

# **Dissolving Terrorism at Its Roots\***

**by Hardy Merriman and Jack DuVall**

This chapter explains that as nonviolent resistance is used to fight oppression, which terrorists exploit to mobilize support, and as it models a new, more effective way of representing grievances and opposing injustice, the perceived need for and legitimacy of terrorists as liberators will be marginalized. When civilian-based, nonviolent forces are able to come to the fore and produce decisive change in a society, the demand for terrorism as a form of struggle will subside. To further this end, we propose that support should be given to specific groups that are waging nonviolent struggles for rights, freedom, and justice, and that a new discourse be developed about the effectiveness of strategic nonviolent action compared to terrorism or other forms of insurrectionary violence.

When groups in political conflict feel that their fundamental rights are denied or their deepest interests are threatened, they are likely to oppose such abuses by the strongest means with which they are familiar. For many people in history, this has meant waging a conventional military struggle or guerrilla warfare. For others, this means a violent uprising or terrorism. Terrorism, therefore, is a means of conducting a political conflict and is a response to the belief that some form of oppression must be fought.

Despite this fact, many discussions about non-military responses to terrorism focus on judgments that the United States' "war on terror" has been conducted in ways that are amoral or wrong, that Western countries are using the "war on terror" as an excuse to further their own geopolitical or economic agendas, or that a violent response to terror will result in more violence. Whatever the merits of these claims, when they become the primary points of discussion, the rationale for non-military responses to terrorism loses its pragmatic content and often fails to identify concrete alternatives. Therefore, our goal here is to address how, pragmatically, non-military policies and responses can be designed to deal with transnational and local political actors who are willing to use extreme violence against civilians in an attempt to achieve their ends. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus primarily on Islamist terrorism because it is a pressing worldwide concern that has spawned significant debate about how nations and organizations should respond to it.

## **Reducing terrorists' sources of power**

Our ideas for a nonviolent response to terrorism are designed to diminish the ability of terrorists to rely on two of their primary sources of support, which are authoritarian regimes and disaffected or alienated peoples living in oppressed societies. If such regimes and peoples no longer support terrorism or believe in its efficacy, the capacity of terrorists to function will be seriously degraded.

---

\* This chapter appears in: Ralph Summy and Senthil Ram (eds.), *Nonviolence: An Alternative for Countering Global Terror(ism)*, Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2007.

There are three forms of action that are required to do this. They are:

***1. Address oppressive conditions that terrorists exploit***

Authoritarian regimes provide significant, if sometimes indirect and unintentional, support for terrorists by creating oppressive conditions (such as the suppression of rights, horrendous economic inequality, and lack of educational and employment opportunities) that terrorists exploit and claim to be able to solve. Some of these regimes also support terrorists directly by providing them with resources and sanctuary. To make it difficult for terrorists to rely indefinitely on these sources of power, people who are living under oppression and who want to obtain self-rule, justice, and human rights should be identified and provided with the knowledge of how to do this nonviolently.

***2. Provide a realistic alternative form of mass struggle***

Marginal or deeply alienated groups in many societies may offer support, particularly in the form of young people for recruitment, to terrorist organizations because they come to see terrorism as the most vigorous way to wage struggle against a potentially existential threat, such as foreign occupation or cultural annihilation. Therefore, one way to decrease the adoption of extreme violence in these situations is to offer a realistic alternative form of struggle that has the promise of being more effective than terrorism. Strategic nonviolent action can and should be promoted and taught as such an alternative.

***3. Develop a new discourse about nonviolent power***

As a means to further these first two objectives, developing a new discourse about comparative advantages of different ways of fighting for higher causes, for use in education and also in the media in these societies, is essential. This reformed discourse would have the theme of explaining past successes and future potential of civilian-based rather than military struggle as well as the comparative costs of the two forms of struggle—thus countering the implicit belief that terrorism is the most effective form of expressing militancy or fighting for a cause. This theme would then be adapted to specific societal contexts.

Following discussion of these three elements of how to dissolve the roots of terrorism, we address how they may be implemented in practice.

## **Address oppressive conditions that terrorists exploit**

Authoritarian regimes indirectly provide support for terrorists by creating political, economic and social conditions that make members of their publics more receptive to terrorist recruiting. Furthermore, some severely repressive regimes directly provide resources for terrorist groups that are willing to collaborate with them in attacking their perceived enemies. For example, Iran subsidized non-Iranian terrorist organizations that bombed U.S. military facilities in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. But if the resources and reach of authoritarian regimes were to be significantly contracted, so too would the likelihood of these governments serving as foils or funders of terrorism.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq suggests that military intervention (whether pre-emptive or reactive), as a way to accomplish “regime change” in the case of an authoritarian government, is unlikely to be a frequent occurrence in the future, given the enormous human, economic and political costs imposed on an invader or occupier. The fact that there are almost no instances in the past hundred years in which violent insurrection has displaced an authoritarian regime and led the way to a sustainable and stable democratic order suggests that armed internal resistance is also unlikely to diminish the problem of authoritarian oppression as a cause or support of terrorism.

In contrast to the high cost or futility of organized violence as a strategy to displace authoritarian rule, nonviolent resistance has been a powerful form of struggle that has been used increasingly over recent decades on behalf of a wide variety of geographical, political, social, and cultural causes and movements. From struggles for woman’s suffrage, minority rights, economic justice, and labor organizing to anti-corruption campaigns, human rights campaigns, and large-scale pro-democracy movements, nonviolent action is a proven and effective way for ordinary people to fight for government based on the consent of the governed and equality under the law.

The potential for nonviolent power is created when people withdraw their obedience and cooperation from an oppressive system. It involves using methods of protest and persuasion (such as rallies and marches), noncooperation (such as economic boycotts and strikes), and intervention (such as sit-ins or civil disobedience) to gain leverage in a contest with an institutional or armed opponent. Over the course of a struggle, a nonviolent movement raises the cost of maintaining a ruler’s system of oppression, calling into question the system’s sustainability and dividing the loyalties of its defenders. Ultimately, because of the pressure generated by the nonviolent movement, the oppressive system must reform or face collapse.

The nonviolent movements that are most successful are those that, formally or informally, have represented a proposition to the public about a better vision for the future. In order to motivate people to overcome their inertia, a movement’s vision should incorporate the goals and aspirations of many groups from the existing society. This “vision of tomorrow” for the movement helps to co-opt a regime’s main supporters, such as the military and police, to transfer their support from the regime to the nonviolent movement. This has been seen most dramatically in the fall of autocratic rulers at the hands of pro-democratic campaigns in Ukraine (2004), Serbia (2000), Chile (1988) and the Philippines (1986). In each of these cases, military forces refused in a crisis to obey corrupt or criminal rulers, who thereafter had no choice but to surrender power to democratic successors.

Beyond these four examples, a major new study by Freedom House, published in July 2005, found that in 50 of the 67 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the past 33 years, nonviolent civic resistance was a “key factor”—but that, in contrast, when opposition movements used violence, the chances for liberation were greatly reduced. What is more, not only was nonviolent action demonstrated to be an effective means of struggle against oppression, it was also shown that it is far more likely to result in a freer,

fairer society. In 20 of the 67 transitions from authoritarian rule covered in the study, violence was used at some point by political oppositions—but in only four of those nations do people have full political rights today. Yet, in 31 of the 47 nations where no opposition violence occurred during the transition, the people now enjoy full political rights.<sup>1</sup>

The logical conclusion to draw from this evidence is that nonviolent action needs to be considered and applied far more frequently and in a broader variety of oppressive situations than it has been. Consequently governments, nongovernmental organizations, and other groups should identify civilian groups that are in authoritarian-ruled countries and that want to fight for political change or reform. If and when these civilian groups ask for help, governments and nongovernmental organizations should provide the skills training and know-how to teach these groups how to engage in nonviolent struggle. The goal of this assistance would be the lifting of oppression or transformation of authoritarian systems, which would deny terrorists the opportunity to exploit the popular antagonism that these systems produce and therefore reduce their ability to recruit and maintain their legitimacy. In addition, all the forms of assistance that such regimes directly provide to terrorists, such as sanctuary, legitimacy, material support (equipment, finances, weapons), training grounds, and schools, would then be denied to them.

### **Model a realistic alternative form of struggle**

One useful way to understand why terrorism enlists support is to imagine that there is a market for terror—a supply of terrorists, obviously, but also a demand for their services. The West’s military response to terror has the effect of reducing the supply of terrorists by finding and killing or imprisoning them. While that has undeniably deprived terrorist organizations of certain key operatives and complicated their operations, it is not claimed that that has degraded their capacities to the extent that they are no longer regarded as a grave threat. Moreover, military action in multiple countries has fueled worldwide antiwar-based opposition to the effort against terrorism and some have argued that it has backfired by enabling terrorists to portray the effort as part of an alleged “crusade” to subordinate such societies. Regardless of the merits of these arguments, one thing is clear: the military option attempts to address only the supply side of the market for terror without noticeably lowering the demand.

As stated in the opening paragraph of this chapter, terrorism represents a protagonist position in a political conflict, on behalf of the claim that some form of oppression must be fought. The demand for terror has political roots, and therefore lowering the demand for terror should more logically require a form of political action than military strikes or moral exhortations not to use violence.

Waiting for foreign governments or third parties to remove the grievances or correct the specific injustices that terrorists bemoan presumes that those capable of intervening will

---

<sup>1</sup> *How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2005), pp. 8, 10. Available online at: [http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special\\_report/29.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/29.pdf)

understand and agree that this would be effective, have the means and will to intervene when necessary, and that collateral damage will be minimal. But since indigenous energies and strategies have almost always been the predicate for successful resistance to oppression, stealing the thunder of terrorists by invoking an alternative method of resistance does not require waiting for the *deus ex machina* of third party remedies. What is required is that a proffered alternative to violent struggle be persuasively presented and modeled as a pragmatic choice.

The aim of promoting and representing this alternative would not be to convert terrorist leaders who embrace violence for ideological or religious reasons. Instead, it would be to cut off their support by appealing to large segments of various societies' populations that see no other way to be liberated. There is already evidence that many people in these societies are uncomfortable with terrorism and could embrace realistic alternatives if they were presented. News coverage, especially in Iraq, Jordan and Egypt, has been replete with interviews of bystanders to terrorist incidents who are appalled by the devastation to innocents caused by terrorism and who deplore the idea of suicide bombings. Yet some of these same people may still reluctantly support terrorist groups because they feel that in the face of oppression, doing something is better than doing nothing—that violence is the strongest form of resistance.

Reducing market demand for a product or service is typically accomplished when a competing product or service captures more buyers. So nonviolent insurrection must be promoted so as to show its advantages in satisfying the needs of those “buyers”—that it can succeed in situations where terrorism has so far failed, and can do so at far lower cost to participants and would-be beneficiaries. The general failure of terrorism is a historical fact. Insurrectionary violence has typically led to the worst oppressive governments.

Therefore, the heart of a non-military response to terrorism involves convincing aggrieved people, who may be attracted to terrorist groups, that nonviolent movements can aggressively represent their aspirations and yield results. Groups that are receptive to this logic should be educated and indeed trained in the practical know-how required to organize and apply nonviolent power. As the latter becomes the driving force in a society's fight against oppression, it will begin to reduce the demand for terror, which in turn will deny to ideologically committed terrorists the support that they need from a society, in the form of material resources, sanctuary, new recruits, and legitimacy. As the terrorists lose their putative base, the society will be gaining a far more constructive means of liberation.

### **Develop a new discourse about nonviolent power**

The third component of a non-military response to terrorism must be a large-scale new global educational campaign to universalize a new kind of discourse about how societies struggle and achieve change. This discourse would be culturally-specific and infused with creativity, but the central theme of it would be the same wherever it was used:

political violence and terrorism stall or destroy the causes they attempt to advance, and civilian-based, nonviolent struggle is a far more effective alternative.

This new discourse would recognize that the chief weakness of terrorism is the ideas and assumptions that support it. Theatrical rhetoric and spectacular terrorist acts, if not followed by political results, reveal the flaws that will cause terrorism to collapse from its own contradictory arguments: that people's lives can be liberated through death, and that better societies can be built by triggering armed conflict on a national or global scale. In the mean time, a nonviolent response to terrorism can expedite this collapse by targeting terrorism's vulnerabilities. To do this, new arguments should rebut the efficacy of terror and promote nonviolent struggle on every level: religious, psychological, political, cultural, and linguistic.

### *Religion*

Regarding religion, a robust new set of arguments must be developed in conjunction with moderate Muslims and academics to demonstrate that targeting and killing innocent civilians is not consistent with the highest traditions of Islam. The people to make these arguments are those who are respected in the societies in which terrorist rhetoric is most prevalent. There are clear exhortations in all major religions that life is sacred, and this heavily challenges the use of terror.

Simultaneously, arguments also need to be made for why nonviolent action is an appropriate response to oppression that is within the scope of Islam. As professor Stephen Zunes writes:

One of the great strengths in Islamic cultures that makes unarmed insurrections possible is the belief in a social contract between a ruler and subject. This was stated explicitly by the Prophet Muhammad's successor Abu Bakr al-Siddiq when he said 'Obey me as long as I obey God in my rule. If I disobey him, you will owe me no obedience.' Successive caliphs reiterated the pledge; Imam Ali, for instance, said, "No obedience is allowed to any creature in his disobedience of the Creator." Indeed, most Middle Eastern scholars have firmly supported the right of the people to depose an unjust ruler. The decision to refuse one's cooperation is a crucial step in building a nonviolent movement.<sup>2</sup>

### *Psychology*

Beyond defining religious reasons for the legitimacy of nonviolent action, the psychological truth must be driven home that extreme violence goes against most human instincts. The language of terrorists employs constant re-justification of the use of violence, because terrorists otherwise encounter reflexive resistance to killing as a routine tactic of struggle.

Another psychological vulnerability of terrorist methods is that their application is predicated on elite-based, non-participatory ideological (if not tactical) decision-making. This reveals terrorism as a tool of those who wish to control the actions of, instead of empower, the people they claim to represent. By joining a terrorist cause, you get to put

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Zunes, "Nonviolent Resistance in the Islamic World", *Nonviolent Action*, January-February 2002.

your life at risk, but you have no say in the ends or means of the movement. You are expected to make enormous sacrifices—indeed the commitment of your entire life—but you do not get to contribute your ideas or perhaps even see the results of your work.

In contrast, nonviolent struggle is participatory, expects contributions from ordinary activists, uses means that are proportionate in scale and quality to the ends, and holds out the prospect of success before the end of the lifetimes of those engaging in the struggle. Indeed, the *gestalt* of a nonviolent struggle mirrors and anticipates that of the outcome which is sought: the reification of the people's own decision-making and empowerment. Terrorists, on the other hand, have nothing to say about how extreme violence helps build the future society that is attractive to most people. How do secret societies, suicide bombings, and targeting civilians help create a society that most people want to live in? They don't.

### *Politics*

One political argument that deserves special emphasis in this new discourse is that by taking up arms against an oppressive power, resisters are confronting their oppressor where he is strongest: his military force. In contrast, nonviolent action creates a genuinely asymmetric conflict, in which the means of struggle are categorically different than those easily available to an authoritarian opponent. In comparison, the world has not entered an era in which non-state violent actors numbering in the thousands can challenge major state actors and defeat them on any battlefield defined by the ability to deliver and apply violent force.

### *Culture*

Specific cases in Muslim and Middle Eastern countries can be cited and publicized to combat the contention that civic resistance does not work or cannot happen in these societies because of special cultural factors. History bears out the opposite<sup>3</sup>:

- In Egypt, from 1919-1922, Egyptians used methods such as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, and other means of noncooperation to help win their independence from the British.
- In 1929, Abdul Ghaffar Khan founded the *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Servants of God) movement to resist British rule in what is now Pakistan. The *Khudai Khidmatgar* wore uniforms, trained themselves as a nonviolent army, and set up a code of behavior that stressed discipline, community service, and bravery. Anyone who committed an act of violence was immediately removed from the movement. Their methods consisted of creating alternative institutions (mostly schools), organizing work projects, picketing and strikes.
- In 1978-79, a combination of strikes, boycotts, protests, tax refusal and other forms of noncooperation in Iran withstood enormous repression (it is estimated that as many as 20,000 resisters may have been killed) by the US-backed Shah

---

<sup>3</sup> These cases draw from:

Stephen Zunes, "Nonviolent Resistance in the Islamic World", *Nonviolent Action*, January-February 2002.  
 Brad Bennet, "Arab-Muslim Cases of Nonviolent Struggle", in Crow and others (eds.), *Arab Nonviolent Political Struggle in the Middle East*, pp. 41-57.

- and his well-trained armed forces. This broad civic resistance paved the way for the flight of the Shah in 1979.
- In December 1981, Druze in the Golan Heights began a nonviolent struggle against forced Israeli citizenship. The Druze used a general strike, demonstrations, and courted arrest by defying certain restrictions. After 15,000 Israeli soldiers imposed a 43-day siege in which homes were destroyed, some resisters were shot, and hundreds were arrested, the Israelis dropped their demand that the Druze accept Israeli citizenship. The Druze were also promised a pardon from military conscription, the right to have economic relations with Syrians, and non-interference with their civil, water, and land rights.
  - In March 1985, after protest riots were put down by police, the struggle against Sudanese president Ja'far Numeiri took a nonviolent turn. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals leafleted and called for a general strike and civil disobedience campaign. Some sectors of the police and judiciary joined the opposition. Labor leaders joined the strike. By early April, the army took over the government in a bloodless coup, but the nonviolent resisters continued to demonstrate to ensure that the new army-led government would disband the national security forces and arrest the former dictator's supporters. The military acquiesced.
  - In 1987-88, the first Palestinian Intifada had major elements of nonviolent action and consisted of demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, refusal to pay fees, and building alternative institutions such as schools. Although not totally nonviolent, the Intifada impressed many Israelis with the determination of ordinary Palestinians to struggle for their own homeland, pushed the Jordanians to endorse Palestinian self-determination, and indirectly led to Oslo negotiations between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel and the United States.
  - In February 2005, in response to the suspected Syrian assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, Lebanese took to the streets in the so-called Cedar Revolution. After massive demonstrations, 14,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon withdrew and the pro-Syrian Lebanese government was disbanded.

These and other cases (such as the overthrow of the brutal Suharto dictatorship in 1999, and the ongoing nonviolent struggle in Western Sahara) show that nonviolent action can gain traction in these societies, that it can succeed even under situations of harsh repression, and that it is not a culturally-specific phenomenon that somehow cannot occur in Middle Eastern or Muslim countries. These cases need to be re-told and publicized as examples of the militant character and effectiveness of this form of struggle.

### *Linguistics*

Linguistically speaking, part of the effort to re-tell these historical cases and to present nonviolent action as a realistic alternative to terrorism involves creating new terminology that makes the underlying ideas and concepts come alive for people who are otherwise bombarded with the view that violence is the most powerful sanction. Without this new terminology, some will not recognize nonviolent action as a powerful, pragmatic form of political struggle and may confuse it with pacifism or religious or moral forms of

nonviolence (which can also be powerful and political, but are not the same as nonviolent action). As Zunes writes about nonviolent resistance movements in the Muslim world:

The term “nonviolent action” is not highly regarded among those in unarmed Islamic resistance movements, in part because its Arabic translation of the term connotes passivity. Yet while the term understandably may not have widespread acceptance, and while few may explicitly refer to these movements as largely nonviolent campaigns, in practice many such actions fall under the rubric of nonviolent action.<sup>4</sup>

A similar example is given by American theologian Walter Wink, who interviewed participants in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Wink writes: “What we found most surprising is that a great many of the people simply do not know how to name their actual experiences with nonviolence.” When asked about using nonviolent action as a form of resistance to apartheid, he was told “We tried that for fifty years and it didn’t work.... violence is the only way left.” Yet, when Wink asked the South Africans what resistance methods had been most effective in the previous two years,

They produced a remarkably long list of nonviolent actions: labor strikes, slow-downs, sit-downs, stoppages, and stay-aways; bus boycotts, consumer boycotts, and school boycotts; funeral demonstrations; noncooperation with government appointed functionaries; non-payment of rent; violation of government bans on peaceful meetings; defiance of segregation orders on beaches and restaurants, theaters, and hotels; and the shunning of black police and soldiers. This amounts to what is probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse nonviolent [methods]... in a single struggle in human history! Yet these students, and many others we interviewed, both black and white, failed to identify these tactics as nonviolent and even bridled at the word.<sup>5</sup>

Examples such as these show that the terminology to describe accurately pragmatic nonviolent struggle does not yet exist in some societies. Any new discourse to advance nonviolent struggle must take this into account and find or create effective new terms to frame what nonviolent action is.

What all of these religious, psychological, political, cultural, and linguistic arguments show is the need for new discourse to rebut the spurious claim of terrorism’s effectiveness and to introduce and dramatize the historical reality that civilian-based nonviolent conflict is a powerful and realistic alternative. This discourse would have great appeal if it could help articulate not just what people are willing to abjure (terrorism), but also what they believe will work better (nonviolent “people power”). We can see evidence of groups that could be receptive to this discourse in the recent opposition party boycott of elections in Egypt, in the fledgling movements for rights and justice in Tunisia and other North African countries, and in the still-resilient student and labor-driven opposition in Iran. All those presently active in civic resistance in Muslim countries are already far more numerous than terrorists. What they need is a new public recognition of their bravery, an informed appreciation of the results that their methods

---

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Zunes, “Nonviolent Resistance in the Islamic World”, *Nonviolent Action*, January-February 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Wink, *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus’ Third War*, (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), p. 4 as cited in Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 11.

have had earlier in history, and, to support all this, a new public discourse about “people power” that reflects its actual dynamics.

## **Implementation**

The initiatives proposed in this chapter would have greatest impact if adopted or represented in the work of local, regional, national, and international groups. This would include both governments and nongovernmental organizations, pursuing a comprehensive strategy to support—but not interfere with—civilian-based movements in parts of the world where terrorism thrives or is threatening, by:

1. Underwriting independent efforts to furnish tools, equipment and training in strategic nonviolent action to civic groups resisting oppression;
2. Defending the rights of nonviolent resisters;
3. Promoting accurate media coverage of nonviolent struggles; and
4. Promoting the new underlying discourse through educational and public-informational programs

### ***1. Underwriting independent efforts to furnish tools, equipment and training in strategic nonviolent action***

There are two elements that groups need to wage nonviolent struggle successfully. The first is generic knowledge of how nonviolent struggle works, and the second is specific knowledge of a situation that is used to identify and map the opportunities and constraints facing nonviolent resistance in particular conflicts and circumstances.

The international community can do a great deal to help transfer generic knowledge to oppressed people about how nonviolent struggle works—through identifying reformers or change agents within a society and providing them with translated materials (books, videos and other learning tools) about the dynamics of nonviolent action, how it can be strategically planned, and how it has been used around the world. The goal of this assistance would be to support the development of a self-reliant nonviolent struggle capacity in these societies. How the recipients of this assistance choose to apply their new knowledge in their own contexts would be entirely up to them. No one will know the situation on the ground in these countries better than the people living there. International groups should not and do not need to involve themselves in trying to tell these movements what to do.

We can see an example of the value of such assistance in the case of Serbia. Through the 1990s the United States tried to rely mainly on diplomacy with Slobodan Milosevic to end his aggression in the Balkans, but it declined to provide much support to his democratic opponents inside Serbia when they were using nonviolent action to oppose him. When Milosevic began ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, NATO bombed Serbia until he stopped, but he remained in power. Finally, in 1999, US and European institutions gave modest but well-targeted support to nonviolent pro-democracy groups in Serbia, which brought Milosevic down in a year. The leader of one group famously remarked in 2001 that if Serbs had known in the mid-1990s how, for example, Chileans had forced out

Pinochet, there never would have been ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, because Milosevic would have been removed before he started that genocide.

The lesson of this example is that, when properly directed, foreign assistance focused on transferring knowledge and skills in civic resistance can help to accelerate a burgeoning nonviolent movement—the goals, terms and modalities of which will still be developed by indigenous groups. This is not to say, however, that foreign support was the decisive factor in the Serbian or other cases. These broad-scale movements cannot be spawned or orchestrated by international actors, nor can such assistance ever be a substitute for the development of a genuine mass movement which only native political activists will know how to galvanize. It is therefore the role of international groups and institutions to try to assist, not control or create, indigenous movements whose message, strategy, and organization must be self-originated to resonate and unite people who are facing oppression.

### ***2. Defending the rights of nonviolent resistance groups***

The right to undertake the specific action that takes the form of nonviolent resistance is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a number of articles, but it is particularly clear in Article 19<sup>6</sup> (freedom of expression) and Part 1 of Article 20<sup>7</sup> (freedom of assembly). By clearly endorsing the people's right to resist nonviolently if their rights are being trampled, and then taking efforts vigorously to promote and protect this right, members of the international community can go a long way towards incentivizing this form of resistance against oppression.

Furthermore, if the underlying right to rise up nonviolently is already implied by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, more explicit international norms defending this right should be developed. For example, when a government is oppressing its citizens, and these citizens begin to organize and act nonviolently to protect their rights, an international norm could be framed and invoked whereby it would be considered legitimate for certain kinds of assistance to be given to the civilians taking this action. This promulgation of new norms could strengthen the rationale for assistance.

### ***3. Promoting accurate media coverage of nonviolent struggles***

Media coverage can be crucial in alerting people to the power of nonviolent struggle in overcoming oppression. Yet, much of the media's current reporting and analysis tends, subtly or obviously, to reinforce unintentionally the belief that extreme violence is a logical default response to oppression, while also propagating misconceptions about nonviolent action. This happens for several reasons.

First, many journalists have no real understanding of the political dynamics in a nonviolent conflict in which civilians are engaged. That is usually true because foreign correspondents pay attention to leaders and diplomats and unthinkingly assume that they

---

<sup>6</sup> *Article 19*: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

<sup>7</sup> *Article 20*: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

have decisive influence over events, rather than paying attention to less visible civic action that often ends up driving those events.

Second, because many journalists lack understanding of the sources of nonviolent power, most news stories reinforce the belief that violence is the most propulsive, certainly the most concussive, methodology for challenging oppression. This, of course, is the same justification that is constantly expressed in terrorist rhetoric. (Even the most admired news reporters rarely question the assumptions behind that rhetoric.) While we have already explained why history contradicts this claim, and noted that violence, and especially terrorism, have a relatively poor record in ending oppression, it is important to realize that the arguments that continue to form the conventional wisdom in most analysis and reporting have serious consequences in terms of the messages that they convey to people about what is possible in the world of political power. Certain beliefs may be invalid but they can still impel people to make disastrous choices or preclude other people from making productive choices. It is difficult to create a new discourse while the mass media continues to peddle the old discourse.

Finally, when media coverage does appear about nonviolent action, it often attributes its success to factors that are not the most pivotal in these struggles. For example, media coverage of the “color revolutions” emphasized foreign support for resistance groups, which had nevertheless rallied most of their own support and money on the basis of their own political propositions and strategies. Earlier media coverage of the people power revolution in the Philippines and the rise of Solidarity in Poland tended to emphasize the charisma of their movements’ leaders rather than the intelligence of their strategies, the content of what they said, or the concrete action taken by tens of thousands of their supporters, which divided the loyalties of defenders of the regimes they were challenging.

There are numerous other factors that are also cited erroneously in the media to explain the success of nonviolent movements. Among these is the belief that the regime being fought with nonviolent action was “soft” and that such strategies would never work against a “hard” regime (which overlook stories about the brutality of Milosevic in Serbia, Videla in Argentina, Pinochet in Chile, or even the British in India). Another misconception is seen by the way some stories emphasize the supposed enlightened action of a few elites who, at the critical moment, supposedly chose to grant concessions to a nonviolent movement (ignoring, of course, how those decisions may have actually been constrained, or forced, by the power of the nonviolent movement). Other popular misconceptions are the belief that this form of resistance can only work in countries that have reached a certain level of economic development or that nonviolent strategies can only be adopted by certain cultures, or by people with a certain educational level. Again all of these supposed factors or explanations that members of the media cite as pivotal serve to de-emphasize the power of what ordinary people can do when they are organized, united, and have a strategic plan. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to rebut each of these misconceptions in detail, more work needs to be done to publicize and teach the real operation of nonviolent movements to members of the media.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Two excellent sources that address popular misconceptions are:  
Kurt Schock, “Nonviolent Action and Its Misconceptions: Insights for Social Scientists”, PS: Political

Nongovernmental organizations can play a crucial role in doing this. First, they can, through their own reporting, accurately depict and analyze nonviolent struggles in their own media sources (such as newsletters, websites, articles monographs, reports, books and other literature). Second, they can make efforts to explain to members of the media how nonviolent action works, what its record is, and how to identify signs that it is occurring in countries around the world right now. Coordinated attempts to do this could create a significant impact, because disproving the efficacy of terrorism and highlighting the impact of nonviolent struggle must be driven home to everyone who is otherwise in a position to be attracted by the false claims of those who push extreme violence.

#### ***4. Promoting the new underlying discourse through educational and public-informational programs***

A greater effort needs to be undertaken to promote this discourse in schools and other public-informational programs. New curricula need to be created for primary, secondary, college, and university education that question the historical assumption that violence is the most powerful sanction and that explore other, more powerful, forms of force that people can bring to bear in political conflicts.

Specifically, historical examples of nonviolent movements should be taught and analyzed in history classes, with particular emphasis on understanding the strategies that such movements have employed. The results of historical violence and terrorism should also be compared to those of nonviolent movements in history. Humanities classes should emphasize works that show forms of power other than violence. Current events should be discussed that illustrate the widespread use of nonviolent methods in countries around the world. These and other ideas need to be developed and incorporated into classroom and informal learning settings at all levels for all ages.

## **Conclusion**

As arguments supporting the supposed supremacy of violence saturate many oppressed societies, it is clear that a new and coherent counter-voice needs to emerge. This voice needs to challenge terrorism and address its political roots. History makes clear that nonviolent action has long been a more effective strategy for dissolving oppression. What remains is teaching the world that this is true.

As nonviolent struggle is promoted and modeled more conspicuously, authoritarian regimes that support terrorists can be transformed; the social, economic, and political conditions that terrorists exploit can be alleviated; and the perceived necessity of terrorism as a strategy for liberation will recede. As civilian-based forces begin to come to the fore and produce decisive change, the appeal of and demand for terrorist-driven resistance will subside.

---

Science and Politics, Vol. 36, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 705-712.

Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 6-12.

Violence is no longer the ultimate sanction available to oppressed people. John F. Kennedy said: "The wave of the future is not the conquest of the world by a single dogmatic creed but the liberation of the diverse energies of free nations and free men." The new work of nonviolent civic power can represent the arrival of that future.