

# “Starting with secondly”

## Land dispossession and (non)violence discourse

Jonathan Brenneman

### The covenanted nation and the “violent” dispossessed

*“The easiest way to dispossess a people is to tell their story starting with secondly.”*

—Mourid Barghouti, *Palestinian Poet*

“How about you renounce violence?” the audience member demanded of Ali Abunimah, the only Palestinian panelist at the academic presentation held at Notre Dame University. It was a startling interruption to the peace studies event. Abunimah had just countered a misconception that justifies Israeli military strikes against Palestinians as purely retaliatory. He recognized the media’s tendency of “starting with secondly” as a key aspect of Israeli colonization, which frames Palestinian retaliation to violence as aggression. The audience member’s response? “This is the Kroc Institute of peace and you sit here justifying violence.” With his finger pointed at Abunimah, the disrupter leveled his demand again, “Renounce violence as a starting point!”<sup>1</sup>

The audience member didn’t ask the Catholic American professor to renounce violence, though Western Catholics have contributed to much more violence than Palestinians. Nor did he demand a renunciation of violence from the Israeli professor sitting next to Abunimah, although she had been in the Israeli Military. Never mind that the Israeli military has killed nearly ten times as many people as Palestinians have (and nearly twenty times as many children).<sup>2</sup> The audience member had no qualms about the overt and systemic violence used to disposes Palestinians of their land; the only violence he wanted renounced was that of the people being dispossessed.

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1 Ali Abunimah, “Understanding Gaza.” Lecture at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, August 28, 2014, <https://youtu.be/OJlOs86wva8?t=3574>.

2 Statistics, <https://www.btselem.org/statistics>.

The hypocrisy of the audience member is glaring. What is more insidious is the implicit association of Palestinians with violence. Putting the onus on those being dispossessed to make peace—that is, to “renounce

**Putting the onus on those being dispossessed to make peace—that is, to “renounce violence”—is a common rhetorical tactic of colonial projects, especially those of “covenant-ed nations.”**

violence”—is a common rhetorical tactic of colonial projects, especially those of “covenant-ed nations,” a term Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz uses to name a settler colonialism founded on a promised land and chosen people narrative.<sup>3</sup> While focusing on European colonization of North America, she lists two other examples of this: the Boer colonization of South Africa and Israeli colonization of Palestine.

The audience member’s comment is an echo of demands that apologists for covenant-ed nations make in every context. He likely did not realize that he was playing the part of Apartheidist P. W. Botha and putting Abunimah in the role of Nelson Mandela, but he nearly parroted the South African Apartheid leader’s oft-repeated refrain, “As soon as he [Nelson Mandela] renounces violence and undertakes not to start violence in South Africa, the government will release him.”<sup>4</sup>

The unique aspect of covenant-ed nations is the role of religion in the claiming of the land. Other authors in this issue write about the religious aspects of the colonization of North America, but this was also a theme in South Africa and in Palestine. Religion is used not only to bless colonialism with a “Promised Land” narrative but also to demonize those whose are being dispossessed of their lands.

Botha claimed in 1987, “I have come to the realisation and conviction that the struggle in South Africa is not between White, Black and Brown, but between *Christian civilized* standards and the powers of chaos.”<sup>5</sup> This motif is picked up presently with the portrait of Palestinians. In 2012 subway ads were put up in New York and San Francisco stating, “In the war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man.

3 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 50.

4 Pieter-Dirk Uys, ed., *P.W. Botha in His Own Words* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 23.

5 Uys, *P.W. Botha*, 23 (emphasis added).

Support Israel. Defeat jihad.” The covenanted nation can claim an angelic innocence, but for the covenant narrative to work, any opposition to the chosen people in their promised land must be evil, chaotic, and savage. To keep up the narrative it is essential for the covenanted nation to consistently portray those they are dispossessing not only as violent but also as the originators of the violence.

This fixation on the violence of the oppressed and dispossessed is troubling because it is so often effective. It is a key aspect of Israel’s *Hasbarah* (Hebrew for “explanation”) project.<sup>6</sup> US media is happy to provide the space. An audit of five major US newspapers from 1967 to 2017 bears this out:

*The U.S. mainstream media’s coverage of the issue favours Israel by providing greater access to Israeli officials, focusing on Israeli narratives both in terms of the quantity of coverage as well as the overall sentiment, as conveyed by headlines.*

*This is in marked contrast to the Palestinians, who are consistently underrepresented as well as covered more negatively. Furthermore, key elements of the conflict are understated, likely not to provide readers of these publications the full nature and complexities of Israel’s over 50-year occupation of the Palestinians.<sup>7</sup>*

The effect of the erasure of Israeli violence, particularly by ignoring structural violence, allows a colonial narrative of irrationally hostile natives to spread.

The call for Palestinians to renounce violence perpetuates the colonial framing of the conflict: that the colonizers are righteous and that there would be peace if only the savage indigenous people would put down their weapons. Or, as the Israeli refrain goes, “If they put down their guns, there would be peace; if we put down our guns, we would be driven into the sea.” This hypothetical, devoid of any historical backing (quite the opposite), is based on nothing other than a blind faith in the colonial narrative. The narrative that Palestinians are inherently violent

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6 The Israeli’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs refers to itself as “Hasbara”; <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/abouttheministry/pages/what%20hasbara%20is%20really%20all%20about%20-%20may%202005.aspx>.

7 Usaid Siddiqui and Owais A. Zaheer, *50 Years of Occupation a Sentiment and N-Gram Analysis of U.S Mainstream Media Coverage of the Israeli Occupation of Palestine*, 416 Labs, <http://416labs.com/blog/2018/12/19/50-years-of-occupation>, 15.

creates a dichotomy in the colonial framework: either Palestinians are violently aggressive, or they should surrender. The colonial imagination has no room for true nonviolent resistance.

### **An ecosystem of nonviolent resistance**

*“We teach life sir. We Palestinians wake up every morning and teach the rest of the world life, sir!”*

*—Rafeef Ziadah, Palestinian-Canadian poet*

I was enamored! I stood outside of a makeshift pavilion in the middle of the South Hebron Hills desert, the sun beating down on my neck, the wind swirling the dust around my legs, thinking that I had just glimpsed heaven. For a moment the Israeli soldiers overlooking us from the hill-tops just seemed powerless. It was a feeling I’ve had on a few occasions: when praying at Standing Rock and when attending an Urban Land Justice gathering led by displaced people in Cape Town, South Africa. This feeling—that I’m witnessing the inbreaking of the kin-dom of God—only seems to happen when I’m among people who are fighting the dispossession of their land and doing so without violence.

The moment took place in the town of At-Tuwani, on the southern border of the West Bank. The people of At-Tuwani find themselves on the front lines of Palestinian dispossession. At-Tuwani sits in a valley. The hilltop to one side of it hosts an established illegal Israeli settlement.<sup>8</sup> On the hilltop to the other side sits a newer illegal outpost (a proto-settlement). The goal of the settlement and the outpost are to take over all the land in the middle and merge. That land makes up the village of At-Tuwani and the surrounding fields where shepherds graze their flocks.

Similar to other settler-colonial projects, Israelis who live in settlements tend to be there either out of financial difficulty or out of a religious fervor claiming their supposed God-given right to the land. The settlers near At-Tuwani are the latter. They hold extremist beliefs that they are destined to take over the land, cleanse it of all non-Jews, and rule over it as God-ordained lords. Their actions are just as extreme. They intimidate and attack Palestinians, especially shepherds, who are often alone in fields near the settlement and school children who have to pass the

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8 All Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories are illegal under international law. These settlements are additionally illegal under Israeli law.

settlements en route to school.<sup>9</sup> They have also thrown animal carcasses in Palestinian wells, their only water source.<sup>10</sup> They do all of this under the watchful eye of Israeli soldiers, who are not allowed to stop them, and who sometimes assist. In short, the Israeli machine made up of soldiers and settlers is trying to dispossess the Palestinians of At-Tuwani by turning their lives into a living hell.

But the people of At-Tuwani do not despair. Through a series of strategic decisions, the leadership of the village determined that the best way to combat their dispossession was to “renounce violence” and instead

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to resist nonviolently. This was no easy task. To effectively use nonviolence, the people of At-Tuwani had to create an entire ecosystem of resistance. They didn’t just have a nonviolent campaign or a single strategy of nonviolence, but the village as a whole, in relationship with one another, chose nonviolence as a way of life. Everyone had a role to play in a balanced approach that grew the community—an ecosystem of resistance.

It was not just older, able-bodied men who led the charge. Women were at the core of the nonviolent resistance.

An incident near the beginning of the resistance helped put this in motion. The Israeli military invaded the village to destroy the pylons that held up power lines. They were going to leave the village with no electricity. The people in At-Tuwani realized that with armed guards surrounding the equipment, the men would be arrested or killed if they even approached. The women did not hesitate to step up. One elder woman stood in front of a bulldozer that was there to tear down the pylon, driven by a young female Israeli soldier. The woman from At-Tuwani stared straight into the young soldier’s eyes, and she could see


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9 Christian Peacemaker Teams and Operation Dove, *The Dangerous Road to Education: Palestinian Students Suffer under Settler Violence and Military Negligence* (Creative Commons: 2010), [http://www.cpt.org/files/palestine/shh-report\\_school\\_patrol\\_2009-10-the\\_dangerous\\_road\\_to\\_education.pdf](http://www.cpt.org/files/palestine/shh-report_school_patrol_2009-10-the_dangerous_road_to_education.pdf).

10 David Hearst, “West Bank Villagers’ Daily Battle with Israel over Water,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/sep/14/west-bank-villagers-battle-water>.

the soldier break out of her military training and become a young woman again. The Israeli dropped her head and turned the bulldozer around, and they stopped their destruction. Ever since then, the women of At-Tuwani not only have participated in the nonviolent demonstrations but are in all the planning meetings—and often lead them. Their leadership brought deeper creativity and inclusion into the ecosystem of resistance.

Artists, musicians, and actors also played a role in the ecology of non-violence that has been cultivated in At-Tuwani. In my many visits to the village, I never went to a demonstration that didn't also include a celebration, and I never went to a celebration that didn't also include a demon-



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stration. Their love of the arts attracted the Jenin Freedom Theater. The theater did a “Freedom Bus” tour through the West Bank. They stopped in major cities like Nablus, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Ramallah and in tiny little At-Tuwani. The idea was that the troupe would do playback theater, as a way of storytelling and healing. In the evening the village gathered. They told stories, and the actors would play them out. The troupe acted out stories of children being jailed and people being beaten by settlers. They told these stories with beauty and care, often finding ways to add in some humor, so everyone could laugh together.

At the end of the evening, the organizers of the event reminded everyone to come back tomorrow to break ground on a new building, despite the authorities threatening to not allow them. The celebration needed a demonstration.

Their organizing had space for “outsiders” to participate as well. An Israeli organization called Ta’ayush, an Italian organization called Operation Dove, and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) answered the call. They were especially helpful in getting children to and from school past the Israeli settlements. In 2004 Operation Dove and CPT started accompanying children every day to and from school and lived in a small house in town. The settlers didn't change their actions much, but when their actions targeted not only “savage” Palestinian children but also “civilized” internationals, it became unacceptable. The organizations were able to

document the attacks. Ta’ayush used their contacts with Israeli journalists to make the issue front-page news, and eventually the Israeli government took notice. They demanded that the Israeli military show up every day to walk the kids to school. This is an unprecedented occurrence and a huge win for the At-Tuwani campaign. Though there are still many problems

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with having a foreign hostile military walking children to school (the soldiers are often late, often don’t get along well with the children, or do not live up to their obligations),<sup>11</sup> it showed that this small village could leverage power and advocate for change.

The children of At-Tuwani were not helpless. They were part of the ecosystem too. I witnessed this when I was invited to a demonstration to build the kids a shelter that they could wait inside,


if soldiers were late to walk them home from school, as they often are. The strategy included all aspects of the ecosystem. Internationals were invited to come and be observers. The men of the village would work on putting the shelter together, quietly behind the demonstration. Women led the chants and choreographed the event. The children were part of the demonstration too. They gave interviews to journalists, talking about their first-hand experiences. And they playfully challenged and distracted the soldiers. They were waving Palestinian flags, hanging them up on fence posts. The soldiers would angrily tear them down and throw them on the ground. So the kids would pick them up and hang them up again. They knew what they could get away with, without getting into too much trouble, and they knew not to get into fights with the soldiers. While the soldiers were occupied minding the children, the shelter was constructed. This was no lucky accident with ornery children; they were all trained in nonviolence.

The organizers in At-Tuwani know that they need to teach their kids these ways as well. So they put on a peace camp not only for their own children but also for the children of their Israeli allies. I attended the grad-

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11 CPTnet, “AT-TUWANI: Military Escort Misconduct Exposes Palestinian Children to Risk on Their Way to and from School,” Christian Peacemaker Teams, April 9, 2014, <https://www.cpt.org/cptnet/2014/04/09/tuwani-military-escort-misconduct-exposes-palestinian-children-risk-their-way-and->

uation of the peace camp, and it was incredible! The huge pavilion tent was filled with parents, friends of the village, and Israeli and international human rights NGOs. Two women MCed the event, while the men of the village served coffee to the crowd, a role reversal of patriarchal norms. The main event was the kids. First, a group of boys came up and danced *debbkah*, a Palestinian dance that tells a story of resistance. The young boys enthusiastically expressed themselves and told stories through movement.



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Then two girls came up and gave riveting speeches to the crowd about what they had learned. They sounded like practiced orators.

After all the children, Palestinian and Israeli, were honored for completing the camp, we got up to get food and share a meal together. I sat down beside a Palestinian Muslim activist from a nearby village, sitting across from a Jewish Israeli—one a farmer who will probably never leave that region, the other a well-educated, well-traveled journalist. They sat across from each other, old friends, reminiscing about the different

demonstrations they'd been a part of, asking about each other's families, laughing, and eating off the same plate.

It didn't hit me until I stepped outside the pavilion and remembered where I was. I looked around and couldn't help but think, *This must be what heaven is like*. When I hear about God's upside-down kingdom, the image of those two eating together that day is what comes to mind. Despite the hell around them, they created heaven.

Not every day in At-Tuwani is like that day. Palestinian children are still arbitrarily arrested and abused by Israeli soldiers, farmers are still harassed and beaten by settlers, but the unifying force of the nonviolent ecosystem has made a difference. Not only does it offer temporary relief and make Palestinians feel better and more powerful; it actually makes them more powerful. For example, they created a master plan, allowing them control of building projects. This is unheard of in the West Bank. It means they no longer have to ask the Israeli Civil Authority for building permits (the CA denies 99.8 percent of requests). The demolition orders on the homes and the school were removed!



## Conclusion

*“I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

How do people who have seen the liberating power of nonviolence—who understand it strategically or believe in its moral authority, who have witnessed its success against land dispossession—not contribute to the clamors of those with power that the violence is the fault of the powerless and that their renunciation of violence is what is needed for peace? How can we lighten the burden on those who are already carrying so much on their trail of death? Looking at King’s quote in conversation with Barghouti’s offers an insight. Both quotes hint at a sequence: “starting with secondly” or “without first.” Before suggesting nonviolence, it is necessary to recognize, name, and condemn the massive violence of displacement. If one does not, one risks perpetuating colonial frameworks whose demand of nonviolence is actually a demand for nonresistance to land dispossession. A key component of colonialism is erasure. This erasure includes the erasure of the violence of colonialism and land dispossession. To preach nonviolence one must *first* name and condemn the violence of colonialism.

## About the author

Jonathan Brennehan comes from a long line of Mennonites on his father’s side and a prominent Palestinian Christian family on his mother’s side. He grew up attending Lima Mennonite Church. After graduating high school, he participated in the Mennonite Mission Network’s Radical Journey program in Northern Ireland before attending Huntington University, where he studied history and philosophy. He then worked with Christian Peacemaker Teams Palestine Project in Hebron, where they built partnerships with Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers to transform violence and oppression. Jonathan was a Rotary Peace Fellow studying at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, and holds a master’s degree in International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University’s Kroc Institute. That program included a six-month internship with Ndifuna Ukwazi in Cape Town, South Africa, an organization which advocates for more just land policies. Most recently, he participated in the Mennonite Voluntary Service program, volunteering with MC USA to facilitate the writing, passing, and implementation of the Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine Resolution. He currently resides in Syracuse, New York, with his partner, Sarah.