



International Institute
for Nonviolent Action

NON-VIOLENT POPULAR RESISTANCE IN THE WEST BANK

THE CASE OF THE POPULAR STRUGGLE COMMITTEES

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Nonviolent popular resistance is more threatening to [the state of] Israel than armed resistance. The difference between the two is that in the first all segments of society takes part, including children, women and old men, while the latter is limited to a small sector of society.

(An activist from Bil'in village, November 2011)

1

. Introduction

This report presents the Palestinian struggle against Israel's colonization through the activities of local activists on the ground and the impact of such activism on local communities, international participants and Palestinian national political struggle in general. Particular reference is given to the work of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRCs) in the West Bank,. PRCs are village-based groups, first formed in 2002, which coordinate unarmed resistance activities against Israel's colonization.¹ Although the work of these committees is irregular, territorially disconnected or locally based, and often issue-oriented, they have become arguably the most important in the current struggle against Israel's colonial practices within the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), by constituting a fundamental shift in Palestinian resistance from armed resistance to mass participation in the form of a civilian and nonviolent nature of the struggle.

Understanding popular resistance and nonviolence in the OPTs today has been addressed in several ways. The historical approach traces today's popular resistance as a continuation of a long history of Palestinian unarmed struggle commencing during the Ottoman times to British and subsequently Israeli colonization². An alternate approach frames the experience of non-violent struggle through the prism of social

¹ More specifically, PRCs were initially formed to confront Israel's land confiscation policies in the West Bank villages following Israel's decision to construct the Wall on Palestinian villages' lands. As noted by the Stop the Wall Campaign: "The Wall has destroyed a large amount of Palestinian farmland and usurped water supplies, including the biggest aquifer in the West Bank. 78 Palestinian villages and communities with a total population of 266,442 will be isolated as follows:

Villages surrounded by the Wall, settlements and settler roads - 257,265 Palestinians.

Villages isolated between Wall and Green Line - 8,557 Palestinians

Villages isolated and residents threatened with expulsion - 6,314 Palestinians."

For further information check: <http://stopthewall.org/>

² See, for example, Qumsiyehm, Mazin.(2011) *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment*. Pluto Books.

movement theories³. The report draws on both approaches, highlighting recent cultural history such as the first and second intifadas (starting in 1987 and 2000, respectively) which have shaped much of the PRC's vision and strategies and the role of local communities and individuals and their engagement with nonviolent activism.

In addition, the report analyses the role of international participation, that is how legitimacy in relation to resistance is constructed and solidarity with the Palestinian struggle strengthened. Finally, the report assesses the nature of agency and the potential for the resistance movement to transform the political power dynamics in the OPTs in favor of the oppressed Palestinian people.

The Palestinian PRCs build upon a rich tradition of Palestinian struggle against colonizers. This includes both the earlier history of struggle and more recent experiences. In the majority of interviews conducted as part of this research, there is a tendency to think of the



first intifada (1987-1991) as a very positive and successful civil

³ For example: Daghash, May. *Bili'in: A Microcosm of the Palestinian Non-violent Social movement*. Nova & Popular Struggle coordination committee, 2011. See also Pallister-Wilkins, Polly. "Radical Ground: Israeli and Palestinian Activists and Joint Protest Against the Wall". *Social Movement Studies* 8 (4): 393-407.

resistance experience, as opposed to the second intifada (beginning in 2000), which is perceived as a more or less a painful one. The mass-based, participatory, unarmed, tactics of the first intifada serve as a useful example for many engaged in the PRCs, as opposed to the use of military resistance tactics by a small segment in the second Intifada (and which left the majority of the population exposed to Israel's heavy use of arms in retaliation).

At the same time, the PRCs have made use of other, international approaches to resistance as analogies. This has included the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the civil rights movement in the United States, and in some cases, the Indian anti-colonial struggle. These three cases, in addition to the first intifada, are generally perceived through the lens of mass participation, civil disobedience, and unarmed forms of resistance. Furthermore, due to a long history of mainstream Palestinian factions viewing themselves as part of Third World anti-colonial movements, Palestinian resistance has been compared with that of Algeria against French colonialism – although this was mainly characterized as an armed struggle⁴. These comparative experiences inside and outside the OPT have contributed to a dichotomy of violence/nonviolence when approaching the Palestinian resistance tradition. Consequently, given the range of understanding associated with the concept, in this report the term 'popular resistance' specifically refers to unarmed, non-factional, inclusive practices.

When under attack by external forces, communities restructure themselves in order to maintain social cohesiveness and confront challenges. The role of the community and its relationship to the resistance movement is an essential element to understand the conditions within which the PRCs function. The sustained will and active support of the indigenous hosting environment has enabled and prolonged organized protests. In such conditions, the community is not

⁴ See : Alshareef, Maher (1995). *Bahthan A'n Kaeen, (in search for an Entity)*. Al-Mada publishing.

only a hosting environment but a major factor in the resistance strategy itself, shaping it and shaped by it.

The report consists of five sections. The following second section briefly touches upon the methodology used, with a more extensive elaboration available in the annex. The second section frames the nature of unarmed resistance in general and specifically contextualizes Palestine's resistance tradition. In addition, it sets out the debates among Palestinians regarding how Palestinian resistance has been represented and the politics of naming or re-narrating history. The third, fourth and fifth sections, present the tactics and strategies and achievements of the PRCs. The three sections describe the formation of the PRCs and situate particular communities' experiences in relation to the struggle. This includes the various legal channels undertaken by the PRCs as an example of political transformative action and the role played by networks and individuals engaged in international solidarity activities. The final section concludes with how these small initiatives have the potential to become a national strategy that can transform the overall struggle against Israeli colonial practices.

2 . Methodology

The research in this report is based on fifteen in-depth interviews and nine focus groups (the average composed of five to eight participants) conducted between October 2011 and February 2012 with members of PRCs and local residents (which includes youth activists, older women and men of the community) in three West Bank localities: Bil'in, Nabi Saleh, and the Jordan Valley. The choice of these three localities offers an overview of local communities' strategies of resistance to Israeli colonial practices⁵: the erection of the Wall on Bil'in's agricultural lands, the encroaching Israeli settlement and colonial infrastructure on the lands of Nabi Saleh, and the confiscation of natural resources in the understudied Jordan valley. The focus groups included both PRC members and other groups less visible on the PRCs, including women. This was done in order to draw attention to the role of understudied community members. To complement and supplement the interviews and focus groups, additional ethnographic on-the-ground observations, published research reports and journalistic accounts (in Arabic and English), and television and online media archives (largely local Arabic media sources) were used to help identify major political elements in the PRCs work that can have the potential to transform political reality in the OPT.⁶

[All quotes, unless footnoted, are drawn from interviews conducted by a research team at the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University and translated by the author.]

⁵ Furthermore, each locality offers a different span of experience with regards to PRC resistance activity. For example, Bil'in has more than seven years of experience in continuous demonstrations, Nabi Saleh is a site of more recent protest activity, and the Jordan valley, also engaging in more recent PRC activism (although not direct protest demonstrations) has received very little media attention in comparison to other localities.

⁶ We focused our ethnographic fieldwork around the following indicators: demographic, socio-cultural, political, legal, economic, and media representation.

3

. Approaches to Popular Resistance and the Politics of Naming

3.1 Principle-pragmatic *and* tactical-strategic approach:

For over a century, Palestinians have used different tactics to resist the multiple forms of colonialism they have been subjected to—from Zionist settler colonialism beginning in the late 19th century, to British mandate colonialism following WWI, and to Israel’s colonialism and military occupation in the present⁷. In the Palestinian struggle, resistance becomes almost any act that disrupts the social, political, or legal order imposed by the colonial occupying power. Therefore, in addition to ‘being present’ or remaining on one’s land—which is perceived as an act of resistance and has been referred to as *sumud* or “steadfastness” in the face of colonial occupation—acts of civil disobedience (such as challenging Israel’s imposed curfew policies and standing in front of bulldozers) and symbolic performances of resistance (such as referencing national signifiers and international figures of resistance) are used to disrupt the settler colonial project. These practices and forms of resistance are compatible with a global understanding of what has been categorized as nonviolent resistance, which has been defined as “[a] civilian-based method used to wage conflict through social, psychological, economic, and political means without the threat or use of violence⁸.”

At different historical moments, strategies of resistance have been shaped according to changes in the socio-political context, political culture, availability of means, and ideological influences. During the post-

⁷ While the report’s fieldwork focuses on the OPT, it is important to highlight the continuity of Zionist-Israeli colonial practices from the beginning of the colonization of Palestine until today. The discussion here, therefore, references all of Palestine in order to contextualize, and not exceptionalize the conditions in the OPT.

⁸ Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth. “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): PP 7-44

WWII era of decolonization, the use of violence and armed struggle was perceived as the main—and sometimes the sole (in classical Marxist framing and Third World anti-colonial movements based on the theorization of Frantz Fanon)⁹—route to undermine colonialism and attendant forms of oppressions. However, violence has a tendency to reproduce itself.¹⁰ This has contributed towards reflections and debates by the colonized regarding the efficacy of violence. In the Palestinian case, during and after the second intifada (which was a result of the failure of ‘peace’ negotiations to end the military occupation), there have been various critiques of dependence on military tactics among activists¹¹. Scholars of nonviolence have approached these debates via two comparative categories: pragmatic versus ideological and tactical versus strategic.

The *pragmatic* argument highlights a power asymmetry when physical power is not an available option, as in the lack of sufficient arms to mount an armed revolution¹². Nonviolent approaches therefore are strategically more effective in mobilizing the oppressed population and in transforming the conflict into a more resolvable one¹³. This argument prevails in Palestine with regards to the inefficacy of military tactics due to the extreme power imbalance between the Palestinians and the Israeli state, where Palestinians suffer more casualties and pain than victories and achievements. As one commentator said, “using military tactics now is actually playing into the occupation’s hands, for they have all the

⁹ Fanon, Franz (1965). *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press. And FANON, FRANZ. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press. On Palestinian political thoughts see: Alshareef, Maher (1995). *Bahthan A'n Kaeen, (in search for an Entity)*. Al-Mada publishing

¹⁰ Scheper-Hughes, Nancy & Bourgois, Philippe (edit, 2009). *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*. Wiley-Blackwell publishing.

¹¹ See for example: Allen, Lori A. (2002) ‘Palestinians Debate “Polite” Resistance to Occupation’ Middle East report online: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer225/225_allen.html.

¹² See for example: Zunes, Stephen. Kurtz, Lester R. Asher, Sarah Beth (editors) (1999). *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective*. Blackwell Publishers, MA.

¹³ See Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth. "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict." *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): pp. 7-44.

weaponry and decide the rules of the game¹⁴.” Beyond the pragmatism of power imbalance, unarmed mass-based movements are also seen as an effective means to gain power, achieve further degrees of social solidarity or to fight against existing unjust powers, whether colonial, dictatorial, or based on other systems of structural violence¹⁵.

Although not in contradiction to the pragmatic argument, an *ideological* position is based on a principled ethical historical reasoning against the use of violence, as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. In the context of Palestine, an example which is frequently cited is that of Mubarak Awad who played a major role in spreading ideas on nonviolence in the period before the first intifada¹⁶. Resistance tactics in the second intifada incorporated guerrilla tactics and suicide attacks, generating much debate among Palestinians on the ethicality, legality, and effectiveness of such means. Another framework to understanding popular resistance is through the difference between tactics and strategy. The *tactical* approach, which argues for short to medium term campaigns in order to achieve a particular goal within an existing social framework. The aim is to better the conditions of the people under oppression. In the context of Palestine, examples include prisoner hunger strikes, planting trees on confiscated lands and demonstrations against the Wall. In opposition to the issue-oriented tactical approach is the *strategic approach*, which is guided by a structural analysis of social relationships and is mainly concerned with the fundamental transformation of society. Particular campaigns are thus

¹⁴ An interview with a young activist from Bethlehem, November 2011.

¹⁵ See for example: Ackerman, Peter and DuVall, Jack. (2001) *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Non-Violent Conflict*. Palgrave publishing. NY.

¹⁶ Mubarak Awad is a Palestinian-American principled nonviolence activist whose father was killed and his family forced out of Palestine in the 1948 war between Jews and Arabs – and which resulted in the creation of 750,000 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and neighbouring Arab states. In 1983 Awad returned from the U.S. to Jerusalem and established the Palestinian Centre for the Study of Nonviolence. He was exiled by Israel for in 1988. For more on his role in the first intifada See: King, Mary Elizabeth (2007). *A quiet Revolution: the first Palestinian Intifada and nonviolent Resistance*. Nation Books, NY.

conducted within the context of a long-term revolutionary strategy¹⁷. In Palestine, the first intifada included components of a strategic approach, such as creating parallel institutions to the Israeli colonial ones, including schools, medical clinics, and alternative policing and local conflict resolution systems. Today, Palestinian advocates of nonviolent popular resistance and their international supporters make use of these various approaches in their ongoing resistance struggle.

3.2 Politics of Naming: Debate and Reflection

Mainstream Western media, Western popular perception and political discourse has largely articulated the Palestinian national struggle as historically 'violent.' Phrases such as 'cycle of violence', 'terrorism' and 'culture of suicide and death' have tended to be commonplace. The West's representation of violence (in collusion with Israel) has both served to delegitimize Palestinians' right to national liberation and had an impact on the ground through the use of discursive tools as an essential part of the subjugation of the colonized¹⁸. A crucial element is to deny Palestinians the humanity, agency and legitimacy to wage an anti-colonial resistance struggle in the first place. In addition, many Palestinians believe that the use of military tactics in resistance struggle will equate the victim with the oppressor, thus furthering biased media representations of the Palestinians, in effect equating their struggle with 'terrorism'. In response, some Palestinians have appropriated such media discourse, categorizing their struggle as 'nonviolent,' in part to gain



¹⁷ See: <http://www.nonviolenceinternational.net/seasia/whatis/book.php>

¹⁸ Ala Jazze, "Discorsi e pratiche della resistenza popolare" *Conflitti globali* (2010) Agenzia x.Milan, Italy.

legitimacy on the international stage.

Emphasis on violence/non-violence has overlooked the nuances which exist in relation to the Palestinian struggle. Palestinian activism can be differentiated between popular resistance (*Al moqawama al sha'biyeh*) and armed struggle (*Al moqawama al musallaha*), the former which can be further distinguished between *jamheriah* [grassroots] or *sha'biyeh* [popular]. The difference in the use of language shows the efforts Palestinians are making to gain popular international solidarity with their struggle, while maintaining a grassroots vision locally. Thus the English term 'nonviolence' has become a keyword to gain solidarity through *moral sympathy* while the use of the term 'resistance' shows that Palestinians are seeking support for their political rights.

The international focus on violence/non-violence as opposed to Palestinian popular resistance highlights the Eurocentric re-signification of cultural notions and resistance practices in Palestine because the binary of violence/nonviolence is signified through the prism of the colonizer¹⁹. It is notable that the term 'violent' is made when directed against Israeli civilians or soldiers but not against Palestinians, who have in fact been subjected to violence since the first moment of Zionist colonization of their lands. Furthermore, it obliges Palestinians to use a Western lexicon to describe themselves or otherwise they will not be 'heard.' The debate is still ongoing, yet to the Palestinians, the most common meaning of nonviolent resistance is a form of activism that does *not include the use of arms*.

¹⁹ See for example: Ibrahim Shikaki: *What is the 'right' type of resistance?*
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/06/201162895553754742.html>

4

. Evolution and Scope of Popular Resistance

4.1 Formation

Many Palestinians hold romantic accounts about the imagery and forms of (unarmed) resistance used in the first intifada, particularly what is described as popular participation in resistance in contrast to guerrilla tactics, which are restricted to a small number of participants. Popular demonstrations and mass movements of civil disobedience against the military occupation characterized the first intifada, both in practice and collective memory. The name ‘Popular Committee’ itself can be traced back to the first intifada that began in 1987. These committees were formed in local neighborhoods to offer protection to community members from the Israeli army and settlers, to enforce the orders of the unified leadership of the first intifada, and to plan local forms of resistance that included creating parallel institutions to the occupation such as schools, medical clinics, voluntary work, land cultivation, food supplies, awareness raising, and women committees.²⁰

A young man from Bil’in, although he did not live through the first intifada, pointed out that “the achievements of the first intifada were remarkable. The spirit of voluntarism and popular work impacted society overall. What we are looking for now are similar achievements and successes that will lead us to liberation with the least losses.” The Popular Struggle Coordination Committee (PSCC), which is a coordinating body among popular committees across the West Bank, clearly stated that the first intifada is their inspiration and model to follow²¹.

Following Israel’s military invasion of the West Bank and its Palestinian political, civil, and social institutions in June 2002, Israeli

²⁰ *The first intifada leaflets are replete with statements about realizing people’s power through civil disobedience and self-governance.*

²¹ *See: <http://www.popularstruggle.org>.*

bulldozers started digging the first trench to erect the Wall near the northern West Bank towns of Jenin and Qalqilia²². Less than a month later the first local popular meeting issued its first statement against the Wall's construction. The immediate local response came long before Palestinian Authority (PA) officials paid attention to the danger posed by the Wall to Palestinian self-determination as it divided and confiscated Palestinian lands within the West Bank, and reduced the prospect of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. In the following months, the grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (Stop the Wall) was founded as part of the Palestinian Environmental NGO Network to mobilize affected communities against the Wall and attract international attention²³.

In nearly every locality impacted by the Wall, a new 'Popular Resistance Committee' (PRC) was formed, some building upon existing political structures such as political party factions and village councils, others starting as initiatives by local youth without official intervention by any formal political structure²⁴. Activists attribute the formation of Bil'in's committee in 2005 "to other sites struggling against the Wall, and specifically Budrus." The village of Budrus, west of Ramallah, became a significant example for nonviolent popular resistance and methods of organization. The PRC coordinator in Budrus village explained that the popular committee in the village included representation from all political parties and organizations, and for that reason, he believes their efforts to be popular and successful²⁵.

²² Local committees under the name of "land defense committees" formed in most West Bank localities in response to the Wall's construction on Palestinian village lands. Because of the intense military operations at the time, it was not clear what exactly could be done to effectively challenge the Wall's construction.

²³ See: 'Repression allowed, resistance denied'. Addameer, the Palestinian Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association and Stop the Wall. 2009. Some of these committees continue to be active, while others petered out once the Wall was completed.

²⁴ Most committees ceased to exist after the Wall was fully constructed on or around village lands. Few PRC continued such as Bilin and Nilin.

²⁵ Bringing together activists from different political parties did not mean that there was a political vision on the side of the factions to undertake unarmed popular resistance. However,

The formation of Bil'in's PRC took political parties and local institutions into consideration. It was established after a public meeting in the village representing the majority of the people, thus exemplifying the egalitarian nature of the PRC as a bottom-up initiative, contrary to the imposition of political parties, which tend to exhibit a reversed pyramid structure. Following its formation, the PRC insisted on keeping membership open to anyone willing and capable of serving the goals of the committee²⁶.



In most villages, the PRC formed immediately as Israeli surveyors came to their land and demonstrations took place. From the beginning, the PRCs' aims have been to stop the bulldozers and not to clash with Israeli soldiers. Such a practice, however, became impossible due to the soldiers' armed responses to the demonstrations. When Palestinian demonstrators came near the Wall the Israeli army bombarded them with tear-gas and rubber-coated metal bullets. On several occasions, protesters in different villages were able to halt construction of the Wall

local activists whom politically lean to those factions enforced their resistance practices on the Palestinian political scene. It can be considered a bottom-up process.

²⁶ *The PRCs in Nabi Saleh and the Jordan Valley followed a similar pattern, building on other localities' experiences, including that of Bil'in.*

for a few hours or even days. These actions were the direct and immediate response by a community under threat, inspired by national imaginations but primarily functioning as local initiatives against particular colonial policies on a local level. As an elderly woman explained: “Bil’in was a quiet village . . . today we are connected to people from other villages in the West Bank, and we have a voice. The majority of us are 1948 refugees. We were horrified by that experience and feared the same would happen to us in 2005. Therefore we resisted in order to stay on our land”.

4.2 Tactical vision: Inclusion as form of success

The existence of the PA’s state-like institutions complicated the relationship between three levels of political activism: local, national and international. The relationship between these scales necessitated a shift in strategy among the PRCs. This included pressuring the PA to support the affected communities and to raise the issue of the Wall internationally. One of the activists explains the logic of popular activism as follows:

We focused on three levels in our strategy of protests against the Wall: first on the local level through the demonstrations; then through a legal approach and court case on the illegality of the Wall; and finally through making contact with international movements²⁷.

Activists from Nabi Saleh, Bil’in and the Jordan valley depict their mission and visions in a similar vein. Popularity, localization, and international solidarity have characterized the movement. The idea of popularity emerged strongly in both the name and politics of the local village committees. Not being exclusive but representative, unarmed, and

²⁷ The Media Coordinator for the village of Aboud’s PRC, as cited in Addameer, the Palestinian Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association and Stop the Wall report entitled: repression allowed, resistance denied.” 2009

non-factional (although activists have their own political and ideological affiliations) has defined the committees' political practice; the activists describe their practice of resistance as the entire village's fight, as shown by one young activist from the village of Ni'lin:

The collective punishment of the army and the killings definitely affect the village a lot, but with the sadness about the losses there is anger. [...] The village has decided [to pursue popular struggle], and they will not stop the struggle because it's our right²⁸.

The use of inclusive language, like "the village" and "our right," claims grassroots democratic participation in the popular struggle. This is in contrast to the PA's 'authoritarian populism' in urban centers (area A) which have worked against democratic politics and participation²⁹.

Although armed resistance gained wide popular support among Palestinians during the second intifada, it was criticized for its alienation and exclusion of the wider population, including women who had played a prominent role in the first intifada, from the struggle, and which in turn reinforced undemocratic trends^{30, 31}. In an implicit response to the second intifada's lack of popular participation, a Budrus PRC member described a demonstration in 2004-2005 as follows:

... in every march in Budrus, about 99 percent of the residents participated. [...] Female participation was several times more than men's. People describe rural and peasant women as being conservative and unwilling to leave their homes, but what I saw was exactly the

²⁸ As cited in Addameer, the Palestinian Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association and Stop the Wall report entitled: *repression allowed, resistance denied.*" 2009

²⁹ See for example: Johnson, Penny and Kuttat, Eileen (2001) 'Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada,' *Feminist Review*, No. 69, *The Realm of the Possible: Middle Eastern Women in Political and Social Spaces* (2001), pp. 21-43.

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ See for example: Abdo, N. (1991) 'Women in the Intifada: Gender, class and national liberation. *Race and Class* 32, Pages 19-34.

*opposite. [...] I went to the mosque loudspeaker and announced a march of women and asked that women join*³².

The collective nature of the PRCs in the villages characterizes the localization of resistance.

A Nabi Saleh noted that: “In the beginning, nearly everyone in the village participated. Now we have a good 50% of the people in the village taking part in the activities”³³. Taking the experience of Budrus and Biddo into account, Bil’in’s PRC was aware of the importance of popularity. As one PRC member articulated: “It was clear for us that village participation was vital to the success of our resistance activities. In the beginning we had extraordinary participation, but participation was not always permanent. Now we have a good 10% of the village constantly present in every activity. Knowing we cannot build our struggle further from a small number of participants (as the village is small), we were forced to diversify our forms of activism and came up with new local strategies.”

4.3 Creativity and symbolic resistance

The activism of the PRCs is sufficiently diverse so as to be strategically creative, which as one Bil’in activist commented, “requires secrecy in order to be able to surprise the army.” In response to the first bulldozers on Bil’in village lands in February of 2005, for instance, villagers chained themselves to their olive trees, declaring that the soldiers would have to uproot them along with the trees. One young woman with a smile on her face described another creative tactic: “One day the youth came up with the idea of confronting the soldiers by

³² As cited in “Repression allowed, resistance denied”. Addameer, the Palestinian Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association and Stop the Wall. 2009

³³ A main question for debate and reflection among activists is how to increase and maintain active participation over years of struggle and how to transform local activism to the national level.

throwing balloons full of animal feces at them”. Such creativity continues every Friday, building on local experiences. such as a demonstration where all participants wore a mask of a PRC activist arrested by Israel, or protests that reference national cultural symbols like Land Day (March 30), Prisoners Day (April 17), and other international symbols of resistance like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Mandela. They have also mimicked movies such as Avatar and built a demonstration on the global tragedy of the Nazi Holocaust³⁴.

Although the use of national and international symbols is very present in the weekly demonstrations of the PRCs, the use of national symbols differs from previous acts of resistance used in the first intifada. The most prominent difference arises from the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords that resulted in the formation of the PA. Intended as a first step to ending the military occupation and establishing a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, the PA’s formation has created structural impediments to the use of first intifada tactics. During the first intifada the Israeli military government banned any form of Palestinian nationalism or symbolism. Consequently, acts of resistance capitalized on actualizing and spreading national signifiers, such as the map of Palestine. Displaying a Palestinian flag, or even the mere colors of the flag, was considered a violation punishable up to one year in prison under Israeli military law. Reading banned books, participating in cultural events, and membership in labor unions were seen by Palestinians as satisfactory acts of resistance. However, after the PA’s formation the majority of national symbols were no longer banned and their use declared non-threatening to Israel³⁵. As a Nabi Saleh leading activist who was involved in the first intifada explained: “Popular resistance for us is an overarching

³⁴ See: Jawad, Rania. *Staging Resistance in Bil’in: the Performance of Violence in a Palestinian village. The Drama Review: the journal of performance studies*, Volume 55, No 4. (2011). P 128-143.

³⁵ Hilal, Jamil (1998) *‘The Palestinian Political System after Oslo; A Critical Assessment. Muwatin, The Palestinian institute for the study of Democracy, Ramallah, and Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut, 1998.*

culture. It is not a demonstration or an act of stone-throwing. It is not a media campaign. It is an actual culture of resistance. It's the general culture to create an alternative to the occupation." Today though, the spreading of such a culture of resistance is constrained by the shifting resonance of national symbolism. As one activist who participated in the first intifada commented: "We were willing to die for having raised a Palestinian flag on a pole, where today it is everywhere and nearly meaningless." As a result, symbolic disobedience as an act of resistance to the colonial power became an insufficient nonviolent tactic.

That said, the PRCs have been instrumental in building a resistance movement which draws on lessons from past experiences and which have been based on elements of popularity and inclusiveness, creativity and symbolic resistance. The PRCs have made use of the experience of the first intifada while avoiding the exclusive nature of the second intifada's resistance tactics and advocating a nonviolent popular resistance strategy. In order to more fully understand their work, we must understand their larger strategic vision and practice alongside their local tactics.

5 . Strategic factors, impact and achievements

5.1 Community building

A critical element of the PRCs' activism has been in community-building. In particular, this has included the following: supporting the community in moments of crisis through a process of egalitarian decision-making regarding its needs, encouraging voluntarism, consciousness-raising about the injustice of colonial conditions, creating local alternative media outlets in place of dependence on mainstream national and international media, developing a strong outreach strategy to international institutions and officials, and helping rebuild after the destruction caused by Israeli policies. This last includes re-cultivating and planting confiscated and uprooted olive trees, rebuilding houses demolished by Israel (such as in Jiftlik village in the Jordan Valley), rebuilding schools, instigating local boycotts of Israeli products and encouraging the consumption of local Palestinian products, and refusing to work in Israeli settlements.

Along these lines, an activist in Nabi Saleh described the villagers' achievements by saying:

It is not just about throwing stones or demonstrating. We volunteered with the popular committee in planting hundreds of olive trees on Israeli-confiscated land. We support the boycott of Israeli products and oppose work in settlements, and now in Nabi Saleh the percentage of Palestinians working in settlements is zero.

A Jordan Valley activist reflecting on the PRC's work noted that: "It is small achievements here and there. We learn about local communities and their needs, such as building a school for the community's children. Now there are more than 100 students in that

school. This is a successful project. It is initiating the beginning of change”. Despite their small-scale nature, these actions reflect the ability of Palestinians to claim power and confidence as well as the will to refuse and counter the colonial project. This was clearly articulated by one Bil’in woman: “We have regained our confidence in believing in ourselves and our ability to induce change”. These achievements can arguably be seen as a shift from nonviolence as a tactic to nonviolence as a strategy. Moreover, this strategy addresses several levels of oppression, such as colonial, patriarchal, and local power hierarchies, while also positing and implementing an alternative mode of community living.

Another important element associated with the PRCs is the emerging local, grassroots and independent (i.e. not associated with the established political factions) leadership is emerging from within. They are gaining popularity and replacing traditional faction leaders, whether in the local or international media.. These new leaders do not directly confront the traditional leadership; rather they bypass them. Factors which have helped both the PRCs and the emerging local leadership is people’s distrust of the traditional local leadership and their frustration with political factions. The role of Palestinian political parties and people’s confidence in the PA’s leadership has dramatically declined since the start of the Oslo process³⁶. Many activists on the ground claim that political factions have prioritized power and access to offer over prioritizing helping and supporting local communities³⁷. Others attribute the decline of factional politics to their shift away from a grassroots orientate onto a more professional and urban-based elite. In addition to this, during the second intifada factions focused on military tactics and armed struggle and did not invest in local popular resistance. As a result

36 See the latest example of Public Opinion Poll: Parties and political movements and the democratic transformation in Palestine. April, 2012 by The Ramallah Centre for Human Rights Studies (RCHRS). <http://www.rchrs.org/index.php?limitstart=4>

37 Hamas could be an exception, through its charity organizations, but it doesn’t seem that its work reflected in mobilizing people beyond its party agenda. And since Hamas’s control of Gaza many people see in the same way they see other factions.

of these developments, political factions have largely become invited guests rather than leaders in locally-led initiatives (see for example Bil'in's annual conference for popular resistance³⁸).

At the same time many Palestinians have become frustrated at the political parties' inability to overthrow the military occupation. Such sentiments have been shaped and enhanced by the occupying power's systematic "iron wall" policy which has involved pushing Palestinians to reach a conclusion that resistance is futile³⁹. The PRCs and their work are therefore seen as providing an alternative example for the rest of Palestine. Moreover, this work is both nonviolent and creative – in stark contrast to the traditional leadership and their actions – which may offer the possibility of strategically shifting power imbalances between the colonizers and the colonized.

5.2 Gender Dynamics

Female empowerment is another significant achievement for the PRCs. In most localities, women have become a major visible player in local activism, whether through direct involvement in demonstrations, decision-making, planning, participation in media campaigns, and debates regarding gender. Their involvement is in marked contrast to their presence during the second intifada. Women's participation is multi-dimensional, which reflects their various roles in the community, including the arguably greater burden they bear as a result of the Israeli army's repression. For example, their children's participation in the struggle has involved women even if they have not directly taken part in the protests and demonstrations. As a Nabi Saleh mother described, speaking about her son:

38 See: <http://www.bilin-village.org/english/conferences/>

39 On the historical roots of the use of the term see: <http://www.mideastweb.org/ironwall.htm>

My son used to love football and he is excellent in school. In one of the demonstrations, he was shot in his leg by an Israeli soldier and now has an artificial joint in his knee. This is one of the most painful things for me, to see your child's dream disappear. It was his dream to major in physical education in the university. Now I cannot help him to achieve this dream.

Despite this painful experience, the mother added:

However, I continue to participate in the struggle by opening my house to activists, giving them water, giving them refuge from the painful tear gas. To anyone who is injured, I open my house to them, during a demonstration or not. I give activists my children's clothes after they are drenched by Israel's use of stink water.

Another mother commented:

Nearly every family hosts the activists who participate in the demonstrations. We eat together, talk together. This makes the community stronger and makes the relationships among the local families and with those in other villages, as well as between Palestinian and international activists, much stronger.

In Bil'in, an older woman described women's participation as such:

Even if we do not take part in demonstrations directly, we stay at home to provide the necessary support, such as monitoring the army's movement in order to inform the activists. We offer water and shelter. Our homes are always open to the activists from the village, the neighboring villages, and outside solidarity activists.

Although there is a tendency to think of women's empowerment along their traditional roles, that is, as wives, sisters or mothers, in these local sites we also see a younger generation of female activists who are breaking strict gender lines. One young female proudly described her role as always being present during the demonstrations: "I was trained in first aid to be able to help injured people during the demonstrations, yet, my

role is also being an active participant in each demonstration. I am one of the activists.”

5.3 Legal channels

Other forms of empowerment and achievements for the PRCs lie in the use of legal tools against the occupation, such as the use of Israeli and international courts (the International Court of Justice, courts in England, Spain, and Canada) to confront the injustices posed by the occupation. This includes encouraging students from the villages to study international law so as “to be able to use it against the occupation of Palestine,” as a young Bil’in activist explained in one of the focus group meetings. Using a legal argument has become part of the political debate among the local communities of Bil’in, Nabi Saleh and others. One Bil’in female activist reflected on the Israeli High Court’s decision to change the route of the Wall as an achievement. At the same time though, other activists have perceived the opposite, saying: “In reality, changing the route of the Wall deepened the occupation, for it de facto legalized Israel’s settlements on the village land, which is illegal under international Law”.

Whether we agree with either argument, the fact that international law has become an essential part of local discussions shows a shift in political imaginations. The present struggle is based on a local understanding of being part of a global sphere of institutions and an active legal system that could shift the dynamic of local struggle against Israeli colonial rule. It also empowers Palestinians through broadening the set of tools available to them to challenge the colonial setting and alter power dynamics in favor of the oppressed.

5.4 International solidarity

The role of international solidarity, whereby the Palestinian struggle is globalized and where protest demonstrations capitalize on

international and media networks, is another significant role and achievement for the PRCs. Targeted campaigns against companies building the Wall, for instance, have been launched in a number of countries, emphasizing the ‘international’ role that makes Israeli repression possible⁴⁰.

International solidarity with Palestinians has taken several forms over recent decades. In the 1970s, the PLO established strong relations with many leftist parties and intellectuals in Europe and the U.S anti-colonial national movements, and post-colonial nation-states in the developing world. Marxist-Leninist internationalists played an active role in the armed struggle of the PLO in the 1970s where Palestine was seen as another front fighting against imperialism.

More recent forms of solidarity, however, differ dramatically. First and foremost, solidarity activism is not a homogenous ideological group, but includes an array of human rights, environmentalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalization activists that do not articulate a single political vision. Second, solidarity functions within the parameters of a hegemonic liberal discourse of nonviolence. Third, activists are participating directly in Palestinian popular resistance within the OPT and not in exile, as in the 1960s and 1970s. The most prominent of such solidarity groups is the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), established in 2001. It aimed to provide some form of protection for Palestinians, by exploiting Israeli soldiers’ supposedly greater (and racist) hesitance at wounding an international (mostly white European or American) activist. As a young Palestinian activist noted: “Soldiers will think ten times before shooting a foreigner [ajnabi] or an Israeli. This is why we feel safer when a solidarity activist is in the village”.

⁴⁰ For example: The global movement for a campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) or See: <http://www.bdsmovement.net>

The presence of international and Israeli activists in the PRCs' resistance strategy highlights their inclusive nature. Their presence is not just a matter of solidarity with Palestinians, but creates meaningful cultural and political exchange between Palestinians and internationals and Israelis, where each learn from the others' experience, knowledge, and support. Unlike the support from governmental and non-governmental international bodies that offer relief to Palestinians in the form of financial aid and food rations, for example, international activists' participation in these demonstrations is most often based on ending Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. The Palestinian cause is therefore addressed as a political issue rather than a humanitarian one, not an issue of surviving colonial occupation but fighting it. Many activists at local sites expect internationals to report Palestinian stories of resistance when they return home, to "witness the reality," as an activist articulated, "and tell the world the truth". The work internationals do in favor of the Palestinian cause is therefore not only characterized by participation, but also includes serious work on the media front, creating alternative media outlets, translating and documenting the suffering and the agency of Palestinian locals, and gathering financial support. The relationship between internationals and Palestinians has also enabled local Palestinians to travel abroad and participate in forums to speak about Palestine and Palestinian culture at conferences and summer camps, as well as developing symbolic twin ships with localities in Europe.



THE CASE OF THE POPULAR STRUGGLE COMMITTEES - NON-VIOLENT POPULAR RESISTANCE IN THE WEST BANK

Although the participation of international and Israeli activists in the PRCs' resistance campaigns does not overthrow the dominant power relationship between foreigners and locals, the dynamics take a more egalitarian form.

5.5 Media

Since 2004 local Palestinian, regional Arab and international (predominantly English language) media have covered the protests in Budrus and subsequently in Bil'in. In terms of the local media, much of this coverage was in favor of these local initiatives, and many opinion articles encouraged other localities to follow the same tactics of resistance. The unarmed protests at that time were not categorized as nonviolent or unarmed but rather as an anti-Apartheid Wall demonstration. When the Wall started to be built on the land of more villages, mainly in the Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem areas, other villages adopted the same model of unarmed protests⁴¹. In 2007 local and Arabic-language media started describing the weekly demonstrations as "popular resistance"⁴².

In terms of international coverage, English-language mainstream media outlets periodically covered the demonstrations and selectively addressed the PRCs' activities⁴³. Much of this coverage contrasts this form of resistance to armed operations and suicide attacks, not seeing the PRCs' work as part of a larger strategy of struggle against the occupation and a continuation of a long process of unarmed resistance. In many cases, US-based media represents the PRCs' work as being

⁴¹ PRC resistance campaigns subsequently emerged in other villages not impacted directly by the Wall but by other Israeli land confiscation policies.

⁴² The archives of local media: Alayam newspaper, Aljazeera TV and Maan news agency.

⁴³ NY times, LA time, Washington Post, Chicago tribune, CNN, BBC, in addition to Israeli media including Haaretz, Yediot Ahronot (English) and Israeli TV channel 2.

something of a surprise or implausible⁴⁴. Because of the circulation of foreign-language alternative media coverage of the weekly protest demonstrations, and other media outreach strategies used by the PRCs, the use of Palestinians' nonviolent tactics has received more media visibility over the years.

While there has been more noticeable coverage of the nonviolent popular resistance activities, there is a tendency to approach such activism with a sense of moral sympathy rather than political solidarity. For example the renowned NYT opinion writer Thomas Friedman wrote in a 2012 article⁴⁵:

By Palestinians engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience in the West Bank with one hand and carrying a map of a reasonable two-state settlement in the other, they will be adopting the only strategy that will end the Israeli occupation: *Making Israelis feel morally insecure but strategically secure*.

Excluding the use of arms from the picture gives Palestinians moral superiority and enables them to be seen as victims rather than as aggressors, a necessary tactical and strategic path to ending the occupation.

At the same time though, this perspective has arguably contributed to some shift in perceptions among some in the international media. Increasingly, voices are not only acknowledging the history of unarmed activism in Palestine, but now calling on the international community to take concrete measures of political support⁴⁶. An article in the *Economist* comments:

⁴⁴ On the early US media coverage see for example: Patrick O'Connor's article 'Nonviolent Resistance in Palestine' <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/media/nonviolent.html>

⁴⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/04/opinion/a-middle-east-twofer.html>.

⁴⁶ For example, see <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/03/201233135633153770.html>

We've asked the Palestinians to lay down their arms. . . . if only they would embrace non-violence, a reasonable and unprejudiced world would see the merit of their claims. . . . What will it take to make Americans recognize that the real Martin Luther King-style non-violent Palestinian protestors have arrived, and that Israeli soldiers are shooting them with real bullets?⁴⁷

Finally, the use of the internet has been one of the main tools that facilitate the movement from very local to global practices of resistance. In some villages where protests take place, Palestinian and international activists have developed very organized media strategies where photographs, live video, and informational reports are immediately posted following each resistance action⁴⁸. International media is thus informed about the actions while they are taking place, causing attention to popular resistance to grow globally. For many activists, international media attention is focused on the the popular resistance against the Wall. In some villages where the Wall has been fully erected, popular resistance actions have faded. By contrast, in other villages, the resistance continues despite the fact that the Wall has already been built. Bil'in, Nilin and Nabi Salih are clear examples of the persistence of the local struggles. A local activist explained how "Israel makes facts on the ground like a settlement or the Wall. Palestinians protest in response and then get tired. This time, it is different." The strategy of sustained popular resistance and international media-related strategies has begun to influence most political factions to think more seriously about the effectiveness of such popular resistance.

5.6 Diplomatic recognition

Official political international bodies also started paying attention to the work PRCs are doing. In many cases, official delegations from

⁴⁷ http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/05/israel_and_palestine_0

⁴⁸ See for example: <http://www.bilin-village.org/english/> and <http://nabisalehsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

foreign consulates visit villages and localities to witness the repressive measures undertaken by the occupation forces⁴⁹. In his speech in Cairo in 2009, US President Barak Obama stated:

Palestinians must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. . . . This same story can be told by people from South Africa to South Asia; from Eastern Europe to Indonesia.

Obama's statement does not acknowledge the fact that nonviolent unarmed resistance is practiced daily in Palestine, yet it gives the impression that unarmed resistance could be a strategic choice for Palestinians to gain international support. Such support can already be seen from EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton who said that she is "deeply concerned" about Bil'in's PRC activist Abdullah Abu Rahmeh, who faces several years in an Israeli prison and whom she described as a human rights defender committed to nonviolent protest⁵⁰. In addition, the case of Basem Al-Tamimi was monitored closely, where "the EU was officially present in the military court⁵¹". A Spanish consulate representative made it clear that "Spain strongly supports the work of the popular committees, and believes in their work⁵²". Additionally, the EU's Political Affairs Officer pointed out that the EU is supportive of the "work of the popular committees, [and] they have the right to act and work nonviolently⁵³". The media visibility of political officials and

⁴⁹ Many activists perceive the present and the attention of international official bodies as a substantial achievement for PRC. Nevertheless, *realpolitik* still the dominant logic for most international bodies; that explains the inability of the research team to get official statements about PRC activism apart from the mainstream political rhetoric.

⁵⁰ On other occasion, British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, met a group of Palestinian non-violent resistance activists near the city of Ramallah.

⁵¹ Phone interview

⁵² Phone interview

⁵³ Phone interview

representatives participating in village demonstrations and issuing such statements of support enables Palestinian activists to demand concrete measures be taken by countries to hold Israel accountable for its repressive policies. Such support from international officials, however, has not yielded any significant legal, political, or economic pressure on Israel to adhere to international law.

6

. Constructing a national strategy

PRC activism became visible due to the persistence and continuity of their struggle, as in Bil'in, Ni'lin, Al-Ma'sarah, and Nabi Salih. Many activists have sought to consolidate the work of the PRCs and popularize their experiences across the West Bank. One such successful initiative is the Popular Struggle Coordination Committee (PSCC), which coordinates and supports unarmed popular resistance across the OPTs. Examples include Bil'in's annual popular struggle conference, ongoing strategy meetings among activists from different localities, and the participation of local activists in other villages' protest activities.

The first political movement to advocate for this form of activism was the Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) led by Mustafa Barghouti. The PNI proposed that Palestinian civil society, local initiatives and community organizations play a greater role in national decision-making and the strategy of resistance. In 2009 Fateh, the faction which dominates the PLO and the PA, held its sixth conference. It was the first time in the history of the Fateh movement that the notion of resistance was coupled with the terms "popular" and "unarmed". As President Abu Mazin stated: "Popular resistance against the Wall and settlements, house demolitions and land confiscation provides a creative model of resistance." The example of Bil'in, Ni'lin, and Al-Ma'sarah presented as prototypes of popular resistance, which should be the main means to resist the occupation. In the talks between Fateh and its main political rival, the Islamist Hamas party, on forming a national unity government during 2011, the latter agreed that popular resistance be the means of combatting the occupation. Khalid Mashaal, the head of the Hamas political office, said: "We believe in armed resistance but popular resistance is a program which is common to all the factions". He also stated: "This resistance will be increased and organized and there is to

be an agreement on its style, on greater efficiency and the formation of a framework to direct it”⁵⁴. Hamas’ position is an important shift in the movement’s policies and many observers see this as a strategic shift for Hamas and accredited the PRCs to this change in national discourse.

The changing public political discourse has raised Israeli concerns regarding the proliferation of popular resistance across the OPT. Israeli media categorized the demonstrations against the Wall as “good and acceptable” as long as they were localized. However, since 2009 and in the wake of the Arab Spring, the thought of mass-based demonstrations and other forms of popular resistance became a source of discomfort for Israel’s leaders. Many media reports have covered IDF training and the testing of new weaponry to confront the possibility of transformation of Palestinian popular resistance from the local to the national, in other words from a tactical to a strategic choice on the Palestinian national level⁵⁵. In sum, popular resistance as an anti-occupation tactic has gone from very local to global and now has the potential to become a national strategy of resistance.

⁵⁴ In an interview with Khaled Mashaal (AFP). Hamas to focus on popular resistance. Nov 25, 2011.

⁵⁵ See: *Strategic Assessment #43: Palestinian Popular Resistance: The Scenarios and Challenges*. At <http://www.alzaytouna.net/en/publications/books/strategic-assessment/151380-strategic-assessment-43-palestinian-popular-resistance-the-scenarios-and-challenges.html>

7 . Conclusion

By the end of the second intifada, many Palestinians had begun to doubt that resistance to Israel's colonization could result in significant political change. By contrast, the work of the PRCs on the community level has proven to be a meaningful and successful tactic to confronting colonial policies. Initially local initiatives, they have shown that sustainable counter-colonial activism can pave the way for national strategies to emerge. Drawing on lessons from the first intifada, the PRCs' activism demonstrates how people's power can be gained through unarmed means.

PRC activism is not only based on confrontation tactics, such as the weekly demonstrations protesting Israeli land confiscation policies, but is based on a politics of inclusivity and creativity. Their resistance tactics have developed into a strategic vision, working on the community level to rebuild the collective ability to resist. This has involved taking a critical look at the marginalization of women in society and expanding the channels of resistance to include: using legal means at the local and international level, attracting international solidarity and media attention, and influencing the political stance of several international political bodies, particularly human rights organizations and the EU. The most significant work of the PRCs has thus been its unarmed resistance tactics and overall strategic vision that has impacted the Palestinian national discourse of nearly all Palestinian factions and political parties. Despite all the obstacles of carrying out political work in the OPT, PRCs provide us with an exemplary form of persistence and commitment to social justice and anti-colonial politics.

