Hamas Pacifists and Settler Islamophiles: Defining Nonviolence in the Holy Land

Aaron J. Tapper

When we think of nonviolent struggles of the past century, we tend to reflect on Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We honor these figures precisely because they were exceptional: radical nonviolent extremists who changed the world through their faith-based insistence on absolute pacifism.

Yet, must religious leaders identify with absolute pacifism in order to promote nonviolence? In Israel and Palestine, few seem ready to turn their swords into ploughshares. Historical pain and suffering in both Israeli and Palestinian histories make such a path difficult. In the Jewish tradition, for example, many look to Martin Buber, an outright peacenik who argued for Israel to embrace Palestinians and create a bi-national state. Yet, in a famous exchange between Buber and Gandhi, the eminent author and advocate of the I-Thou relationship asserted that nonviolence was not an absolute. The Germans, he told the Mahatma, could only be defeated using force. Some situations call for the use of force, the use of self-defense.

If one accepts that nonviolence can be stretched to include the right to self-defense, once-rigid boundaries begin to liquefy. Can a Hamas founder be an advocate of nonviolence? What about a Jewish Israeli living in the West Bank? When one journeys to the Holy Land with an open mind, it is virtually impossible to compartmentalize people and their ideas. Just as the conflict is much more complicated than that of Jew vs. Palestinian, the positions of religious leaders cannot always be reduced to that of pacifist or militarist: nonviolence is not a black and white phenomenon.

Absolute Nonviolence in Judaism and Islam

Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom believes in absolute pacifism. Born in America, Milgrom moved to Israel in the 1970s and served in the Israeli Defense Forces. After the 1982 Lebanon War, however, Milgrom began engaging in nonviolent activism on a regular basis, eventually withdrawing from his IDF reserve duty entirely. He argues that the biblical commandment lo tirtzach, commonly translated in Jewish circles as “thou shalt not murder,” should instead be translated as “thou shall not kill.”

In fact, Milgrom claims that Judaism does not sanction the killing of another person at all, even in situations of self-defense. “The rabbis of the Talmud did all they could to prohibit the killing of a human being. Our [current] discourse is justifying the use of force. What was once a marginal tradition in the Talmud has become mainstream.” Is there even any proof, he rhetorically asked me, that the Talmudic rabbi ever put someone to death?

Truth be told, however, Milgrom’s views are unique within the world of Jewish theology. As one Orthodox rabbi and well respected Rosh Yeshivah (yeshivah director) confided, “Can you cite any traditional Jewish source that understands lo tirtzach to mean ‘you should not kill’ rather than ‘murder’? [Milgrom] is the only one.”

As for Islam and absolute nonviolence, contrary to general stereotypes there are more Muslim Palestinian religious leaders who support this idea than there are Jewish Israelis. However, those Muslims who believe in absolute nonviolence appear to come exclusively from a very specific tradition within Islam—the Sufi, or mystical, tradition.

Take, for example, Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari, the leader of the Naqshabandi Sufi order in Jerusalem. When I met with Bukhari in his Old City home, his speech sounded Gandhi-esque; he cited mantras such as “violence only creates more violence.” Bukhari told me that if an IDF soldier attacked him he would not fight back, à la the Christian Bible, “turning the other cheek is not a sign of the weak.” When asked how Palestinians could counter the power of the IDF he responded in saying, “with love, compassion, and understanding.”

Bukhari frequently participates in interfaith dialogue meetings around the world, including recent conferences in Belgium and Scotland in which Jews and Muslims from Israel and Palestine participated. But he is well aware that
dialogue is only an initial stage toward peace. “The meetings are good, but the leaders need to take the messages back to their communities here.”

However, just as Milgrom is considered a radical by Jewish theologians, Bukhari’s message is not part of the dominant discourse within Islam. Though Bukhari reflects a general position among Sufis in both Israel and Palestine, Islamic leaders with greater followings belittle these teachings. For example, according to Palestine’s Supreme Court Justice of *shari’a* (Islamic law), Sheikh Tayseer Al-Tamimi, “Sufis follow a different path in Islam, the spiritual path, not shari’a…. They don’t represent most Muslims.”

Absolute pacifism has not been the chosen path to peace for more than 99 percent of the religious leaders in Israel and Palestine. A Middle Eastern Gandhi has yet to emerge. However, there are many religious leaders calling for peace, many within the nonviolent context.

**A Nonviolent “Settler”?**

One of the most famous Orthodox rabbis involved in nonviolent dialogue activities is Menahem Froman, a Jewish Israeli who is the Chief Rabbi of Tekoa, a West Bank town south of Jerusalem. Froman is well known for having met with former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat on numerous occasions, in addition to having traveled to the Gaza Strip to dialogue with the late Sheikh Ahmed Yassin of Hamas. Currently, he is trying to organize a group of Israeli rabbis and Palestinian sheikhs to meet and discuss how to work out a religious agreement concerning Jerusalem, an issue he considers to be the “heart of the conflict.”

Froman is clearly an anomaly—a rabbi of Ashkenazi descent who drops Arabic phrases into his speech with seeming regularity. When I met with him in his Tekoa home, he used the phrase “insha’allah” a handful of times, an Arabic phrase that means “God willing.” Whether called Adonai or Allah, Froman believes there is only one God.

But Froman is also a “settler,” a Jewish Israeli living on the “other” or non-Israel side of the Green Line, the pre-1967 border that once separated Israel from the Jordanian-controlled West Bank. As such, Froman is viewed by many Palestinians as part of the problem, a cause of violence. For the Mufti of Palestine and Jerusalem, Ikrima Sabri, it is irrelevant that Froman is extraordinarily active in bridging relations between Jews and Palestinians, because he is living on “Palestinian land.” Only when Froman “moves to Israel,” or agrees to become a Palestinian citizen under the authority of an independent Palestinian state, says Sabri, will he be ready to speak with the rabbi.

Froman typifies the phenomenon of religious nonviolence in Israel and Palestine. Though many religious leaders promote theologies of nonviolence—via activities such as interfaith dialogue, nonviolent demonstrations, prayers in favor of coexistence—they can be perceived as promoting violence based on the plot of land they call home.

**Nonviolent Founders of Hamas?**

Sheikh Imad Al-Falouji is a paradox of another kind. A former Palestinian Authority Minister of Information, Al-Falouji lives in the squalid Jabbaliya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip. When I interviewed Al-Falouji in Gaza City, he proudly told me that he was one of the founders of Hamas’s Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigade, the wing of Hamas responsible for suicide-bombings and other violent acts. Though he was involved in their work for nine years, he said that he officially parted ways with Hamas in January 1996 over differences in ideology.

One of the reasons Al-Falouji left Hamas was because he holds that targeting civilians in Israel is not justified according to *shari’a*. “I am against bus bombings and bombings in the markets. We [as Muslims] can only kill those who are trying to kill us.” Al-Falouji argues that he has never changed his position on this matter. Rather, he said, Hamas’s stance is what shifted in 1996, transforming isolated acts of suicide bombing into a regular phenomenon.

When asked whether or not he thinks *shari’a* validates the killing of Israeli soldiers, Al-Falouji told me that it is permissible to kill soldiers in Israel or Palestine because the IDF, as a military organization, aims to inflict violence on the Palestinian people through specific killings as well as general military occupation. In his view, killing soldiers is an act of self-defense, not an act of self-initiated violence. Further, he claims that it is warranted to kill Jewish Israeli civilians living in Gaza because they are living on “stolen land.” This position, he said, is supported by International Law. “The position of the United Nations supports me…. People have the basic right to defend themselves or their own property.”

For most Israelis, Al-Falouji’s embrace of violence against settlers puts him squarely in the militarist camp, just
another “Jew-hating Islamist extremist who wants to drive Israelis into the sea.” But Al-Falouji is also the founder of Dayanot, an interfaith dialogue organization aimed at bridging relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. In fact, he spends much of his time working for Dayanot, trying to bring understanding to these warring peoples. He sees himself as a believer in nonviolence who sanctions violence only in situations of self-defense, when protecting his people’s lives and land.

I asked Al-Falouji why he got involved in what seems to be an organization that would support nonviolence and peace. He replied that he believes there are major differences between the state of Israel and Judaism. “Israel is not a Jewish state,” he said. “The life of a Jew is holy, as is the life of a Muslim or Christian…. I constantly tell my Jewish friends that Israel does not represent the Jews.” Israel is a nation-state, he continued, not a religion. “The Jews are not my enemies. The Occupation is.”

A belief in a nonviolence that includes room for self-defense is echoed by other religious leaders who were once associated with Hamas. Sheikh Tallal Sidr founded the Hebron chapter of Hamas and in their early years was one of the five highest Hamas leaders in the West Bank. This all changed, however, when he was deported to Southern Lebanon in 1991 along with hundreds of others the Israeli government deemed to be “militants.” It was in exile that Sidr realized nonviolence was the way towards “Allah’s justice,” for “the path of killing [here] has no end.” Sidr told me that once he gave a talk at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem with Deputy Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior, and a “settler from the audience asked me if I support the killing of settlers. I told him that anyone who kills a woman or a child or a civilian is a criminal.”

When I asked Sidr whether he believed in a Gandhian notion of nonviolence, such as absolute pacifism—if he would wrap his arms around his body if attacked by an Israeli soldier in his own home and refrain from acting out in any way—he said, “There is a difference between defending oneself and attacking another. It says in the Quran ‘don’t be an aggressor’ and this means against anyone—women, children, civilians, or soldiers. But if someone attacks you, you are obligated to fight [to defend yourself].” He added, the Quran permits self defense only when accompanied by specific constraints. A Muslim can only inflict harm on an attacker “as much as needed,” he said.

In 2002 Sidr was one of a select group of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious leaders who participated in the Alexandria conference, at which time he was awarded the Coventry Prize of Peace and Reconciliation by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In January 2005 he was one of the main speakers at the World Conference of Imams and Rabbis, which took place in Brussels. Though not an absolute pacifist, former Hamas leader Sheikh Tallal Sidr is clearly a promoter of nonviolence.

Nonviolence in Israel and Palestine?

By thinking of nonviolence only in Gandhian terms, we miss the important role played by throngs of religious leaders who currently advocate for a nonviolent peace within their communities. Should a Rabbi Froman, who spends a majority of his time seeking coexistence with Muslim Palestinians, be blacklisted from the nonviolent camp because of where he lives? And what about Sheikh Al-Falouji? Should he be removed as well because of his definition of self defense? Even if one disagrees with his notion of “self-defense,” isn’t it also crucial to delineate between his words and his actions? Doesn’t he spend much of his time involved in fostering peaceful relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians?

The debate over what constitutes nonviolence is much deeper than a mere academic exercise. As the IDF now turns to removing Israelis from the Gush Katif settlement block of the Gaza Strip, what is deemed violent and nonviolent behavior will have life-and-death consequences. Whether Gaza Israelis choose to defy the IDF with guns or not will affect how the IDF reacts to their protests, which in turn will either enflame or quell these Jew vs. Jew skirmishes, potentially causing ripples around the region.

The same holds true for the Palestinian community. As Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas continues to rein in Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants, attempting to move his people toward internationally recognized statehood, the choice his government makes about whether to engage with these figures through dialogue or through warfare will either strengthen or divide Palestinian society, a distinction with important implications for the long-term situation.

Being able to recognize and reward any steps toward nonviolent peace, however tentative, will be critical in the next few years. And, as with all conflicts, popular opinion is as fundamental as anything else. Israelis and Palestinians—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—must reorient their understandings to accept the fact that nonviolence is not an absolute. It is both an ideology and a practice that casts a wide net. Froman, Al-Falouji, and others in this camp are not simple theologians; they have sophisticated ideas. They cannot be marginalized or written off due to where they live or with whom they affiliate. The masses in both Israel and Palestine, and those diasporans living beyond these borders, must embrace nonviolence when it is present, and it is present all the time. The increased perception of this presence of nonviolence will help us move these communities toward peace.

Most Israelis and Palestinians long for peace. This is the view of those who I listened to during this past year. Over and over I heard the words, “insba’allah,” “b’ezrat Hashem” (may it be God’s will) that Yerushalayim, Al Quds, Jerusalem, live up to its name and truly become the City of Peace, bringing holiness to this troubled Holy Land.