Is Gandhi Relevant to Kurds?

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Kani Xulam
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When President Obama visited Wakefield High School in Arlington, Virginia, in the fall of 2009, he was asked this question:

"If you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?"

The president hesitated—perhaps making certain he didn't name someone who might raise a red flag, or create embarrassment.

When he finally decided on a name, it was this: "Gandhi."

Then he added: "Now, it would probably be a really small meal because, he didn't eat a lot."

He went on, "He's somebody who I find a lot of inspiration in. He inspired Dr. King, so if it hadn't been for the nonviolent movement in India, you might not have seen the same nonviolent movement for civil rights here in the United States."

In fact, you could say, the president was paying homage to someone who had directly enabled him to become the highest public official in the United States.

I'd like to tell you two stories from the annals of nonviolence, one Indian, the other Kurdish, and whether they can tell us anything about realigning the Kurdish struggle for liberty from its warpath to nonviolent resistance.

If time permits, I will end with an actual story of Gandhi's meeting with King George the Fifth at Buckingham Palace in London. In that meeting, Gandhi was vintage Gandhi. And if Nathaniel Hawthorne is right, "Our past is a rough draft of our present and our future," President Obama would have had a formidable companion for dinner and returned home with more than food in his stomach.

Speaking of more than food in his stomach, let me digress a bit here and squeeze in a story about Madeleine Albright, the second secretary of state in the Clinton administration. Last month, the *New York Times* run a story about her titled, "Madeleine Albright: By the Book." Because I can pass as a lover of books, I read the piece with more than my usual curiosity for an op-ed piece.

I found out that of the nineteen books that she favored, I had actually read eight. Because she is older than I am, I figured I still had some time to catch up with her. But what really intrigued me about the piece was her definition of a good

book, which she compared to a good speech, and said it should make the audience: "laugh, think, cry, and cheer."

Now that is a tall order. Let me be frank with you at the outset that I have no intentions of making you laugh--our topic is too serious for that, and I'm probably too dull-witted for the task anyway.

Crying and cheering—well, I'm not so sure if I can do that either.

But I do hope you will leave here thinking.

I hope you will leave thinking with increased curiosity about Gandhi and his theme of nonviolence.

Can it possibly be that Gandhi's incredible, world-changing nonviolence may be what we need to achieve an independent Kurdistan?

Consider that profound thought with me for a moment.

In directing our gaze to nonviolence, I also pay tribute to Kamal Artin and his friends at Kurdish National Congress (KNC), the hosts of our conference, who heartily deserve another hearty round of applause for bringing us together here.

Let's show them our genuine appreciation!

In re-directing our view to nonviolence, I am also redirecting the gaze of the Kurds from violence, the fiendish delight of our foes—to nonviolence, the Achilles' heel of our adversaries.

Gandhi's nonviolence, after all, brought a world superpower to its knees, and who knows but that it may be the approach to bring us success?

Indeed, some of us, sitting in this room today, may be the instruments to bring that miraculous change about.

After all, in ancient Persia, part of our beloved Kurdish homeland, a young woman was told some 2,500 years ago: "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

That young woman, Esther, rose up and magnificently saved her people from annihilation.

May we perhaps one day look back and see that this was the day that someone here rose up, and set the nonviolent spark that helped to save our Kurdish people?

In 1917, *Hindi Punch*, a satirical paper, wrote of an Indian prince of Bikaner who had returned to Bombay from a tour of Europe and was ordered to show his passport at the customs.

The prince complained that he had not been asked to produce one when he left the country, and wanted to know what had changed in the meantime.

The officer told him he had left India in "European garb," which exempted him from examination, but was returning in "native costume," which required him to submit to inspection.

I don't know if Gandhi ever knew of this story. If he had, his mind may have flashed back to his time in South Africa in 1893. Dressed in his impeccable European clothes, he was riding a train from Durban to Pretoria. He was told, as a coolie, he could not ride first class.

When he refused to move to the back of the train, he was kicked out of it at Maritzburg railway station together with his baggage. It was, you might say, a providential kick. Nothing like it has ever been the source of so much good—before or since.

Clothes and Indians go back in history. Before the English showed up on the shores of India, Indians had set the standards for fashion for much of the known world.

In the Roman Empire, Indian tunics commanded not just attention, but also a lot of money. A trade, in spite of hardships, kept European ladies happy and Indian ones busy.

By the time Gandhi came of age, the order had reversed. To be sure, India still supplied cotton and silk to the world, but the weaving was done in Europe. The mechanized production made the Indian spinning wheel obsolete. Great Britain dominated India and Indians were trying to find their place in the new world.

Gandhi, a spiritual person by temperament, was, to use his term, "experimenting" with his life to come to terms with the new Indian reality. In South Africa, he found not just his voice, but also his Indian roots and the best of western writers such as Thoreau, Mazzini, Ruskin and Tolstoy.

Initially, his was a voice in the wilderness. The world was filled with the prophets of violence and supreme cunning. Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian like Gandhi, spoke the language of unbridled confrontation and had coined the slogan, "Give me blood and I promise you freedom."

Vladimir I. Lenin in the pages of *What Is To Be Done?* had written of the need for a "small, compact core of the most reliable, experienced, and hardened workers … connected by all the rules of strict secrecy," to bring about revolution.

Gandhi, on the other hand, thought violence, secrecy and lying had a common ancestry. In his words, "I would rather India remained a thousand years more under British rule than that a lie be used to win our independence."

A votary of truth, its kindred, he declared was love of the kind that Jesus of Nazareth had spoken of it in the pages of the *New Testament*. Knowing what India had possessed once, he set out to regain it: freedom and self-sufficiency.

Writing in the pages of his newspaper, *Young India*, he laid the ground for the formation of an army of soldier-saints. The word, dignity, which we use relative to the Arab Spring these days, was not used then, but it must have played a big role in the deep recesses of his heart or brain.

In 1920, he asked his compatriots to boycott foreign clothes and adopt home spinning as a way of liberating self as well as India. Wearing a farmer's *dhoti*, that covered one-fourth of his body, he announced the first ever bonfire of imported clothes in India.

It proved to be a cathartic event. He later undertook a tour of the country to debut his clothing line as it were and always asked his fans, now numbering millions, to cleanse themselves of artificial western appendages and values. In the words of Emma Tarlo, the effort embodied, not just freedom and self-sufficiency, but also "spiritual humility, moral purity, national integrity, communal unity, social equality, the end of 'untouchability' and the embracing of nonviolence."

Some mistook his action as the work of a coward. He was the total opposite. If the choice was between cowardice and violence, "I would choose violence," he noted.

Nonviolence, he added, required more courage than violence. He did not live to see the lone Chinese student standing in front of a tank at Tiananmen Square, but would have certainly recognized a kindred soul in him.

In the words of Louis Fischer, "No coward would sit still on the ground as galloping police horses advanced upon him or lie in the path of an automobile or stand without moving as baton-swinging police laid about them."

But Gandhi's soldier-saints did, prompting a physicist, Albert Einstein, to say of their general, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

My second story is from the oral history of the Kurds.

I first heard it watching a Kurdish film in Washington, DC. *Min Dit* was the name of the film. The children of Amed were its theme. Anyone who has been to the largest Kurdish city in Turkish Kurdistan can tell you of his or her stories of these homeless kids who are forced to live concentrated lives or skip years to assume roles that we ordinarily assign to the adults.

But in *Min Dit* there was something else.

There was a bedtime story about a Kurdish village cursed with a terrible plague. Like most children's stories, it started bad, got worse and then there was magic, a solution that was telling, heartwarming, and everlasting, which allowed the children to enter into the sleep zone on a very happy note.

Inside the Kurdish tale, a wolf attacks the livestock of the village with impunity. The villagers feel terrorized and powerless. One day, the village elders call for a meeting to remedy the situation.

A decision is finally taken: The wolf must be found and eliminated. A search team is put together. After a couple of tries, the beast of prey is found. As a villager gets ready to shoot it, an old man shouts, "Lay down your gun."

Everyone is surprised. The old man counsels a pause. He approaches the wolf and offers it a piece of meat. The wolf eats the offering and turns into a pussycat. The old man takes advantage of the moment and ties a bell around its neck.

"This wolf will never harm anyone again," he says.

"Whoever can hear the bell can run away," he adds.

From then on, whenever the wolf approaches sheep, the ringing of the bell wakes up the shepherd. Whenever it approaches a deer, the deer runs off for safety. Days pass and the wolf grows hungry. Then one day, he falls near a rock and dies of starvation.

I don't know about you, but I find the seeds of nonviolent resistance in this Kurdish tale. Our ancestors thought of it as a way to cope with the losses of their animals and we could expand on it to prevent the death of at least some of our fighters.

The numbers speak for themselves. In the latest fighting between the Kurds and the Turks, most experts agree on a number of 45 thousand deaths so far. The Turks say their losses are in the vicinity of 5 thousand. Ahmet Turk, a Kurdish parliamentarian, gave a list of 17 thousand civilian Kurds to President Obama in 2009, saying all were murdered by shadowy Turkish groups.

That leaves the figure of 23 thousand for the Kurdish fighters. The figures in Iraq, between the Kurds and the Arabs are even more lopsided, again, against the Kurds. Iran and Syria pose the same questions.

To be sure, nonviolent resistance is not exempt from deaths, but when it is waged, its disciples are its first casualties and not the defenseless civilians who are often first tortured and then murdered on the flimsiest of charges. As Kurds, to persist on a path that is to our disadvantage is not only wrong, but also reckless.

I will close, as I promised, with the story of Gandhi's meeting with King George the Fifth at the Buckingham Palace in London. According to Vinay Lal, a

professor of history at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Gandhi and King George engaged in a light banter as a sitting King and his subject would.

But Gandhi wouldn't let go of the historic occasion without a bit of histrionics. A year before, he had marched to the sea, making his own salt and breaking the monopoly of the British on the essential commodity. At the meeting, he produced a pinch it and placed it in a yogurt bowl.

There is no record of the king noticing it, or making a comment about it. But that didn't matter. Gandhi was a politician-saint in India and he knew of the famous Indian saying, "Be faithful to your salt-giver." In fact, the tradition of the subcontinent goes, if you want to seal a friendship, throw some salt into the water.

For Gandhi, yogurt was as good as water.

Yes, Gandhi has a lot to teach us—if we listen carefully.

Gandhi showed us that nonviolence—when properly applied—can be just as powerful as all the great armies that ever marched… all the mighty navies that ever sailed… and all the grand air forces that ever flew.