Review Essay

Reflections on researching Palestinian resistance

Michael J Carter: Palestinian popular struggle: Unarmed and participatory

Routledge, 2019

Raja Shehadeh: Going home: A walk through fifty years of occupation

Profile Books, 2019

Ramzy Baroud, ed.: These chains will be broken: Palestinian stories of struggle and defiance in Israeli prisons

Clarity Press, 2019

Reviewed by **Andrew Rigby,** *Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies, Coventry University*

I have had a close interest in the ongoing disaster that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for four decades – since my first visit in 1980. I have spent a significant section of my professional life researching and writing about how Palestinians and Israelis have struggled to somehow change the course of this ongoing catastrophe. During this time I have developed close friendships with Palestinians and with Israeli citizens, and with that has come a deeply personal concern about the manner in which their lives have been damaged and contaminated by the unrelenting colonial expansion of Israel over increasing areas of Palestinian territory, the abuse of Palestinians' basic human rights, and the associated weakening of those democratic values and practices of which Israeli citizens were once so proud.

As someone who has always prided himself on his 'professionalism' as a researcher, with a deep value commitment to nonviolence as both a method of action and as a philosophy of life, I have puzzled long and hard over the nature of my relationship with the Palestinians and Israelis who have been the subjects of my studies. I have never had any illusions that my

research has been value-free—my values have directed my research interests. Moreover, the respect and admiration for the activists I have studied over the years has been an important factor in establishing the basic trust relationship between us. The main problematic for me has been a consequence of this trust relationship—a reluctance to be too critical of the subjects of study, particularly in relation to the claims made by them about the significance and the effectiveness of their activities.

Over the years I have settled on adopting the role of a critical friend: someone who shares the basic values of the activists—a trusted friend—who seeks to support their endeavour by providing different perspectives, interpretations and critiques of their projects. As such I have tried to act as a constructive yet critical accompanier.

These reflections were occasioned by my reading of Michael Carpenter's *Palestinian popular struggle: Unarmed and participatory,* shortly after I had completed reading Rajah Shehadeh's *Going home: A walk through fifty years of occupation*. I enjoyed reading Carpenter's book, knowing the locations and communities where he carried out his fieldwork and familiar with some of the movement-networks with which many of his informants were affiliated. But I finished with a big reservation. I felt that Carpenter had written a book to laud the activists within the Palestinian popular resistance movement, and in the process had failed in what I consider should have been his prime role—a *critical* friend.

Carpenter is a Canadian academic with a clear libertarian/anarchist political commitment, who carried out his doctoral field research on Palestinian unarmed popular resistance during 2013-14. He starts his book with a brief review of three significant instances of unarmed Palestinian resistance that took place in 2017-18: i) The Temple Mount protests in Jerusalem that took place during July 2017 after Israel installed metal detectors at the entrance to the mosque complex, following the killing of two Israeli border police by three Palestinian citizens of Israel; ii) The protests sparked by the arrest of a 16 year old girl in the village of Nabi Saleh after she had slapped an Israeli soldier, which was caught on video camera; iii) The commencement of protests in Gaza in March 2018 called the Great March of Return, demanding the lifting of the Israeli blockade and reaffirming the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

There can be no doubt that for those involved in these protests they were of significance, as evidence that Palestinians were still protesting against

the ongoing occupation and associated abuses. But Carpenter, I am afraid, lapses into hyperbole when he claims:

> By 2017, popular struggle became the clear expression and substance of Palestinian resistance. It was used in small and large cases, planned and spontaneous, and recognized by the global community. Nothing suddenly changed in 2017, but a slow-building critical mass came into itself. There was no mass uprising, and very little unified resistance, but the paradigm of Palestinian struggle had shifted, for Palestinians and the world (p. 30).

I confess that I do not understand what is meant by the reference to a 'critical mass came into itself', but what I do know is that on the basis of the research carried out by myself and Marwan Darweish there can be little doubt that by 2017, the energy had waned from the popular resistance movement in the occupied West Bank.[1] It was no longer 'popular'. In some protest actions there seemed to be more foreigners and Israeli solidarity activists participating than local Palestinians. And far from being 'spontaneous', there was a definite routinized quality to the weekly Friday protests taking place at a limited number of locations. There were many reasons for this waning of the movement—and to be fair Carpenter does allude to some of them in his study, mentioning disagreements between local popular committee activists at the grassroots level and obstructionism by the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, despite his laudatory appreciation of the different activities initiated by the village-level popular committees, Carpenter acknowledges at one point in the text that there was no mass uprising and very little unified resistance!

I would suggest that one reason for this apparent contradiction in the author's analysis is his failure to resolve the tension between the social scientist's role as observer and their personal commitment and support of a just resistance struggle. So, at one level, he reports on the phenomena he has witnessed in the course of his fieldwork, and at another level he makes claims about the significance of what he has witnessed within the wider context of the overall popular resistance struggle which, I am afraid, remain unsubstantiated. Just one illustration: he refers to the establishment of the

1 M. Darweish & A. Rigby, *Popular protest in Palestine: The uncertain future of unarmed resistance*, London: Pluto, 2015

Popular Struggle Coordinating Committee, in 2008, which received some financial support from Italian and other sources, and with the emergence the following year of an ongoing popular resistance struggle in the village of Nabi Saleh he concludes: 'This was no longer a rural movement against portions of the separation barrier. It was a popular committee-led global coalition against the occupation. […] The movement was just getting started.' (p. 114) The movement might have been 'getting started' in his eyes, but does cooperation between Palestinian and Italian activists constitute a 'global coalition'?

Since those years the occupation has continued to deepen and deepen, and for those of us who persist in seeking answers as to how to reverse this process I am afraid Carpenter provides few insights, other than a necessary condemnation of the role of the Palestinian Authority—a judgement that many would endorse, particularly the Palestinian lawyer and author Raja Shehadeh.

Shehadeh was one of the founders of the Palestinian human rights organisation *Al Haq,* and acted as an advisor to the Palestinian delegation involved in the Madrid peace talks of 1991. The first book of his that I read was *The third way: A journal of life on the West Bank*.[2] On the title page there was a succinct explanation of the title: 'Between mute submission and blind hate I choose the third way—I am *sumid* (the steadfast)'. Reading his latest book, *Going home: A walk through fifty years of occupation*, one gets the clear sense that Shehadeh has had to struggle incredibly hard not to submit to extreme bitterness and hatred or complete disillusionment. As he writes:

> There was a time when we hoped that we were getting rid of the occupation and I worked and lived for that moment. But it dissipated twenty-four years ago with the first Oslo Accord, and since then I 've lived without hope, constantly trying to adjust to life and accept that it will only go from bad to worse as the occupation becomes more entrenched, grabbing more of our land and tightening the noose around our necks (p. 169).

In essence, his books have been about how he and others have tried to adapt and cope with the ever-tightening strangle-hold of the occupation, without losing their humanity and giving way to blind hatred or abject submission.

2 R. Shehadeh, *The third way: A journal of life in the West Bank*, London: Quartet Books, 1982.

Writing has been one of the ways he has continued to assert his commitment to his Palestinian identity, culture and way of life.

In his latest book, Shehadeh reconstructs his walks around his home town of Ramallah, each of them prompting memories and stories of how the Israeli occupation has impacted on his life and experience. After half a century of life under the sway of the Israeli occupation he recalls:

> For many years I raged in anger at my fate. Now when I look back over my life, I can see that the occupation has provided me with an immense amount of work and great challenges, not only in how to resist but in how to live under its ruthless matrix of control as a free man refusing to be denied the joys of life (p. 40).

For someone like me, of a similar generation to Shehadeh, the richness of this book lies in his honest reflections on the everyday challenges of coping with, and thereby resisting, an ever-more tenacious occupation. This is what faces Palestinians living under occupation every day of their lives—how to summon up the steadfastness necessary to maintain resilience in the face of relentless oppression. This is *sumoud*[3]—doing what is necessary to live one's life as a human being under inhuman conditions: 'to exist is to resist'.

One of the most pungent reflections in the book is prompted by a visit to the Arafat Museum and Mausoleum. Like all national memorials, the historical narrative represented is selective; the main story line is of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (doomed) armed struggle—with absolutely no recognition of past mistakes nor any representation of the *sumoud*/steadfastness of those living under occupation. For Shehadeh, there is the painful recognition that, after fifty years of trying, the Palestinians have not succeeded in forcing Israel to end its occupation. But 'the struggle is neither over nor won, and what keeps it going is nothing other than our sumoud' (p. 182). Moreover, in the process of struggling to retain their humanity the Palestinians have, in the words of Shehadeh, brought:

> Israel to self-destruct. The country that occupied us half a century ago bears little resemblance to the Israel of today. By forcing them to justify the unjustifiable, that which is patently illegal, we have helped them destroy their legal system and, through their open discrimination, the

[3] Alternative spelling is ***sumud.***

> rule of law and respect for international law. We have also helped destroy the socialist aspects of their system by providing them with cheap labour. We have certainly not won, but neither have they (p. 155).

In one of the chapters in *The Third Way,* Shehadeh told of a visit he made to a newly released Palestinian political prisoner called Khalil. It was clear to the author that the veteran prisoners had made a great impression on the young man, moulding the poor impression he had of the level of resistance shown by those on the outside. 'What's this freedom you think you have?' he asked. ' … everyone is frightened. … At least in prison you are not afraid. You have nothing to lose. It is there that you find the brave men. And it is they who are really free.'[4]

My personal knowledge of prisons is limited, confined to teaching peace studies to a couple of long-term prisoners at a local jail, one of whom happened to be a Palestinian. We have remained in touch and I plan to share with him a third book on Palestinian resistance—*These chains will be broken: Palestinian stories of struggle and defiance in Israeli prisons*, edited by a US-Palestinian Ramzy Baroud. The book consists of twenty personal accounts by contributors about their experience as political prisoners. Some are desperately sad—people consumed by bitterness and hatred, driven to acts of lethal violence, forfeiting so many years of their lives whilst enduring the everyday pain and desperation of the long-term incarcerated. But others are positively uplifting and inspirational. Let me just share just one of them.

Hilal Mohammed Jaradat, from Yamoun in the north-west of the West Bank, was arrested in September 1987, charged with involvement in the killing of three armed settlers, and sentenced to 30 years. He was released in 2011, aged 46. By the time he was released he had learned 16 different languages, some of them with the aid of fellow-prisoners who had studied and lived in different countries. He had also taught hundreds of his comrades English and Hebrew. He writes, 'Reading allowed me to escape, in my mind, to a world beyond the prison walls, where there are no metal gates, no watchtowers and no sadistic prison guards, to places where people are equal and where possibilities are endless' (p. 73). Reading and learning languages was Hilal's means of escape, it was also his joy. But it was also his mode of resistance, his way of asserting and maintaining his identity as a Palestinian intellectual, his form of *sumoud*—steadfastness. He writes:

3 Shehadeh, *The third way*, p. 25.

> As soon as I was arrested, I grasped the nature of the long fight awaiting me. It is the same fight faced by all prisoners before me and those who are left behind. The Israeli prison administration basically tries to break our spirit, to keep us isolated and uninformed, while we struggle to maintain a semblance of our humanity, to retain a sense of order within the most chaotic surroundings (p.74).

'Struggling to maintain a semblance of humanity'—that phrase resonates with me, as I am sure it does with many who have accompanied Palestinians (and Israelis) over the years in their struggle for a sustainable peace. As the occupation deepens, as the likelihood of any significant change diminishes, so it becomes ever-more difficult to sustain hope for the future. And this brings me full-circle back to the dilemma of the researcher as critical friend. Of course we have a responsibility to be analytical, to identify weaknesses and strengths, to explore possibilities for change as well as identifying the many factors and processes that stand in the way of a new future—but surely we also have a moral and human responsibility to help sustain hope.

References

Darweish, M, & A. Rigby. 2015. *Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance*, London: Pluto.

Shehadeh, R. 1982. *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank*, London: Quartet Books.