

## **CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN OCCUPIED PALESTINE: CONTESTING THE MYTH THAT “IT’S NOT REAL RESISTANCE”<sup>1</sup>**

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*In the shadow of heroic stories of the freedom fighters from the first and the second Intifada, images of martyred guerilla soldiers frequently portrayed on walls and buildings, and Palestinian youth every Friday risking imprisonment by throwing stones with slingshots at Israeli soldiers during demonstrations: many international and Palestinian activists seem to believe that the small scale, cultural and symbolic forms of resistance “are not real resistance”. This article analyzes in depth two empirical cases of such forms of resistance from the occupied West Bank from the theoretical work on power and resistance developed by James C. Scott, Michel Foucault, Gene Sharp and others. By doing that, this article seeks to scrutinize the following question: In which ways does these cases of small scale, cultural resistance express protest or discontent towards the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and in which ways can they be understood as to directly or indirectly undermine, decrease or dismantle aspects of Israeli occupational power? This article thus aims to contest what I will show is the myth that cultural resistance in Palestine “is not real resistance”. It is grounded on direct observation and participation as a peace activist throughout nine months in the occupied West Bank during the year of 2009.*

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### **Introduction**

*“The Palestinian people rose from the ashes of each onslaught to engage in novel forms of civil resistance” (Qumsiyeh 2011:09)*

Earlier academic research strengthens the perception that apart from armed resistance, Palestine has also a strong tradition for using nonviolent, multifaceted as well as popularly anchored forms of resistance (Qumsiyeh 2011, King 2007, Seitz 2003, Rigby 1991, Ackerman and Duval 2000, Galtung 1989). The latest substantial work on the issue is Qumsiyeh’s *Popular Resistance in*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank resistance researcher Stellan Vinthagen for the supervision of this paper.

*Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment* (2011). This study presents a valuable historical account for the development of the history of Palestinian nonviolent resistance since the Ottoman rule and up to recent times. Another important work on the topic is King's *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance* (2007). This work shows the diversity and extent of the nonviolent resistance that was being used during the first Intifada. Related to King's research, Rigby presents the inside story of nonviolence during the same Intifada in his book *Living the Intifada* from 1991.

All these works show how Palestinian resistance towards the Israeli occupation has been largely nonviolent. Yet they all have an overall focus on overt, large scale forms of such resistance. Recent years of nonviolent activism in the region is yet to be covered, and as far as I know, there has not been published academic material aiming to scrutinize practices of nonviolent, more covert forms of small scale resistance in occupied Palestine from the last two years. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze in depth two chosen cases of such resistance that were undertaken in 2009. These examples have not before been covered by research.

This article thus aims to confront – and possibly help to reshape – what I will show is the mistaken perception that cultural, small scale resistance “is not real resistance”. This I will show by scrutinizing the following question: in which ways, and to which extent, does these two cases of small scale forms of cultural resistance manage to express protest or discontent towards aspects of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and in which ways can they be understood as to directly or indirectly undermine, decrease or influence aspects of Israeli occupational power?

### **Method and material**

As most empirical data presented in this article were acquired during my nine months stay in Palestine, some words on the methodological aspects are required. The stay was not originally intended as a traditional fieldwork related to the aim of writing an academic research paper. On the contrary, I went to Palestine as a peace worker to volunteer with the Palestinian led grassroots organization, International Solidarity Movement (ISM)<sup>2</sup>. I am well aware that my role as an activist to some extent may contradict the need for analytical distance required for

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.palsolidarity.org](http://www.palsolidarity.org) for more information on the work of ISM

academic writing. However, I nevertheless believe this is possible by amongst other things subjecting my observations to close scrutiny, critical reflections as well as with the help of theoretical models and concepts. In addition to the data generated through participant observation as a peace worker, I base this study on two conversations with a Palestinian and international grassroots activists that both took place during the summer of 2009. The conversation with my Palestinian informant, “Mahmoud”, I chose because it serves as such a clear example of showing the perception that cultural, symbolic, nonviolent resistance “is not real” (conversation 1, see below). Secondly, Mahmoud himself is a prominent grassroots activist in the Nablus region and has played a crucial role in the development of precisely cultural and symbolic resistance in the area. The conversation with my Swedish informant, the experienced activist of the International Solidarity Movement, “Gustav”, I chose because it seemed to be a very spontaneous description of what I have chosen to call the Burin kite demonstration that I will analyze in detail later in the article.

By analyzing two different cases of cultural resistance, I do not intend to present a representative image of the diverse world of creative, small scale and cultural resistance towards the Israeli occupation of Palestine. On the contrary, I think such an attempt would be a rather bold enterprise – perhaps even impossible – as the diversity of the forms and faces of such resistances seem to be so large. On the other hand, I have chosen precisely these two cases based on strategic selection as they are useful in showing how forms of resistance that at first glance does not look like they undermine occupational power, nor like they in an obvious manner express protest towards it, actually are doing precisely that – if carefully observed.

All names and characteristics of informants are changed to protect the respective individuals. However, I have not done such changes in a manner that would affect the meanings of the sayings of these informants, nor the role that they play in the analysis of this paper.

### Theoretical background: resistance and power<sup>3</sup>

Swedish resistance researcher and activist Stellan Vinthagen defines *resistance* in general terms as “(...)to attempt to stop or severe relations where people are being used as tools for others or servants in an hierarchy”<sup>4</sup>, or more explicitly as “(...) a hindering of subordination” (Vinthagen in Eriksson and Hettne 2001:206). However, the work of American social anthropologist James C. Scott provides a useful tool in shedding light on less visible forms of resistance. In his classical work from 1990, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Scott distinguishes between what he views as *the overt* forms of resistance respectively what he understands as *the covert* forms of such. Amongst subordinated groups, he claims, it is important to look at “(...) what is said in the face of power and what is said behind its back” (Scott 1990:5). He broadens this idea by referring to what he calls the “public transcripts”, which he views as “(...)a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott 1990:2-4). On the other hand, the so called “hidden transcripts” is viewed here as the “discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by power holders” (Scott 1990:2-4). By assessing the discrepancy between what is being expressed off stage and what is being expressed on stage, Scott shows how resistance does not necessarily need to be conducted publicly, outspokenly – or even loudly. On the contrary, he argues, resistance might just as well be “(...) disguised, low-profile, [as well as] undeclared (...)” (Scott 1990:198). Therefore, Scott argues, hidden signs of resistance can in many cases be found in folktales, the undertaking of rituals, discreet forms of irony and miming, as well as the deliberate slow performing of work or tasks imposed by the power holders. Such kinds of covert, low-profile, hidden, everyday forms of resistance could be understood in extended terms as what Scott terms “infrapolitics” that refers to the kind of politics that is invisible similarly to infrared lights (Scott 1990). Infrapolitics, Scott argues, “(...)is essentially the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril.” (Scott 1990:199).

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<sup>3</sup> For elaboration on the general debate on different definitions on the term resistance, please see Einwohner, Rachel L. and Hollander, Jocelyn A. (2004): “*Conceptualizing Resistance*”, Sociological Forum, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Dec., 2004), pp. 533-554, and Lilja, Mona and Vinthagen, Stellan (2009), “*Motstånd*”, Studentlitteratur, Lund

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine.

When it comes to the term *power*, however, American sociologist Steven Lukes argues that the term could be divided into three separate categories (Lukes 2005/1974). “The One-Dimensional View”, which according to Lukes often are referred to as a “pluralist” approach, includes what is proposed by Robert Dahl as an “(...) intuitive idea of power”, and could be defined in the following way: “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do” (Lukes 2005/1974:16 referring to Dahl). Power, then, is looked upon as a zero sum game that assumes that where *A* gets more, *B* gets less. What Lukes terms the two-dimensional view on power, developed by Bachrach and Baratz, extends Dahl’s one-dimensional understanding of the term as to additionally include the agenda setting on the decision making process. According to this view, power is present when “(...) decisions are prevented from being taken on political issues over which there is an observable conflict of (subjective) interests (...)” (Lukes 2005/1974:25 referring to Bachrach and Baratz).

However, what Lukes understands as the third dimension of power, which broadly could be viewed as the more qualitative approaches to the term, is far more complex. In this matter, the theories developed by Michel Foucault serve as a useful approach to the term. According to him, power “(...) produces “subjects”, forging their character and “normalizing them”, rendering them capable of and willing to adhere to norms of sanity, health, sexuality and other forms of propriety” (Lukes 2005/1974:91 referring to Foucault). In this sense we can talk about a power that is discursive, meaning how a general, overall way of perceiving; understanding; thinking; experiencing and talking about certain aspects of society; social phenomena; individual or collective actions; or even world views, represent a covert form of power in the sense that it shapes, controls and limits human behavior. Foucault thus writes about a form of domination which to a large extent is based upon what can be called *disciplinary power* (Foucault 1980/1976 in Lukes 2005/1974). Disciplinary power thus operates when people unreflectively subordinates themselves to these so called regimes of truths or discourses. These can for instance be understood as the normative or hegemonic perceptions of acceptable behavior created for example by the fear of punishment. Punishment can here be understood both in terms of social as well as physical sanctions (Foucault 1980/1976 in Lukes 2005/1974).

## The hierarchy of resistance in occupied Palestine

After I had finished my work in the occupied West Bank in the year of 2009, my feelings were ambivalent regarding what seemed to be a common view in relation to the perceived *validity* of cultural and other forms of symbolic, small scale resistance. Despite Palestinian resistance being overwhelmingly nonviolent, vastly small scale, frequently symbolic, and in many cases, cultural, my impression is still that many international and Palestinian activists in the West Bank seem to *value* the direct and overt forms of traditional, large-scale or even violent resistance to a larger extent. Several times while chatting with international short-term volunteers of the International Solidarity movement<sup>5</sup> or other similar organizations, they expressed that they preferred to do what they called “real resistance” referring to the direct, classical forms of more high-intensive nonviolent resistance. This could for instance be nonviolent direct actions, or protest marches where stone throwing and other forms of violent confrontations with the Israeli soldiers were likely to occur, etcetera. This view, thus, implicitly rejects the realness of more small scale, seemingly symbolic forms of resistance. My impression that such forms of grassroots resistance are not valued as highly among many activists, reached its peak when a prominent Palestinian grassroots activist of nonviolent, small scale resistance in Nablus, Mahmoud, confessed that he had lost his faith in cultural manifestations and other forms of cultural, symbolic resistance:

*“To tell you the truth, I am tired, really tired... The occupation is working like normal in the villages, last week the settlers burned down many olive trees in Iraq Burin, I feel that nothing is working, our efforts aren't working. Everything was much better during the first and the second Intifada... then at least people were active – they resisted. You know how it was like in Nablus during the first Intifada? There was not a single person who was not active in the resistance movement in one way or the other. Everybody helped out, everybody helped the families whose members were fighters. Several times I even saw the old grandmothers with their long, black, Palestinian dresses, you know the ones which reach all the way down to the floor? If any person that the Israelis were after came, they*

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<sup>5</sup> For elaboration on the International Solidarity Movement in occupied Palestine, I strongly recommend the article “ISM at the Crossroads: The Evolution of the International Solidarity Movement” by Charmaine Seitz in *Journal for Palestine Studies* (2003).

*hid them under their skirts. They opened up their skirts like this [demonstrating gestures], I saw it several times. In the old city [of Nablus], mothers and children threw food from their rooftops and down to the freedom fighters running around in the narrow passages. And now... it's like everything is standing still. We're all of the time talking about culture... cultural resistance... we organize demonstrations in front of the settlements... we arrange events in protest of the occupation and against the land theft and against the Wall. But it's not helping. Sometimes I feel that I am fed up with all this cultural, nonviolent resistance. It's like we're just pretending! And I'm sick of it. I am sick of these useless demonstrations and nonviolent protests. It is not real... It is not real resistance! To tell you the truth... many times I think that... if we could only have done armed resistance... Like during the Intifada... Only then could we bring about true social change."*

*'Mahmoud, 38, Palestinian grassroots activist and youth coordinator in the Nablus region.*  
(Conversation 1)

Mahmoud is of course right when he says that the occupation is working as normal in the villages. Therefore, I argue that it is understandable that an active Palestinian like him easily could get disillusioned regarding any kind of ongoing resistance. However, according to my observations, it looks like the idea that cultural, nonviolent resistance is not real somewhat seems to be connected to what I perceive as the existence of a hierarchy of resistance. This seems to be a hierarchy regarding the degree in which different forms of resistance appear to be given prestige amongst many people in the occupied West Bank.

For example, on the pale white stone walls of the crowded Old City in Nablus, or on the walls of Balata Refugee Camp, you do not have to go far before spotting posters and photographs of martyrs heroically posing with their rifles in their hands and with their *kaffia*<sup>6</sup> on their shoulders. In many family's homes the same kinds of photos are hanging on the walls, and in such cases it rarely takes long before one of the family members explains that their son or

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<sup>6</sup> *Kaffia* is the name of the traditional Palestinian cloth, commonly used as a head scarf, shawl or for decoration.

brother was a freedom fighter that was martyred for his devotion. Various times while visiting families, proud parents were eager to let me know that their son was a fighter, perhaps imprisoned for his devotion for justice. I believe that these practices could be understood as valuable examples for illustrating the importance and the prestige of the armed freedom fighters who were martyred during the first and the second Intifada. What I understand as the hierarchy of resistance, then, appears to be topped by these martyrs as they paid the biggest price for the struggle for justice – their lives. Second in the hierarchy, we would assumingly find the freedom fighters that with their direct, armed resistance thus easily could *become* martyrs in the future. We must assume, then, that the stone-throwing youth or the softer forms of violent resistance to the occupation, or large scale nonviolent resistance like massive boycott campaigns etcetera, comes somewhere in between the armed freedom fighters and the symbolic resistance in the hierarchy. As many people seem to understand such cultural resistance as “less real”, like we learned from Mahmoud’s quote above, I argue that we seem to find the small scale, cultural or symbolic forms of nonviolent resistance at the bottom of the hierarchy of resistance

### **Case one: the Kite Demonstration in Burin and the Destruction of Disciplinary Power**

An example of the use of cultural symbols as a part of the Palestinian grassroots resistance towards the Israeli occupation is seen in what I term the Burin kite demonstration<sup>7</sup>. The demonstration happened during the summer of 2009 in the small Palestinian village of Burin located south of the city of Nablus. Burin is inhabited by roughly 3500 people in a valley squeezed between the two fundamentalist Israeli settlements Yizhar and Bracha whose construction have led to the annexation of large parts of the villager’s agricultural fields. Furthermore, Yizar and Bracha are located on hills, surrounded by a barbed wired fence with controlling, armed security guards<sup>8</sup>. The nature of the settlements thus severely limits the Burin villagers’ options for doing resistance. As the situation with the settlements leads to a severe

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<sup>7</sup> As far as I know, there has not been published any material in English on the kite demonstration in Burin.

<sup>8</sup> The villages of Burin and Iraq Burin, which both are located close to the religious settlements of Bracha and Yizhar, are two of the several active villagers that were central in my work with the International Solidarity Movement throughout the year of 2009.



restriction of the villager's chances to continue with their chosen livelihood, it is not difficult to see how the one-dimensional *power over* is present in the case of Burin. The two-dimensional power is apparently also present as the Burin residents seem to be deprived of the possibility of affecting the decision making process on issues related to the settlements.

The following description is a summary of what my Swedish informant, "Gustav", told me after he himself had participated at the Burin kite demonstration. He is a 27-year-old, Swedish artist that was working as a solidarity activist with the International Solidarity Movement during a number of months in 2009;

*"It was just another Friday in the small village of Burin. The villagers had gathered with the inhabitants from their neighboring village [Iraq Burin], and organized yet another demonstration in protest of the confiscation of Palestinian agricultural land by the Israeli settlers of the nearby illegal settlement of Yizhar. But this Friday, the demonstration got an unexpected turn.*

*After having marched the way up from the mountain valley of Burin towards the settlement in the south, the villagers stopped at the small hill among the remains of their olive fields. Then they took up home-made kites of different sizes, shapes and styles that they had prepared beforehand, but these were not any kind of kites. Underneath some of them, the people had painted the Palestinian flag in bright red, green, white and black colors. Other kites were decorated with streamers in the same colors.*

*After a while, the people then cut the strings of their kites, and with the wind leading them even further south, several kites landed gently in the middle of the fundamentalist Yizhar settlement that is surrounded by a two meter tall barbed wired fence."*

(Conversation 2)

### **A Silent Invasion: Forceless Force**

Freely flying, with the mere help of the wind, seemingly liberated from most earthly barriers – it is not difficult to see how a flying kite could be interpreted as a symbol of freedom. The

Palestinian flag attached to it could thus equally easily be interpreted as a symbol of a free Palestine. By using the airspace above the settlement as a medium with which they could express their political opinion, one could also say that “[t]he political message is expressed through the medium of transmission”, making it a useful example of a form of cultural resistance (Duncombe 2002:8).

With the kites quietly gliding through the clear, mid-day sky right above the illegal Israeli settlement of Yizhar, I argue that it seems like the villagers imposed a transmission of a message of Palestinian nationalism upon the Yizhar settlers. I argue that it is likely that the Burin demonstrators, with their Palestinian colored kites, thereby forced the Yizhar settlers to relate to the villagers as Palestinians in one way or the other. Additionally, I argue, the demonstration could be viewed as an attempt to make the settlers to somehow relate to their disapproval of the land confiscation made by the settlement, with something I here will term *a forceless force*. The Burin kite demonstration was *forceless* because it was silent, colorful, in many ways poetically nonviolent, and at the same time so childishly humorous – all attributes associated to the opposite of conventional power. It was at the same time *forceful* because it managed to *insert* a supposedly unwanted symbol (the flag) of an apparently unwanted nation (the Palestinian) upon the Israeli settlers assumingly *against* the will of the settlers.

Therefore, in the same way as the Burin villagers cannot escape the presence of the settlement that annexed large amounts of their agricultural fields, it seems like the villagers themselves made their supposedly unwanted Palestinian nationalism equally inescapable to the inhabitants of Yizhar. By taking advantage of the airspace in the sky that naturally bypasses the physical barrier between Yizhar and Burin, the villagers empowered themselves to reclaim the ability to influence as they succeeded with getting their message of nationalist discontent inside of the settlement itself. In that way I argue that the demonstrators actually managed to counter and overcome the unreachableness of the settlement – with purely nonviolent, cultural means.

Like a pictorial example of cultural resistance; a colorful form of creative warfare, the Burin kite demonstration can therefore be understood as a *metaphoric, nationalist invasion* imposed on Yizhar by a forceless force.

## Undermining Disciplinary Power

According to a UN special report on settler violence in the West Bank, the settlements in the Nablus region, and particular Yitzar and Bracha are considered to be the most violent of the ideological settlements in the West Bank, after the ones in the city of Hebron<sup>9</sup>. The report even argues that “[t]he full extent of settler violence is difficult to capture, in part, because settler harassment has become such a routine part of life for some Palestinians” (OCHA 2008, December). Therefore it seems likely that even a fear of general harassment and violence is present in the case of the villagers of Burin. While the Israeli settlers have the judicial right to possess arms for security reasons, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) frequently arrest Palestinians in Palestine based on the suspicion of possessing arms. The Burin villagers in our case cannot therefore reasonably be said to impose any kind of security threat to the Israeli settlers. The settlers, on the other hand, do seem to have the ability to impose such a threat to the Palestinians of Burin. If there was any doubt about the IDF practice of juridical safety for Palestinians, it is important to mention that

“(…)according to the Israeli human rights group Yesh Din, over 90% of investigations into settler violence are closed without an indictment being filed. By contrast, when Israeli civilians are the target of Palestinian violence, the IDF actively pursues Palestinian suspects; thousands of Palestinians are arrested and prosecuted through Israel’s military court system each year.” (OCHA 2008, December).

In the case of Yizhar, with its barbed wired fence and heavily armed settler guards ready to intervene if they experience any kind of real or imagined “threat” from the Palestinian villages, it is likely to assume that the Burin villagers fear the threat of punishment if for instance they would want to resist the presence of the settlement with physical, direct or even violent, means.

So one could perhaps criticize the claimed resistance of the Burin kite demonstration for being too unclear, too indirect, too small scale and too symbolic in order to reach any form of substantial social change in such an extreme social context as that of the problems with the

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<sup>9</sup> Please see elaboration in the report, OCHA (2008, December), “*Unprotected: Israeli settler violence against Palestinian civilians and their property*”, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, Occupies Palestinian Territory (OCHA), Special Focus, December, <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/files/ochasettlerreportdec08.pdf>

settlers in Palestine. However if we analyze the Burin demonstration in terms of the Foucauldian disciplinary power, I argue that it certainly could be understood as a successful attempt of *undermining* such power to a certain extent.

Perhaps because the fear of punishment seems so legitimate, I argue that we should accept the proposal that the villagers of Burin probably could be understood to have been disciplined in to subordinate themselves to the discourse that indicates that they could not possibly even try to approach the Yizhar settlers with any form of overt resistance. Then such a silent invasion of nationalist dissent, like the use of Palestinian colored kites over a fundamentalist settlement, thus becomes an equally silent sign of *rejecting* that discourse in a way that is simply not life threatening.

Then again, one could ask; if there were Palestinian colored *stones* that the villagers *threw* over on the other side of the security fence to Yizhar – couldn't that equally have been seen as a form of undermining disciplinary power? Wouldn't it even be a more explicit form of such undermining, as the aggressive style of such action would have been to expose oneself to a greater physical risk? And wouldn't that too have been a small scale Palestinian nationalist invention as the stones presumably also would fall *inside* the settlement?

I argue that, theoretically one could perhaps have interpreted such stone throwing as both a form of undermining disciplinary power as well as a small scale nationalist invention. However, I think that in practice, it is not likely that such action would be interpreted in that way by the Israeli settlers in Yizhar. That is because the additional message of aggression that the throwing of stones eventually would push forth, easily could be interpreted as of being reduced to an irrational or hollow form of childish protest without any visible effect. With stones being thrown, the settlers might look upon the action as a failed attempt of harming, threatening or intimidating. It could therefore even be subjected to ridicule, and in that sense strengthen the settler's feelings of unity. It could also have had a destructive effect on the villagers of Burin in the sense that it could fuel a discourse about Palestinians and the Burin villagers as being violent and therefore – terrorists – if such a stone action for instance came out in international media. A

hypothetical stone action over to Yizhar could thus at worst scenario serve as to legitimate even harder repression from the Israeli settler guards.

Additionally, I argue that kites have a much stronger symbolic value for a free Palestine that stones would have had in the sense that they have the ability to fly. Resembling birds, kites can fly freely over all Israeli checkpoints, apartheid walls and inhumane barriers. With the poetic power of the kites gracefully bore forth by the wind, the act addresses emotions and sensibilities that are directly alien to conventional power, and that thereby defeat it in strange but important ways. I argue that this is a crucial point in understanding the strengths of the symbolic value as well as the practical value of the Burin kite demonstration as a form of resistance.

### **Case two: civil disobedience and covert resistance in Shaikh Jarrah**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> of March the year of 2009 there was an event of resistance related to a press conference that took place in the disputed Palestinian neighborhood of Shaikh Jarrah<sup>10</sup> located in Occupied East Jerusalem (ISM 2009, March). Due to an ongoing dispute over the ownership of the land of Shaikh Jarrah, the Israeli Government evicted the home of the Al-Kurd family of the neighborhood in November 2008<sup>11</sup>. This, in combination with the frequent violent confrontations between settlers and Palestinians, as well as the controversially large amount of Israeli eviction orders handed out in the area, Shaikh Jarrah had been a hot spot in local as well as international media (PNN 2008).

However, the fame of the area was closely connected to a special initiative made by the housewife of the evicted house known as Umm Kamal al-Kurd, as she had raised a protest tent with the aim of shedding light on the evictions imposed by Israeli authorities in the area (IMEC News, 2009, November). Accompanied by banners texted in both English and Arabic stating *no to*

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<sup>10</sup> For general information about the situation in Shaikh Jarrah neighborhood see for example OCHA (2010, October): *"The Case of Sheikh Jarrah, updated version, October 2010"*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed information on the eviction of the Al-Kurd house, please see The Electronic Intifada (2008): *"Only feeble protest over family's eviction", the 21th of November.*

*ethnic cleansing*, the tent soon became a symbol of Palestinian steadfast resistance in occupied East Jerusalem (ISM 2009, July).

The press conference at the protest tent of Umm-Kamal in Sheikh Jarrah was originally organized as a part of an ongoing festival in celebration of Al Quds as the Capital of Arab Culture for the year of 2009<sup>12</sup>. However, at the time of the press conference in Shaikh Jarrah, the festival had been banned illegal by the Israeli authorities (Al Jazeera 2009, March). Only days before, the Israeli police had therefore arrested roughly twenty Palestinians and imposed a closure of several Palestinian nonviolent, cultural events in schools, universities and cultural centers (Yetnews 2009). Trouble was therefore expected, and various grassroots organizations had mobilized its members and activists. Following, is a short description of how I myself experienced the event at the press conference in East Jerusalem.

*I arrive at Shaikh Jarrah at around mid day, the sun is strong, and it seems like the speeches are just about to start.*

*Umm Kamal herself is standing in a smaller group together with other prominent religious activist figures such as Sh Raed Salah, the leader for The Islamic Movement in Palestine '48, as well as Theodosios Attallah Hanna, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Jerusalem. With their traditional religious gowns, hats and beards they give the impression of having religious authority, superiority, as if there is some kind of religious consensus regarding the Palestinian issue in East Jerusalem. It feels quite powerful. Press people are lined up in front with Umm kamal, Raed Salah and the others, and the speeches begin.*

*Suddenly I feel a growing apprehensiveness among the people around me. Some journalists distance themselves a bit from the others. Activists seem to seek each other, some take up their note-books. I turn around to see what is happening. And over there by the road at the entrance of Shaikh Jarrah, the Israeli police cars are coming driving towards us. Two large police horses are calmly riding up towards the yard, and stop not*

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<sup>12</sup> Please see the web pages of the festival for elaborate information on Al Quds (2009): <http://www.alquds2009.org/english.php>

*far from where I stand. Several orthodox settlers from the neighborhood come out from their houses onto the streets, observing.*

*Nevertheless, the press conference continues, seemingly undisturbed. What will happen, now with the Archbishop and the leader for the Islamic movement soon speaking? When would the police intervene? And what would they do to us? Would the Israeli authorities try to violently stop the conference when the Archbishop finishes?*

*But as soon as the Archbishop finishes his speech, he passes the microphone quickly over to Raed Salah. And Salah immediately starts a public prayer. The men in the crowd of audience gather quickly with the Islamic leader, lining themselves up in rows behind him.*

*All these Palestinian men who all by a sudden are standing there on the yard before the protest tent of Umm Kamal seem like a massive wall of concentrated, Palestinian religiousness. Led by Raed Salah, in his Islamic tunic, white hat and long, black coat, the men now bow calmly, silently and synchronically – towards the direction of Mecca in front of their armed occupiers. Like a self-evident and total rejection of the Israeli police unreasonable aspiration to suppress the celebration of Al Quds, the men continue praying. It's like a symbol of the total human humbleness before God. And it is like the view of these deeply religious, Palestinian men in a way make the Israeli authority seem weak and incomplete – in all of its armed, occupational mortality. With the rhythm of the prayer, the men raises again to their knees, synchronically. And the prayer last.... And last... and last... With no Israeli police intervene.*

*Until they finish.*

Now how is such an event to be understood?

### **Covert Resistance: Hidden Transcripts**

A silent prayer on a dusty yard in an Arab neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem is perhaps not something that immediately makes us think of resistance. However, as part of a festival banned illegal by the Israeli government, it is quite evidently a classical example of civil

disobedience. However, that makes the prayer itself no different from the cultural festival as a whole. However, by drawing on the work of James C. Scott I argue that we might get a fruitful tool enabling us to see beyond the mere immediate interpretations of the prayer manifestation in Shaikh Jarrah. Now, if we seek in the seams of *how* the prayer manifestation was conducted as well as how it developed, I argue that we would find traces of infrapolitics or hidden transcripts of covert, undeclared messages of resistance.

With such a large amount of Israeli police presence at the controversial protest tent in Shaikh Jarrah at a press conference being a part of the banned cultural festival which all ready had resulted in the arrest of roughly twenty Palestinians, I think it is not exaggerating to claim that most of us anticipated some kind of police violence, arrests and/or imprisonments. Furthermore, if we assume that Raed Salah, the Archbishop, Umm Kamal al-Kurd, and the other speakers were all aware of the possibilities of police violence, arrests and imprisonments while continuing the press conference as planned, if we assume that the praying men too sensed the tension and the apprehensiveness in the crowd fearing the repression from the armed Israeli: I argue that we could interpret the *timing* of the prayer in Shaikh Jarrah as a possible example of a hidden strategy of infrapolitics. By letting the prayer last and last, I understand it as an undeclared form of sabotage of the Israeli attempt to suppress the action. This was done, I argue, while disguising it by simply playing on the melody of an “on stage” hegemonic discourse of a certain basic level of respect for religious practices and beliefs that would make it difficult even for Israeli soldiers to legitimately arrest a group of religious men performing their faith publically.

Not surprisingly, after the prayer had finished, the Israeli police started to arrest people in the crowd on the yard of Shaikh Jarrah. One Palestinian woman was injured by the Israeli police, and Sh Raed Salah and six other participants were arrested (ISM 2009, March). I argue that the prayer during the press conference in Shaikh Jarrah thus can be understood as a silent weapon of infrapolitics used by the subordinated group in a relation of occupied/occupier in order to postpone the excessive and seemingly inevitable force later imposed by the Israeli police?



### **Civil Disobedience: Consent Power and Voluntary Servitude**

Referring to theories on nonviolence developed by Gandhi, the American political scientist Gene Sharp writes about what he calls “consent power” which is to be understood in connection to the phenomenon “voluntary servitude” (Sharp 1973). This understanding of power indicates that *the tyrant* or oppressor does only possess dominating power due to there being people *willing* to obey his rules due to fear, loyalty or hopes for rewards. If the oppressed groups thus were to *withdraw* such cooperation – then the power of the ruler would become invalid. Gandhi argued: “[t]he moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states” (Gandhi quoted in Sharp 1979:55). As the situation of Palestine differs largely from the situation of colonial India, I do of course by no mean claim that a total liberation in the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine would be possible simply by *rejecting* the legitimacy of the Israeli occupational policies and existence.

However, I argue that the Shaikh Jarrah press conference and the festival for al Quds as Capital of Arab Culture represent a withdrawal of consent simply in the sense that the participants and organizers kept on with the planned happenings like normal – despite it being officially declared illegal by the Israeli authorities. Clearly, that is in itself to successfully undermine the occupational authority of the Israelis in this particular situation. It could also be viewed as a sign of resistance to the fear of repression that naturally exist amongst the Palestinians, and hence also a resistance to the psychological and cultural manifestations of Israeli power among the occupied.

In contrast to the disciplinary power of Foucault, the consent power of Gandhi and Sharp might serve as a framework with which we can understand power in order to understand how to undermine it. Unlike the Foucauldian hidden disciplinary power, the consent power refers mainly to the overt power of declared, socially constructed laws like prohibitions, restrictions, deprivations of access to certain resources, etcetera.

One could criticize the prayer manifestation in Shaikh Jarrah for not seem to have won any significant battle as it resulted in the arrest of seven people and the injury of one. But I argue,

however, that by refusing to be servants of the prohibitions of the occupier, the participants managed to reclaim their possibilities for fulfilling the press conference after all. In that way the Palestinians of Shaikh Jarrah managed nothing less than to dismantle the *function* of such prohibitions. And if that is not the undermining of power, then I do not know what is. By doing that, the participants also show what other Palestinians could do facing similar restrictions, and if more people did it, more often – it might eventually lead to a massive resistance strategy that would make occupation a lot more difficult and costly for Israel.

### **Conclusion: Contesting the Myth that “it’s Not Real Resistance”**

The two empirical cases of what I understand to be forms of cultural resistance as presented in this article have represented different modes of expression with which the participants have attempted to affect different aspects of the Israeli occupation. By this, my attempt has been to highlight the ways in which certain cultural aspects or symbols have enabled Palestinians to push forth their messages of protest and discontent towards the Israeli occupation. I have also attempted to shed light on the ways in which one could understand these forms of resistance as to have undermined, decreased or even dismantled certain aspects of Israeli occupational power.

The kite demonstration in Burin transmits a message of Palestinian nationalism by taking in use kites painted in the Palestinian nationalist colors, and let them fly over the fundamentalist settlement of Yizhar. Despite the settlement being seemingly unreachable to the Burin villagers due to Israel’s strict policy of separation, we have seen that by using the *airspace above* Yizhar as the medium for such transmission the demonstrators managed to erase the *practical effect* of this policy to a certain extent. In that way the demonstrators enabled themselves to show *protest, discontent* and *dissatisfaction* towards the illegal settlement of Yizhar under circumstances that by first glance would make any kind of resistance nearly impossible. I have showed how this could be understood as a way of undermining the Foucauldian disciplinary power. With the help of the wind, we have seen how the message of the Burin Kite Demonstrators even reached *inside* of Yizhar with their Palestinian nationalist kites. Therefore, I have argued, the Burin Kite Demonstration can even be viewed as a poetic form of metaphorical – but yet actual – Palestinian, nationalist *invasion*.

In the second case, we have seen how something as seemingly harmless as an *outdoor prayer* in the Palestinian neighborhood of Shaikh Jarrah in occupied East Jerusalem can be understood as a quiet weapon of the weak when confronted by the on stage face of the “tyrant”, drawing heavily on the work of James C. Scott. Through sensitive analysis of *how* the prayer was undertaken, I have attempted to highlight how the participants in subtle ways showed their protest toward the Israeli repression of the cultural festival and of the Shaikh Jarrah press conference in particular. I have also attempted to show how the Palestinian participants’ clever use of the public transcripts of a hegemonic respect for religion, managed to *postpone* the excessive force that probably otherwise would have shut down the conference at once. In addition, we have seen how the use of *civil disobedience* in connection to the festival of Al Quds, witness of a possibly emancipatory consciousness that in turn resulted in that the Israeli ban of the festival was made partly dysfunctional. By withdrawing their acceptance of the given juridical rules imposed by the Israeli government, the participants seem to succeed in destructing the consent power as developed by Gene Sharp, and in that way manage to go on with the festival despite the Israeli ban.

If we go back to our initial research question for the paper and try to judge whether or not the two analyzed examples of nonviolent cultural resistance could be understood to have expressed *protest* or *discontent* towards the Israeli occupation of Palestine, or if it would be reasonable to understand them as to directly or indirectly *undermine*, *decrease* or *dismantle* different aspects of Israeli occupational power – on the basis of the discussion above – the answers to the questions seem to be rather unambiguous.

I argue therefore that it is short-sighted to underestimate all or most forms of small scale, overt or low-intensive forms of cultural resistance – in line with the theories of Scott – just because their modes of expression do not speak as loudly. It seems to be more difficult to see how for instance a group of Palestinian youth throwing stones at the heavily armed and militarily equipped Israeli soldiers, which is the case during many of the weekly demonstrations against the Wall each Friday throughout the West Bank, can say to be *undermining* or *decreasing* the *power* of the occupiers or of the soldiers. On the contrary, in such cases, by separating the *mean*

of resistance from its *ability* to challenge dominating power, I argue that the classical forms of small-scale, pseudo-violent resistance in Palestine are not truly effective.

To conclude, I would actually go so far as to call for a *revising* of what I have presented in this paper as the hierarchy of resistance. Instead of romanticizing the large scale, violent or pseudo-violent forms of resistance against the illegal occupation of Palestine and thus uncritically assuming their superior effectiveness: international, Israeli and Palestinian activists in occupied Palestine should instead start to truly recognize the real potential, effectiveness and value of exactly these small-scale, cultural or more covert forms of resistance that the present hierarchy rejects. Additionally, it is clear that cultural resistance allows greater participation than more traditional forms of resistance because there are fewer people that would be willing to utilize violence or overt, large scale forms of such due to all potentially fatal repercussions. The participatory precedence of cultural resistance, I argue, could therefore be viewed as an additional indicator of the superior effectiveness of such.

For further research on this issue, I strongly argue that there is a need for comprehensive academic research that systematically scrutinize the implications, meanings and effects of the different strategies and practices of cultural, small-scale resistance towards the Israeli occupation in Palestine. As a grassroots activist of nonviolence myself, I believe that such research would be of highly relevance for Palestinian, Israeli and international peace workers in the region, as well as for other advocates for social justice, democracy and human rights in and outside occupied Palestine.

Therefore there also exists an important academic need to explore the extent to which the perception discussed in this paper – that cultural resistance *is not real resistance* – is valid amongst activists of nonviolence both in the West Bank and in Gaza. That is because, based on the discussion above, I argue that a change of heart with this matter would actually be beneficial in order to make the resistance towards the occupation of Palestine more effective.

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