

Lighting a candle... finding a way forward:

The work of 'The Way':

*The Palestinian Organisation for
Development and Democracy*

**An interview with Younes Musa & Khaled Abu Awwad
by Virginia Leake**

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This interview took place in Ramallah, in the Palestinian Territories. It describes the work of a new Palestinian organisation The Way: The Palestinian Organisation for Development and Democracy which seeks to build a Palestinian civil society and achieve an independent Palestine through non-violent resistance. This interview traces the history of this organisation's work, the challenges being faced, the projects they are developing, and a philosophy that engenders hope. The interviewer was Virginia Leake, who works for Dulwich Centre Publications. Angel Yuen and Ruth Pluznick were also present.

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Can you tell us about the history of your organisation ...

Younes: In the last few years, there have been times when it has felt as if everything we have been struggling for has been collapsing. It was from this sense of deep concern that our founders met together and started to make plans for a new way forward. Our founders are our strength. All of them have been in jail many times. Many of them have been shot, and all of them were involved in the military struggle against the occupation for a long time. Some of them were sentenced to life in prison but were released as part of prisoner exchanges.

The strength of our founders is in the major change that they have been through. After a long experience with the armed struggle, in which they encouraged people to free the country through killing the other side, now they are taking an opposite path, a path of non-violent resistance.

We love our people. We don't want to see their blood continually spilt and we have seen the result of non-violent action elsewhere. We have studied the work and action of Gandhi. In India they achieved independence through non-violent struggle. We are not less than those people. Yes, we are under occupation, but to improve our position in the world, to improve our reputation, to have the world turn to us rather than away from us, we are rejecting violence.

You mentioned to us earlier that you don't want to rush the building of this organisation, that you want to build strong foundations ... can you say more about this?

Younes: There are probably about 3,000 Palestinian organisations but maybe only ten of these are really active. The rest all grew up quickly and then collapsed very quickly. We wish to be patient and build our relations with others. We don't want to fall down the same holes that the people who have come before us fell into. We want to be very patient, to move very slowly. Not because we are turtles, but sometimes it's wise to move like a turtle!

Can you tell us more about your founding members?

Younes: The man I introduced you to yesterday was for many years the most wanted man by the Israelis

as he was very much involved in the armed struggle. They captured him and sentenced him to life imprisonment. He had been involved in many acts of violence himself, and he was tortured while in prison. How could it be, you might ask, that he changed direction and realised that non-violence was the future? Well, it was in prison that for the first time in his life he was able to talk to Israelis. The segregation is so extreme here that young Palestinians only get to see Israelis in their army uniforms at check points or when the Israeli military is taking part in incursions into Palestinian villages. But in prisons, sometimes Palestinian prisoners have the chance to talk with Israeli guards. There is time in prison for many conversations. There is very little else to do. And so, while he was sitting with the guards he would talk with them and argue about the whole situation. And he realised that some of these guards genuinely wanted peace. They simply want to live with their families in peace and in harmony, and to enjoy their lives. And they want to die peacefully also. They don't want to be shot or knifed, or bombed.

As he had been sentenced to life in prison, he thought he was going to die inside prison walls. But as it turned out he spent ten years in prison and was then released. As soon as he was free he started to seek out ways in which he could contribute to peace and justice. And he was one of the key figures in starting this organisation as a focal point for non-violent resistance.

Has there been opposition to your work about non-violent resistance?

Younes: Yes, of course. It is not a popular course of action and can be dangerous. For instance, a few people may accuse us of being collaborators with Israel. No one before has dared to stand behind the philosophy of non-violence. But we are not afraid, because we expected that we would be exposed to dangers, and are still expecting this. Our founders are leaders in our society and local people trust them. Why? Because we saw them over years sacrificing everything for the struggle. They gained our trust as they risked their lives time and again. Now they are using their ideas, thoughts, and minds, to convince people of what we believe in. It is still an act of courage, just a different form.

The programs and activities that we run are also significant in building trust. We cannot simply talk, we must take action to support our people and to promote the ideas of non-violence.

Can you tell us about these projects?

Younes: We are starting small, just like a tree that is starting to grow. And we are reaching out to young people, and to children who are ten and eleven years old. We hold discussions, teachings and workshops, and it is our hope that this generation will become the peace-makers. They will spread the ideas. They will become leaders. They will speak with their neighbours, their families. Soon they can be our lecturers. And they will not only be speaking about peace and non-violence. We are focusing on the development of every aspect of Palestinian life – health, education, and community life. We are also working with university students – the ‘Youth of the Way’ who are going to be our new leaders, who will carry new ideas into the streets, the schools, the universities. And we are initiating women’s programs. Our women members are visiting the streets of the villages and refugee camps, to listen to the women and to consult with them about what projects will be of most significance to them. We may have our ideas, but they may differ from the perspectives of the women in the camps. So we are listening to their stories and planning together what projects will be meaningful.

We must take action in order to build trust. We have heard so much talking for so many years. The only way we can trust the one who is talking or debating is if we see them taking action.

As you are speaking there seems a clear sense of hopefulness about these new directions, can you tell me more about this hope ...

Khaled: If we feel desperate about everything, if we are frustrated, then we only see the darkness in front of us, we don’t see light. There is a saying that is significant to me. It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness a thousand times.

Our real fight as Palestinian people, as a people who have lived under occupation for so long, is to hold onto hope. This is our real fight and it’s a very hard one. It’s more difficult, I think, than waging an armed struggle.

Our other biggest challenge relates to trust. It often seems that the Israeli leadership is only ever interested in describing Palestinians as terrorists. And, as I mentioned before, our people only ever see Israelis holding weapons and enforcing the occupation. So no wonder there is no trust between us.

All of us who have turned the corner and embraced the idea of non-violence know the price of violence. For me, I lost two of my brothers. My son has also been shot. Another brother has also been shot in his legs. These sorts of stories are true for all of us. Surely it must be time for us to talk with each other and to say that we are not willing to pay the price of violence anymore. If our leaders do not yet understand this, then let’s go to the streets and face them, and help them to understand.

We are from far away and soon we will be returning home. Are there ways in which people like us can assist you and your work?

Khaled: I am hoping that you will write about the things we have been discussing – our ideas, beliefs, and feelings. We cannot travel to where you are now going but perhaps you can take our words with you. And if you return here one day, you could bring some education with you. I believe some of you are social workers. Perhaps there are materials, ideas, and stories from your part of the world that could assist us in our work here.

And perhaps, something about our experiences here could be of value to you. As Palestinians, we know suffering and through this experience we have learned a lot about every aspect of life. Perhaps, regardless of our borders, regardless of whatever divisions our leaders try to place between us, we can be there for each other in some way.