

Special Report

The Gandhi Project: Philanthropy or the pacification of Arab opposition?

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April 15, 2005—Since his death in 1948, Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi has been deified, and worshipped as the ultimate symbol of non-violent resistance, peace and moral authority. Now the sanitized and mass-marketed Gandhi image is being wielded again, in a new propaganda campaign aimed at Palestinians, and anti-Israeli resisters throughout the Middle East.

Bankrolled by the [Skoll Foundation](#) and the [Global Catalyst Foundation](#), the [Gandhi Project](#) seeks to bring “the message of nonviolent resistance, peace and tolerance to Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps.” The centerpiece of the [project](#) is the 1982 Richard Attenborough film “Gandhi,” dubbed in Arabic by Palestinian filmmaker Hanna Elias (of “The Olive Harvest”) and a team of Palestinians. The film has been screened throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and there are plans to screen and distribute the film throughout the Arab world.

With missionary zeal, the project’s organizers, which include mega-wealthy American executives and high-tech venture capitalists, actors Ben Kingsley (who played Gandhi in the film) and Richard Gere, are eager to encourage Palestinians to use Gandhi’s pacifistic *satyagraha* methods, and “open the eyes of the oppressor.” According to an [AP report on opening of the project](#), the founder and chairman of the Skoll Foundation, former eBay president [Jeffrey Skoll](#) wants Palestinians to “*see the Gandhi in themselves.*”

In spite of what appear to be pristine and altruistic objectives, and likely good intentions, on the part of many involved with the project, a number of questions must be asked. What is the message? Who benefits? Why now?

On the surface, the idea of Western elites funding a campaign that wields Gandhi, urging Palestinians to “turn the other cheek,” and the Arab/Islamic world to behave *more “Gandhi-like,”* immediately smacks of colonialism in its most patronizing and unwelcome form. But even putting that aside, other disturbing issues are raised.

The inherent assumption of the project’s message, and the targeting of the campaign, is that Palestinians and Arabs (not Israel or the United States) are violent, and must refrain from violence and “terrorism.” Other underlying assumptions are equally insidious. They include the notions that 1) after generations, Palestinians have no clue how to go about their own resistance, 2) Palestinians have not exhausted all forms of resistance (including non-violent methods that have included classic forms of satyagraha), 3) non-violence is the only effective and applicable method, and 4) Gandhi was perfect, and his myth is universal truth. Palestinians are expected to look upon the project as a “gift of hope” that brings a “lesson” of peace.

The Gandhi Project (intentionally or innocently) serves as a convenient weapon of Bush-Sharon “Road Map” planners—who are eager to “de-radicalize” opposition, and neutralize dissent and resistance across the Arab world throughout the Middle East, and across the “Grand Chessboard,” and quietly accept the Bush-Sharon “[Road Map](#)” (and the [non-viable Palestinian state](#) that comes with it).

Consider the project's timing. It comes on the heels of a questionable election that ushered in Israel-US-annointed "moderate" Mahmoud Abbas, a new Palestinian leader accommodating to the duplicitous new Bush-Sharon posturing, an alleged [Gaza pullout](#) (that does not include a West Bank pullout), the [Rafik Hariri](#) assassination, [Condoleeza Rice](#) provocations, and expanding US-led pacification operations in Iraq, [Iran](#), Syria, [Lebanon](#), Central Asia, the India-Pakistan corridor, etc.

At a press conference, actor Ben Kingsley revealed that the idea of an Arab version of "Gandhi" came directly [in response to a Palestinian initiative](#). Abbas, an Oslo architect who has routinely chastised Palestinians for violence, has lent "strong support" to the Gandhi Project and its pacifistic anti-reaction/"anti-terror" message.

Is this part of what Ali Abunimah (editor of the [Electronic Intifada](#)) calls "[mass Middle East hypnosis](#)"—a "lapse into hypnosis and euphoria about a non-existent 'window of opportunity' for peace" in a "new season of political manipulation and self-serving opportunism," spearheaded by the ubiquitous "hard core of the international peace process industry—those accustomed to living as parasites off other people's tragedies?"?

The line between "peace," and "anti-terrorism," remains fuzzy at best. In a series of essays, compiled in the book *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map*, the late Edward Said wrote about the ongoing "blame the Palestinians" propaganda apparatus:

"The road map...is not about a plan for peace so much as *a plan for pacification*: it is about putting an end to Palestine as a problem. Hence, the repetition of the term "performance" in the document's wooden prose—in other words, how the Palestinians are expected to behave, almost in a social sense of the word. *No violence, no protest, more democracy, better leaders and institutions, all based on the notion that the underlying problem has been the ferocity of Palestinian resistance rather than the occupation that has given rise to it.* [my emphasis-LC]

"This is why I have been skeptical about discussion and meetings about peace, which is a lovely word but in the present context simply means that Palestinians will have to stop resisting Israeli control over their land."

"So deeply ingrained has this notion become that even the Palestinian leadership has subscribed to it, with the result that as the intifada rolls on, the average American hasn't the slightest inkling that there is a narrative of Palestinian suffering and dispossession at least as old as Israel itself. Meanwhile Arab leaders come running to Washington begging for American protection without even understanding that three generations of Americans have been brought up on Israeli propaganda *to believe that Arabs are lying terrorists with whom it is wrong to do business, much less to protect.*" [my emphasis-LC]

Satyagraha, or Surrender?

Even if one can dismiss the "blame the violent Arabs" undercurrents, and accept the Gandhi Project in the spirit with which it has been offered, are Gandhian *satyagraha* tactics an appropriate response?

As Ali Abunimah (editor of [Electronic Intifada](#)) wrote in [The Myth of Gandhi and the Palestinian Reality](#):

"While one can admire Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent principles, one can hardly point to the Indian experience as a demonstration of their usefulness in overthrowing a colonial regime. Indeed, Gandhi's concepts of satyagraha, or soul power, and ahimsa, or nonviolent struggle, played an important role during the Indian independence struggle, however the anti-colonial period in India was also marked by extreme violence, both between the British and Indians and between different Indian communal groups. Anti-colonial Indians committed a wide variety of terrorist acts; the British government was responsible for numerous massacres and other atrocities; and communal violence before, during and after independence claimed the lives of millions of people. One simply cannot argue that Indian independence was achieved in a nonviolent context."

A powerful rhetorical counter to the satyagraha philosophy can be found in the ideas of Malcolm X—specifically his legendary feud with Martin Luther King, Jr., the “Gandhi of the 1960s.” In a series of speeches, Malcolm X said the following:

“King and his kind believe in turning the other cheek. Their freedom fighters follow the rules laid down by the big bosses in Washington, DC, the citadel of imperialism.”

“I believe that it’s right to be nonviolent with people who are nonviolent. But you’re dealing with an enemy who doesn’t know what nonviolence is. As far as I’m concerned, you’re wasting your time.”

“Never turn the other cheek until you see *them* turn the other cheek. Make it a two-way street. Make it even-steven. If I’m going to be nonviolent, then let them be nonviolent. But as long as they’re not nonviolent, don’t you let anybody tell you anything about nonviolence. No. *Be intelligent.*”

One need not even go that far to wonder. Is satyagraha applicable to Palestine, in the face of the unique nature of Israeli oppression? Is it foolish, insulting, to think that Palestinians themselves do not already utilize a multitude of non-violent protest and resistance strategies?

To again quote Abunimah (from [“On violence and the Intifada”](#)):

“No people in history, not Indians led by Gandhi, nor South Africans led by Nelson Mandela, ever faced the kind of state violence that Palestinians face without some of them resorting to armed resistance or desperate acts of revenge. And yet today, even though killing is spiraling, and every Palestinian is subject to the intrusive, daily terror of the occupation, only a tiny number of Palestinians take part in counter-violence of any kind, let alone attacks on civilians. *Meanwhile, long before the suicide bomb phenomenon appeared, there has been a long history of non-violent activism by Palestinians defending their land and rights in the face of Israeli violence, but sadly this has been ignored by many of the same critics who now chide the Palestinians for not being more like Gandhi.*” [my emphasis-LC]

What lessons have been learned in the past five brutal years of relentless Anglo-Israeli tyranny? What forms of non-violent resistance have not already been attempted?

Or, to again quote Edward Said, “Why should we passively accept the fate of flies or mosquitoes, to be killed wantonly with American backing anytime war criminal Sharon decides to wipe out a few more of us?”

Jonathan Cook, an International Herald Tribune journalist living in Israel, covered the August 2004 Middle East tour by Gandhi’s grandson, Arun Gandhi of the [MK Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence](#), which in many ways set the stage for the Gandhi Project.

In a piece titled [“Nonviolent protest offers little hope for Palestinians,”](#) Cook wrote, “But few Palestinians are likely to embrace peaceful protest as a way of attaining statehood—not because Palestinians are hellbent on mindless retribution against Israelis, but because nonviolence is unlikely to be effective as a strategy.”

“The sad truth is that over the last four years, in the second Intifada, the Palestinians have learned that there is no necessary correlation between the violence they inflict on Israelis and their own suffering at the hands of Israeli force. Despite the current lull in attacks on Israelis, Palestinian deaths continue daily.

“Palestinians now understand that violence is the surest way to get their struggle noticed. Bombing buses is immoral, but it makes front pages, reminding the world that there is a conflict. When Palestinians are the victims, the world switches off.”

Later, Cook identifies a practical problem—citing examples of *classic Gandhian satyagraha tactics* attempted in Palestine:

“Conversely, when Palestinians adopt peaceful strategies, the news media can barely stifle their yawns. *The current hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners protesting the violation of their rights is a case in point. It has utterly failed to ignite international interest, except briefly when the Israeli authorities decided to sizzle kebabs inside cells.*” [my emphasis-LC]

“Equally, the dozens of mostly nonviolent protests in the West Bank against the Israeli security wall rarely flicker on to the Western news media’s radar. And once the wall is completed, most avenues for peaceful resistance to the occupation will be blocked for good. *Neighbors cut off from each other in a series of isolated cantons will be in no position to stage the kind of mass demonstrations needed to bring about change.*” [my emphasis-LC]

Finally, Cook points to the element that is missing in most Palestine-related peace activities (which, by extension, includes the Gandhi Project):

“The efficacy of nonviolence might look different to Palestinians, were they receiving the steadfast support of leftist Israelis. But in reality it is the Israelis, not the Palestinians, who are the missing peace partners. Apart from a handful of radical peace groups, Israelis have rejected the legitimacy of all forms of Palestinian resistance, whether peaceful or not. What is required...is a little more anger and courage—from Israelis who can see the folly of the occupation.”

Indeed, shouldn’t the efforts of activists, and the wave of foundation resources behind the Gandhi Project, be focused not on programs that “convert” Palestinians and followers of Islam, but aimed directly at the masses in Israel and the United States—where there have been no comprehension of, or interest in (much less resistance to) the open criminality and brutality of their respective governments, even as the lies of the “war on terrorism” and 9/11 are cemented into official policies and the very fabric of societies?

Gentle Foundation-Funded Imperialism

It is a fact that anti-imperialist resistance and peace movements throughout the world are infiltrated, co-opted and undermined by overt and covert methods. Some of this destruction comes at the hands of philanthropic organizations, foundations, human rights fronts (NGOs), and “progressive” media and academia— [intelligence fronts](#) that are awash with money from governments. According to former CIA operative Philip Agee, a typical example of foundation-backed infiltration is in full swing right in Venezuela, where aid groups and media fronts, led by [USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy \(NED\)](#), are being used as part of a coup against the Hugo Chavez government.

(Not surprisingly, the [NED](#) and the [USAID](#) are also deeply involved in Palestine, the “peace process,” and activities designed to support political moderates, while “confronting violence and incitement.”)

James Petras (“Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America,” *CovertAction Quarterly*, Fall 1998), noted how NGOs are used to “foster a new type of cultural and economic colonialism and dependency,” and are directly responsible for “de-politicizing” and “de-radicalizing” whole areas of social life, particularly in the Third World. And “where they have become firmly established, radical social movements have declined”—“diverting people from the class struggle into collaboration with their oppressors.”

As tracked by researchers of [Left gatekeeping](#) (also [Leftgatekeepers.com](#)), a diverse industry currently operates as an instrument of covert government policy, disguised as progressive academia and media, “radical” multi-culturalism, anti-war activism and do-gooder progressive capitalism.

What are we to make of the people behind the Gandhi Project? The board of the [Skoll Foundation](#) consists of current and former Silicon Valley executives, led by former eBay president Jeffrey Skoll. The [Global Catalyst Foundation](#) has a similar profile, led by the energetic [Kamran Elahian](#).

Among the long list of creative and fascinating social entrepreneur, social activism, and grass-roots social welfare groups funded by the foundations, two organizations on the Skoll Foundation's roster of grant [recipients](#) stand out in stark contrast to the rest.

One is the [Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies](#), which is also funded by the Ford Foundation (see "[Ford Foundation and the CIA](#)" by James Petras), [George Soros and his Open Society Institute](#), [USAID](#) and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. (Johns Hopkins also houses the Center for Strategic and International Studies, home of Zbigniew Brzezinski and others).

The other is the [Aspen Institute](#), whose CEO is former CNN chief [Walter Isaacson](#), and whose board and honorary trustees have included super-elites and former government officials such as Madeline Albright, Henry Kissinger, Robert Mosbacher, Cyrus Vance, Bruce Babbitt, Maurice Strong and Robert McNamara. Former FCC Chairman Michael Powell currently serves as a senior fellow of the [Aspen Institute Communications and Society program](#). The Institute has been funded since its founding in 1950 by the likes of the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation and others identified as [intelligence fronts](#).

Is the support of these two direct connections to the New World Order's inner circles reflective of the foundation's politics? Or is this a "non-issue," that only the hopelessly cynical would bother to notice?

Even if one legitimately concludes that the Gandhi Project is not a sponsored covert operation, it is one that can be easily co-opted, and used like one.

As described by Frances Stonor Saunders in the book *The Cultural Cold War*, infiltration and manipulation of broad segments of societies by intelligence agencies produce "the most effective kind of propaganda" where "the subject moves in the direction [governments] desire for reasons which he believes to be his own."

Problems with the Gandhi Myth

Gandhi's legion of true believers, led by the [MK Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence](#), and legions of Western academics, have perpetuated the legacy (or, the "myth," according to critics) of the perfect Gandhi—while criticism of Gandhi has been systematically denounced as hateful revisionism.

Is the myth true to historical fact? Is the use of the "Gandhi" film that epitomizes the myth, whose political message and historical accuracy have always been open to controversy, problematic in and of itself?

In [India and the Raj: 1919-1947; Glory, Shame and Bondage](#), Suniti Kumar Ghosh offers a shockingly ugly portrayal. Ghosh's research presents an unflattering picture of a brutal opportunist and manipulator, who despised African blacks and lower-caste Indians and Untouchables—and that the much-heralded satyagraha was a product of racism. Was Gandhi a tool or agent of the British crown, who, despite his image as a liberator, aided in the suppression and control of the Indian masses?

A few [excerpts](#) from this (unfortunately out of print) book:

"Satyagraha [was] an ideal weapon with which to emasculate the anti-imperialist spirit of the people. Gandhi himself declared that his satyagraha technique was intended to combat revolutionary violence. It may be borne in mind that this prophet of non-violence, though violently opposed to the use of violence by the people in the struggle against British imperialism, actively supported, whether in South Africa, London or India, the most violent wars launched by the British masters and, towards the close of his life, was in favour of war between India and Pakistan and approved of or suggested the march of troops into Junagadh, Kashmir and Hyderabad."

"While in Africa for twenty-two years, he was full of eulogy for the British colonialists and 'vied with Englishmen in loyalty to the throne': it was his 'love of truth' [that] was at the root of this loyalty."

"His continual references to God, to 'the inner voice' and to the religious scriptures and epics, his claims that his steps were guided by God (that for instance his fasts were undertaken at the call of God), his 'ashrams' and his ascetic's robe swayed the Hindu masses powerfully in this land where godmen flourish even today. His harking back to a mythical past, the Ram Rajya, had an immense appeal to the backward-looking Hindus, especially the peasantry enmeshed in feudal ties."

"Gandhi did his best to turn the gaze of the people backward, to revive the obscurantist ideas and faiths of the past and to blunt the power of reason. When it suited him, he talked of the "sinfulness" of foreign cloth or of the Bihar earthquake in 1934 as having been caused by the caste Hindus' sin of untouchability. His "moral" outpourings on modern civilization, industry, medicine, etc., had their appeal to the masses of the people in a colonial and semi-feudal society, who groaning under the impact of a bastard civilization felt yearnings for the supposed pristine glory of a vanished age."

"Gandhi knew how credulous the masses were. 'If one makes a fuss of eating and drinking and wears a langoti', said Gandhi 'one can easily acquire the title of Mahatma in this country.' Again he said: 'in our country, a Mahatma enjoys the right to do anything. He may commit murder, indulge in acts of debauchery or whatever else he chooses he is always pardoned. Who is there to question him?'"

"Systematic efforts were made by interested classes and persons to deify Gandhi—not without his knowledge. During the Bardoli satyagraha of 1928, which opposed the government's enhancement of land revenue 'affecting a small but dominant landed class', Vallabhbhai Patel and others including Gandhi 'deliberately used a religious idiom in their speeches and writings'."

"Myths about Gandhi which have no semblance of truth were consciously built up and propagated by his colleagues. Nehru deliberately falsified the history of the anti-colonial struggles of the Indian people before Gandhi's advent—struggles which were not diversionary ones like those in which Nehru participated under the leadership of Gandhi."

"Gandhi of the popular imagination was not as he really was. He became in the imagination of the oppressed and exploited, the simple and unsophisticated masses a symbol of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle the very opposite of what he was. They created him in the image of an ideal hero of their conception."

"British imperialism recognized him as the national leader. Like General Smuts, many Viceroy's including Willingdon regarded him as an asset. In combating the militant forces of anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle, the British ruling classes counted on his help and he never failed them. As Judith Brown wrote, 'Gandhi was impelled into or at least confirmed in a national leadership role by the Government's attitude, its needs and fears, as much as those of his followers or the compulsions of his own personality... They [the British officials] angled for his help *in the struggle against violence and terrorism* [my emphasis-LC]. From his days in South Africa, Gandhi regularly maintained personal contact with the highest levels of Government, even when no specific issue was at hand"

"The other prop—a more important one—on which Gandhi's charisma rested was the lavish support extended to him by the Indian big bourgeoisie. The Indian business elite hailed him: his message of non-violence, his satyagraha, his faith in the raj, his political aspirations, his abhorrence of class struggle, his 'change of heart' and 'trusteeship' theories, his determination to preserve the social status quo, his 'constructive programme' intended to thwart revolutionary action—all these and more convinced them that in the troubled times ahead, he was their best friend."

"His outlook on industrialization never frightened them. Rather, they expected that Gandhi's 'moral' outpourings on industry and modern civilization would weave a spell on the masses, victims of cruel exploitation who were yearning to escape from it. His ashram, all other organizations of his, and all his political, social and moral campaigns were financed by them."

"Edgar Snow was not wrong when he said: 'Nobody else in India could play this dual role of saint for the masses and champion of big business, which was the secret of Gandhi's power'"

“Gandhi's political decline started when it was realized by his close associates as well as by his big bourgeois supporters that his calculations about the 'Quit India' movement had gone awry. The British imperialists no longer frosted him, though in 1945-47 they handled him carefully in order not to antagonize him because of his influence on the Hindu masses. Nor did his associates, his former 'yes-men', and big bourgeois patrons repose in him the faith that they had before.”

“Who conspired to kill him is shrouded in mystery. It seems that the center of the ‘terrible and widespread conspiracy’, as Gandhi called it days before his assassination, was not Pune or some other distant place but quite close to him, and he had apprehensions about it.”

“Gandhi had served his purpose. His big bourgeois patrons, his Congress colleagues and British imperialism had no more any use for him. In his seventy-ninth year he passed away as a martyr with a halo around him and with all criticism of both his political and personal life hushed.”

G.B. Singh, author of [Gandhi: Behind the Mask of Divinity](#), who claims to have spent 20 years poring over Gandhi's documents, speeches and writings, echoes the Ghosh account, and more. Singh believes that Gandhi's image is a fabrication perpetuated by Western clergy and intellectuals, and Gandhi's inner circle—and Gandhi himself. He charges that a huge propaganda factory operates to this day. (See this [interview](#) with Singh, and his short essay, “[Would the real Gandhi please stand up?](#)”.)

Controversy even burns, to this day, regarding the assassination of Gandhi. Gopal Godse, co-conspirator with his brother, assassin Nathuram Godse, looks back at the murder of Gandhi [without regret](#). He, and apparently many others (considered to be “extremists”), insist that Gandhi helped destroy India (see also [Nationalism and the Gandhi Myth](#)).

Gandhi's followers must address the historical details exposed by these historians and critics. If there are problems with the historical facts about Gandhi, what are the implications for peace activists, scholars, and anti-occupation resisters, and the very foundation upon which they operate?

The Shortfalls and the Challenge

Supporters of the Gandhi Project, and the Gandhi example, might counter that a cynical view of their “gift of hope,” and any criticism of the legendary Gandhi, is counterproductive to peace—and that the project is not about pacification or propaganda, but the encouragement of “more effective resistance”; activities that that are lawful, more spiritually enlightened, and able to “open the eyes of oppressors.”

The honest question for the Gandhi crowd: How does one “open the eyes” of the likes of George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, and the legion of other butchers (who view all of humanity with contempt and sadistic derision)? Is it naïve to think those who have no interest or incentive to “transform” will change (or stop laughing)?

One of the darlings of the Left, writer and activist, [Arundhati Roy](#) wrote: “Gandhi's Salt March was not just political theatre. When, in a simple act of defiance, thousands of Indians marched to the sea and made their own salt, they broke the salt laws. It was a direct strike at the economic underpinning of the British Empire. It was *real*.” Perhaps.

But while a great number of creative methods of non-violent protest and activism are essential, the point is that *all* forms of resistance must be brought to bear—and the tactical wisdom and effectiveness of any method can only be decided by the unique circumstances faced by the resisters. What works in the United States, Britain or even Tel Aviv may not work in the killing fields of Palestine and Iraq. What seems like a no-brainer to American peace activists may, in fact, lead to ruin on the streets of Ramallah, and the glorification of compliant victimization all over the world.

There is no one philosophical answer, in spite of what the proponents of the Gandhi method may proselytize.

The post-9/11 Peak Oil era is an unprecedented era. This is uncharted territory for humankind—a new paradigm that demands painful re-examinations of old ideas and past doctrine. In Roy’s words, “we must not allow non-violent resistance to atrophy into ineffectual, feel-good political theatre. It is a weapon that needs to be constantly honed and reimagined. It cannot be allowed to become a mere spectacle, a photo opportunity for the media.”

This is not a time for backward-looking icon worship, or the “de-radicalizing” of thought (or any program that overtly or covertly encourages it), but for an extremely radical first step: clearly and correctly identify the problem. There is a powerful alliance of whistleblowers, activists, researchers, academics and ordinary citizens, who have worked lifetimes, waiting for the masses to “get it.”

As whistleblowers [Mike Ruppert and Catherine Austin Fitts](#) have suggested:

“There is still a great deal to learn from 9/11 that can proactively help individuals read the real map of the world and make a difference in their own lives. This involves a fundamental change of approach: the old, futile course of action asks citizens to go hat in hand to government and corporate interests to make them change (an impossibility), while the new approach says that if citizens can change enough within, that change can shift markets while there is still time to make some difference in the outcome for individual lives. In other words, one approach tries to convince us that the right path is to get someone else (with no interest in doing so) to save us and the other says that we must accept the responsibility for saving ourselves and gather and exercise the real power we have and have not yet used.”

So far, most Palestinians are not buying “Gandhi.” “Even many of the 300 people who attended the movie’s Arabic premiere were unconvinced,” according to the Associated Press report. Said Dea Opahi, a 21-year old Palestinian, “If we stopped resisting Israel, it would probably confiscate all the land left to us.”

Despite their exhaustion after years of resistance, most Palestinians “have no intention of abandoning their fight for an independent state.”