

West Bank: An evening in Burqin

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The sun is slowly coming down in this northern West Bank village. We are really a few kilometers from Galilee just outside the green line. Around the city of Jenin and the nearby villages, a cluster of Israeli settlements remind us of the occupation, as well as numerous checkpoints controlled by Israeli soldiers.

Burqin is an old village. The story is that one day, Jesus stopped here on his way to Jerusalem. He met lepers and told to these wretched of the world that they would be healed and indeed they were, so says Luke in the New Testament [[1](#)]. We visit a very antique church in the middle of the village where our Palestinian guide tells us this is precisely where the miracle occurred.

Today, Burqin is part of a densely-populated circle of villages living off what remains of their land. Most people identify themselves first and foremost as farmers even if, in real terms, their income now mostly comes from outside through, now declining, remittances from brothers and fathers that have migrated everywhere in the world.

Indeed, Burqin is in the middle of the storm. It's been like that for quite some time. So is the whole Jenin district, a green and hilly region inhabited by over 250 000 Palestinians. The villagers revolted against British rule in the 1930s under the leadership of the famous Ezzedeen Al-Qassam. Later, they fought hard in subsequent wars against Israel. Finally in 1967, Jenin and the West Bank were occupied. In 1987 with the first Intifada, the whole district became a burning field of revolt. And despite the 'interim agreement' of 1993, it remains so even today. Technically speaking, Jenin is now 'co-managed', so to speak, by Israel and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), as part of the 'deal' agreed under the Oslo agreement.

This evening, things are pretty quiet. Gathered to enjoy the usual narghile, people chat and share jokes. The weather is cool and pleasant. It seems so far away from any sort of conflict and tension. The 'mukhtar' (traditional village head) is happy because he has finished completing his house (after 25 years) where a large part of his extended family resides. When the night falls, we move to a marriage where hundreds of people have come to celebrate. In the center place of the village men gather to cheer the groom. In the surrounding houses, women are looking by as much as they can, but they also are enjoying their own ceremony. Marriage is really a way to assure redistribution. Before the end of the evening, the new family will have gathered enough money to start building their house, most probably over the top or beside the rest of the extended family ('hamula') which is at the heart of the Palestinian society.

Later, the loudspeakers call men to dabke, the Palestinian dance. They hold themselves by the shoulder and go around in ardent foot-trumping runs. There is no doubt about the substance of the matter, as songs, symbols and gestures are all about resistance, patriotism and 'sumud' (steadfastness). Toddlers run around with elders, with a majority of teens and very young men. It is taken seriously, you can see that in their faces. But it's neither dramatic nor romantic. It has no other sense than expressing this combative identity which characterizes Palestinians. The party continues until late at night.

Most of the village has now gone to sleep. Arafat, Karim, Jihad, Refaat and many others are moving in and out to engage in the other favorite Palestinian art, politics. All of them, and indeed most of

their age group have participated in resistance activities. 'We are all graduates of the 1987 Intifada' says Refaat. Most have gone to jail, many were tortured or maimed at one point or the other.

This 'generation' came hard against the occupation. But it was also a challenge, although implicitly, to the original leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). After a while however, the PLO under Yasser Arafat was able to prevail. Nonetheless even today, the memory of the Intifada is very strong. 'Israel was on the defensive when we pushed back their tanks with our bare hands'.

After the agreement between the PLO and Israel in 1993, there was hope that some sort of a deal would come true, even if not perfect. But rapidly, the house of cards came down. Successive Israeli administrations accelerated the locking-up of the occupied territories through the expansion of settlements and so-called «by-pass roads», destroying the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state. Things got sour and very tough, especially when resistance pushed up again. When the second Intifada erupted in 2000, Jenin, as usual, became the epicenter. The whole Northern region became the nightmare for Israel because of the suicide bombers that came from it to blow themselves up in Tel-Aviv and other Israeli cities. In fact, many of these 'shahid' were from Burqin. 'We were really surprised that so many of our neighbors became Martyrs. We understood later how many young men were so angry and determined to use their own body for what they saw as an act of resistance' says Arafat. Later in 2002, Jenin became famous again when fierce Palestinian resistance caused scores of Israeli soldiers' casualties. The army came in full force and literally bulldozed the refugee camp, killing 56 Palestinian civilians and fighters in a few hours.

Today apparently at least, Burqin and Jenin are 'pacified'. The Palestinian authorities are working hand in hand with Israeli security under the guidance of US general Keith Dayton. It's part of the latest deal which was approved by President Mahmood Abbas and implemented by his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The fighters linked with Hamas or Fatah's dissidents have been arrested or forced into hiding. Over 1000 Palestinians are detained by the PNA, without trial or accusation, just like over 10 000 Palestinian political prisoners in Israel. According to the human rights organizations, torture and maltreatment is abundant in the Palestinian jails.

However in terms of securing Israel, this not enough. Indeed, encirclement of Palestinian cities and lands remains tight. Even if some control points have been closed, there are literally hundreds of Israeli-controlled check-points in the West Bank. Otherwise, the 'border' remains closed except for a few dozen Palestinian workers who can work in Israel. Palestinians from inside the green line, who used to come shopping into the district, are not often seen, as they are discouraged by the roadblocks, therefore adding on the economic decline of the Palestinian areas. The destruction of Gaza is used as a terrorist threat: 'do not dare to resist because we will do with you (in the West Bank) as we have done with them in Gaza'.

Around the table however, people are not here to lament about the occupation which they consider the 'normality'. They have no illusion about the 'peace process' or on the economic benefits that were announced by the PNA and Israel in the last period. 'The battle early in 2009 in Gaza destroyed any illusion that was left around' says Refaat, a teacher currently managing a Palestinian NGO in Ramallah. 'The idea that somehow, a political settlement is about to come is buried'. In the meantime, the economic and social situation remains dreadful, with unemployment rates of 50-80% and a very serious deterioration of living conditions. Before his illness, Ariel Sharon, the then Israeli PM had said it clearly, 'we are going to put Palestinians on a diet', meaning the kind of siege that has been imposed on the Palestinian society in the last seven years. Everything is done to weaken, humiliate, destroy the Palestinians except an all-out massacre which would remind the world of the situation. 'Killing us slowly is more efficient from the official point of view in Israel' says Refaat.

Ok, this is 'normal' from the point of view of people living under the occupation. But what next then?

What can happen?

Everyone agrees that the Al-Aqsa Intifada triggered by Yasser Arafat in 2000 failed and in fact was used by the occupiers to strengthen their position. In the meantime, Fatah, the movement that led Palestinian resistance for the last 40 years, is agonizing as a credible and legitimate political force. Military resistance by Hamas also failed and even worse, the Islamist movement has fallen into the same pitfalls that were manifested by Fatah standing in as the 'PNA'. This became evident with the events in 2007. After a brief fight, Hamas organized a 'counter-coup' to the move planned by the Israelis and the US through their Palestinian surrogate, Fatah's boss in Gaza, Mohamed Dahlan. The problem however is that after this, Hamas became itself very authoritarian, using the 'good old' tactics of nepotism and control. 'The 'take over' of the strip by Hamas in 2007, says Refaat, badly damaged the reputation of a movement that was initially seen by many as an alternative to the declining and corrupted post-Arafat Fatah'.

In the meantime under Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli regime seems to be determined to erase once and for all the possibility of ending the occupation. Is that the end of the story I asked my Burqin friends?

'Our capacities are presently limited' says Arafat, the local leader of the Democratic Front, one of the three left Palestinian parties [2]. He explains that the DF that used to have thousands of activists back in the late 1980s has now 'only' 100 members in Burqin. He is surprised when I say that very few villages in the world, even in countries with a strong activist tradition, can claim 'only' 100 local members (out of a population of 5000). Nonetheless for Arafat, the issue is rather qualitative. As for most of the people around the table, the fact is that currently, the Palestinians have 'no leadership'. As DF activists, they do not really respect their own leadership although everyone agrees that Abd al-Karîm, otherwise known as Abu Laila (the current DF leader in the occupied territories), is brilliant and honest. 'Our leaders have been transformed into the 'loyal opposition' and are not really opposing the capitulationism of the PNA'. Moreover, the leadership has accepted to play a minor role in the management of an unacceptable regime. 'They criticized Fatah all the time, but the salaries of the officials is paid by Abu Mazen' (nom de guerre of Mahmood Abbas).

In fact, even Abu Laila admits himself that his 'hands are tied': 'We have now two police states, one in Gaza and one in the West Bank'. He believes that Abbas is cooking a deal with Hamas to perpetuate the impossible status quo, for 'each one to have relative control over 'his' territory, leaving the occupation in command'. He is hoping to raise the issues of the social and economic dimensions of the present crisis so as to attract angry youth, but that is problematic. Traditionally, the DF as well as groups like the PFLP were perceived by the population as more 'radical' nationalists, all geared towards national liberation, rather than left-leaning socialist groups struggling for the social empowerment of the poor.

At another level, leftists factions like the DF are not well positioned to criticize the authoritarianism of the PNA and of Fatah, having themselves shaped by heavily-centralized decision-making. This democratic deficit is coming back to haunt the left. It is now discussed, and there are moves to implant another culture. But there is still a long way to go.

Mustapha Barghouti, now the head of the Palestinian National Initiative (al-Mubadara), was one of the few that saw this problem before others. He defected from the Communist party to promote another political culture, more open and inclusive, focusing on civil non-armed resistance against the occupation as an apartheid society contradicting all provisions of the international human rights convention. But now Mustapha is also pessimistic. Although a fervent supporter of the peace process, he cannot be but very somber: 'The Israelis have no incentive to compromise. They are not pressed in any fashion by the Palestinian authorities. They are comforted in their intransigence by

the continuous support from the US, despite and beyond Obama'. Despite initial hopes and frequent encounters with the new administration in Washington, Mustapha sees no result to affect the sinister alliance condoning Israeli practices in the occupied territories as well as their aggressive behavior towards the Arab and Muslim countries.

So the spirit is a bit low tonight in Burqin. Nonetheless, I am informed that the activist core of 'only' 100 members remains active through social projects of different kinds. The 'social safety net' provided by a politicized civil society (closely linked with the left) is crucial for the people, apart from family support.

My friends also animate a workers' coalition against the local (municipal) authorities and UN agencies who, despite the fact that they employ many Palestinians, are not very respected because of inefficient and corrupted practices. The flame is kept alive and like nowhere in the struggling global south, activists remain connected with their people.

Is the solution through civil resistance initiatives like the well-publicized movement in Bil'in (near Ramallah)? It has been much promoted as the way to confront Israeli apartheid practices through peaceful demonstrations and well-planned media events. Around the room, there is a consensus that the tactics used in Bil'in are effective. Moreover, it was the most spectacular aspect of the first Intifada. 'We were able then to paralyze the occupation by confronting, without arms, the Israeli occupation. The non-military component of the struggle became the centerpiece of resistance.

However, it is 'premature, says Arafat, to abandon altogether the military part of our struggle. This is not India here, and the Israeli occupiers are not like the British, who had no will to fight'. He concedes at the end that traditionally, the Palestinian struggle was 'overmilitarized' and did not, except during the first Intifada, build enough strength through mass mobilization.

Political discussions carry on over the night. As people slowly retire, I am left with a contradictory impression. I am still struck with the statement about the 'only' 100 activists remaining. I keep thinking, 'wow, if we could have this in my country!'

But the permanence of resistance goes beyond that. I understand that most of the people in Burqin are well aware of what is happening not only locally, but at a larger, even international level. On this of course the impact of Al-Jazeera, in addition to the wide use of the internet and mobile phones, cannot be neglected. 'People now see and hear directly the voices of the opposition in Palestine and the Arab world' says Refaat. 'We have lost our naivety towards our self-proclaimed leaders. We are free thinkers now'.

In this village of 5000, there is no capitulation. 'We are ready to rise up again, as we have no choice really'. Israeli occupation forces, even supplemented by PNA military and police, do not control the area. 'This is not Egypt or Jordan, we do not bow down to the Sultan' say my friends. Even if General Dayton is working hard to develop local repressive capacities, the occupation cannot rule by force only.

From the Palestinian side, resistance is not based on a 'grand strategy', therefore the inherent tendency within the movements to reproduce some of the same mistakes and impasses. But because it is a people's struggle and not a movement of a minority, resistance remains basically uncompromising, so it is quasi impossible to crush it. Is this enough? Certainly not. But one day probably not far ahead, the facades of the occupation will crack again, resulting from the complex fractures that undermine the Israeli society and State (not talking about the declining evolution of the US Empire). Occupation will also crack from the imagination of Palestinians fighting endlessly, generation after generation. For sure, the people of Burqin will continue to be part of this invisible

accumulation.

Footnotes

[1] Luke 17:11-19

[2] The DFLP originally came out of the Popular Front (PFLP), which remains numerically speaking the largest leftist force. There is also the People's Party (former Communist Party).