

# *Will the Arab*

# *Spring reach Palestine?*

**Joseph  
Dana\***

## **Abstract**

*The author writes about the possible impact of the Arab Spring phenomena on Palestine, arguing that Palestinians have been trying to use non-violent means to resolve their own problems with Israeli for over four decades. The author argues that internal divisions between Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and the Fatah-governed Palestinian Authority have served the interests of party officials in Ramallah and Gaza City to ensure their continued rule, and thus the situation is untenable, with few harboring any hope that the current reconciliation talks will bring true unity.*

*Further, the author describes how Palestinian activists are gravitating towards non-violent means as a way of highlighting what occupation and Israeli control entail for them; peace is clearly sought after by activists, whose immediate concern is the ongoing human rights violations in the Palestinian Territories.*

---

*\* Joseph Dana is a journalist based between Africa and the Middle East. His work has appeared in The Nation, Le Monde Diplomatique, GQ, London Review of Books, The National (UAE), Monocle, Guernica, Tablet, The Forward, and The Mail & Guardian, among other international publications.*

Western discussions of the Middle Eastern revolutions during the past year have invariably included the question of whether the Arab Spring will arrive in Palestine. While this might seem like a natural jump, this thinking displays the ignorance about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is too often shapes Western analysis of the Middle East. The Arab Spring captured international attention with demonstrations of the desire and capacity of Middle Eastern civil society to overturn unjust structures of governance through primarily non-violent means. Palestinians have been trying to use the same forms of non-violent means for the past 43 years.

---

*Israelis and Palestinians are rarely able to predict outbreaks of violence. When observers forecast violence – for example, during the tense months around the statehood vote in the United Nations, when Israel warned of rebellion in the West Bank- nothing comes of it.*

---

During the festive photo ops and grandiose speeches surrounding the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) United Nations statehood bid, few observers took note of the obvious exhaustion among average

Palestinians, as seen in interviews and polls. The emotional and physical losses of the Second Intifada have left Palestinians depleted, with little capacity to manage even political split between Hamas and Fatah in 2006. Internal divisions between the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and the Fatah-governed Palestinian Authority have served the interests of party officials in Ramallah and Gaza City, ensuring their continued rule. The situation is untenable, and few harbour any hope that current reconciliation talks will bring true unity.

Israelis and Palestinians are rarely able to predict outbreaks of violence. When observers forecast violence – for example, during the tense months around the statehood vote in the United Nations, when Israel warned of rebellion in the West Bank- nothing comes of it. Despite this unimpressive track record, many in the West Bank are quick to raise the coming Intifada against Israeli occupation. The next Intifada, people say, will be one of stones and not suicide bombers, a clear allusion to the First Intifada. Some non-aligned activists are acting on this sentiment and gathering around the idea of civil disobedience against Israeli occupation in Palestine.

Indeed, the use of social media is changing perceptions of the conflict in the West, moving away from the

peace and security narrative as the defining paradigm. The deprivation of Palestinian rights in the Occupied Territories is slowing entering the discourse, even in mainstream American thought. Ironically, former Israeli Prime Ministers like Ehud Barak are explicitly giving legitimacy to this shift in understating. In February of 2010, Barak said that “As long as in this territory west of the Jordan River there is only one political entity called Israel, it is going to be either non-Jewish, or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be an apartheid state.”

Given the matrix of control that already exists in the West Bank, along with the institutional discrimination that Palestinians citizens of Israel face in all sectors of life, from buying land to choosing a community to call home, an Apartheid reality might not be as far off as Olmert and Barak assume. Palestine’s new generation of activists are aware of this rights narrative and, using the Arab Spring for inspiration, are pushing forward with a bold rights-based strategy.

Diana Alzeer is typical of the new breed of urban Palestinian activists. Her small frame conceals a fiery rhetoric, which quickly comes to the surface when the future of Palestinian activism is raised. Alzeer is emblematic of the next wave of Palestinian activism in the Occupied

Territories; young, non-violent, and disconnected from Palestinian party politics. Despite the news cycle of endless peace negotiations and fears of impeding violence in the region, non-aligned political activists like 24-year-old Alzeer are perfecting forms of civil disobedience, which they believe will be the backbone of the next chapter in the conflict. The rural villages dotting the rugged landscape of the West Bank that have been directly affected by Israel’s controversial separation barrier have become a rallying point for the nascent popular resistance movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

In 2003, at the height of the Second Intifada, when bombs were exploding in Tel Aviv cafes and the Israeli military was imposing curfews throughout the West Bank, the unassuming Palestinian village of Budrus began a non-violent campaign against the construction of the barrier on its farmland. According to the Israeli government, the barrier needed to be placed inside Budrus to ensure the security of nearby settlements. After two years of almost daily non-violent demonstrations, some of which saw Palestinian women standing directly in front of working bulldozers, the Israeli military made an unprecedented decision: to change the route of the barrier. Ninety-five percent of the farmland in Budrus, which would have been swallowed by the barrier, was saved

through noncompliance and popular resistance. The Popular Struggle - the umbrella term for current non-violent resistance movements in the West Bank – saw its first victory.

---

*After Budrus, many villages throughout the West Bank adopted our model of non-violence,” said Ayed Morrar, a revered and prophetic figure who led his village in the fight against the Separation Barrier.*

---

“After Budrus, many villages throughout the West Bank adopted our model of non-violence,” said Ayed Morrar, a revered and prophetic figure who led his village in the fight against the Separation Barrier. “People at the time understood that our issue is about freedom, not economic or establishment issues. When the First Intifada took place in 1987, our economic, social and political situation was better than now. During the First Intifada and in Budrus in 2003, people were not looking for more money or to build a state. The main issue was and is freedom.”

Every Friday afternoon, after the midday Islamic prayer, a diverse array of Palestinian villagers, international supporters and Israeli peace activists gather in village squares across the West Bank before confronting the

Israeli military. Each village has a different story but the issue is always the same; the slow confiscation of land by Israeli settlement.

Demonstrations begin with spirited calls for Palestinian unity but quickly take on a confrontational tone. In each village, activists march towards contested lands and are stopped by a blockade of Israeli jeeps and soldiers, ready to break up what they consider to be illegal riots. According to the Israeli military, all protests must be coordinated with the military governor, who holds the sovereign authority to grant demonstration permits. Since 1967, not a single permit has been issued for any type of Palestinian demonstration. These peaceful protests quickly spiral into an exchange of tear gas, stones and sometimes rubber bullets. After nearly a decade, the protests have a choreographed sequence, whereby peaceful protests turn into violent confrontations.

“The question is, how are we going to speak to the core social and economic needs of average Palestinians?” asked Fadi Quran, a 23 year old youth leader as he stood next to an eight meter high wall separating Ramallah from Jerusalem. “We need to tie the social and economic to the political reality on the ground. This is a challenge but not a challenge for people in villages like Nabi Saleh, who have had their land taken by

---

*“We need to tie the social and economic to the political reality on the ground. This is a challenge but not a challenge for people in villages like Nabi Saleh, who have had their land taken by settlements.”*

---

settlements.” He continued, “They see it; the link is obvious between the settlement taking their land, and their poverty. But in places like Ramallah and a lot of cities in the West Bank, it is not obvious.”

The March 15<sup>th</sup> movement is a loose collective of urban activists who share Quran’s vision of transforming the Palestinian struggle. The movement emerged last year in Gaza and quickly spread to the West Bank as a Palestinian response to the Egyptian revolution. Rebuilding Palestinian national identity, badly damaged by six years of internal division between Fatah and Hamas, has been the driving focus since its inception. Activists from in major cities who regularly travel to village protests decided to bring the reality of the occupation into the heart of Ramallah, a city often compared to Tel Aviv for its disconnected lifestyle. During one of their first protests in solidarity with the Egyptian people, plain clothes Palestinian Authority police officers arrested and beat a number of activists.

Despite its portrayal in the West, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is not well liked in the West Bank. Set up in the 1990s as part of the Oslo peace process, the PA was designed as an interim governing authority for Palestinians. Most Palestinians believe that the current Fatah dominated PA is corrupt and ineffective. Fadi Quran claims that the March 15<sup>th</sup> movement does not target the Palestinian Authority, but rather aims to develop a new way of fighting the occupation, through noncompliance, mass protest and non-violence. “At the moment, in Palestinian history and the history of the region, popular resistance and civil disobedience are the necessary tactics that should be used and at this moment in time they are the only tactics that we have to achieve freedom, justice and peace for all.”

The non-violence tactic is a striking component of the March 15<sup>th</sup> platform. Western observers have long wondered why Palestinians have not adopted forms of non-violent resistance on a larger scale. The commonly held position states that if Palestinians adopted such tactics, then the West would quickly and wholeheartedly rally behind the Palestinian struggle. According to activists, non-violence has been employed for years but is often overshadowed by attacks on Israeli civilians by radical political factions. “As Palestinians, we tried armed

---

*Informed by the history of the Palestinian struggle, young activists are challenging the status quo of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at a time when the world is counting on the next chapter of the Arab Spring to play out in Palestine.*

---

resistance during the Second Intifada; apart from the fact that I do not agree with it in any way, it only moved us backwards,” Diana Alzeer noted in Ramallah, the evening before a demonstration. “We did not move forward.”

On the southern border of Jerusalem, on a non-descript bluff of land above the Jerusalem Zoo, sits the Palestinian village of al-Walaja. The former bread basket of Bethlehem, al-Walaja is currently enmeshed in a legal battle over the construction of the Separation Barrier on its land. Unlike Budrus, which would have lost farmland to the barrier, al-Walaja will be completely encircled by an eight meter high wall when the barrier is completed. The village will have a single entrance and exit point, controlled by a guarded gate once the wall is completed.

Sheerin al Araj is a member of the al-Walaja popular committee and helps organize the weekly non-violent demonstrations against the wall, which have been taking place

on Fridays for the past two years. Like other Palestinian activists, al Araj rationalizes her involvement in the Popular Struggle movement by analyzing the larger context of the Palestinian struggle. “Palestinians have not had a vacation or even a day off for the past 200 years. We have not had peace and quiet for 200 years,” she notes in her modest home adjacent to the Jewish settlement of HarGilo. “But these days are very promising. There is a lot of youth movement, there is movement on the ground - but I am a bit scared. Everyone is telling us that there will be a third intifada, which is not good for us. It does not matter what type of intifada it will be, it is still a war.” She pauses for a sip of sugary tea. “Non-violent, violent, it does not matter. The repercussions for Palestinians are always the same: violence. It does not matter how you fight.”

Ultimately, Fadi Quran noted, the role of the activists must be to make Israel’s occupation as difficult as possible to manage, using every non-violent tactic at their disposal. In a conflict where one side is at a great disadvantage in terms of the power dynamic, symbolic acts of non-compliance are perhaps the only way of inflicting significant damage. “The only thing that has really put pressure on the Israelis throughout history in terms of their relationship with Palestinians has been acts of civil disobedience like those of the

First Intifada. It forced the Israeli government to give concessions to the Palestinians.”

Informed by the history of the Palestinian struggle, young activists are challenging the status quo of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at a time when the world is counting on the next chapter of the Arab Spring to play out in Palestine. Last May, thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria, and hundreds of March 15<sup>th</sup> activists in the West Bank gathered at Israeli borders and checkpoints to mark the anniversary of the *Nakba*-the Arabic word for catastrophe, used by Palestinians to commemorate the creation of the state of Israel. Since the Second Intifada, Israel has created a myriad of borders and checkpoints to isolate and subdue Palestinians for security reasons. The idea of the March 15<sup>th</sup> activists was simple: hold symbolic mass protests at these border crossings and checkpoints to remind the Israelis of their presence.

Palestinian activists are coalescing around non-violence as a way of highlighting what occupation and Israeli control mean for them. Although peace is clearly desired among activists, their immediate concern is the day-to-day human rights violations that characterize life in the Occupied Territories.

Activists like Sheerin al Araj are using the present lull in violence to

perfect the non-violent methods of their struggle. News from the ground appears to be working against the Palestinians, as Israel has been given ample room to expand settlements and entrench its occupation, but al Araj is optimistic. “Each country has its own history. Each one of them has had their own 200 years of struggle,” she remarked as we walked around her modest village. “Palestinians had the same but what we did not have and was thirty years of quietness. In Egypt, they had [quietness] through dictatorships, which was awful, but it did give them a certain amount of quiet. That is what we have lacked but it does not matter because the Palestinians will have their moment. The ultimate result will be similar to the rest of the Arab world - and that is what scares the hell out of everybody.

The power of civil society to affect change in the Middle East is the lasting contribution of the Arab Spring. But for Palestinians, civil society has been affecting change since the beginning of their struggle. The problems, as activists understand it, are the corrosive influence of party politics, the reliance on armed resistance against a formidable military, and division. The last twenty years of endless peace negotiations and sporadic cycles of violence have been the worst for Palestinians, in terms of the abject loss of their rights. It is only a matter of time before the majority takes the lead of the activists.

“We taught everybody in the Middle East how popular resistance works,” said Ayed Morrar. “In the First Intifada, before Facebook and Twitter, while the Arab people were in a deep sleep, we taught them how to resist. Now we see real examples of people achieving their freedom in front of us and the price of our freedom is not more than their price. We are ready to pay this price.”