

Marda Dunsky: *Stories from Palestine: Narratives of Resilience*

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Reviewed by **Andrew Rigby, Coventry University**¹

I have been visiting Israel and Palestine since the early 1980s. It has been an up and down emotional journey. There was the buoyancy after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, and there seemed to be definite grounds for hope for the future. Since then, it has been a challenge to summon the will to express any optimism as the possibilities for any sustainable peace have been eroded.

Hence it was with some trepidation that I opened a book by Marda Dunsky, an American author and journalist who happens to be married to a Palestinian academic with whom I have worked in the past—hence the review copy. But *Stories from Palestine* foregoes the usual framing of Palestinians as either victims or perpetrators of violence. Instead, Marda profiles a number of quite remarkable people who have resisted the pull of despair, said no to the appeal of hatred and violence, and summoned the will and perseverance to act as creative agents of change, whilst living in an environment that has so few obvious sources of hope.

There is Abdelfattah Abusroar, who founded a children's theatre in Aida refugee camp, under the shadow of the separation wall in Bethlehem. He seeks to inspire people with his vision of 'beautiful resistance' and his belief in the power of art as a means of expression and resistance for children (and adults).

There are the organic farmers clinging to their vocation as cultivators of the land. Nothing remarkable about that, except they are cultivating land where they are blocked from digging wells for irrigation and where, in some cases, they have to negotiate checkpoints to access their land since the construction of the 'separation barrier' by which Israel has expropriated new stretches of Palestinian territory.

¹ Andrew Rigby is co-author (with Marwan Darweish) of *Popular protest in Palestine: The uncertain future of unarmed resistance* (Pluto Press, 2015).

There is Hana Al-Hroub, winner of the 2016 ‘Global Teacher Prize’: ‘A teacher must remain strong enough in order to stand before her students as a brave person [...] to convince them that they have the capabilities to change tomorrow and the future’.

There is Shyrine Ziadeh, who created the Ramallah Ballet Centre, despite the claims of those who insisted young people should be defending Palestine instead of dancing. She also had to face up to criticism from those trapped within the old Palestinian patriarchal culture, who tried to deny young people the opportunity to enjoy movement for its own sake. For Shyrine, dance is not only a vital means for young people to express themselves, but also is a way of showing the world that something beautiful can come from Palestine.

Then there are the writers like Nadia Harhash, who struggle professionally and personally to provide hope, especially to the young:

Life feels so miserable and worthless that death seems merely to be a change, not a loss. Young men are eager to go and fight, knowing they will likely be killed, because this would not be a loss to them.

Reading this book left me with the usual mix of emotions that I have experienced on my visits to Israel and the Palestinian Territories:

Anger at the abuse of basic human rights that is part and parcel of the ethnic cleansing that is integral to the Zionist-colonial project;

Sorrow at the loss of life-chances experienced by generation after generation of Palestinians growing up under occupation;

Contempt for the Palestinian political elite ensconced in their positions of privilege and prioritising their own status above the wellbeing of their fellow-Palestinians;

Concern at the moral degeneration of large swathes of the Israeli population who have come to accept occupation as ‘normal’;

Admiration for the courage of that minority of Israeli citizens who refuse to be complicit in the occupation—most obviously by refusing conscription into the military;

Awe at the tenacity of Palestinians who, despite the ever-tightening stranglehold of the occupation, still manage to summon up the resilience to hold on to their humanity and not give way to blind hatred or abject submission.

This steadfastness is what Palestinians call *sumud*: holding on to valued ways of life and associated identities in the face of a deepening and pervasive occupation. It is best expressed by Abdelfattah Abusroar:

Sumud is continuing living in Palestine, laughing, enjoying life, falling in love, getting married, having children. Sumud is also continuing your studies outside, to get a diploma, to come back here. Defending values is sumud. Building a house, a beautiful one and thinking that we are here to stay, even when the Israelis are demolishing this house, and then build a new and even more beautiful one than before – that is also sumud. That I am here is sumud. To reclaim that you are a human being and defending your humanity is sumud.

Somewhere, decades ago, I came across the aphorism: ‘To despair is to betray the future’. To lose hope for the future is to relinquish any attempt to exercise one’s agency for change. In capturing something of the creativity, tenacity and courage required of those Palestinians who have refused to give in to despair, *Stories from Palestine* succeeds in reminding the rest of us of our own moral and human responsibility to help sustain hope for the future,