Is Issa Amro the Palestinian Gandhi?

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HEBRON, West Bank – Issa Amro led a group of American tourists toward two soldiers standing sentry in the street. Amro, a Palestinian human rights activist, told the soldiers he intended to continue his tour beyond them. The young soldiers shook their heads and one radioed his commander. The tourists could pass, but not Amro, the soldier said. That section of Shuhada Street, a main thoroughfare, is closed to Palestinians.

Amro told the visitors he’d meet them on the other end of Shuhada; he would take a different route. The interaction is a regular feature of Amro’s tours of Hebron, the most disputed Palestinian city in the West Bank, where some 800 Israeli settlers live under the protection of 1,500 Israeli soldiers amidst 200,000 Palestinians. Amro has gained international recognition as an advocate for Hebron’s Palestinians and as a vocal proponent of nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation.

Amro’s dream is for a mass Palestinian protest movement, he said – coordinated, disciplined, populist and, most of all, adept at nonviolence tactics. His supporters, locally and internationally, see him as a beacon of justice and leadership: a “Palestinian Gandhi.”

Lara Friedman, for instance, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace in Washington, D.C., said Amro is a model organizer. “He is an example of the kind of leadership that is growing at the grassroots in Palestine, and is a leadership committed to nonviolence,” she said.

To critics, however, he’s a self-promoting provocateur. Hebron’s settlers, in particular, who describe themselves as a besieged minority fighting for their God-given right to a place where they have deep spiritual and historical ties, view Amro as a troublemaker who incites hatred against them from Palestinians while courting their condemnation by an international community that they perceive as anti-Semitic.

“Only the terrorists get power from what he’s doing because he gives them the moral support for doing bad,” said Tzipi Shlisel, who lives near the building Amro uses as his headquarters.

Amro, 37, was born in Hebron’s Old City, in a house he can see from the headquarters atop a hill in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood. He can’t visit because it is in an area closed to Palestinians. He was born in the house, he said, because Israel’s curfew for Palestinians at the time prevented his mother from going to the hospital.

His parents never spoke negatively about Jews, Amro said. His mother would tell him about the Jews who lived in Hebron before the 1929 massacre in which Arabs killed 67 of them and drove out the rest, and about Palestinian neighbors who she said sheltered many during the three days of violence.

He said his family avoided talking about politics. The conflict had claimed Amro’s grandfather, who was killed in the 1950s moving goods between the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Amro’s father was wounded by gunfire shortly after the first Israeli settlers arrived in Hebron in 1967.

“So he wanted us only to focus on our education,” Amro said. “But the occupation was really not letting us do that because of the curfew, because of the continuous harassment from the settlers.”
He was 14 when a Brooklyn-born settler named Baruch Goldstein opened fire on Muslim worshippers inside Hebron’s Ibrahimi Mosque in 1994, killing 29. Two of Amro’s schoolmates were among the dead. One was a boy he had played soccer with each morning. “He did nothing to be killed,” Amro said. “He was so peaceful.”

The incident, condemned by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, prompted the Israeli military to close the mosque as well as roads and shops in the vicinity, including Shuhada Street. The mosque was reopened but Shuhada never was, its shops’ metal doors welded shut. Palestinian families who live above them were forced to use or create alternate entrances.

Amro was studying electrical engineering at Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron when the second Palestinian Intifada broke out in 2002. Violence from Palestinians during the mass uprising was met by Israel with overwhelming military force. During his senior year, Amro and some 5,000 students found the entrances to their school sealed shut by the Israeli army.

“Four years of studying very hard, and then in your last year you lose your degree, you lose your future,” Amro said. “I saw that my future was very dark, and it was for me, I’m losing my life.”

He thought hard about what he could do, he said. He researched the nonviolence movements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the overthrow of apartheid rule in South Africa. He and a friend organized their fellow students and reopened their campus in defiance of an Israeli military order, sleeping there to ensure that it stayed open.

At the same time, Huwaida Arraf, a Palestinian-American attorney and activist, was asking around in her network for “the movers and shakers in Hebron” as she sought to assist nonviolent resistance throughout the occupied territories, she said. Someone told her about the young men leading the action at the university. “I thought that was way cool and I got in touch with them,” Arraf said.

She invited Amro to several days of formal training in nonviolence methods that were held in Hebron. She also introduced him to the work of Gene Sharp, an American academic and author who had devoted his career to the study of nonviolent action. Amro pored over his books.

A year later, Amro formed Youth Against Settlements. As coordinator, he mentors a group of young Palestinian volunteers working to attract international attention to Hebron. Dozens of Palestinians are affiliated with his group, Amro said, but a core of about a dozen gather regularly at its headquarters. The building is a former Palestinian home that the Israeli military used as a base during the second intifada. Amro contacted the owner, who had left Hebron, and sued for the property in Israeli court so that settlers wouldn’t move in after the army left, he said. He won. For his volunteers, the center is physical proof of the power in the methods that Amro preaches.

There he hosts a steady stream of international tourists who visit Hebron year-round. Several groups per week, sometimes per day, trek up the hill through olive groves to meet Amro. Some sleep there or are treated to a dinner of mujaddara, a Palestinian lentils-and-rice dish, as they hear Amro or his head volunteers describe conditions in their area of the city, the Israeli-controlled section known as H2. Amro’s goal is to garner a critical mass of international support that could pressure Israel to end its military occupation of the West Bank, he said. He uses local grievances to make his case: home seizures by settlers, arbitrary road closures, new
checkpoints, home raids, arrests and shootings of Palestinians, settlers attacking or harassing Palestinians with impunity and separate legal systems for Israelis and Palestinians, to name a few.

Amro also organizes demonstrations and trains local residents to film human rights abuses. He challenges Israeli actions in Israeli courts and tries to recruit more Palestinians to nonviolent activism.

His work took on particular urgency during the wave of stabbing attacks in Israel and the West Bank by mostly young Palestinians two years ago. Amro began to get calls from parents in Hebron who knew of local teens planning such attacks. Most cases involved teens wielding kitchen knives facing off against trained soldiers and police armed with automatic weapons; the young attackers usually ended up killed themselves.

Amro describes personally intervening and preventing at least seven incidents. He found his way to would-be teen attackers before they reached their targets, he said, and turned their commitment to suicidal violence into enough hope for their futures that they handed him their knives. Such interventions are dangerous for both parties – if security forces had spotted Amro with an armed person, both could have been arrested or shot in accordance with Israeli law. Yet his approach highlights his opposition to Israel’s response to Palestinian violence and posits one that he believes could be more successful in resolving a conflict most describe as intractable.

Would-be attackers whose plans he thwarted were usually moved by their families to the care of relatives where they could receive appropriate attention to their mental health, Amro said. None were willing to speak to this reporter for fear of repercussions from Israeli authorities.

But another young man who epitomizes the shift in approach that Amro hopes to foster was willing to speak.

Mohammad Amro is a distant cousin of the organizer. Fourteen members of his family were involved in armed fighting during the second intifada. One uncle was killed, another sentenced to 14 years in Israeli prison for providing support to Palestinian gunmen trading fire with Israeli troops. Mohammad’s father was charged in 2002 with being involved in a bombing that killed seven in Israel. He’s serving a 718-year sentence, said Mohammad, who has seen his father only five times since his arrest.

Mohammad’s family warned him that he would be a target for Israeli authorities because of his family ties, he said, so he spent much of his time indoors. Now, he’s a volunteer at Amro’s center. He said that not only he but his father have come to support nonviolent resistance as an effective and safe alternative to the activities that led to their separation.

Amro’s work has earned him praise from the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Human Rights and from American politicians, notably Bernie Sanders. His work has also drawn the ire of both Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Amro faces up to 10 years in Israeli prison for 18 charges that include incitement and insulting a soldier. And he was arrested by the Palestinian Authority in September for a Facebook post criticizing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, for which Amro was charged with disturbing public order and “causing strife.”

Amro is free on bail and has retained both an Israeli and a Palestinian lawyer to fight all charges in the respective courts. Israel’s charges cite arrests between 2010 and 2016, some of them revived since Amro was originally released without charge. Amro has appeared in court in Israel’s Ofer military prison several times in the last year, and the trial continues.
The legal pressure on him comes at a time when his international profile has never been higher. The recognition is a double-edged sword. In addition to the legal challenges, he faces increasing threats and harassment, he said – enough so that he’s taking extra safety precautions, which he declined to specify. Yet he cited a letter of support for him signed by 32 members of Congress in June as evidence that the message he promotes is having greater influence.

“Members of Congress are taking a risk by standing up for me,” Amro wrote for The Hill shortly after. “But in doing so, they are accurately reflecting the growing sentiment among Americans who believe in equal rights for all people.”

It is that messaging – framing the Palestinian cause as a human rights issue rather than a dispute about politics or religion – that distinguishes Amro and his generation of activists. It is his success in representing that message to the international community that distinguishes him among activists in the West Bank. A steady stream of tourists, mostly from Europe, pass through his group’s center in Hebron year-round. Amro increasingly travels abroad for speaking engagements. He visited Washington, D.C. in October for a public conversation with Peter Beinart, a journalist and Israel expert.

The event was organized by Friedman’s group to highlight Amro’s work and what he represents. “For years, I’ve gone to synagogues and other events where people have said, ‘Well where’s the Palestinian Peace Now and where’s the Palestinian Gandhi?’ Friedman said. “Well I mean, Issa Amro has been doing this sort of thing on the ground for years, and he’s just one of many.”

Friedman said Amro’s legal predicaments represent the conflicting pressures that nonviolent anti-occupation activists experience. Israeli authorities are adept at suppressing violent protest, she said, but struggle to find an answer to nonviolent resistance. “So you delegitimize – you marginalize – the nonviolent protest,” she said. “You pretend it doesn’t exist and you treat everything that happens as a form of violence to justify any level of counter reaction.”

Since beginning his activism, Amro has been arrested or detained more than a dozen times. A scar on his scalp is a leftover from a beating by Israeli police, he said. His nose was broken when he was attacked by a settler, and he walks gingerly due to a back injury suffered during another beating by Israeli authorities.

Volunteers gather nightly at the center to hang out. They play cards, watch soccer and music videos on their smartphones and smoke hookahs on outdoor couches with burn marks that Amro said were the result of a nighttime incursion by teenaged settlers. He often sits off to the side by himself, reading news on his phone or staring intently at the ground with his arms crossed, his hand to his chin and his brow crumpled in a thoughtful scowl.

“When I sit by myself, I think how I can affect them more and more to come join nonviolent resistance,” he said of Palestinians affiliated with Hamas, the ruling party in Gaza. He dreams of political unity between it and the West Bank’s Fatah government, he said, and is encouraged by the deal signed by both in October. Amro wants a leadership that can educate and train its population in nonviolence methodology, he said, “because nonviolent resistance without real training can’t work.” He speaks to Hamas leaders in an effort to convert them to his methodology. He claims he has had some success. Their fervent ideology, he said, could make them and their supporters fearless agents of nonviolent tactics.
“Issa, he has a special mind,” said Izzat Karaki, 28, one of Amro’s senior volunteers. Karaki and his friends used to laugh when they heard about nonviolent resistance, he said. Resistance was happening all around them when they were teenagers during the Second Intifada, but it was done with guns, bombs and stones. What appealed to him, however, was the ability to fight the occupation and stay alive and out of prison.

From Amro, Karaki learned how he could protect himself and others from false charges by filming encounters with soldiers and settlers. Amro taught him to clasp his hands behind his back when talking to soldiers to avoid making gestures they could interpret as threatening.

Abed Sider, 36, doesn’t work with Amro’s group but said he has known him for about 15 years. “He’s a good man,” Sider said. “Whatever he wants, I help him.”

Muhanned Qafesha, 25, was involved in activism before he joined Amro’s group, translating for visiting internationals and journalists and accompanying foreign observers on patrols.

Qafesha is one of Amro’s most active volunteers. He leads tours for the groups of internationals who stop at the center in a steady stream year-round, sometimes taking as many as two groups per day to observe the realities of life in Hebron: the two-story gated checkpoints with electronically-controlled turnstiles; the wire mesh protecting Palestinians on Old City streets from trash thrown by settlers who live above; shuttered shops in once-thriving markets. Settlements in the West Bank are communities near Palestinian villages, but in Hebron settlers live above and next door to Palestinians.

Qafesha accompanied the American tourists Amro led in August. They were a delegation with Dream Defenders, an activist group made up mostly of people of color. They visited to learn about life under Israeli occupation and what parallels might exist to the grievances of people of color in America.

When Amro was stopped on Shuhada Street, a settler in civilian clothes and a skullcap approached from behind the soldiers and explained that Americans could pass, but not Arabs. He said he was a security guard. Amro turned to his group, smirking: “He’s telling the soldiers what to do. You see?”

The man said that Palestinians have 95 percent of the city, and Jews are relegated to only a fraction, which is restricted to Palestinians because of past terror attacks. It is a common grievance of the settlers. Although 7,000 live in neighboring Kiryat Arba, settlers in Hebron blame the Israeli government for not allowing them to build more homes in H2 and blame Palestinian violence for the beefed up military presence and any measures taken in the name of security.

“The married kids cannot live here in Hebron,” said Shlisel, who has 11 children. “There’s no apartments available for Jewish people.”

In spite of his organization’s name, Amro is adamant that Jews and Palestinians can live together peacefully – if they are equal by law. “We need equality first,” he said. “Then everything can be possible.”

Photo captions:
1. Issa Amro, right, speaks to a group of international tourists.
2. An Israeli soldier films Amro and a visiting international volunteer.
3. Izzat Karaki smokes a cigarette outside the YAS center.
4. Karaki, left, and Muhammed Qafesha pause during a night patrol in H2. Volunteers take a camera out for patrols when tensions are high.
5. Alleged settler graffiti is scrawled on a wall along a walkway in a Palestinian section of H2.
6. A Palestinian flag flies on the property of the YAS center. A settlement home flies an Israeli flag next door.
7. The view of Ibrahimi Mosque and Hebron’s Old City from the YAS center.
8. An Israeli military base on a hilltop opposite the YAS center.
9. Two women approach an Israeli sentry in H2.
10. An Israeli soldier mans an outpost on the restricted portion of Shuhada Street.
11. Qafesha addresses a visiting group of Europeans.
12. Karaki relaxes outside the YAS center.