



'Gandhi' in Arabic Screened in West Bank

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RAMALLAH, West Bank -- Actor Ben Kingsley and U.S. philanthropists unveiled an Arabic version of the film "Gandhi" on Wednesday, hoping to bring the legendary Indian revolutionary's message of nonviolent resistance to Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps.

The release of the 1982 Academy Award winning film, dubbed into Arabic by 129 Palestinian actors, comes at a key moment in the Mideast conflict. Many Palestinians are exhausted after more than four years of violence but say they have no intention of abandoning their fight for an independent state.

"The message (of the movie) is fresh. People should and will be affected by it," said Kamran Elahian, an Iranian-American businessman who helped organize the effort.

But Palestinians who saw the film were skeptical about applying its nonviolent message to their conflict with Israel.

The new version of the film is the centerpiece of the Gandhi Project, which hopes to spread the philosophy of peace and tolerance throughout the region.

The project, sponsored by the Skoll Foundation and the Global Catalyst Foundation, two U.S.-based philanthropic organizations, plans to offer free screenings throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip and to distribute DVD copies to local civic groups to show to youth. The film also will be shown to Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

"Gandhi was an ordinary man who took it upon himself to change the world, and telling his story is one way to get people to see the Gandhi in themselves," said Jeff Skoll, chair of the Skoll Foundation.

Kingsley, who played Gandhi in the movie, said its most important message was the idea of Satyagraha, a Sanskrit word meaning "truth force," the use of nonviolent resistance to open the eyes of the oppressor.

"The force of truth is at the center of the controversy," he said.

Gandhi and his followers boycotted British products in India and defied laws they considered unjust. Even when they were beaten for their protests, they did not fight back.

Gandhi's campaign of disobedience was credited with helping win India's independence in 1947. He was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist in 1948.

Kingsley is only the latest Hollywood actor to get involved in restarting Mideast peace efforts.

"Seinfeld" star Jason Alexander came here in support of the grass roots "One Voice" peace initiative, and actor Richard Gere has been touring the region in recent days appealing for peace and dialogue.

Though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been saturated with violence, "Gandhi" could find a newly receptive audience.

Relations between Palestinians and Israelis have warmed considerably since the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in November. The two sides declared a cease-fire, and violence has plunged in recent weeks. A poll last month showed Palestinian support for suicide bombings had plummeted to 29 percent from 77 percent in a poll last year.

But it remains unclear how the film will be received.

Even many of the 300 people who attended the movie's Arabic premiere Wednesday in the West Bank city of Ramallah were unconvinced. While they respected Gandhi as a man who liberated his people, they were not sure they were ready to adopt his tactics.

"There are too many differences," said Dea Opahi, a 21-year-old man. "If we stopped resisting Israel, it would probably confiscate all the land left to us."

"It's too late. Maybe if we had started earlier," said Khadga Sharkouyi, a 75-year-old woman.

A few did believe it was time to try another way, especially in light of the results of more than four years of fighting that killed 3,469 people on the Palestinian side and 1,032 on the Israeli side.

"For sure nonviolence is the best and Gandhi's experience is a good example" Hassan Hussein, 17.

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On the Net: <http://www.gandhiproject.org/>

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