

April 7, 2005

On a Screen in the West Bank, Gandhi's Message of Nonviolence

By [GREG MYRE](#)

RAMALLAH, West Bank, April 6 - For the Palestinians, nonviolent resistance has rarely been the guiding principle in their struggle with Israel.

But on Wednesday, more than two decades after the movie "Gandhi" filled theaters worldwide, the first version dubbed in Arabic was screened here, with the blessing of the Palestinian leadership. It marked the start of a project financed by wealthy American businessmen that aims to bring the film to Palestinians as a whole.

The screening, at the Palace of Culture, was attended by an audience of several hundred, among them several Palestinian cabinet ministers. Ben Kingsley, who won an Oscar for his starring role as Mohandas K. Gandhi, was in Ramallah as a guest of the Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas. The movie's message, Mr. Kingsley said, was as timely today as when the film was released in 1982. "The force of truth is irreducible, and this is the center of the message," he said at a news conference here.

Organizers of the "Gandhi Project" plan to show the film throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in cities, refugee camps, and villages. Beginning next month, the film will be presented to the large Palestinian refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The film, which won eight Academy Awards, has been issued previously with Arabic subtitles, but never before dubbed in the language. The organizers said they received permission from Sony Pictures to show it without charge in Palestinian communities.

Mr. Kingsley and the organizers said that their message was nonpolitical, and that they were not trying to take positions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, it ignited a debate at the theater, where Palestinians differed over whether Gandhi's philosophy could be applied in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I wanted to see how he confronted occupation," said Abla Afanah, a teacher in Ramallah. "I think it may be possible to implement this here."

"It's not possible," interjected Sudki Safat, a friend of Ms. Afanah and an official in the Ministry of Education. "I know Gandhi and his principles. But I also know my enemy very well."

"Gandhi would fail if he faced the Israelis," said Mr. Safat.

Many of the invited viewers were youths from refugee camps in Ramallah. Several said they were interested in other aspects of Indian resistance to British colonial rule, like economic self-reliance and the boycott of British products.

"We have studied revolutions all around the world, and try to learn from them," said Rajai al-Biss, 18, a college student. "But I don't think we have the means to boycott Israeli products. We have a different reality here."

Opinion polls have consistently shown that a large majority of Palestinians have supported attacks against Israel as the best way to end Israel's occupation and to achieve Palestinian statehood.

However, in recent months, Palestinians have generally been supportive of Mr. Abbas, who is calling for an end to the armed uprising and has sought to revive full-fledged peace talks with Israel.

Palestinians argue that they have pursued nonviolent resistance at various times over the years, to no avail. Over the past two years, unarmed Palestinians have staged numerous protests against Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank, but they point out that their efforts have attracted relatively little attention.

Israel, meanwhile, says the Palestinians as a whole have never made a strategic decision to abandon violence.