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Ice cream peddler a role model for nonviolent action

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NCR Today

NPR's "Weekend Edition" ran a story about the Qalandia checkpoint between Jerusalem and the West Bank. Amid stone-throwing boys and tear-gas-shooting soldiers, an Arab peddler was selling ice cream. I've been across that checkpoint, and I had a vivid image of the scene. It made me think about pundit complaints that protesters don't use nonviolence. And it reminded me of rock-throwing in Northern Ireland.

I've only been to Jerusalem and the West Bank once, to observe the elections in 2006. But starting in 1999, I spent 10 Julys in Northern Ireland, standing at flashpoints in my Irish Parades Emergency Committee blue jacket and photo ID around my neck. One protest I remember vividly took place on Springfield Road in Belfast after a Loyalist (mostly Protestants who want union with the UK) march along the Catholic street. The march was over and the marchers long gone. But the police, then called the Royal Ulster Constabulary, lingered, and boys began throwing rocks at their Land Rovers and light tanks. The road was wet from water cannons used earlier, and there was a light drizzle. The Land Rovers wheeled around the intersection, chasing the boys to where I feared a kid would slip and fall under the wheels. But nobody fell, and eventually someone gave the order for the RUC to pull out.

That night, there was rioting in Belfast, but the boys on Springfield Road were home, wrapped in blankets and drinking hot chocolate, retelling their resistance to the police. That's when I understood the wisdom of the parents, letting their children take symbolic actions -- those rocks were not going to hurt anyone -- under their watchful gaze. The Good Friday agreement had just been passed and the Republicans (mostly Catholics who want a unified republic) had made a commitment to put away their guns. They chose peace, but still they protested the lockdown of their neighborhood to clear the street for Orange Order parades. I suspect the Arab parents follow the same strategy. After all, it is one thing to throw stones at soldiers at a crowded checkpoint in the midday sun and quite another to carry out violent acts in the night.

My point is that nonviolence is a thriving strategy in the Palestinian community. It is also, or it was also, present in Syria. We are being urged to arm the resisters, but we weren't there to support nonviolent civil resistance. Not in Syria or Libya or Egypt or Bahrain or two decades earlier in Sarajevo and Bosnia.

We have to learn how to build nation-states without supplying weapons. We would go a long way by imitating the ice cream peddler, supplying good things without posing any threats.

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