

Community Development as Resistance and Resilience.

An interview with Mahmoud Zwahre from the Palestine Popular Resistance Coordinating Committee, conducted, edited and introduced by Eurig Scandrett, Queen Margaret University and *Concept* editorial board. More on the Popular Resistance Committees can be found on www.popularstruggle.org

Community development in occupied Palestine is inevitably hazardous work and unquestionably political. Palestinians who remain in Palestine are divided between three territories with very limited movement between these: Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. In Gaza, Palestinians live under a military blockade and face regular incursions by Israeli troops and attacks by drones. Palestinians in the communities that survived the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and remain within Israel along with those that Israel illegally annexed in 1967 such as East Jerusalem, are treated as second-class Israeli citizens and subject to institutional harassment. The remaining West Bank is divided into Areas A, B and C: the urban centres of Area A are largely under the control of the Palestinian Authority albeit under the scrutiny of Israel. Communities in Area B are under Palestinian civil responsibility with Israeli military control. Palestinian communities in Area C, which constitutes over 60% of the remaining West Bank, are under complete control of the Israeli military, which constrains any form of development or community organising for Palestinians but facilitates the illegal construction of 'settlements' for Israelis. Furthermore, the wall, which creates an apartheid-style segregation between Israelis and Palestinians, has been largely built on confiscated Palestinian land.

In this context, the popular resistance committees (PRC) that have emerged in many villages in Palestine have become a key component of resistance to the Israeli occupation, building on and consolidating capacity amongst communities that have faced decades of dislocation, hardship and perpetual harassment by the Israeli military

and Zionist vigilantes. In this situation, community development and education are clearly acts of political resistance. At a local level, PRCs mobilise through cultural and building projects (in defiance of the occupation) and support people facing land confiscation, house demolition and legal conflicts. PRCs also link together for joint action through the Popular Resistance Coordinating Committee.

In recent times, the popular resistance committees have succeeded in organising grassroots mobilisation in several high profile and strategically important protests. Early in 2013, PRC activists re-occupied land that has been taken by Israel for the development of the E1 settlement. E1 would join annexed East Jerusalem to the illegal settlement of Ma'ala Adummim, thereby splitting the West Bank into two discontinuous parts. Later that year, a 'day of rage' and protests by PRCs and others succeeded in disrupting – albeit temporarily - the Praver Plan for evicting Bedouins from their land in the Naqab (or Negev) in order to create Jewish-only communities. And earlier this year, a forcibly depopulated village in the Jordan Valley was reclaimed by the PRCs. In Palestine, community development and popular education are inseparable from resistance to colonial occupation.

Mahmoud Zwahre is an organiser with the popular resistance committee of the village of Al Ma'asara in the district of Bethlehem and is a member of the Popular Resistance Coordination Committee. I interviewed Mahmoud during a study visit he made to the UK at the end of 2013. I first met Mahmoud during a visit to Al Ma'asara with the San Ghan'ny choir which sang at a demonstration against Israeli theft of village land. His determined commitment to nonviolent confrontation in the face of Israeli violent oppression impressed us all. Later, Mahmoud showed some of us around the work of various PRCs, including the remarkable Al Mufaqarah in the South Hebron hills, where a resilient community lives in caves in defiance of Israeli attempts to depopulate the area. The PRC mobilises volunteers to build houses for families and to keep re-building them every time the Israeli soldiers destroy them.

I started our interview by asking Mahmoud about the origins of the popular resistance committees.

Let me go back a little bit to the history of popular resistance during the last 100 years, because it's not something new in Palestinian history. It's something that was in some periods more visible, in the 1930s and the general strike in 1936 for six months, and the uprising against the British mandate. Even action against the Israeli occupation started with a popular resistance, and ended sometimes with armed resistance. Palestinian civil society used different methods of popular resistance, from before the Belfour declaration (in 1917) up to 1987, which was the summit of the popular resistance: the first intifada. And in that intifada, all the people were committed to popular resistance, all the sectors, with a great harmonic relationship among Palestinian society towards this popular intifada.

Within the first two years there was a high level of commitment to popular resistance until the third year when some forms of armed resistance started. Palestinians did not kill any Israelis in the first two years, and I think that was the best moment for the Palestinians to achieve their goals, as an outcome of this intifada, which put Israel in the corner for violations of human rights. This was one of the reasons why Israel was forced to go into the negotiations [for the Oslo agreement], although unfortunately the outcome was not that good.

After the first intifada, the Israelis knew that the culture of the Palestinians is a type of popular resistance, with the habits and traditions of social solidarity. But Israel always tries to attach the terrorist label to the Palestinians, by pushing them into violence. Israel does not want to see a Palestinian popular intifada, they want to show that Israel is a democratic country, experienced in fighting against terrorism and this can be sold to the west, to Europe and to the United States.

The second intifada also started as a popular intifada but the Israelis managed to push the Palestinians into a cycle of violence, especially when they started killing 20 or 30 people each day, so the Palestinians wanted revenge by suicide bombing and by using armed resistance. And in this period, Israel started building the wall.

In 2002 they started building the wall and at the same time they had the siege in Jenin, and in Bethlehem, in Nablus, lots of killing, and no-one paid attention to a wall built here or there. Journalists are focusing on the blood that is flowing everywhere in the West Bank and Gaza. They started building the wall on the border – in Jenin area in the north - until they arrived at Qalqilia. There they started to penetrate the Palestinian land to include it to the other side of the wall. And the people started to resist.

So from here the roots of the popular committees start to form in different villages, like Jayyous and other villages around, where in each village farmers started to resist. In the minds of the farmers: 'it's my belongings' you know, 'it's my trees, and my field, and I must resist'. And in a natural way, they go and stand in front of bulldozers, they try to stop this uprooting and this confiscation of the land. The idea was picked up by the people of the villages to form popular committees. This is not a new term by the way it is something that existed in the first intifada. So in the minds of the people there is some background for these things, with the difference in the environment they created these popular committees. With more visibility for the term 'popular' because in the minds of the people now there are two models in front of them: the first model is the first intifada, the second model is the two years of the second intifada which was full of violence and massacres. And I think that the people reacted against that. No-one is thinking to carry a gun and to shoot at the bulldozer – just 'I want to protect my land with my body'. This is not something that they educated themselves about but something that they lived, that they experienced and that they trust from the beginning. So they formed the popular committees to promote the popular form of the resistance.

So sometimes these popular committees take daily actions – every day they organise actions because there is work going on on the ground. So they go and demonstrate, and when they go they start to spread the information to the people in the village to come and protect the land. And this didn't manage to stop immediately the Israelis but they kept on going, building the wall in the north and the west, until they reached Jerusalem.

The people who started organising the actions were the farmers, but then with other activists, the people who have some experience. So the members of the popular committee in each village can be activists, farmers, sometimes local council members, students, men, women. There is no clear structure for the popular committee. Whether I am a member or not, it depends how many times I participate and am committed to the resistance. So this idea started to spread in all the villages that the wall is going through.

The popular committee is not just to organise actions but also to advocate for popular resistance, to connect with Israeli activists, with international groups. So they start to build these networks with other villages where they formed popular committees and this also spread to the north west of Jerusalem. In Beit Iksa five people were killed, many injured, many people arrested. And the media was not covering this because of the situation in the cities with the second intifada. The media pay attention to ten killed in Nablus or Jenin, not to someone arrested or someone injured in a small village. But even so it was documented by the popular committees, by the journalists, by the local activist groups, and then later after 2005 when things calmed down a little bit these issues start to be more visible for the Palestinians and also for the international community.

And as the wall continued, other villages followed, so the popular committees start to think more about strategies, about tactics, about creativity, about joint actions all over the West Bank. But each village is thinking locally. The most interesting thing is how these popular committees manage to survive in some villages. I'll give you al Ma'asara as an example, we have 10 people committed, but those ten people are not tired, they keep going on, as if they are a rope eating the rock, you know, with time, even though it is tiring but they manage to keep on the model. And many other villages managed but in some villages after the wall passed them they stopped. But even if the work stopped you create some activists in these villages who are ready on call - if there is something going on in another village, they will join. This is why the activism idea in Palestine was created, which is not found in the first intifada. In the

first intifada it was the leadership, but now it is activists growing up, and I do not want to say a leadership, but there is a type of leadership that people start to relate to now in the popular resistance. So these are the origins and the shape and structure of the popular committees inside the villages.

Over the past ten years the popular committees have gained experience of mobilising. For example through social media - there are many facebook pages for the popular committees with the various things going on. Also targeting local media in Palestine, on the TV, radio, newspapers, you can find good media coverage for all that they are doing. Advertisements for actions and events – the public ones. Targeting international media and international solidarity, also through social media, email lists and so on, popular committees are doing well in this. This comes through training with the popular committees using capacity building: video training, radio training, social media, internet security, all of these things. Meetings happen in the villages, for example, a film screening, through theatre, through music, a debate about this movie, about the importance of popular resistance, and so we can recruit people and get commitment from the people. Sometimes we manage to reach schools and to mobilise the students at the universities.

Also for capacity building we have these programmes for increasing awareness of activists. We have a diploma programme and a Masters programme in order to increase knowledge of international law and Israeli law, about what can be done and what cannot be done. On the ground, we have legal campaigns to defend the prisoners, to defend the land, to increase awareness amongst the locals, if the Israelis give you a demolition order for your house, what are the legal steps that you must do and how you can defend your house, on the legal side and also on the popular side, because we can support you through popular actions, and also the legal actions to protect your land or your house.

The Masters is done between two universities: Birzeit and Al-Quds, and we are the partner who brings the people who want to learn and we design the courses with them, according to our need, not according to the agenda of the universities. So we

have, for example, this strategic plan: we want this course and we want this outcome from this course so we cooperate with the two universities to design these courses and the lectures. To learn to use video we go to the media centres; with the radio things we go to the local radio. For the legal things we have lawyers, we have local legal organisations. For the land, we know, through lawyers that we cooperate with, the process that must be done in order to protect the people's land and the people's houses.

We target the villages. We notice that village x has received demolition orders. So we go there with a lawyer. We have a workshop with the people in the village, explaining to them the legal steps that must be done in order to prevent the demolition. Because the Israelis are looking for the moment when no-one will object so they can do what they want. So this is like another type of resistance. And this is something that is important to accumulate victories. The people will see that at least we have prevented five houses from being demolished. And the same with access to land and confiscating land - we do the same.

We are pushing for the Palestinian Authority to invest in area C for a political reason – our struggle is in area C. If Area C falls to the Israelis then there will be no Palestinian state. If area C comes to the Palestinians then there will be no settlements. So this is the challenge - how to work in Area C - what is the priority? What is the use of investing in Area A? no need! We need to work in Area C, on agriculture, on building houses, to renew houses which were built some time ago, that they cannot demolish, to create life in these houses. So there are many ideas that can be done. If you have the funds for these ideas it will be good, so we are pushing for example now on the Palestinian Authority to do this. And we have succeeded. We have managed to have projects that must be implemented in Area C. For example the Australian government is supporting this, partly also the British government is supporting projects in the Jerusalem area, it is something that we must focus on. And in this case, the idea is to build the resilience of the people in area C.

In Al Ma'asara we have now a tourist project. This project is to increase the resilience of people and to attach the old generation with the new generation. And the new generation will carry the habits and the traditions of attachment to land, the same as the old. So the idea is to cultivate four fields next to the settlement, and to sell the products to the women's cooperative in the village. The women's cooperative will run a restaurant with traditional food. Some women will be specialised in traditional cooking, the traditional bread and so on. So this is to increase resilience and to create jobs for people. It's a continuity but keeping on the spirit and the traditions and the habits that the old generation was carrying because this is part of our identity, part of the culture. Of course you are supposed to get permission from the Israelis for such development, which they always forbid, so, you avoid it as much as you can, until you reach a point where you have a confrontation.

Settlers now are doing treks in the mountains and telling international people that this is Israel. But now we are inviting people to come and go through the valleys, we train people, young people to do the political tour for people in the mountains and so on, because this is also advocacy for the cause, and to advocate for resistance and resilience of the people in Area C. This is important in areas like Jordan Valley or South Hebron Hills, or even Naqab in 1948 [ie Palestinian land occupied in 1948, subsequently recognised as the state of Israel]. This is important to show what is going on, how the settlements are expanding and how the Israelis are cleansing the people from Naqab area and how popular pressure on Israel at least will make them stop and think 'we will not do it just now', because there is popular pressure in Israel. And this is a great success for the popular resistance with the Praver plan in Naqab.

I want the people who read this to know that the Palestinians are resilient, and to see how Israel reacts to popular resistance. I want them to understand that we are not victims – no, the Palestinian people are powerful and their power is growing and the complete picture comes when all the elements combine with each other and international solidarity is one of these important elements. This is the face of the Palestinians that I want them to see from the popular resistance, not like a dry tree in the desert – people all over the world are trying to see us like this. No there is

something coming out of the popular resistance, with all this pressure from demolishing, arresting, killing, confiscating, the repression and the violations: there still are roots growing through these rocks, reaching to the water, absorbing it to the leaves to be alive and to be green. This is what I want them to see from the popular resistance, the story that is coming out that shows the resilience of the people.