
The book of Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta comes at an opportune time when the US Secretary of State John Kerry is making a concerted effort to mediate in the Israeli-Palestine tensions. As Dore Gold, president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and former Israeli negotiator has said “There is a consensus in Israel favoring a Palestinian state, but not along the 1967 borders (as the Palestinian leadership insists); not with East Jerusalem as its capital (a cornerstone of every Palestinian plan); and not without maintaining an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley (which Palestinians reject as a challenge to their sovereignty).” Gold could have added that there is no consensus within Israel about a “Palestinian right-to-return beyond not discussing it.

Moreover, the Israel-Palestine issues are only part of a wider Middle East picture. As Ursula Franklin points out in the Foreword “Ours is a complex global society, in which unforeseen and unforeseeable instruments of power, control and interaction are emerging at rapid rates. These new power structures are frequently superimposed on traditional arrangements and habits of political and social conduct. Such new developments, often related to modernization and globalization, are altering individual and collective behaviours and a society’s sense of belonging and responsibility.”

Her insight is elaborated in the Israel-Palestine context by the Palestinian activist Elias Rishmawi who says “The world, with globalization, is becoming a small village, then the whole Middle East is what? Israel/Palestine is what? We are talking here about a small land and a small population. We need to come up with a certain vision that will help both of us to think that without having peace, justice, and equality, there will be no solution.”

Maxime Kaufman-Lacusta has developed through interviews and quotations from talks given at conferences on non-violent action in Israel-Palestine a fascinating book — an extended evaluation session on tactics and strategies among Palestinians and Israeli activists along with “internationals” — Europeans and Americans usually associated with International Solidarity Movement to which belonged Rachel Corrie who was killed in a house demolition protest.

Maxime is interested in how people became involved in non-violent action, in their family history and their beliefs, how they evaluate the overall situation and the effectiveness of the aims and the tactics. However, the emphasis is on improving the effectiveness of action by asking about individual’s evaluation of the overall situation, the aims, the strategy, the tactics,
the effectiveness of the actions and the value of cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians and internationals. “Despite its relative marginality and other impediments to its successes, the non-violent movement has chalked up some notable victories over the years. And even it these have been relatively small when compared to the magnitude of the task, they provide a good entry point for a foray into some speculation on the potential for non-violent struggle in the future.”

For most, Israel Occupation means the land and processes put into effect after the 1967 war with the occupation of the “West Bank” which had been under the control of Jordan, Gaza and Sinai under Egyptian rule and the Golan Heights, part of Syria — thus 46 years of “Occupation”. For some, especially Palestinians, occupation begins in 1948 and the Arab refugee flows from villages now in the State of Israel. Discussions on the implementation of the “Right to Return” — an important Palestinian demand — concerns if a return should be to the Israeli areas which the Palestinians had left or rather a return to the potential Palestinian State — basically the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or rather monetary compensation for property lost.

The first working title of the book was to have been “From Beit Sahour to Bil’im”, but the title would have been understood only by those who recalled the town of Beit Sahour’s sustained tax strike in the late 1980s and the continuing weekly protests at Bil’in against the “Separation Wall” which would deprive Palestinian farmers of access to their lands and land confiscation.

The title Refusing to be Enemies may give the impression that the focus will be on attitudes, on the refusal to make the Other the Enemy. However, there is relatively little emphasis on psychology. Gene Sharp is the spiritual “godfather” with some extended quotations of his talks at seminars in Palestine with Mubarak Awad as the person who had translated into Arabic and distributed widely Sharp’s list of potential actions — until Mubarak Awad was deported in 1988 from Israel to the USA. However Mubarak Awad had planted many of the seeds which later flowered in part through his nephew Sami Awad of the Holy Land Trust whose observations are often quoted stressing that “Nonviolence is not just weapons to resist the occupation; it is how to build the community of the future, how to resolve internal problems, how to unify the different factions and different ideas that you have in your community, which is a very big problem for us today.”

Originally in much of the Palestinian community non-violence was considered as submissive, as a way for Israel and the West to pacify the Palestinian people. However, little by little, the main thrust of Gene Sharp’s non-violent strategic action which is the power to say “No” has progressed so that now many Palestinians see non-violence as an active tool to resist and end
the occupation. The key to Sharp’s approach is the fundamental proposition that “Withdrawal of popular and institutional cooperation diminishes, and may sever, the availability of the sources of power on which all rulers depend.” Building on this fundamental insight, largely proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, one must then analyse correctly the sources of power on which rulers depend and then develop methods and strategies to weaken or counteract these sources of power — financial, military, ideological, economic, intellectual etc.

At first glance, the sources of Israel power, largely backed by the USA, seem strong, and many Palestinians are discouraged by the lack of progress and the inability to make a dent in the power equation. As one Palestinian activist, Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of Wi’am said “The Palestinians are hitting bottom. There should be a jump-start, a way to have hope, maybe to inject hope in people. I don’t know how. Because you need to see progress, and what we see is a lot of retrogression. The Israeli right-wing government is doing a lot of illegal things — building settlements, building a wall — so people say non-violence won’t work. The question is, would violence work?”

However, as we have seen from the “Arab Spring” and as we may be seeing these days in such countries as Turkey, Brazil and Greece, it may be possible to weaken radically the sources of power in a relatively short time and in most cases with non-violent methods. What is more difficult is how to establishes new sources of power — hopefully more just and participative sources of power. Many of the non-violent techniques discussed by those interviewed in this book are good at weakening power. There is relatively little discussion as to what happens next.

The interview-conversation style of the book gives the feeling of sitting in an extended planning and evaluation session with non-violent activists. As would be true in practice, there is some repetition of ideas and some broad generalizations. However, the issues are crucial, and Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta has done an excellent job of bulling the discussions together and highlighting the basic questions and approaches. This is a book well worth reading carefully.

Rene Wadlow