodan

Milosevic in Serbia, was the hammer of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine -- and has begun the "Saffron Revolution" in Burma.

A study by Freedom House published in July 2005, "How Freedom Is Won," reported that in 50 of the 67 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the previous 35 years, nonviolent civic force rather than armed struggle was pivotal. Moreover, it concluded, "the activity of strong nonviolent coalitions reduces the appeal of opposition violence."¹¹

This confirms the insight of Princeton economist Alan Krueger who, while skeptical of anti-terrorist policies that try to diminish the supply of jihadists, believes "it makes sense to focus on the demand side, such as by...vigorously protecting and promoting peaceful means of protest, so there is less demand for pursuing grievances through violent means."¹²

To the extent that zeal in fighting oppression can be harnessed to civil resistance, not only can an alternative pole of creative space in previously closed societies be raised to attract and organize resisters, intense pressure can be placed on authoritarian regimes that quicken the process of radicalisation and serve as despised targets for violent incitement. The political rationale for fighting oppression would effectively be transferred from terrorist groups to civil resistance.

This has happened before in the modern period. In India in the 1920's and 1930's, Gandhi mounted nationwide campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience that mobilized tens of millions of Indians to fight for independence from the British Empire. For almost thirty years before Gandhi's rise, the most dramatic resistance to the British had come from terrorist groups. But despite a popular following in Bengal, Punjab and Maharastra, assassinations of British officials, and the martyrdom-by-imprisonment of a charismatic terrorist leader, terror had no political results. Gandhi vociferously challenged its effectiveness, and by the time of his Salt March in 1931, he had thoroughly stolen the terrorists' show, without firing a shot.

In the Philippines in the 1970's, after President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, armed resistance was led by the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army, which steadily gained strength -- and helped give Marcos justification to consolidate authoritarian control. But after the regime assassinated the democratic leader Benigno Aquino in 1983, his widow led a nationwide civilian-based movement that propelled her to win a presidential election in 1986 and invite mass protests that protected defecting military units. The ensuing victory of "people power" undermined the appeal of armed struggle as a way to change the system.

Today the choice between civil resistance and radical violence as the vehicle for dislodging oppressors is less spontaneous and more deliberate by activists. For example, in the Maldivive Islands, governed since 1978 by the same corrupt dictator and his business clique, there is a competition for leadership of popular discontent. A nascent but erratic opposition party is vying for primacy with nonviolent civic activists but also with radical Islamists. The latter are essentially telling the people: Don't believe the democrats, they will only deliver you to the capitalists. But many Maldivian women are convinced that women's rights will disappear if Islamists take power. Meanwhile the regime is believed to have staged a bombing to justify new repression and has played games with promised elections.

Similar competition or parallel struggles by power-seeking groups that have opted for either violent or nonviolent methods can be found today in the Palestinian Territories, Iran, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. And in Muslim societies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Egypt, debates among militants and bystanders rage about the justifiability of extreme violence.

In the global media, the default assumption of news producers and editors is that the most powerful force against state power is violence. But doubts about whether the costs of violence can be sustained are beginning to appear in the visual media. In Alfonso Cuarón's Oscar-nominated 2006 motion picture, "Children of Men," a police state in Britain in the year 2027 is bedeviled by violent fighters who murder innocent people in pursuit of a woman they think will discredit the regime, and tanks pulverize apartment buildings full of civilians while trying to kill insurrectionists. From the action of either side, the result is not freedom but rubble.

Amid this global competition of events, ideas and images claiming to represent the battle for justice and the cause of liberation, what might be the elements of a new international strategy to help redirect militant struggle from violent to nonviolent conflict?

A Civilian-Based Strategy

It has become a cliché that "the real battle against terrorism lies in wresting the hearts and minds" of the people away from extremism, but the crux of that, in the words of John Harrison of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore, is that its "belief system [has] to be challenged and defeated to a point where you are not going to get people to support it any more."¹³ All political movements must persuade followers to undertake a particular form of action. If the effect of its action is dubious or uncertain, a radical movement cannot as easily produce the psychological agitation necessary to field new violent actors.

So the *first dimension of a strategy* to develop alternatives to radicalisation and political violence is obvious: Those who want to fight oppression should be deflected from favoring and adopting violent struggle as the means to do so. This requires three specific tactics:

- The public discourse that justifies violence as effective or necessary has to be discredited, targeting the instrumental rather than the ideological basis for the enterprise. The goal of terrorists to overturn oppression is not the problem – the methods of action to which they are attached are the problem. But the assumption that terror is "invigorating," to use Lenin's word, is rooted so deeply in the modern revolutionary mind, that educators, civil society leaders, international institutions, and the news and entertainment media everywhere must be enjoined to help subvert the mythology of violence.
- The cost to innocent noncombatants of extreme violence must be publicly dramatized among the people ostensibly represented by violent groups. Those who have notional sympathy for these groups should be shown graphically – through a new global media offensive – that the latter are toxic to the life and livelihood of children and women as well as the hope for any general stability in society. The reality of violent struggle is that it kills innocent people who have a

universally accepted right to live. Any ideas or beliefs which reject that in principle or violate it in practice must be censured and stigmatized.

- A significantly higher level of personal sanctions should be applied to members of authoritarian ruling groups who oppress their own people or control states that finance, harbor or supply groups using extreme violence. This should include the complete interdiction of financial and travel opportunities beyond their own borders. It is time to terminate normal international professional life for senior government officials whose actions procure, facilitate or justify the use of terrorism and organized violence.

Yet criticizing and obstructing violence only goes so far without promoting an alternative, once the goal of activists to defeat oppression is accepted. So the *second dimension of a strategy* to direct would-be fighters away from extreme violence is to promote civil resistance as a powerful force for change, and then to legitimize and support its use. This should have five elements:

- The international community – NGO's, governments and regional entities such as the EU – should assist capacity-building in strategic and tactical performance by indigenous actors in nonviolent struggles for rights, democracy, and freedom from domination. These nonviolent action-takers should be told: We will give you the knowledge and the tools you need, but we will not interfere in your choice of ideology or political goals. This effort should include the establishment of a new international funding source for the support of nonviolent resistance, free of the taint or suspicion of any government's interests or politics.
- A new global solidarity network of activists and foundations must be developed to support the decision to opt for nonviolent struggle and to help minimize the risks that it entails. We must create a world in which nonviolent resisters know that when they take the risks inherent in dissidence and opposition, there will be a worldwide army of advocates, teachers, donors and friends willing and ready to give them physical, logistical, legal and moral assistance.
- Media and educational institutions should be enjoined to raise the visibility and teach the "counter narrative" of effective nonviolent struggle everywhere. Widely held misconceptions -- that nonviolent action is about making peace rather than defeating oppressors, or that resistance is always quelled with repression – have to be reversed. Young people must be shown that the pay-offs for involvement in violent groups – belonging to an urgent cause, becoming a warrior – are also provided by civil resistance. The stunning record of nonviolent movements on every continent in winning rights and liberating peoples must become common knowledge.
- New international sanctions should be targeted at repressive state actors who shrink the space in civil society used by nonviolent actors and independent media. Mobilizing against tyranny and injustice is facilitated when organizing and communicating with citizens is less difficult. If these channels are shut off, the impulse to resist is either directed toward extremist violence or has to await safer, nonpolitical avenues to be expressed, thus possibly delaying the development of an alternative to radical violence.

- The international news media must be challenged to increase substantially the reporting of civil resistance campaigns and movements. Persistent nonviolent strategies are often more successful in ending oppression and winning rights, yet there is far more reporting of transitory violence and the spectacle of terrorist actions. Conflict is inevitable in a world wracked by the suppression of freedom and vast inequities, so leaders in the new global civil society must choose which method of conflict should be encouraged.

Today in Zimbabwe, in the midst of autocratic abuses and economic collapse, a valiant group called Women of Zimbabwe Arise has mobilized more than 30,000 members to join in protests and civil disobedience demanding a peaceful transition from dictatorship to genuine democracy. Jailing, torture and sexual violence visited on these women have not stopped them. But today they are mostly limited to their own resources. When a member dies at the hands of the regime, only her family and fellow activists mourn – few elsewhere notice or seem to care. That has to be changed, so that nonviolent struggle in any country never feels like a lonely or thankless quest.

There is a vigorous alternative to violent struggle, and it is represented by millions of courageous civil resisters who live in Zimbabwe, Burma, Egypt, West Papua, West Sahara, Belarus, Iran and dozens of other countries. The causes pursued and the methods used in such conflicts are not only compatible with the goal of quenching the fires of political violence. The success of this alternative as a force for political change is that goal's prerequisite.

¹ Andrea Elliott, "Where Boys Grow Up to Be Jihadis," *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 25, 2007.

² Roger Hardy, "Al-Qaeda Deputy Sets Out Strategy," *BBC News*, 5 July 2007.

³ Islamist Web Sites Monitor No. 91, Jihad & Terrorism Studies Project, Middle East Media Research Institute, May 4, 2007.

⁴ Anne McElvoy, "Forget the gunboats - it's time for good old-fashioned diplomacy", *The Independent*, London, January 13, 1999.

⁵ Special Dispatch, Jihad & Terrorism Studies Project, Middle East Media Research Institute, May 8, 2007

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Violence," *New York Review of Books*, February 27, 1969.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press, 2004 (originally published 1961), p. 3.

⁸ Dr. Maria Stephan (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict) and Dr. Erica Chenoweth (Belfer Center, Harvard University), "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Political Conflict," forthcoming journal article, 2008.

⁹ Ian Black, "Violence Won't Work," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2007

¹⁰ Notes by Jack DuVall on remarks by Cass Sunstein, American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, September 2007.

¹¹ Adrian Karatnycky, Study Director, "How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy," A Research Study by Freedom House, 2005.

¹² Alan Krueger, "What Makes a Terrorist," *The American: A Magazine of Ideas*, November-December 2007.

¹³ Amy Chew, "Opinion: A Fight for Hearts, Minds of Indonesia's Muslims," *New Straits Times*, July 9, 2007.