CULTURES OF RESISTANCE.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE:
AN IRISH REPUBLICAN NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE

Pat

Bobby Sands

CONTENTS

About the *Cultures of Resistance Activism Forum*

Cultures of Resistance Activism Forum is a project that aims to address the Western hostile use of language intended to restrict debate related to mainstream Islamist movements and currents. The project will explore more effective means to respond to hostile use of language—as well as explore how better to insist on extending public debate beyond its standard focus on 'Islamist violence'—by launching a 'positive' (non-defensive) discourse on Islamism.

In partnership with a wide number of social activist and public campaign groups, we aim to advocate for a shift in language from the defensive to the positive; to learn how others, in different struggles, have achieved this transition; and by this means, and by gaining greater critical mass, to open space in which a discourse of rebuttal and 'resistance' can be developed through visual and other means to imposed narratives and stereotyping. The aim is to change the terms of debate and to move it to a more directly challenging, but more widely accessible, advocacy of understanding Islamist ideology.

Cover
1981, General views of Republican areas: Women protesting during the hunger strike by Irish Republican prisoners in 1981.

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FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE:

AN IRISH REPUBLICAN NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE

At a recent Conflicts Forum seminar, I was asked to give a personal perspective on the subject 'From the Margins to the Centre'. I approached it from the viewpoint that a resistance movement has to place itself at the centre, because that is where an impact can be made on the process of change.

Interview with Raymond McCartney, *Sinn Féin*

Above
Bin-lid demonstration, 1981

Opposite
An IRA woman addresses
a demonstration, 1981

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I began my talk by examining where Sinn Féin found ourselves at that moment in time, and I joked that Conflicts Forum had set me the goal of condensing 800 years of Irish history into a ten-minute talk. The following is an edited version of the talk I gave at the seminar.

The Irish peace process has been described as having some degree of success in that a problem described by many as intractable has at least come up with some solutions. It has seen an end to armed conflict and a demilitarization of our society. It has created a political framework to deliver equality; in justice, legal, social and political affairs. For us as Irish republicans and nationalists, it creates a framework to end British interference in our affairs, and creates an overall structure to do that.

This did not happen by accident, but by design. From a republican perspective we were guided by strong, strategic objectives based on our understanding of our history and they provided the framework on which we managed changed. This process was guided by the presence of good leadership and a vision for the future. This gave us a sense of what could be achieved and how it could be achieved. Too often in our history decisions for tomorrow were hampered by the experience of yesterday.

The relationship between Britain and Ireland is familiar to many who have experienced colonialism. In the 1920s, Britain partitioned our country and many of us were locked into a state that did not recognize us as citizens. The systems of governance and political affairs were designed in such a way that

every aspect of life was underpinned by discrimination. The politics of domination prevailed over four decades until the late 1960s.

The late 1960s heralded the emergence of the Civil Rights movement which articulated the need for equal citizenship and universal suffrage and governance. The response of the state was one of suppression of the movement's ideas and the oppression of its supporters.

At that time in the hour of great need, the leaders of the resistance movements, of the political movements, failed the people. On that basis and as a result of the failure of politics, armed resistance emerged on our streets. The underlying basis of that military resistance was both the British presence in our country and a total and absolute mistrust of politics.

A resistance movement has to place itself at the centre, because that is where an impact can be made on the process of change
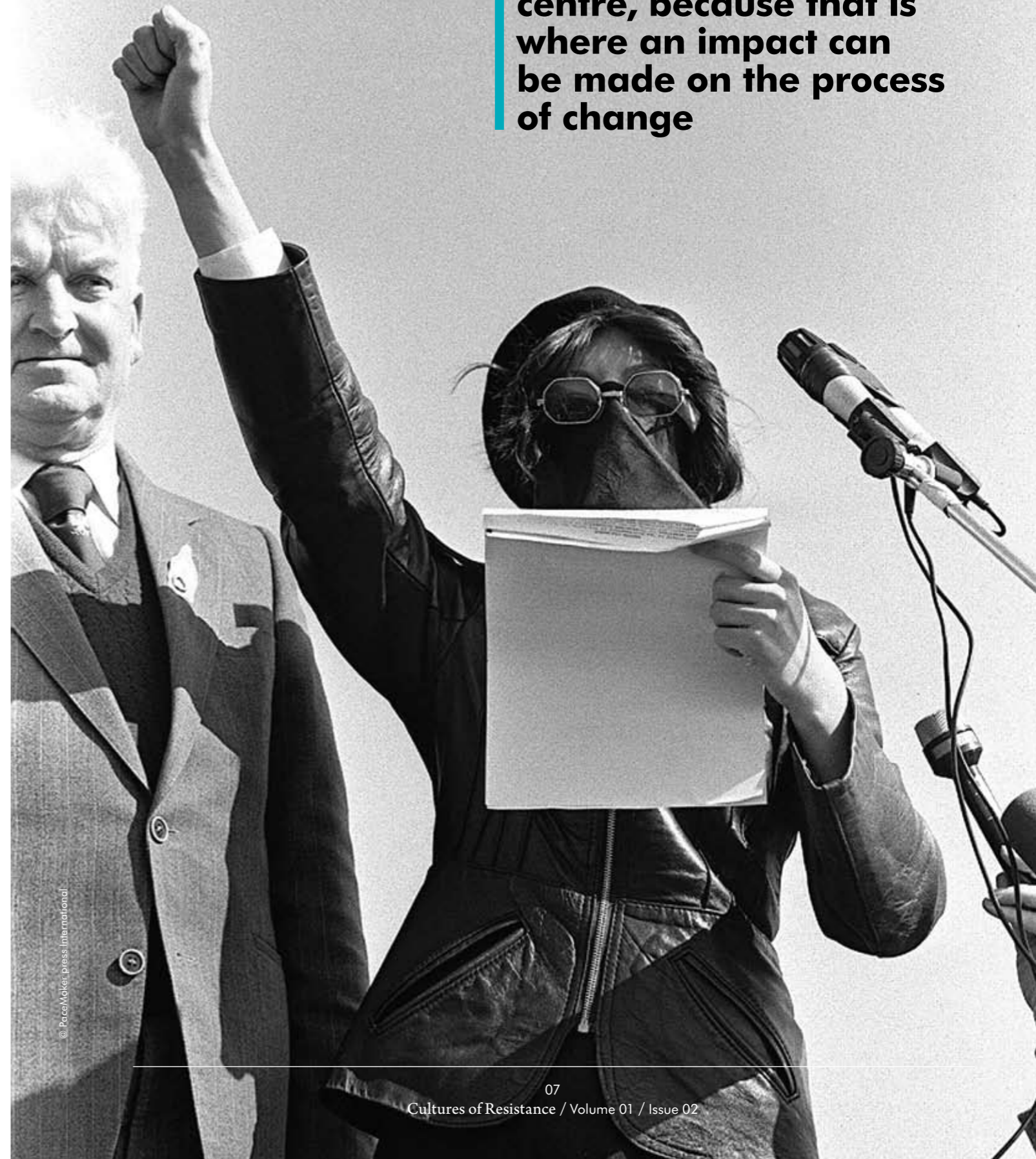
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Therefore, for the next ten or 15 years, there was an emphasis on total reliance on military actions. This was led by the IRA and the response of the British state was that of emergency laws and oppression, political policing and killing on our streets.

Throughout that period, there was a total reliance on armed struggle, but it soon became apparent that over-reliance—irrespective of its ability to deliver—placed too much responsibility and workload on too few people. Awareness of these limitations prompted a decision to reposition the movement from reliance on a small minority waging armed resistance to an emphasis on political resistance through constitutional change.

Under the leadership of Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin began to articulate that if the Irish Freedom struggle was a political struggle (and this was already accepted by all involved in that struggle), then it required a strong political force—a party to represent the aspirations of republicans and nationalists. As early as 1982, Gerry Adams also contended that when a military stalemate ensued there had to be political negotiations and with it political outcomes. The British privately conceded that there was a military stalemate but there were still elements in the British establishment who did not want to negotiate.

Sinn Féin argued that there were more sites of struggle than the military struggle. Up until this time, Sinn Féin did not contest elections. However, when in 1981 Bobby Sands went on hunger strike in Long Kesh, he stood for election to the British parliament and was elected. This had a powerful effect on republicans. They saw not only how the republican position could be advanced electorally but that there was a sense of, and a zest for, mass participation. That type of change—the need to change political direction—was not without

difficulty for some republicans. The great strength of the Sinn Féin leadership was its ability to create a framework for internal discussion, debate and with it an exploration of the way forward. Some decisions did prove too much for some activists who left the party in 1986 when it decided to end the policy of abstaining from taking seats in the Irish Parliament.

It is often a task of liberation and resistance movements to manage change. The best guarantor of managing change is the ability to detail what will ensue as a result of the decisions made, and provide practical evidence of its outworking. Sinn Féin's electoral successes highlighted the need for other forms and sites of struggle. It also meant that our political opponents could no longer rely on military and emergency laws as the only means to curtail resistance.

It also permitted Gerry Adams to begin internal discussion and subsequently to convince our political opponents on the island of Ireland of the need for a peace process. This was premised on the paradigm that there would be no military solution, and the process should be based on inclusivity without preconditions.

It was on that basis that the Irish peace process began. British policy up to that time was dominated by military and security thinking. The election of Tony Blair in 1997, who was free from the legacy of past Conservative government party policy, seized the opportunity. This was reinforced by international solidarity, particularly from the Clinton administration and the emerging new democracy in South Africa.

Importantly for the republican community and for republican activists particularly within the military struggle, there was a sense of ownership of the process. Whereas it was directed by the leadership, it required a great deal of grassroots work to explain the changes

to activists. For those involved in military struggle there had to be a clear demonstration to see where it was going —that 'politics was working'.

They began to see that armed actions in themselves were tactics and therefore had to change with prevailing conditions. Opponents to change in the process often tried to portray the military activists as the blockage to progress. Indeed the leadership of the military struggle took initiatives to demonstrate that they were not obstacles but that they wanted the process to work. This included the calling of military cessations, initiatives to put arms beyond use. I contend that the process allowed republicans, in particular Sinn Féin, to move from the margins to the centre of the political dynamic, and in so doing bring about change.

Republican resistance provided the dynamic for political change. Sinn Féin's political strength had increased and with it our ability to set the political agenda. In response, in 2005, the IRA formally announced an end to armed struggle and committed its activists to political programs. The transition from armed resistance to political resistance in many ways was a seamless process. Today we carry on as political activists to achieve the same objective.

In conclusion, my experience of political activism is similar to that of many others. When military resistance was the only means to create change, that was our tactic. We are involved in a political struggle, and therefore when political circumstances allowed, or dictated that our tactics needed to change, then our revolutionary character came to the fore.

Our struggle is about ending British interference in Ireland, the creation of a national democracy and we continue to pursue that from the place where most change comes—the centre of political struggle. ∎

It is often a task of liberation and resistance movements to manage change

A DISCOURSE OF DEMONISATION
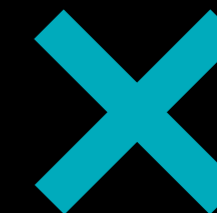
When scenes of the Iranian demonstrations were shown on American television and around the world, the impressions given by Western media were largely of visions and values that were incompatible with anything that existed in the West.

Written by Seyed Mohammad Marandi, *University of Tehran*
Photography by Yannis Kontos

Whereas, in fact, the resistance to the US was linked to the 1953 coup that had been instigated by the CIA and the fear of a renewed American attempt to retake the country. Many of the 1979 revolutions' roots and themes are very similar to many 20th century anti-imperialist resistance, anti-colonial and liberation movements in Asia, Latin America, the US' Civil Rights movement and the black struggle more widely.

There was also, however, a very strong critique of liberal democracy, corporate domination, and capitalism throughout the Islamic revolutionary discourse at that time. Traditional themes such as poverty and injustice, despotism and imperialism, and commodification of women, were criticized in the Islamic discourse of Imam Khomeini. The aim was to bring about social justice, compassion and freedom within the framework of an Islamist discourse. Despite war, sanctions and terrorism supported by the major powers and hostile neighbours which were largely reactionary and were funded by American and Western governments to anti-government groups in Iran—both militant and non-militant —to a large extent Iran has weathered these and has moved forward. It has maintained plurality, a lot of which is linked to the resilience of a sense of sacrifice that comes from the themes of Ashura. Some of Iran's practical success in showing Islam's relevance and applicability in today's world comes from the fact that the gates of ijtihad remain open. As Imam Khomeini wrote in a letter, different circumstances, different eras, and

different places may result in different applications of Islamic law.

What is significant, however, is that some aspects of the Islamic narrative are, in many ways, similar to the leftist critique of capitalism and neoliberalism. However, the difference is that while this Islamic narrative distances itself from extremist individualism, it also stresses individual rights. And of course a duty to the creator. It stresses human values like anti-racism, and Iran supported and continues to support movements that are in no way whatsoever Islamist, yet which struggle for equality and justice: the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, Sinn Féin in Ireland, Liberation theology, the Sandinistas, Morales, Chavez and others. It has been an inclusive narrative; one that is non-sectarian, nor nationalistic in the negative sense. Iran is probably the only Islamic country that supported Bosnia in a practical sense and has continued to support the people of Palestine. In solidarity with the Palestinian people, many Iranians wore the kafiyyeh during the war initiated by Saddam Hussein and many were martyred wearing it.

These are themes and visions that are common to much of humanity. But the reality is that the dominating discourse that exists at the level of the global media has reinforced the idea of the irrational, violent oriental—in this case Iranians. During the war with Iraq, Iran was continuously demonised—stories were provided by the media to reinforce the idea of the irrational Iranian oriental. Stories in the western press spoke of Iranian combatants—many children, it was claimed—who were provided 'keys to

heaven'; claims were made about Iranians carrying out 'human wave' attacks against Iraqi troops. As a person who served for five years in the war as a volunteer, I can state with authority that these claims are false.

Ironically, this was happening at a time when the US and Saudi Arabia were funding Saddam Hussein and the forces that brought about the Taliban ideology in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The United States and its client states have supported sectarianism and racism in order to isolate Iran from the broader Islamic community and beyond, and while Iran is not a utopia, I believe that its failure to connect with the West and parts of the Islamic world are largely due to the power of the western media and the discourse that it uses against Iran, as well as funding by regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the US.

This demonisation of Iran is coupled with a general lack of knowledge amongst many in the West, including key decision-makers, about the Middle East and in particular Iran. In my own profession —academia—my experience of western academics has shown that ignorance is immense. A while back I submitted an article to a progressive and respected academic journal—the *Journal of American Studies*—in which I critiqued the discourse on Iran. In the article, I refuted the idea, widely repeated in the 'West', of the keys to heaven and that children were sent to fight in war, and I provided as evidence of this, the fact that I was a veteran of the war. The referees wrote in response that "you have to prove that there were no keys to heaven"; "you have to prove that no children fought in

the war". In other words, I was asked to prove negatives, and of course, not being able to do this, my article was rejected.

I am very sceptical about the amount of influence and scope that exists in the West to change this discourse—President Khatami's attempt to make this change through his proposed 'Dialogue among Civilisations' failed. Nevertheless, there are two recent and major events that can, I believe, bring about grassroots alliances and unity with the possibility to challenge the status quo and current discourse. One is Hizbullah and its victory over the apartheid state of Israel: it has brought Arab, Muslim and other communities together and has provided an opportunity for broader dialogue and greater unity where people can rally around common themes.

The second is the growing rise of discontent in the West and beyond. The social and economic crises in particular, as well as global warming, will definitely make life more difficult and I believe that these can bring about a situation to enable those who are discontented with the current state of affairs to broaden dialogue, understanding and activism. Secular fundamentalists like Edward Said cannot accept non-secular, rational resistance. But based on the values that I have outlined above, I believe there is a great deal in common among all trends of thought without either side having to give up their individual core values. In some situations, in order to accommodate seculars who were not sympathetic to their thought, some Iranians turned to relativism and became liberals—similar to some of the leftists of the late 1960s who, after the Paris revolt in 1968, turned

to post-modernism. These thinkers—certainly in Iran—lost their credibility among their constituencies.

The reality is that an Islamist discourse exists and will continue to exist, and many of its themes are common to all freedom-loving human beings. Hence, in order to successfully resist, we must unite, and in order to do so we must recognize that we all have these themes in common. ■

Dr Seyed Mohammad Marandi *is Assistant Professor of English Literature, University of Tehran, Iran. He is also a regular commentator on* Al-Jazeera English *and other news programmes.*

What is significant is that some aspects of the Islamic narrative are, in many ways, similar to the leftist critique of capitalism and neoliberalism

The dominating discourse that exists at the level of the global media has reinforced the idea of the irrational, violent oriental —in this case Iranians

Students at the Mofid University in Qom. Mofid University was established in 1989 specifically to carry out comparative studies between Islamic sciences and modern humanities. Included in the objectives of the university are revising the human sciences on the basis of the Islamic principles and standards, as well as paving the way for the expansion of scientific and research co-operations throughout the Muslim World. Portraits of Rafsanjani and Khamenei hang on the wall behind them.

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INTRODUCING A NEW POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Written by
Alastair Crooke
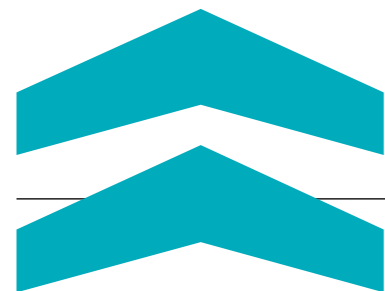
Glancing back at what may have been the decisive factor that took politically marginalised resistance movements to a seat at the 'table of power', and towards transforming their societies, it seems that a step-change in language often has been the key transformatory element. The aim, as a Sinn Féin leader said, had been to move the party from a defensive discourse of victimhood to the language of mobilisation and of a 'challenge' to the community to embrace positive change. It was by these means that otherwise demonised and isolated resistance movements moved from the margins towards the epicentre of effective politics. But such is the nature of language that the 'image' of moving from the margins to the centre is understood differently by different movements: some perceive the imagery in linear terms, and interpret this as locating the two ends of the political spectrum and of a move to the 'middle ground'. Unsurprisingly, this generates adverse reactions from those who see such movement as an abdication of principles. But if the centre were revisualised as a globe with the outer surface understood as delineating the boundary of what might be described as effective politics, it is clearer that what is intended is how to move from the ineffective outer surface to the epicentre of the sphere of effective politics.

The aim essentially is to be more effective at penetrating the generally impervious condition of policy-makers to hear any discourse that lies beyond the frame of their own dogmas: in other words, the objective is to 'transform' the listener. Speaking any message that is at odds with the prevalent discourse is not simple. Any discourse has to contend with the failure—or perhaps the refusal—of listeners to comprehend what is being said. And, undoubtedly a component of refusal to 'comprehend' is attributable, not so much to doctrine, but to unconscious fears and vulnerabilities. There is also an element of contrived incomprehension that is malicious too, of course. These represent people that are held fast in the grip of instinctive culture of opposition to any alternate vision to their own.

But when we refer to coming from the margins to the epicentre, it reflects a sense that, for many reading this article—in their different situations and with various political views—feel that we are being pushed quite deliberately to the margins of politics. And to travel too far to the margins of politics can be liberating perhaps, but offers very little opportunity to impact on how this world may change. The trade-off between impact and the freedom of discourse at the margin opens up debate about the relationship between preserving the legitimacy and authenticity of any resistance movement's stand in the eyes of its supporters, on the one hand, and of the real frustrations of marginality, on the other. Any engagement in politics implies some compromise—and that holds out the danger of loss of credibility—and for any resistance movement, its credibility and legitimacy comprise its main asset.

I believe that despite such risks to credibility of embarking on politics, that politics—correctly managed as a part of a strategy of refusal to acquiesce to the status quo—remains as valid a component of resistance as armed action alone. The question that presents itself is: what is the form of resistance most appropriate to the circumstances; and what are the most effective means by which it may be pursued, at any given time?

Earlier in 2008, the Secretary General of Hizbullah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, gave a speech in which he spoke about movements taking on identities of resistance that embraced wider constituencies. The Resistance was no longer to be confined to the Shi'i of South Lebanon, or Sadr City, or the Palestinians of Gaza. He suggested a broadening of the constituencies to include Sunni, Shi'i, or seculars who shared a conviction of the need to bring radical change in the status quo.

There are here some underlying tensions that need to be addressed in what constitutes this 'resistance'. Often westerners describe Syria as a 'secular' state: they assume by this that because hijab is less in evidence in Syria than in other places, and religiosity is less evident, that Syria cannot be a part of the 'resistance'. They assume that secularism implies that Syrians must share the western dislike for religiously-inspired movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah. But this is not the case: in fact there is strong support in 'secular' Syria for both movements. It is this broadening out of the meaning and nature of resistance to which Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah was alluding in his speech, I believe. He was asserting that resistance is as much a political attitude or a mode of thinking about the problems facing our societies, as it is about armed resistance or conformity of view or of circumstance.

When we speak of resistance, we should try to give a new and wider significance to the meaning of this term—or to find a better terminology. The word 'resistance' needs to become a broad-tent concept that embraces many segments of society—even those who might not now view themselves as ever becoming a part of any resistance. There are many different tools available to resistance, and different tools may be appropriate to different segments of the population. The question is how to recoup the image and significance of resistance—and to valorise it in a new way.

In one sense, it is possible to suggest that there has been 'resistance' in the West since at least 1948—an entirely secular resistance. I am referring here to what is known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Although it is remains a philosophical movement, its first generation of proponents—at least—can be regarded as a form of resistance—or of a flat 'refusal' to acquiesce before the norms of the western status quo processes of thinking. The conclusions of the Critical Theorists who worked, firstly, in Frankfurt and then in the US, were pessimistic about the possibilities of bringing change by means of critical analysis of an American mindset overwhelmed by the hegemony of instrumental rationality. For this reason some believed that the only route was one of resistance and refusal of instrumental, means-and-ends thinking.

This instrumental thinking has taken the technique of empirical inductive thinking to a universality that has driven out wider understanding, and reduced human beings and nature to no more than specimen-objects, and which has come to define humans as no more than the sum of their desires and appetites. This type of secular resistance does not mean armed resistance, but a refusal to accept prevailing political and intellectual dogmas, and the refusal to accept immoral norms of nation-state behaviour—in spite of a widespread public tolerance of such norms. I give this as an example of the potential to network together several different strands of critical discourse and separate visions for the future, who nonetheless may share components of a language of refusal and rebuttal of the precepts on which the status quo is argued and justified.

Much of this resistance in the West has centred around a shared struggle against a corporate media that has used modern techniques of psychology-management and advertising to induce wants and needs in people that serve only the interests of their own corporate purposes, rather than the real needs of the 'targets' of their products. Others within the 'Frankfurt School', despairing of the prospect of changing corporate media dominance and institutional 'conditioning' have tried to look for means other than 'resistance' by which to bring a radical change to the process of thinking in the West. One such person was Jürgen Habermas, a philosopher, much read in Tehran, who suggested that it might be possible to create some discrete spaces within the public sphere and create some

> **...critical refusal to acquiesce, as well as attempts to regain footholds within the public sphere available to real democracy, can be seen to constitute 'resistance'**

institutions that are somehow less influenced by, and resistant to, the corporate media and the western instrumental mindset. I am arguing that both critical refusal to acquiesce, as well as attempts to regain footholds within the public sphere available to real democracy, can be seen to constitute 'resistance'.

Habermas suggested that if these 'communities' were created—that perhaps it might be possible to establish little pockets of real democracy within the positivist-instrumentalist way-of-thought. It was by such means that Jürgen Habermas envisioned challenging the entrenched elites who managed and limited discourse in the West through institutional and corporate structures—and at the same time manipulated language and images in such a way that people came to believe that their happiness and prosperity resided in—and is fulfilled in—the system of today. What I am trying to suggest therefore is that with a different significance attached to the meaning of the word 'resistance', we may discover a different discourse and imagery that will 'transform' people away from the sphere of manufactured 'lifestyle' aspirations—to become truly 'political' again.

The question is—despite such different approaches—can some commonality of critical discourse be agreed—such as to mobilise a 'critical mass' of support—and to carry us closer to the centre of political relevance—that is, the ability to 'do truly political things'. Is there sufficient common ground in the feeling of oppression that say someone living in Europe or the United States may say they experience, and the very different—and more intense—sense of occupation that a Palestinian feels that leaves him or her really almost no space for politics at all, in the daily struggle of life?

Conflicts Forum has tried—through a series of meetings—to provide a forum to explore whether, in a common language of rebuttal and of critical examination of the precepts on which the status quo rests, there is the means for a 'broad-tent' political resistance that can nonetheless coalesce around a network that has both the mass and the capability to be effective. I hope that we may in these ways act as catalyst for debate. ■

Alastair Crooke *is co-director of Conflicts Forum.*

Thank you for having us here as South Africans. Our collective presence here represents some of the sectors that participated in the liberation struggle: Mrs Fatima Hajaig MP spent a considerable period of time in exile and was part of the external wing of the liberation movement; Mr Na'eem Jeenah was, and is, a prominent member of civil society institutions; and Comrade Adli Jacobs was part of the underground structures of the liberation movement, and also had a public face in the United Democratic Front representing the faith community activists in the Call of Islam and represented the same organization at the interfaith body, the World Council of Religion and Peace.

I am introducing the South African input, but I am sure that the organizers did not invite me here in my capacity as the Ambassador to Lebanon and Syria, but rather to contribute to the collective input by the South African Delegation. South Africa's experience is important and we hope that the sharing of this experience with people in other parts of the world can benefit societies that are grappling with the issues of identity, secularism, the role of civil society, and particularly that of faith communities in a modern society.

South Africans have been described as the rainbow nation—every individual has a multiplicity of identities. We have eleven official languages, our flag represents compromise, we have a history of tribal wars, and a history of legalized race discrimination which led to oppression and consequently suppression. A person's race was defined from birth: it determined where you could live, which school you could attend, which health facility you could use, whom you could marry, and where you could be buried.

Persons of European decent owned more than 70% of the land and the schooling system was on a par with the schools in the United Kingdom, the US, Canada, and Australia. But the majority of the dispossessed considered themselves as black. The term 'black' was an inclusive label adopted by indigenous persons of Asian decent and persons with mixed ancestry—it was a consciously chosen political identity. Most of the South Africans here today experienced the era of 'black consciousness' which gave rise to political formations inspired by Marcus Garvey, Steve Biko, and Malcolm X.

On the question of political identity, some of us viewed the black consciousness experience as a response to oppression but not as an end political philosophy. Many, but not all of us, here today can be described as 'charterists', those who advocated that the *Freedom Charter* adopted in 1995 was the 'Magna Carta' of our struggle. The *Freedom Charter* states that all the national groups should have an equal say in the running of the country which in the thinking of the people involved in the 1955 Congress of the People recognized the fact of their being different national groups with different traditions.

A political identity is not static and evolves over time. The Charterist Movement, particularly the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was considered as the internal wing of the African National Congress, consciously advocated for a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa. The UDF was a movement based upon the *Freedom Charter*. It was a broad-based movement whose constituent members were trade unions, faith communities, sports bodies, cultural organizations, professional guilds, business associations, etc. It harmonized the existing community organizations and launched street-level movements down to street, block, township and area committees. And this led to the formation of many other formations internally. The *Freedom Charter* was a document drawn up in 1955 by the people of South Africa who found tools for organization within the document. For example, among other issues, it addresses the following: fair labour practices (which the trade union movement used as an organisational tool); equal education (which the Education Crisis Committee employed as an organisational tool); and the health and international sectors.

For the purpose of this seminar, let us focus on the faith-based communities, which included the Call of Islam, the Christian Institute that produced the *Kairos* document, and Jews for Social Justice. UDF activists played an important and key role in broader society and national organizations—including organizations like the Muslim Youth Movement, the South African Council of Churches, the Muslim Judicial Council, representative Hindu organisations, and activists from the indigenous 'belief systems'. The leadership of the representative formations did not require much persuasion from the vanguard activists to establish a structure, which was to become a model for interfaith social action. This action was adopted to move our communities away from the ghettos of the mind and soul. These faith communities, together with business formations, trade unions, and other cultural formations initiated the establishment of the Peace Secretariat and peace committees that created the atmosphere for the peaceful resolutions of South Africa's problems.

The ANC had established an underground coordinating structure with UDF activists through military political councils which co-ordinated resistance activity internally in South Africa. On the one hand, armed struggle continued, while on the other, one of the key objectives was to rob the apartheid state of its moral basis.

The broad liberation movements held two important conferences that influenced a change of strategy from one that focused on armed struggle to pursuing negotiations as an arena of struggle. An external conference issued the Harare Declaration and internally the Conference for Democratic Future to facilitate this change. The participants in these conferences represented the liber-

MOVING SOUTH AFRICA FORWARD IN

ation movements and civil society in South Africa, and the issues discussed ranged from fair labour practices, the education and health crisis in South Africa and how to deal with international forums and structures.

In the period immediately after the establishment of a democratic country, the faith communities advocated, in partnership with other civil society formations, for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired the TRC and the Vice-Chairperson was the Reverend Alex Borraine. Many faith community activists served on its various committees. The TRC was a court-like body set up in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. Anyone who felt that he or she was a victim of its violence was invited to come forward and be heard. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution.

The TRC was seen by many as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa. Despite some flaws, it is generally (although not universally) thought to have been a successful initiative. The work of the TRC was accomplished through three committees: First, the Human Rights Violations Committee investigated human rights abuses that occurred between 1960 and 1994; secondly, the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee was charged with restoring victims' dignity and formulating proposals to assist with rehabilitation; and

thirdly, the Amnesty Committee considered applications from individuals who applied for amnesty in accordance with the provisions of the Act. The Commission was empowered to grant amnesty to those who committed abuses during the apartheid era, as long as the crimes were politically motivated, proportionate, and there was full disclosure by the person seeking amnesty. To avoid any sense of victor's justice, no side was exempt from appearing before the commission. The commission heard reports of human rights violations and considered amnesty applications from all sides—from the apartheid state to the liberation forces including the African National Congress.

Secularism in South Africa today is not an anti-faith movement. The faith communities were partially responsible for introducing the concept into the South African constitution which created the enabling legislation to support the languages, culture and religion of all South Africans. The new challenge is how to define within faith communities the methodology to promote a non-racial, especially a non-sexist, South Africa.

The other members of the South African collective at this seminar will elaborate on the role of minorities in a resistance struggle as part of a broad movement. ■

Ambassador Mohamed Dangor
*is Ambassador of South Africa to
Syria and Lebanon.*

Secularism in South Africa today is not an anti-faith movement... The new challenge is how to define within faith communities the methodology to promote a non-racial, especially a non-sexist, South Africa

Written by Adli Jacobs

HEARING THE

The Call… drew the ulema closer to the struggle for freedom and democracy [which] allowed it to introduce the Muslim community to an Islam that spoke to their problems of poverty and marginalisation under Apartheid

I am one of the founding members of The Call of Islam, a faith-based political organisation in South Africa that has its roots within the broader Islamic Movement. From these roots, the Call of Islam inherited the notion of a comprehensive Islam; studying the Qur'an directly; and seeing the lives of God's Prophet and the early Muslim communities as guides for modern socio-political struggles. It was from this basis that the Call of Islam decided to make a vocal stand against Apartheid by becoming part of a broader movement called the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1984. This political front was home to a large number of community- based organisations, civic structures, women's organisations and the biggest union federation. It was arguably the biggest mass based movement with over 700 affiliates representing the disenfranchised majority inside South Africa while the African National Congress (ANC) was in exile. Indeed, the UDF was aligned to the ANC sharing common principles embedded in a document called the *Freedom Charter*.

Muslim groups in South Africa were divided on the issue of joining the UDF. Some, like the Muslim Youth Movement (and its affiliate, the Muslim Students Association), believed that Muslims should march separately from others so that their Muslim faith would not be compromised. Others, like Qiblah were more aligned to the Pan African Congress, a smaller breakaway party from the ANC. There were also Muslims, although in a minority, who supported the Apartheid state. The Call of Islam chose to join the UDF for a number of reasons. Muslims make up just about 2 percent of the South African population. This minority was further divided into different ethnic groups. Part of the Apartheid project was to frame Muslim groups as outside the mainstream of the black community. A divided disenfranchised majority was after all the basis of Apartheid—the South African interpretation of colonialism.

In refusing to cede ground to the hegemonic attempts by both Apartheid as well conservative and narrow radical groups, the Call forged a different narrative for Muslims of South Africa in the midst of struggle. This new narrative imagined a transformed Muslim community (with a critical consciousness) making effective contributions to the broader struggle for liberation as part of the broader progressive forces. This narrative was constructed by fusing the instructions of the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad to be witnesses to justice with the insights gleaned from lived experience of Muslims under Apartheid. In an interactive process of acting in struggle and then reflecting upon it in the light of Islamic source materials, the Call widened the traditional and orthodox meanings of religious terms such as 'belief', 'being conscious of God' and the 'other'. Belief (iman) could also mean having hope that God will deliver us from Apartheid, openness to a divine plan (taqwa) could also refer to alert to injustice and disbelief (kufr) could be akin to racism and oppression.

This new narrative also introduced different concepts into political Islam, including:

Working with the leaders of the community

The Call of Islam was in alliance with the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC, one of the biggest ulema bodies in South Africa), operating on a twofold strategy. On the one hand it was drawing the ulema closer to the struggle for freedom and democracy and on the other hand it allowed the Call to introduce the Muslim community to an Islam that spoke to their problems of poverty and marginalisation under Apartheid. This alliance was based on the idea that the clergy could serve as the religious leadership, that it also recognised their conservatism. This conservatism, however, was attributed to a failure to engage with this conservative clergy intellectually or with any real empathy for their positions. As the struggle against Apartheid unfolded, leaders from the MJC saw themselves as members of the Call.

Walking with others

Through joint religious gatherings, mass funerals and mass protests, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims formed active interfaith solidarity. UDF public meetings were not only initiated with Christian prayer but also included Muslim dua and litanies from Hindus and Jews. This was not only an opportunity to bring Islam into focus for others, but also to foster tolerance amongst Muslims who have a tendency of regarding other religions as insignificant. Christian priests and unionists were coming into mosques as much as Muslim leaders were addressing the political gatherings of others.

A woman's place is in the struggle

In grappling with the marginalisation of Muslim women within the community, the Call (less in talk but more in activity) facilitated Muslim women to play an equal role in demonstrations, public speaking, in agit prop plays and leadership. Occasionally, the Call would commemorate the role of women in the struggle against Apartheid in week long public events. With the ground laid, the Call elected a woman to lead the organisation in the late 1980s.

Speaking to the people

In some ways, the Call of Islam's greatest strength was its media. With lessons learnt in the UDF, the Call developed a wide range of media including regular and well planned pamphlets, posters, banners, t-shirts, agit prop plays (or dramas), videos, graffiti and political songs. What they all had in common was that they translated complex ideas and political terms into plain English often using the colloquialisms of the community. The Call of Islam had developed a wide and sophisticated network of ensuring distribution and spread of its newsletters throughout the community.

Amongst the various Islamic stories retold by the Call was that of Hilful Fudhul. When the Prophet Muhammad was a young man, Meccan traders robbed a travelling merchant. In response to his call for help, Meccan tribes forged an alliance to ensure justice for the aggrieved. This was referred to as the 'Alliance of the Virtuous' (or Hilful Fudhul). During his last years, the Prophet renewed his commitment to this alliance for the common good. It is this commitment to struggle on behalf of the vulnerable in society that continued to inspire members of the Call of Islam right up the period of freedom and democracy in South Africa in 1994.

Today Call of Islam members are involved at all levels of government and are prominent members of NGO's as well as unionists and business individuals. Amongst its members are ambassadors, Members of Parliament, an ex-Premier, Councillors, researchers, academics as well as members of the ulema. ■

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ANTI-APARTHEID ISLAM

Written by Na'eem Jeenah

With about one million members, the Muslim community in South Africa forms barely two percent of the total population. Yet it is a community that is much more vibrant, vocal and visible, politically, socially, and economically than its numbers might suggest. This high visibility is not a new phenomenon; it has been so for many decades.

This profile was also evident during the anti-apartheid struggle—particularly in the decade of the 1980s. What was the form of this heightened visibility of Muslims and, in particular, Muslim involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle? Why were Muslims able to attract the kind of attention during the struggle that they did, despite their small number? Why did 'political Islam' and 'Islamism'—terms that many Muslim anti-apartheid activists used to describe what they did—become not only an accepted fact among non-Muslim (particularly Black) activists, but also came to be regarded as a positive force within a struggle that was largely conducted by non-Muslims? These are some of the issues this article will explore.

In the 1980s in South Africa, our understanding of political Islam, Islamism (or the 'Islamic Movement') was of an approach to Islam that recognised the political relevance, meaning and message of liberation. This understanding compelled the participation of Islamists in the anti-apartheid struggle. Thus, political Islam in South Africa meant anti-apartheid Islam.

Within this phenomenon there were three tendencies or strands. There was a group of Muslims and Muslim organisations who aligned themselves to the United Democratic Front (UDF)—the internal face of the banned African National Congress (ANC). Most prominent in this tendency was the Call of Islam (COI), formed in 1984 as a breakaway from the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM)). Others included the Muslim Judicial Council (although it was mostly pulled along by the Call) and a smaller organisation called Al-Jihad.

The second tendency included those Muslims who aligned themselves with the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) or the Black Consciousness Movement. The major player within this tendency was Qibla, an organisation formed in the early 1980s and inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Qibla's tactics included the armed struggle, and a number of its members left South Africa to receive military training abroad. The third tendency included the MYM and the Muslim Students Association (MSA) which, in the 1980s, was the student wing of the MYM. These two groups professed a policy of 'positive neutrality' in relation to the various sections of the South African liberation movement, arguing that, rather than aligning to any particular ideological group within the liberation movement, they preferred to act independently as Islamists and to co-operate with all sections of the liberation movement.

These three different ideas of engagement with the struggle resulted in different kinds of influences within the liberation movement and in the post-apartheid period.

One point to note is that despite what many people outside South Africa might remember having seen on their TV screens in the 1980s, the Muslim community as a whole was never mobilized against apartheid. Within the community there was a minority that was active against apartheid; there was an even smaller minority that collaborated with apartheid; but the vast majority simply accommodated and acquiesced to apartheid. The Muslim community, thus, spanned the spectrum of involvement and non-involvement. And within the minority of Muslims that were involved, some were inspired simply by the need to fight oppression and racism and were involved as members of different liberation organisations—from the South African Communist Party to trade unions to the Black Consciousness Movement. Others were inspired by Islam, most of these being active through the Muslim organisations mentioned above. The fact that only a minority of the Muslim community was involved in the struggle was not unique to the Muslim community, however; this was the case for all communities, including the Black African community.

In the case of the three Islamic tendencies outlined above, the reason that their voices and activities were regarded as legitimate was partly because South African Muslims regarded themselves—and were regarded by others—as people of South Africa; indigenised if you will, irrespective of where their ancestors might have come from. Another reason was that these organisations maintained a constant engagement and partnership with the rest of the liberation movement. I use the term 'rest of the liberation movement' because these organisations regarded themselves as part of that movement. The issue of engagement and of sharing of struggles is a critical part of what Muslim activists did.

In the current context, for example, Palestinian solidarity in South Africa is only as prominent as it is because of the engagement of solidarity activists with local social and other mass movements which have nothing to do with Palestine, yet which have taken that cause on board. They have done so because they have become convinced of the unity of struggles across the world and because Palestinian solidarity activists have worked hard to ensure that the parallels between Palestinian and local struggles are constantly highlighted. It is also because a number of Palestinian solidarity activists are also members of these movements.

In the 1980s that kind of engagement led to a sharing of experiences, of discourses and even of symbols. For example, in some parts of the country, the 'Allahu Akbar' call became a slogan that was used at marches and rallies even where there were not many Muslims present. Being used repeatedly as an Islamic slogan of liberation, it soon became a nationalist slogan that was even used by non-Muslims. The Palestinian kaffiya, long used by Muslim activists across the world, also became a

Why did 'political Islam' and 'Islamism'… become not only an accepted fact among non-Muslim (particularly Black) activists, but also came to be regarded as a positive force within a struggle that was largely conducted by non-Muslims?

South African nationalist symbol and was consequently banned in South Africa.

For Islamists involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, then, there were two discourses: One was a discourse within the Muslim community, with the anti-apartheid Muslim organisations trying to mobilize the community against apartheid or, at least, to convince the community that politics was a part of Islam. This was not entirely easy, what with most of the ulema in South Africa arguing that politics was antithetical to Islam and repeatedly preaching to Muslims that they should not be involved in 'kuffaar politics'.

The second discourse was with the broader liberation movement, engaging various sections of the movement in order to be part of a unified whole in the struggle for justice. The first discourse drew on an Islamic/Qur'-nic discursive language of oppression and liberation; and the second attempted to make that first Islamic discourse more relevant and applicable to the South African struggle.

An indication of the extent of the involvement of Muslim organisations—the few that were involved—in the struggle is the contribution that they made to the struggle and to the language of the struggle. One of the leaders of the Call of Islam, Farid Esack, for example, is sometimes credited with having added the term 'non-sexist' into the slogan of the ANC which had called for a 'non-racial, united and democratic South Africa'. I

have also argued elsewhere that the notion of Islamic feminism took root in South Africa before a more general feminist movement had emerged.

The COI, being an affiliate of the UDF, contributed heavily to the Front, just as the UDF contributed heavily to the Call. The MYM, with its 'positive neutrality' position, had won the respect of various sections of the liberation movement and, because it was not aligned to any particular group within the liberation movement, it was able to work with all of them. This position also had positive repercussions for the internal dynamics of the movement. In the late 1980s, when adherents of Black Consciousness (BC) and supporters of the Congress Movement (led by the ANC) were, literally, at war with each other—resulting in hundreds of killings across the country—BC and UDF supporters who were members of the MYM were able to meet at MYM programmes, argue and debate while knowing full well that it would not end in violence—more than what they could expect in their townships.

These Islamist organisations did not cease their activities in the period of negotiations between the liberation movements and the apartheid government in the early 1990s—or, indeed, after our first democratic election in 1994. Between 1994 and 1996, when the process to draw up a new South African Constitution was underway, many Muslim organisations and individuals made submissions to the Constitutional

Assembly on a range of issues. Most, however, focussed on issues with narrow Muslim interests—such as the recognition of Muslim Personal Law. The MYM and COI, however, made submissions on a range of other issues as well.

Indeed, the MYM was at the forefront of arguing at various national consultations and in written submissions that South Africa's new Bill of Rights should contain not just liberal first generation rights—such as the right to free expression, the right to vote, and so forth, but should include basic socioeconomic rights (or third generation rights) such as the right to education, the right to be free from poverty, the right to a clean environment, etc. Ultimately, the new Bill of Rights did include certain third generation rights.

It is clear that this engagement of a numerical minority with and within a broader liberation movement and discourse resulted in influence moving in both directions: that Muslims made an impact and a contribution to the struggle and the shape of the new society, and that the liberation struggle also made an impact on how the Muslim actors in this theatre of struggle ultimately understood Islam and understood how they should live as Muslims.

Finally let me make this point: sometimes when we raise the issue of being more aggressive in engagement with broader society with Islamist groups from the Middle East, one gets a sense that their attitude is: 'We have a just

cause and everyone should just support us.' Unfortunately, that is not how the world works. The reason Muslims in South Africa were as vocal and active as we were—as Muslims—was because there was a genuine feeling of fellowship and of a common struggle in a cause that everyone was engaged in. There was never a sense that Muslims were supporting someone else's cause, or the other way around. Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle were not *in solidarity* with Black South Africans; we *were* Black South Africans. ◼

Na'eem Jeenah is an activist and spokesman for the Palestine Solidarity Committee in South Africa.

A good starting point is to remind ourselves of the observation made in *Milestones*, the celebrated work by Sayyed Qutb: In it, Qutb argues that the early Islamists—in their eagerness to overcome the stereotypical adverse image of Islam—pushed the pendulum too far to the other extreme: they sought to present Islam as a religion of dialogue and to stress the points of consonance with Western mores. For Qutb however, this 'apologist' discourse robbed Islam of its true essence. He believed Muslims had to refocus on the issue of Jihad, rather than to try to 'interpret' Islam in a way more acceptable to Westerners. His emphasis on jihad caused a storm of controversy, and unfortunately his underlying message of being true to the essence of Islam was lost in the resulting storm.

I regard this as a real quagmire facing the Islamic movement: It both wants to preserve its true 'self', and at the same time to present Islam to others in an appealing and attractive fashion. If we are not to become enmired in this quagmire, we should return to the Qur'an and recall where it says that "Jews and Christians will never be satisfied with you—unless you follow their faith." In other words, they want the whole of you: So, what to do?

In the earlier period, as Qutb perceived, Islam lacked confidence, and was on the defensive in the face of an assertive and confident 'other'. And by 'other' I mean specifically the West. I emphasize the difference between then and now, as in this period we have started to recover our confidence—mainly owing to the Islamists' embrace of resistance.

This imposes on us several things: Firstly, we as Islamists are affiliated with a set of values that presents themselves as an initiative that can help resolve the problems of the world. Consequently, we become partners in the task of solving the problems of the world—both East and West. It is my belief that the harsh attitude adopted by the West towards Muslims and Islamists may serve practical and political interests, but has absolutely no doctrinal justification. This is because a human being is a human being—East or West.

The 'being' to whom the world is addressed is the same. The problem is—and here we are discussing terminology and how to present it to the other—that I am not in accord with the attempt to find a terminology 'available to all' because Islam as a faith has to have its own terminology—one that is capable of providing understanding to, and attracting others, even under the polarised conditions of today. It has to present itself faithfully and fully—whether the West accepts it, or not. Islam has to maintain its ability to say what it wants to say.

Underlying all our Islamic thinking is the concept of the Umma. Unfortunately, we speak about the Umma today as if it is somehow disconnected from the world—and as if its boundaries are the boundaries of sectarianism, geography, personal interests. Whereas a key aspect of a worldwide Umma is that it represents a community that are committed to common issues or causes—regardless of sect and regardless of ethnic or geographic affiliations. Thus, if we stress this issue, it allows us—when, for example, I feel that the West is not listening to me for the mere fact that I am Muslim—to assert these values, which we, the Umma, all hold in common. The fact of Islam having such a large proportion of the world's population associated with certain key principles and values, represents a potentially powerful instrument by which western values can be influenced too. Therefore we, as Muslims, need to focus on our understanding of Islam in this present circumstance.

My third point is that I believe, given all the issues in contention between the West and Islam, the 'misunderstandings' are not really—at bottom—disputes about ideology. I make this point because I remain convinced that all our Islamic terminology can be understood by the 'other'. It is not a problem of misunderstood terminology as such—but of the 'mode' and attitude of the listener that inhibits their understanding. We need a revolution in the technologies of delivering and communicating information such that it becomes capable of transforming the mode of understanding of the listener. Such is the spirit of the time that it is not what is being said, but, rather it is the 'openness' or 'state of being' of the listener that determines his or her receptivity. I do not welcome the prospect, and I know that many others share my misgivings; but nevertheless I fear that we may destined—as the inevitable concomitant to bringing a change in the mode of receptivity in the 'other'—to suffer military conflict before such a change in 'understanding' comes about. Such an event seems to be at our door—but it just may create the shock that impels those who are not ready to listen, to be forced to listen. And I am not talking here about Israel, which is but a detail in the wider picture. ■

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Qutb... believed Muslims had to refocus on the issue of Jihad, rather than to try to 'interpret' Islam in a way more acceptable to Westerners

MSCNCEPTNS OF ISLM

I usually try to begin a commentary with an episode drawn from history; but in the context of the 'misconceptions of Islam' I believe it more appropriate to start from where matters rest today.
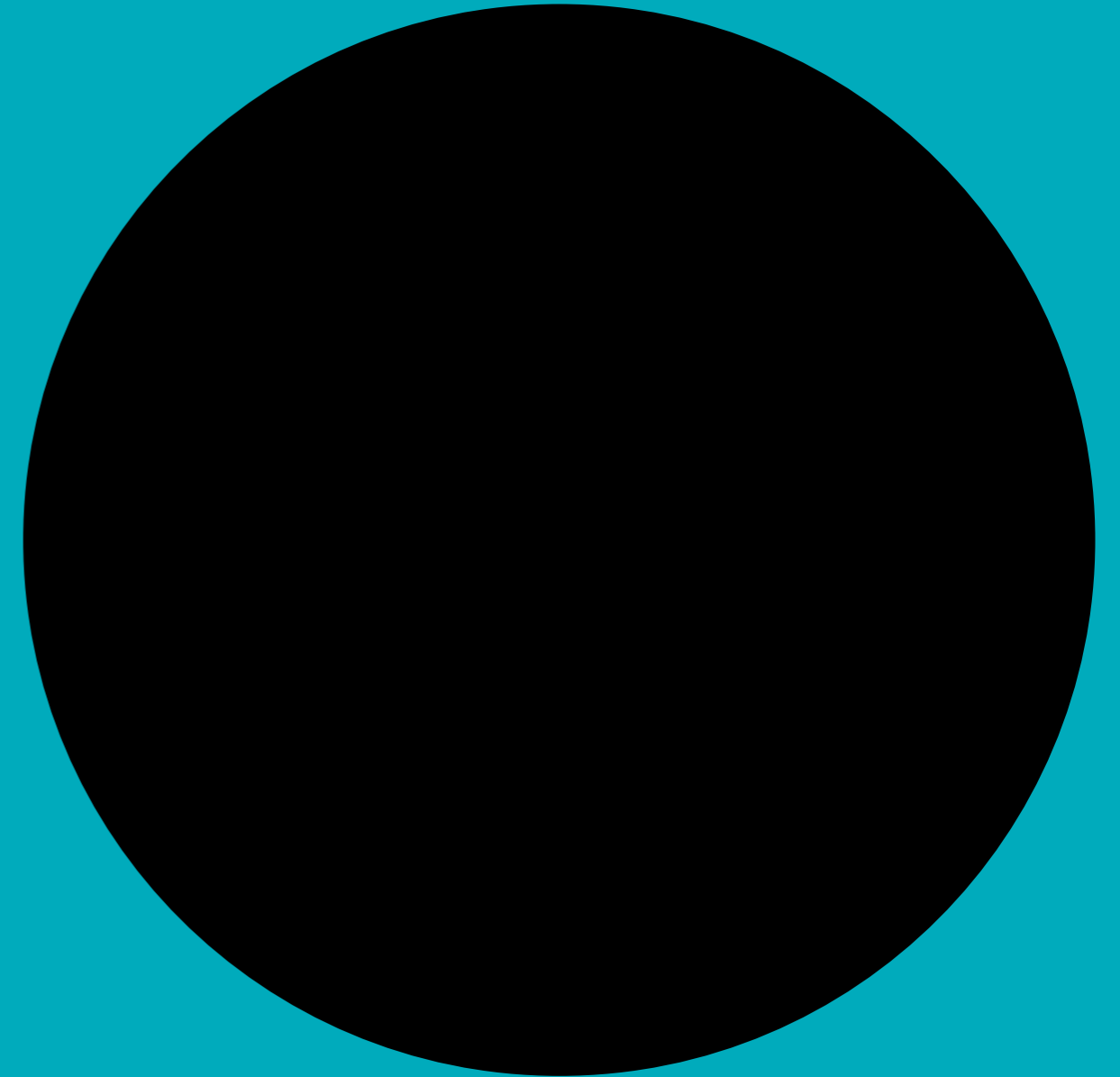
Written by Sheikh Chafiq Jaredah

RESISTANCE

&

FREEDOM

Resistance is synonymous with freedom because freedom is the flip side of resistance. If we take this definition or this concept of resistance, we realise its position and value in human beings and communities.

Written by Raafat Murra

Resistance is a human instinct; it is a part of the mental, spiritual and psychological components which make up human beings. Man was created free, and as we know from history, humans have always struggled against all forms of domination, oppression and hegemony. That is why we find in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* the most fundamental principle: that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person and no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

In the classic text, *Law of War and Peace* in 1625, Grotius wrote of self-defence as a fundamental natural right: "this kind of [self-defence] derives its origin from the principle of self-preservation which nature has given to every living creature". In this definition, self-defence is a human instinct that is normal in every human being.

Resistance rarely starts from self-interest—it has broad, more comprehensive goals that override individual interests and limitations. It has as its goals the welfare of the whole community. Likewise, it is wrong to reduce resistance to the military dimension only; it is about more than its military dimension—it is preceded by cultural, intellectual and social components which are considered to be the main foundations for launching a comprehensive resistance and which act as a support for a wider resistance. The more in-depth the intellectual and cultural frameworks, the greater will be the importance of military resistance.

We can see this happening clearly in two important arenas at present: the experience of Hamas in Palestine and of Hizbollah in Lebanon, where the Palestinian and Lebanese societies have adopted and developed a culture of resistance. Both societies provide the core and foundation from which these movements can build stability, protection and support.

Because this resistance is a response to injustice, occupation, dispossession, and a reaction to forced servitude, it has greater solidarity and co-operation from all the segments of the community to the resistance and helps deepen the culture of resistance. This allows the resistance to enlist and engage all segments of the community to its project, and engages everyone in the community in resistance from his or her specialization as teachers, doctors, engineers, employees and merchants. This is enhanced through the role of religion, customs, traditions and the social legacy that creates an environment for the culture of resistance.

The history of our region, particularly Palestine and Lebanon, is filled with tides of resistance, and the resistance has achieved many victories against invaders and occupiers. This is an important cultural heritage which helps in increasing the power of resistance in our time. A 'culture of resistance' is now rooted in our society—this is due to the nature of the Palestinian issue and its essence, to the fundamental importance of religion in our society, the increasing popularity and influence of the resistance movements, and the failure of the process of a negotiated solution.

The military victories achieved by the resistance movements against the Israeli occupation in Palestine and Lebanon played a major role in increasing consciousness of the culture of resistance.

Resistance has revealed the truth of the occupier's society from the inside— the resistance has also demonstrated clearly the social and economy flaws to occupation.

There is no doubt that the collusion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) project—which is based on a negotiated solution leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state— with the Israeli rejection, also contributed to increased support for the resistance because the resistance provided a just political vision. The media has played a significant role in revealing the reality of Israeli society, and the resistance has also succeeded in using media in professional and smart ways as part of its struggle.

In conclusion, the culture of resistance has become a decisive factor in the ability of the resistance to achieve its victories; it has widened the scope for the success of the resistance whilst narrowing the political room for manoeuvre of the occupation forces—as resistance exposes the illegitimacy of Israel's claims in respect to occupation. ◼

Because this resistance is a response to injustice, occupation, dispossession, and a reaction to forced servitude, it has greater solidarity and co-operation from all the segments of the community to the resistance and helps deepen the culture of resistance

The transition from armed resistance to political resistance in many ways was a seamless process. Today we carry on as political activists to achieve the same objective

Raymond McCartney's Irish Republican Narrative of Resistance, page 04