

Afghan nonviolence handbook

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I believe that knowledge of nonviolent civic mobilisation must precede nonviolent action. Some might ask what nonviolent civic mobilisation is – it is a way of using conflict constructively, and has many names such as ‘nonviolence’, ‘civil resistance’, ‘nonviolent civic mobilisation’, and so on. While the term ‘nonviolence’ can refer to both an individual lifestyle and as a means of waging political struggle, for the sake of this discussion, I am interested in the second definition, where nonviolence is thought of as a means of struggle that is distinct from the individual lifestyle choices that might also be associated with nonviolence. OSCAR’s (Organisation for Social, Cultural Awareness and Rehabilitation, www.oscaraf.org) involvement in nonviolent civic mobilisation in Afghanistan is guided by this understanding, and we believe that people should be educated in nonviolent civic mobilisation first, and then become active in movements for change. Because very few people in Afghanistan have a positive understanding of nonviolence, many do not consider it as a means for waging struggle for gaining their constitutional rights. To counter this, OSCAR has been conducting workshops for civil society members and young people in some of Afghanistan’s provinces, to increase awareness of the power of nonviolence.

I first encountered nonviolence when reading a book called ‘*Civilian Jihad in the Middle East*’, edited by Dr Maria Stephen. This book is a collection of writings by various authors about the philosophy of nonviolence and the history of nonviolent actions in Islamic communities in the Middle East and North Africa. I was completely new to the philosophy of nonviolence when I started reading, and prior to this the only thing that I knew about nonviolence were the names ‘Bacha Khan’, ‘Gandhi’, and ‘Martin Luther King’. Crucially, I thought of nonviolence as passive and attempting to avoid conflict. However, after reading and translating the book, I learned that nonviolent civic mobilisation is not passive – nonviolence is an active alternative to violence for waging political struggle, and can be used by communities to demand their rights.

I had hardly finished reading the first quarter of the book when I decided to translate the book into Pashto. I realised that the message of nonviolence needed to be spread among young Afghans, because they deserve to live peaceful lives after decades of war. To achieve this, they have to know about peaceful, nonviolent methods that can help them gain their constitutional rights. Having completed the translation of the book, I had gained an understanding of the methods of nonviolent civic mobilisation and I understood how nonviolent civic mobilisation worked. I would also have frequent discussions about nonviolence and the tactics involved with my colleague, Maria J Stephen. Communicating with others about nonviolence helped me to gain confidence in the approach, and in 2011, I felt ready to conduct an introductory workshop for the members of civil society in Kunar.

The six-day workshop, which was the first of its type in Afghanistan, attracted attention from the local community. Alongside *Civilian Jihad in the Middle*

East, we also used the CANVAS guide on nonviolence, *50 Crucial Points*, and Gene Sharp's book, *There Are Realistic Alternatives*. Thirty people attended, 11 of whom were women. Three of the women were members of Kunar Provincial Council, while others were journalists and women's rights activists. At the outset of the workshop, the logic of nonviolence was strange for the participants – they believed that nonviolence was a weak way of waging struggle, and was inconsistent with Afghan culture. However, towards the end of the workshop, their perception about nonviolent civic mobilisation had changed. Since that first workshop, OSCAR has been involved in teaching nonviolence in a number of other provinces in Afghanistan. Alongside our nonviolence trainings, OSCAR writes articles in local languages, gives interviews to the local media and distributes Pashto translations of *Civilian Jihad in the Middle East* and *A Force More Powerful*.

With the passage of time, I felt the need to develop a curriculum for teaching nonviolent civic mobilisation in Afghanistan that is responsive to the specific cultural and economic environment here. After studying nonviolent civic mobilisation and attending some seminars on the philosophy of nonviolence, OSCAR developed a curriculum that is based on Islamic and other cultural references relevant to Afghanistan. The curriculum explores the relevance of nonviolent civic mobilisation in an Afghan context, the history of nonviolence in Afghanistan, leadership, and strategy in nonviolent movements. It also explains sources of power and the mechanisms for communication that can be used in Afghanistan to mobilise nonviolently. The book argues that conflict itself is neither good nor bad, and that it depends on the attitude and approach of those engaging in a conflict as to whether it is constructive or damaging. Finally, our nonviolence handbook explores violence in its various dimensions and forms. Every discussion is followed by a practical exercise, which gives the participants an opportunity to work in groups to discuss the various topics and their relevance to their own situation.

The mentality that violence is a solution to a problem and that ordinary people don't have the potential to introduce change in their own lives, are the two main hurdles in spreading the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. To challenge this mentality, OSCAR uses historical examples from the Middle East and the nonviolent movements in India as illustrations, and shows workshop participants documentaries such as *A Force More Powerful* (a series of documentaries that illustrates different nonviolent civic mobilisation movements in some areas of the world). Countering the perception of nonviolence as weak or passive is challenging, but Afghans are aware of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement led by the Pashtun leader Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, and this helps us to demonstrate the potential of nonviolence. The movement is also known as '*Surkh Posh*', ('Red Shirts'), and in the 1930s they waged a nonviolent campaign against the British in today's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Though some Afghans accuse Bacha Khan for siding with the Communist regime in Kabul, he is widely respected as an influential Pashtun leader. Afghans believe that Bacha Khan's movement worked for social reforms among Pashtuns, and should be used to transform the political, social, and economic conditions in Afghanistan. Since many Afghans know and respect

Bacha Khan and the *Surkh Posh* movement, we are able to use this story to demonstrate the relevance of nonviolence in an Afghan context.

The majority of our trainees are young people, and we use Facebook groups to build our network. Although we focus mainly on young people with modern education and other activists, we also provide opportunities for religious scholars and tribal chiefs to attend our workshops. Perceptions of nonviolence are changing, particularly among those who have attended our trainings. They now believe that nonviolence is a strong tool and should be spread among young people. OSCAR believes that once the Afghan civil society is equipped with non-violent civic mobilisation they will be able to start waging nonviolent campaigns. Although Afghans wage nonviolent actions on a small scale in different areas of the country, with more support and training they will grow in confidence and be able to start larger scale nonviolent campaigns. I hope OSCAR's work will serve as an inspiration for others in the future.

To support the promotion of nonviolence in Afghanistan, OSCAR was established in 2011. OSCAR teaches the methods of nonviolent civic mobilisation, and is one of the few organisations promoting nonviolence in an Afghanistan – <http://www.oscaraf.org>

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Diaspora solidarity for Eritrea: the Arbi Harnet campaign

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Conditions in Eritrea

Eritrea – one of the ‘Horn of East Africa’ countries – was established in 1890, when the region was colonised by Italy. After being occupied by the Italian military in 1890, Eritrea remained an Italian colony for many years before falling under a UK mandate in 1941, and then became a federated state as part of Ethiopia in 1951. After some unsuccessful nonviolent campaigns in the cities and towns in the 1950s and 1960s, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began the armed struggle for independence in 1961. By the 1970s, there were two rival Eritrean armed movements at war with one another – the ELF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). After the civil war ended in 1981, the EPLF dominated Eritrea both militarily and politically, and achieved independence for Eritrea in 1991.

In 1994, the EPLF was renamed the ‘Peoples’ Front for Democracy and Justice’ (PFDJ). Two decades later, the PFDJ remains the only legal political party, and control the country politically and economically. There is no right to free speech, assembly, protest or free media. Thousands of Eritreans are in detention for their political views, without access to due process.

Since the government introduced ‘National Military Service’ in 1995, the country has become highly militarised. All grade 12 students attend the ‘Sawa