



***JPS* “Hidden Gems” and “Greatest Hits”: Repression and Dissent; Contentious Politics in Palestine**

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, Yousef Munayyer reflects on the politics of contentiousness through the lens of dissent and repression. He singles out Naseer Aruri’s “Resistance and Repression: Political Prisoners in Israeli Occupied Territories” (1979) as a *JPS* “hidden gem” and Gene Sharp’s “Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle” (1989) as a “greatest hit.” Aruri’s piece, which has not garnered as much visibility as Sharp’s, pinpoints the ways in which political imprisonment, torture, and the weaponization of the law, as well as extraterritorial jurisdiction, are wielded by Israel as instruments of political repression. The “greatest hit,” by the late contemporary theorist of nonviolence Gene Sharp examines the Palestinian national movement’s resistance strategy eighteen months into the First Intifada.

KEYWORDS

Dissent; repression;
resistance; nonviolence;
politics of contentiousness

AS THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* (*JPS*) collectively reflects on half a century of publishing, my task was to look back at the voluminous material published through the lens of repression and dissent. Doing so was a useful and revelatory exercise. Despite the fact that the *Journal* has been coming out for five decades and that there is no shortage of contentious politics and coercion to be found in the annals of Palestinian history, not nearly a proportionate amount has been covered in our pages over this time and on these topics.

This disparity is even starker when one considers that the Palestinians have been and continue to be a stateless people who, throughout their modern history, have been in direct confrontation with powerful states. This, in turn, makes the streets and squares central arenas in which politics plays out, often in the form of political mobilization and brutal state repression. Modern Palestinian history has been filled with major and defining episodes characterized by just such interactions—from the Great Revolt of 1936–39 to the First and Second Intifadas, and countless smaller episodes in between. While *JPS* has covered numerous aspects of these different episodes, only a small contingent of articles has focused on repression and dissent. From among these, I have chosen Naseer H. Aruri’s “Resistance and Repression: Political Prisoners in Israeli Occupied Territories”¹ as a “hidden gem” and Gene Sharp’s “The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle”² as a “greatest hit.”

Before delving into these two pieces I want to note several others that boast their own unique strengths and are worth returning to as well. Charles W. Anderson’s “State Formation from Below and the Great Revolt in Palestine”³ and Matthew Hughes’s “From Law and Order to Pacification: Britain’s Suppression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–39”⁴ are two important contributions on the uprising, the former looking at dissent and the latter focused on

repression. While both are important citations for scholars interested in repression and dissent dynamics during that historical moment, the two articles are relatively recent contributions and thus did not seem befitting of a hidden gem or greatest hit designation. Kenneth W. Stein's comparative "The Intifada and the 1936–39 Uprising: A Comparison"⁵ and Ann M. Lesch's "Prelude to the Uprising in the Gaza Strip,"⁶ both published in the 1990s, were insightful reflections on the moment; however, they have also both received a degree of attention that places them somewhere in between the two assigned categories in this reader's estimation. Finally, Elaine Hagopian's "Minority Rights in a Nation-State: The Nixon Administration's Campaign against Arab-Americans"⁷ and Tawfiq Zayyad's "The Fate of the Arabs in Israel,"⁸ which both appeared in the mid-1970s, warrant special mention because of their value as first-person reflections on mobilization and repression dynamics.

Hidden Gem

Aruri's article, "Resistance and Repression," has, according to a web search, been cited in only nine publications over the past four decades. While the piece itself breaks no news nor puts forth any new theorization, its focus as well as the evidence it adduces and the conclusions it draws are worth noting because of how they identify one of the issues most central to understanding the repression of Palestinians—specifically: political imprisonment, torture, and the use of the law as an instrument of repression. Aruri's article is also noteworthy for using a settler-colonial lens to frame its analysis, albeit loosely.

The immediate context of Aruri's piece, published in 1978, was informed, of course, by Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and by the rumblings in Palestinian politics that would ultimately shift the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) toward negotiations a decade later and, importantly, the prelude to the Camp David peace talks of 1978–79. Still heavily influenced by the Cold War, what was then the Arab-Israeli conflict had in the last decade seen the aftermath of the 1967 war, Black September, the Nixon administration's "diplomacy," and its triangulation with the Soviet Union, as well as continued secret and not-so-secret talks between Israel and Egypt.

It was in this context that the Palestine National Front (PNF) emerged in the early 1970s. The rise and fall of the PNF, which Aruri tells us was established "with the announcement of a resistance programme, responding to the escalation of Israeli activities aimed at consolidating the occupation in the wake of Palestinian setbacks in Amman and Jerash," is the case Aruri begins to examine in order to discuss resistance, repression, and the relationship between the two in Palestine.⁹

Aruri's analysis covers a number of enduring themes that are particularly relevant today. One is what might be called the repression-dissent nexus. The relationship between repression and dissent is a question that has preoccupied many social science researchers in this field. While it is generally accepted that dissent brings forth repression, the converse is not always true. For Aruri, however, it was true, as is made clear in his observation that "the denial of Palestinian national rights generates resistance and, in turn, invites repression." This, he says, leads to a "cycle of violence" to which "there can be no end."¹⁰

Other themes that endure are the use of imprisonment and torture as politically repressive weapons. Aruri's article documents how these tactics were used against Palestinian activists in the West Bank during the period he covers (roughly the decade following 1967). He outlines

the role of the law in both enabling and condemning this repressive activity, from Israeli occupation legal codes built on Mandate-era British emergency regulations to international humanitarian law. Administrative detention, which garners special attention in the article, continues to be a tried and true repressive tactic used by the Israeli state four decades later. Similarly, the prison activism discussed by Aruri in the form of hunger strikes is used by Palestinian political prisoners to this day.

Further foreshadowing a current trend, Aruri ends his article with a discussion of “extra-territorial jurisdiction,” in which he examines legal efforts to “enable Israel to intimidate Palestinians and their supporters abroad and to discourage normal dissent with regard to occupation policies among the Palestinian ‘diaspora.’”¹¹ This squarely represents an early iteration of the transnational dimensions of Israeli repression that are today most recognizable as global networks coordinated by the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs to combat the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Greatest Hit

Sharp is the academic thinker and writer perhaps best known for advancing theories of non-violent resistance. His three-volume 1973 tome *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is a foundational classic in the field. His reflection in *JPS*, titled “The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle,” has been cited nearly seven times more than Aruri’s piece, which appeared a little over a decade earlier. Sharp’s article is a contemporaneous response to the First Intifada, a political moment in Palestinian history that has become known as the most significant mass non-violent mobilization since the establishment of the State of Israel. For these significant reasons, I’ve chosen it as my selection for greatest hit.

Sharp’s article was published in the fall of 1989, in the midst of the intifada at a point when it began to turn more violent than it had been during its initial stages in 1988. Sharp sounds an alarm about this turn and calls for a “dramatic shift” in Palestinian strategy.¹² The Israelis, he argues, “prefer to deal with Palestinian violence rather than with nonviolent struggle.”¹³ This seems to resonate with the statement made over two decades later by Major General Amos Gilad of the Israeli army reserves. “We don’t do Gandhi very well,” Gilad told U.S. government officials in reference to Israel’s brutal response to recent nonviolent demonstrations in the occupied Palestinian territories.¹⁴

Brutal repression, Sharp tells us, “is likely” precisely because “nonviolent struggle wields significant power in conflicts if applied courageously and skillfully,” adding that this is a recognition of the power of nonviolence and “not a reason for abandoning it.”¹⁵ Sharp argues that the repression of nonviolent resistance triggers a process of “political *jiujitsu*” where the oppressors’ strength ultimately becomes their weakness because it increases resistance, creates problems in their own camps, and recruits third parties in support of the resisters.¹⁶

Sharp understood Palestinian goals to be focused on independence and sovereignty in a Palestinian state and, at the time of his writing, that was very much the conventional wisdom. Palestinian leaders had “declared independence” in late 1988 within the framework of UN Resolution 242, and Sharp lays out how he sees the goals of the intifada as prioritizing institution building and proving Palestinians to be “‘unrulable’ by the occupiers.”¹⁷ Secondary and tertiary goals of the uprising, he indicates, were to influence Israeli public opinion and domestic politics, on the one hand, and international opinion, on the other.

Sharp is troubled by what he sees as a lack of Palestinian preparation coupled with the “severity of Israeli repression in the form of beatings, shootings, killings, house demolitions, uprooting of trees, deportations, extended imprisonments and detentions without trial, and so on,” and he struggles to see the strategic effectiveness of stone throwing by Palestinians.¹⁸ Sharp further points to the role of collective Jewish trauma from a history of anti-Semitism which he argues can trigger “highly disproportionate and irrational responses” to even small-scale Palestinian violence.¹⁹ Seemingly at a loss as to how to move forward, he even goes so far as to suggest that a path the intifada might take is to initiate a “major hunger strike” akin to that staged by Chinese students that year.²⁰ If Palestinians adhered to his strategy of 100 percent nonviolent struggle, “the aim of Palestinian independence—recognized by Israel and internationally—could not long be denied,” Sharp concluded.²¹

In Conversation with Each Other

Aruri and Sharp have both died in the last decade. They have both left a deep legacy of scholarship from which others can learn. In their pieces, they give nods to the importance of the repression-dissent nexus in Palestine and how one affects the other, and they analyze overlapping themes.

Aruri sees violent repression as spurring violent dissent. Sharp sees the same and laments that Israel is able to dictate the rhythm of the pattern and thus steer it away from nonviolent strategies toward violent resistance. To remedy this, Sharp places great responsibility on leadership and strategy, and while he stops short of saying so directly, his call for Palestinians to adopt a strategy of 100 percent nonviolent resistance can only be understood as a policy recommendation to the political leadership.

How might Aruri respond to this? In his article on the repression of the PNF, Aruri makes clear that movement leadership is a primary target of state repression. The nonviolent resistance in the West Bank in 1973, which was led by the PNF after it was established in August of that year according to Aruri, had been dealt a significant blow by April 1974 after the Israeli military rounded up a large number of its leaders and placed them in indefinite detention. Leadership is of course important for implementing disciplined strategy, but how disciplined can strategy be when leadership is the target of severe repression? Sharp makes a point to mention the Israeli deportation of Palestinian American nonviolent resistance advocate Mubarak Awad to underscore the extent to which the Israelis saw exclusively nonviolent strategy as threatening. However, his failure to even mention or reckon with Israel’s assassination of Khalil al-Wazir, who was playing a leading role from abroad, in an article on the intifada published in 1989, is a glaring omission that only magnifies the challenge of demanding a 100 percent nonviolent and disciplined resistance even as the Palestinian leadership faces violent, if not eliminationist, repression.

Sharp also makes a point of focusing on the optical power of nonviolent resistance. He writes of political “jiujitsu” and the importance of transforming Israeli and Western public opinion. Full adherence to a completely nonviolent strategy is key to this, and he worries that the shift away from it lost the Palestinians the powerful advantage of their “‘David and Goliath’ image . . . on Western television screens.”²² But while he recognizes the unique challenge Palestinians face in appealing to both Israeli and international public opinion because of the history of Jewish persecution, he says nothing about why this historical narrative would not be weaponized against Palestinians, even if the struggle were entirely nonviolent.

Unlike most victims of colonialism, Palestinians are not struggling against an imperial power the way Gandhi did with the British. Rather, because of the history of Jewish persecution, Palestinians are, as Edward Said once aptly put it, “the victims of the victims.”²³ Appealing to international opinion in this unique context is a Sisyphean challenge even if done in entirely nonviolent ways. BDS and the global response to it lend interesting evidence that speaks to Sharp’s argument. Today, the tactics employed by the global movement for Palestinian rights represent the single biggest nonviolent resistance effort in Palestinian history. It is entirely focused on nonviolent action that is informed by economic decision-making alone. Yet, as foreshadowed by Aruri’s discussion of extraterritorial jurisdiction, today we are seeing an Israeli response to BDS that involves a worldwide repressive apparatus seeking to close the space for dissent by those advocating for Palestinian rights around the globe. Perhaps the most powerful tool in the pursuit of these repressive aims are allegations of anti-Semitism, which continue to be effective in Western contexts in particular, even as BDS activism remains 100 percent nonviolent.

Written decades ago, Aruri’s and Sharp’s contributions touched on themes that continue to be relevant today. Readers will find that in this moment of retrospective reflection, both articles afford them much to think about.

About the Author

Yousef Munayyer is an independent scholar and nonresident fellow at the Arab Center Washington, DC.

Endnotes

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9. Aruri, “Resistance and Repression,” p. 50.
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11. Aruri, “Resistance and Repression,” p. 63.
12. Sharp, “The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle,” p. 10.
13. Sharp, “The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle,” p. 12.
14. Wikileaks Public Library of U.S. Diplomacy, “IDF Plans Harsher Methods with West Bank Demonstrations,” 16 February 2010, para. 5, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10TELA-VIV344_a.html. Then director of policy and political-military affairs at the Israel Ministry of Defense, Maj. Gen. (reserves) Amos Gilad was speaking in reference to unarmed demonstrations taking place throughout the West Bank and specifically in Nabi Salih in early 2010.

15. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 5.
16. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 5, italics in original.
17. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 6
18. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 7.
19. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 7.
20. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 10.
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22. Sharp, "The Intifadah and Nonviolent Struggle," p. 10.
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