

# Writing While Fighting: Salim Tamari, His Generation, and the First Intifada

Penny Johnson

## Abstract

In five essays written by Salim Tamari during the first Palestinian intifada, 1987–91, he examined the role of urban merchants, the strategies of Israel’s intelligence services, and the dilemmas of the intifada’s leadership and Palestinian civil society’s “limited rebellion” in the ongoing intifada. Penny Johnson – writing in the context of the Palestinian *habbat* al-Shaykh Jarrah of 2021, often referred to as the Unity Intifada – draws on Tamari’s essays to consider the legacy left by the first intifada on more recent Palestinian politics. She also uses Tamari’s first intifada essays to suggest several aspects of the first intifada worth revisiting by scholars after three decades.

## Keywords:

Salim Tamari; intifada; Palestinian leadership; Palestinian left; Ramallah.

I began writing this essay on 15 May 2021 – Nakba Day – the first quiet morning in Ramallah after some time. The day before, in confrontations with the Israeli army in about two hundred locations in the West Bank, eleven young Palestinians were killed, including a student at Birzeit University, Fadi Washaha. In Gaza on Nakba Day, however, there was no lull: intensive Israeli shelling and airstrikes continued destroying lives, homes, and vital infrastructure, the death toll mounting into the hundreds. For eleven days in May, Hamas fired its rockets and Palestinians protested in Jerusalem, throughout the West Bank, and in cities inside the Green Line. Some were

calling it a third intifada or, even more grandly, the Unity Intifada.

In this tense atmosphere, I returned to five essays written by Salim Tamari in the heat of the first Palestinian intifada, three decades earlier. All but one were published in *Middle East Report* (the magazine of MERIP, the Middle East Research and Information Project), where several other writers in the occupied territories also found a voice. I wanted to consider how Salim and other writers of my generation approached “writing while fighting,” and whether these analyses of the first intifada have resonance for us today.

A first observation: Salim had a cooler head than many of us. He began his incisive essay on urban merchants and the Palestinian uprising by noting: “Reflections on the intifada are permeated with the ideological predispositions of their writers. It evokes the parable of the blind men and the elephant: every perception reveals the perspective of the beholder.”<sup>1</sup> In his essay, first presented as a talk at Georgetown University in May 1989 and then published in a book edited by Birzeit University faculty members Roger Heacock and Jamal Nassar, Salim brought into focus the collective agency of urban shopkeepers in what he termed in his title the “revolt of the petite bourgeoisie.” This was a perspective those of us on the other side of the elephant had not considered as we penned urgent articles on the war of the camps that initiated the uprising, the rising of villages in collective resistance, and the ubiquitous courage displayed by young people and women in demonstrations everywhere confronting the Israeli army.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that Salim was always correct and always prescient – who could be in those shifting and turbulent times? Like most of us, he first relied on personal observation – hence a focus on the Ramallah-Jerusalem axis in his writing on urban merchants – with additional documentation coming either from the communiqués of the uprising or the equally breathless reports in the Palestinian and Israeli press. Salim began by delineating the initial successes of the merchant boycott on paying taxes to Israel and the ensuing tensions, problems, and internal resistance (rising from chambers of commerce to peddlers). These led, in his view, to that boycott’s collapse in the summer of 1988, although the commercial strike continued. Somewhat earlier than most of those writing while fighting in the occupied territories, Salim identified an “organizational crisis” of the intifada. As early as August 1988, he noted that “while the commercial strike formed the backdrop for the routinization of the uprising, the institutional development of the intifada was not galvanizing around the popular committees, as anticipated by the United Leadership.”<sup>3</sup> Hindsight (over three decades later!) makes me wonder why he did not consider why and how that boycott was observed longer, and indeed intensified, in the small town of Bayt Sahur.

Reviewing Salim’s intifada texts also brings back forgotten histories, at least for me. In “Eyeless in Judea,” published in the summer of 1990, Salim examined Israel’s strategy of using human collaborators and creating paper forgeries.<sup>4</sup> His meticulous examination of the fake *bayanat* produced by the Shin Bet (deploying the name of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising) is fascinating. Salim exposed one interesting twist when Shin Bet collaborators accessed the United Leadership’s communiqués before they were published: “There were even cases when reality – to paraphrase Umberto Eco – was imitating forgery. Fake *bayanat* were distributed one or two days before UNLU

circulars hit the streets, and when the latter appeared they literally corresponded to the forged ones, insinuating that the leadership had been penetrated from within.”<sup>5</sup> This also serves as a reminder that fake news is not only a province of our new social media but can be tossed on a street or posted on an olive tree.

Another essay published in the summer of 1990 had a surprising resonance with me in the 2021 summer of discontent in Palestine and our own limited rebellion. In “The Uprising’s Dilemma: Limited Rebellion and Civil Society,” Salim deepened his analysis of the “crisis of direction” facing the intifada and the political forces leading it. He argued that the intifada’s main achievement of mobilizing “whole sectors of a civilian population” had reached its limit, while routinized revolt had neither led to “total civil disobedience – and complete disengagement from Israeli rule – nor transformed into a political initiative that can engage the enemy in negotiations on terms favorable to the Palestinians.”<sup>6</sup> But perhaps most relevant for our times is his search, in his words, “to locate the social base of the intifada in more specific terms.”<sup>7</sup> Noting again that urban merchants “played the only corporate class action in the uprising,” he identified other forces as urban refugees, village youth, and students. Attentive to class analysis, he saw the rising of urban refugees as an “upheaval of the urban poor,” rather than the emergence of a working class revolt, arguing, perhaps controversially, that the “working class has not made its presence felt.”<sup>8</sup> Israeli rule, he observed, has had “the unintended consequence of homogenizing the social base of the Palestinian communities,” but “did not destroy or even radically modify their social hierarchies.” It is well worth pondering the role of those social hierarchies in the ensuing three decades.

Also worthy of reflection, as our aging first intifada generation places hope in the new youthful generation to challenge authoritarianism in Palestinian rule and Israeli apartheid (a tall order), is Salim’s observation on the rather flexible category of “youth”: “The fact that the generic category of ‘youth’ (and later ‘children’) came to be seen as the primary force propelling the *intifada* underscores the indeterminate class character of the movement itself (although perhaps not its leadership).”<sup>9</sup> Reading this observation thirty years later, we might well wonder at our lack of rigor in unpacking this generic category. To date, some herald “youth” as the main force resisting both the occupation and internal authoritarianism, while others decry the youth of Ramallah cafes and their middle-class aspirations. What binds together youth today and what separates them?

Salim could not have predicted the events that ended that summer of 1990 and brought us into a new era: Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. However, in an essay two years after these invasions with the intriguing title “Left in Limbo: Leninist Heritage and Islamist Challenge,” Salim obliquely considers this new reality, including the 1991 Madrid peace conference, through a careful dissection of the dilemmas of a weakened Palestinian left.<sup>10</sup> He begins with a wider lens, asserting, “The late 1970s saw the demise of the organized left as a viable political force in Arab society.” Against this dismal background, he does laud some of the Palestinian left’s achievements in the intifada, including the “forging of democratic and largely autonomous movements in which large sectors of youth and women became involved.”<sup>11</sup>

But at the time in which he wrote (in 1992), he saw the Palestinian left retreating in a crucial battle over women's dress and behavior. He described the acute disarray of leftist political parties and factions after the fall of the Soviet Union, and found "the reformed Palestinian left," such as the People's Party and the break-away Democratic Front (FIDA), offering "an eclectic glasnost toward all former taboos: social democracy, liberalism, Trotskyism [where did he get that?], and religion."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps his key observation: "Behind this visible retreat of the left (Arab as well as Palestinian) is a venerable tradition of divorcing the political from the cultural and social sphere."<sup>13</sup> Here he cited the failure of the three main Palestinian socialist tendencies to challenge the personal status code, presumably for fear of alienating the religious street (and mass sentiment). Interestingly, he termed this failure a "myopia" and located in it two features that bring us back to his analysis of urban merchants, "the absence of cosmopolitan urban centers and the decline in number and weight of the urban middle classes (caused by war and migration)."<sup>14</sup>

One might contest this very broad assertion, but it brings us to the central features of Salim's scholarly preoccupations, both with class analysis and, increasingly, with cities. I cannot presume to say why, as the Oslo years rolled on, Salim took his enormously productive turn into memoirs and the social history of the late Ottoman and British Mandate period. One possible reason is simply the dreary policy orientation of sociological research in the post-Oslo period, what Salim and Rema Hammami in a 1997 review of Palestinian sociology called "quantitative fetishism."<sup>15</sup> Another, however, might be to bring that cosmopolitan history of Palestinian cities and their inhabitants out of the shadows.

Salim's last writing (while perhaps no longer fighting) on the first intifada and its aftermath came in a 1995 article entitled "Fading Flags: The Crises of Palestinian Legitimacy," after the Palestinian Authority arrived in Gaza and Jericho.<sup>16</sup> The plural crises of the title is significant – we were no longer facing, Salim argued, a simple "crisis of direction," as he posited earlier, but a crisis both of legitimacy and of Palestinian national identity. He vividly contrasted the ubiquitous defiant (because forbidden) Palestinian flags of the first intifada and those of the subsequent period where "the Palestinian flag lies forsaken and virtually ignored, its green margins turned dusty blue from the double exposure of sun and neglect."<sup>17</sup> But even more telling for our times, Salim asked if the civil society and grassroots initiatives of the intifada – whose power, he also noted, is sometimes exaggerated – could put the brakes on "the emerging authoritarian and antidemocratic tendencies of the new Palestinian regime."<sup>18</sup> A quarter of a century later, we are faced with the same question.

What can we draw from Salim's and other scholars' reports on the first intifada, that signal event that is still in history's shadows? In the same 1997 review of Palestinian sociology, Salim and Rema observe that it is "striking that ten years later such a critical review of one of the most significant events in Palestinian history has yet to be written."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps we are still blind women and men trying to examine an elephant – or perhaps those of my generation simply have bad eyesight. We await a younger generation, where indeed an interest in the first intifada has begun to stir. And we may be entering a new period of writing while fighting. I finished this essay in the summer

of 2021, in the wake of demonstrations – with youth prominent – protesting the death in Palestinian detention of activist Nizar Banat that were violently suppressed by Palestinian police and security forces.

Salim’s critical eye in his writing on the first intifada can help us use our common history for the present. However, as he warned in 1990: “The mythologies of the intifada have to be brought into synchrony with people’s real potentialities.”<sup>20</sup> I would add James Baldwin’s apt warning in *The Fire Next Time*: “To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it. It is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used. It cracks and crumbles under the pressure of life like clay in a season of drought.”<sup>21</sup> Salim’s essays on the first intifada – open to criticism, elaboration, and, crucially, discussion – steer us away from such an invented past and, hopefully, toward using that moment in Palestinian history thirty-five years ago to understand our troubled present.

*Penny Johnson is a contributing editor of the Jerusalem Quarterly. Her latest book, Forgotten: Searching for Palestine’s Lost Places and Hidden Memorials, written with Raja Shehadeh, will be published by Profile UK in March 2025.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Salim Tamari, “The Revolt of the Petite Bourgeoisie: Urban Merchants and the Palestinian Uprising,” in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. Jamal Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Praeger, 1990), 159.
- 2 See Penny Johnson, Lee O’Brien, and Joost Hilterman, “The West Bank Rises Up,” *Middle East Report* 152 (May–June 1988): 4–12, online at [merip.org/1988/05/the-west-bank-rises-up/](http://merip.org/1988/05/the-west-bank-rises-up/) (accessed 14 November 2024).
- 3 Tamari, “The Revolt of the Petite Bourgeoisie,” 167.
- 4 See Salim Tamari, “Eyeless in Judea: Israel’s Strategy of Collaborators and Forgeries,” *Middle East Report* 164–165 (May–June 1990): 39–44, online at [merip.org/1990/05/eyeless-in-judea/](http://merip.org/1990/05/eyeless-in-judea/) (accessed 14 November 2024).
- 5 Tamari, “Eyeless in Judea,” 43–44.
- 6 Salim Tamari, “Limited Rebellion and Civil Society: The Uprising’s Dilemmas,” *Middle East Report* 164–165 (May–June 1990): 4–8, quote at 4, online at [merip.org/1990/05/the-uprisings-dilemma/](http://merip.org/1990/05/the-uprisings-dilemma/) (accessed 14 November 2024).
- 7 Tamari, “Limited Rebellion,” 5.
- 8 Tamari, “Limited Rebellion,” 6.
- 9 Tamari, “Limited Rebellion,” 6.
- 10 Salim Tamari, “Left in Limbo: Leninist Heritage and Islamist Challenge,” *Middle East Report* 179 (November–December 1992): 16–21, online at [merip.org/1992/11/left-in-limbo/](http://merip.org/1992/11/left-in-limbo/) (accessed 14 November 2024).
- 11 Tamari, “Left in Limbo,” 19.
- 12 Tamari, “Left in Limbo,” 17.
- 13 Tamari, “Left in Limbo,” 17–18.
- 14 Tamari, “Left in Limbo,” 18.
- 15 Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari, “Populist Paradigms: Palestinian Sociology,” *Contemporary Sociology* 26, no. 3 (May 1997): 275–79, quote at 279, online at [doi.org/10.2307/2654002](https://doi.org/10.2307/2654002).
- 16 Salim Tamari, “Fading Flags: The Crisis of Palestinian Legitimacy,” *Middle East Report* 194–195 (July–August 1995): 10–12, online [merip.org/1995/07/fading-flags/](http://merip.org/1995/07/fading-flags/) (accessed 14 November 2024).
- 17 Tamari, “Fading Flags,” 11.
- 18 Tamari, “Fading Flags,” 12.
- 19 Hammami and Tamari, “Populist Paradigms,” 277–78.
- 20 Tamari, “Limited Rebellion,” 8.
- 21 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 80–81, quoted in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown Books, 2020), 26.