

The Social Actor

A Critical Appraisal of the Palestinian Context and its Challenges

ABSTRACT This article is based on a critical vision that attempts to highlight the importance of the social actor in the Palestinian context as a whole. It includes basic ideas about the author's understanding and expectations of all the aspects associated with the role and profession of the social actor as a transforming mechanism of issues in the Palestinian context. It broaches fields of work, specialization, and concentration in viewing individual cases as manifesting a nationwide social phenomenon. If we accept that Palestinian society is vulnerable to psychological setbacks, its recovery, according to Fanon (1972) lies in the resistance against the colonizer.

KEYWORDS: mental illness in Palestinians, detrimental social factors in Palestine, effects of Israeli colonialism on Palestinian mental health

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the arrogance and political violence Palestinians are forced to endure is unmistakably one of the most pronounced and harrowing experiences of the twenty-first century. Numerous forms of psychological damage to Palestinians are perpetrated against this population under Israeli occupation and colonialism.

The colonial context generates psychological and political repercussions that create a fertile environment for psychological disorders and mental illness that are expressed, in the most severe cases, through anger, rebellion, and tension. The environment of violence rebounds on Palestinian society in the absence of an inclusive liberal vision.

Accurate psychological diagnosis is ineffective since it is devoid of the value of cultural and national content. Deciding the treatment for psychiatric patients is impossible because the policies and practices of Israeli colonialism continue, and therefore, the causes and factors leading to the mental disorder, as well as the problems and challenges Palestinians face, are not included in the

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appraisal of their cases. Moreover, psychosocial and traumatic conditions and adaptation are measured solely by exaggerated quantitative statistics. Psychological trauma, behavioral, and emotional disorders are unable to respond to the techniques associated with Western diagnosis and treatment.

Palestine, one of the world's most erratic, political, economic, and social arenas of conflict, is a place where stability is the exception rather than the rule. The specificity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, spanning almost a century now, has generated a panorama of conflict that is forcing the political and social infrastructure and its incumbent services to respond to constantly changing contextual demands. The environment, swept by waves of conflict, generates uncountable psychological, economic, and political problems and vulnerability at all levels of social, economic, and political life.

In the midst of the day-to-day clashes between the colonized and the colonizer, structures totter and are addressed by positive adaptive alternatives that form the sociology of resistant adaptation as a moral and national value form (Malki et al. 2004). Examples of how this adaptation occurs were visible in the experience of the popular uprisings in 1987 and 2000, the attacks and killings in the Jenin and Nablus Camps in 2002, the successive wars on Gaza in 2008 and 2014, all of which have led to the current and most notable revival of the culture of solidarity and volunteerism among Palestinians.

One of the most important features of the Palestinian context is the rapid change resulting from the successive Israeli colonial policies applied after the Palestinian population was uprooted in 1948. A process of continuous "ethnic cleansing" (Pappe 2007) continues as Israel attempts to establish its state on the ruins of Palestine's historical cities and villages. More than two-thirds of Palestinian citizens have changed from being farmers to refugees, having been subjected to a process of losing the basic value of the land as a palpable and tangible value. Frantz Fanon (1972) in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* interpreted the value of land as symbolizing livelihood and dignity to the colonized. The Palestinian, in the same context, is starved, beaten, imprisoned, tortured, and hunted down. His/her home is demolished without having committed any crime. His/her national dignity is violated and it cannot be restored without confronting the colonizer. This is an existential condition to healing the psychological humiliation caused by the occupier.

The loss of Palestinian land and the associated value and moral system constitutes the moral reference of the Palestinian individual and enshrines a web of safety and stability for the population at large. In the face of the terrorism exercised by the "Israeli state" against it, the Palestinian extended family has undergone

fundamental changes in its function and structure resulting from dispersion in the Arab countries and within historic Palestine itself, in Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The latter has the highest population density in the world. Palestinian society has been intellectually and culturally isolated for fifty-one years since the Israeli occupation in 1967. It has endured the poverty, misery, political violence, and extreme unemployment exacted against it by Israeli occupation, as well as the ensuing psychological and social trauma generated by these conditions.

Palestinian villages and cities in Jerusalem and historic Palestine have been subjected to a process of dissolution and systematic racial discrimination in which their culture, language, educational curriculum, as well as Palestinian identity and personal and national dignity have been targeted (Ma'atouq 2014). Their humanity has been crushed and their way of life dismembered. Palestinians became aware that their "Palestinism" was being lost when they traveled from their poor neighborhoods to the neighborhoods of the occupiers. Angered by the sight of the asphalt, the buildings, the paved streets, and the glances of the colonizers, they came to realize how separated and detached they had become from the reality they had aspired to.¹ The more manifestations of discrimination and arbitrary laws against the Palestinians intensified, the more the violence reverted back to the colonizers who instigated it.

The historical contexts in the occupied territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem were linked by the annexation to Jordan and Gaza to Egypt following the ethnic cleansing of 1948 (Pappe 2007). They were occupied again in 1967. Jerusalem remained "suspended" along with the core and essential issues of the conflict. The West Bank came under autonomous authority after the Oslo Accords were signed, and this resulted, in 1993, in the region being carved up into areas known as A, B, and C.

The areas of B and C have become marginalized in terms of their infrastructure and basic services as a result of the Palestinian Authority's lack of control over them. This has been reflected in the level of their care services. There are no accurate statistics on the population in these areas, but they have been estimated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at around three hundred thousand Palestinians, all of whom are deprived of basic services and have poor infrastructure and food supply systems as a result of the colonial policies imposed on them. The Israeli colonization

1. For more on the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in Jerusalem, see Agazerian 2010.

has been a major obstacle to the continuity of the development of these areas and the fulfillment of the needs related to their agricultural structure.

International organizations such as United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) with its multiple services, and Palestinian institutions including the Red Crescent and Agricultural Relief, some sectors of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Ministry of Health, Agriculture, Education, Social Affairs and Women, and some civil society organizations associated with the former sectors have been the main providers of relief services.

A social worker is always necessary in all activities related to the needs of the society, including lending projects, relief programs, programs for fighting poverty, and academic and psychological guidance. In spite of the importance of the role of the social worker in the Palestinian context, the role has not risen to the level of “social actor” insofar as social workers have no influence in developing social and economic policies.² This is a result of the hostile and oppressive environment associated with colonialism, customs, and traditions, the powers that be and their policies, and the marginalization of social workers’ legal, trade-unionist, and vocational frameworks as a means of protecting them. More important are the theoretical, intellectual, and professional frameworks on which the social worker depends. Such frameworks would be more likely to uphold the application of social, economic, and political policies if they failed to protect the dignity of the Palestinian individual.

ISRAELI COLONIZATION AS A KEY ROLE IN SHAPING THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF THE PALESTINIAN LANDSCAPE

Hereinafter, basic and vital aspects that hinder and marginalize the role of the social factor in relation to the Palestinian context will be touched upon, with a critical vision that attempts to focus on the importance of the social factor in the Palestinian context as a whole and not on the basis of individual cases (e.g., rights of children and the marginalized, battered women, and the poor). The latter issues, despite their importance, only serve to further divide what has already been divided and to scatter efforts aiming at building a society based

2. We use the term social actor here to include all disciplines in social and human sciences and to replace the term specialist, assistant, or social and psychological therapist, with their functionally assumed role in the individualization of assistance and intervention; the social actor’s form correlates with the political, economic, and societal context and is committed to nationalism and societal change.

on justice, development and planning. It is essential that the social actor be aware of and prepared for the requirements of a shift in thinking, diagnosis, and practice.

OLD PROBLEMS AND THE INABILITY OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOLUTIONS

There is no question that Israeli colonization has played a key role in shaping the Palestinian landscape and in subordinating the Palestinian economic and political structure. Social, psychological, and economic problems under colonialism are uncountable and increasing. This is in addition to the lack of any possibility for the Palestinians to utilize their natural or even their human resources because of being shackled by coercive political agreements, represented by the Oslo Accords, and economic protocols, represented by the Paris Convention. The latter have deprived the nascent PA of the most vital sector that contributes to improving the standard of living of the Palestinians. The PA emerged in parallel with its adoption of free market principles and the marginal role of the state in monitoring and protecting prices, controlling and directing investment projects, and fostering development. It has displayed weakness and vulnerability in the face of the problems of poverty, societal violence, and issues of discrimination against women, and the paucity of psychological services available in psychiatric hospitals.

Neither the ability nor the quality of the management of social institutions have helped effectively to develop the mental health sector for citizens. This sector has yet to be developed.

The education system is in decline and is beset with a narrowness of thinking. The role of the specialist within it in dealing with daily problems including that of societal violence is restricted because of an inability to find radical solutions. This is due to the absence of professional institutions supporting the education system, since the Palestinian situation generates violence and conflict caused by the loss of justice in all its forms. These factors increase the frequency of societal and political violence, as do the deletion of national and political problems from the Palestinian curriculum; a fact that threatens the real key foundations of Palestinian national identity.³

3. To expand on this point, see Rafeedie 2011.

The entry of specialists, such as a clinical practitioners or developmental workers, into the psychological, social, and developmental services (PSD) sector is still limited, given the internal constraints associated with an inherited legacy. The reasons for this include customs and traditions that have not yet absorbed the importance of these disciplines and their role in breaking the psychological and social barriers to building a community of justice and well-being, as well as other obstacles related to the existence of multiple professional disciplines that respond to new requirements, functions and roles, as well as the traditional educational structure and methodology in school and university education.

The family is the mainstay in solving societal and individual problems faced by the Palestinians, which has so far survived despite the absence of the so-called state. Historically, the Palestinian family has played an important role in alleviating the suffering of its children by creating life or work opportunities, supporting prisoners, the wounded, and the politically abused, forming psychological and social support networks alongside the popular committees in the 1987 uprising (intifada) and the invasions in 2000, as well as forming district and village committees that have played a role in absorbing the negative fallout of conflict and in providing psychosocial, social, and even economic support for those affected by it.

After its establishment in 1994, the PA was unaware of the special needs and requirements of building a state under colonization. The absence of strategic and development planning made it a revenue economy state, dependent on the Israeli colonial state and its laws related to political agreements. In addition, its cadres and institutions were linked to clientelism and factionalism, as reflected in the poor performance and distortions of its care and services institutions, as well as its implicit adoption of traditional solutions that did not protect the social actors in playing their role, especially in cases related to murders on the grounds of so-called "honor."

The main challenges workers face in the social and humanitarian fields are poverty, destitution, and deprivation of capability; all being the cause of social and psychological illness, in addition to marginalization, crime, and corruption. They are all candidates for increase and growth in the absence of social justice and a social security system, and in the context of failure to apply the law to cases that violate rights and laws. The situation and the predicted suffering that results from it are doubled in the areas known as B and C, which constitute 82 percent of the West Bank and which does not have full powers or services equivalent to those in the area known as A.

As part of bridging the gap and addressing the challenges in these areas by the PA, many social workers responded to the needs of these regions by developing small development projects and social awareness programs that target social capital among the youth and women. Although these initiatives are significant, they do not provide a living for young people nor do they provide them with new skills that open horizons or job opportunities for them. The implementation of the policies of Palestinian NGOs is linked to these institutions' compliance with the liberal formulas of the World Bank and its subordinates.

That is not the only aspect: international institutions such as the World Bank, USAID, and others have helped to sustain and strengthen the malignant expansion by supporting infrastructure projects. These include the transportation system and roads, which in turn promote the policy of apartheid based on the Israeli entity. For example, USAID contributed to building a road that goes beyond the 60th line (currently reserved for Israeli settlers) to reach the villages of Battir and Nahalin and connect them to Bethlehem. There are many examples that can be listed in this area, such as the communication line between Nablus and Tulkarm (Hamdan 2011). These grants and subsidies help boost the policy of apartheid and improve its image globally, especially in the occupied territories in general, and especially in areas occupied in 1967.

In the case of Jerusalem, the Palestinian institutions of Jerusalem, which were active prior to the Oslo Accords, are now isolated, besieged, emptied, and closed from research, service, cultural, social, and economic centers. Since 2000, more than thirty Palestinian institutions have been closed, headed by Orient House, the Arab Studies Society, the Chamber of Commerce, et cetera. The aim of Israeli colonization is to Judaize the Palestinian place through the policies of demolishing homes and applying stringent laws to the population.

This is not very different from the experience of the Palestinians of 1948, when the funds of national institutions were monitored and confiscated. Discrimination and racism were the norm and the associated legal, social, and economic aspects were hidden or suppressed, while at the same time the possibility of geographic, informational, and professional communication between the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and areas of the Palestinians of 1948 was prevented by the weight of Israel's racist colonial policies.⁴ The most recent demonstration of the latter was the construction of the apartheid wall.

4. See Syrian Women Forum 2009.

PENETRATING NATIONAL STRATEGY: FRAGMENTING THE SOCIAL COMPONENT BY DELETING THE POLITICAL COMPONENT

The support provided by some European states to the Palestinian people before the Oslo Accords was not dependent on a political viewpoint, but rather on the support and backing of these countries, represented by their institutions and parties, for the just cause of the Palestinian people's liberation and independence and the restoration of their stolen rights.

After the Oslo Accords in 1993, the international institutions of the World Bank and the US, Canadian, German, British, and Spanish institutions that were in charge of supporting the continuation of the peace process entered into the political and cultural landscape.⁵ They operated within the Israeli vision of peace and set conditions for the new actors of Palestinian community institutions and the PA, initiating a set of activities and services that did not constitute a priority for the Palestinian population as the Palestinian scene was specific, insofar as it had not achieved national independence. The top priority for the Palestinians is to eliminate colonialism and to set priorities in light of the political situation and not the agenda of the financier. Hence, these powers worked on subjugating the projects and the programs in a way that was in line with their own vision of the conflict.

They distorted the institutions' way of thinking and their interest in creating the elements of steadfastness and struggle. This led to partial projects for the provision of services to women, children, and youth (sports, art and theater, research and development services, psychological and legal guidance, institutions supporting the disabled, governance, judicial and legal reform, democracy and political participation). Ironically, in hindsight, we realize that the Palestinian people were one of the most active Arab nations in the public sphere prior to the Oslo Accords and the onset of foreign aid.

Since the development and framing of these activities, Palestinian society is no longer effective because it is not linked to a comprehensive national strategic vision that understands the solutions to societal problems and the challenges of development. These institutions deal with development as a professional job in

5. According to the Oslo Accords, the areas of the West Bank were divided into three major areas. Area A constitutes 18 percent of the area of the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority theoretically controls it in terms of security and services. Area B constitutes 22 percent and its security is dominated by the occupying power but the service side is under the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority. Finally, Area C constitutes 60 percent of the West Bank and is controlled by the occupation state in terms of security and services. It contains more than one hundred settlement compounds.

an approach that is called “professionalization of development” (Sbeih 2011) without addressing its effectiveness and its impact on infrastructure, bringing it closer to the areas of achieving growth that depend on the extent of its service to the Zionist capital.

In dealing with the issue of poverty and programs to remedy it, these institutions focus very much on its manifestations and consequences, without delving into the power relations between the colonized and the colonizer. The racist and economic policies of Zionist Israel generate poverty of all kinds while concealing the relationship between it and the economic policy of the PA in producing poverty.

UNRWA, since its inception, has been one of the most important institutions working to combat poverty and support the historically destitute segments of the population. However, it has begun to reduce its services and retreat after the Oslo Accords, as the PA is empowered to provide these services. UNRWA is abandoning many of its employees in different sectors and reducing the budget within its projects and services.

This position is making UNRWA deviate from its path, not in terms of services to the Palestinian camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, but in dealing with the refugee issue not as a political or national matter, but strictly as a humanitarian matter. It is here that the gravity of the situation lies.

Such aid represented abstract theoretical relief, service and information programs in social capital that were neither productive nor developmental. The aid offered did not open up opportunities for living amid colonial conditions; accordingly, it was a “first aid policy” for the needs of an emerging Palestinian society that has never experienced political stability.

There are more than 2,770 NGOs in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem, and some 330 women’s organizations, most of which were established after 2006.⁶ This begs the legitimate question of why these institutions were founded, why they are needed, and what is impact and effectiveness on Palestinian society. The answer lies in the volume of violations women have faced as the increasing number of honor killings; twenty-nine cases were recorded in 2013 while only four cases were recorded in 2011. So why have violence and the so-called honor killings escalated?

Many of the institutions that work in democracy and human rights proliferated sequentially after 2006, forming the essence of the specialists’ work and

6. Studies reveal an increase in the number of NGOs. See Ajyal Radio Network, October 26, 2014, www.arn.ps/archives/155013.

their professional reference. However, their concepts and vision are linked to the financiers rather than the needs and priorities of the local community. So how can human rights be discussed in isolation from the colonial context that violates human existence?

One important observation about those institutions and specialists working in them can be evoked. While appreciating and respecting the work they do, they have diverted the course of their work and specialization solely to the social, civil, and service aspects. They have withdrawn from the public opinion that depicts the political, national, and economic landscape. Given that these institutions are depoliticized, and since they have been emptied politically and nationally in response to the donors' vision and agenda, they produce hollow social workers. This is a political issue par excellence, because after the popular uprising (intifada) in 1987 the political dimension was prominently present while the social aspect was eliminated and marginalized over significant historical stages during Palestinian struggle, though more recently those organizations and new hollow political social workers have marginalized the political aspect. What is needed now is balance between the social and political dimensions, which can be achieved by a committed social actor.

It is important to mention here the importance of rereading the experience of the popular uprising of 1987 in comparison to the opposite dimension of value and culture present in the Al-Aqsa intifada and independence struggles in 2000. The popular uprising of 1987 launched a movement of struggle linked to a national project. Thus all aspects of life were consolidated in supporting the libertarian project and found their place within the individual, social, and political groups and their political, social, and economic societal action. These projects, left unfunded by Europe or the USA, were related to the needs of Palestinian society in an economy of resilience and resistance, insofar as the domestic economy and the reclaiming of agricultural land and the alleviation of illiteracy and popular education were in line with an integrated vision that went beyond the political and social patterns of the period.

The intellectual discourse of the social specialist—with the importance it places on social change—is still subject to a reformist liberal vision, since it is linked to the nature of work with international institutions and the assistance and funding for institutions where specialists work; it is a reform framework that is in harmony with the loose state, the free market, and World Bank orientations.

Therefore, the role of these institutions in judicial reform and legislation has declined. They have directly served in strengthening a political system

based on economic, political, and social inequality, instead of dismantling it or presenting a comprehensive vision within the process of desired social change.

To summarize, the institutions active in the Palestinian humanitarian and development fields have consciously or unconsciously contributed to the transformation of the Palestinians and their cultural impoverishment and replaced them by the concepts of democratization, humanism, and peaceful and rational resistance as a liberal product in harmony with the cultural environment produced in the West.⁷ These institutions have also contributed to dissolving and impoverishing the local culture and emptying it politically of mobilization in the liberation project. This is why the Palestinians have withdrawn from the structurally and nationally weakened public sphere, which has become dominated by the technology of adaptation and lethargy associated with the politics of the PA in combination with colonialism.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: A DISABLING ENVIRONMENT

The social actor in Palestine faces numerous problems and obstacles that impede his/her roles at all levels. These include the colonialist policies and racist laws (Abunimah 2003), the division of Palestinian areas into cultural cantons that have grown and developed in isolation—in some instances as far away as 10 km—from Palestinian villages and cities. Hence, they acquire geographical experiences consistent with the cultural and social structure within them, but are unable to transfer these experiences to other areas. The educational curricula at the primary and secondary educational levels is monitored by the Israeli agents of colonization, since the curricula plays a fundamental role in promoting pride of national and community values and in identifying the problems Palestinians face in this context.

The curriculum works on dismantling the foundations of national identity and relegating the problems associated with its environment. This includes pulling asunder all aspects connected to Palestinian society and maintaining obstacles to any ambitious work to change the heavy structure that prevents the social activist who aspires to change. This is because the values being upheld essentially contradict the obsolete traditions that hinder the process of radical modernization in society.

7. According to Hamdan 2011, the active institutions in the Palestinian humanitarian and development field have contributed—consciously or unconsciously—to the transformation, exploitation, and cultural impoverishment of the Palestinians.

Psychological trauma as seen in behavioral and emotional disorders under colonialism is unable to respond to the techniques associated with Western diagnosis and treatment. This is for several reasons. Firstly, accurate psychological diagnosis is ineffective since it is devoid of the value of cultural and national content. Secondly, deciding the treatment for psychiatric patients is impossible because the policies and practices of Israeli colonialism continue, and therefore, the causes and factors leading to the disease, as well as the problems and challenges Palestinians face, are not included.

Moreover, psychosocial and traumatic conditions and adaptation are measured by exaggerated quantitative statistics. In this context, the Palestinian Counseling Center notes: "It is very rare to focus on the therapeutic diagnostic tests of psychiatric clinics and case studies ... in addition to the lack of specialization in the field of psychiatry."⁸ The difficulty in applying Western therapy on the Palestinian politician (Amro 2007) is significant, for cultural and social considerations are quite different.

In terms of sociocultural structure, customs, and traditions, a distorted cultural structure has been developed that is between traditionalism and overly-selfish individualism, in response to the adoption of free market laws, high prices, and the absence of national enterprise. In addition to the aforesaid are the deterioration of moral values, the erosion of social norms, and the inability of positive social structures to prevent problems and deviations. This is in comparison to the way it was a century ago, when solidarity, assistance, a collective mindset, community interest, and the community safety net functioned well.

Some reactions have been characterized by taking traditional stances on issues that do require vengeance in a fanatical sense. The role of the specialist is restricted to the areas in which he or she is allowed to operate. This includes judicial reform and altering laws without changing the mentality that embraces those behaviors.

All of this has coincided with the emergence of social problems such as crime, theft, harassment, drug addiction, and prostitution. These have become societal phenomena that threaten social cohesion in light of structural distortions occurring in the nascent Palestinian economic system. The latter has no mature institutional infrastructure capable or qualified to intervene to contain

8. See, for example, Abdul Aziz Musa Thabit, *In Yourselves* (np: Foundation of Arab Psychological Sciences, 2014).

these distortions for reasons related to an environment that is “antipsychologist.”

With regard to educational institutions and research centers, their role in exploring an active research or theoretical methodological referencing is still narcotized and intellectually adolescent for reasons related to adopting a rigid theoretical framework and diagnostic models. The latter are associated with schools of thought not built according to the requirements of the Palestinian reality. These theories have been copied and pasted and the knowledge and pathological cases have been turned upside down in a way compatible with the theoretical model and the therapeutic diagnosis prepared for them. The disease has been affected by Western intellectual abilities, which creates the impression that the problem is not part of the solution.

Since the principles and philosophy of social research methodology are based on the skills of formulation and hypothetical questioning, pathological knowledge has been presented within a constructed theoretical framework. The social and psychological specialist, for considerations related to negative psychology, tries to convince the psychologically or socially disturbed that they have deviated from customs and traditions and their role is to reembrace those values in order to heal. This occurs without going into the social and economic factors and inequality that generated that deviation.

The theoretical models that specialists apply are from the sphere of functional theory. Such models concentrate on role, social order, psychoanalysis, behavioral input, integration of the pattern, the role of conflict, Maslow’s human hierarchy, et cetera. Even if theories of functional constructions about generational conflict that lead to the integration and stability of society were applied, such models would not be adequate to analyze the societal needs associated with the readaptation and compatibility of the individual within the political and social reality that caused the disease or problem in the first place, and not vice versa. The theoretical frameworks currently being used have been developed outside a political conflict environment, and they do not take into account the component that connects societal problems within the colonial context to the presence of a non-Arab cultural intruder.

What is needed is not a radical and structural development of new theories—even if I would not be opposed to that—but rather a synthesized and harmonized combination of some or several models and a conciliatory approach, in an attempt to read and understand societal problems. Such a perspective would gather information and data from the grassroots reality associated with a political economic context and would put into perspective the

hypotheses and theoretical perceptions of the data and information collected. This would be in addition to originating a theory based on individual and collective case studies, a mode rarely used in the Palestinian context. A formal theoretical or cognitive framework simply does not allow for the emergence of knowledge in this way.

MODELS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE: A FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE YET TO BE EXPLORED

There is no doubt that the arrogance and political violence Palestinians are forced to endure is unmistakably one of the most pronounced and harrowing experiences of the twenty-first century. Numerous forms of psychological damage against Palestinians are perpetrated extensively. These include repression, assassination, arrest, exile, demolition of homes, withdrawal of identities, and humiliation and violation of human dignity at military checkpoints (Hart and Le Fort 2010). The justification for the existence of international institutions and the United Nations is to support and defend the Palestinians in an environment that generates Israeli violence. Yet, despite the documented records and accounts of exclusion, violence, and denial of human rights faced by the Palestinian population, the mission of these institutions has become just a dead letter, since they are unable to take any action within an unjust balance of power in a world biased towards Israeli colonization.

It is evident that the psychological state of the Palestinian population has been undermined as reflected in their psychological incompatibility, emotional imbalance, tension, existential alienation, and cultural impoverishment (Hijazi 2005). A negative charge of indifference, denial, and self-alienation has been caused in the absence of early solutions to emerging problems and responses to the challenges of circumstances imposed upon them. The Palestinian cultural reality has been Westernized. It has been reformulated through the educational curriculum and the political and economic policies of the NGOs in accordance with the political vision of the PA in the region.

Mental illness, as seen by Kanaaneh and Netland (2003), does not attack the “self” as does a virus. Rather, it is a state of cognitive perception interacting with the event and the social position itself, before, during, and after the event, that causes frustration, anxiety, traumatic experiences and existential stress. Several other symptoms are manifest in the Palestinian people as they undergo the aggressions on the Gaza Strip, which have exposed some 1.8 million Palestinians to terrifying experiences and severe psychological trauma. These

people have lived through terrifying events throughout the relentless Israeli military onslaughts on Gaza to the deafening sound of the bombardments resounding endlessly in a place of death where few survive.

The indirect effect of the crudeness of Israeli guards, the wasting of time, and the transgression of their dignity to which Palestinians are subjected at the military checkpoints, the mental scars left by watching bloody events on television in the West Bank or Jerusalem, or the loss of a son or a friend, are to cite but a few. The same sentiment of indignation prevails over the areas of Palestine 1948, where the Palestinians are at risk from settlers' attacks and the systematic violence and racism of the Zionist entity in their dealings with the Palestinians. From a clinical perspective, a correct approach aimed at highlighting and recording the traumatic experiences and psychological effects on the Palestinian population has not been taken, since research fails to focus on these experiences despite the importance in detecting the magnitude and impact of political violence and its spread. Instead, a focus on numerical statistical data alone has been adopted.⁹ This approach is no longer adequate, especially in terms of the clarification of effects, depth, and continuity. Furthermore, research has rarely been dealt with from a valid clinical perspective insofar as it has not studied or diagnosed the cases within the social context of Palestinians' experiences, feelings, and perceptions, as a people whose lives succumb to the consequences of colonialism. A case in point is the refugee issue, which is one of the most tragic and historically painful issues and is now a legacy of three generations including those Palestinians who experienced eviction in 1948 from their rightful homeland.

It is for this reason we believe that a specialized research team is needed to study the personal experiences, abuses endured, and the biographies of these victims. The issue of the Nakba or ethnic cleansing of 1948 has been expressed and recorded through the vast number of experiences of the refugees who were placed in an environment unsuitable for human dignity. The national and political dimension of the collective memory and the historical and natural rights of the Palestinian people have been deleted, and the issue of the refugees living in camps has been turned into a simple issue of providing relief for a humanitarian problem. The social existence of the Palestinians has

9. For more on Fanon's ideas about revolution and how the colonial context generates psychological and political repercussions that can create a fertile environment for psychological illness or mental disorders, see Saif Da'na, "The Justice of the Oppressed: Sociology of revolutionary Violence," *Al-Akhbar*. November 20, 2014.

become stigmatized within the suffocating narrowness of a closed vision and the absence of a fair solution that would allow them to return to their homeland, to the villages and cities from which they were displaced. Their cause, which once topped the political and cultural scenes, when they were still able to play an active decision-making role, has since become a burden on the loose state of the PA by reducing the services of UNRWA (Al-Sheikh 2008).

This has caused a psychological syndrome that has reformulated the Palestinian cause within a political vision that takes no account of the context that produced the moral, political, and cultural conditions of the Palestinians, or their positive and effective adaptation to harsh conditions. The latter have contributed to the crystallization of identity and psychological characteristics with diverse and interacting identities developing in spatial and temporal space without a common historical experience.

Furthermore, the gender issue of how Palestinian women have been affected by the policies of Israeli colonialism in the midst of conflict needs to be studied and analyzed. Women have suffered many forms of political violence including imprisonment, murder, and the demolition of their homes, as well as the imprisonment of their relatives and spouses (Kevorkian et al. 2014). Such challenges and experiences have contributed to leaving psychological and social scars on the female population. In this context, Palestinian women have been successful in withstanding political and societal pressure, and transforming their traditional roles of passive femininity within a traditional environment into the combined roles of traditional housewife and family managers in the absence of the father figure. This has helped to deconstruct the stereotype of their typical traditional roles as women.

Roles played by women in the midst of conflict have led them to advance into roles traditionally reserved for men only. These experiences need to be studied, documented, and highlighted in the context of understanding women and their issues, in connection with the political and liberal situation of the Palestinian context. Moreover, trends that advocate women's liberalism within a capitalist vision are currently sweeping the arena in dealing with socially abused women, but they do not take into account the big patterns that justify and create violence, the first of which is colonization and the second is the traditional structure of Palestinian society and societal mores.

It is common knowledge that the experience of imprisonment, torture, isolation, and humiliation and the "objectized" relationship between the prison guard and the Palestinian detainee and the manner in which they are treated during their detention necessarily affect the mental health of the detainee.

With regard to the detention of people in colonial detention centers, few psychological studies have conducted research linking mental illness to cases that have experienced political violence and the colonial practices that produced the disease in the first place. Their emotions and personal characteristics need to be recorded, beyond the limiting restriction of numerical indicators that measure their psychological and social adjustment, levels of frustration, anxiety, et cetera. Collective experiences as well as cultural and national dimensions that affect their cure and reintegration need to include a component for exceptional cases in the methodological framework of the analysis.

This does not imply that Palestinian society is made up entirely of mentally ill people or that application of analytical and diagnostic models are designed only to sort people into categories. Quite the contrary! Nevertheless, there must be awareness that the colonial context generates psychological and political repercussions that create a fertile environment for psychological disorders and mental illness that are expressed, in the most severe cases, through anger, rebellion, and tension. The environment of violence is created by colonialism, which rebounds on Palestinian society in the absence of an inclusive liberal vision. If we accept that Palestinian society is vulnerable to psychological setbacks, its recovery, according to Fanon (1972) lies in the resistance against the colonizer.

In our discussion of these and other ideas, we can recall the ideas of the revolutionary psychiatrist Franz Fanon, who sees revolutionary violence as a social, political, and psychological function and the only strategy to empower the colonized. The excessive violence used by the colonizer is not only to break the resistance of detainees, refugees, and children, but also to defeat the Palestinian people by destroying their morale and will, to bring about negative adjustment to the outcomes of the colonizer's policies through their defeat and acquiescence. This is why therapy and understanding of treatment for the colonized is necessary in a culture of resistance and confrontation. Any attempt to rediscover themselves as social actors able to confront and express their angry emotions that may turn into community resistance is suppressed, as is happening now in the areas of the West Bank.

THE SOCIAL ACTOR: DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND THE SOCIAL IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

In the last part of this study, I describe basic ideas about our understanding and expectations of all the aspects associated with the role and profession of the social actor as a transforming mechanism in the Palestinian context. I also

attempt to broach fields of work, specialization, and concentration in viewing individual cases as manifesting a nationwide social phenomenon. When broached from this angle, the concept of “case” becomes a concept of “issue” and a community phenomenon.¹⁰ The approach I adopt for this purpose is from the perspective of a preventive policy based on societal, national, and economic developments to political and community strategies, and from the service of individuals and groups in order to empower and strengthen the community. In addition, I focus on how to empower the specialist with work skills within the community and with decision-makers, so that social actors may understand, read and relate to societal problems and then solve them within a comprehensive framework that can extend to the development of economic, political, and social policies. The latter policies should incorporate individual services designed to address the loss of identity that is happening and to enable the recovery and rediscovery of a person’s national and societal identity.

These are the basic characteristics that would contribute to transforming social workers into social actors, thereby making them influential and instrumental in society.

In order to support the social actor in the Palestinian context through a comprehensive vision of the phenomena emerging under colonialism, it is necessary to research and deepen social workers’ vision of the cultural, political, and social nature of Palestinian society and the phases of profound change that have affected its structure. Their ability to diagnose the general psychological and social characteristics that support their vision and analytical reading and the subsequent planning of how to develop solutions to the societal problems they face also need to be developed and elaborated.

To support and strengthen the social actor, society, and groups, it is necessary to begin thinking and working with social and nongovernmental institutions and universities to develop social development plans, so that Palestinian society may become free from its total dependence on the economy of colonialism and the state of economic and political exposure it suffers. The psychological and social problems are a solid expression of the crisis of society and the political economy and not vice versa. This is why it is important to restore and

10. In many practices, specialists and trainees, in providing counseling and therapeutic services, take away the human characteristics and uniqueness of the counseling service seeker who is thus classified as an individual “case” and is allocated a case number, since dealing with them as individual cases minimizes the scale of its occurrence as a social phenomenon.

renovate the positive adjustment of the Palestinian people to what it was in the popular uprising of 1987. The latter uprising represented the moral and value system of resistance to colonialism that produced an economic and social system that contributed effectively to strengthening, and empowering society to be economically independent.

The small projects put in place then, such as animal husbandry, agriculture, tillage, bee-friendly plants, and land reclamation, represented not only an economic dimension, but also a relinking of the relationship between the Palestinians and the land that Fanon (1972) understood as offering “dignity and bread.” Relations have been subsequently weakened and transformed in the face of the brutal policies of free market dynamics in the absence of the state.

The land, with the richness of the value it represents, creates a dynamic that enhances collaborative, organic relationships between people, and builds social solidarity, networks of social strengthening, and safety nets that provide a healthy environment that combats all forms of economic and social challenges. Even the invasions of colonization and their psychological and social costs on the Palestinian people can be lessened in this context, as opposed to the preventive policy of civil society organizations and international relief institutions. Such a strategy is a national alternative to the strategies of begging donors and donor countries.

The work of the social actor lies in researching methods of adaptation, survival, and resistance. It lies in the development of social capital, the eradication of illiteracy and the restoration of women’s productive roles in work, institutions, politics, economics, and home economics. Indeed, women still save many Palestinian families in Palestinian villages and the countryside. The work of the social actor would stimulate social culture and the interest of society and would revive the culture of neighborhoods and popular committees, which has served as a steadfast psychological and national support system for the problems of its inhabitants.

Such elements of prevention and protection of the community are essential and fundamental factors that would continue to strengthen and modify each person’s response to political threats and invasions. They constitute a positive response that would help individuals to rebuild themselves, despite the presence of stressful factors such as occupation. The dimensions of psychological, social, familial, and religious support, as coping strategies, are helpful in overcoming psychological trauma. For that reason, there should be a return to building and strengthening family and community support and raising the

level of respect and appreciation for acts of resistance, as one of the most important elements in the healing and recovery process.

In the midst of our search for social and cultural change as factors of protection in the culture and for habits that modify some types of health symptoms, we must automatically rid ourselves of habits that stand in the way of change, modernization, and the development of society.

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BILAL AWAD SALAMEH is a lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences at Bethlehem University. He holds a doctorate in sociology from the University of Granada. His books include *Methodological Thinking in the Design of Social Research* (2014), *Democratic Life and Its Empowerment in the Hebron Governorate* (2006), and *The Palestinian Refugee Is Absent from His Homeland* (2006). Email: dr.bilalsalameh@hotmail.com

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