

Unfree in Palestine: The Psychological and Cultural Anatomy of the Awe-Inspiring Palestinian Resistance

A Most Important Book for All Who Study National Liberations

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Global Research, November 03, 2014

[Dissident Voice](#) 2 November 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The new book by academics Nadia Abu-Zahra and Adah Kay — [Unfree in Palestine: Registration, Documentation and Movement Restrictions](#) (PlutoPress, 2013) — is a brilliant achievement, and a landmark in the study of both the ongoing Israel genocide in Palestine,¹ and national liberation struggles in general.

At first look the book is simply a well-researched academic treatise, with 693 endnotes, about administrative controls imposed on Palestinians by Israel. It is written in a sober style with great intellectual clarity.

As one enters its pages, however, *Unfree* becomes a far reaching analysis of the mechanics of a colonial state's eradication and domination of an indigenous population, that has parallels in other modern states such as Canada.² And it becomes an incisive description of the psychological and cultural anatomy of the awe-inspiring Palestinian resistance.

The unstated lessons of this book are transportable to any colonial nation state, and the picture is one that exposes the vicious nature of colonialism in the institutional instruments that are used. Despite the balanced and academic approach of the authors, readers will be horrified to learn the minutia of what Palestinian citizens continue to endure in "the only democracy in the Middle East", and to learn the history of Israel's colonialism through the lens of administrative controls.

How has and does Israel contravene international law? Let us count the ways...

... the Hague Regulations, the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Fourth Geneva Convention, various United Nations Resolutions, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

These legal documents run parallel to another story - that of the largest denationalisation project in modern history. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees describes Palestine as "by far the most protracted and largest of all refugee problems in the world today".² In Palestine, the tools of the census, the population registry, and residence permits effectively denationalised a nation. It is one of the greatest ironies that, as nationalism faded in Europe, it waxed in the Zionist movement to Palestine, and as

international law opposed denationalisation, denationalisation in Palestine rose ever higher. [p. 20]

One of the most profound chapters in *Unfree* is the one entitled “Coercion and Collaboration” (Chap. 4). The authors recognize that colonialists always depend on collaborators, and that any colonialist enterprise must implement a strategy for securing collaboration. Israel’s methods to coerce Palestinians to become collaborators in its genocide are violations of the explicit language of international statutes, and are inhuman, as the facts presented demonstrate. The authors always summarize by understating, such as:

The pressure to collaborate is one of the most difficult demands on Palestinians who either need IDs or need to retrieve them. This pressure permeates and is instrumental to the perpetuation of the system of control. [p. 83]

At times, the explicit descriptions of documented Israeli war and occupation crimes overpowers any human reader, such as:

In the first decade after 1948, “curfews became the most common method of controlling Palestinians”.⁶⁸ Perhaps the best-known incident in this period took place in 1956, in the village of Kafr Qassem. The Israeli army gave only a half hour’s notice to the village leader that a curfew would take effect at sunset. With no way of telling the villagers returning home at dusk, the villagers were surprised to be confronted by armed forces asking if they were from the village. When they said “yes”, 47 men, women, and children were shot dead, one by one, at close range, in the first hour of the curfew alone.⁶⁹

Defending the premeditated massacre, Brigadier Shadmi had told his forces, “A dead man is better than the complications of detention”. Shadmi and his men eventually served short prison sentences, were formally pardoned, and then promoted to leading roles in Palestinian municipalities and the Dimona nuclear facilities.⁷⁰ [p. 106]

There are descriptions of routine Israeli interferences with births, and with Palestinian health services in general:

Médecins du Monde reported in November 2003 that Israeli officials had been holding birth delivery kits at the airport for seven months (sent by the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA). The Ministry of Health in Nablus had been waiting for these kits since February 2003. In 2002, when Palestinian needs were greatest after Israeli attacks, Israeli officials at the airport kept medicines for eight months – until one third of them had expired – that had been sent from Germany, the US, and Italy to the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees.²³ [p. 129]

Some of the introductory summaries to chapters are among the most compelling academic statements on the treatment of Palestinians by Israel, such as:

In the spring of 2002, yellow and purple blossoms covered the fields and trees around Jenin, a Palestinian town named for the fertility of its earth, and known for the largest forested area in the West Bank. But that spring, the forest had a

different use. Israeli army forces were sweeping through the West Bank, taking over 8,500 Palestinians from their homes and workplaces and holding them captive in makeshift camps. Around Jenin, the army separated the men aged between about 18 to 50 from the children, women, and older men; then they took the men to the forest: handcuffed, blindfolded, in their underwear; they were forced to kneel or squat in the cold mud, and denied blankets, food, and water.¹

Soldiers had written the ID numbers on Palestinians' wrists with blue ink.² Then each man was photographed, interrogated with the use of a digital file containing details about his life, and had his ID number written on the back of the photo. Using plastic shackles – described by Amnesty International as a form of torture because they stop blood circulation and cut into the skin – to bind captives' hands, they blindfolded them, and kept them, “squatting, sitting or kneeling, not allowed to go to the toilet, and deprived of food or blankets during at least the first 24 hours”.³

Majdi Shehadeh was one of over 600 Palestinians taken from Tulkarem refugee camp:

“We weren't given any food, and when we asked for water they poured it over us. The handcuffs were tight and when the blindfolds were taken off on our arrival I saw some people with hands black and swollen.”⁴

By 3.30 a.m. they began to shake with cold. Elsewhere, in the Ramallah area, so many Palestinians were taken that the army forced them into a dried-up septic tank for lack of space in the prisons.⁵ After a day and a half, they were given their first food:

[F]or 10 people we got a tomato and an apple and we shared this. Every six people had a loaf of bread, but a very small one and 200 grams of yoghurt.⁶

From 1967 to 2006, Israel incarcerated almost 700,000 Palestinians, that is, nearly one-fifth of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza.⁷

[...]

Harvard professor Sara Roy, whose father carried an identification number imprinted on his arm in the Second World War, was one of those who noticed the connections between these so-called bureaucratic elements during the 2002 mass arrests:

“[W]hat does it mean when Israeli soldiers paint identification numbers on Palestinian arms; when young Palestinian men and boys of a certain age are told through Israeli loudspeakers to gather in the town square; when Israeli soldiers openly admit to shooting Palestinian children for sport; when some of the Palestinian dead must be buried in mass graves while the bodies of others are left in city streets and camp alleyways because the army will not allow proper burial; when certain Israeli officials and Jewish intellectuals publicly call for the destruction of Palestinian villages in retaliation for suicide bombings or for the transfer of the Palestinian population out of the West Bank and Gaza; when 46 per cent of the Israeli public favors such transfers and when transfer or expulsion becomes a legitimate part of popular discourse; when government officials speak of the “cleansing of the refugee camps”; and when a leading Israeli intellectual calls for hermetic separation between Israelis and Palestinians in the form of a Berlin Wall, caring not whether the Palestinians on the other side of the wall may starve to death as a result.¹⁰” [p. 160, 161]

Finally, a most fascinating section of *Unfree* explains the Palestinian spirit and culture of

resistance that is termed “*sumud*”. The following sequence of quotes from *Unfree* constitutes a description of *sumud*:

“We Palestinians have learned to lose without being defeated.³⁰ [p. 172]

Sumud is [...] described by Edward Said as “a way of turning presence into small-scale obduracy”,³³ in which sheer presence constitutes resistance; it contradicts “the natural behavior expected ... exodus and leaving”.³⁴ [p. 172]

The internationalisation of the term *sumud* is attributed to Shehadeh, who explains that, faced with the two options of “mute submission” or “blind hate”, he would choose the third: *sumud*.³⁵ [p. 173]

People in difficult conditions like Hani Amer often refer to their children, their families, and all people suffering collectively, as reasons for staying in place. [p. 173]

[Quoting Anthropologist Rema Hammami:]

“In terms of the society’s self-image, this is a society that for more than fifty years has lived in a constant state of dispossession. [It is] an incremental dispossession: it goes on, and on, and on. And the society is extremely strong in terms of survival, in terms of survival strategies. It’s very proud of that as well.

I mean, I think the self-image that most Palestinians have – we all have of ourselves – is that, “We are constant losers. We’re just people, and we just lose all the time. And we lose, but you know what? At the end of the day, they are not going to win. Because we’re stubborn. We’re stubborn bastards, right. I got nowhere else to go. This is my home. They can do what the hell they want. But I’m staying”.⁴¹ [p. 174]

Thus, *sumud* is a powerful and foundational explanation of the phenomenal Palestinian resistance. *Sumud* is a psychological alternative to suicidal physical resistance against a vastly more powerful invader, and to fleeing or accepting death. This alternative is made possible by being culturally embedded, and the feasibility of *sumud* is consistent with the “self-image-incongruence model of individual health” that I have recently described, based on known socio-medical research.³

There is one aspect of *Unfree* with which I do not agree. In their final chapter, the authors cast *sumud* as a technique of non-violent resistance. I do not see why the cultural and psychological basis for *sumud* would have to be inconsistent with a resistance that includes armed self-defence.

In other words, there is no reason, in my view, that *sumud* is at odds with an armed intifada. Indeed, it seems to me that *sumud* and armed rebellion are natural partners and supporters of each other, and that neither can survive without the other.

This is important because it is becoming more-than-apparent that nothing short of physical force on the ground will stop Israel in its “cleansing” and “grass mowing” projects. Certainly *sumud* alone, no matter how noble and admirable, is no match for years and decades more of business as usual in Palestine. Applying the myth of pacifism as a realistic counter to a genocidal maniac nation such as Israel would only ensure the murder of Palestinian society.

Nonetheless, that is a minor interpretational aspect, and *Unfree*, will be of great benefit to anyone interested in the truth about the so-called “Israel-Palestine conflict”, or interested in resistance struggles in history and in colonized regions (everywhere).

1. Note: The authors of *Unfree* do not qualify Israel colonialism as a “genocide”. It is not their goal to establish any legal judgements, but rather solely to factually describe the historic realities on the ground. [[↵](#)]
2. See: Rancourt, Denis G., [Israel’s Attempted Genocide Must Fail – Lessons from genocide in “Canada”](#), *Dissident Voice*, August 2, 2014. [[↵](#)]
3. See: Rancourt, Denis G., [Self-Image-Incongruence Theory of Individual Health](#), *Dissident Voice*, October 26, 2014. [[↵](#)]

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