

The First Intifada: would you choose violence?



Faris Odeh confronts an Israeli tank with a stone.

The Arabic word “intifada” literally means “shaking off”. It was used to describe a Palestinian uprising against Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The First Intifada (1987–93) took Palestinian as well as Israeli leaders by surprise because it came from ordinary people. Tens of thousands of people rose up in organised resistance. In the first year, most Palestinians chose nonviolent tactics like strikes, demonstrations or simply refusing to do what they were told.

Nonviolent resistance was hard for the Israeli government and military to oppose because the more force they used, the more sympathy the Palestinian movement gained. 650 Palestinians were killed in the first 18 months of the Intifada. Seeing images of children confronted by Israeli tanks made many people see Palestinians differently.

The Intifada was successful in many ways. It brought together Palestinians from different groups that had often disagreed. Islamic organisations, women’s groups, trades unions, communists, farmers, students and the poor were united in their efforts to end the occupation.

The movement had many successes. The USA was persuaded to speak out against Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, and the King of Jordan, a neighbouring Arab country, gave up his claim on the West Bank and threw his support behind the idea of a Palestinian homeland. Palestine declared independence and 50 countries recognised it.

More Israelis also began to question and oppose the occupation of Palestine. Women in Black was one of several groups of Israeli women’s groups that rose up in opposition to the occupation.



Useful video: The First Intifada and Palestinian consciousness

www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zthk2hv

“A people which fights against the usurpation of its land will not tire so easily.”

David Ben Gurion, first prime minister of Israel, 1938

However, as the Intifada carried on, some Palestinian politicians called for armed struggle, and violence increased. There were three suicide bombings against Israel during the First Intifada, killing 18 people. Nonviolent and violent action existed side-by-side for a while, but the nonviolent campaigning got less attention in the news. A common image was of Palestinians throwing stones. As violence increased, fewer Palestinians took part in the nonviolent campaign out of fear.

Despite this mix of violence and nonviolence, the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organisation realised they needed to change their approach or be left behind. They shifted their position to renounce violence and negotiate for a Palestinian state.

This made peace talks possible and helped lead to the Oslo Peace Agreement in 1993. However, the occupation continued, there were still settlements, and Palestinians and Israelis were still using violence. A Second Intifada began in 2000.

“As for terrorism... I repeat for the record that we totally and absolutely renounce all forms of terrorism, including individual, group and state terrorism.”

Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, 1988

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"[Palestinians'] weakness is their strength. And of course it gave the Israelis a view that it will be impossible to continue to occupy the territories without any permanent solution."

Amran Mitzna, Head of Israeli Defence Force Central Command, 1986–1990

"My position is that the foreign policy of the United States says we do not believe there should be new settlements in the West Bank or in East Jerusalem. And I will conduct that policy as if it's firm, which it is."

President George H.W. Bush, 3 March 1990

"As long as we choose violence, Israel will always defeat us."

Mubarak Awad, Palestinian activist

"The scenes of [Palestinian] children being beaten, of women marching in front of the stone-throwers, of poverty and oppression... all evoked strong feelings among Israeli women."

Gila Svirsky, founder of Women in Black, an Israeli group that protests against the occupation

Journaling questions:

1. What was the Intifada?
2. Look at the image of Faris Odeh, a Palestinian boy in the Second Intifada. Why do you think the Intifadas are described as "asymmetric warfare"?
3. How successful was the First Intifada for Palestinians and why?
4. To what extent do you agree with Mubarak Awad's statement, "As long as we choose violence, Israel will always defeat us"?

