

Letter from Jerusalem

Yara and the Wanted Eighteen

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Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reacted to spiraling events in Jerusalem and elsewhere in October and November with a predictable, if dangerous, formula: force and more force. The slew of directives from his right-wing government includes a 2 November cabinet-proposed amendment to the penal law increasing the punishment for stone-throwers (peculiarly, even if there is no evidence of intent to harm) from ten to twenty years in prison. Most recently, in the wake of protests erupting after the 8 November police killing of a young man in the Galilee village of Kafr Kanna, Netanyahu threatened to strip Palestinian protestors of Israeli citizenship.

An alarming number of Palestinian children have been arrested since the “silent intifada,” as Jerusalemites like to call it, began simmering last June – that is, since the murderous burning of the teenager Muhammad Abu Khdeir and the Israeli attack on Gaza. Military Court Watch reports 201 children under military detention as “security prisoners” in August 2014 and 182 in September 2014.

Israeli political absurdity seems limitless. It does not seem to learn from its past experiences. We recall that at the beginning of the first intifada, Yitzhak Rabin – then minister of defense – made his notorious directive calling for breaking the bones of stone throwers. Did that stop the intifada, or slow it down? Did the intifada slow down when the Israeli military command decided to demolish the homes of imprisoned militants, leaving their families without shelter in the winters of 1988 and 1989? Did similar collective measures of punishment imposed by Sharon, Ben-Eliezar, Olmert, and Mofaz succeed in halting the second intifada?

There is no doubt that the Israeli courts will issue harsh measures this time toward Jerusalem’s children, as they have done in the past. As in the past also this will not stop

the accumulating anger from spreading to adjoining towns, villages, and camps – with the coming insurrection possibly engulfing all of Palestine. The powder keg may well be the continued and coordinated actions by right-wing Jewish religious extremists at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound – actions that would not be possible without increasing support from politicians, including ministers and Knesset representatives. International concern over the dangerous situation in Jerusalem needs to be translated into a return to the basics: East Jerusalem is not “disputed” territory – a term some global reporting on the events at al-Aqsa has adopted from Israeli discourse – but occupied, and Israel is not the legitimate sovereign. “It’s the occupation” is the clear message coming from East Jerusalem events; let us hope the world hears it as clearly.

Indeed, the recent launch of an animated film recalling the events of the first intifada, some twenty-five years ago, manages magically to highlight these events. Amer Shomali’s documentary film *The Wanted 18*, released in October 2014 in Jerusalem and Ramallah as part of the Qalandiya International Festival, is a nostalgic trip to a recent past, a mere three decades ago. Yet viewers felt that its events took place a century ago. Shomali narrates the story of Bayt Sahur, the town that developed a model of resistance during a period when the technology of communication did not include the cell phone or the Internet. Nor did activists have access to Twitter, Facebook, and the like. The ordinary people of Bayt Sahur decided to rebel in an extraordinary manner. Forty-one years after the Nakba, and twenty-two years after the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, they decided, collectively, to become self-sufficient. They were following, it seems, the dictum of Gibran Khalil Gibran: “Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave, eats a bread it does not harvest, and drinks a wine that flows not from its own winepress.” The Sahuris were thus challenging their own nation, which drank and ate from those who had colonized its destiny.

The people of Bayt Sahur, who in 1989 did not exceed few thousand in number, decided to boycott the Israeli civil administration of the West Bank. At the time, the civil administration was collecting taxes, regulating permits for work and travel, and controlling health care, education, and public works. All features of daily life were under its control: the granting of work permits, car registrations, driving licenses, and trade permits. Even being granted a phone line was conditional on the good behavior of the applicant. Applicants who were perceived as politically active in opposition to Israeli rule, even in a symbolic manner, were denied services and rights, and had to enter into protracted negotiation with the civil administration in order to obtain their permits. Bayt Sahur became a source of constant irritation to the Israeli authorities, challenging not only the rule of the civil administration, but the army itself. Yitzhak Rabin, who had threatened to crush the intifada by force, issued special directives aimed at Bayt Sahur. Tax collectors were given wide latitude to exact the most extreme measures against the civilian population. The movement of civil disobedience retaliated by urging people to hand in their IDs to the army and the civil administration. The Israeli establishment panicked, seeing in Bayt Sahur the beginning of a loss of political control over the entire civilian population in the West Bank and Gaza.

Bayt Sahur became the vanguard of the Palestinian rebellion. It surpassed the national

movement in other regions, developing a new language of resistance. It created popular committees to replace the services of the civil administration, appropriating its power and placing it in the hands of the people. These initiatives were at the core of United National Leadership of the Intifada. They developed new mechanism of protest leading to a national movement of civil disobedience. The movement's creativity was most visible in daily forms of defiance. These included organizing popular neighborhood education in response to the closing of schools and colleges; arranging local guards to protect stores from army incursions; boycotting taxes; and transforming home gardens into vegetable farms (homestead agriculture). The general aim was to replace the hegemonic presence of the Israeli economy and commodities with locally produces goods and services.

One element of this resistance was the boycott of Israeli food products, including Tnuva brand milk and dairy products. Shomali's documentary film, *The Wanted 18*, uses this story to recall a crucial landmark of Palestinian resistance in the twentieth century. In order to maintain their boycott of Israeli dairy products, the residents of Bayt Sahur organized their own dairy, comprising eighteen cows. In an attempt to break the boycott, the Israelis declared Bayt Sahur's independent dairy a threat to national security. When Israelis came to confiscate the cows, however, they were unable to find them. The Sahuris had secreted the "fugitive" cows to different locations around the town, offering them refuge from the Israeli military. The army and the state of colonial occupation became a laughing stock as soldiers, fully equipped with their tanks, jeeps, and guns, were seen chasing after the cows brought by the town to ensure the supply of milk for children.

Interestingly, the moment recreated by Amer Shomali in his film is one that he himself did not witness. During the first intifada, Shomali was a ten-year-old living in a refugee camp in Syria. He was able nevertheless to recreate the intifada narratives through a creative mix of animation and interviews with participants.

At the end of the film, my nine-year-old daughter Yara began to interrogate me. "Daddy, when are we going to see a new intifada?" I am certain that little Yara's question was also asked by an older Yara, Amer's wife – after whom he named one of the "leading" cows in the animated film. It is also a question being asked by the more than one thousand audience members at the film's premiere on 31 October 2014 in Ramallah and Jerusalem. Many of them were witnesses to the Bayt Sahur movement of civil disobedience during the first intifada; some were survivors of the Nakba in 1948; some had come through the Beirut siege of 1982; most of them were here during the 2002 invasion of the West Bank; and virtually all of them experienced the recent war on Gaza. All are asking the same question, not only out of a nostalgic impulse, but out of a conviction that the Israeli presence, that of an expansionist settler-colonial intrusion throughout its sixty-six years, will continue on the same path unless it is challenged in the manner exemplified by Bayt Sahur.

Let us salute Amer Shomali and the people of Bayt Sahur, who have reminded the world – Palestinians included – of a model of insurrection that has deservedly become a legend.

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