

# Nonviolent mobilization between a rock and a hard place: Popular resistance and double repression in the West Bank

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Jacob Høigilt

*Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

## Abstract

Recent research on contentious politics in the Middle East emphasizes the importance of repression and its effect on social movements, often manifested in demobilization and so-called ‘nonmovements’. This case study of West Bank Palestinian activism seeks to go beyond such outcomes. The current, youthful nonviolent Palestinian grassroots activism in the West Bank is persistent, despite repeated violent repression. Focusing on the interplay between context, practices, and networks, this article shows how an increasingly vocal and visible popular resistance movement has asserted itself despite facing *double repression* – from the occupying Israeli state and the Palestinian National Authority. In a highly repressive context characterized by widespread demobilization, especially among young people, the impetus for mobilization is not perceived opportunity, but rather existential threats. The analysis focuses on how long-term repression from the external occupier and the internal elite contributes to forming specific kinds of contentious practices and networks among young Palestinian grassroots activists. By deploying new and creative contentious tactics they partly succeed in challenging the Israeli occupation without risking sanctions from the internal Palestinian elite. They are also able to criticize this elite implicitly, bringing popular pressure to bear on it. However, while the strategic use of nonviolence has provided these activist environments with a degree of resilience in the face of repression, they are unable to mobilize on a wide scale as long as the Palestinian political elite does not support them.

## Keywords

contentious politics, mobilization, nonviolence, Palestine

## Introduction

On 11 January 2013, a group of about 200 Palestinian activists, most of them youths in their 20s and 30s, erected tents on a piece of land between Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement of Ma’ale Adummim. Dubbed E1 by Israeli authorities, the area is occupied by Israel, and plans for major settlement construction there had recently been approved by the government. As soon as the first tent had been erected, Palestinian and international media reported that the activists had announced the establishment of a Palestinian village called Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun) in the area, and that the Palestinian owners of the land had agreed to this move. In effect, the Palestinians had established a settlement on Israeli-occupied land. It took the Israeli

authorities more than two days to get the necessary court rulings to dismantle the tents and arrest the activists, and by that time, around 2,000 Palestinians had visited or tried to visit the site, and it had attracted the attention of major international news outlets, like *BBC*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times* (Sherwood, 2013).

Bab al-Shams was a particularly successful act of non-violent contention, but it was not unique. In fact, it was just one example of creative grassroots activism in the occupied West Bank during recent years. Nonviolent resistance to occupation has a long history in Palestine (Qumsiyeh, 2010). The specter of suicide attacks and the

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**Corresponding author:**

jachoi@prio.no

violent second intifada in the 2000s diverted both Palestinians and observers from this fact, and the international donors' smothering embrace of Palestinian civil society discredited the notion of nonviolence for several years during and after the second intifada (Norman, 2010: 103–113). As I will show below, recent years have seen a revival in non-violent activism despite repression and a general atmosphere of frustration, apathy, and demobilization among the Palestinian population. Many of the most energetic activists are young people in their 20s and 30s. This article aims to explain how, against the odds, a youthful Palestinian grassroots movement has managed to sustain its non-violent activism. It also analyzes the effects of the repressive context on the contentious practices and networks that engage in them, asking: How does the highly adverse political environment affect the mode and extent of mobilization among young grassroots activists? I argue that the interplay between context, networks, and practices has produced an energetic and creative grassroots movement that is nevertheless significantly limited because of the political constraints imposed on it from above.<sup>1</sup>

This analysis seeks to contribute to the engagement between social movement theory and Middle Eastern studies in recent years. Scrapping the orientalist approach that saw Arab and Islamic politics as somehow exceptional, a number of studies in the early 2000s employed social movement concepts in their analyses of Islamism (Clark, 2004; White, 2002; Wickham, 2002; Wiktorowicz, 2004). This encounter has been followed by a fruitful, critical appraisal of the study of contention in the Middle East (Albrecht, 2010; Bayat, 2010; Beinin & Vairel, 2011; Kurzman, 2012). Two ideas in particular form the backdrop of this article. First, Beinin & Vairel (2011) call for a relational rather than structural approach to contentious politics where context, practices, and networks are the central variables through which to understand contention in Middle Eastern societies. They also highlight the need to account for *demobilization* in societies that are characterized by far less freedom than is the case in Western countries, which have generally served as theory-building cases. Second, recognizing the impact of violent repression on political activism in the Middle East, Asef Bayat has introduced the idea of social 'non-movements': 'collective actions of noncollective actors [...] [that] embody shared practices of large numbers of

ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change' (Bayat, 2010: 14). The value of both contributions is obvious in light of the trajectories of the so-called 'Arab spring'. Norman's (2010) account of the dynamics of demobilization during the second intifada in Palestine also brings out the relevance of such additions to the study of contentious politics.

However, I argue that the Palestinian or, more specifically, the West Bank case may move the research agenda forward by showing how activists are able to overcome fragmentation and demobilization by employing creative contentious practices in the face of sustained repression. Adopting Beinin & Vairel's (2011) reorientation towards context, networks, and practices, this article argues that the *double repression* inflicted on Palestinian grassroots activists by Israeli and Palestinian authorities has led them to devise innovative, nonviolent practices. These practices succeed in challenging the occupation by pacifying or bypassing the Palestinian elite. However, the occupation and a culture of political factionalism also put severe constraints on activists' capacity to build strong networks. The stubborn will of Palestinian grassroots activists allows us to look beyond the concepts of demobilization and social non-movements and analyze the interplay between a highly adverse context and creative contentious practices.

Building on Schock's analyses of nonviolent resistance (Schock, 2013: 281; 2005: xviii), the article attempts to contribute to a synthesis of social movement scholarship's emphasis on structure and civil resistance studies' concern with the strategic logic of nonviolent resistance. As Schock observes, there has been relatively little focus on the agency of insurgents: on how their strategy, methods, targets of protest, and degree of organization may help them overcome repression (Schock, 2005: 33).<sup>2</sup> He refers to this ability as resilience: the 'capacity of contentious actors to continue to mobilize collective action despite the actions of opponents aimed at constraining or inhibiting their activities.' (Schock, 2005: 142). I argue that while the political context and certain features of West Bank social networks impede nonviolent mobilization, activists' practices – both their strategies and their innovative tactics (McAdam, 1983) – have helped them overcome these impediments to a certain degree.

The analysis is based primarily on interviews with activists and observers in the West Bank from fall

<sup>1</sup> I deal mainly with activism that takes place in the West Bank. For a broader study of recent nonviolent resistance in the Israel–Palestine conflict, including examples of international and Palestinian–Israeli joint initiatives, see Hallward & Norman (2011).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in the latest edition of their classic study of contentious politics, McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly (2001) turn towards a more relational approach to contention. However, critics point out that their focus on a taxonomy of contentious mechanisms makes their framework somewhat unwieldy.

2011 to fall 2013.<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork of varying length (from one week to four months) was carried out at different intervals during this period. The author stayed in Jerusalem during short stays and in the West Bank village of Beit Jala (close to Bethlehem) from late December 2012 to early May 2013. During these stays, I travelled around the West Bank meeting activists and ordinary university-aged youth, from Nablus in the north to Hebron in the south. Interviewees were selected based on snowballing. Starting with leaders of community centers in refugee camps and NGOs in Palestinian towns, I identified other activists with less formal organizational attachments. I also took care to interview young people who were interested in politics but had chosen to stay away, citing fear or disillusionment. All in all I conducted 33 tape-recorded interviews.<sup>4</sup> Akram Atallah of the Norwegian research institute Fafo's Bethlehem office set up and participated in several of the interviews. A respected former activist and political analyst, he helped me gain access to interview objects who would otherwise have been hard to approach as an outsider. I also witnessed and sometimes participated in contentious events such as demonstrations, prayer meetings at a site threatened by annexation, disruptions of meetings, and stone-throwing against Israeli soldiers.<sup>5</sup> News reports from independent Palestinian media and activist web sites also form an important part of the source material. The data include interviews and news reports from October 2011 to February 2014. Palestinian activism relies heavily on Facebook for the sharing of news and viewpoints, and data from Facebook have been used as background material, but I have chosen not to quote directly from Facebook posts due to the semi-private nature of several of the profiles in question. Interviews with activists who spoke fluent English were conducted in English; other interviews were conducted in Arabic. The English translations that appear in this article are my own.

### **Context: Explaining demobilization in the occupied Palestinian territories**

There have been ebbs and flows in the fortunes of the Palestinian national movement, but observers and activists alike agree that never have prospects been bleaker than at present. Shortly stated, Palestinians in the

occupied Palestinian territories (OPT) experience a situation of double repression: by the occupying Israeli state and by their own, quasi-sovereign authorities in the form of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank and the Hamas government in the Gaza strip. The demobilization of nonviolent activists, a phenomenon that has persisted since the Oslo peace process started in 1993 (the second intifada in 2000–05 notwithstanding), may thus be explained by factors both external and internal to the Palestinian people in the OPT.

To start with the external factors, the nature of the Israeli occupation has reduced the West Bank into disjointed Palestinian-controlled enclaves, outside of which the movement of any Palestinian is subjected to severe restrictions and hindrances. Settlement construction, which was a major cause of the uprisings in 1987 and 2000, has continued relentlessly in the West Bank. Excluding annexed East Jerusalem, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank increased from 190,206 in 2000 to 350,143 in 2012 (Foundation for Middle East Peace, 2012: 7). The large and small Jewish settlements with their bypass roads, the winding route of the separation barrier, and the existence of numerous military 'security zones' closed to Palestinians all carve up the geography of the West Bank. They are accompanied by a large number of closures and checkpoints that make travel between villages and cities cumbersome and at times impossible. This has led to political fragmentation and weakening of central national institutions, resulting in the resurgence of kinship and family identities and loyalties (Khalidi, 2008); in Jamil Hilal's words, a 'politics of the local' (Hilal, 2010: 31).

The socio-economic results of the occupation and the Oslo process are perhaps not as immediately visible to the visitor, but they are no less detrimental to political development. The PNA has 'minimal policy space' (Khalidi & Samour, 2011: 12), lacking a central bank and being unable to offer investors a predictable environment (due to Israel's ultimate control over the land and money transfers). The many Palestinians who are left to their own devices by a powerless quasi-state have few opportunities. Access to the Israeli job market has become steadily more limited, but still approximately 100,000 Palestinians work in Israel, about 20,000 of them in Israeli settlements on Palestinian land (Ma'an news agency, 2013a). Many Palestinians feel forced to work for Israel or in settlements, as other income is hard to find. The World Bank recently calculated that youth unemployment (among 15–29-year-olds) was 25.9% in the West Bank (World Bank, 2012: 7). Israel's stranglehold on the PNA economy and the Israeli export

<sup>3</sup> Where only the first name of an informant is given, the name has been altered to protect his/her anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> The interview guide is available at JPR's data replication website: <http://www.prio.org/JPR/Datasets/>.

<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, I never participated in acts of the latter two kinds.

industry's penetration of the Palestinian market has thus led to a situation where a significant number of Palestinians rely on taking menial jobs in Israel for their income, and Israeli goods and produce cannot be avoided as there is often no alternative available. Feelings of shame, resignation, and apathy are widespread.

Internal Palestinian structures and dynamics also lead to political fragmentation, resignation and apathy. As Wendy Pearlman shows, the second intifada highlighted the already existing fragmentation of Palestinian politics: it suffered from lack of both leadership and a sense of collective purpose (Pearlman, 2011: 152–157). The end of the second intifada and the security reform started by Mahmoud Abbas ended years of relative anarchy, but it also made the PNA more authoritarian than it had previously been, apparent in the worsening human rights situation (International Crisis Group, 2010: 131–133). From having to contend only with the Israeli state as an adversary, today activists face repression also from their own authorities, who do not accept internal challenges or other ways of dealing with Israel than their own. The 2007 conflict between Hamas and Fatah, with the ensuing political split between Gaza and the West Bank, exacerbated political fragmentation and authoritarianism. Since the Palestinian state-building project started after the second intifada, and even more so after the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, any Palestinian political actor that wants to challenge the status quo has to struggle against not one repressive regime, but two – the Israeli and the Palestinian.<sup>6</sup> The result of the Palestinian elite's policies is a politically fragmented and paralyzed society.

Officials, activists, and observers of West Bank society all agree that it is characterized by political inertia, not least among young people. The head of the PLO's Youth Development Center in Jerusalem, Mazin al-Ja'bari, commented that 'I think youth lost confidence in the political system, they lost confidence in both sides. They have become frustrated, and this frustration has not translated into activism – they have become careless instead.'<sup>7</sup>

I met several young people with a background in Fatah or leftist activism who had either quit activism altogether or expressed deep disillusionment with the movement they belonged to. Many young people who

took a keen interest in politics stayed away out of disgust with politics, like Mona, a 19-year-old student at Bethlehem university who had lost faith in the national movement: 'The political factions do not make a difference. [...] [Factional politics] is only a way to distract people and get them to do what they [the factions] want. They each have their own visions, and none of them is what I want.'<sup>8</sup>

She is not alone. As Sayre & al-Botmeh (2010: 8) state, Palestinian youth is characterized by disillusionment and political apathy since the second intifada effectively ended in 2005. Disgusted by political infighting, they point to the sufferings of their older brothers or parents, asking rhetorically what they gained from losing the best years of their life in Israeli prisons (Christophersen, Høigilt & Tiltnes, 2012: 11).

Internal Palestinian politics affect activism negatively in two ways. First, a feeling of fear resulting from increased authoritarianism can easily be discerned in the West Bank. A version of classic Arab neo-patrimonialism arrived in Palestine when the exiled PLO leadership returned to the Occupied Territories after the Oslo accords in 1993. Under Yasser Arafat, a clientelist system was established as he tried to keep the various factions of the PLO, armed groups, and clan leaders under control (Khan & Hilal, 2004; Tuastad, 2010). As for the main Palestinian liberation organization, Fatah, of which Arafat was also chairman, it became closely associated with the PNA after 1994, with obvious tension between its role as state-supporting party and its role as a resistance movement (Pearlman, 2011: 154). One immediate consequence was the damage done to internal and national democracy (Bröning, 2011: 73). Made up to a large extent of Fatah elite, the PNA in the West Bank has been marked by the need to assert control, especially after the split with Hamas in 2007. The result is that the role of civil society and the culture of popular, cross-factional grassroots activism of the 1980s have been weakened at the same pace as the Fatah and Hamas elites have asserted their control, as shown in a major study by Nadia Abu Zaher (Abu Zaher, 2013: 401). Instead, a 'culture of fear' has come to dominate the political climate in the West Bank, as the International Crisis Group (2010: 35) put it. PNA security forces cooperate with the Israeli military in identifying and detaining militant activists; Palestinian dissidents of all political colors are persecuted; and the media is closely monitored. The PNA has, in short, begun to resemble the other Arab police states.

<sup>6</sup> There are two separate regimes in the West Bank (the Fatah-dominated PNA) and Gaza (the Hamas government). In this article, only the West Bank situation is dealt with. There are significant differences between the West Bank and the Gaza contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mazin al-Ja'bari, Bayt Hanina, 15 January 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mona, Beit Jala, 7 March 2013.

To the atmosphere of fear is added a widespread feeling of frustration (*ihbat*) and cynicism. Even committed political activists expressed their utter sense of hopelessness. Two female Fatah activists in their late 20s castigated their own organization at all levels, telling me they felt ‘frustrated’, ‘tied and bound’, having ‘no space’.<sup>9</sup> The sentiment of cynicism has been brilliantly analyzed in Lori Allen’s (2013) study of human rights NGOs in Palestine. Allen shows that the PNA’s attempt at state-building, its professionalization of politics, and the influx of vast sums of money with strings attached from Western donors after 1993 have had damaging results: ‘sincere and committed struggles for social justice are replaced by the “business” of development, individualistic self-promotion, and political apathy’ (Allen, 2013: 97). The solidarity and will to self-sacrifice that Palestinians connect with the grassroots national liberation movement are seen to have been betrayed in the post-Oslo political system. NGO workers often feel caught up in a system they do not believe in but rely on to feed their families; those outside the NGO system look at it with disdain. There is a widespread perception that values of social and national solidarity have been lost to the advantage of a PNA-induced consumerism that distracts especially the middle class from the national struggle with its material lures (Allen, 2013: 89).

Repression in itself is not necessarily a hindrance to mobilization. It might instead facilitate it, as shown in the first intifada from 1987. As Khawaja (1993) writes, commenting on that sustained act of contention:

Repression can strengthen collective identity, the sense of belonging to a group, by operating as a symbolic reminder of a group’s shared circumstance vis-a-vis authorities and their agents of control. And salient identity implies increased within-group solidarity. (Khawaja, 1993: 66)

It is the combination of Israeli occupation and Palestinian authoritarianism that accounts for the widespread demobilization in the West Bank today. The existence of not only an occupying power, but also two repressive national liberation organizations (Fatah and Hamas) has distorted Khawaja’s picture. Palestinian activists in the West Bank and Gaza today experience double repression. The emergence of the repressive PNA and Hamas governments has confused and broken down the ‘collective identity’ and ‘belonging’ that Khawaja identified as a

major force in the 1987 intifada. As Abu Zaher (2013: 121–126) shows, the ‘within-group solidarity’ has been weakened as a consequence of the liberation movement turning into two predatory statelets. This reality has contributed to the current atmosphere of disillusion, fear, and alienation. There are clear limits on even nonviolent mobilization against both the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian elite’s policies. For example, during a demonstration against Palestinian–Israeli negotiations in July 2012, PNA repression ‘took the form of *mukhabarat* [secret police] and police beating people with batons and metal chains, sexually assaulting and spitting in the face of female protestors, kidnapping and beating several people, including journalists, in police stations’ (O’Ceallaigh, 2012). The security coordination between Palestinian and Israeli forces, which was instituted as part of the Oslo framework, makes the PNA appear as a ‘sub-contractor’ for the occupying force. As one report stated the matter, ‘it is common to hear Palestinians complain that they are living under two occupations’ (Clarno, 2013: 37).

### Practices: The challenge from the grassroots

Against this bleak background the sustained effort of grassroots activism in the West Bank is a remarkable phenomenon. The Bab al-Shams incident which introduced this article was part of a chain of youth-led activism in the West Bank that has become steadily more visible and energetic during the last five years. Employing the quarterly chronology of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* from 16 November 2010 to 15 November 2011, I counted no less than 248 demonstrations, rallies or marches, mostly in the West Bank.<sup>10</sup> Inspired in part by the village protests in the West Bank that have taken place since 2003 to protest against the separation barrier (Hallward, 2009), young Palestinian activists have made a clean break with the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s policy of pursuing national liberation through bilateral negotiations in the Oslo peace process. They seem also to have scrapped peace activism and instead

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Fatah activists Dina and Manal, Bethlehem, 11 February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> All in all, in Gaza and the West Bank there were 420 contentious incidents during this period, of which 304 were nonviolent and 116 were violent. In this context, nonviolent incidents include stone-throwing by civilian teenagers against Israeli soldiers raiding West Bank towns and against armed Israeli settlers. Violent attacks were almost exclusively in the form of rocket or mortar attacks on Israel from the Gaza strip, carried out in most cases by unidentified Palestinians who in most cases belonged to one or other of the numerous militant resistance groups, including Hamas’s ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades.

turn to nonviolent resistance, as Maia Carter Hallward finds in her interviews with one-time peace activists (Hallward, 2011: 164–167). Without bothering to wait for cues from their elderly leadership, young Palestinian grassroots activists engage in unarmed but confrontational resistance against the ongoing Israeli occupation and confiscation of West Bank land. They have marched on checkpoints; agitated repeatedly for Palestinian unity across factional borders; demonstrated inside Jewish settlements; and organized big annual demonstrations in Hebron against the settler presence in the middle of that city.

Their activism exhibits several characteristics that are linked to the adverse context in which they find themselves. First, it is not driven by political opportunity, but rather by the perception of threats so grave that they must be confronted, despite the high costs and small chances of (at least immediate) success. What motivated the activists I interviewed was not the possible attainment of statehood so much as the physical threat of losing their homeland due to the continuous expropriation of Palestinian land and the construction of Israeli settlements on it. Towns like Bethlehem and Qalqilya are almost completely surrounded by the separation barrier, and big swathes of Palestinian farmland around the West Bank have been confiscated, probably in preparation for settlement building. Despite the knowledge that they have very little leverage and risk exposure to tear gas, rubber-coated bullets, and imprisonment, activists felt unable to stand by and watch the slow annexation of their land. This reasoning illustrates the importance of perceived threats as a driver of contention in and by itself (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Beinin & Vairel, 2011: 21–22). The dynamic is reminiscent of the pattern of occupation and resistance before and during the first Palestinian intifada (Alimi, 2007; Khawaja, 1993), suggesting that the long-term Israeli repression of nonviolent Palestinian resistance quells it only temporarily.

Second, this activism is creative, having engendered new forms of contention. Bab al-Shams was hailed as a qualitative change in Palestinian resistance by activists themselves and by the local media, since the ‘villagers’ took the initiative from the occupying power (Ma’an news agency, 2013b). Israel is often accused of creating ‘facts on the ground’ (e.g. settlements and the separation barrier) that are hard to negotiate away once they are established. What the Palestinian activists did in the Bab al-Shams incident was in effect to establish their own ‘fact on the ground’ rather than responding to an action taken by Israeli soldiers or settlers. Having prepared the event in secrecy, they caught both the Israeli and

Palestinian authorities by surprise and were able to make it into all of the local and several international media, like the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* (Kershner, 2013; Sherwood, 2013). The peaceful activists were of course no match for the Israeli military, and their village was demolished after a short while, but the point of the initiative was not that it should last. The act was instead pointedly symbolical in its creativity. First, it signaled the will to be offensive, instead of at best reacting to Israeli policies and at worst remaining passive – the Palestinian leadership has patently been guilty of this at several junctures. Second, it generated attention to the rapidly decreasing chances of establishing a separate Palestinian state in the face of continuous encroachments by the Israeli military and settlers. Third, the fresh approach to resistance by itself energized the Palestinian public and the media discourse. More than 2,000 individuals visited the village for the two days it was allowed to exist, and there was intense and enthusiastic discussion of it in Palestinian media. For a time, it ended the state of lethargy seen to pervade the political field and directed energy towards something constructive, instead of the endless series of recriminations between warring factions of the elite. In the words of Doug McAdam (1983), the young nonviolent activists engaged in ‘tactical innovation’, a process that has been shown to invigorate social movements. McAdam shows that the US civil rights movement saw sharp increases in activism connected to new forms of contention, and from the as yet scant data it seems that on a much smaller scale, a similar process took place in the West Bank: after Bab al-Shams, four more villages were established along the same pattern in the course of less than a year. As McAdam notes, however, tactical innovation succeeds in quickening the pace of insurrection only if opponents are not able to neutralize these moves ‘through effective tactical counters’ (McAdam, 1983: 736). The nonviolent activists in the West Bank have not so far been able to actually increase the pace of insurrection, for reasons I will return to shortly.

Third, the nonviolent practices of recent years have proved their potential as sites of ‘diffusion’ and ‘brokerage’ (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). If we define diffusion as ‘transfer in the same or similar shape of forms and claims of contentions across space or across sectors and ideological divides’ (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001: 68), at least two examples of diffusion can be seen. Bab al-Shams made explicit a connection with other kinds of popular activism that had remained largely implicit before that time. The press release for the initiative was published by the Popular Struggle Coordination

Committee (2014). This is a loose organization that gathers activists from the various West Bank villages which have staged the weekly, nonviolent demonstrations against the building of the separation barrier since 2003. It is a distinctly grassroots movement, although its popularity has induced many among the PNA and Fatah elite to appear for a short while at the scene, getting interviewed by the media, before the Israeli military starts firing tear gas grenades against the protesters. The fact that the press release was published by the Committee indicates personal and organizational integration on the grassroots level. In other words, the village protests set off a number of other initiatives that shared the concern with losing the land and the tactic of directly confronting the occupying force, notably Bab al-Shams. And Bab al-Shams in turn inspired four similar initiatives across the West Bank, including Ein Hijleh village outside Jericho in January–February 2014, where the activists managed to stay on the land for one week before they were forcibly evicted by the Israeli military. In all of these initiatives, political and ideological differences were put aside in order to concentrate on the common enemy.

Moreover, being a grassroots initiative, Ein Hijleh drew supporters from local communities in the Jericho area, where the village was situated. For example, when the Israeli military closed off the roads leading to the area in order to prevent the activists from getting supplies, locals who knew the area intimately delivered water and other necessities on horseback.<sup>11</sup>

As for brokerage, the linking of two or more unconnected social sites by a mediating unit, the press release distributed by the activists of Ein Hijleh features an interesting paragraph:

Based on our support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) we call upon our friends and international solidarity groups to stand with the demands of the Palestinian people and boycott all Israeli companies including Israeli factories and companies that work in the Jordan Valley and profit from Palestinian natural resources. (Popular Struggle Coordination Committee, 2014)

The BDS campaign, which calls for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights was initiated in 2005 and has gained recognition as a significant evolution of the Palestinian struggle (e.g. Tamari,

2013: 60; Hallward, 2011: 207–211).<sup>12</sup> The campaign unites Palestinians in the occupied territories, Israel, and the diaspora, and it also involves an international community of solidarity activists. Its steering committee is composed of 27 Palestinian NGOs, representing the whole political spectrum, and it has succeeded in coordinating international awareness-raising campaigns. The last example of the latter was the 2012 Global Day of Action, which included actions in 23 countries, the majority of them European.<sup>13</sup> The BDS campaign has been so successful that both the Israeli prime minister and the US secretary of state have been forced to recognize it as a counterforce to their own policies. The BDS national committee makes a point of including all the political factions among Palestinians, and has become an important node in the network of grassroots resistance initiatives, not only within the occupied territories, but across the geographic divides that separate Palestinians. As one activist-scholar states, the BDS campaign has ‘to some extent opened up a space for Palestinians – and particularly Palestinian youth – to restart the process of reclaiming their national movement by organizing Palestinians across national boundaries’ (Jamjoum, 2011).

Fourth, the BDS campaign is perhaps the most obvious example of how these grassroots activists have been able to bypass or pacify the Palestinian elite by linking different social and political sites together in a common initiative. Not prone to accept dissent on either internal or external issues, the Fatah-dominated PNA and its security apparatus have been quick to stifle activism they view as a challenge to their authority, regardless of whether that activism is directed at Israel or at the Palestinian leadership. BDS coordinator Omar Barghouti explained that it has managed to avoid repression by making all the political forces, including Fatah, part of the BDS National Council, not as individual members, but as members of a joint committee that constitutes the biggest partner in the BDS National Council (BNC). All the factions are able to agree on the principle of BDS, and so they could agree to come together in such a cross-factional committee. Thus Fatah is indirectly part of the BNC, but neither it nor the PNA can be held responsible by Israel for the discourse and actions of the BNC. This is one reason the BNC escapes PNA repression. Another is the fact that the BNC represents nearly

<sup>12</sup> Its website is found at <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>.

<sup>13</sup> The BDS campaign’s own description of the Global Day of Action is found at <http://www.bdsmovement.net/activecamps/bds-global-day-of-action-2012>.

<sup>11</sup> Skype interview with spokeswoman for the Popular Struggle Coordination Committee Diana al-Zeer, 5 March 2014.

all the Palestinian political forces; it acts as a broker by connecting different social sites and speaking on their behalf (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001: 142). This function gives the BDS campaign an unusual degree of freedom and political leverage in relation to Fatah and the PNA:

We can have our cake and eat it, too. We have legitimacy based on the membership of all the political parties, but none of them interferes. None of them sits at the table as a party. [...] We have nothing close to democracy, nothing to stop the PNA from trying to crush us. But they know you can't crush such a huge coalition without alienating the entire society. So if you check the Arabic media you will not find one single attack on the BDS movement by any Palestinian official. They are too scared. *We* criticize them, but *they* do not attack us. That's leverage.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in the fall 2013 the BNC was able to publish a strongly worded condemnation of PNA president Mahmoud Abbas's policy of normalization (i.e. engaging in joint projects with Israeli organizations) under occupation without getting punished for its boldness.

It is not only by co-opting the elite that the grassroots movement avoids repression. It may also remain silent on the shortcomings and abuses of the Palestinian authorities and focus squarely on nonviolent confrontation against the occupation in ways that do not embarrass the PNA. Settlements like Bab al-Shams are one such tactic. A related tactic is to purposefully hike in West Bank areas that are closed to Palestinians for 'security reasons', the generic excuse the Israeli government uses to close off several parts of the occupied West Bank to its inhabitants. Activists will video-record themselves while walking, talking about where they are and what they do, and then share the videos on Facebook as an exercise in raising morale. A bolder variation on the same theme is to infiltrate a settlement, whip out banners and placards and start a demonstration against settlements *inside* one. These are actions that directly challenge the occupation (which is often otherwise hidden behind the 'screen' of the PNA) and galvanize bystanders. At the same time, unlike violent activism they do not cause difficulties to the PNA, which has committed itself to provide security for Israel in the West Bank as part of the 2003 so-called Road Map to Peace supported by the Quartet (the USA, Russia, UN, and EU). Consequently,

the authorities feel no need to crack down on this kind of activism.

In contrast to such successful bypassing of the PNA, when activists have tried to challenge the PNA directly without sufficient political groundwork beforehand they have been swiftly dealt with. For example, in the midst of the Arab uprisings a group of young activists dubbed the 15 March Movement managed to mobilize thousands of Palestinians under the slogan 'the people want the division [between Fatah and Hamas] to end' – a clear criticism of the Palestinian elite. However, Fatah was able to infiltrate the protests and managed to portray it as their own idea in the West Bank, severely discrediting the initiative (Ma'an news agency, 2012). The result was that the demonstrations died down as quickly as they had appeared. In a less subtle manner, PNA security forces simply attacked a group of youth activists who gathered peacefully under the label Youth for Dignity in Ramallah in 2012 to protest against President Mahmoud Abbas's decision to host a former Israeli minister of defense for talks in that city (O'Ceallaigh, 2012). The repression of this criticism of normalization stands in sharp contrast to the BDS campaign's ability to voice such criticism.

Fifth, a common trait of the BDS campaign, the establishment of 'settlements' on Palestinian land, and the nonviolent village protests against the separation barrier is that they focus their activism on specific issues or aims on which everybody can agree, including the PNA and the top echelons of Fatah. Nobody can criticize the attempt to retake occupied land in the West Bank or to boycott Israel without losing whatever political credibility and legitimacy they might have. At the same time, these initiatives are by their very existence an implicit criticism of the Palestinian leadership, because it consistently fails to engage or develop similar popular tactics, clinging instead to a strategy of negotiations and state-building that most Palestinians believe is counterproductive. The Youth Against Settlements campaign in the southern West Bank city of Hebron is a particularly potent illustration of this point. Its foremost aim is to pressure Israel to reopen a central market street in downtown Hebron which it closed to Palestinians in order to facilitate the transport in and out of the city of some 400 Israeli settlers who have taken up residence in the middle of the old city. Isa Amr, the campaign's coordinator, works independently of the factions and was scornful of the Palestinian elite's contribution to Palestinian resistance: 'Neither Hamas nor the PLO factions wish to relate to us, but when we organize a demonstration, thousands turn up here in Hebron. When they do the same, only some handfuls of people come, many of

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the Omar Barghouti, Ramallah, 6 November 2013.



whom are Israelis.' He reported widespread antipathy to the PNA and massive support for grassroots initiatives like his own among the city's inhabitants.<sup>15</sup>

### Networking under double repression

Palestinian society is characterized by 'thick' networks (Broadbent, 2003). Commenting on activism in Japan, Broadbent writes that 'institutionalized networks, norms and roles carry much heavier weight' there than in the USA and Western Europe. 'Accordingly, networks have a highly structural, normative, actor-defining quality in Japan' (Broadbent, 2003: 210). The same is true in the Palestinian context, but here, these thick networks represent a hindrance rather than a resource for the development of independent grassroots activism.

The main reason for this is the entrenched political culture of factionalism. Always an important factor in Palestinian politics (e.g. Sayigh, 1997: 229–243), factionalism contributed to political rigidity and hostility in the post-Oslo reality. Hamas and leftist factions like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine opposed the Oslo framework, and so enmity between them and Fatah became stronger. Simultaneously, the elite level in Fatah became almost synonymous with the PNA, which therefore took on a factional quality and turned into a more and more authoritarian quasi-regime. Persecuted and harassed, leftists became disillusioned and joined donor-driven NGOs instead, making themselves irrelevant as national resistance activists (Allen, 2013: 75–76). As became apparent in 2007, Islamists did not succumb to Fatah dominance, and after a bloody split established their own quasi state in Gaza. These developments have exacerbated cleavages along factional lines. Several of the youth I interviewed for this study complained that it was impossible to carve out a space independently of one of the factions. Even if they tried, others would inevitably view them as belonging to this or that faction based on their families' known affiliation.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it seems nearly impossible to assume an independent position from which to voice criticism in Palestinian society. Factionalism impedes any new political initiative because it is likely to be framed as one faction's attempt at discrediting or sabotaging another, and so the young activists are caught in a web of factions and allegiances. This situation has an

interesting parallel in Lebanon, perhaps the most factionalized country in the Middle East. Analyzing the limited success of the youth movement that struggled against sectarianism, Charles Tripp succinctly observes that 'they were too much part of the very thing they were trying to resist' (Tripp, 2013: 131). The same can be said of Palestinian youth activists, who remain caught up in a patriarchal political system. Tripp's comment, and the limited impact so far of Palestinian youth activists, are reminders of how social and political structures may effectively restrict the range of choices available to individual activists, a point that has been used to criticize the rather voluntaristic model of nonviolent activism proposed by Gene Sharp (Schock, 2005: 44–45; Dajani, 1994: 99).

The other impediment to the evolution of young activist networks is the Israeli system of closures and control on the West Bank, what Jeff Halper (2000, 2009) refers to as a 'matrix of control', defined by

military administration of much of the West Bank [...]; a skein of 'facts on the ground' [...], notably settlements, but also bypass roads connecting the settlements to Israel proper; and administrative measures like house demolitions and deportations. (Halper, 2009)

The matrix of control impedes movement and communication between the villages, cities, and regions of the West Bank. Restrictions were particularly tough during the second intifada, when for months at end, it was impossible to travel between several of the major cities, so that people were confined within the boundaries of their municipalities. Restrictions have since been loosened somewhat, but there is still a large number of closures and checkpoints dotting the West Bank. In 2012, there were 98 permanent checkpoints, hundreds of mobile ones, and 450 'unmanned physical barriers' – mounds of dirt, concrete blocks, gates, and road segments closed to Palestinian traffic (B'Tselem – The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 2012). As I described above, one consequence of this is the renewed rise of family and clan in local politics. But it is not only the Palestinian polity that has become fragmented. Activists trying to organize independently of the factions run into their own problems. A former Fatah student activist from Bethlehem related that during a lecture, the professor had mentioned the northern West Bank city of Jenin, a hotspot during the second intifada. A female student interjected: 'Jenin? What Jenin? Where's Jenin?' My informant was shocked that she had obviously not heard about the place

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Isa Amr, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ilham, a youth center director, Bethlehem, 18 January 2013, and Bakir, former Fatah student activist, Bethlehem, 28 January 2013.

before.<sup>17</sup> The example is extreme, yet many young Palestinians from cities like Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem admit with some embarrassment that they have rarely or never visited major cities in the West Bank, just a two-hour bus ride away, and have few ideas of the political or social life there. As each of the Palestinian enclaves is subject to specific threats by the occupation, such knowledge is important in order to forge common understanding, solidarity, and national sense of purpose.

Between them, factionalism and the matrix of control have made integration across political and geographical divides difficult for young grassroots activists, despite their shared disillusion with the political elites and their common grievances. The result is that although independent networks of youth activists exist in cities across the West Bank (with Ramallah as a main node), they constitute at present less a movement than a kind of marketplace of ideas and protest events to which youth from various parts of the West Bank contribute from time to time. They are at odds over important issues like the desirability to engage in armed resistance, whether to agitate for the dismantling of the PNA or not, and if the UN track is the right strategy for liberating Palestine. They have yet to gather under a common ideological and programmatic umbrella.

However, a process of integration is taking place, in no small measure as a result of the diffusion and brokerage functions of nonviolent practices described above. The well-known activist Jamal Jum'a, coordinator of the grassroots organization Stop the Wall, admitted in an interview that the organization 'had not addressed youth to a sufficient degree', but that this was changing. He said that since 2006, the organization has focused on engaging youth, and it supports the independent youth activists without trying to co-opt them.<sup>18</sup> During fieldwork, I met Jum'a repeatedly at social gatherings and political gatherings involving young activists to which we had been invited separately. This connection between independent youth and a well-established campaign with a network all over the West Bank is one indication of increased integration. Another such integrative channel is provided by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign. A Ramallah-based activist stated that it was this campaign that inspired him to join the resistance struggle. Today he is an important figure in the networks that struggle against naturalization with Israel and for PLO reform.<sup>19</sup>

The Bab al-Shams incident with which I introduced this article illustrates the evolving nature of these networks particularly well. I met activists in their early and mid-20s in Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Hebron who had got to know about the initiative through trusted friends. Travelling to Bab al-Shams, many of them met like-minded activists from other parts of the West Bank for the first time. Bab al-Shams provided them with an important opportunity to establish new contacts and engage in discussions about the path for future resistance. For the first time, these young activists were able to discuss freely future strategies and political choices in an atmosphere relatively free of factional tensions and competition.<sup>20</sup>

Of particular interest in this regard is the fact that several of the youths who engage in these networks are active members of Fatah Youth. Some of them are severely critical of their own organization, but not to the extent that they want to leave it. Instead, they participate in grassroots activities together with youth from other factions and independents. Some of the organizers of Bab al-Shams and Ein Hijleh were prominent Fatah activists. This point is important because factionalism is an obstacle to the independent youth's attempt at mobilizing, as argued above. Considering the fact that Fatah is the dominant player in the West Bank and a crucial part of any attempt to reform Palestinian politics, its younger generation's willingness to join their independent peers in activism and criticism of the older generation is potentially important. Moreover, there is awareness among the top echelons in Fatah that they need to give their young activists more space and influence.<sup>21</sup>

However, until now none of the factions have really responded to the criticism and disillusion they face from society and even their own members, and despite the energy of the grassroots activists who challenge them there are clear limits to what can be achieved without support from above. Isa Amr in Hebron, who has been able to gather thousands to protest against the occupation, was quite clear that he felt he had no influence on Palestinian politics whatsoever.<sup>22</sup> To be able to mobilize massively, these grassroots activists are dependent on support from above, and that support is not forthcoming. On the contrary, the interviews show a deep-seated belief among youth that the elite is able to appropriate any initiative taken by grassroots activists

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Bakir, Bethlehem, 28 January 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the Jamal Jum'a, Jerusalem, 12 December 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Fajr Harb at the Carter Center, Ramallah, 4 April 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with grassroots activist Ahmad, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Hasan Faraj, leader of Fatah Youth, Ramallah, 6 March 2013, and Husam Zomlot, adviser to central Fatah leader Nabil Shaath, Ramallah, 9 April 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Isa Amr, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

and use it to their own advantage rather than in the cause of liberation:

They [the seniors] say that we're with you, we support this and that initiative – but everything becomes little more than exploitation of youth activism. The idea comes from the youth, and the older generation exploits it for its own benefit.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

After this article was written, and during the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014, something quite remarkable happened in the West Bank. Young protest organizers managed, without assistance from any of the political factions, to gather at least 10,000 people for a peaceful march against the Qalandiya checkpoint near Ramallah to protest against the occupation (Sherwood, 2014). It was the first time in many years so many people turned out for a demonstration. At the same time, the event showed the difficulties faced by young activists. They desperately appealed to leaders of the various political factions to adopt the initiative and secure that the momentum was being upheld, but they all refused to do so.<sup>24</sup> The incident nicely captures two main results of the analysis presented here.

First, in the current situation, the youthful grassroots activism I have been reviewing here cannot grow into a mass movement, as the structural and political impediments it faces are too great. Indeed, in light of the double repression it is subject to it is remarkable that there are still so many activist environments and so much sustained activism. The explanation for this offered here is two-pronged. On the one hand, many Palestinians perceive the current threats posed by the Israeli occupation and theft of land as so grave that they are willing to resist it despite the risks they take and the small chance of success. In other words, this is a clear case of threats rather than opportunity driving mobilization. On the other hand, having taken the decision to engage in activism, a combination of creative contentious practices and strategies to pacify or bypass the Palestinian elite have made activists able to confront the Israeli occupation in spite of the impediments to mobilization. The strategic use of nonviolent resistance has provided them with a certain

degree of resilience (Schock, 2005: 142) that enables them to keep up and even intensify contention, a process that started some ten years ago and is still ongoing.

It is hard to say much about the outcome of the re-energized nonviolent resistance among West Bank Palestinians. At present it has a limited impact. Activists are able to create international headlines at times, and their initiatives have been covered by Palestinian media and served to inspire people who would otherwise not have joined the movement. However, they have not managed to seriously alter the dynamics of either internal Palestinian politics or the Palestine–Israel conflict.

The analysis supports Beinin & Vairel's (2011: 9–13) claim that contexts, practices, and networks are crucial factors for making sense of Middle Eastern contentious politics, which takes place in less open societies than exist in Western Europe. However, I have sought to move beyond the concepts of demobilization and social non-movements to investigate how organized, sustained contention may take place despite heavy repression. Palestinian activists face an unusually difficult situation, since they are repressed by both external and internal actors. However, their predicament is not unique, and the concept of double repression and nonviolent ways of countering it may be profitably used in other contexts, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. In the Middle East, one conceivable case would be (largely ineffective) Iraqi nonviolent protest against the US occupation and the Maliki regime (Zangana, 2013). Further afield, the peace communities in Colombia may be studied as cases of resistance against double repression. These communities have developed nonviolent methods of resistance that civilians may use to resist repression from all the sides in Colombia's violent conflicts (Alther, 2006).

Despite the difficult hurdles it faces, nonviolent Palestinian grassroots activism has proven able not only to survive, but to bring more and more pressure to bear on the Palestinian elite and the Israeli state which it challenges. Nonviolent Palestinian activism is certainly between the rock of occupation and the hard place of Palestinian authoritarianism, but by renewing the repertoire of contention and developing alternative networks activists seem to have been able to find a soft spot.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with activists Suhad and Yusuf, Hebron, 19 March 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication with Dr Ahmad Jamil 'Azim, lecturer at Bir Zeit University, who was himself approached by the organizers of the demonstration, Ankara, 23 August 2014.

## Replication data

The interview guide for the fieldwork in the West Bank is available at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/>.

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JACOB HØIGILT, b. 1977, PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies (University of Oslo, 2008); Senior researcher, Fafo Institute of Applied International Studies (2009–2013); Senior researcher, Peace Research Institute Oslo (2013–); most recent book: *Islamist Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2011).