



Urbanization and Bottom-up Politics in Palestine: The Case of Yatta

Mattia Ferino

ABSTRACT The West Bank (occupied Palestinian Territories) is a fragmented network of urban clusters while the rural area is slowly chipped away by Israeli settlers and military apparatus. Palestinians' bodies are squeezed between checkpoints, razor wire, apartheid walls, military watchtowers, barracks but also between state bureaucracy, incorporation of labourers and cultural dispossession. The occupation through multiple devices produces dispossession and the national struggle explodes with violent and unforeseen forms against Israeli settlers and soldiers. The present paper is a reflection based on one year of fieldwork in Yatta's urban cluster and its rural area in the southern West Bank. By analysing Israeli's occupation law, the present work aims at explaining how the Palestinian urbanization process is forced under colonial rule with interlinked consequences on cultural and material dispossession, and youth liminal identities. Within the frame of this set of socio-spatial fragmented relations, the distrust of political parties is growing, and political forms are re-territorialized in local struggle. The research inquires why radical subjectivity is emerging in the Yatta social-spatial context produced by occupation law. How, despite the devices of Israeli occupation, aiming at drawing docile bodies and geography, the bottom-up political phenomenon emerging from Yatta's urban context explodes in sudden violence.

KEYWORDS Palestine, colonialism, anthropology, violence, urbanization, lawscape, bottom-up politics

Yatta Urbanism: Space Boundaries and Occupation Law

Yatta is a city in the south-eastern West Bank, formally with 64,277 inhabitants (PBCS 2019) but the population is almost 100,000 including the suburbs. Yatta's area is divided as follows: Yatta as the town itself, which was built around the old town city centre; Shafa Yatta (in Arabic, Yatta's edge, rim, border), which extends nearby and reaches the so-called South Hebron Hills, an area scattered with hamlets and villages that used to be autonomous, and are now incorporated in the urban area; and Masafer Yatta, the area that surrounds the hills. The word Masafer comes from the Farsi verb *sfr*, also used in Arabic, to express the act of travelling, and the preposition *ma-*, which refers to the place where action takes place. Thus, *Masafer Yatta* is Yatta's transhumance area. Yatta became a city just recently; in the past it was considered a village, a large and old one, as many other villages are today in its urban landscape, like al-Karmel and Ziph. In their fieldwork, British explorers visiting Palestine and mapping it in the 1870s briefly reported on Yatta as a shepherds' settlement (Conder et al. 1883: 310). Similarly, Yatta is described as a large village also in Mandatory Palestine

under the British rule (1920–1949) (Shwarz 1938). In the Jordanian era (1949–1967), it was still a village, with 6,326 inhabitants (Government of Jordan 1964: 13), without significant demographic growth compared to the British Mandate period (British Mandate Government 1945: 23). The urbanization process developed under Israeli occupation, dating back to 1967.

The shift from rural to urban may be investigated from various points of view. Space boundaries and the use of the soil are usually related to cultural behaviour in a broad sense: economic, religious, political, or mythical. Less explored, in anthropology, is how the modern law is shaping the landscape, forcing a specific dwelling-style. Referring to “lawscape”, Andreas Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos argues that “Space without law can only be this fetish of absolute smoothness, the absurdity of a holy city of justice” (2015: 66). Indeed, the space as occupied by bodies is always under the rule of laws: no space is even thinkable without interdicts and licit use, especially if we think of space and bodies as contiguous, according to the idea of space in Deleuze (Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos 2015: 38–106; Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos 2013; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In this work I assume this methodological perspective to inquire how Israeli occupation law is forcing the natives to modify their sociospatial approach in Yatta. The urban cluster appears clearly divided from the rural area:

well-organized agriculture can be observed in Yatta’s valley and even a short trip outside of the city centre allows one to observe a landscape of abandoned fields. The reinforced concrete buildings plated with well-polished white limestone, distinctive of Palestinian’s urban area, become, beyond a certain point, recycled materials-made marquees with weak concrete foundations. The prized olive cultivation beautifully arranged and well-terraced in the hilly zone is barely found here and there. The olive trees rise from clay spots surrounded by limestone blocks. The streets suddenly stop being asphalted and become unpaved, dusty on dry season and muddy with spring rains. The watering system for growing aromatic and officinal herbs and vegetables disappears leaving space to barren terrains.¹

A bird’s eye view returns the idea of a border between inhabited and abandoned areas, civilized versus savage. This border, rather than marking the opposition between civilized and savage, is related to the separation of area A and B on one side and area C on the other. The three zones, A, B and C, originated from the Oslo process² and are characterized by a mix of different rules.³ The control partition of these legal areas has specific consequences from both the environmental and human points of view. The border between area A and B

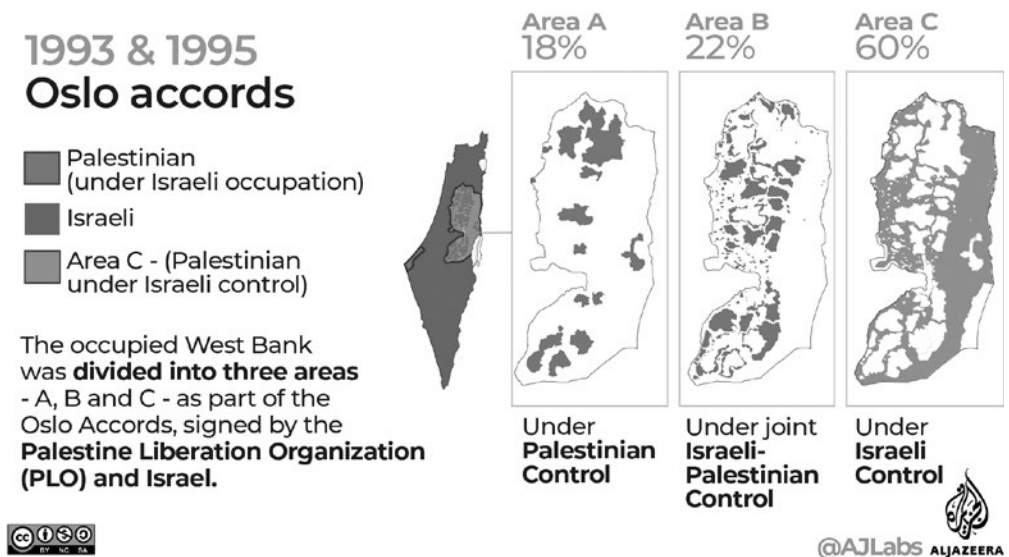
¹ Field note – January 2018 – Road 60, West Bank, Palestinian Territories.

² The Oslo accords (1993–1995) aimed to create the State of Palestine within the green line – the border before the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 – in West Bank and Gaza.

³ With the purpose of returning Palestinian sovereignty progressively, the accords divided the land as follows: Area A is under full Palestinian military and civil control; area B is mixed Israeli military control and Palestinian civil administration; area C is under full Israeli military and civil administration. After almost thirty years, nothing has changed, and the sovereignty restitution process stopped in 2000 (Pappé 2021; OCHA 2015; UN-Habit 2015).

is under the Palestinian civil administration control, whereas the area C is under the Israeli civil administration, and this it would appear to mark the passage from the inhabited to the abandoned space, from “striated” to “smooth” space⁴. According to Israeli NGOs and UN agencies, this legal device has become a tool used against Palestinian residents while encouraging Israeli settlers to strengthen the existing settlements, and favours the creation of new outposts benefitting from infrastructures and building permits, permits which are never issued in the Palestinian villages (UN-Habit 2015; OCHA 2017: 12). This legal partition enlightens the concreteness of lawscape: different supervisory authority on a territory also means the recognition of different legal freedoms and therefore of different socio-spatial relations.

Picture 1: 1993–1995 Oslo accords – Haddad 2020



The New Historians⁵ have clearly shown that the post-war process was conceived by the Israel government as aiming to “Judaize or ethnically cleanse” (Pappé 2021:74) those areas which were intended for annexation (Op. cit.: 73–74, 129–136). Pappé underlines, from

⁴ The smooth and the striated are two ways to think of the space, an original conceptualization by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 474–500). According to *the technological model* (Op. cit.: 475–477) used by the authors to explain the concept, the smooth is like “felt” obtained by fulling, held together by the plot, in an amorphous structure. On the contrary the striated is like the “weave” made with a regular organized pattern. The smooth space is open in all directions, which allows spontaneous movement on it. The striated space is closed: necessarily partitioned in regular unavoidable knots; here movement is driven by the structure.

⁵ Cf. Caplan (1995).

the historiographic point of view, how the Israeli plan was to establish free land for European Jewish settlers: “Since 1967, successive Israeli governments experimented and perfected the vision of having the land without the people living on it. The first step was to decide that Palestinians had no need to live in spacious areas and should cling to densely populated spaces. The open and green spaces were to be only occupied by Jewish settlers” (Op. cit.: 74).

Urbanization in Palestine is a matter of expulsion from the rural areas, to set up unclaimed territories. Pappé underlines that the establishment of Israel was imagined in a space left empty since the Exodus (Pappé 2007: 10–11).⁶ This myth is so familiar that even today it is common to represent “Palestine as an ‘empty’ and ‘arid’ land before the arrival of Zionism” (Op. cit.: 229).⁷ The lawscape, or how the regulations of occupation outline the space and the human way to inhabit it, is a hodgepodge of international law, ancient Ottoman law and normative administration. Under international law, an occupying nation must follow the jurisprudence used by the nation before its occupation⁸. A law of the late Ottoman period, aiming at formalizing land ownership to increase tax income, is invoked nowadays to allow the state to conduct an expropriation policy in the function of reassignment to settlers. Thus, in Area C, land that is not cultivated for over two years can be ‘lawfully’ requisitioned by the Israeli government, a practice which allows settlers to seize it and, due to the occupation soldiers, to defend this right by force (Foreman 2009; Braverman 2008). On the other hand, the Israeli civil administration prevents Palestinians from using their land in 99% of Area C (OCHA 2019). This makes Area C look like a “smooth” space, but its wild and abandoned appearance hides a “striated” space with sophisticated law ties and hard struggles behind it⁹. Within this frame, it can be easily understood why “suddenly reinforced concrete buildings plated with well-polished white limestone, distinctive of Palestinian’s urban area, become, beyond a certain point, recycled materials-made marquees with weak concrete foundations”¹⁰. The opposition of urban to rural as civilized versus savage, inhabited versus abandoned, is a fetish. What occurs in

6 The biblical idea of returnees proposed in the book of Jeremiah, exposing the “firm belief that the people of Israel would return to their land” (Sweeney 2004: 917), was recombined in secularized and nationalized Judaism (Pappé 2007: 10–11). In the late 19th century, when the first Zionists arrived, they considered the land empty (Pappé 2007: 11).

7 This approach reflects another juridical aspect of the legal basis of settler colonialism in Palestine. The image of an empty land matches with the concept of *terra nullius*, the legal basis of modern colonialism (Veracini 2015; Wolfe 2006).

8 It is known that Israeli forces in the West Bank, under international law, occupy a foreign country’s territory. However, this is a thorny issue as Israel claims there was no state before Israel’s foundation (cf. Tilley 2011).

9 Likewise, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos’ “white cube” example where: “A body moves [...] consciously or unconsciously obeying invitations and exclusions, sensory barriers or gestures of guilt-free overload” (2013: 37). Palestinian bodies are obeying to the immediate presence of police and soldiers, and their frequent and direct actions maintain contact with the natives (Fanon 1963: 33–94; Mbembe 2008).

10 Field note – January 2018 – Road 60, West Bank, Palestinian Territories.

the rural areas is not a struggle against the lack of subsistence means, it is a struggle against Israeli occupation. According to the World Bank, it is the current Israeli administration that virtually precludes Palestinians from investing in Area C (World Bank 2008, 2013), forcing Palestinians to live in miserable conditions or to flee (UN-Habit 2015; OCHA 2017). The lawscape shapes a vacuum to ensure the settlement project and forces the population to move to the urban centre. It is questionable if the urbanization process could be considered a “free” process of human agency or if it is strictly bound to structural processes where the “willingness” is a mere theological illusion of “the city of god”, to quote back the Mihalopoulos-Philippopoulos allegory. In the West Bank, however, the urbanization process is clearly a relocation enforced by occupation, with a patchwork of laws aiming at drawing a docile geography for Jewish only settlers.

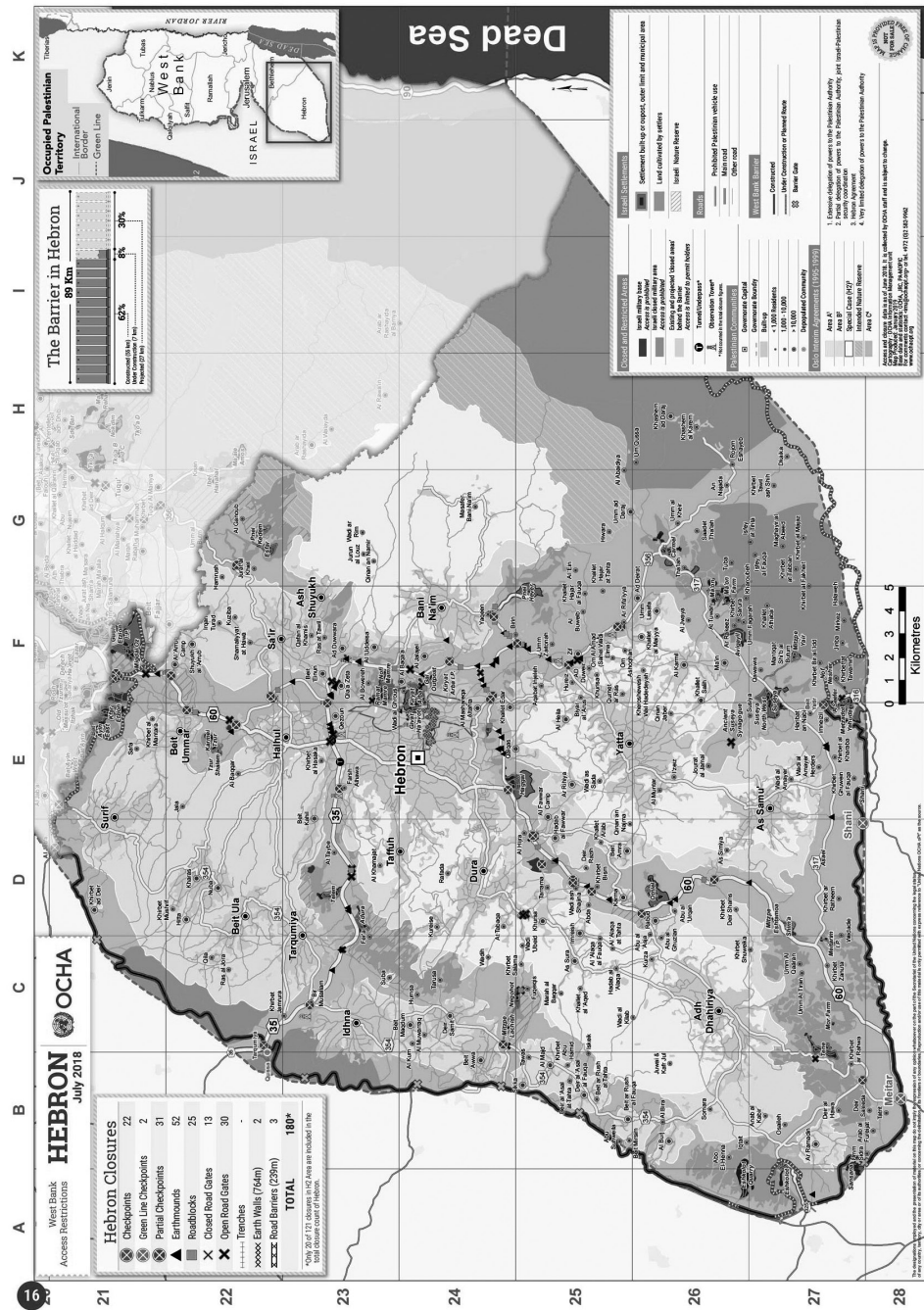
Urban Disposessions

Yatta’s Areas A and B are bounded by Road 60 and one of its branches, Road 356, that becomes 317 and then reconnects to Road 60. This island in the West Bank’s archipelago¹¹ is formed by Yatta itself, As Samu’ – the second largest municipality – and other twenty-six smaller localities, all villages, except for al-Fawwar, which is a refugee camp resulting from the 1948 Nakba people transfer. The map (Figure 2) shows that all around the city there are checkpoints, partial checkpoints, earth-mounds, roadblocks, road-gates, and watchtowers, all of them installed with the clear purpose of disrupting the free circulation of Palestinians (Peteet 2017: 99–138; OCHA 2020). The surrounding of each settlement is equipped with military barracks, which also functions as a military security control of the urban cluster. *Masafer Yatta* became a firing zone under the threat of expropriation with demolition and destruction of crops (Pappé 2021; al-Adraa 2022). Yatta is despoiled from its transhumance space and desperately trapped within a confined, locked space, with a continuously increasing population trend; with severe difficulties to produce even the basic foodstuffs for the community, the city is completely dependent on goods coming from Israel.

Leila Farsakh affirms that land confiscation and the transfer of population to urban areas is following the same pattern of urbanization and expropriation that happened to the Indigenous nations of South Africa, better known as Bantustan (Farsakh 2015). Alternatively, Julia Peteet uses the term enclavization of Palestinian cities (2015: 208–228). Rassem Khamaisi talks of cities under siege as a clear plan of the Israeli civil administration for Palestinian cities in west Bank (2018).

¹¹ The brilliant concept of the West Bank as an archipelago was put forward by the French artist Julien Bousac (2019), who transposed on a map the Israeli-controlled areas as a sea, so drawing a group of islands and naming it “L’archipel de Palestine orientale”.

Picture 2: West Bank access restrictions – OCHA 2018



A common feature emerging from the work of the above-cited authors is the idea of an ongoing attempt to cut Palestinian cities off from access to resources. A city, in general, does not produce what it consumes in food, energy, clean water and raw materials. The classical analysis on the city assumes its sovereignty on the outside. In Palestinian cities, things are upside down: the external sovereignty plagues the entire population with a state of siege (Mbembe 2008). This condition is interconnected with the massive use of the Palestinian labour force in Israel. Between 1968 and 1974, the share of Palestinian labourers in Israel rose from 6% to 33%, while wages and goods consumption in the Palestinian territories increased and the unemployment rate dropped steadily (Hackl 2022). This process is a major phenomenon in Yatta: “The municipality estimated that 75 percent of the labour force in Yatta, which is one of the largest towns in the West Bank, worked inside Israel. Once known for breeding sheep and producing yoghurt, most of area A and B has become urbanized while the Israeli occupation restricts the freedom to move and work the land” (Hackl 2022: 6–7). This “development under-occupation” involves restrictions on the import-export regime aiming at protecting the Israeli economy while disadvantaging Palestinian entrepreneurship. This has produced a paradoxical development outcome; while the per capita income rose, Palestinian national productive capabilities deteriorated (Farsakh 2012: 26–42). Such as cross-border labour phenomenon became a spoiling device of the urban area, which makes Yatta *de facto* an enclave dependent on Israeli goods and its labour market without the recognition of Palestinian workers’ rights (Farsakh 2012; Hackl 2022). This process of strong unilateral dependence not only creates dispossessed people but also constructs

Picture 3: Zif’s Gate. Picture from the author



a mutilated city, an open-air prison. The presence of such brutal realities as checkpoints, razor wire, apartheid walls, military watchtowers, barracks, and restricted areas makes clear the idea of a siege, according to Khamaisi (2018) and Mbembe (2008).

The city expands from the abandoned centre where the remains of the old stone houses lie, just few of them restored for public use often funded by foreign NGOs. From there, the urbanization follows the streets with medium-tall buildings or one-floor houses with garden, generally plated with elegant, polished limestone. The built area spreads to the less trafficked zone where the agriculture's area has its traditional shape with olive groves or horticultural and aromatic herbs growing with irrigation system. The agricultural land is constantly worn away by new construction sites, scattered along the roads. Yatta is a work in progress site and the landscape changes fast.¹²

Yatta is not like other Palestinian *madina*, those cities that have a recognized status. Yatta is also not like Hebron, with its tall and modern buildings: a merger between Palestinian limestone traditions and a display of modern materials and architecture like steel and glass. Nor it is like Bethlehem or Nablus, with care for traditional historical buildings and restoration of the old town. Yatta is more like a chaotic, provincial spot and is considered a hick town by most Palestinians. While there is no urban plan at all, urbanism is forced by the juridification of the space produced by the occupation regime. One of the major sites is al-Karage, literally, the garage, with its chaotic and dusty bazaar where people go to move outside the city. Al-Karage is always jammed by cars, taxis, minibuses, and so-called illegal taxis (without official license but informally tolerated). It is the picture of the economy of the town: people come and go to work, or travel to benefit from the services outside (in Hebron, Bethlehem, or Israel, and only rarely to Ramallah).

The city does not have other gathering places such as cafés, pastry shops, restaurants, and malls like other cities. They are not available in contiguous places, but the ones that exist in al-Karage are made for workers for take away and the activities offered are exclusive to men. During the evening and at night, the cafes scattered in the urban cluster are crowded with males only; the main activities are playing pool, smoking *shisha*, watching football matches from all over the world, and chatting while drinking a variety of non-alcoholic beverages. Women's socializing takes place at home, as a real gathering area does not exist. There are no malls and no markets, except the hustle and bustle al-Karage, and no cafes for families where it is not considered a shame for a group of women or families to go there. The usual social life for a woman is hosting visitors in her home, usually relatives or female friends, or vice versa.

Rapid urbanization without planning is also removing residential and public space for social life. It leads to cutting off kinship proximity, so the diverse families are forced to live in small dwellings. The families try to avoid living *shabak shabak*, literally window to window, as privacy and women's modesty are regarded as essential social values (Rubenberg 2001). The need to escape these close quarters also promotes the proliferation

¹² Field note – December 2017 – Yatta, West Bank, Palestinian Territories.

of scattered housing, with an increasing knock-on effect in chipping away agricultural land. Clearly such architecture promotes several kinds of dispossession, as there is evidence for a connection between the urbanization process and material or symbolic dispossession and violence (Muggah 2012; Buhaug and Urdal 2013). If the use of Palestinian labour by Israel is an attempt to establish “social and political dispossession” (Hackl 2022), the result of this process is the production of indocile rather than docile youth.

Picture 4: Yatta city centre. Picture from the author



Dispossession and Liminal Identities

E: So ... I mean ... what do you think you are? Fellahin or Madani?

I: No ... I think I am more like Falastini¹³

This conversation occurred with Ibrahim, a friend and informant during the fieldwork, while finishing a holiday meal in a wide spring meadow in Susiya¹⁴, a Shafa Yatta hamlet in Area C. Ibrahim and I were talking about the usual things: job, life, family, our desires, and dreams.

¹³ Field note – April 2018 – Susiya, West Bank, Palestinian Territories.

¹⁴ Susiyeh, Susiya, Susia, Susya – due to the different transliteration from Arabic *سوسيا* or Israeli *סוסייה*. I prefer to use *Susiya*, as it is the transliteration used by the Palestinian Authority and commonly used, even though in speech you will often hear Susiyeh.

To appreciate this passage is important to take a step back. In Palestinian society, and more generally in the Arab world, there are three social communities: *Bedu* (or *Badawi*), *Madani* and *Fellahin* or *fellah* (Boqa'i 2005; Conder 1879: 202–291). *Al-bedu*, Bedouin, is the best known in western culture with its nomadic or seminomadic habits, long distance travel and cameleer noble traditions. Bedouin comes from *al-badia*, the desert, and means inhabitant of the desert. *Madani* comes from the Arabic word *madina*, the city, a commercial-bureaucratic centre, and its dwellers as citizens. The word citizen evokes an assumption of urbanized/civilized people, as *al-madaniyya* also means civilization. Their auto-representation is the expression of the old heritage city dwellers, keepers of civilized traditions, modern and old-fashioned at the same time. The *madani* are often deemed by the rest of the community as a bit upper-crust spoiled people, as among the parochial representatives. The last figure, *fellahin*, refers to the condition of peasants, the rural sedentary residents of the countryside, strictly bound to the land and a life of physical labour.

At the time of this field interview, I was focusing on cross-border labourers going behind the wall in Israel. I was not yet interested in the social identities of Palestinians and their self-representation. The question came up by chance. It was not a surprise that neither *madani* nor *fellahin* could fit Ibrahim's self-representation. It is fundamental to understand that the classical identity figures of tradition are strictly bound by the environment, in the sense of inhabited ecology. Ibrahim's bewilderment is connected to his liminality: his living space is neither fully urban nor fully rural. Ibrahim at the time was almost thirty-years old, a young man with his heart in Susiya, his native village, and his feet in Yatta. Clearly between and betwixt in a liminal manner.

Liminality, as condition of refugees stabilized and encamped, is a well-known topic, at least since Michel Agier published "Between War and City" (2002)¹⁵. This model points out that "the liminality of all situations of exodus that gives a frustrated, unfinished character to this type of 'urbanization', much more than its precarious, improvised, always incomplete material aspects that one finds also in urban peripheries of poor countries" (Agier 2002: 337). However, as I argued before, this concept of urbanization is focused solely on urban space, forgetting access to resources and the circulation paths of goods and people as the results of sovereignty inside and outside urban clusters. In Yatta's urban cluster there is a soft, ongoing break in existential conditions, which leads to a slow process of liminality, in comparison with the sudden existential disruption of the Nakba or other mass displacement. For instance, Ibrahim, as a young man of his generation, is stuck between his desire to live in Susiya and to work for improvement of his community, and the impossibility of living there and make thrive his house and his family. Like almost all the other adult men, he is socially compelled to start a family, to leave his father's home and build a new house while continuing to fulfil his duty within the family-group. He also has to honour his lineage by expanding it with numerous descendants. Economic dependence and unemployment in Yatta are forcing Ibrahim to work in Israel. Cross-border workers have critical living conditions, mostly as a consequence of the 'lawscape' made by

¹⁵ On refugees' liminality condition also Harrell-Bond and Voitura (1992), Malkki (1995).

gates, tunnels, waiting cages and other so-called security-purposed devices (Peteet 2015, 2017). This circulation system aims to discourage workers from going back and forth daily, with a procedure that is organized in such a way as to create long standing queues, sudden closures, and intrusive searches. Besides the expected delays, this generates humiliation and frustration¹⁶: Palestinian workers stay for weeks far away from home, sleeping in shacks in the fields where they work or in under-construction buildings. In addition to this imposed, disorientating lifestyle, there is no sense in investing money in Susya¹⁷, where all the buildings and facilities are under threat of demolition (OCHA 2015). Ibrahim therefore must move to the city, but even there he has no space to improve his conditions: he is neither a peasant, nor a citizen. The money he earns is all used to support the family and even if Ibrahim studied art in Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem and is a good photographer, he has no chance to make a career or to find a job in the services sector.

In advanced capitalist countries, though urbanization and modernization came “dripping blood and dirt”, it was also capable to free desires and satisfy wishes by means of markets (Lyotard 1993; Deleuze and Guattari 1977). Glittering and restless cities return the image of “things you desire you didn’t even imagine”. The colonized city is the opposite, as Fanon expressed clearly for colonized Algeria: “It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light” (1963: 39). These words are still relevant today, because in the colonized world the promise of wellness and enrichment claimed by modernization never showed up. Palestinian clusters are hungry towns: though not in terms of goods consumption, people are starving in opportunities, freedom, and space. Jamil Hilal highlighted how the process of individualization and fragmentation beside the growth of goods consumption runs deep in Palestinian society as result of globalization (2015, 2020). This day-by-day transformation is different from 1948’s forced displacement. The oppression of consumption capitalism within a frame of occupation and traditional duties is a less clear phenomenon, harder to recognize and to struggle with as a collective political subject. Rather, it is easier to blame the individual for failure in the impossible attempt to become successful within the frame of meritocratic neoliberal ambitions (Hackl 2022). Nevertheless, this process of political dispossession through labour incorporation and economic dependency (Ibid.) is not necessarily bound to be achieved. Palestinians, especially the youth, even if fragmented, are committed to their national cause (Hilal 2020). This feeling of being *Falastini* as expressed by Ibrahim manifests the idea of a community in struggle despite liminality conditions.

¹⁶ These topics are really on everyone’s lips, is one of the first thing you learn living in West Bank. To deepen analysis Peteet 2017.

¹⁷ As in all Area C as highlighted by different reports of World Bank (2008, 2013).

Picture 5: Housing unit in Area C Susyia, exterior. Picture from the author



Picture 6: Housing unit in Area C Susyia, interior. Picture from the author



National Struggle and Bottom-up Politics

The Palestinian National Authority¹⁸ (PNA) is perceived by most of Palestinians as not suiting people's political needs. Fatah¹⁹ is busy giving priority to employing their supporters and local leaders in government bureaucracies, the security apparatus and wherever there is political influence. This bureaucratization of politics weakened the party's capability to mobilize mass support on national issues. Fatah represents, today in the West Bank, the elite and its reproduction through rigid structures and nomenclature (Khalidi and Samour 2011; Hilal 2015; Hilal 2020). The general sentiment about PNA became clear when, during my fieldwork, I noticed that the corruption of the president himself and his government were the talk of the town. There are other reasons that push Palestinians to consider the PNA an empty expression of the elite's power. For instance, the security coordination with Israel is a poke in the eye to Palestinians suffering from Israeli military violence (Sogge 2018). The general elections have been delayed until further notice since 2007, another reason for people's distrust. Dissatisfaction with Hamas, the other major party, is also rising with the same charge: as an expression of the elite's power, practicing the same corruption where they rule, in the Gaza Strip (Hilal 2021). As PNA totally embraced the neo-liberal economic doctrine of free trade, the fragmentation of society reached an acute level, overwhelming unions and the anti-colonial struggle (Khalidi and Samour 2011; Hilal 2015, 2021).

However, political fragmentation does not necessarily mean giving up the struggle²⁰ and could provide leverage to renew the political framework. As the frame of party-structures becomes weaker political activism gets fragmented: "from national field" becomes "local field" (Hilal 2020, 2021). This process is supported by the environment: different socio-spatial conditions and resources allow different political practices. National identity and national effort are dismissed; instead, what is central within the existential condition for survival inside is the "local struggle", strictly bound to everyday oppression. From this fragmentation emerges a territorialized resistance, *al-sumud*. *Al-sumud* can be translated as steadfastness or resilience, with multi-layered definitions and practices (van Teeffelen et al. 2011). *Al-sumud* is indeed a mixed political praxis with two poles. One is cultural resistance to the assimilation attempts by the occupier in order to preserve identity and roots (Rijke and van Teeffelen 2014). At the other pole there is resilience, as less allegoric as social science frequently points to: planning non-violent strategies to keep living and using the land under threat of dispossession by settlers (Ibid; Van Teeffelen et al. 2011; Hammad and Tribe 2020). Resistance to the attempts of transfer, promoted by Israeli occupation, implies also continuously restoring the place that the occupier destroys in order to keep rooted. Surviving in poor conditions in Area C's rural communities means "to exist is to resist", as Sami²¹ – a young activist from Sarura – summed up wisely.

¹⁸ The proto-state government of the occupied Palestinian Territories.

¹⁹ The political party of the president and the prime minister since the creation of PNA. Since 2007, it has been in control only of the West Bank as the Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas.

²⁰ Instead, individualization is it more often an attempt to impose docility on bodies (cf. Foucault 2003)

²¹ Sami, besides being a Youth of Sumud – <https://www.facebook.com/youthofsumud/> – is a friend who helped me during the fieldwork. In a recorded interview he said that: "To us... exist

Al-sumud can be practiced also without “being in the land”; preserving identities and national culture is resistance in itself, as all scholars underline.²² However, this narrative avoids saying that the cultural practice of *sumud* has developed in Palestinian exiled communities with the armed struggle and foundation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Rijke and van Teeffelen 2014), with the aim of keeping a culture in the frame of sovereignty regain on territories. It was a part of the struggle. *Al-sumud* re-territorialization took place as a practice after the second intifada, achieving results with Popular Committees. It is Yatta’s Area C case of the Palestinian Popular Committee of the South Hebron Hills, where many villages have been capable surviving the displacement plan: Susyia, Jinba and many others. In rarer cases, some improvement of living conditions occurred with the approval of a town plan after years of struggle, such as At-Twani, and even of returning to displaced sites, like in Sarura,²³ a displaced hamlet in Masafer Yatta.

I argue elsewhere that *sumud* is a mutilated practice without land in which to practice it. The production involves not only the commodities, but also the circle of innovation and reproduction of heritage, culture, social rituals, and even language (Ferino 2020). Material production is interlinked with production of meanings; being cut off the environment is to break the connection with everyday gestures strictly bounded with cultural transmission and reproduction (Leroi-Gourhan 1993; Warnier 2001). I do not want to state that this implies cultural poverty, as cultural solutions bloom in even the most deprived places (Appadurai 2013: 115–130). I mean that *sumud* without land is shifting from a social reclaiming practice to the repetition of the wound in the collective memory, which has become less attractive, especially for youth²⁴. Also, the armed struggle – *al-muqawama* – did not end with the military defeat of the second intifada. Besides Hamas, there are many other smaller groups active locally, for instance the now well-known Lion’s Den in Nablus, with a considerable escalation of violence (Al Tahan 2022; Kingsley and Yazbek 2023). In Palestine in 2018, the Al-Aqsa Martyr Brigade²⁵ was the most talked-about armed group and its leader, al-Zaboor, born Ahmad Naji, from Balata camp, became a folk hero after his death (Sogge 2018). *Al-muqawama* has changed in comparison with PLO guerrilla warfare, which aimed

means resist... that means sumud” (recorded interview with Sami, 24/03/2018, Sarura – West Bank – Palestine).

²² The paper by Jeyda Hammad and Rachel Tribe (2020) contains a rich literature on this topic.

²³ To learn more about the interesting case of At-Twani, see “Everyday Evil in Palestine” by Ilan Pappé (2021), and for Sarura the docufilm by Nicola Zambelli called *Sarura – The Future Is an Unknown Place* (2022).

²⁴ On this, during an interesting focus group, Ali, a friend from Masafer Yatta, translating for me a focus group, engaged in a long discussion with Mohammed, a guy from al-Fawwar camp, who could not understand the position to stay and struggle while preferring to flee outside the country with a good marks on his degree. Mohammed could not understand Ali’s point of view, as struggle for land seemed something intangible to those who were dispossessed generations before.

²⁵ The al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades is a Palestinian armed group. They have never laid down their weapons and refuse to join the Palestinian security forces. The reason for the conflict is security cooperation. On the security cooperation agreement, see Lia (2006).

at creating and defending state sovereignty. Michael Milstein writes, for Israel National Security Studies (INSS), something extremely interesting about it:

The Arab term *muqawama* may be translated literally as “resistance,” but this translation fails to transmit the broad, varied conceptual and practical contents of the term. *Al-Muqawama* is much more than a military method of action or a political concept; it is a comprehensive view of the world and a way of life. [...] The resistance has no intention of trying to achieve military parity [...] The elements of resistance understand their military inferiority. Nonetheless, they claim that mental strengths enable them to offset the enemy’s military-technological superiority, in particular their stamina and capacity for self-sacrifice. According to the concept of resistance, victory lies in [...] realizing victory through a non-defeat. (Milstein 2010: 57–60)

The success of the struggle has been postponed indefinitely, becoming an existential conflict with self-sacrifice as a non-defeat capability. The practice of armed struggle manifests as sporadic violence escalation against the Israel Defense Force or the settlers. The attacks are always more often with rudimentary tools such as knives or even scissors, or with firearms, individually or in small groups.

This is the case of Yatta’s lone wolf attacks, with several cases of stabbing to death (Reuters 2018; BBC 2015) and the 2016 shooting in Tel-Aviv (Kubovich et al. 2016). These facts turned the spotlight of the Israeli public on Yatta, an unknown town before the shooting. *Shin Bet*, the Israeli Internal Security Agency, hurried to blame the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as the inspirer of the 2016 attack. But later, *Shin Bet* had to admit that the attackers were not an organized terrorist cell, and they did not receive directives or support from ISIL or other organizations (Cohen 2016). Meanwhile, the Israeli public debate focused on the social causes of Yatta’s youths’ frequent lone wolf attacks (Schindler 2016), though any reflection about the conditions that generated these attacks was generally lacking. A declaration of Jamal Baha’is, deputy mayor of Yatta, to *The Jerusalem Post* outlines the differences from the case in Jenin, where armed groups of fighters are properly structured with a significant presence.

The youth of our city are desperate and sick of Israel’s occupation and its closure [of movement] over the Palestinians [...] If you look at the past few months, or at the number of attackers coming from the Yatta area, and you contrast it to Jenin a decade ago, Yatta has just a small fraction of the fighters among the population. We don’t know if there will be further attacks. (Schindler 2016)

Violence and Dispossession Regime

Baha’is marks the difference between organized groups and Yatta’s attackers, suggesting that the latter seem to act unpredictably, in a way not coordinated by militant groups, stemming from the desperate life produced by conditions under occupation. The condition of liminality existence in Yatta is a matter of desires and frustration, a mutilated capitalistic modernity of an under-siege enclave. Many young Palestinians are fascinated by imported goods: luxury cars, magnificent villas, and bombastic wares became the subject of their desires; from smartphones overflows a stream of baller flexing their fleshy wealth. Subordination to the power which

shapes individuals and influences their desires (Butler 2005: 1–30)²⁶ is clearly recognizable in this process. Palestinians are primarily hostages of the colonial system that crafts desires and devices to prevent movement, fair access to the work market and goods, which turns modernization into a hollow promise. The case of car racing is iconic (Chamas 2015), the desire to drive fast in a territory where roads for Palestinians are full of roadblocks, earth mounds, road-bumps and checkpoints, where to be shot by a soldier is an everyday possibility, is a source and frustration of desires. Within such a cage dissatisfaction and frustration grow (Sogge 2018) and the smouldering rage under the surface erupts suddenly. The Yattawi's attacks are done without strategic planning, re-framed in terms of the national struggle only in retrospect, praised but not claimed by armed organizations. The violence in the struggle seems not to aim at a target and certainly shows no concern for the backlash. Practicing such attacks has an enormous cost, beyond the extrajudicial executions, detention and torture inflicted in Israeli prisons (Ballas 2020), also for the community: “After two attackers from Yatta [...] in 2016 [...] The Israeli army blocked entrances to Yatta, and Israel revoked 83,000 travel permits for Palestinians throughout the West Bank. The father of one of the attackers told a newspaper that his son ‘has destroyed his future’” (Hackl 2022: 13–14). Besides the above-cited sad consequences for the life of the Palestinians, a further point should be considered, namely the intrinsic limits to the attempt to control carried out by Israel. According to rational choice theory, coercive power relies on the fear of negative consequences: security forces base their power not on actual control but on the potential to exercise it. All this crashes when, to use the words of Tareq, interviewed by Sogge: “someone would pick up arms, just to send a message, to say that... I do not accept this, and I do not care if I die or live” (Sogge 2018). “Nothing to lose but their life”, as states the title of Suad Amiry's novel (2010) on Murad's journey to go to work in Israel.

Checkpoints, razor wire, apartheid walls, military watchtowers, and barracks are part of disciplinary and biopolitical strategies, a control device aiming at making Palestinian bodies docile (Mbembe 2008). This lawscape control of territory and bodies does not achieve its goal: it may prevent some attacks but produces conditions for sudden and unpredictable violence, against which Israel's sophisticated control system looks as brutal as it is ineffective. The residents from Yatta underlined the existential conditions in which the blind rage of the youth grows:

locals speculated that the disproportionate number of attackers coming from Yatta might be attributed to its topography. “Yatta is surrounded by settlements in all directions,” said Azzam Nawarjja, [*Nawajja, likely typo by the author] a Yatta resident who splits his time here and in

²⁶ “We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. The customary model for understanding this process goes as follows: power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms” (Butler 2005: 2).

the Palestinian village of Sussiya to the south. “The settlements are choking the air we breathe.” To the west of Yatta sits Otniel and to its south is Jewish Sussiya, a settlement that has been trying to expand for three decades and in the process displace Palestinians who claim to work the land. (Schindler 2016)

Picture 7: Israeli military barracks along Road 60. Picture from the author



The siege of Yatta, rather than producing docile bodies, a dispossessed “reserve army of labour”, produces indocility. Trapped youths find no solutions other than returning the violence against Israelis. The colonized body, from being a place of control, becomes a weapon, embodying the brutal form of necropower²⁷, a radical form of subjectivity which is not willing to accept politics as a form of mediation (Fanon 1963: 33–94; Mbembe 2008). In this form of sudden and blind uprising, rage as a political phenomenon must be recognized. The lack of clear claims, achievement of rational targets, and even collective planned action could make us assume this is not political. Here politics cannot embrace the form of reaching compromise between different instances, where no common public space is given. Politics rather than acting as “being together with others, acting in concert and speaking with each other” (Arendt 1998: 162) is a “re-action” to the caging conditions of the lawscape.

²⁷ When power chooses who lives and who dies, which in Palestine takes the “most accomplished form” (Mbembe 2008: 165)

Here, “under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” (Mbembe 2008: 177).

Picture 8: Israeli mobile checkpoint along Road 60. Picture from the author



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Author

Mattia Ferino graduated from Università degli Studi di Cagliari in philosophy, he is now a Master's degree student in anthropology at Università degli Studi di Torino. His fields of research are colonialism, dispossession, and violence in political processes in Mediterranean and Middle East areas.

Contact: mattia.ferino@gmail.com