



Lessons Learned from Historic Nonviolent Movement-Building

The First Intifada: Researching Best Practices from Momentous Unarmed Efforts

December 2017 will mark the 30th anniversary of the First Intifada, a popular uprising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that shattered complacency and forced Palestinians and Israelis to reexamine the political, social and geographic status quo that had been ossifying since 1967. Although it failed to secure Palestinian freedom or produce lasting Middle East peace, the First Intifada left an indelible mark on the region, brought the two sides to the negotiating table for the first time and contributed to a fundamental shift toward recognizing the Palestinians as a people with legitimate claims to the region and a unique national identity.

For much of the world, however, the First Intifada is still remembered as a violent eruption. Very few Israelis or Americans point to civil disobedience as being a significant component of the uprising, although Palestinians adopted many nonviolent strategies to challenge the occupation and assert their rights on a mass scale. While the iconic image of the First Intifada is a masked teenager hurling stones at Israeli soldiers, in reality the backbone of the uprising was made up of vegetable growers, student organizers, union members, home-based entrepreneurs and volunteer nurses. In particular, Palestinian women played a critical role in the leadership of the uprising, yet this aspect of the First Intifada has never been accurately documented, contributing to the misconception, both internationally and in Palestinian society, that women do not have a role to play in the struggle against the occupation.

Lessons from this era are still relevant to freedom seekers in the Middle East and beyond. Our team at Just Vision has examined the beginning of the First Intifada – when the civil disobedience movement that was the driving force behind the uprising was at its peak – with the aim of creating an engaging and thought-provoking documentary project to share lessons learned from this period with a broader audience. Upon uncovering the powerful, yet under-documented, role of women during the uprising, we focused our project on telling these stories. Through targeted interviews, we have explored the following questions:

1. What civil resistance strategies proved effective or disappointing and why?
2. What conditions were present at the time to enable nonviolent mass mobilization to emerge? How do these conditions differ from today?

Given the many forms of participation during the First Intifada, we ensured that our interviews reflect urban and rural backgrounds, representation across political backgrounds, a wide geographic spread and professional backgrounds that are as diverse as the spectrum of activists who participated in the uprising.

Since contemporary civil resistance leaders who do not learn from past mistakes are more likely to repeat them, we felt a sense of urgency to capture lessons learned from historic unarmed efforts while nonviolence leaders from that period are still alive to share their stories. This project is intended to ensure that the stories of thousands of lawyers, students, union workers, day laborers and medical teams who sustained the First Intifada can inspire audiences to recognize the power and efficacy of nonviolent resistance and apply relevant lessons to today's reality.