



The **GLOBAL DAY OF ACTION AND PRAYER FOR SYRIA** will be held on September 21. In preparation we have asked guest experts to contribute essays that help our understanding of “the things that make for peace.” We hope these will help in our understanding of an alternative vision of peace with justice and practical peace-making strategies that can stand as alternatives to the war and violence that is being perpetuated in Syria. This is the second in this series of background essays.

Syria Global Day of Action and Prayer: September 21st, 2016

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE IN SYRIA

By Ethan Vesely-Flad, Director of National Organizing, Fellowship of Reconciliation

Nonviolent resistance is a methodology of pursuing social and political change through protest, civil disobedience, economic or political noncooperation (such as strikes and boycotts), the creation of alternative institutions and educational models, and other methods, without using violence. While these tools have been used for millennia—as long as humans have exerted power over one



another—the philosophy and practice of nonviolent struggle has grown exponentially since the early 20th century.

Owing greatly to the inspirational teachings of Mohandas Gandhi and the legacy of the *satyagraha* (truth force) movement led by the Mahatma in the early 1900s, nonviolent resistance has become a foundational framework for social movements worldwide. Communities in struggle against oppressive systems—from political dictatorships to illicit corporate actors—regularly use nonviolent tactics to gain moral legitimacy and ethical suasion.

Researchers Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan argue in their 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works* that nonviolent resistance campaigns are more than twice as effective as violent ones, citing dozens of global examples from the past century. Nonviolent resistance, they report, presents fewer obstacles to moral and physical involvement, information and education, and individual commitment. Greater participation then contributes to enhanced resilience, more tactical innovation, increased opportunity for civic disruption, and shifts in loyalty among opponents' supporters (including the military). They find successful nonviolent resistance movements usher in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, which are less likely to regress into civil war.

For some, indeed, nonviolent resistance is strategic: a method to be deployed in certain circumstances, especially when facing heavily militarized state security or other armed forces. But many activists have adopted nonviolence as a way of life, and not only as a tactical asset. Spiritual practitioners like Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States and Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam have received global recognition for proclaiming steadfast love of their political opponents while pursuing dramatic goals toward social change. (See Rev. Dr. King's "[6 Principles of Nonviolence](#).")

Nonviolent Resistance in Syria

Starting in late 2010 and throughout 2011, popular uprisings swept through the Middle East, becoming known as the Arab Spring movement. Beginning in March 2011, hundreds of thousands marched in the streets of Syria calling for greater human rights, the release of prisoners of conscience, and dramatic political change. [Local Coordination Committees](#) played a key role in supporting nonviolent resistance during the early months of the uprising. The [Syrian Nonviolence Movement](#), with the support of diasporic Syrians, globally promoted the practices of noncooperation, civil disobedience, and the building of parallel structures and institutions.

The Bashar al-Assad regime responded harshly to these nonviolent acts of mass resistance, imprisoning hundreds of protesters and using live ammunition and even bombs against the marchers. By July 2011, news agencies reported military cadets were seen [joining the mass marches](#). That October, a network of civil society groups organized under the banner of Freedom Days; in December they

sponsored a two-week [Dignity Strike](#) that featured strikes of stores, universities, and government agencies as well as acts of civil disobedience.

In April 2012, another round of nonviolent actions were launched through the Stop the Killing movement. A primary organizer, a 32-year-old female lawyer named Rima, was detained by Syrian forces in November along with three other courageous Syrian women when they staged a [“Brides of Peace” public demonstration](#) that called for the end to all military actions in the country. In the following months, despite immoral, brutal acts by both the regime and rebel forces (including “siege warfare” that denied food and humanitarian aid to civilian populations), which yielded a staggering death toll, many communities continued to organize creative acts of nonviolent resistance.

Today, more than five years into this conflict, many have become desensitized to reports of [numerous armed factions](#) seeking battlefield victories. The civil and proxy war being waged by the Assad regime, *Daesh*/ISIS/ISIL, rebel forces, and outside aggressors (including Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and others) now represents one of the deadliest conflicts in modern history; more than half a million Syrians are presumed dead. In the context of such a devastated country—which has also suffered at least half its population displaced, a destroyed infrastructure, and embittered sectarian movements defining and exploiting religious and cultural divisions—the prospect of nonviolent change might seem impossible. Yet the cycle of violence will continue endlessly unless political and social space is made for a nonviolent way.

There [continue to be extraordinary efforts by Syrian civilians](#) to act nonviolently in the midst of war, and a lasting resolution of the civil war will depend on whether the international community will choose to support Syrian-led initiatives centered on restorative justice and transformative dialogue that includes all stakeholders in the conflict.

What You Can Do

- Pressure your members of Congress and the White House to cease [funding appropriations](#) for military support and training of armed groups in Syria.
- Call on the [Obama Administration](#) to redouble U.N. efforts toward an immediate ceasefire in Syria, and urge that peace negotiations include a commitment to free and fair elections.
- Follow the [Syrian Nonviolence Movement](#) on Facebook.

- Support the work of the [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#), which has provided [trainings for Syrian civil society activists](#), and in 2016 conducted an in-depth assessment survey of the protection needs of refugees and migrants fleeing Syria.
- Advocate for the release of Syrian prisoners of conscience by all parties, through human rights agencies like [Amnesty International](#).

***To DONATE to organizations supporting nonviolence [click here](#) and follow the instructions.**

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How Can You Take Part in the GLOBAL DAY OF ACTION AND PRAYER FOR SYRIA?

- *An **Interfaith Prayer Service** will be held at the Community Church of New York on September 21st at 5:00 p.m. Join us!*
- *Use the available **Toolkit of resources** to plan a prayer service or other activity in your community in conjunction with the day.*
- *Your congregation, organization or community can endorse the interfaith **Call for an End to the War in Syria**, which will be issued at a press conference prior to the service. To endorse, contact GlobalDayforSyria@gmail.com.*
- *Like and follow GDAPS us on social media at **Facebook.com/GlobalDayForSyria** or using **#GlobalDayForSyria**.*

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