The Fluidity of Resistance

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“The fish,  
Even in the fisherman's net,  
Still carries,  
The smell of the sea.”  
               --Mourid Barghouti

"We did not go into the battle because we love to be hungry or in pain, but for our dignity and the dignity of our nation."

With these words, Thaer Halahla from Hebron encapsulated the spirit of resistance. Halahla, and the hundreds of dignified hunger strikers who carried on their struggle even in the face of imminent death each made personal decisions to resist. An act of resistance is not a selfish one; it is an act for the dignity and liberation of humanity. The Palestinian street similarly rose up in support of the political prisoners, and within it, Palestinians of all factions, religions and social backgrounds showed how national unity comes from the hearts of the masses and not from decisions or agreements dictated by 'leaders' in Ramallah or Gaza City. The historic and ongoing struggle was built by the masses, and will always be lead by them.

The original Palestinian Nakba fragmented Palestine 64 years ago. It marked the initial mass implementation of Zionist designs to reconstruct the nation as one comprised of a Jewish majority despite its indigenous Palestinian population. Its effects continue to be felt everyday in Palestine not as a historic event, but as the outbreak of a process that continues to shape the lives of Palestinians in every corner of today's world. As a result of this ongoing process, Palestinians today represent the largest refugee community on this planet.

International mass-media, which mirrors the Western agendas that created, and continue to support, the colonial enterprise in Palestine, widely misrepresents Palestinian resistance. In this context, a deeper look at this multi-faceted resistance can be valuable. People around the world remember that Palestine still exists when TV sets show images of Intifadas. However, even away from the peaks and troughs of mass-uprisings encapsulated by the Intifada, resistance is an ongoing and developing process. An Intifada cannot sustain itself for over 60 years, yet everyday grassroots resistance within an ongoing revolutionary process can and has sustained itself within Palestine and among Palestinian people around the world.

The 64th year of the ongoing Nakba is now upon us, and wide ranging events are being held across Palestine, in the Arab world, and further afield across Europe, North America and elsewhere. Though marked by a significant growth in the solidarity movement, these events are led by Palestinians, they are shaped by Palestinians, and they are needed by Palestinians not to commemorate an event from the past, but to reinforce a national and human identity and culture that itself has been repressed and denied for decades. Grassroots popular initiatives do not grab international attention in the way Intifadas may do, but if it were not for intra-community, intra-family, and even personal reinforcement of culture and identity, Palestine's struggle may have been confined to the history books decades ago.

Fatima Lamaa’ is a 67 year old refugee living in Deheisheh camp. Israeli soldiers killed her brother Ali in 1980 as they attempted to force-feed him during a prisoners’ hunger strike in Nafha prison. Fatima remembers:

My brother Ali told me once: 'resistance is not only armed struggle; we have to use the power of pens, colors, songs, folklore…etc'. Since then, I have been making Palestinian embroidery. My favorite pieces are the map of historic Palestine including the Palestinian names of cities and villages, the key with the mantra ‘We Will Return’ and the traditional bridal dress with its vibrant colors. For me, embroidery is a means of resistance by which I reflect and demonstrate my hope and my identity.

The ideas of Ali and the ongoing resistance of Fatima extend from, and build upon, Palestinian ideas globalized through the work of Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish and Naji al-Ali, among others. For such people, resistance was not limited to the gun, but also built and implemented with words, ideas, and colors. Resistance has infinite breadth, and unlimited possibilities. Fatima's use of traditional embroidery as resistance is a clear statement about the reinforcement and celebration of her identity. The need for such identity affirmation is particularly significant given the displaced nature of the Palestinian people, and such practices have been an intrinsic part of Palestinian life both within the borders of historic Palestine and for those in the shatat (diaspora).

In the aftermath of the original Nakba in 1948, as Faisal al Hourani wrote in Duroub al Manfa (Paths of Exile), education became the 'alternative homeland' for Palestinian refugees. This notion was not about replacing the homeland or the struggle for it with education. Instead it referred to the fact that for Palestinians the deep belief and ongoing success in education became a major tool within that struggle. This belief in education continues today, as does its role in affirming national identity and creating ideas for use within the struggle. These facts are not lost within the new generation.

Khalid Waleed is 24 years old and was born in exile in a Bethlehem refugee camp. He remembers well the reinforcement of this belief in education that was passed down by older generations of his family.

My grandfather often recalled the words that his father had spoken to him whilst they were collecting wheat in Jordan after the Nakba: “If we were not displaced, you would inherit hundreds of dunams in Bayt Jibreen. Now, I have nothing to give you. In fact, you have to help me to secure the family's basic needs. All I can give you is advice; continue your studying which will help build your future and that of our people.”

Such sentiments are strongly evident within the specific Palestinian experience, but they also embody a universal and human experience of resistance. Colonized people across the world use such tools in their struggles as do communities in exile. Nelson Mandela famously stated while he was being held in Pollsmoor National Security Prison in 1988 that “education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” Mandela's ANC held the same belief in education as did Palestine's struggling masses. Similarly it worked to reaffirm cultural practices including music, native languages and African literature. Similar patterns are evident within many other struggles, and this only works to reinforce the human and universal nature of the struggles of the oppressed and their forms of resistance. A look at the resurgence of indigenous languages and arts amongst indigenous communities around the world highlights this fact.

Within Palestine, intra-family and intra-community resistance does not grab international media headlines, yet it is probably the single most powerful tool in affirming and celebrating national identity that has been practiced by the Palestinian people since the Nakba. This grassroots work has historically always been reinforced by community-wide actions.

Popular grassroots demonstrations have always figured prominently in this context, yet clearly the battle of a child with a stone against an Israeli tank is a hugely one-sided battle. The stone will never break the tank, yet inside the hearts of Palestinians it will strengthen national belief and involvement in the struggle for rights, which subsequently greatly reaffirms collective identity and unity. Akram Shorouf, from the village of Nuba near Khalil (Hebron) was never naive about the power balance in such grassroots demonstrations, yet wholeheartedly believed in the need for collective participation.

We knew that popular demonstrations, irrespective of their size, would never alone be enough to liberate Palestine, yet we were convinced that they were both useful and necessary. We knew that burning tires, closing entrances of our camps, and throwing stones at Israeli tanks were nothing in terms of confronting heavily armed and trained Israeli forces. We knew that demonstrations were necessary to challenge Israeli occupation, reaffirm our collective unity and national identity, and to push the international community and public opinion to see the real face of Israel and the occupation.

On a local level, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement could in many ways be said to follow this pattern. In terms of affecting real change, the global BDS movement has far reaching aims and powerful strategies, but internally within occupied Palestine one may question how much the Israeli economy can really be challenged by Palestinians who have an economy that is entirely under the colonizer’s control. The potentialities of BDS, however, as a way to build a global movement proactively working together as part of the Palestine liberation struggle cannot be underestimated; nor can its power in reinforcing the belief in collective human work within the struggle be ignored. Such resistance is ultimately much more powerful as a tool of unification across Palestinian society than anything potentially offered by national political parties. As 51 year old Abdel Qader Nassar comments,

I feel that the boycott of Israel is one of the most meaningful and practical tools available. I feel that through BDS I am actively doing something to defend my dignity and humanity.

The ever-developing and widening of resistance’s scope is essential in preserving and affirming national identity in the course of confronting the comprehensive colonial campaign targeting the very existence of the Palestinian people. Thus, to maintain their existence and identity, Palestinians have found themselves obliged to struggle not only on the political level, but also in social, cultural, and economic arenas as well. Creativity has been demonstrated in the ability to employ the maximum of people power and in the use of the best available means of struggle in the suitable circumstances and time. Therefore, while Palestinians continue resisting, the tools of resistance continue to morph, develop and expand.

Resistance is a permanent fixture within the rigors of Palestinian daily life and existence. Still, there remain significant days annually in which collective actions are stepped up. Land Day (March 30) is prime example of such days, as is Nakba Day (May 15). In 2011, Nakba Day proved highly significant in terms of the progression of resistance. It represented the first time that Palestinian refugees have, en-masse, taken pro-active steps to actually enforce their right of return physically. In spite of the inaction by the international community of states and so-called rights agencies, refugees marched to the borders of their homeland. In Syria and Lebanon, Palestinians tried to physically cross the borders to pro-actively practice their right to return to their occupied homeland. The murderous response of Israeli forces was well documented. Many of these protestors fell as martyrs amidst the silence of international bodies who, on paper, support the rights that these dignified human beings were striving to practice. At checkpoints within occupied Palestine similar 'Marches of Return' were also met with the might of the internationally-funded Israeli military machine.

Within the context of Nakba 64, events around May 15 will again feature a broad-based spectrum of resistance activities. The exact shape of activities planned by refugees in surrounding Arab countries are being kept tightly under wraps given the undoubted violence that any action will endure, but the pro-active struggle that was developed to new stages last year should be seen as a beginning of a new stage of struggle rather than anything that was or can be defeated by age-old Zionist techniques.

Across historic Palestine, resistance will take on myriad forms and expressions. Art murals will be created in refugee camps and public exhibitions will highlight the ongoing Nakba. Children will gather to listen to community oral history projects with community elders, and people of all ages will take to the streets in protest. Kites and flags emblazoned with designs highlighting the Ongoing Nakba will be flown in streets, and over the Apartheid Wall. Awda ('Return') sports competitions will be staged, and children will ride bikes to deliver Nakba 64 literature and names of Palestine's historic villages to houses ensuring that no one is forgotten. Many other such events are being held across all corners of Palestine within the program of national events although they remain aimed at local level community participation rather than the attraction of huge national crowds. Such intra-community events are targeted at a level that will increase grassroots participation across all levels of the community and including all ages. This is part of the resistance of cultural and identity-based affirmation and strengthening of collective unity and identity.

On wider national levels similar patterns emerge. The national distribution of posters and banners, the national distribution of resistance and political statements, as well as major collective national events for Nakba Day are all practices which work towards the same ends. The major demonstrations in central Ramallah and Gaza City will draw many thousands of Palestinians into the streets, and there is little doubt that further thousands will take a more direct route towards their true homes and the pro-active struggle for rights as they head towards the Qalandia checkpoint separating them, in Ramallah, from al-Quds (Jerusalem). Between the Qalandia demonstrators and the rest of their country will stand nine meters of US-funded concrete Apartheid Wall and several thousand rounds of ammunition, tear gas and other weaponry, also paid for by Israel’s international supporters.

Within Palestinian communities in exile similar patterns will emerge. From London to Washington DC, from Paris to Geneva, activities are being planned and implemented by Palestinians who refuse to be silent and refuse to let geographical separation translate to detachment from the struggle.

There is also a spontaneity in resistance; an element of surprise through which things can happen at any moment. For these reasons, the true shape of coming resistance activities, for Nakba 64 and beyond, can never be predicted. The resistance will develop as the masses wish, and its creativity and elements of surprise will continue.

Within Palestinian households and families the world over, the traditions of resistance—whether through the preparation of traditional foods, the reading to new generations of the works of Kanafani and Darwish, the passing-on of embroidery skills, or any of the innumerable other ways in which resistance manifests—continue to live on and be celebrated. Within Palestinian communities events will always be held as part of the affirmation of identity and culture. On a larger national and international level large scale public events continue to not only grow but widen in their ideas, reach and creativity. All of this work has become part of daily Palestinian life. For Palestinians, existence is resistance, and in common with Palestinian existence, Palestinian resistance is also a fluid, ever developing and ever broadening process.