

Mit Sit-ins: gegen Bulldozer: Der Gewaltlose peotest in Palestina

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Popular Protest in Palestine: Uncertain Future

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Budrus is a small quiet and picturesque village west of Ramallah near the 1967 border with Israel which has been directly impacted by the Israeli government decision to build the separation wall in 2002 or as many activists will call it the “apartheid Wall”. One of the leaders of the nonviolence committee in the village described the action taken by local residents to stop the destruction of their land and uprooting their trees to build the Wall; “It was a Friday, November 7, 2003. Suddenly, at around 10.00 am we saw the Israeli bulldozers arriving at our land. I started speaking with the coordinators of the different political factions ... I went to the mosque, and started shouting to the people of the village that we wanted to make a demonstration and that the target was the bulldozers; we didn’t want to engage the soldiers or anyone else, but simply to stop the bulldozers from uprooting our olive trees to build the Wall. We tied ourselves to the trees by chains to stop uprooting of the trees”. The Palestinian population in the 1967 occupied territories has a long history of organised nonviolent popular resistance to the Israeli occupation and the first Intifada (uprising) in 1987 was the most developed form of nonviolent civil resistance with unified leadership and cohesion and a clear strategy to put an end to the Israeli occupation through the local popular committees. The current wave of the Palestinian popular resistance *to the* occupation started in 2002 in response to the Israeli decision to build a Wall to act as a physical barrier between the West Bank and Israel and this movement took a different form of resistance to express opposition to the occupation and to defend their lives and land. A villager from Azzoun, Qalqilya district explained that the “aim

of the resistance is to stay on our land". However, the activists contextualise their particular objectives within the framework of resisting and bringing an end to the Israeli occupation. Specifically, the protest arose against the confiscation of the resident's land, denial of access to their land and property, and the violence and harassment of the settlers towards the villagers.

The second Intifada or Al-Aqsa Intifada began in September 2000 following Ariel Sharon's provocative entry into the Al-Haram al Sharif (Temple Mount) area, but the deeper cause was the build-up of frustration, resentment and anger resulting from seven years of peace process that only served to deepen Palestinian dispossession and deprivation whilst strengthening the Israeli occupation through settlement building and land confiscation. The situation was only made worse by the malfunctioning and corruption of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the creation of a new Palestinian elite who benefitted from the status quo. The rapid militarisation of the second Intifada effectively sidelined any significant role for civil society organisations in a nonviolent struggle, as a younger and more militant generation came to the fore, who superseded to some extent, a discredited older generation of leaders.

The growth of popular protest against the construction of Wall was characterised by the emergence of a series of localised pockets of active popular resistance both against the Wall but also in opposition to the threat of land expropriation from the Palestinian villages to build and extend settlements. The construction commenced in the north of the West Bank in Jenin district. Once the local villagers in Aneen and Al-Taybah realised the threat to their land and their livelihood, they reacted as best they could and organised public meetings and informal popular resistance committees were

created. These had little or no formal structure and were composed by those affected and local leaders and activists. The repertoire of protest included what they could do to obstruct the construction process using ropes to pull down the half-constructed fence during the night, cutting holes in the fence and holding protest marches and making special efforts to cultivate the land and plant crops adjacent to the barrier. Some of these activities attracted the support and participation of Israeli and international solidarity activists. However, notably there was virtually no involvement of the PA and the political parties. As the construction of the Wall progressed southwards, so it sparked further protest and the number of sites of contestation increased and many of the local organisers, who in fact were drawn mainly from the generation of the first Intifada activists, allowed themselves to dream that they might be initiating a new unarmed uprising. As one leader of a local popular committee expressed it, 'We came alive in the first Intifada. Then we died in the second. Maybe now we are being reborn.'

There are a number of reasons why the contemporary wave of Palestinian leaders of the popular resistance have chosen nonviolent modes of resistance against the occupation; the failure of Oslo peace process and stalemate of the peace negotiation with Israel has led to people realising that they need to take action, that there is no other alternative at this stage. As one activist stated: "The last few years we have realised that nonviolent resistance should be a full strategy. Negotiations have failed and will continue to fail because there is a serious imbalance of power and no international pressure on Israel. So how can we change the balance of power?" There is also realisation that the armed struggle and the violence of the second Intifada in 2000 was disastrous in its consequences, helping to reinforce the Palestinian image abroad as terrorists

and leading to a forfeiture of international support, Palestinians “have tried armed resistance and we saw that it was very damaging. We are the victims and people start to see that now”, the activist continued.

There is awareness that the military balance between Israel and the Palestinians is utterly asymmetric, and that to pursue violent means would be to play into the hands of Israel. Member of the networks argued that “We have been through different stages – armed struggle, the intifada, and now the balance of power is not in our favour so now we are revisiting this strategy. In the last couple of years all the parties have seen this reality, that we cannot challenge Israel by military means. Maybe with nonviolent resistance we can pull the carpet from under the Israeli’s feet and expose their violence both direct and structural”.

The first intifada showed that Israel is less capable of dealing with popular resistance, and that its treatment of nonviolent protesters can seriously undermine its international standing as a democratic state facing a “terrorist threat” from the Palestinians. There is more sympathy and understanding in the world towards nonviolent resistance in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, (OPT) as one of local leaders in the south Hebron Hills put it; “Israel has the military power and we have the nonviolent power”.

The peak of the nonviolence protest activities was in 2010-11 when there was a maximum of 40-50 villages and neighbourhoods engaged in some form of organised unarmed resistance against the ongoing occupation, such activities included men and women, young and old despite their political affiliation to stop the threat to their livelihood and wellbeing. Some of these pockets of

resistance, such as Budrus and Bil'in, gained an international profile during the peak of their resistance but this declined with the passage of time. The growth of the activism along the route of the Wall also spawned a revival of the civil resistance in other locations when Palestinians were threatened by the expansion of the Israeli settlements and different resistance committees were established in neighbourhoods of Silwan in East Jerusalem, to thwart the Israeli plans to confiscate land and homes and transfer it to the settlers. In 2008 the Youth Against Settlement movement in Hebron was created as part of the sustained struggle to ensure the Palestinian presence in those parts of the city controlled by the Israeli settlers and resist the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes and property. Meanwhile similar campaigns were launched in South Hebron Hills to prevent the eviction of the Bedouins from their homes and to resist the restrictions imposed by the Israeli army to prevent them from cultivating and grazing their land. A year later, the first protest was launched in Nabi Saleh in Ramallah district targeted against the expansion of the neighbouring settlement Halamish, the same protest also began in Kufr Qaddum, West of Nablus, challenging the expansion of Kedumim and the closure of the main road that leads to the village .

Despite the growing and wide spread of protest at no stage of the current popular resistance there was anything comparable to the mass grass root movement of protest characterised the first intifada in 1987. All activities against the Wall and settlements were nonviolent in nature and included offensive type protest such as demonstrations, sit-ins, occupation of an Israeli supermarket by Palestinian protesters in Gush Etzion and the boycott of Israeli goods sold in the OPT.

The challenge for the organisers of the protest was that demonstrations and unarmed confrontations with soldiers failed to impact in clear manner upon members of Israeli society. One way to address this challenge has been to organise actions that do “interfere” with the everyday lives of the Israeli public and the Jewish settlers in the West Bank specifically. On October 16, 2012 a group of Palestinian activists blocked the route 443, one of the main arterial roads that cross the OPT and link Jerusalem with Tel Aviv. The group drove their cars on the road slowly and at pre-arranged spot stopped blocking the road. The aim of the action was to highlight the settlers’ violence against Palestinians and their property during the olive harvest. One of the organisers explained that the “action today came to stress that as long as Palestinians suffer under the daily practice of the occupation and settler terror, Israeli daily life cannot continue as normal”.

Accompaniment is another form of nonviolence resistance and refers to the practice of activists accompanying Palestinians as they go about their daily lives so that, by their presence and witness, they can deter assaults by settlers and the Israeli occupation forces. They accompany farmers to work their land, children to go to school and shepherds with their flock. This protective role has been played by different groups – Israeli solidarity activists, internationals and Palestinian activists. For example, in the South Hebron Hills activists from the Israeli solidarity group Ta’ayush (Co-existence) and from Rabbis for Human Rights have acted as a protective presence in the area since 2000 and were then joined by international volunteers. Within the city of Hebron members of Youth Against Settlements (YAS) have attempted to act as a protective presence for those Palestinians living adjacent to Israeli settlements in the city. As one of their members explained, ‘We observe the settlers ... We have 50 people ready to mobilise if any house is threatened ... We are not afraid to

confront the settlers. Our aim is to empower the local people – they are not alone – so that they can hold on to their property.’

Another form of resistance conducted by the Palestinians is to cooperate with Israeli peace groups to document the human rights violation and the use of the Israeli legal system. In Qalqilya District activists also linked the legal path to that of protest. As one activist recalled: “We raised the issue before the court. We won one case in the Israeli High Court where we had restored around 2000 acres of confiscated land”. The constructive resistance though is the positive actions taken by villagers and activists to work with their community and present alternatives to support the community and their resilience to stay in their land and homes. To underline the claims of Palestinians to their land and protect it from the settlers the governor’s office in Nablus provided tractors in 2012 to enable local people to plough land adjacent to local settlements in order to forestall its expropriation by the settlers. In the words of the governor: “We try to support people in their efforts to regain access to their land. The Israelis destroy schools, we rebuild them. They cut the electricity, we bring a generator. ... One idea, taken from the settlers, is to have portable housing units, or else provide people with the materials to construct houses, to create a new reality, facts on the ground. ... I supported farmers by providing the cost of tractors to plough the land next to the settlements which was threatened with confiscation, in total 17,300 dunums were ploughed”. As with most forms of popular resistance in Palestine, international and Israeli solidarity activists have also played an important supporting role in relation to different forms of constructive direct action relating to land use, particularly through volunteering to assist in planting olive trees and helping with the olive harvest.

It is clear that whilst the first Intifada in 1987 was predominantly a wide civil disobedience movement the current wave is seasonal and localised pockets of resistance, as one activist put “ if only there were hundreds of protest actions every Friday. ..and if Fatah mobilised its cadres, then we would have a different situation” The first Intifada succeeded in shaking Israeli decision-makers and touching significant sections of the Israeli public, this wave of resistance has failed to impose a sufficient cost on Israel and has not been able to influence Israeli society. However, the significant message of the current popular protest is clear “we will not accept the status-quo” and “reject the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation”.

There is a routine and predictable, quality to the protests at the Wall and settlement encroachments. Each Friday after prayers in the mosque people would gather and march to the site of contestation. Once the target area had been reached banners and flags would be waved, chants and songs repeated. Sometimes tyres would be burned and stones thrown at the soldiers. The soldiers would respond with tear-gas grenades, sound bombs, rubber bullets and ‘skunk water’ (a chemical fluid with a foul stench that clings to the body and clothing) – and live ammunition in some cases. There would then follow a kind of cat and mouse game with Palestinian youths using slingshots to harass the soldiers whilst snatch squads of soldiers tried to apprehend them. Often the chase would continue into the local village with soldiers forcing entry into homes to make arrests.

So why has the popular protest failed to make a significant impact? What are the challenges facing this Palestinian movement? A range of factors needed to be overcome, including the political fracture between Fatah and Hamas which

impacts on the Palestinian community and is reflected in the nonviolence movement. The lack of a coherent strategy and the lack of coordination between competing networks of activists. As one member of a popular committee in Silwan observed, 'A major challenge is the coordination of nonviolent activities. Some focus on the Wall, others on checkpoints and others on settlements. There is no coordination like there was in the first intifada'

The crisis of leadership is pervasive and lack of commitment to popular protest and lack of trust held by Palestinians in leadership at any level and the cynicism about the motivation of anyone taking a leadership role helps to explain the low rate of participation and problems of mobilising people. All this has contributed to a widespread sense of resignation and despair amongst Palestinians of any hope for a future peace settlement. The perception of many has been that the dominant political class and associated political elite have a vested interest in 'business as usual'. They might mouth their support for popular resistance and the struggle to bring the occupation to an end, but they remain very wary of any kind of popular movement that might threaten their life-style and their privilege.

The economic impoverishment of large numbers of Palestinians denied the opportunity of working in Israel and with restricted access to other sources of employment and income stands in marked contrast to the privileged minority who have prospered under the 'post-Oslo occupation'. In a situation where few substantial gains have been achieved by popular resistance, it is not surprising that those living on the bread-line became reluctant to add to their burdens by participating in protest actions and thereby risking fines,

imprisonment and physical injury for no apparent purpose. In a nutshell, the changes that have taken place within the OPT in the years of the 'peace process' have eroded the socio-political base necessary for a unified movement of civil resistance of the scale sufficient to exercise leverage over the Israeli public and decision-makers and cause them to review their commitment to continuing the occupation.

However, the popular resistance has not been pointless and futile. It has been significant as an ongoing symbol of the Palestinian refusal to acquiesce to the status quo of occupation and as a means of communicating that refusal and denying legitimacy to the occupation – and the justness of their cause – to wider constituencies globally, which has in turn fed into the growth of international networks of solidarity and civil society organisations that campaign in support of the Palestinian struggle to end the occupation. There can be little doubt that the lived experience of international solidarity activists in Palestine strengthens their capacity for advocacy amongst their own networks in their home countries. This has been a significant factor in the expansion over recent years of a global grassroots movement of solidarity urging an end to the Israeli occupation. The growth of the transnational campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) targeted at Israel and initiated by Palestinian civil society organisations in 2005 is perhaps the most obvious illustration of this phenomenon. The growing international solidarity movement with the Palestinians is a clear indicator of citizens' movements that wish to address this injustice and violation of the Palestinians human rights and exercise pressure on Israel.

In March 2015 the Israeli electorate voted into power the most hard-line coalition in Israel's history, headed up by Benjamin Netanyahu who had campaigned on the promise that he would prevent the establishment of any Palestinian state. In the national newspaper *Haaretz* the correspondent Gideon Levy bemoaned the result: 'If after six years of sowing fear and anxiety, hatred and despair, this is the nation's choice, then it is very ill indeed. In the OPT the return of Netanyahu to power was met with indifference by significant sections of the population. This is echoed the feeling of despair and frustration that been growing over the last few years because of the stalemate or more accurately the end of the peace process. The failure of the popular protest to exert sufficient leverage on the Israeli public and decision-makers to cause them to question their commitment to the continuation of the occupation added more to the frustration. In conclusion, the internal Palestinian factors contributed to weak popular protest movement and the sanctions imposed by illegitimate and brutal occupation has led to further frustration and despair and to an outbreak of violent attacks by individuals against Israeli civilians and army.

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