

Interpolating Gazans' non-violence
Responsibilities in the academy and the media
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Published in:
Partecipazione e Conflitto

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Pace, M., Shehada, M., & Abu Mustafa, Z. (2021). Interpolating Gazans' non-violence: Responsibilities in the academy and the media. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 14(2), 584-603. <http://sibaese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/24248/20222>

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Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 14(2) 2021: 584-603

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v14i2p584

Published 15 July, 2021

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERPOLATING GAZANS' NON-VIOLENCE: RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE ACADEMY AND THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the creation of Israel in 1948 its strategies of suppressing Palestinian resistance reveal a conscious scheme of slow elimination of the natives. What concerns us in this article is that, in light of all Israel's intentional violence, episodes of Palestinian non-violence do not capture and sustain the world's attention in the way that violent acts do. In order to fill this gap, and conceptually, we draw upon the rich works of Puar and de Sousa Santos, as well as others, to show how Gazans' heterogeneous ontologies and experiences with Israel's settler colonialism have, over the years, shaped a multiplicity of strategies for resistance. Empirically, we draw upon ethnographic observations and interviews conducted with Gazan Great March of Return (GRM) protesters to analyze their strategies of non-violence. We conclude that, in spite of the lack of sustained focus by academics and the media (in general) on the embedded resilience of Palestinians to Israel's settler colonial regime, and in spite of Israel's targeting of resistance itself, Palestinians' resolve remains as alive as ever in pursuit of their right to have rights. Our analysis in turn has implications for how the media and the academy interpolate and write about non-violence.

KEYWORDS: resilience, Gaza, Great March of Return, non-violence, resistance

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1. Introduction

Non-violent Palestinian resistance has a long and rich history dating back to the early 1900s, that is, well before the creation of Israel in 1948. During Ottoman times – but particularly during the British Mandate – Palestinian resistance to British colonial control (and support of Zionist aspirations in historic Palestine) was predominantly non-violent. Strikes, protests, diplomatic and political petitions, as well as other forms of civil disobedience, characterised such opposition and challenges to colonial rule, exemplified through, for instance, the Palestinian (Arab) Revolt of 1936-9 (Qumsiyeh 2011).

With the creation of Israel in 1948 and with increasing recognition – through the passage of time – that externally-imposed and half-hearted diplomatic initiatives were not going to lead to the Palestinian Right of Return, Palestinians increasingly perceived armed struggle as the only way to secure their rights (Masalha 2012). In the years after the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, Palestinian grassroots movements turned to a combination of non-violent as well as violent resistance.

The 1973 Yom Kippur war was followed by more radical Palestinian armed struggle, however, the 1987 Intifada saw Palestinians undertake non-violent actions such as building barricades and roadblocks, burning tires, staging sit-ins, demonstrating, participating in strikes and other civil disobedience strategies. As the uprising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) persisted, Israel responded with oppressive violence. Israeli-Palestinian violence intensified during the Second Intifada – which grew out of the collapse of the ‘peace process’ in 2000. While Israel used deadly force,¹ Palestinians responded with suicide bombings, rocket attacks and sniper fire (Abufarha 2009). From 2001, Hamas started firing improvised projectiles, called Al-Qassam rockets, towards Israel. After Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005, Hamas fired a few projectiles in symbolic celebration. Since June 14, 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and assumed both roles of government and resistance, it became gradually keen to spare Gaza an all-out war. Consequently, rockets have become a deterrence and defense arsenal rather than an offensive mechanism. This is reflected in a decline in rocket firing since 2008, when Hamas accepted the Froman-Amayreh ceasefire Agreement, which Israel rejected (Ettinger 2008). However, the split that ensued between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank had severe repercussions. From 2007, Israel imposed a land, sea and air blockade on Gaza while it engaged in three major wars with Hamas in 2008-9, 2012 and 2014.

As we argue in this article, this context resulted in armed and non-violent resistance in Gaza becoming more experimental, incremental, interactive, contextual and largely dependent on provoking a response from the international community (see also the contribution by Stefanini in this Special Issue). As conditions in Gaza deteriorated, in March 2018, tens of thousands of Gazans began weekly Friday peaceful protests called the “Great March of Return” (or GRM) at the border fence with Israel – symbolic of the settler colonial violence imbued in Israel’s siege on Gaza. The protests, led by independent activists, were intended to be non-violent and included children, women and elderly raising Palestinian flags and singing national songs (Kuttab 2018). Israeli forces, however, responded with deadly and excessive force. In reaction, demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails, hurled stones with slings, burned tires – to distract Israeli snipers – or sought to breach the fence. Israel responded with live fire with its forces using tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and live ammunition mostly by snipers, killing 214 Palestinians, including 46 children and injuring over 36,100, including nearly 8,800 children (OCHA 2020).

What we observe from the above historical trajectory is that Israel’s strategies and tactics of suppressing Palestinian resistance – in order to entrench settler colonial rule – reveal a conscious scheme of slow elimination of the natives, particularly Palestinians in Gaza (Roy, 1999). In parallel to this deliberate

¹ Including the shooting of over 1.3 million bullets on the first days of the Intifada. See Pedatzur (2004).

strategy, and given the long history of non-violence in Palestinian resistance to colonial rule, what concerns us is that, in light of Israel's intentional violence, episodes of Palestinian non-violence do not capture and sustain the world's attention in the way that violent acts do. So, while Israel continues with its plan to render impotent any Palestinian resistance, international observers – whether in academia or in the media – become complicit by not shedding sustained light on Palestinians' embedded belief in non-violence² and in their quest for their right to have rights (Hamacher and Mendoza-de Jesus 2014).

In order to fill this gap, we structure this article as follows. Firstly and conceptually, we briefly review and draw upon the rich work of Taiaiake and Cornthassel (2005), Alkhalili (2017), Bhungalia (2018), Coulthard (2014), Daigle (2014), Puar (2015), de Sousa Santos (2014) and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2005), to show how Gazans' heterogeneous ontologies and experiences with Israel's settler colonialism have, over the years, shaped a multiplicity of strategies for survival, resurgence, resistance, and refusal.³

Secondly, and empirically, we draw upon 11 interviews conducted with Gazan GRM protesters.⁴ It is important to emphasise that physical access to Gaza is extremely challenging (see Human Rights Watch 2017a). Moreover, although we attempted to secure a balanced gender profile amongst our interviewees we ended up with 2 female and 9 male respondents. This was mainly due to interviewees' reluctance to share their thoughts on the subject from a distance/over the phone/via Skype in general and amongst female respondents in particular. Therefore, our interviews need to be considered in light of the fact that the majority of protests' organisers were male as were the majority of casualties (Médecins Sans Frontières 2020; UN 2020). Interviews were conducted in Arabic by co-author Ziad Abu Mustafa (6 interviews) and Muhammad Shehada (5 interviews) – both originally themselves from Gaza, between September 2019 and July 2020.⁵ We did succeed in ensuring a valid and representative sample of Gazans in terms of age (ranging between 26 and 72), location (respondents were from central Gaza/Al-Dharaj, Khan Younis, Rafah, al-Shati refugee camp, al-Zahra) and political affiliation (moderate, critical, Hamas affiliated, Fatah affiliated, independent) as well as socio-economic situation (employed, unemployed, retired, students, activists). Interviewees were identified and recruited as a result of their active presence during the protests. Others were selected through a snowball effect, that is, where existing research subjects helped us recruit further interviewees from among their acquaintances. By combining these two methods we addressed the limitations of the latter by ensuring a level of control over our sampling method, representativeness of our sample while minimising any potential bias. In conclusion, our key argument here is that in spite of the lack of sustained focus by academics and the media (in general) on the embedded resilience of Palestinians to Israel's settler colonial regime, and in spite

² Of course, there are exceptions. See for instance Abu-Nimer (2004), Pearlman (2012) and Zaru (2008) amongst others. Although these authors, and more specifically Pearlman (2012), would agree that violent and non-violent strategies do often co-exist at the same time, our point here is that such works are not part of a sustained and consistent focus on Palestinian belief in non-violence.

³ This literature we draw upon is by no means an exhaustive one. Specifically, in the Palestinian context there is a vibrant discussion on the choices groups make between violence and non-violence that shed important light on the dynamics at play in contexts of conflict and ensuing mobilization. See for example, El Kurd (2020), Jamal (2019), Pearlman (2012) and Zeira (2019), amongst others. Al Shabaka is also prolific in the production of articles, policy papers and podcasts examining the challenges and obstacles for Palestinians' continuous use of non-violent means of protest. See, for example, Erakat (2019).

⁴ With the exception of one interviewee, who did not participate in the GRM.

⁵ Co-author Ziad Abu Mustafa was physically in Gaza and met protesters during the march. Moreover, as a child and a student he observed the first Intifada. During the Second Intifada, he worked with international and Palestinian newspapers and observed the manner and extent of coverage of events by journalists on the ground with some being trapped within the "orders" of their editors, while others shared their sympathies with the Palestinian struggle.

of Israel's targeting of (particularly non-violent) resistance, Palestinians' resolve remains as alive as ever in pursuit of their right to have rights.

2. Israel's Settler Colonialism and Palestinians' Resistance Strategies

The academic debate on resistance to settler colonialism is a vibrant one. Taiaiake and Cormtassel (2005) present five pathways for indigenous action against a community's colonial reality, namely that indigenous people must: 1) reconnect with the land of their heritage; 2) protect their indigenous language(s); 3) "transcend the controlling power of the many and varied fears that colonial powers use to dominate and manipulate [them] into complacency and cooperation with its authorities"; 4) aim to be as self-sufficient as possible in terms of food, clothing, shelter and medical needs; and 5) foster a decolonizing strategy through community solidarity across generations. In her work on the *mushaa'* – the Arabic term for "commons", which was a prominent system of land tenure in the Levant – Noura Alkhalili (2017) shows how the once peasants who practiced *mushaa'* on their lands and who have, as a result of Israel's settler colonial regime, become landless, have reinvented themselves as expert contractors of the remaining commons. She highlights the dynamics of seizure of these commons by Palestinian refugees as a form of resistance against Israel's control. From her part, Lisa Bhungalia (2018) documents how indigenous peoples refuse to be completely consumed by settler colonial practices aiming at their social death, thus rendering the colonizer's efforts an enduring failure. By social death Bhungalia refers to the manner in which Israel takes a calculated interest in maximum destruction of Gazan bodies, or what Mbembe (2003: 30) refers to as "death worlds" through the fabrication of a pretext for its offensive(s) in the Gaza Strip.

Coulthard (2014) brings the writings of Karl Marx and Patrick Wolfe together to provide a rich account of Canadian practices of settler colonialism in terms of shifting forms of recognition. By the "politics of recognition," Coulthard refers to "the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to "reconcile indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler-state sovereignty via the accommodation of indigenous identity claims in some form of renewed legal and political relationship with the Canadian state" (2014: 3). Coulthard cautions us that we cannot easily divorce such forms of recognition from ongoing settler-colonial efforts aimed at acquiring indigenous territories. Such granting of rights to land to indigenous peoples simply serve to slightly rearrange colonial structures of power, while leaving intact "a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (Coulthard 2014: 7). Israel's supposed "withdrawal/disengagement from Gaza" is a case in point. Israel still has full control "over its borders, sea and sky" as our interviewees put it. Moreover, Israel has craftily developed an openly transactional relationship with Hamas in Gaza (by allowing Qatari funds in exchange for Hamas guaranteeing calm), while its attacks on Gaza aim to weaken Hamas. In this way, Israel sustains full control over Gaza while allowing Hamas administrative responsibilities on day-to-day affairs in the Strip: giving it full justification for its blockade and periodic military assaults for an area it does not control (on an everyday basis).

Moreover, while Israel ensures the sustenance of an ever-weakened Hamas governing Gaza, it keeps a Palestinian Authority (PA) elite in the West Bank in order to outsource policing the population to the PA and place the "burden" of Palestinians' wellbeing on the PA. This keeps the PA stuck in a *façade* diplomatic process that sustains the *status quo*. Craig Daigle takes issue with the PLO's shift from the use of "terrorism" to diplomatic struggles at bringing the Palestinian cause on the agenda of international organisations such as the UN. He argues that this approach "...overestimates the PLO's ability to influence regional politics...", pointing to the failure of the PLO to come even "...remotely close to establishing a Palestinian state either through political or military efforts" (Daigle 2014: 12).

Israel's "right to maim" is eloquently investigated in Puar's work (2015) which details Israel's efforts at suppressing/killing of Palestinians' hope and future trajectories – in effect targeting their power to resist – through maiming, but not killing. In this way Israel renders Palestinian bodies debilitated and available as "a source of value extraction from populations that would otherwise be disposable" (Puar 2015: 18). For Puar, debility is a state in which death is disallowed and unliveable conditions are perpetuated. Yet, amidst all this settler colonial (slow) violence (see Nixon below), Palestinian resilience and deep belief in resisting Israel's illegal occupation get stronger.

This strength and resilience are reflected in the work of de Sousa Santos (2014) where he calls for a recognition of the diverse ways of knowing by which people across the globe run their lives and provide meaning to their existence, and which he refers to as "cognitive justice". De Sousa Santos and Puar's work are important for this article as they shed light on how Western domination (which we read as settler colonial domination in our context), profoundly marginalises and silences knowledge and wisdom (and creative ways of resisting) of the colonized and oppressed. Complementing these works, in her reflections on "Counter-spaces as resistance in conflict zones" Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian uses women's voices, collected since the onset of the Second Intifada, to uncover how they have managed to develop "women-oriented strategies that protected the domestic space and produced innovative transcripts that created counter-spaces of safety to rebuild the family home" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005:110). She thus reveals how, in spite of settler colonial attacks on the domestic and private sphere, a focus on women's agency shows a great degree of creative resistance and activism.

While we find the discussed works above extremely useful in thinking about Palestinian ongoing resistance strategies in the face of calculated forms of Israel's settler colonial regime, what we miss is a specific focus on these resistance movements, the very people who constitute them, not only as subjects to analyse, but as subject positions from which we can see and interpret the settler colonial regime as fearful of resistance. And how this fear in turn empowers Palestinians to sustain their resilience in the face of war crimes (UN News 2019) and continual violations of international norms (Human Rights Watch 2017b; Amnesty International 2019a) by the colonizer. It is these subject positions that the next section of our article now turns to, before we reconnect with our prime concern here: namely that the main international media, and academia, in general sustains its focus on Palestinian violence rather than embedded forms of non-violent resilience against Israel's illegal occupation.

3. Israel's fear of a Gazan Gandhian movement

In 2015, some young Gazans spontaneously turned towards the perimeter fence that separates the besieged enclave from Israel to protest Gaza's increasingly unliveable *status quo* (Finkelstein et al. 2015). Scenes of young Palestinians walking unarmed to non-violently challenge the fence – that both physically and metaphorically desiccates life in Gaza – triggered great concerns in Israel about the possibility of Gazans turning to the fence *en masse* to call for their rights. That same year, senior Israeli security analyst, Yossi Melman, wrote in the Jerusalem Post, that: "Attempts to break through the fence are nightmare scenarios for the defense establishment. What will happen if thousands of Palestinians march on the fence, knock it down and continue their march into Israel? Will Israel respond with gunfire that will lead to a massacre?" (quoted in Adem 2018).

Such serious concerns are consistent with the broader *modus operandi* of Israel's settler colonial regime in the occupied Palestinian territories. For instance, in 2011, WikiLeaks released a confidential cable entitled, "IDF Plans Harsher Methods with West Bank Demonstrations" between then American government officials and Israel's Director of Policy and Political-Military Affairs at the Defense Ministry, Maj. General (reserves)

Amos Gilad. In that cable, Gilad warns, “we don’t do Gandhi very well,” in reference to weekly non-violent demonstrations in the Nabi Saleh village (Dana 2011).

Israel’s fear of a Palestinian Gandhi is evidently far more seriously in Gaza than the West Bank. Since its 2005 “unilateral disengagement” from the Strip, Israel sought to portray the besieged enclave as a hotspot for violence, extremism, terrorism and little else. The ahistorical narrative that Israel pushes, goes that after Israel left Gaza, “ Hamas seized power, ransacked greenhouses, threw its opponents off rooftops and began launching thousands of rockets at Israel,” as summarised by American columnist Peter Beinart (2014) in an article where he thoroughly dispelled each of the myths Israel propagates. The Israeli portrayal of the besieged enclave as a violent abyss has persisted in mainstream media for years. For the settler colonizer, a Gazan non-violent movement challenging Israel’s oppression on a large scale would be a paradigm-shifting milestone and a ‘nightmare’, as discussed above. Therefore, the propaganda machinery was set in motion to address this likelihood.

4. GRM as Turning Point

Israel’s nightmare of large-scale Gazan non-violent demonstrations came to being on March 30, 2018, when tens of thousands of Palestinians commemorated the Land Day – an occasion for protesting Israel’s expropriation of Palestinian lands⁶ – at the perimeter fence with Israel. In the words of Taiaiake and Corntassel (2005) mentioned earlier, this was Gazans’ way of reconnecting (albeit symbolically) with the land of their heritage. The demonstrations known as the Great Return March, or GRM, were planned to be a weekly activity lasting for six weeks until Nakba Day on May 15 (Adem 2018). The GRM went on until December 2019 (Aysha 2019).

A distinguishing feature of the GRM is, in Taiaiake and Corntassel’s terminology, its enjoyment of solidarity across generations and a unanimous support from all Palestinian factions – despite 13 years of intra-Palestinian divisions.⁷ To the demonstration’s founders, Gazan political leaders and participants, the GRM was a turning point in Gaza’s resistance experience. For GRM co-founder, Ahmed Abu Artema, the demonstrations were a youth-led “resurrection” of non-violent insurgence after more than a decade of exclusive “spotlight” on armed resistance⁸ (Artema 2019). Co-author Abu Mustafa was on the ground in Gaza and witnessed the GRM’s peaceful nature. Based on his observations as well as on our interview material, we categorise the protestors’ engagement in the GRM into 2 types: 1) Gazans who have watched the demonstrations from a distance, and 2) Gazans who have approached the fence to challenge Israel’s controlling power, consistent with Taiaiake and Corntassel’s pathway number 3 (detailed above).

The first type of engagement included families who picnicked far from the fence. Abu Mustafa watched elderly people and tribal leaders taking photos near the border and telling their loved ones that they intended to put the photos next to their house keys to serve as reminders for their children and grandchildren that the GRM is a struggle for their right to return to their original homes (Taiaiake and Corntassel’s pathway 1) and to remind them that they could achieve this right through peaceful means. Some families organised competitive games for their children with the theme being the villages and cities of historical Palestine. There were also groups who engaged in artistic performances about hope and resilience. This group – away from the fence – also included medical units with tents and ambulances.

⁶ This is in remembrance to Israel’s 1976 operation when, in response to the Israeli government’s announcement of a plan to expropriate land for state purposes, strikes and marches were organised in Arab towns from the Galilee to the Negev.

⁷ Interviews with Ahmed Artema, Dr Ahmed Yousef and Ibrahim Haniya conducted by co-author Shehada.

⁸ Especially by the media and international observers alike.

The second type of engagement – Gazans who approached the fence – relates to the prominent minority that caught the media's attention. This group "approached the fence and attempted to damage it, burned tires, threw stones and Molotov cocktails towards Israeli forces and flew incendiary kites and balloons into Israeli territory, resulting in damage to agricultural land and nature reserves inside Israel" (UN 2019b). Israel deployed snipers and forces who shot at and threw explosive devices in proximity to demonstrators. Israeli forces' response to the protests included firearms, rubber bullets and tear gas canisters, some of the latter dropped from drones (Ibid.), echoing Bhungalia (2018)'s notion of social death and the way Israel takes a calculated interest in the maximum possible destruction of Gazan bodies.

In the collective memory of Gaza's population, the last similar large demonstrations against Israel's occupation were the 2000-2005 Second Intifada, and the 1987 First Intifada. As Abu Hisham AlMasri, a 54-year-old tribe leader from Rafah City recalls that, during the First Intifada, non-violent resistance was met with Israel's violent response, including arrests and 6 months in prison sentences. Students were suppressed by the army and had their bones broken for peacefully protesting during Rabin's time.⁹ Israel's conduct in such instances also echoes Puar's notion of "the right to maim" Palestinian bodies.

Since Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, Gazans' resistance has assumed a linear evolution towards armed actions as the predominant resistance strategy (Abusalim 2018). However, armed actions became more restrained after three Israeli wars on Gaza between 2008 and 2014, in which armed resistance produced little or no change in the status quo.¹⁰ Instead, armed actions became increasingly an instrument of deterrence and defense, rather than offense.

Hence, the GRM signified that young Gazans, whose coming-of-age has occurred during the blockade and an era of violent engagement between Israel and Hamas, were open to experiment with non-violence given that three violent wars in six years "couldn't end the conflict or bring peace".¹¹ For elderly Gazans, the GRM offered an opportunity to reconnect to the land of their heritage, as stipulated by Taiaiake and Cornassel (2005). Am Muhammed, 72-year-old widow from Khan Younis, stated: "I participated in the [Great Return] March freely and no one forced me to do so... It was from the people of Palestine to the people of Palestine, from refugee to refugee, who lost their homeland and want to return... no one forces us to share in this great event... They stole our homeland and therefore we want our homeland".¹²

For GRM co-founder Atrema, the demonstrations were an incremental step of building up on earlier inspirations of Palestinian non-violence.¹³ The main trigger of these inspirations was a demonstration that took place in May 2011 on Israel's borders with Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, during the "Arab Spring". In that demonstration, about 100 Palestinians from Syria succeeded in breaching the Israeli border fence and entered Majdal Shams, an Arab Druz village in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (Adem 2018). A more recent inspiration has been what Palestinians call the Al-Asbat rebellion in July 2017, in which Palestinians in East Jerusalem protested *en masse* Israel's decision to install metal detectors at the Al-Haram Al-Sharif complex following a shooting incident. The remarkable ability of peaceful protesters to reverse Israel's decision in less than two weeks revived the spirit of non-violence in Gazan discourse and lent credence to its relevance and potential (Abusalim 2018).

⁹ Interview by Abu Mustafa, 21 July 2020. See also <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/stories-intifada-broke-bones-171210111414673.html>

¹⁰ Interview with Dr Yousef by Shehada.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interview by Abu Mustafa, 20 July 2020.

¹³ Interview conducted by Shehada, 03 May 2020.

4.1 Symbolism and Necessity

Thus, the GRM demonstrations were motivated by a combination of symbolism and necessity. On the one hand, they represented a platform to remind the world that two thirds of Gaza's population are refugees, especially at a critical moment when the Trump administration was engaged in relentless efforts to liquidate the issue of Palestinian refugees by, for instance, defunding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, UNRWA.¹⁴ On the other hand, the GRM stood as an outlet for Palestinians in Gaza to protest Israel's blockade and demand basic freedoms and civil rights (Stern-Weiner and Shehada 2018).

Many of our interviewees expressed the sentimental and emotional value of the GRM protests as these evoked a strong yearning and attachment to the lands lying behind the fence, within their sight and which they are deprived from accessing: lands that they or their parents and grandparents were uprooted from in the 1948 Nakba.¹⁵

Moreover, many interviewees emphasised the intention to challenge Gaza's blockade. Interviewees repeated references to the devastating impact of the siege that resembles Mbembe's "death worlds" and Nixon's "slow death".¹⁶ What GRM participants aimed to achieve was to make visible to the world and international media – particularly Western media – Israel's fabrication of pretexts for its offensives in the Gaza Strip, which have been trapping Gazans in a state of non-life, compounded by the inability to escape such a suspended, liminal condition between life and death.¹⁷ GRM co-founder, Artema, expressed these sentiments thus: "The GRM was a scream for life. Knocking on the doors of the prison, the separation fence. A statement that we don't agree to die silently in our place, we should scream to the world to hear our suffering."¹⁸

Further fuelling the energy for challenging the blockade was the culmination of slow violence in Gaza shortly prior to the demonstrations. Many interviewees described a worsening of living conditions in Gaza in the months that preceded the protests due to further tightening of the blockade and restrictions. For instance, on January 29, 2018, the Beit Hanoun hospital announced it was halting its services, citing Gaza's endemic electrical crisis. Two days later, the Mohammed Al-Durra Children's Hospital announced a reduction in its services by 60% (Aysha 2018a). On February 15, 2018, Gaza's only power plant came to a halt due to lack of fuel (El-Khabar 2018). On March 25, 2018, the power plant stopped producing electricity again after Egyptian fuel supplies were suspended. Egypt further cut down its electricity cables with Gaza under the pretext of maintenance (Aljazeera 2018). This left Gaza with only 120 Mega Watt of electricity out of the daily 500 Mega Watt it needs, which dramatically impacted life in general in the enclave as electricity provision was down to only 4 hours a day (Ibid.). Taiaiake and Cornassel's suggestion about indigenous peoples' aim to be self-sufficient was experiencing one of its greatest reality tests.

¹⁴ Interview with Artema conducted by Shehada, 03 May 2020.

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by Shehada with Artema, Dr. Yousef, Ali Adem, Walid Mahmoud and Haniya. Interviews were conducted on 27, 29, 30 April and 3, 6 May 2020 respectively. Also interviews conducted by Abu Mustafa with (apart from Am Muhammed), Artema, Abu Hussein, Abu Hisham AlMasri, Abu Sakir Alfra, Marina Al-Handi and Hamza AlShobikiy. The latter interviews were conducted on 30 September and 18 October 2019, and on 12, 15, 20 and 21 July 2020 respectively.

¹⁶ As defined by Nixon (2011: 2) such violence is attritional, "incremental and accretive". "[It] occurs gradually and out of sight," and is "dispersed across time and space" in a way that makes it "not viewed as violence at all," but it rather becomes – as in the case of Gaza's blockade – routinised and normalised as the *status quo*, while its cumulative yet non-spectacular devastations are relatively concealed.

¹⁷ Interviews by Shehada with Artema, Adem and Haniya.

¹⁸ Interview by both Shehada and Abu Mustafa, although these were conducted separately and the wording differs.

Furthermore, 2017 was locally dubbed the worst year because of the closure of the Gazan population's main outlet to the world, the Rafah border crossing. Throughout the entire year, it was opened for only 35 days (Palestinian Information Center 2018), which dramatically impacted Gaza's reconstruction following the 2012 and 2014 wars. As Ibrahim Haniya, a GRM participant and close relative of Hamas' top leader Ismael Haniya, put it: "After 14 years of slow death, we've reached a point where we had nothing to lose. We've become indifferent to all consequences. So, instead of dying slowly, people said we want to die with dignity or change the *status quo*".¹⁹

4.2 Emphasising Peacefulness and Independence

One of the recurring themes in interviews with GRM protestors was the participants' emphasis on their independence. Protesters refrained from bringing factional flags, sufficing with the Palestinian flag only; an unusual gesture given the intractable intra-Palestinian divisions (Abusalim 2019). The GRM's peaceful nature is another crucial theme in interviews and participant observation. For instance, in a public conference held in March 2018, the GRM High Committee – a platform that included representatives of all Palestinian factions – stressed the importance of "maintaining the non-violent and popular character of the protests," to deny Israel any pretext for repression (Aysha 2018b). On April 9, 2018, Hamas' top leader Ismael Haniya gave a speech from a podium behind which stood a billboard with iconic portraits and quotes of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi to further assert the peaceful message of the GRM. Haniya – who doesn't speak English – repeated King's historic quote "I have a dream" in English (Toameh 2018). This gesture is unusual in an enclave that has been a fertile ground for armed resistance groups (Artema 2019). More specifically, Haniya's words were akin to putting his life on the line and subjecting the movement to a fierce backlash since for long, Hamas has made the PA's non-violent approach synonymous with pacifism. In fact, Haniya was criticised by Hamas members for using Martin Luther King's picture and quote, because King once – arguably – applauded Zionism (Kramer 2016).

The emphasis on the GRM's peacefulness and independence signalled an openness towards experimenting with non-violence that stemmed from a conviction of the "inability to achieve anything with war and blood", as Hamas moderate leader and intellectual Dr. Ahmed Yousef, who used to act as a political adviser to Ismael Haniya, put it during an interview. During the interview, Dr. Yousef further explained: "There was a conviction and realisation that this door, the non-violent approach, hasn't been knocked on recently and we should benefit from [similar] experiences in India, the US, Northern Ireland and South Africa – where peoples succeeded [with a non-violent approach] after a phase of using armed actions, which hadn't resulted in any significant outcomes".²⁰ Realising the importance of public opinion in the West and its value in impacting political positions in Western countries, the GRM's logic also stemmed from the pursuit of evoking attention, sympathy and solidarity from the Western public. Gazans "chose to use a language the West understands which is non-violence," in a way that does not "provoke the occupation but can attract media attention and achieve something meaningful because Western media can sometimes be sensitive to humanitarian emergencies".²¹

¹⁹ Interview by Shehada.

²⁰ Interviews with Dr Yousef conducted by both Shehada and Abu Mustafa.

²¹ Ibid.

5. Disappointment: Media Bias and Settler Colonial Power

From the beginning, Israel showed clear intentions to counter the GRM. For instance, an Israeli Minister suggested “parachuting food and medicines deep into the enclave” to “tempt” Gazans away from protesting (Surkes 2018). Israeli snipers, well hidden behind sand dunes near Gaza’s borders, were explicitly instructed to “shoot anyone breaching the fence” (Kubovich 2018). Shooting included the intentional targeting of legs by Israeli soldiers (Pitman 2018; Glazer 2020). Israel furthermore deployed drones and military vehicles along Gaza’s borders. The Israeli army used naked force such as live-fire, expanding/dumdum bullets, rubber-coated bullets, and teargas to disperse the masses and prevent protesters from reaching the fence (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights 2020). Violence has been Israel’s usual *modus operandi* to deter Gazan insurgencies (Wootliff 2019). On the first day, when more than 30,000 Palestinians showed up for the demonstrations, Israel killed 15 protesters and an innocent bystander, and injured 800 (Khoury 2018). This echoes Puar’s explanation of how Israel’s actions intentionally (dis)allow death while ensuring that Palestinian lives become unliveable.

Despite the enormous efforts that went into organising Gaza’s GRM and ensuring its independence and peacefulness, the majority of mainstream international media still prioritised Israel’s narrative over that of the Palestinians’. The first major blow to the GRM came when Western mainstream media reported the protests from the very first day as “clashes” and “confrontations” rather than non-violent demonstrations. For instance, the Associated Press, BBC and *Washington Post* all reported the protests as violent “clashes”. *The New York Times* portrayed Gaza’s protests as “confrontations”, which draws a false symmetry between unarmed protesters and heavily armed and well-protected Israeli snipers (North 2018). The first sentence in that article stipulated that the protests “descended almost immediately into chaos and bloodshed” and that Palestinians were killed in “clashes with Israeli soldiers”, which again draws the conclusion that both sides were responsible for the Palestinians killed on March 30, 2018 while ignoring that Israeli soldiers suffered no casualties (Ibid.).

The media’s bias of lending credence to Israel’s narrative ignored the courage that Gazans have shown by standing up to Israel’s army and gave Israel a pretext – in Mbembe’s terminology – not only to violently suppress the protests, but also to target the very spirit of non-violence, turning this rare experience into a cautionary tale.²²

Hence, Israel managed to develop a narrative that automatically justifies its shooting of protesters under the pretext that they were breaching the fence, while deliberately ignoring that many protesters were shot from the first day while standing hundreds of meters away from the fence.²³ Walid Mahmoud, a Gazan journalist and activist who attended the protests from the start, explained: “There were snipers arbitrarily targeting protesters, children, women, journalists, and the elderly with explosive bullets. One bullet was enough to cause fatalities amongst many protesters. Israel also used drones to throw tear gas intensively on us”.

In one instance, on March 31, 2018, Palestinian footballer Mohammed Khalil was standing unarmed, tens of meters away from the fence, filming himself with his cell phone when he was shot in his knee by an Israeli sniper destroying his joint and his career (Osborne 2018). In later instances during the GRM, Israel killed and wounded paramedics, journalists, people with disabilities, women and children. Major human rights organisations reported Israel’s actions as possible “war crimes” (UN 2019; Human Rights Watch 2018; Amnesty International 2019b).

²² Interviews with Artema conducted by Abu Mustafa and Shehada separately.

²³ Interviews with Mahmoud and Haniya, by Shehada.

Nonetheless, mainstream Western media continued to often amplify Israel's official narrative and pretexts for its actions. For instance, when slain paramedic Razan al-Najjar was shot dead on June 1, 2018 while she was unarmed and wearing a white coat, Israel tried to spin her death by releasing a doctored footage that showed Najjar saying "I am here on the front line and I act as a human shield" (Buchsbaum 2018).²⁴ *The New York Times* reported Israel's footage after it became known that it had been doctored (Ibid.). This article starts by amplifying Israel's narrative of the incident. It later points to a video "released by Hamas" showing Najjar walking to the fence with her hands in the air but marks it as equally valid to the Israeli doctored footage and degrades the inconsistencies between the two videos as part of a "public relations battle". Only in paragraph 18 (out of the article's 22 paragraphs) does the *The New York Times* point out that "The Israeli video released Thursday appears to be an excerpt from a longer video" in which Najjar was actually saying "I'm acting as a human rescue shield to protect the injured inside the armistice line" (Ibidem). To bury the fact that Israel doctored the video in the last paragraphs of an article that is supposed to highlight how Israel doctored the footage, makes international media – like *The New York Times* – complicit in entrenching Israel's colonial structures of power.

In another more alarming instance, on May 15, 2018, *The New York Times* claimed that "the Gaza demonstration was no innocent protest but what [Israeli] commanders called a 'terrorist operation' orchestrated by Hamas" (Kershner and Halbfinger 2018). The article backed this claim by amplifying an Israeli anecdote, unsupported by any evidence in the article, that the IDF had "ambushed" eight armed "Hamas terrorists" who tried to infiltrate the fence into Israel, carrying different kinds of weapons. The IDF spokesman claimed that all eight "terrorists" were killed in a "shootout" between them and IDF soldiers (Ibid.). However, more than two years after the incident, the IDF has not yet presented any evidence to show that this violent "battle" ever took place (Ziv 2020). In fact, Hillel Bardin, an 84-year-old left-wing activist, has been looking into this alleged "battle" for longer than two years, but received no evidence from different Israeli authorities to support the existence of this incident (Ibid.). Bardin further notes a letter he received from the IDF spokesperson that states that Israel's army had "no record of the location and identities of the Palestinians who were killed" in that incident (Ibidem). Yet, *The New York Times* chose to amplify a baseless Israeli claim and assertively drew conclusions and generalisations from it that the GRM was "no innocent protest".

5.1 Retaliatory/Defensive Violence

Several interviewees expressed frustration over how they felt let down by Western media, which "cherry-picked" rare violent rhetoric or incidents rather than offering a platform to the intended message of the GRM.²⁵ Interviewees conveyed how they feel abandoned in the face of Israel's violent suppression of the protests²⁶ and perceive such violence as an attritional strategy: to increase the price of demonstrating (casualties) way above the expected gains.²⁷ It was also identified as a strategy of inflicting psychological trauma on protesters to undermine their future resistance and kill resistance itself. As Dr Mohammed Abu-Salmia, then hospital director of Al-Shifa hospital, aptly put it: "one of the consequences of the Israeli army policy, which is basically to target the limbs of the demonstrators, is the creation of a disabled generation,

²⁴ On "human shields" in civil protests, particularly on the precarity of civilians trapped in theaters of violence, see Gordon and Perugini (2020).

²⁵ Interviews with Dr Ahmed Yousef and Ibrahim Haniya conducted by Shehada

²⁶ Ibid, as well as interview with Walid Mahmoud.

²⁷ Interviews with Artema, Adem, Mahmoud, Haniya.

who cannot work and cannot be independent and need full care and others to spend money on them... Most of this category's age is between 15 years to 35 years old and this is a deliberate policy", reflecting Bhungalia's point about Israel's calculated interests.²⁸ This also connects with Puar's (2015: 17) notion of "psychological maiming", whereby she explains the process of inflicting severe collective traumas on the population to "debilitate any resistant capacities of future generations."

Interviewees clarified that throwing rocks or tire-burning were both used defensively to distract and obscure the vision of Israeli snipers, and were also commonly used in a retaliatory way to express rage and anger in continuation with Palestinian history, as tire-burning and rock-throwing have been traditional popular strategies of resistance since the First Intifada of 1987.²⁹ In short, what interviewees expressed adheres to Taiaiake and Cornassel's point on how Gazans (as indigenous peoples) foster a decolonizing strategy by building on the diverse experiences Palestinians have historically had with Israel's settler colonialism.

6. Aid in return for scaling down protests at the fence

May 14, 2018 was the day on which the US (Trump's) administration held a ceremonial opening of its new embassy in Jerusalem with the attendance of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Kouddous 2018). Palestinians saw this not only as an open provocation, but as an assault on their cause, as Jerusalem is central to Palestinian identity.³⁰ This contributed to increasing the number of protesters: on May 14, at least 40,000 Gazans attended the GRM (Kubovich et al. 2018). Israel killed more than 60 protesters and wounded around 2,700, making May 14 "the bloodiest day in Gaza since the end of the 2014 war" (Sanchez 2018).³¹

All interviewees regarded May 14, 2018 as a milestone after which Israel's violence was complemented with tentative humanitarian measures and a meagre alleviation of the blockade to absorb the population's rage.³² This echoes Coulthard (2014)'s argument on how the settler colonial state legitimises its actions by framing these as a form of accommodation of indigenous claims achieved through renewed political relations. For instance, Egypt decided to open its Rafah crossing with Gaza to people's movement until the end of Ramadan and thereafter indefinitely (Harel and Kubovich 2018). Egypt also initiated a ceasefire mediation between Israel and Hamas, which opened the way for the deliberation of "understandings" between the two sides (Ibid.). In November 2018, these understandings brought about monthly Qatari aid to Gaza that passed through Israel, in return for scaling down the protests and gradually ending them (Harel 2019). Qatar's aid includes monthly \$100 cash handouts to about 70,000 individuals and fuel to reduce Gaza's acute electricity shortages (Reuters 2019). It was initially meant as a tentative 6-months package of \$150 million (Al-Mughrabi 2018) but continues until today and was even increased by \$15 million from February 2020 (Khoury 2020). Getting back to Coulthard (2014), this shows how Israel's relations with Egypt and Qatar serve the settler state to rearrange its colonial structures of power while keeping intact a clearly secure set of hierarchical social relations and sedimenting Gazans' dispossession of their lands and self-determination.

Dr. Yousef explained how Israel placed conditions that "If [Qatar's] money enters, there has to be calm... Israel first stipulated with Hamas to keep protesters away from the fence. Then asked to end the protests

²⁸ Interview held by Abu Mustafa, 30 September 2019, Gaza City.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ This article was written before the 10-21 May 2021 attack on Gaza.

³² Interview held by Abu Mustafa, 30 September 2019, Gaza City.

altogether”.³³ In November 2018, Qatar’s ambassador to Palestine Dr. Mohammed El-Amadi was heard repeatedly instructing Hamas and saying that: “We want quiet” in a widely circulated footage (quoted in Marzan 2020).

Furthermore, Israel’s settler colonial authority and reach included a ban on certain beneficiaries of Qatar’s aid under security pretexts.³⁴ Qatar requested beneficiaries of its aid to submit their fingerprints, which were then shared with the Israeli security apparatus for monitoring, a practice openly confirmed by Israel’s Prime Minister (al-Mughrabi 2018).

The attempts to manipulate the protests with conditional aid flows eventually contributed to producing two new forms of violence at the GRM: provocative violence and rejectionist violence, or armed resistance. Interviewees explained the aspects that distinguish provocative violence from armed resistance, such as being less disruptive, calibrated, and tightly contingent upon aid’s entry or lack thereof. For example, if Israel inhibits Qatar’s cash from reaching Gaza at the point where it has been agreed upon, some protesters utilised primitive tools to provoke Israel. These tools included attaching small incendiary objects to balloons and kites and flying them towards Israel to cause fire to farmlands. Haniya, who knows these activities well, explained that: “[Protesters] devised new tools that could provoke and pressure the enemy, move still waters, without being militant. Hurting Israel without giving it an excuse in front of the world to retaliate”.³⁵

Interestingly, the very idea of using kites and balloons at the GRM started as a peaceful tool of communicating positive messages of peace to the other side and to the world through the media. However, after such messages garnered little or no attention from Israel or mainstream media, they slowly evolved into something different and were appropriated and repurposed to serve as a provocative violence tool. Mahmoud explained that: “At the beginning, kites and balloons were used peacefully. They carried Palestinian flags or letters in Hebrew that read “we want peace,”... “Don’t shoot. We’re peaceful protesters.”... But unfortunately, the media didn’t mention those balloons and kites until they were transformed into a tool of popular resistance”.³⁶ Although the GRM was suspended in December 2019, Gazan groups continued to occasionally launch incendiary kites and balloons towards Israel to push for or expedite the entry of Qatari aid, most recently in May 2020 (Ahmed 2020).

7. Palestinian resistance: Where do we stand?

In recent years, armed and non-violent resistance in Gaza have been experimental, incremental, interactive, contextual and largely dependent on provoking a response from the international community³⁷. Resistance has been experimental in the sense that Gazan protesters at GRM developed into a fractured set (as outlined earlier): those who opted for symbolic acts of violence (e.g., incendiary kites) and those who insisted on the March’s peacefulness. As the former group managed to show tangible results (e.g., Qatari aid) while the other failed to attract media attention, the former prevailed.

Resistance is paradoxical and reflects a core trait of this conflict between Israel and Palestinians. In the Gaza context, violent actions during the GRM were aimed at provoking a response from the international community (e.g., to bring more Qatari aid in). Moreover, rockets have been used with the intention to deter

³³ Interviews with Dr Yousef conducted by both Shehada and Abu Mustafa.

³⁴ Interviews with Walid and Ibrahim by Shehada.

³⁵ Interview by Shehada.

³⁶ Interview by Shehada.

³⁷ By international community we refer to official governments, intergovernmental organisations (e.g., UN), solidarity groups, international media, and include the Israeli public.

the Israeli Army. From Abu Mustafa's observations on the field, when the Israeli army killed demonstrators, Palestinian factions sometimes launched rockets against Israeli targets. Through these actions the factions attempted to absorb the public's anger, who were viewing the fall of "martyrs" without a military response (from Hamas). Resistance is contextual in the sense that Gaza's political groups that participated in the GRM saw in it a solid alternative to an all-out fourth war or infighting.

In sum, the historical trajectory of Palestinian non-violent resistance to Israel's settler colonial regime, in particular our focus on the GRM, sheds light on the crucial opportunity that arises for the media, the academic as well as the international community more generally, in incentivising acts of Palestinian non-violence by rewarding them with the reaction they hope to evoke. Unfortunately, what has tended to happen and what continues to happen is that, by ignoring or not covering the roots of non-violence inherent in Palestinian resistance or, even worse, by cherry-picking spectacular, controversial, or violent occurrences, the media, academia and the international community end up dis-incentivising non-violence. Our analysis also highlights the interactivity of the GRM, where the continuity of certain actions was tightly contingent upon the reaction they provoked. Hence, when non-violence was not rewarded, acknowledged, or covered by the international media/observers, it was outlived by provocative acts of violence that achieve tangible, albeit tentative, results.

Qatari payments to the impoverished Gaza Strip, in return for the maintenance of quiet by militant groups there, spurred spontaneous, occasional, and uncoordinated acts of spectacular and disruptive violence aimed to undermine Israel's carrot-and-stick manipulation of the GRM. This included, for instance, GRM protesters hurling rocks at Qatar's ambassador when he visited the GRM in November 2018.³⁸ It also included individual infiltrations into Israel with improvised weaponry.³⁹ Most prominently, this rejectionist violence also included untimed and occasional firing of primitive rockets against Israel predominantly by members of Hamas' close ally movement, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).⁴⁰

During the GRM, activities of armed factions in Gaza – including Hamas and the PIJ – have been regulated through a centralised Hamas-led "Joint Operations Room" established in July 2018 (Musa 2019). However, Israeli media began circulating the name of PIJ commander Bahaa Abu Al-Ata in January 2019 as a major challenger to the established order in Gaza and to the "aid for calm" ceasefire (Berger 2019). In April 2019, Israel's government imposed severe restrictions on Gaza and officially accused al-Ata of attempting to undermine the ceasefire by launching rocket attacks on Israel (Gross 2019). In November 2019, Israel killed al-Ata and later resumed the ceasefire after ensuing escalations (BBC 2019). This brings us back to Coulthard (2014)'s instructive observation, that we cannot separate Israel's settler colonial objective (of eradicating natives to acquire indigenous territories) from the continuous rearrangements of its colonial structures of power. While such rearrangements are effective to reinforce territorial control, they are less successful in shaping Palestinians' assessments of their political strategies. When asked what they think of the GRM nowadays, especially after the maiming of Gazans by Israel, our interviewees' responses can be categorised in three ways: one group judging that, if another GRM had to be initiated, most people would perceive their potential sacrifices to be senseless and would not lead to any major breakthrough in their everyday lives. A second group argues that, despite Israel's crushing of the protests, the GRM managed to keep life in Gaza going to a minimal extent with modest breakthroughs (electricity back to 8 hours per day, opening of Rafah crossing). A final and third group contends that the idea of non-violence which triggered

³⁸ Interviews with Walid and Ibrahim.

³⁹ Interviews with Adem and Walid.

⁴⁰ Interviews with Dr Yousef, Adem, Walid and Ibrahim.

the GRM has been strengthened and gained more ground since the protesters have shown their ability to challenge Israel's blockade with primitive tools.

8. Conclusion

In this contribution, we have sought to expand on the scope of the extant academic debates on the use of non-violence in general and in the Palestinian context in particular. We did this by analysing Gazans' strategies of non-violence during the GRM protests and conclude that, in spite of the lack of sustained focus by academics and the media (in general) on the embedded resilience of Palestinians to Israel's settler colonial regime, and in spite of Israel's targeting of resistance, Palestinians' resolve, vitality, creativity, innovation, fortitude and revolt remain as alive as ever in pursuit of their right to have rights.

The international community – whether in academia or in the media industry – should be emboldened by such strength amid evident and calculated Israeli biopolitical control (through bodily and infrastructural debilitation of the Palestinian body, mind, and soul).

Finally, we claim that non-indigenous people – that is, people who observe Gaza from afar, with some of these observers supporting Gazans' right to have rights while others playing the role of spectators or commentators such as journalists – must also participate in the responsibilities of resurgence, resistance, and refusal (Naylor et al. 2018). As Ramírez emphasises, this requires individuals to acknowledge the differential positions from which they approach the project of de-colonization (Ibid.). This has theoretical implications for how we (as authors of the lived experiences of Gazans through non-violent protests against their oppressor) as well as others (including the media who are responsible for not only drawing attention to non-violence but also sustaining a healthy focus on this strategic choice of protestors in Gaza) judge and write about non-violence.

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