



Fieldbuilding

Breaking ground for discourse on peacebuilding in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Ali Abu Awwad: 'I promise you: there is enough humanity on the other side'

Rhea Arora • November 16, 2021



In this Interview, Ali Abu Awwad, co-founder of the Palestinian National Nonviolence movement, Taghyeer, discusses his theory of change.

Change is about how we behave: how we belong to the land, how we practice existence in a way that will develop the land and respect its people. It's about how we think: how we perceive our history—we cannot change the past, it's so painful—but we can change the way we think about it, the way we think about peace, and the way that we serve peace.

The people need reconciliation; we need to heal. But this is the third step. We're injured and still waiting on the surgery: the political agreement. Then, we will heal through a national reconciliation process. But the peace agreement requires having the values for it. We cannot get to the healing without dignifying the values of life. This is the first step for change.

Which values are these? – I ask Ali. And how did you decide?

Nonviolence. We need to adopt nonviolence as an identity. This is not a project, or tactic, or strategy (though it is also those things). This is who we are. And it's the only choice. Look, our political identity is very clear: we are Palestinians. But this conflict comes down to changing our behaviors and those of Israelis. And behaviors also identify who you are. So, we need to practice nonviolence – to resist the occupation and take social responsibility for ourselves at the same time – as an identity. And it needs to be framed in terms of strategic actions so that people can believe in them. We must remember that it's not just our humanity that has become our best weapon in this struggle; it's our enemy's humanity. For your enemies to see their own humanity, they need to be faced with yours. This is where nonviolence comes in. And it's a tremendous responsibility, because people can be broken. It's not easy.

I'm not saying we should forget the past and love each other. There is a painful history and a painful reality. This anger is there. And it is fine to be angry—it is only human. But it is forbidden that this anger direct us to a place of suicide, blindness. We need to harness this anger, control it. It can be a great resource for change, but only when we channel it responsibly. And that's why we choose nonviolence, because it is our responsibility.

Where does Taghyeer fit in this schema?

At the first step: our goal is to lead a movement to adopt nonviolence to serve our community, to serve *our* people, before we even talk to Israelis. Both sides have an interior responsibility to be

For us Palestinians, we've been sceptical of nonviolence because it has meant normalisation, meeting Israelis, having hummus with them, etc. This is not the nonviolence we do in Taghyeer. Nonviolence for us is a way of struggling, of facing injustice, of ending the occupation by resisting a violent system by making it unworkable. But it is also a way to develop our own society. For Palestinians, peace seems so far away—and not just because of the Israeli occupation. We have lost all hope, we are desperate, we are struggling to survive. We need leadership that will engage us from both ends: we need to resist the occupier, but we also want to be citizens. And this is hard when there is no state. You cannot act as a citizen. And we're not in the revolution anymore, because there is the Palestinian Authority (PA) on the ground, and there is law, but there is no peace. Instead, we have confusion. In Taghyeer, we are trying to deal with that confusion so that we can allow people their right to practice their relation with each other and the land, and in this way, free themselves first.

And then there is the politics. In my opinion, Palestinian political parties have failed to achieve any political rights for Palestinians and the grassroots movements are not organised enough, not strategized enough, and not supported enough from either the PA, the international community or even ourselves. We are divided. We are not acting with unity around one national plan. This is needed. Everyone seems to be doing their own work, in their own area, with their own values. But at the end of the day, you have to be united as one national movement to not only guarantee pressure on the occupation but to push our own leadership to understand that engagement with civil society must be their first priority. You cannot throw our case to the international community avoiding your own people on the ground. The people on the ground have to take precedence in this struggle.

So Taghyeer does both things, though lesser in the political sphere. We target community leaders to be messengers of change, where people still respect them, and follow and partner with them. We train them; we provide them with resources for support for community action and social change. We educate men on women's rights and engage women in leadership. We are trying to address the male-dominance in our culture. So, it's a whole strategy; and our message is clear. We have created a Palestinian National Nonviolence Charter (it's on our website) that Palestinian organisations and persons can sign, where we speak with one voice in order to act as one nation.

And where does Israel fit in this work?

Well, it's also Israel's responsibility to not be an occupying country: for the purpose of Jewish morality, for the success of the Israeli political project, this occupation needs to end. For 15 years, I have been saying, the only way for Israel to open the door to the world—not just to the Arab and Muslim countries—is to use the Palestinian key.

And look, there is a difference here. There is the occupied and the occupier. Israel must also adopt nonviolence—it needs to be the highest value, for Jewish integrity *and* security. You cannot expect Mandalas to come out of the community you are oppressing. And Palestinians do have responsibility to Israeli security—but what security are we talking about? Are we securing the occupier or are we securing the citizens of Israel? You cannot expect Palestinians to protect their occupier. So, we need Israel to change their relationship to this land so that Palestinians can serve

5 years, after 1993, we will have our independence. But we did not. And this strengthened all the extremist movements on the ground because it proved to them that this occupation will never end. And the war of Gaza...you know, Hamas have said that the only language Israel understands is force. But this is wrong. This is definitely wrong. Because if you look at Gaza today, it's more damaged than ever before. And people are begging to open the gates of Rafah, at the Egyptian border, for milk for their kids, for electricity. This is not how things are solved.

I think the Zionist movement is facing important questions. What is Zionism regarding this reality? How does the Zionist movement define the Palestinian people? Who are we in their eyes? Are we visitors to this land? Are we terrorists, are we tourists? Israel needs to ask itself: who are the Palestinians? Where are the borders of the Israeli state?

The issue is intertwined. Palestinians need to do the same—it feels like the chicken and egg problem: what comes first? Israel wants the egg before the chicken; Palestinians want a healthy chicken to be able to provide the egg. The fear is so deeply ingrained in the Jewish psyche, because of the history, but they have to move past it and Palestinians need to help them. So, nonviolence is the answer—it has to work. I promise you: there is enough humanity in the other side for a Palestinian nonviolent approach to succeed. But I'm scared. I think the conflict is slipping out of reach. People are losing hope. When people lose hope, they lose their fear of death. When people lose their fear of death, life means nothing. That's scary.

Once there is security, there will be freedom. But only if there is freedom, there will be security. Is this where you locate the conflict? – I ask Ali. Is there a separate tension in the details of the peace agreement that is beyond the remit of peace-building? You have said previously, “when the price of peace becomes cheaper than the price of war, we will have peace.” But what do you do if there is an asymmetry in the valuations of war and peace?

You know, what decides the price is the product. What are we buying here? If the product we want to buy is the conflict, then that the price of peace is high doesn't mean anything because we want this conflict, and with this conflict, we feel more secure, comfortable. And people are not dying. And our future is not at risk. But this is not what we experience every day. Do you think Israelis are comfortable? I don't think so. Do you think Palestinians are comfortable? I don't think so. People are losing their morality, their lives, their land, their rights. You cannot occupy a nation and expect security. You cannot threaten a nation, and expect freedom.

When people are ready to compromise, when people are ready to take responsibility without blaming the other, when they are ready to envision a normal future and to serve that vision on the ground, and resist nonviolently the injustices against anyone, no matter who they are, we will have peace. And this is a high price, and maybe we are not ready. And look, we will need to protect the peace agreement when it comes, and for that to happen, it will need to be truthful, realistic, and acceptable—even if we don't trust each other, and there will definitely be problems there. But protecting the other doesn't have to come at the expense of one's own dignity.

leading for change, for a future. You have Israelis moving to the right, and the Palestinians becoming more desperate, more broken. So, things are complicated. But we need a solution, because things will get worse otherwise. Just imagine, in 50 years, if this conflict continues in this way, there will be no people on this land, neither Palestinians nor Israelis. Both sides will fight until the last drop of blood. And this is why nonviolence is important. If that is what creates the conditions for the peace agreement, then that is what creates the conditions for its protection. So, nonviolence doesn't just heal the past, the present; it secures the future.

And there is doubt. Of course, there is doubt. But it's like religion, right? I am a Muslim, and I pray to God because I want to win. I want to go to heaven. But have I seen God? Has anyone promised me heaven? Well, they've shown me the values I need to embody, but even then, you have God saying, 'Don't be so sure!' So there is always doubt. But you believe anyway. You have the kind of belief you are ready to die for. That is what motivates me every day.

◀