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Palestinian Women's Everyday Resistance: Between Normality and Normalisation

By Sophie Richter-Devroe

Abstract

The paper traces Palestinian women's understandings, practices and framings of everyday resistance. Women's resistance acts consist of both materially-based survival strategies and various coping strategies at the ideational level. Focussing on the latter, this study investigates women's practices of travelling to create (a sense of) normal joyful life for themselves, their families, friends and community with the aim of shedding light upon the complex and mutually constitutive interplay between women's agency and the various social and political power structures. It is argued that Palestinian women, although framing their acts of crossing Israeli-imposed physical restriction as acts of resistance against the occupation, are in fact also seizing an opportunity to covertly challenge and trespass internal patriarchal forms of control.

Keywords: Palestine, Middle East, women's activism, resistance, gender

Introduction

All throughout the Israeli attacks on Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009 I tried in vain to get news from Marwan, a friend in Gaza City who had helped me two months earlier to arrange interviews for my research project.¹ I never received a reply. Then, on 18 January, the first day of a very fragile ceasefire, he suddenly filled my Inbox with several jokes, including the following: An Israeli arrives at London's Heathrow airport. As he fills out the entry form, the immigration officer asks him: "Occupation?" The Israeli promptly replies: "No, no, just visiting!" I was very happy to hear from Marwan, but his outpour of humour and jokes, coming from Gaza which had been under constant bombardment and attack for more than three weeks, left me somewhat confused. The "genocidal Israeli attack on Gaza" (Pappé, 2009), killed more than 1400 people,² left many more wounded, and a whole population emotionally and psychologically distressed (see Thabet et. al., 2009). The attacks completely destroyed civilian infrastructure services and brought Gaza "to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe" (Shlaim, 2009:1).

In response to my further inquiries about the situation – but also about his jokes – Marwan answered me in a later email:

...about Gaza and the Israeli aggression, believe me it was the worst days in my life, very difficult, ugly and horrible especially on the kids. Eight windows were broken in my flat. My wife and the kids were in the room and the glass

¹ The main empirical data for this paper was collected during 9 months field work for my PhD project in 2007, 2008 and 2009. I conducted ca. 70 semi-structured interviews, several focus groups and many more informal conversations with Palestinian women (and also few men) from the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip. Names of all informants are anonymised. I am thankful to the many Palestinian activists for offering me their time and help, to my doctoral supervisors, Prof. Nonneman and Dr. Ruba Salih for their constant support, and to Exeter University for financial support. I am grateful to the ISA E-Bulletin for granting me permission to reproduce parts of a paper published in spring 2009.

² Statistics on Palestinian casualties during the military operations vary. The Goldstone report questions the figure of 1166 and finds that NGO estimations (between 1387 and 1417) are more consistent (UN, 2009).

broke on them, but thank God nothing happened to them. Plus the sound of the explosions with the sound of the F16 made my kids, and even us, suffer until this moment. My kids now are scared of everything, even if the door [just] shuts strongly from the wind. [...] About [the question of] how we can still make jokes about Israelis and the occupation? - Because we have to, we have to live and yes, you can call it “*ṣumūd*”.

Ṣumūd, which translates as steadfastness, can be described as a form of infra-politics, or everyday (nonviolent) resistance (Scott, 1997).³ It is, as Marwan shows, the steadfast and stubborn insistence on carrying on with life and even seizing every opportunity to enjoy it, despite all odds. In contrast to the public, heroic and overt nonviolent resistance, which in Palestine is mostly associated with stone-throwing youth, *ṣumūd* is a more covert, often individual and non-organised everyday resistance. The term is used to refer to a wide variety of acts ranging from more materially-based survival strategies (such as continuing to tend occupied agricultural land or engaging in small-scale income-generating projects to provide livelihoods) through cultural resistance (by upholding traditions, folkloric songs or dresses and other customs), to social and ideational resistance (by, for example, maintaining hope and a sense of normality). As a strategy concerned particularly with preserving family and community life *ṣumūd* has been associated particularly with women’s daily struggles (Johnson, 2007:602-3; Peteet, 1991:153; Richter-Devroe, 2008:47-51).

Lama, a mother of five who was born and raised in Askari refugee camp in Nablus and now is a secretarial worker in one of Ramallah’s NGOs, explained her *ṣumūd* in the following way to me:

When we were students in school [...] me and my best female friends we used to talk a lot about our vision for the future for our children. How much you need to keep yourself together, so that you will stay strong, despite all the sadness around you. How much you need to remain steadfast.

Just as Marwan, Lama practices *ṣumūd* at the ideational level through keeping up hope, joy and a vision for the future. It is this form of *ṣumūd* that Palestinian women from various backgrounds continuously stressed to me: their everyday struggles to maintain a normal and – to the extent possible – enjoyable life for themselves, their children and families, *despite* destruction, frustration and death around them. Women organise wedding and other celebrations for their sons and daughters, despite economic hardship, they take their families to visit relatives and friends in other parts of the West Bank and they gather women through mainly informal networks to go on trips and picnics in the countryside, despite Israeli-imposed restrictions of mobility.⁴

The fact that Palestinians now overwhelmingly identify their pursuit of a normal joyful life as a form of everyday resistance and *ṣumūd* is crucial. Why at this moment in time do Palestinians (and, it seems, particularly women) put emphasis on keeping up hope, normalcy and a joyful life, and what can their changing understandings and

³ For a comprehensive study of *ṣumūd* as a Palestinian commemorative narrative, see Khalili (2007:99–112).

⁴ In June 2009 OCHA (2009) identified 613 closure obstacles to movement within the West Bank.

practices of *ṣumūd* tell us about developments in the nature of the Israeli occupation? This paper will focus on women's particular practice of going on trips to enjoy life, i.e. crossing physical (but also ideational) boundaries, with the aim of shedding light upon the functioning of systems of power in the Palestinian case in particular, and on the theorisation of resistance and power more broadly.

Following an introductory overview of theories on resistance and power, I present the cases of three Palestinian women who frame their pursuit of everyday pleasure through travelling as an act of resistance. Drawing on evidence provided in other scholarly accounts and as obtained during my field studies more broadly, my discussion of these three cases highlights that women's leisure trips to claim their right to an ordinary joyful life - although at first sight a mere tactic to temporarily circumvent Israeli control over physical space - can simultaneously function as a (more long-term) strategy, not only to resist Israeli occupation of Palestinians' ideational spaces, but also to challenge patriarchal control within Palestinian society.

Everyday Resistance – Theoretical Considerations

From the 1970s onwards the notion of everyday life increasingly became a focus in scholarly attempts to identify both the location and quality of transformative agency (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; de Certeau, 1984). The local and everyday in these writings was recognised as an important site that not only bears traces of power and policies, but also reacts to, challenges, and gets by and around these power imprints in various, often unrecognised, ways. Studying everyday social and political practices thus contributes to unsettling universalist conceptualisation of resistance and change by revealing alternative - but nevertheless political - modes of struggling. Scott (1997:323) puts it in the following way:

So long as we confine our conception of *the political* to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life, or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt, and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes.

Studies of the everyday thus highlight that resistance is not independent of systems of power, but rather is conditioned by them. Systems of power do not determine the form resistance takes, but they set the possibilities for distinct types of resistance to emerge. Realising this inter-dependence between resistance and power (or agency and structure) should lead one to “use resistance as a diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod, 1990:42). Studied in that way, Palestinian women's everyday struggles can reveal the ways in which the nature of the Israeli occupation and its interrelation with other structures of domination (class, patriarchy, Islamist, nationalist, etc.) has changed. In response to and interaction with these changes, women have devised various forms of resistance that lie in between the more conventional political acts of armed resistance or collective (nonviolent) protest, which one-dimensional mainstream accounts claim to be all there is to Palestinian resistance.

By turning the questions on its head and asking not primarily about everyday resistance, but rather about what distinct understandings, framings and acts of resistance reveal about shifts in the matrix of power relations, one can also avoid falling into the trap of romanticising women's everyday resistance as definite signs of freedom and trajectories for change (Abu Lughod, 1990:42). Rather than devaluing women's everyday resistance as irrelevant and a-political or heroifying it as an unquestionably emancipatory act, more nuanced ways of dealing with their transformative potentials are needed. For an analysis of women's practices of crossing physical and ideational restrictions to enjoy life, two more recent comments following Scott's original conceptualisation of everyday resistance are particularly important: the notion of "quiet encroachment" (Bayat, 1997) and of "accommodating protest" (MacLeod, 1992).

Bayat (1997) has found Scott's everyday resistance paradigm to be inapplicable for studying the "street politics" and "quiet encroachment" of the urban poor in Iran. He finds that their struggles cannot be described as defensive, hidden and marginally affecting systems of power only, but that they are offensive acts and often able to initiate changes in the lives of their actors. "Scott's implicit subscription to rational choice theory", according to Bayat, "would overlook the complexity of motives behind this type of struggle, where moral elements are mixed with rational calculations" (6). Bayat draws attention to the meaning and intent that actors might (or might not) attach to their acts. Are everyday acts that *unintentionally* affect social or political change also a form of resistance? As he explains, "the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" – a silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives" (7) often starts without much political meaning attached to it, but rather is justified on moral grounds.

MacLeod (1992) in a study on the new veiling in Cairo provides further insights into the everyday resistance tactics of women in particular. She argues that the controversial voluntary veiling adopted by educated and working Egyptian women is an ambiguous form of agency with which women both aim to alter and maintain the status quo:

For women, there is no clear-cut other to confront directly. Facing a layered and overlapping round of oppressors, women do not have the relative luxury of knowing their enemy. Relations with men, class relations, and the more distant realm of global inequalities all affect lower-middle-class women in Cairo, yet none is exclusively responsible for women's subordination. Women see a web of cross-cutting power relations, and an ambiguous symbolic solution like the veil that speaks on different political levels suits the nature of these overlapping power constraints (553).

MacLeod thus draws attention to women's multiple and often hybrid subjectivities, resulting in their ambiguous agency of "accommodating protest". Showing that one act of resistance can have different meanings, intentions and effects on different power structures she urges to conceptualise agency not only within the dichotomies of resistance and conformance, but rather to trace how most of the time one act is both conforming and subverting.

A study of Palestinian women's struggles to travel to enjoy life should thus not be caught up in dichotomous questions of whether these acts are either resisting or reinforcing the status quo. Rather, it should be concerned with tracing women's hybrid subjectivities and their ambiguous forms of agency: Which of the oppressive structures (patriarchal, class, nationalist, religious, occupation, etc.) do women accommodate and which might they challenge? Against which do they (claim to) target their acts and onto which might they (intentionally or unintentionally) be "quietly encroaching"?

In sum, this theoretical discussion on resistance and power has established that women's everyday struggles, although mostly quiet and largely unrecognised, are political acts. They should, however, not be hastily romanticised as necessarily being fully transformative in intent or outcome, but rather be used as a diagnostic of power. Women's everyday resistance acts are ambiguous: they might be justified as targeting certain power structures, while in fact "quietly encroaching" onto other forms of control and they might be both challenging and supporting different forms of domination at the same time.

With this framework in mind, I now present a number of specific cases of Palestinian women's everyday resistance acts of travelling to pursue normalcy and pleasure in life. I will do so by providing a short background for each of the women, and their specific practice and understanding of everyday resistance.

Palestinian Women Crossing Boundaries: The Cases

Najla

Najla works as a trainer for women's groups in Ramallah. Every Thursday at around 4pm after work she embarks on the unpredictable journey with a shared taxi from Ramallah to her home village near Bethlehem. Since Palestinians with a West Bank ID like her cannot travel the direct way from Ramallah to Bethlehem through Jerusalem (which would take around an hour) she takes the often make-shift roads that wind through the craggy valley called *Wadi Nar*, "The Valley of Fire", which can, depending on traffic and checkpoints, take up to four hours.

When not travelling back home Najla uses the weekends to visit friends. There is hardly a weekend that she stays in Ramallah, because, as she explained to me, "I need to see my friends and enjoy life. I refuse to be locked up here in Ramallah and just spend my life working. I go, even if there are checkpoints and it takes long. I need to have a change of scenery (*taghyir al-jaww*) from time to time." Her expression *taghyir al-jaww* ('a change of scenery', *lit.* 'a change of air/climate') is very common – it captures well the feeling of being stuck in one place, always breathing the same air, with nothing new or exciting happening. Her story shows that even a short trip within the West Bank constitutes a struggle of regaining control over land and living space.

Amal

Amal is a mother of four – two boys and two girls – in her 40s. She used to live with her husband in one of East Jerusalem's neighbourhoods that were sealed off from the city when the wall was constructed. In order not to lose their Jerusalem IDs she and her family were forced to leave their family home and move to a rented flat in Beit Hanina, an area of East Jerusalem on the other 'Jerusalem' side of the wall. Amal used to be an active member of the Communist party, but now she is no longer interested in

political activism: “I stopped. There is absolutely no point these days. Now I prefer to work as an individual, as Amal. I can, for example, go and treat sick people or help in any other way as an individual – but not in a collective, not in a political party.”

Amal likes to enjoy life. With her female friends she organises regular meetings and trips to different parts of the West Bank, a great deal of which is spend with eating, telling stories of the past and laughing about husbands (who are not allowed to join). “When I really want to relax, however,” Amal told me one day, “then I take my book and go to the settlement nearby.” I was surprised to hear that – of all places – she chooses a settlement to enjoy life. Although Amal was not referring to the highly secured Israeli settlements in the West Bank (which are impossible for Palestinians to access), but to those inside Jerusalem, I still could not imagine how and why, as a Palestinian, it could be relaxing there and I wondered if it would not even be dangerous. She explained to me that she would wear sunglasses and a shirt with short sleeves, so that no one can recognise her as Palestinian. “They think I am a Jewish woman. I can sit there and read my book and no one bothers me. They have nice gardens and parks there. Where can I go here [in East Jerusalem]? We have nothing here, and even if I would find a bench somewhere people would look strangely at me.” Although the occupation has had strongly damaging and restricting effects on Amal’s life, she has decided to make the best of what there is, even if this means finding sneaky ways to gain access to spaces formally out of her reach and control.

Karima

Karima, a forceful and restless Christian woman in her 60s, is a long-term peace activist: “I see myself as the ambassador of peace and justice. I need to meet Israelis face-to-face to tell them about our suffering and what they do to us, so that they cannot escape their responsibility and guilt,” she told me after a joint Palestinian-Israeli women’s meeting in Haifa. As the Palestinian coordinator she had managed to secure travel permits for ca. 20 Palestinian women to go to Haifa for this workshop. When I joined the meeting on its last day, there was tension between the Palestinian women and the Israeli programme instructor. Most Palestinian women complained that the topic of the workshop (communication skills and self-empowerment) is irrelevant to their situation, that they felt patronised by the treatment of the Israeli instructor who, according to them, did not allow any discussion about everyday life under occupation. The Israeli instructor, however, criticised the Palestinian women for not taking the course seriously and for “just coming here to have fun.”

She was right. The Palestinian women did indeed come to Haifa to have fun. Hala, a university graduate, told me in her very im- (and ex-)pressive English:

I came to this meeting because I wanted to see Haifa and I wanted to take a break from my life in Bethlehem. Yes, you can write this in your research. I only came here to have fun. I have no problem saying that. But then – what sort of fun is that? It is not fun for me to come here and listen to her [the Israeli instructor’s] bullshit. It is much better for me if I speak to my Palestinian friends who understand the situation and who understand my feelings. There is no point to tell her anything about my life or about me.

When I met Karima a couple of weeks later in Bethlehem she immediately wanted to explain to me what had happened in Haifa. Staying true to her mission of confronting Israelis with reality, she replied back to the (non-present, of course) Israeli instructor:

Yes, we came here to enjoy! It is our right as Palestinians to also come here to Haifa to have fun. You stole our land [Karima's family is originally from Haifa], our water, our rights and our freedom. So the least we can do is to come here to our land, go to the beach and have fun. There is nothing wrong with that. Or do you really think I want to come here so that you can teach me how to communicate?

Karima thus added yet another layer to how women understand and frame their travel practices to enjoy life. She states that it is her *right* as Palestinian to use and enjoy those spaces now inside Israel.

All three stories provide different illustrations of how Palestinian women struggle to enjoy life through trips and gaining space. Najla's, Amal's and Karima's attempts to carry on with everyday life, by using and enjoying to the extent possible their fragmented and occupied living space provide important insights into their practical and discursive negotiating with changing systems of domination. It is here that Abu Lughod's (1990) call – to use resistance as a diagnostic of power – can guide the way to discovering shifts in the inter-workings of power and resistance in Palestine.

From “Suspension” to “Affirmation of Life”?

A thread that runs through all three women's stories is their struggle to find ways to enjoy life by changing and gaining space: *taghyīr al-jaww* ('a change of scenery', *lit.* 'a change of air/climate'). They state that it is their right to have fun and relax in life. They thus strive to keep up or reproduce a sense of normalcy and hope, despite the destruction, death and frustration they are caught in. Such an attempt to lead and provide for one's family an ordinary joyful life – and more importantly the framing of this struggle as an act of *ṣumūd* – is decidedly different to practices and understandings of resistance during the First Intifada.

In the First Intifada, Palestinian resistance was mainly collective in the form of strikes, mass demonstration or committee work. However, what ran in parallel to the overt public nonviolent resistance acts against Israeli occupation was a more covert everyday resistance, what Jean-Klein (2001) has described as “suspension of life.” In a process that Jean-Klein terms “self-nationalisation” people called upon each other to suspend everyday activities and joyful events. Wedding, religious, birthday or other celebrations needed to be stopped in order to affirm the abnormality of occupation. Time for normality and pleasure was to come only once independence had been gained. As one of Jean-Klein's informants clearly put it: “When we have our state, then we will have one big wedding procession!” (96).

Now, several years into the Second Intifada and with the prospects for peace- and state-building shattered, Palestinians have turned back to striving for everyday pleasure and normality (see Junka, 2006; Kelly, 2008). A redefinition of what constitutes resistance has taken place and certainly, by now, enjoying life and finding hope, despite

the hopeless situation, is considered by many Palestinians a part of resistance and *ṣumūd*.⁵ This is not to claim that an act like, for example, Amal's of sneaking into a Jerusalem settlement to relax, will change the status quo of the Israeli occupation. Rather, the crucial question to ask is: How has the matrix of power relations changed since the First Intifada so that women now regard travel and everyday joy as a form of *ṣumūd*?

Resisting (the Effects of) Israeli Settler-Colonial Policies

One theme that dominates women's struggles is that of space and land. Several scholars have described Israeli policies of spatial control as one of "enclavisation" (Falah, 2005), "bantustanization" (Farsakh, 2005) or "creeping apartheid" (Yiftachel, 2005).⁶ The spatial dismemberment of the Palestinian community has had severe damaging impact on Palestinian economy (Roy, 2004), society (Johnson, 2006) as well as political organisation and action (Taraki, 2008). Israeli "spacio-cidal" policies, i.e. the systematic dispossession, occupation and destruction of Palestinian living space, is made possible "by exercising the state of exception and deploying bio-politics to categorize Palestinians into different groups, with the aim of rendering them powerless" (Hanafi, 2009:106). Such policies have thus secured not only complete domination over the land, but also over the smallest details and fine grains of Palestinian everyday life. Against this background, where and how can Palestinian resistance be practiced? Mbembé (2003) has argued that, since Israeli "late-modern colonial occupation" (25) reduces Palestinians to "living dead" (40), the space left for Palestinian agency is their mere control over their own death; the possibilities of resistance become reduced to the act of martyrdom.

The struggles of Amal, Najla and Karima (and many more women I interviewed), however, contradict Mbembé's assertion and confirm Hanafi's (2009) conclusion that Israeli practices of physical and spatial domination and subjectification are met by acts of resistance other than violence and martyrdom. They show that resistance does not necessarily have to be violent, nor does it necessarily have to be public, collective, or confrontational. Rather, theirs is a struggle to indirectly and quietly re-appropriate and redefine their occupied, fragmented and dispossessed spaces. Each woman has their own way to deal with the spatial dismemberment and destruction of their living space.

Najla's defiance "not to be locked up in Ramallah" and instead embark on unpredictable trips through the West Bank, despite checkpoints and closures, is an example of what by now, according to Hammami (2004), has become one of the most common forms of Palestinian *ṣumūd* against the occupation: "getting there" (26).⁷ This new meaning of *ṣumūd* is decidedly different from its original nationalist understanding. In the 1970s *ṣumūd*, institutionalised through financial support from Arab states, denoted a refusal to leave the land and as such has been criticised as a form of passive non-resistance (Tamari, 1991:61). Now it stands for something more proactive. "Its new meaning, found in the common refrain, "*al-hayat lazim tistamirr*" ("life must go on") is about resisting immobility, refusing to let the army's lockdown of one's community

⁵ Contributions in Teefelen (2007), for example, predominantly relate the concept of *ṣumūd* to Palestinians' searching for hope, joy and a normal life.

⁶ Israeli practices of spatial control are rooted in and informed by the Zionist myth of 'a land without people for a people without land' (see Hanafi, 2009:119) and thus part of Israel's long-term policies of unilateral separation and Palestinian territorial dismemberment (Falah, 2005:1341).

⁷ Palestinian resistance is not only practiced through "getting there," but also "getting around" and, more importantly, "getting by" the occupation (Allen, 2007).

preclude one from reaching school or work” (Hammami, 2004:27). Najla’s insistence to not only stay on her land but also to travel this land and use it proactively, to breathe the different airs of this land, is an example of this emergent and changing understanding of *ṣumūd*.

To re-appropriate space for their own gains, Amal and Karima go even a step further in their defiance of Israeli spatial control. For them, the air they want to breathe is not confined to ‘what is left’ after the Oslo ‘peace’ process. Their tactic to make use of those spaces now formally out of their reach and control, however, must – in order to succeed – take a more covert and cunning form than Najla’s straightforward insistence to “get there.” Both adopt a tactic of disguise: Amal quite literally by dressing up in a short-sleeved shirt and sun-glasses (so as not to be recognised as Palestinian), and Karima by enrolling in the occupier’s project (to obtain the travel permit). To better grasp their acts de Certeau’s (1984) notion of tactics of everyday life is helpful:

The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansion, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. [...] it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.” Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. (xix)

Going to an Israeli settlement to relax, or to Haifa to the beach, or across the West Bank to visit friends and family is not an act with which women can, or believe they can, permanently end Israeli occupation. It is, as de Certeau demonstrates, a tactic to temporarily subvert established power configurations. Gains are temporary, small and personal victories only: Amal might be able to enter the space where she can relax this time, but the next day she must negotiate access all over again. As such, “affirmation of life” tactics differ starkly from the First Intifada “suspension of life” strategies: they are practiced predominantly on the individual (rather than collective) and ideational (rather than action-oriented, practical) level. Amal sees “absolutely no point” in participating in collective political initiatives, Karima insists on her “right as Palestinian to come to Haifa to have fun,” and Lama, quoted at the outset of this paper, stresses that as a mother she has to resist Israeli occupation, by “keeping herself together,” “staying steadfast” and providing a future vision for her children

Since Palestinians can never predict the outcome of their acts, nor the form that Israeli arbitrary and brutal reprisal might take, they now predominantly focus “on the affirmation of life in the immanent present rather than in a future that for [them] appears indefinitely delayed” (Junka, 2006:426). Women’s everyday struggles therefore are mainly individual and short-term; they concentrate on the ‘here and now’ and on seizing every opportunity to maintain (a sense of) ordinary and joyful life. With their tactics women do not aim at effecting long-term political change. As the disproportionately weaker actor they cannot realistically revert Israeli policies of spatial control; they can only trick the much more powerful Israeli authorities, gain access to ‘their’ space and subvert the power relations from within by making use of it for their own good.

Yet, it is in tricking the occupier that they find joy and that their dignity is maintained: “In these combatants’ stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space. We see the tactical and joyful dexterity of the mastery of a technique” (de Certeau, 1984:18). The cunning act of subversion, however temporary and individual, brings joy. Women’s transgression of physical and ideational boundaries does not claim to intent to change the material reality of the occupation and women are aware that their victories over Israeli control are only temporary. This temporary gain over the Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies, however, does subvert, at least, some of the *effects* that these policies intended to have on Palestinian bodies. Junka (2006) argues in her study on the politics of Gaza Beach:

If what is at stake in Palestine today is the very possibility of life itself and the ability of Palestinians to exercise control over their colonised bodies and spaces of everyday life, then the affirmation not only of death but also of life and pleasure becomes a meaningful aspect of the Palestinian struggle. (422)

Her conclusion also holds true for Palestinian women relaxing and enjoying life in a Jerusalem settlement, on Haifa beach or with friends and family in the West Bank. Palestinians’ “affirmation of life” during the Second Intifada (Junka, 2006) thus stands in stark contrast to their “suspension of life” during the First Intifada (Jean-Klein, 2001). Enjoying life is a tactic to subvert the effects that Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies intended to have on Palestinian bodies and agency: to render them powerless (Hanafi, 2009).

“Spacio-cidal” policies and brutal arbitrary force with which Israeli forces have aimed to reduce Palestinians to “living dead” have thus been countered not only by Palestinians taking control over death through martyrdom, as Mbembé (2003) writes, but mostly by other, much more covert tactics, one of which is to keep up hope, laughter and joy. In his earlier book, Mbembé (2001) questions the transformative power of humour and ridicule: “Those who laugh, whether in the public arena or in the private domain, are not necessarily bringing about the collapse of power or even resisting it” (110). In his view humour cannot be considered a form of resistance since it does not radically alter the oppressor’s material base. However, in accordance with more recent literature,⁸ the findings of my field studies show that Palestinian women’s pursuit of everyday pleasure and normalcy does not aim to and cannot change material realities. Since controlling the occupied, fragmented and dispossessed *physical* space is impossible, Palestinian women stress the need to maintain their own alternative *ideational* spaces, by insisting on their right to an ordinary life including its pleasures, joys and laughters.

Resisting Patriarchal Control

Women’s struggles are not only directed against and restricted by Israeli control, they are also shaped by (and shaping) internal Palestinian power structures. During the First Intifada, for example, women did not necessarily choose but rather were *expected* to suspend enjoyment and sacrifice their social life for the national cause. Communal, nationalist and Islamist leadership played an important role in enforcing and policing people’s adherence to the resistance and the policy of suspension (Junka, 2006:423).

⁸ Recent studies that deal with Palestinian’s everyday resistance include Hammami (2004), Junka (2006), Allen (2007), Johnson (2007) and Kelly (2008),

Resistance still remains the main explanatory paradigm for Palestinian politics. Yet, the increased spatial and political fragmentation of the Palestinian community, in combination with the violent attacks that Israeli forces carry out against any form of collective resistance, has reduced not only collective acts but also collective understandings of resistance. Palestinian political culture is increasingly characterised by a plurality of contradictory and competing narratives and forms of resistance. Defining (and practicing) certain acts as resistance, and branding others as collaboration or surrender, becomes a way to assert political and social power. The Second Intifada, for example, was not just launched in resistance to Israeli occupation, but the form it took of public, action-oriented and predominantly armed resistance was also a way to oppose and render the final blow to the negotiation paradigm symbolised by the Oslo 'peace' process.

Internal fragmentation of Palestinian political struggle has certainly changed the matrix of power relations that enable and constrain women's agency, and it might be argued that lack of unity has opened up new spaces for women to define and practise more individual 'inbetween' forms of resistance. Amal's, Karima's and Najla's acts of crossing physical and ideational boundaries to enjoy life and especially their framing of these acts as a form of resistance indicate that women have succeeded in seizing the confusion and struggle over resistance at the national level to "quietly encroach" onto other forms of domination. By claiming that it is their right to have fun they frame their acts as political resistance against Israeli occupation and thus stay true to the meta-frame of resistance. Yet, in fact, their acts challenge patriarchal forms of control exercised by secular-nationalist, religious-political and other actors at national, family and community level.

Bayat (2007) has argued that "anti-fun-damentalism" stems less from the Islamists' fear that the more spontaneous and individual nature of what he terms "the politics of fun" could disrupt moral norms, but rather that it might undermine their own regime of power and authoritative voice on social conduct. Controlling what counts as resistance and when or why people – and particularly women – are allowed to have fun, pleasure and entertainment thus is nothing specific to Islam or Islamist groups, but rather is an attempt undertaken by most political groups to consolidate political and social power. Illustrating his argument with the example from a secular setting where militants from the al-Aqsa Martyr Brigade interrupted a music concert in Nablus claiming that joy and entertainment would disrupt public commitment to the cause and to (the Brigade's understanding and practice of) resistance, Bayat concludes that the "militias' apprehension of "happiness" follows the same logic of power – fear from a rival frame of mind that could ultimately undercut their authority" (456). Women insisting on their right to joy and entertainment thus negotiate with and challenge both Islamist and secular political discourses on fun and social conduct.

Additionally, they also resist patriarchal and social control at family and community level. The suspension of activities such as evening strolls, family visit, or women's coffee circles during the First Intifada restricted particularly women's mobility and social life. Women's leisure trips are often organised with a group of female friends and are a way of keeping intact and strengthening women's informal networks. The general trend to return to a resistance paradigm that calls for the "affirmation of life" has thus been seized by women as an opportunity to challenge patriarchal restrictions,

increase their mobility and revive informal networks, a crucial source of their social and political power.

While most Palestinians have shifted their understanding and practice of resistance from “suspension” to “affirmation of life” the precise forms that women’s practices of “affirmation of life” can take vary widely. Women are not free to choose; their agency is still limited by different and contradictory resistance discourses which vary according to class, age, political party affiliation, the spatial categories of town-camp-village, as well as between local communities.⁹ While, for example, the urban middle classes in Ramallah (but also Bethlehem or Jerusalem) consider the pursuit of a normal joyful life a form of resistance (Taraki, 2008), the authoritative resistance discourse in places such as Nablus, Qalqilya or Tulkarm, takes inspiration from the First Intifada paradigm of “suspension of life”. Najla’s travelling within the West Bank is broadly accepted among Palestinians as a form of *ṣumūd* of “getting there,” but Amal’s and Karima’s acts of using Israeli space for their own ends without directly challenging the power relations between occupier and occupied, might not be. Particularly, participation in joint Palestinian-Israeli projects is often branded as normalising the abnormal situation of the occupation.¹⁰ Consequently the extent to which Palestinian women succeed in gaining social power by framing their crossing of patriarchal physical and normative boundaries as an act of resistance against Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies still crucially depends on their individual context.

Conclusion

Palestinian women’s pursuit of normalcy and joy through travelling and their framing of their acts as forms of everyday resistance highlight the growing hybridisation of their subjectivities. Women are negotiating with and through a multitude of intersecting and quickly changing power relations. The specificity of Palestinian women’s struggles, however, is that although they – like their Egyptian sisters – face a “layered and overlapping round of oppressors” (MacLeod, 1992:553), they *do* have the ‘luxury’ of knowing their enemy. To gain social approval for their acts of travelling to enjoy life, they frame them as resistance to that clear-cut other, Israel, rather than to social control. By demanding their right to have fun they claim to be resisting the Israeli occupation and accommodate their acts within the newly emerging interpretations of *ṣumūd* as “affirmation of life.” Yet, besides subverting physical and ideational forms of Israeli control, women going on leisure trips also transgress patriarchal restrictions at national, community and family level.

The fact that women’s acts of *ṣumūd* centre on the two notions of space and “affirmation of life” points to shifting (inter-related) external and internal power constellations.

Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies of occupation, dispossession and fragmentation of Palestinian living spaces not only target physical space, but also the fine grain and mere possibility of an ordinary joyful life. With their everyday tactics of crossing Israeli-imposed physical borders women cannot permanently change the reality of the

⁹ Israeli occupation and spatial control have by no means brought about a relaxation of patriarchal control but have had widely varying effects on Palestinian social and gender relations (see Johnson, 2006).

¹⁰ For comprehensive discussions of joint Palestinian-Israeli projects and the charge of normalisation against them see Andoni (2003), Richter-Devroe (2009) or Sharoni (1995:131-152).

occupation, but only temporarily and individually subvert power relations. On an ideational level, however, acts of trespassing physical borders to enjoy life might be a more long-term strategy to resist the *effects* of Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies by creating and maintaining own alternative cultural spaces.

On an intra-Palestinian level, women have seized the moment of the emergence of multiple understandings and practices of resistance to formulate and live – albeit in different ways and degrees – their own more individual forms of resistance. By insisting that it is their right to lead a normal joyful life, women frame their acts of trespassing as political resistance against Israeli occupation and thus stay true to the overall meta-frame. Yet, the apparently unintended ‘side-effect’ of their defying Israeli “spacio-cidal” policies is their “quiet encroachment” onto internal secular and religious political and social forms of male domination. With their everyday resistance acts Palestinian women thus challenge and bargain, practically and discursively, with material and ideational patriarchal power structures in their own society.

When scholarly inquiring into whether or not, or to what extent their acts have potential to bring about social or political change, one should, however, not lose sight of the bigger picture: that Palestinian women strategise and act within a context of pervasive and omnipresent Israeli control. In such a setting, maintaining an ordinary joyful life remains for most women the only meaningful, only available, and often the most urgent thing to do.

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