



JPS “Hidden Gems” and “Greatest Hits”: Palestine through the Lens of Activism

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ABSTRACT

This final essay in the “greatest hits” and “hidden gems” series tackles the topic of activism. Noting the richness and diversity of *JPS*’s contributions in this regard, Nadine Naber hones in on the necessity for hope and for grassroots mobilization at this Palestinian juncture. She exhorts readers to revisit Jonathan Kuttab’s 1988 essay, “The Children’s Revolt,” and Salim Tamari’s article, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising,” which appeared in 1991, for both inspiration and edification. Doing so, she argues, “allows readers to reimagine hope as a political ideology and as a set of practices that foster the possibilities for change and decolonization for years to come.”

KEYWORDS

activism; hope; resistance; embodied practices; grassroots mobilizing; First Intifada

AS I SCROLLED THROUGH the *Journal of Palestine Studies*’ compiled tables of contents searching for one “hidden gem” and one “greatest hit,” I was struck by the breadth and scope of the *Journal*’s contributions to the study of activism over the five decades since 1971. I focused on the 1970s and 1980s because I wanted to highlight how, even at this early stage, the field of Palestine studies had been engaged in analyses about activism and resistance that were urgent for many historical and political struggles beyond Palestine’s. In the fifty-year archive, I found essays and articles on women’s movements, workers’ struggles, cross-racial (Black and Palestinian) solidarity, activism among minorities (Druze), resistance to massacres, and the relevance of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism to the U.S. Left—all themes closely aligned with current conversations across the globe about liberatory possibilities for all sectors of society. Although it was difficult to narrow down my selection to two, the pieces I eventually chose invoked themes that are crucial today: the necessity for hope and the necessity for grassroots mobilization. Combing through the archive, I further realized how relevant the *Journal*’s groundbreaking analyses about activism remain for scholars in other fields. My hope is that more and more academic (inter)disciplines will recognize the breadth and scope of these crucial analyses, especially when it comes to the concepts and practices of activism, organizing, resistance, and the possibilities for social transformation.

Kuttab’s “The Children’s Revolt” in the Midst of the First Intifada

In his 1988 essay, “The Children’s Revolt,” author Jonathan Kuttab analyzes the radical changes that transpired across Palestinian society during the First Intifada.¹ I consider it a hidden gem because in the current period of immense hopelessness, this piece reminds us of the sweeping sense of hope that drove such radical changes. Kuttab emphasizes the significance of young people to this period of social transformation, arguing that the intifada “so transformed and

radicalized the way people act and interact that it has produced a new consciousness in Palestinian thinking and relationships.”² Kuttab also provides a roadmap for the conditions that can inspire and maintain hope and social transformation and liberation. A recentering of Kuttab’s essay allows readers to reimagine hope as a political ideology and as a set of *practices* that foster the possibilities for change and decolonization for years to come.

By emphasizing the changes in everyday ways of being and living, Kuttab also reflects on how hope expands when colonized people organize themselves politically, especially when they change how they act and interact with one another. Besides highlighting the fact that it was children who led the First Intifada, Kuttab shows that, in its early years, the uprising entailed a commitment to unity across social differences, to the shattering of fear, the dismantling of internalized colonization and, above all, to generosity.

We often forget that besides dismantling structures of oppression, dispossession, and erasure, resistance to Zionism and settler colonialism requires changing approaches to social interaction. By this, I mean the kinds of relationships people create and the strategies they use to care for their communities. Kuttab affirms why it is crucial to maintain hope *while* intentionally envisioning, strategizing about, and practicing the future Palestinians want to live in. Committing to hope as an intentional practice today means asking how our daily lives and the kinds of relationships we forge amplify the possibilities of decolonization. One might then consider Kuttab’s argument as an affirmation that decolonization is not simply a future dream on the horizon but a process of becoming that requires everyday practices in the present to create the future.

Some of the practices put in place during the First Intifada entailed an intensified spirit of giving, what scholars and activists today call mutual aid—whether feeding and housing one another or creating cooperative economies. As Kuttab illustrates, these intentional practices were part of a political praxis or what we might call everyday disciplines of resistance to counter the all-out assault on the very fabric of Palestinian society. A key takeaway from Kuttab’s essay is that building power and fighting back require unity *and* lifting one another up emotionally, economically, socially, and politically.

The necessity of practicing hope on a daily basis, especially when it is increasingly difficult to believe that Palestine will be free, is ever more urgent. While the direction of Palestine’s future may not be the result of choices that most Palestinians are making, how we *think* and *dream* about that future shapes Palestinian destinies. Dreaming of a future beyond colonial domination inspires political transformations at the center of which, as we saw in the First Intifada, were everyday social practices such as youth empowerment and collective care and unity. In today’s context, we can conceptualize how we care for one another, how we think, and how we envision the role of youth and children as political acts during periods of hopelessness.

Tamari’s “Palestinian Movement in Transition”

I consider a greatest hit Salim Tamari’s article, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising,” which appeared in 1991.³ The piece is essential because it helps explain social and political questions that continue to baffle scholars of social movements today, including how oppressed people can widen their base, incorporate marginalized social groups, and ultimately transform social and political power relations.

Tamari’s article maps and analyzes two major resistance strategies: steadfastness, or *sumud*, based on deterministic views of Israel’s control over Palestine, on the one hand, and more populist strategies based on grassroots activist approaches to national liberation, on the other.

Tamari reminds us that class differences in resistance strategies also matter, and that alternative strategies can emerge as a result. His class analysis brings into view urban entrepreneurs, proletarianized peasants and refugee camp dwellers, and un/underemployed university graduates and dropouts, as well as nationalists. Tamari further nuances this multilayered landscape by situating differences in local and regional concepts and practices of nationalism, modernism, and militarism.

For Tamari, populism emerged out of the “degeneration of the ideology of *sumud*,”⁴ giving rise to the formation of mass organizations that allowed for widening the base of Palestinian resistance. For instance, populist approaches brought in people who may otherwise have been reluctant to join clandestine organizations (from the labor sector and women’s unions, as well as student groups) or had been marginalized due to their socioeconomic class. As Tamari explains, these vast organizational networks enhanced communal solidarity, mobilizing thousands of people from communities that formerly existed as segmented neighborhoods into an overarching national liberation movement. That, he argues, was “the quantum dimension of the intifada.”⁵ Tamari also examines the shifting, dynamic, and historically contingent character of both *sumud* and populism, whether as notions or as practices. Thus, for instance, he points to Israeli officials rethinking their approach as they increasingly categorized Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza as “ungovernable.”⁶

Tamari’s article reminds us of the significance of populist bottom-up approaches, whether in the struggle against classism or settler colonialism. Reading it today allows us to revisit the radical grassroots movement building of the 1980s and its challenges to elitist approaches to national liberation, both within Palestine and beyond. Tamari shows that broadening the view of who counted as social-movement actors (to include youth and women) and extending what was deemed the proper “place” for revolution (to the crevices and alleys of every neighborhood) enhanced the ideological, organizational, and institutional frameworks of belonging and resistance, catalyzing the mass mobilizations that propelled the First Intifada. Returning to this article by Tamari inspires us to reclaim the Palestinian struggle today.

About the Author

Nadine Naber is a professor in gender and women’s studies and global Asian studies at the University of Illinois. She is author/coeditor of five books on Arab/Arab American and women of color feminist activism. Naber is founder and cofounder of organizations and institutions such as Mamas Activating Movements for Abolition and Solidarity, the Arab American Cultural Center at University of Illinois at Chicago, Arab and Muslim American Studies at University of Michigan, and the Liberate Your Research trainings. Naber is a former staff person at the Center for Political Education and Building Manager at 522 Valencia (1999–2001).

Endnotes

1. Jonathan Kuttab, “The Children’s Revolt,” *JPS* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1988): pp. 26–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537288>.
2. Kuttab, “The Children’s Revolt,” p. 26.
3. Salim Tamari, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising,” *JPS* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1991): pp. 57–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537198>.
4. Tamari, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition,” p. 64.
5. Tamari, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition,” p. 68.
6. Tamari, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition,” p. 67.