

# Chapter V

## THE PALESTINIANS' BEAUTIFUL RESISTANCE

by Marine

*My name is Marine. I'm now 20 years old and I'm studying Communication in Brussels. I left to Palestine because I wanted to be able to look at the conflict from another point of view than that of the media. I wanted to pass on my experience of what's happening there to my friends and family. I do not claim I know everything about the situation. At least, I tell and share with you what I saw and went through on the place.*

Having a heavy story to bear, littered with death and exile, being subjected to daily humiliation and feeling helpless in front of a situation that, unfair as it may be, doesn't stir much reaction amongst international public opinion. All this can drive people into a cycle of violence and beyond the point of no return. Some resist the temptation to take the law into their own hands, others yield to it - in Palestine as in other places.

During our 2009 trip, we got to know **Ali Jiddah**<sup>54</sup>, a Palestinian of Nigerian origin who lives as best he can in one of the poorest districts of the old city of Jerusalem\*. He told us the history of the Afro-Palestinians as well as about himself, particularly his teenage years at the time when Israel had just annexed East-Jerusalem\* : *"In 1967, my father had financial problems so I decided to stop school and go to work. That is when I began to feel what it meant for a young 17-year-old Palestinian to live under occupation. There was first the way the Israeli soldiers stopped us on the streets, humiliated and harassed us. Sometimes they even beat us. Then there was the way Israeli civilians behaved with us : I remember them coming in a group into the Old City, singing and dancing in a very arrogant way. I felt I was losing my dignity. Mine and that of my country. I began to talk with some colleagues of my own age who were experiencing the same things : we all tried to imagine what we could do to put an end to this situation."*

Ali told us about his background as a resistance fighter : *" That year, I became a member of one of the Palestinian factions, the PFLP\* : the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. At my time, in 1968, the cycle of violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis was acute. Sometimes Israelis attacked Palestinians, who reacted. Sometimes Palestinians attacked and the Israelis responded. I took part in that cycle of violence. One night I went to Jaffa Street in the new part of the city. I placed a bomb there : 9 Israelis were injured, all civilians. The day*

<sup>54</sup> cf. Chapter 4 : Living is resisting

*before, Israeli planes had bombarded a Jordanian city\* and many civilians had been killed. Our intention at that time was to deliver a message to the Israeli civilians, to say to them : “Be careful ! If you don't protest nor do anything against the brutality of your government, you'll pay for it at the end of the day.” One month later - I was exactly 18 years old - I was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Look, taking part in the struggle is not an outing. There is a price to be paid...”*

Time has passed. Ali, today a wise man fully aware of how precious life is, denounces the evils of violence and has pinned his hopes on a peaceful solution. As he said, *“in spite of how dark it may seem, I know that among Israelis there are some really serious people who want to live in peace with the Palestinians and who believe, as I do, that the ideal solution to the conflict is the creation of one secular democratic state for everybody”*

Ali is not an exception. Many people in Palestine are convinced armed struggle is both horrifying and ineffective. It doesn't mean they have given up fighting for their rights but they choose an alternative way through peaceful means. This is nothing new though : *“Next to armed struggle, Marianne Blume \* had told us before we left, there has always been a civil and popular resistance that wants to show to the occupant that the Palestinians do exist inside Israel. The first intifada\* (or civil resistance) was launched in 1987 from the inside and consisted mainly of spontaneous actions : did the Israelis close down Palestinian schools and universities ? The teachers rented flats and taught there in secret. Did the Israelis confiscate the Palestinians' tools and forbid them to cultivate their fields? They set out on cultivating every bit of land or on their terraces (and before that, under their tents) to support themselves.”*

Today, the Palestinians still resist occupation through peaceful means in their everyday life : some only wear red-white-green-black clothes (the colours of the Palestinian flag), other refuse to adopt daylight-saving time or close their shops before closing time. These measures may seem trivial but *“The Israelis are at a loss faced with the devices the Palestinian people come up with to counter the interdictions”*, Marianne confided to us with a smile.

Alongside spontaneous resistance actions against the occupier itself, something else has slowly but surely shaped up all throughout the West Bank : resistance through culture, with art as sole weapon. The aim is to help oneself carrying on living despite the misery occupation causes as well as to act against indifference and ignorance outside the borders. The initiators of the “ Beautiful Resistance\*”, as they call it, are the first leaders of **Al-Rowwad Cultural Centre\*** in the refugee camp of Aida (Bethlehem). As we spent ten days there, we had plenty of opportunities to take part in the different activities the centre organizes and to catch a taste of their philosophy.

The original idea of the “*Beautiful Resistance*” was to make outside people know about the situation in Palestine via theatre because, as **Ribal\*(19)** rightly said : *“If I go to Austria, France or other countries and tell people about Palestine, they may either say they believe me and agree with me, or maybe they won't and still be on Israel's side. But if we make them feel what the situation is like here,*

*maybe they will all manage to understand what is going on.*” Stirring up emotion through acting, dancing and singing in order to be heard and give a face to all the forgotten people of the conflict is what the “Beautiful Resistance Fighters” aim at. *“But if I throw stones, nobody will listen to me. If I have a gun, everybody will call me a terrorist, which would be true. So let’s try something else.”*, Ribal said.

So, « *Beautiful Resistance* » works at breaking the stereotypes generally conveyed in the media by giving another picture of the Palestinians and of their culture abroad. But this is not its only goal : as Salam\* (18) put it, *“We also try to help the participants in the workshops to become better people, as we think that becoming a better man or a better woman is a way to fight and resist occupation.”*

The most important is probably that this peaceful resistance enables the children and teenagers to express themselves through art : Al-Rowwad Cultural Centre organizes a whole set of artistic activities to help the children of Aida channel the violence they hold in deep down : *“Many of them have lost their bearings, Issa (30), a theatre leader, told us, and it is vital that they can reconnect to their body, to their emotions and manage to express them again. This is all what our work here in the centre is about : help the kids to “get out of confinement”, to open the door to their imaginary world, to their creativity and to dreaming. Art as a way out of violence and imprisonment. The children of Aida learn to free themselves from a much too heavy reality and to immerse themselves in the imaginary world of dreams, to be children again.*

The theatre rehearsals we attended in Al-Rowwad were a disturbing combination of sad facts and trusting hopes. The children’s claim to a childhood free of violence and of worries that should be for adults only hung over the whole play. Their right to dream and to exist fed the dialogs they were acting and prompted us to think, take action and to bear witness :

*“We are pupils in the school  
We have the right to study.  
We have the right to play.  
We have the right in our childhood.  
We have the right to talk for ourselves”*

the young actors and actresses chanted in unison. Yet, while their parents were claiming :

*“Let’s regain our rights  
May the day of freedom dawn !  
We are the generation of the Intifada  
We fed freedom on stones  
Our air is tear gas  
Our perfume smoke and burnt tyres “<sup>55</sup>*

and called for armed resistance, today’s young Palestinians do theatre, sing and dance *Dabka*<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> Extracts of « We are the children of the camp », by A. Abu-Srouf, director of Al-Rowwad

<sup>56</sup> Traditional Palestinian dance

**Salam** testified the importance of the theatre workshops in the children's development : *"Most of them have no place to go and play, nor to express their feeling. They live in a violent environment. Most of them have seen or suffered from violent acts by Israeli soldiers but also by members of our community. It's hard work to teach them non-violence but as here, they learn other ways to express their feelings and I think that one day, they will be able to live in a normal environment again"*.

The loss of one's bearings and the difficulty to express oneself don't only weigh the children down. We attended a quite disturbing scene in Aida : we had told our young Palestinian friends there that we would love to interview them and show the recordings of the interviews to our friends and families in Belgium. We had asked them to answer our questions in Arabic and **Oussama** or **Samira** (both leaders in their 30s) translated into English for us. We had already been working with them for three days and on that day, four of us were ready to film, record and interview **Mazen** (19). We all knew each other quite well now as we had spent all the time together since our arrival in the camp. A last cigarette for Mazen (it's amazing how much the teenagers and young adults of Aida smoke : smoking as an oxygen bottle), and he started telling us about how important the activities at Al-Rowwad were for him. Everything was going on fine until we asked him about his dreams. Mazen suddenly became flustered, couldn't find the words anymore and finally cast his eyes down and kept quiet. Oussama told us then to stop filming : *"Cut!, Cut, please!"*. He inhaled deeply before he set off explaining what was going on : *"This is one of our problems. Many children, many adults too, have real difficulty talking about themselves. We try to solve that through the work we do here in the Centre, but it takes time, a lot of time. What Mazen tells you comes from the heart, you know ? But he isn't strong enough to talk to you like that, I mean normally, to find the words as a normal person would be able to do. That's what you are touching."*

We answered Oussama that we were well aware this was a difficult exercise for Mazen, but that this was exactly what we wanted to bring back to Belgium : the image of real men and women, with their strengths and human frailty. We wanted to go back with pictures and voices showing that the people in Palestine are human beings, just like us. It didn't matter if Mazen mumbled or got confused and we asked Oussama to tell the boy that he didn't need to feel ashamed nor shy with us. We also asked him to tell Mazen we loved him. Oussama translated. Mazen raised his head, smiled at us so gently and whispered : *"I love you too."* Believe me, we all had a lump in our throat. One after the other we stood up from our log and gave Mazen a big hug : *"You were simply great, Mazen. Thank you for trusting us"* We all have tears in our eyes, both stunned and deeply moved by what had just happened.

Indeed, the impossibility to talk about oneself, one's feelings, one's dreams is one of the scars we were left with. Maybe the most obvious one. As **Rima Awad**<sup>57</sup> from the **PCC\*** (organization that develops help services) says, *"the consequences of occupation on the Palestinians' mental health are disastrous"*. Still about Mazen : one night, as we were preparing dinner with some of our young Palestinian friends

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<sup>57</sup> cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

(as it had become customary) and chatting while chopping up the vegetables , we couldn't help crying out : *"But Mazen ! Why didn't you tell us it was your birthday last week ?! We would have organized a party for you!."* He had first smiled without answering anything. But as we insisted : *"Why didn't you tell us ? We would have spoilt you !"*, he eventually whispered : *"Because I hate my life. I hate myself and I hate my life."* We hadn't expected to hear that at all and just kept silent for a while, so sad for him, for all of them.

Now, Marianne Blume had told us one day she was filled with wonder faced with the Palestinians' extraordinary capacity to start up again (and she hoped they would never lose it...). Our friend Mazen proves it again : from under the huge burden thrust on all of them, he has taken up rap music and, together with his buddies, **Jamal\*** (17) and **Mustafa\*** (16) he has created a rap band that has a telling name : the *"Freedom Sons"*\*. Their songs tell about the everyday life of the young Palestinians and give them the feeling they have the power to make things change. *"We write all the lyrics of our songs. We don't want to write only for the Palestinians, but for all the world : we want to tell them about our life here, express what we feel and what we think. We feel that our words are very strong. And it is a really good feeling to know people listen to us, hear our voice."*

If the *Freedom Sons* want to show what the situation in Palestine is like, they also remind the people that, after all, they are just youngsters leading a youngsters' life : *"At first we wrote a lot about the political situation here and the problems it creates. We still do but today, we also write songs about the other part of our life. Songs telling the people we love that we love them : our friends, our mother"*. And Mazen added with a serious look : *" We are not terrorists. Most of you have this image but we are human beings who can sing, dance, laugh. We don't only cry, get injured or killed !"*

What is clear is that the urge that drives all the " beautiful resistance fighters " of Aida is to give a voice to the Palestinian people and make each of them exist as individuals. Photography and cinema are two other means of achieving this, as powerful as theatre and music are. **Mourad** 27) shoots films. *"Bethlehem, 4 a.m"*, for example, is a wonderful documentary that shows huge sensitivity in reflecting the plight of the victims of occupations. It does so with a great sobriety and without any settling of scores. Mourad's resistance weapon is his cine-camera. As for **Ayssar** (18), he goes up and down the streets of his camp looking for realities his camera could bring to light : *"Usually we are the ones in front of the cameras. But now, I am behind it and I take the pictures I want to so I can show reality the way I see it. It's a great opportunity to say what I think about our daily life. I'm not that much interested in politics but I want to talk about the problems people here have with water, food and so on."*

The « *Images for Life* » workshop that is organized in Al-Rowwad helps young Palestinian people to work on a personal image of themselves as well as of their environment and life. An image that is indeed sometimes quite far from the often biased one the official media give. An image that allows them to become aware of their uniqueness too.

So, this is it for the “ Beautiful Resistance” of the refugees of Aida Camp. However, I wouldn’t want you to think this is a special or isolated occurrence or, as sceptical people intimated, that we met the « best ones» among the Palestinians only. Fighting without violence against the violence of occupation is what many of them do : it is so in Jerusalem where Palestinian guides offer the tourists alternative tours around the old city and invite them to look at things from a different point of view. It is so in Hebron, where the Committee works at rehabilitating the houses of the old centre beautifully so as to give its inhabitants a pleasant and soulful place to live in. It is so in Silwan<sup>58</sup>, where the people met again to protest peacefully against Israel’s decision to raze Palestinian houses in order to build an amusement park for the Jews : next to the speeches, we saw little kids in their beautiful costumes waiting to go on stage and protest with their dance steps as their only weapon. The words freedom, justice, and peace were flying over it all, meaningful and sincere. The speakers dedicated them to us and asked us to pass their message to our fellow-citizens : *“Please, look at our children and see them, listen to our children and hear them... Tell your people that we teach peace to our children..”*

Taking over for them : this is the urgent appeal of many of the young Palestinians we met : *“Here, in Palestine, it’s very difficult for us to change the situation, Ribal said to us. But you who have come here to Aida camp or simply to visit Palestine, there are two things you can do when you are back home : tell people about what is really going on here, tell them about the situation as it is.”* And he added in a weary voice : *“ Believe me, the Palestinians are no terrorists. They lead such a normal life, in which nothing happens : they get up in the morning, go to Al-Rowwad, or to the wall, or to school to take exams. That is all they have. They don’t build new tanks or new helicopters.”*

Yes, keeping going to school : the young Palestinians have understood they need tools to make things change. **Mustapha** (16) confirmed : *“Most of the students here in Palestine like learning. They want to learn because they know it’s the only way to a better future. They all live in a bad situation, they see the economic situation is bad, but in spite of all that, they all hope, or better, they all believe they can make things better, build a better future”*. And **Ribal** addressed Théodore (15 at the time of our trip, the youngest in the group) : *“Of course, as you said yesterday, Théo, you can do nothing to change the way things are at the moment. But later, thanks to your studies, you will be able to. I’m convinced that studying, be it theatre or politics or other subjects, will give you tools to speak about the situation in Palestine. To speak of justice. Not only in Palestine. Later, you will be able to act so there is more justice and freedom for all the people who, here in Palestine or in other countries, live under occupation.”*

The spirit of the “Beautiful Resistance” could have inhabited the “ free” Palestinians only, or those who have never had to face the iron giant directly. Well, it is not the case : even inside the prisons, non-violent resistance is getting organized. There, the prisoners share their knowledge and everybody contributes to each other’s personal development, particularly that of the younger prisoners. **Tareq** (29) who was arrested at 18 and spent 16 months in jail<sup>59</sup>, told us that “Each

<sup>58</sup> cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

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*prisoner teaches the others what he knows : a doctor teaches first aid, the teachers teach English or the history of the country. Or people tell about their experience. The last ones to have arrived give news from outside. So everybody can keep informed...". Same testimony by Marwa about her little brother : " To help the boys stand imprisonment, the elder prisoners organize activities for them. My brother, for example, has started learning English and cooking... And he does gymnastics... The prisoners just share their knowledge and experience because it is the only thing they have..."*

Before I conclude on this subject, I can't resist telling you about **Allah**, the young salesman we met in Bethlehem with Sandra<sup>60</sup>. The escapade he made four years ago up to Jerusalem, right under the nose of the Israeli surveillance, is a last pure example of peaceful civil resistance to confinement and oppression. We had a great moment sitting together on the floor of his little souvenir-shop and listening to him telling us the whole story : *"It started as a bet with some friends : you want to go to Jerusalem ? Are you game ? I bet you we do it tonight!.."* And David told us how they left that night, first by car, then on foot, how they skirted round the checkpoints, crawled up to a place where the wall was still just wire fencing. How they progressed metre after metre in the darkest night ever and across the countryside they knew nothing about, getting up and pulling their stomachs in as they hid behind the trees when the sound of steps or engines caught them unawares. In which state of overexcitement and fright they finally arrived in sight of Jerusalem, crept into the old town and there, at last, let themselves unwind a bit, lost in the middle of a crowd that, what a delight!, wasn't in the least aware of their presence !... *"We walked, and walked... over every centimetre of the town, every centimetre of our town, thinking : we are in Jerusalem! WE ARE IN JERUSALEM!!!... We just couldn't believe it!..."*

Yes ! They had managed !... They slept for only four hours during that 24-hour-long adventure and David's eyes were still quivering at the memory of all they had had to endure and above all, the memory of the absolute bliss it had been to be able to walk again in the streets of Jerusalem... Each step had been an act of disobedience that gave him and his friends the feeling they had recovered some power over themselves and their own lives.

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Rebellion and revolt are words both cursed and loved. A violent revolt that is none of our business will be criticized whereas a peaceful one which we can side with will be glorified. I have given you here facts and testimonies and I think I managed to stay objective. Which doesn't mean I want to stay neutral.

" Beautiful Resistance" is a subject that has particularly enthralled me. It reminds me of the time when I considered the resistance fighters of the history of mankind as heroes and examples to follow for a better world. I was young and candid and still believed everything was possible in a world in which citizens committed themselves to building a better place for everybody. But as there seemed to be

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<sup>60</sup> cf; Chapter 3 : The Palestinian archipelago - Bethlehem

more resistance fighters in the past than in the present, I had ended up thinking the time of rebelling and acting was over.

I chose to tell you about the Palestinians' « Beautiful Resistance » because it was a way for me to rekindle the fire of my hope for a fairer world. Also because this form of resistance is true to my idea of a rebellion : peaceful and through artistic activities.

Choosing to tell you about this Beautiful Resistance was also taking side of the human rights, which by the way were born from a rebellion. But tell me : why do we have to rebel and fight again for something everyone of us is supposed to have gained ?... Why such regress to an archaic no-law system ?... Why should one always dominate the other ?... Why is this need to possess and exclude the other stronger than the desire to share ? Why this greed ?... Questions that eventually have but one answer : because human beings are but human beings

Yet, fortunately, human beings are also what **Tareq** tells us they are : as we asked him how he managed to be such a sweet and tender young man, how come he hadn't turned into an angry person after the months he had spent prison and in this life in a camp surrounded by the wall, Tareq had this simple answer : “ *I chose to. I chose to be and behave as a human being. I chose to be a man bursting with humanity. If they had turned me into a beast, they would have won*”.