

**Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum: September 10, 2002**  
***The Potential for a Non-violent Intifada: A New Possibility for the Israeli  
Palestinian Conflict***  
**Notes from the comments of John Marks (SFCG), Susan Collin Marks (SFCG) and Dr.  
Steven Kull (PIPA)**

**Additional information about the poll discussed below is available on our website at  
[www.sfcg.org](http://www.sfcg.org) under “News Releases”.**

**Susan Collin Marks** introduced the forum and presented a brief overview of the topic to be discussed - examining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and focusing specifically on a recent poll commissioned by Search for Common Ground and conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in Israel and the Palestinian territories to determine public attitudes about the potential for non-violent methods in the Intifada. The poll was administered by the Palestinian polling organization, The Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, and the Israeli polling organization, the B.L. and Lucille Cohen Institute for Public Opinion Research of Tel Aviv University.

Susan Collin Marks said that she and John Marks recently moved to Jerusalem to head up Search for Common Ground in the Middle East (SFCGME). One of their priorities is to support the emerging interest in and support for non-violent action as a means of breaking the cycle of violence that feeds and sustains the conflict. Many people in the region say that they know what the solution is but they don't know how to get there. The largest obstacle to reaching that solution is the cycle of violence – the same cycle that she, as a South African who was involved in the South African transition from apartheid to democracy, witnessed in South Africa. She maintains that there is a slowly growing recognition that if the Palestinians were to adopt nonviolent methods, the cycle of violence could be broken, creating the space for the solution to be agreed – and implemented. A large part of Search's work in the region is to support, educate, and sensitize around the issue of non-violence among both Palestinians and Israelis.

Conducting a poll was new for Search for Common Ground and Susan Collin Marks explained that before conducting the survey, Search did not understand the power of polling as a tool for conflict resolution. After the survey was conducted they saw that a poll allows for new ideas to be seeded within the community and society and to become part of the political and social discourse.

She concluded that polling can be part of a broader strategy to encourage the adoption of non-violence.

**Dr. Kull** reiterated Susan Collin Marks' statement that those in the territories know that something needs to change. People tell him, “We can see the light at the end of the tunnel; we just can't seem to get into the tunnel”. He explained that there are two levels of thinking that people often use in responding to polls. The first level is posturing – where people take a

position without giving it a lot of thought and one that allows them to close ranks and rally around their leaders. The second level allows people to step back and think about what needs to be done overall. The poll, of which Dr. Kull was the principal investigator, tried to get at both means of thought.

The poll sought to examine, for the first time, the attitudes of Palestinians and Jewish Israelis on the potential for non-violent methods in the Palestinian Intifada. In discussing details of the poll, Dr. Kull illustrated that there was plenty of posturing. For example, both sides felt strongly that their current actions – the Palestinian Intifada and the Israeli government's policies in response – were achieving their objectives. But this leaves room for questioning. Are both sides really doing so well? The violence has continued without a solution. How can they both think that their current actions are working? For example, another interesting observation was that a large number of Palestinians felt that violence against Israelis would make them more willing to negotiate while Israelis felt that violence against Palestinians would make them less willing to negotiate. High Palestinian support remained (in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile) for armed attacks on Israeli soldiers and suicide bombings of civilians. Dr. Kull suggested that maybe these responses are a way for both sides to express their doubts about the potential for a non-violent movement. Yet despite these responses, Dr. Kull reported signs that both sides are looking for other ways to respond to the conflict. There appear to be strong signs of support for non-violence – at least as strong as those advocating support for violence.

On the Palestinian side, 62% responded that new approaches to violence are needed. In a question asking for Palestinians to rate non-violent methods, 92% favored mass boycotts of products made in settlements; 91% favored boycotts of Israeli cigarettes, soft drinks, etc.; 83% favored large groups blocking construction in settlements; 82% favored limited strikes for Palestinian workers; 81% favored mass protest demonstrations; and 73% favored large groups blocking the demolition of homes. In addition, there was a high willingness of Palestinians to both participate in these methods as well as to encourage others to do so. Therefore, if these non-violent methods were actually used, there would be hundreds of thousands of Palestinians ready to act!

The survey also explored the issue of martyrdom to see if there was something about violent action that made it more prestigious than non-violent action. The survey asked if Palestinians would regard someone who was killed while engaging in non-violent action as a martyr and 88% said yes – as much or more than they would regard a suicide bomber as a martyr. Palestinians favored refusing to work in the construction of settlements and refusing to do business in the settlements, even if it meant that they would lose their jobs.

Overall, 80% of Palestinians approved of a large-scale Palestinian movement committed to non-violent actions and 56% would be willing to participate in such a movement. While support for non-violent action is strong, a majority of Palestinians still have doubts that non-violent movement would be effective. Concerns include the fact that Palestinians have tried mass non-violent action in the past without resulting in a change in Israeli behavior, the belief that Israelis are too stubborn and that such a movement will have no impact on their behavior, and that it would take too long for a non-violent movement to produce a real change.

On the Israeli side, Dr. Kull stated that Israelis seem to be capable of stepping back in terms of how they view the conflict and they have a “broader normative framework” that allows them to see things as legitimate that might not be in their own interest. 78% of Israelis believe that Palestinians have a legitimate right to seek a Palestinian state and 56% oppose the expansion of settlements – provided that Palestinians pursue both using non-violent methods. Dr. Kull emphasized that these findings were common both among supporters of Sharon’s government and Likud leaders. 57% of Israelis would approve of a Palestinian movement committed to non-violent action against Israeli occupation and 63% responded that the Israeli government should take a more tolerant stance toward Palestinian demonstrations and not try to stop them. 70% oppose phasing out the checkpoints, although this decreased to 61% provided that Palestinians start using non-violent methods. There was also a margin favoring increased flexibility over negotiations on a Palestinian state provided that there was an extended period of non-violence.

Dr. Kull concluded that both Palestinians and Israelis currently have confidence that their use of force is working yet both sides are showing a readiness to support something new. Judging from the poll, Israelis are doubtful that a non-violent movement would emerge and Palestinians feel that if one did emerge, the Israelis would simply squash it. Yet if a non-violent movement emerged that was supported by Israel – it could result in a self-fulfilling cycle.

**John Marks** began by stating his desire that non-violence in the Middle East become an idea “whose time has come”. He continued that this is currently not the case and the concept of non-violence has not emerged as a major movement. Instead, it may be described as a “small boom” that was started among Palestinians and which people have been writing about for years. John Marks described the concept of non-violence as “so logical as to be overwhelming” and as far as he can see, “the only way out of the cycle of violence”. He explained that older models haven’t worked and this could be the way out - a means for people to make a difference on a mass level. While some may call the idea of a non-violent movement “counter-cultural,” John Marks believes that these kinds of ideas can come INTO a culture, and while some may say that a sole leader is needed, he pointed out that these leaders have not emerged in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and he cited the example of Yugoslavia, where a group of young people successfully embraced non-violence as a means for change.

He continued that many people always emphasize the “uniqueness” of the conflict in the Middle East and are thus resistant to look at outside ideas. He explained that Search for Common Ground understands that you can’t simply transfer the resolutions for one conflict to that of a second conflict. Perhaps 50% of Search’s toolbox would work from one conflict to another but you have to experiment to see what works best in each situation. In this conflict, one lesson learned is that polling is a tool for conflict resolution. It provides a way of opening new possibilities in societies and provides a way for the public to think about these possibilities. He explained how media coverage about the poll resulted in a direct impact on public discourse where at least now the concept of a non-violent movement is a possibility on the horizon.

John Marks explained that Search for Common Ground is taking an educational and catalyzing role in encouraging non-violence and is trying to aid both sides to reach a peaceful solution. He outlined, in addition to polling, other efforts that Search is undertaking to promote non-violence:

- Broadcasting the documentary series, *A Force More Powerful*, written and produced by Steve York to Palestinian and Israeli audiences. The series aired last spring on seven independent Palestinian stations and will be seen again this fall. Arrangements are currently being worked out also to show it on Israeli TV.
- Working with women to help them become specialists in non-violence. The idea is that by strengthening women, they will be able to play a powerful role in helping to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.
- Convening roundtables on issues of non-violence with both sides of the conflict represented. These will be televised.
- Conducting seminars for both Israelis and Palestinians on the topic of non-violence. Stemming from a number of Israeli radio segments about the poll, John Marks was invited to give a seminar on non-violence.
- Working with organizations on both sides of the conflict that want to train people in non-violence – a subject requiring a high level of training and discipline.