Popular Protest in Palestine

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The Uncertain Future
of Unarmed Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

In 1989 one of the authors (Marwan Darweish) interviewed an activist in Gaza. It was at the height of the Palestinian popular uprising against occupation, the first intifada – a time of high hopes and great expectations for Palestinians. The interviewee commented, 'You sense that the leadership is not separate from the Palestinian people, but that it is present everywhere. … You feel a unity and an amazing solidarity which differs from anything else we have felt in the twenty or so years since the PLO was formed.'[1]

At around the same time Andrew Rigby was interviewing a former political prisoner living in the refugee camp at Far'a in the West Bank. This informant echoed the sense of solidarity and hope expressed by his Gazan contemporary as he described the key feature of the popular resistance at that time: 'Everyone helps each other … all the people have the same way now, the same struggle against the occupation – from the children to the old men, all the same, they want to get rid of the occupation. One soul through many bodies, through many voices.'[2]

More than 20 years after these interviews took place both authors interviewed a senior Fatah official and member of the Palestinian Authority (PA) at his offices in Ramallah. We were trying to discover how such a person in a leadership position within the party and the administration viewed the spread of popular resistance that had started amidst the violence of the second intifada in opposition to the construction of the Separation Wall and had spread to challenge settlement expansion and land expropriation in other parts of the West Bank. Like the politician he was, he provided us with an up-beat assessment:

Popular resistance is spreading and intensifying … we are planning a more comprehensive approach to nonviolence which will include not just demonstrations but other areas such as the economic boycott of all Israeli goods, not just settlement produce. This will impact on Israel. The aim is to create a culture of popular resistance, a way of living. … We are planning a publication on how to become part of the popular resistance. … There is a degree of consensus amongst all the parties on the importance of popular resistance. Even Hamas supports this form of resistance. In the reconciliation talks between the PA and Hamas this strategy was accepted and agreed.

Nearly two years later, in November 2013, we interviewed another senior Fatah member and district governor with the PA. He was far less sanguine in his assessment of the 'state of play' with regard to popular resistance (the term used by Palestinians to refer to their civilian-based unarmed resistance to occupation):

> If there was a massive popular resistance, there is a possibility of success. … As a Fatah person I feel that if we do not lead the movement, then it will not move – but Fatah has no programme, so how can we lead? We need a plan, not just an ad hoc reaction to events. But some of the leaders have a personal interest in the status quo. … There is a price to be paid in resistance, and the leaders should be to the fore. It should not just be the people paying the price. So this is part of the cycle of mistrust. People want to see their leaders to the fore, as an example to people on the ground. … At the moment popular resistance is very localised, every Friday the same few villages, the same thing. It is not popular as it does not include the mass of people. If we were serious we would make life hell for the settlers, blocking the roads, making the soldiers work. That would be popular resistance.

Through the voices captured in these four quotes we can begin to grasp the trajectory followed by many Palestinians over the past quarter of a century: from a time of hope in the late 1980s and early 1990s when there was confidence in the power of popular unarmed resistance as a means of bringing an end to the Israeli occupation, through to the waning of that hope and the acknowledgement of the weakness of leadership that has accompanied the failure of the wave of popular resistance that started in 2002 to halt the construction of the Separation Wall. The aim of this book is to delve deeper into the dynamics of this trajectory by examining the Palestinian struggle against occupation through the lens of unarmed civilian-based resistance.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Both authors have had a personal and professional interest in the role that unarmed civilian resistance might play in bringing an end to the occupation since the 1980s. As part of this involvement we have made repeated family and research/consultancy related visits to the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Israel itself. Over time our friendships with Palestinian and Israeli activists have deepened and our contact lists have grown accordingly. In late 2010 we felt that Palestinian interest in unarmed modes of popular resistance had grown to such an extent that the time might be ripe for an in-depth study of the potentialities (and limitations) of such an approach, in the context of the disaster of the

second intifada and the clear indications that the so-called 'peace negotiations' were leading nowhere. So it was with that intention that we made contact once again with our friends and associates. From them we gathered a basic guide to the main sites of contestation within the West Bank and contact details for key members of local popular resistance committees in each location. Essentially these consisted of those villages that had been active in the struggle to protect their land and their well-being by trying to stop the advance of the Separation Wall; those were the sites where Palestinians had been inspired by the resistance to the Wall and had taken up the struggle to resist the expansion of local settlements that threatened to expropriate more of their land, and those sites – both rural and urban – in territory designated by the Oslo Accords of 1995 as Area C where Palestinians were engaged in an ongoing struggle to protect not just their land but also their homes and their way of life from the assaults of Israeli settlers supported by the Israeli occupation forces.

Starting in 2011 we began to make contact with these local activists, and we stayed in touch with them through to late 2013 when the main body of our fieldwork was completed. During the early period of our fieldwork we shared with our respondents their sense of hope that the struggle against the occupation was taking on a new power with the spread of resistance to new sites. As one of our contacts observed, 'We came alive in the first intifada. Then we died in the second. Maybe now we are being reborn.' But over the following months we witnessed the decline in people's hopes and expectations regarding the leverage power of popular resistance as a means of dislodging the Israeli occupation. This was not something we wanted to experience – like them we had been energised and enthused and so we also shared in the disappointment felt by many who had come to acknowledge that for all their initiative, courage and struggle, they had not managed to impact on Israeli publics and decision makers who remained as committed as ever to the continuation of the occupation and the accompanying abuse of Palestinian human rights. So our focus changed – from trying to understand the factors that had led to an upsurge in popular resistance we had, by late 2013, begun to spend more time with our informants looking backwards in an attempt to understand why the movement had failed to make any appreciable progress towards achieving its basic objective of bringing the occupation to an end.

Accordingly, the analysis that is developed in the following pages is based very much on the insights and judgements of the activists themselves. Each of the face-to-face interviews and conversations – of which there were in excess of one hundred – with Palestinian and Israeli activists, politicians and opinion leaders was carried out in either their own language (Arabic and Hebrew) or in English.[3] Marwan, being proficient in all three languages, would normally take the lead in the interviews. If the medium was Arabic or Hebrew, he would also provide Andrew with a simultaneous translation in English, with Andrew

busily scribbling notes and checking that the voice recorder was still operating. The notes and the recordings were then transcribed, coded and analysed using one of the standard social science software programmes for the analysis of qualitative data. We gave considerable thought to whether or not we should provide basic source references for the quotations taken from the interviews, which we have used throughout the book. In the end we decided that our paramount concern should be to avoid any actions that might undermine the security of our informants, and this required taking all reasonable measures to guard their identities.

Our approach to the study was informed not just by our long-term personal and professional involvement with different aspects of Palestinian resistance to occupation, but also by our deep value-commitment to nonviolent means of struggle for peace and justice. However, it became very clear early in our fieldwork that Palestinian activists were uncomfortable when we talked about 'nonviolent resistance'. As one of them explained, 'When we started we used the language of popular resistance. We did not want to use the term nonviolence – we practised it but did not talk about it. We try to internalise it, so that it becomes part of our culture, but the word itself sounds strange.' Accordingly we have tended to use the term 'popular resistance' to refer to the civilian-based modes of resistance pursued by Palestinians. Moreover, we ourselves felt that nonviolence was not the most appropriate term to use to refer to the methods of resistance typically pursued by Palestinians. In normal usage nonviolent resistance involves a refusal to inflict, or threaten to inflict, direct physical harm or injury upon an opponent in a conflict situation.[4] Consequently it has to be acknowledged that many of the clashes that have taken place between Palestinians and Israeli occupying forces and settlers have not been nonviolent insofar as stone-throwing by Palestinians has become a standard part of their repertoire of protest in such situations.[5]

CIVIL RESISTANCE STUDIES

Our analysis was also informed by the body of literature on civil resistance to tyranny and injustice that has grown in recent years. Most definitions of civil or civilian resistance emphasise that it is a mode of challenging opponents that are not averse to using violence by civilians, relying on the sustained use of methods that are predominantly nonviolent, unarmed or 'non-military' in nature, in pursuit of goals that are widely shared within the society.[6] It has been noted by a number of scholars and commentators that there has been something of a surge in publications on civil resistance in recent years.[7] For example, April Carter observed in 2012 that 'the increasing number of unarmed resistance struggles in recent decades has led to a growing literature discussing the theory,

strategy and methods of such resistance and describing individual movements.'[8] Much of this work draws on the original contribution of Gene Sharp who began publishing on nonviolent resistance in the 1950s and whose three-volume study, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) remains a keynote work in the field.[9] More recently the work of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan has received attention with their evidence-based claims that over the past century nonviolent forms of resistance to oppressive regimes have been more likely to succeed than violent forms of insurrection and armed struggle, a fact that they have attributed primarily to the higher rates of popular participation possible in nonviolent struggles compared with violent ones.[10] However, the prime focus of such works has been on unarmed civilian-based resistance to authoritarian domestic regimes by citizens struggling for democratic change. Thus, a recent study by Sharon Nepstad focuses solely on such domestic 'uprisings', arguing that the key determinant of success in such struggles is security force defections.[11] It is a stimulating study, but the models presented in this and other works are of limited relevance as frameworks for the analysis of cases of unarmed resistance against foreign domination and occupation.

There have been a host of books written about resistance to occupation in continental Europe during the Second World War, but only a limited number have focused on unarmed resistance during that period. Those that have included such a concern within their frame of reference have proven to be particular helpful for our purposes. Jacques Semelin's work on civilian resistance in Europe during the period 1939–43 has been a source of considerable insight which has informed our study. Particularly important has been his understanding that the aim of unarmed resistance to Nazi occupation was never that of defeating the occupier by nonviolent struggle. People realised that they lacked the means to drive them out. Rather:

> The goal of this spontaneous struggle was instead to preserve the collective identity of the attacked societies; that is to say, their fundamental values. ... When a society feels less and less submissive, it becomes more and more uncontrollable. Then, even if the occupier keeps its power, it loses its authority. This expresses how much civilian resistance consisted primarily of a clash of wills, expressing above all a fight for values.[12]

Hence, the prime aim of civil resistance was to deny the occupier's claims to legitimacy, whilst waiting for eventual liberation that was expected to come from outside intervention by the armed allied forces. So, for Semelin, the first act of resistance is 'to find the strength to say *NO* without necessarily having a clear idea of what one wants.'[13] From this perspective the core of resistance is the determination not to give in to the will of the aggressor for, as Semelin has argued, 'The founding act of a resistance process against an occupation is

basically an affirmation of the superiority of the de jure authority over the de facto one.'[14]

Another study of civilian resistance to occupation that has been a key source has been Werner Rings' examination of different types of collaboration and resistance in occupied Europe during the Second World War.[15] Rings' work helped us develop our categorisation of types of resistance to occupation that has informed our study throughout, and which complemented our understanding of the dynamics of unarmed resistance based on the mainstream literature within the field of civil resistance studies; these are summarised below. In addition we have drawn on Mazin Qumsiyeh's detailed and comprehensive account of nonviolent resistance in Palestine, especially during the period from the Ottoman rule to the first intifada.[16]

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING DYNAMICS OF CIVIL RESISTANCE

1. 'Dependent power'

The basic assumption informing most studies of nonviolent civil resistance in pursuit of social and political change is that all forms of domination and oppression are dependent on various sources of support, including the cooperation (willing or forced) of significant sectors of the population.[17] Repressive regimes depend not only on fear and intimidation and the coercive power of the police and armed forces, but also on the habits of obedience of citizens and their preparedness to pay taxes and generate other forms of revenue required. To the extent that citizens can overcome their fear and their habits of obedience, then it becomes increasingly costly for regimes to impose their will.

2. The importance of identifying and undermining 'pillars of support'

Many students and activists attempting to understand the dynamics of regime change through civilian-based resistance focus on identifying the key pillars of support of a regime, and explore the ways in which these pillars might be undermined and regime support eroded.[18] In identifying the pillars of support, analysts and activists have typically focused not just on internal props such as the loyalty of key sections of the administration and security personnel, but also on those external sources of support on which a regime relies.[19] An integral part of attempts to undermine external sources of support involves searching for transnational allies that can exercise leverage directly on targeted regimes or indirectly by influencing those external actors upon whose support a regime relies.

3. Raising the costs of regime policies

Some scholars have emphasised the significance of nonviolent resisters influencing regime policies by means of activities that raise the costs of its repressive policies. Frequently such activities involve actions that are intended to provoke reactions on the part of the regime that can 'backfire' and result in a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of significant internal and external actors, including in certain cases members of the regime's own security forces whose loyalty can be stretched to such a degree that they refuse to carry out orders.[20]

4. The chain of nonviolence/influence

Johan Galtung developed the strategic concept of a 'chain of nonviolence' to refer to that process whereby civil resisters who cannot impact directly on the decision-makers against whom they are struggling can sometimes make links with groups and 'intermediaries' who can, in turn, connect with others, so that the chain of influence approaches closer to the power structures that are being challenged.[21] Galtung located the theory (and the practice) of links in the chain of nonviolence within the context of social distance – that is, when there is too great a social distance between adversaries for them to identify and communicate with each other, then there is a need for intermediaries who can more readily exercise some kind of leverage over the adversary and its supporters.

TYPES OF NONVIOLENT ACTION

Gene Sharp has identified three main categories of nonviolent action: protest and persuasion, non-cooperation, and interventions.[22] In his study of civilian-based resistance to occupation during the Second World War, Werner Rings identified four main categories. The following characterisations are derived from Rings, but developed through the prism of nonviolent resistance and will be used throughout this study as a framework for characterising different forms of nonviolent or unarmed resistance.

- *Symbolic resistance*: 'We remain what we were and communicate to others by means of gestures, actions or dress continued allegiance to our cause and its values.'
- *Polemical resistance*: 'We oppose the occupier by voicing protest and trying to encourage others of the need to maintain the struggle.'
- *Offensive resistance*: 'We are prepared to do all that we can to frustrate and overcome the oppressor by nonviolent means, including strikes, demonstrations and other forms of direct action.'

- *Defensive resistance*: 'We aid and protect those in danger or on the run, and thereby preserve human beings and human values endangered by the occupying power.'
- *Constructive resistance*: 'We challenge the existing imposed order by seeking to create alternative institutions that embody the values that we hope to see flourish more widely once we are free.'[23]

CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR EMERGENCE OF COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE TO OCCUPATION

Research into civilian-based resistance to occupation and oppression has identified a number of conditions necessary for sustained collective resistance to oppression in general and occupation in particular.[24] The most obvious is that sufficient people share a strong commitment to a common cause, based on a shared experience of oppression and injustice. However, a number of other 'enabling conditions' would seem to be significant:

1. A strong sense of identity and social solidarity shared by members of the subject population. One of the necessary conditions for a high degree of social cohesion is the absence of deep horizontal and vertical divisions in society.
2. An effective leadership with a vision, able to articulate the concerns and needs of the population and respond constructively to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities.
3. A strong 'democratic culture' based on a tradition of active citizenship and respect for basic human rights, which thereby renders the experience of oppression and injustice all the more intolerable and about which 'something must be done'.
4. Ownership at the grassroots level with a central role being played by community-based and civil society organisations and networks.

CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE TO TAKE AN UNARMED/NONVIOLENT FORM

Certain types of conditions seem to be necessary for the resistance to take a nonviolent form:

1. The presence of experienced practitioners and advocates of unarmed modes of resistance within the leadership.

2. Extreme imbalance in the means of coercive power available so that any resort to violence in the struggle against a regime would invite massive retaliation and consequently be counter-productive.
3. The absence of strong 'counter-movements' within the society advocating and pursuing violent means of resistance.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CIVIL RESISTANCE STRUGGLE

Based on the above, it is possible to identify a range of conditions that could strengthen and improve the likelihood of an unarmed civilian-based resistance movement sustaining itself and thereby making progress towards achieving its goals. These include the following:

1. A strong sense of solidarity throughout the subject population and within a movement that encourages the widest possible participation and within which all kinds of people can play a role.
2. Clear achievable goals that are widely supported by activists and citizens in general.
3. Organisational strength throughout all levels of the movement, enhanced by the participation of people with experience of nonviolent resistance.
4. Capacity to generate a clear strategy with a repertoire of tactics and action that can be adapted to changing contexts by activists trained in nonviolent action and sufficiently disciplined and aware to avoid responding to provocation with violence. Such repertoires can include bold, high-risk actions that dramatically challenge the legitimacy of the regime alongside lower-risk activities that perhaps erode fear or at least involve people not ready to run greater risks.[25]
5. The capacity to maintain communication within the resistance movement itself, and with wider publics, including sympathetic bystanders, third parties and external actors prepared to act as links in the chain of nonviolence. This also extends to include communication with opponents, aimed at encouraging 'loyalty shifts' amongst security personnel and armed forces by reassuring them that they can have a role to play in the anticipated future.
6. Widespread recognition of the legitimacy of the struggle with regard to aims and methods which can lead to significant third parties exercising their leverage power on behalf of the 'just cause'.
7. Reliable supply of the resources required to sustain the struggle. This includes economic, financial and material resources as well as symbolic support.

8. Sources of external support from state and non-state actors that strengthen the resilience of the population to continue its resistance and do not undermine the legitimacy or the solidarity of the movement.

Of course a resistance movement might meet all the conditions identified above, and yet fail to achieve the goal of liberation from domination and occupation. For this to happen it is vital that conditions are created such that the target regime is forced to concede that the status quo is unsustainable. This can only come about if the 'sticks' wielded by its opponents and concerned third parties carry such salience and impose or threaten such costs that the 'carrot' of an alternative future relationship between the parties becomes more attractive than the continuation of the old pattern of domination, subjugation and occupation. In this book we shall examine the ways in which Palestinians and their supporters have tried to use unarmed means of resistance in order to bring about such a situation.