



Thinking about social movements and obstacles to protesting globally: lessons from Palestine

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Books reviewed:

The Palestinian Prisoners Movement: Resistance and Disobedience

Norman, Julie M. (London, Routledge, 2021), 146 pp. ISBN: 9780367749415

Palestinian Women and Popular Resistance: Perceptions, Attitudes, and Strategies

Kayali, Liyana (London, Routledge, 2020), 260 pp. ISBN: 9780367444358

The Palestinian Prisoners Movement, by Julie M. Norman, and *Palestinian Women and Popular Resistance*, by Liyana Kayali, are important books that contribute innovative empirics and theoretical observations to conversations that take place in the disciplines of sociology and political science, in particular, between scholars who research social movements and contentious politics.

Looking at the trajectory of anti-occupation and national liberation movements in Palestine since the establishment of the state of Israel, with a focus on the two decades preceding the Oslo agreements and those after, Norman and Kayali discuss what happens when the opportunities for mobilisation gradually foreclose and, consequently, what shape do social movements take in such circumstances.

To do so, they focus on prisoners and non-activist women. Both authors examine the negative influence that the post-Oslo consolidation of the occupation has had on these two populations but, at the same time, highlight how the political work of prisoners and politically unaffiliated Palestinian women—seemingly at the margins of anti-occupation movements—has created innovative strategies of mobilisation, quite central to larger dynamics of contentious politics.

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Prisoners

Norman investigates the transformations of the Palestinian prisoners' movement, which has historically provided symbolic capital for political mobilisations outside of prisons and has been central to the Palestinian national question. She explains how the combined effect of the enlargement of the carceral complex in Israel, aided by the expansion of securitisation measures on the one side and the polarisation of the Palestinian political scene on the other side, has affected the organisation and the strategies of the prisoners' movement. As explained in chapters three to five, collective hunger strikes and civil disobedience acts, the strength of the "counterorder"—a de facto alternative and prisoners-led system of life within prisons—transformed into individual hunger strikes, usually demanding the release of prisoners rather than the improvement of carceral living conditions for all, while more individualistic interpretations of the counterorder became the new normal. In prisons, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, the traditional sharing of economic resources and the ability to overcome factional identities have been weakened by two factors: first, the post-Oslo general dismissal of "resistance" as the mission of the entire Palestinian nationalist movement—replaced by the Fatah-led technocratic institution-building and by factional infights—and second, the shifts in prison administration, including rampant privatisation of the carceral-industrial complex, a more widespread use of "human intelligence" and the legalisation of a larger number of forms of detention and disciplinary practices within the prisons (chapter seven).

Such transformations have had the effect of increasing the dependence of the prisoners' movement on the political factions active outside of jails (chapter six), marking a significant change from the past, when the prisoners had the resources to self-organise while external movements and factions followed their lead. In spite of all these changes, Norman confirms that the prisoners' movement maintains its centrality to the Palestinian anti-occupation and nationalist movements.

Norman's book wants to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the relations between movements inside and outside of prisons, in a context where incarceration amounts to a mass experience due to the huge number of Palestinians in jails, and due to the territorial fragmentation, the enclosures, the limitations to free movement (which recreate open-air prisons) that have developed along with the occupation. This book stands out against the current literature as an important addition, although at times, the findings offered read as too general and sweeping.

Nevertheless, Norman's book is an optimistic one. Building on Gene Sharp's notion of *political jiu-jitsu*, she argues that the prisoners' movement creates an ethical dilemma for the Israeli administrators and security forces, who are forced into negotiations with them to avoid projecting a negative image and/or because the system becomes unworkable due to the prisoners' non-cooperation. To support this claim, Norman shifts the focus from the results achieved through protests (often disappointing when compared to the demands) to the significance of the process itself, highlighting the transformational effects and the potential of the prisoners' protests. While this is a methodologically and epistemologically welcomed shift, especially for political scientists who are often less sensitive to the significance of processes



than they are to outcomes, Norman reads very optimist and seems to overlook the little political cost that the scaling up of incarceration of Palestinians has had for the Israeli authorities.

Non-activist women

Kayali's take is less optimist and more substantial in linking fresh fieldwork research to theoretical debates around violence, gender and political participation. Her analysis, in fact, does not only examine the forces restricting opportunities for mobilisation from the outside of the national liberation movement, but also considers those dynamics internal to the movement which have a negative effect and disempower specific groups of Palestinians, like women.

By focusing on unaffiliated Palestinian women (meaning those who are politically aware and savvy but are not typically identified as activists—see p. 3), Kayali successfully challenges the narrative about their political apathy. Resistance, she argues, has moved in a different sphere than traditional parties' rallies or well-known organisations' initiatives. Kayali explains that, rather than being weary of activism itself, these women are weary of prevailing forms of activism and existing social and political organisations, which they perceive as not fully ethical and legitimate (chapters four and five). However, rather than turning their back on politics and activism altogether, these "ordinary women" enact alternative strategies of resistance in their everyday life (chapter six).

In a larger context characterised by growing institutional violence and military occupation, the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) is severely questioned by increasing numbers of Palestinians. The Oslo agreements, in fact, have made the PA co-responsible of Israel's security, meaning that Palestinian activists and movements are under the Israeli and PA's often repressive control. The gendered implication of this general securitisation of Palestinian politics and activism is women's marginalisation. In chapters three to five, Kayali offers a thick engagement with and contribution to the scholarship on gender, conflict and violence, masterfully weaving the analysis of the obstacles that Palestinian women encounter when mobilising, together with a solid examination of the strengthening of patriarchal gender norms and expectations, when movements are more exposed to violence and repression.

The book concludes by foregrounding the notion of political cynicism to describe Palestinian women's attitude towards resistance (p. 215), a condition which captures their continuous endeavour of critiquing the existing and searching for something better. Political cynicism is a different way of pushing the boundaries, something Kayali's research participants are steadily committed to.

The research participants in Kayali's book represent a significant force within Palestinian society, and they are able to take the lead of nation-wide and transnational processes of political contention and mobilisation, resulting in innovative movements such as the 2019 mobilisations and the Intifada of the Unity. However, the recourse on everyday forms of resistance signals structural weaknesses, from the absence of a solid political structure and leadership, to the lack of a



long-term strategy to conquer power. This leaves the movements vulnerable to violence and *divide et impera*, making the project for national liberation fragile.

Conclusion

The contribution of Area Studies to larger disciplines has often gone unnoticed and more so in the case of Palestine, which usually features in disciplinary debates only when these are about post-conflict institutions-building—which, quite significantly, these two books identify as a major obstacle to the achievement of peace and justice. Even more advanced and ground-breaking conversations bridging Indigenous and Palestinian Studies on the topic of settler colonialism and racism, struggle to make the way into disciplinary debates. This is due to a general reluctance of traditionally white-dominated communities to make space for those, and also to the misperception that Middle East politics is just too specific to be salient for comparison. Social science scholars of the Middle East have often strengthened this perception through Orientalism and a tendency to portray political facts in the region as exceptional.

And yet, these two books are relevant to the study of social movements in the “West” too and also demonstrate the fallacies of liberal approaches to conflict resolution when too narrowly focused on institution-building, a finding whose importance goes beyond the specific case of Palestine. The two books examine how the transformations of Palestinian social movements have taken place in a larger context characterised by the dominance of elites who are less accountable to their own population, in spite of operating in electoral and representative political regimes, than—it seems—they are to intergovernmental financial organisations or to the interests of foreign countries, whom they depend on for economic survival and national security.

While this dynamic takes a particular shape in the case of Palestine/Israel, the Middle East and North Africa, it is not specific to the region. The growing unaccountability of national elites and the foreclosing of opportunities for mobilisation are global processes, which cut across regime types and world regions. Because of the unprecedented democratic setback, the increase of illiberal governance—from widespread surveillance to the use of emergency legislation—and the growing independence of the ruling elites from popular base, social mobilisations in the “West” too have profoundly changed in ways that we are yet to recognise and examine in depth.

The revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes that have been taking place in the Middle East and North Africa tell us a lot about the potential and the limitations of mobilisations and grassroots activism well beyond geographical boundaries; in fact, social movements are up against similar challenges in most countries in the world. For this reason, it is extremely important to read and seriously engage Area Studies literature and especially so, when such literature comes from Palestine/Israel, the Middle East and North Africa.



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