

NONVIOLENCE ACTION LAB
CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY | HARVARD
KENNEDY SCHOOL

NOVEMBER 2020

NONVIOLENCE SUMMIT REPORT



CHAIR: ERICA CHENOWETH

SUPPORTED BY SIDNEY TOPOL AND THE TOPOL FAMILY
FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE CARR CENTER NONVIOLENT ACTION LAB



OUR PURPOSE

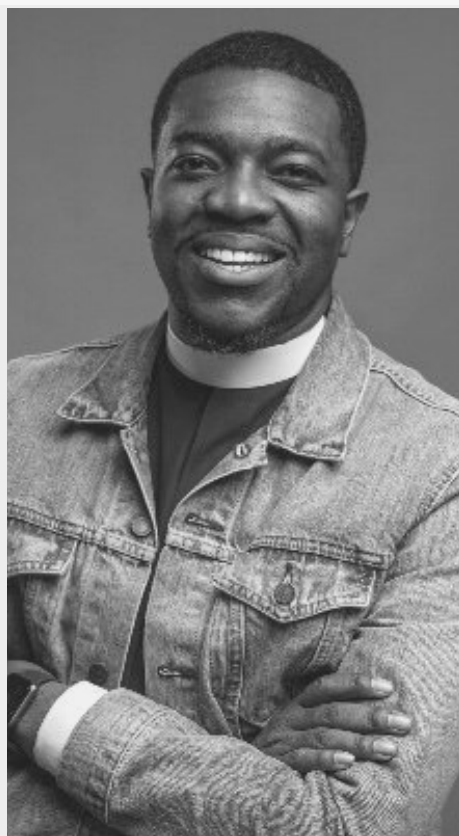
The Nonviolent Action Lab produces and disseminates up-to-date knowledge on nonviolent action, how it works, and global trends in success and failure. Existing research shows that nonviolent resistance can be highly effective in defending democracy and creating transformational change, but many people remain skeptical about its effectiveness. By studying and amplifying nonviolent resistance, and synthesizing lessons learned, the lab makes it easier for the public and practitioners to embrace nonviolence as a way to seek justice.

SUMMARY

On Thursday, November 12, 2020, scores of students, activists, and scholars around the world gathered online for the inaugural Summit on Nonviolent Resistance Today. Convened by the Nonviolent Action Lab at Harvard Kennedy School's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and made possible by financial support from Sidney Topol and the Topol Family Foundation, the summit gave participants a chance to learn from practitioners currently engaged in nonviolent campaigns in the U.S. and the Middle East; to hear Topol fellows talk about their ongoing research projects; and to brainstorm ideas for future research on the nature and effectiveness of nonviolent action.

KEYNOTE

Rev. Stephen A. Green, Senior Pastor of Heard AME Church in Roselle, NJ, served as the summit's keynote speaker. He spoke to participants about his commitment to Kingian nonviolence and described how he is working to implement those ideas in collaboration with local groups protesting against structural racism and police violence in Louisville, KY. Rev. Green underscored the importance of building "beloved community" through actions that shift power to the people, provide essential services, amplify existing local efforts, and challenge sources of economic and political power.



TOPOL FELLOWS PANELS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM ACTIVISTS ON THE GROUND

After Rev. Green's keynote address, participants heard from two panels composed of activists and recent Topol fellows. The Topol Fellowship helps students in Harvard's Kennedy School of Government develop a more comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of nonviolent resistance movements around the world, and of the efficacy of nonviolent action. Recent fellows are now affiliated with educational institutions around the world, from nearby [Fletcher School](#), [UMass Boston](#), and [Boston Latin School](#) to the [University of Haifa](#) in Israel.

PANEL 1

- Alex McCauliffe (Topol Fellow, Fletcher School): "Non-violent resistance and feminism: Designing negotiations for sustained peace"; and
- Galia Golan and Osama Elewat ([Combatants for Peace](#)): "The challenges in advocating non-violence during an ongoing armed conflict"

PANEL 2

- Dipali Anumol (Topol Fellow, Fletcher School): "Building an Ethics of Care in Research During COVID-19"; and
- Oriel Eisner (Topol Fellow, Harvard Divinity School) and Sameeha (Palestine): "Solidarity Relationships and Nonviolent Resistance"



BRAINSTORMING / LOOKING AHEAD

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS THAT ACTIVISTS AND ORGANIZERS ARE ASKING THAT SCHOLARSHIP DOES NOT YET HAVE ANSWERS TO?

Participants spent the final hour of the summit brainstorming ideas for new research projects on the changing nature of nonviolent action and its efficacy. Prof. Erica Chenoweth, director of the Nonviolent Action Lab and chair of the summit, prompted participants by asking: “What are the most important questions activists and organizers are asking that scholarship does not yet have answers to?”

Many of the ideas tabled in response to that prompt involved issues of broad and enduring concern to scholars and practitioners.

- How should researchers conceptualize and assess the outcomes of nonviolent campaigns when those campaigns may last for years or even decades? What does “success” look like or mean in this context?
- What can we learn from closer study of attempts to mobilize nonviolent campaigns that fizzled, and how can we identify those attempts in order to study them?
- What are the different styles or modes of leadership in nonviolent movements, and how do these differences relate to movement success or failure?
- Should researchers broaden their work on nonviolent action to cover more forms of organization and activism? Are scholars too focused on street protests?
- What role does the media play in keeping movements going or snuffing them out?
- How do nonviolent movements succeed in dismantling oppressive systems, and why do groups that achieve this goal so often become oppressors themselves?
- How can nonviolent action be used to bring about revolution rather than reform? If liberation is impossible under capitalism, how do we transform this system, and what role can nonviolent resistance play in that process?

Many more focused on pragmatic issues confronted by activists engaged in nonviolent resistance campaigns.

- How can outsiders support and participate in nonviolent movements without co-opting them? What can activists do to facilitate healthy contributions from outsiders, and how can outsiders think about what “good” support looks like?
- How can we improve communication across nonviolent movements to increase their collective power and advance shared goals?
- How can nonviolent movements cooperate with political insiders without being reduced to serving as instruments in struggles between elites?
- Why have highly publicized and well-funded efforts to deepen the involvement of women and other marginalized groups in high-level peace negotiations resulted in so little change, and how can this be rectified?
- How can activists counter disinformation campaigns?
- How can activists use social media to grow and sustain movements?
- What tools are available to activists who want to (safely) track volunteer training and task management?
- How do movements maintain nonviolent discipline in situations where violence could be morally justified (e.g., self defense) but would probably be counterproductive?
- How can activists increase access to education about human rights and social justice in communities with different cultures and beliefs? More generally, how can we find common ground among individuals with such different biases?

A third and final cluster focused on issues that are especially salient in the United States right now.

- What tools are available to activists that are especially powerful for opposing rising authoritarianism in electoral democracies?
- During periods of intense political polarization, does nonviolent mobilization improve prospects for positive social change, or does it mostly just amplify pre-existing conflict? How can activists improve prospects for the former?
- How can activists try to engage and enervate the one-third of the U.S. population that chose not to vote in the 2020 elections? Should they?