

One Battle at a Time

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Samia was not yet seven when the Six-Day war between Israel and three neighbouring countries erupted on 5 June 1967. All she can remember is the fear, mixed with excitement she felt when the sirens went off in Jerusalem where she lived with her parents and two siblings. She quickly learned the routine of stopping everything and calmly heading off to the shelter in the ground floor of the house she lived in. Stopping everything meant exactly that. It didn't matter whether she was watching her favourite cartoon programme, or in the middle of a dream or even in the bathroom; she had to stop everything and find her way to the shelter, calmly and quietly. Being the responsible older sibling that she was, she always made sure to remind her parents to pick up her younger brother who was two, before running to the shelter. This was her way of coping with the fear she felt; to distract her mind and try to focus on taking responsibility for another, more vulnerable, person than herself.

The war was quick and decisive. It was over in just six days. Samia and her family survived the war physically unharmed but the psychological scar was too obvious to be ignored. It was the first time she had ever seen her mother cry. Little did Samia know that the events of those six days would have a life-time impact on hundreds of thousands of Palestinians for generations to come.

It was nearly fifty years later when Samia, now a human rights activist, slowly approached the checkpoint on a hot and sunny summer's day in August 2016 on her way to Ofer military court. "Te'ouda?" (Hebrew for identity card) shouted the soldier with his finger on the trigger. He wanted to check Samia's identity card to determine whether she was one of those lucky Palestinians who are allowed to cross over to the other side of the wall where the Military Court is located. The soldier had a quick look and waved her through. Samia felt a welcome sense of relief as she was now sure she would make it to court in time.

The gate at the entrance to the court finally clicked open at around 10:30 a.m. and a loud voice with an aggressive tone yelled something which was incomprehensible. Samia confidently walked through the first metal-detecting machine holding a stack of Norwegian passports belonging to a group of law students who had come to visit Ofer Military court, to attend court hearings of Palestinian youngsters and to try to understand what occupation is all about.

Everything was cleared and the group was ushered in, one by one, through the first, then the second metal-detecting machines.

Before they were about to go through the third security check, a guard said in Hebrew to another guard “treat them with respect please.” Samia gave a literal translation of what the guard had said but a more accurate translation would have been to say “don’t treat those foreign students the way we treat Palestinians

As the group of enthusiastic law students entered the compound they encountered Palestinian mothers and fathers who had travelled long distances to attend a court hearing of a loved one. Some had left their homes at 5:30 a.m. in order to make it in time for their son’s hearing. Others took a day off work and sacrificed a badly needed day’s salary. Others left toddlers with relatives hoping they would be back before noon. Hot and tired, but thrilled to know that at least some foreigners care to know; the families politely took turns to tell the Norwegian students their stories.

One mother after the other told incredibly moving stories about terrifying incidents with hardly any emotions as if this was the norm to be expected. A mother from a village near Hebron told the students her son was arrested at 2 in the morning after a group of ten soldiers fully armed and accompanied by a service dog raided her home while they were all asleep. She hardly had time to put some clothes on and when she asked the commander for the reason for her son’s arrest she was pushed and told to shut up.

Another mother from the same village told the students her twelve year old son was late coming home from school one day. She later found out Ibrahim, her son, was arrested on the main road after some soldiers chased a group of boys. Ibrahim could not run fast enough and was arrested. She now needed to come up with 5000 shekels to pay for the release of her son on bail pending his trial in a few months’ time.

A father told the students how soldiers at a checkpoint a couple of months ago tore his permit up and told him to go back home. When he asked for the reason the soldier told him it was because his son was in prison. He tried to explain to the soldier that without the permit he could not visit his son who was held in a prison inside Israel. The father was excited to be at Ofer today for his son’s hearing as this would be his chance to see his son for the first time in months. The stories went on and on as the students listened with disbelief, only to realise this was the tip of the iceberg for what was yet to come.

As they made their way into one of the court rooms to attend the hearing of a teen-age boy from a village near Jerusalem, the judge was quick to ask them to leave immediately explaining that the defendant was a minor. Had it not been for Samia, the students would have left, but she knew the law. She quickly referred to the document given to the group by the military public relations officer at the entrance and informed the judge that court hearings were

supposed to be open to the public provided the parents consented, which they had. The judge reluctantly agreed to allow the group to stay and the hearing commenced.

It took the law students only a few minutes to realise that the hearing was a total sham. The students were not fooled by the piles of documents in front of the prosecutor or by the black robe that the lawyer was wearing nor by the computers and the simultaneous interpretation. The body language alone of everyone involved was enough to reveal the truth about these courts and what their objectives were. Dispensing justice was obviously not a consideration.

The fate of that boy in shackles was decided long before he even appeared in court. Like hundreds of other boys his age, he would have been interrogated without being informed of his rights and without seeing a lawyer. His lawyer will most likely have advised him to plead guilty, even if he claims to be innocent, because that is the quickest way to get out of the system. He would then spend two to three months in prison. Sad and helpless the parents in the room would try to negotiate a better deal but without success.

Over the past fifty years of military occupation, more than 760,000 Palestinian men, women and children have been detained by the Israeli military, many of whom ended up spending the best years of their lives in Israeli prisons. During the same period of time, hundreds of thousands of Israeli civilians have moved to live in illegal settlements built on Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is no coincidence that the majority of those arrested these days are arrested from locations near settlements or roads used by settlers. Evidence collected by Military Court Watch reveals that the majority of Palestinian boys who get arrested are arrested from villages and refugee camps within two kilometers from a settlement or a road used by settlers or the military.

Successive Israeli governments, on both sides of the political spectrum, have actively pursued settlement policies in the territory Israel occupied in June 1967, infringing on Palestinian individual and collective rights and seriously undermining the prospects for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. It is not an exaggeration to say that settlements are at the epicenter of multiple human rights violations that have plagued the region for fifty years.

Palestinians have long well-understood the political dynamics that have so far failed them time and time again. Whether it was super powers or Arab countries in the region or the UN, the political winds infrequently blow their way in any meaningful sense. Yet, they have long realised they simply could not afford the luxury of losing hope. No super power in the world could ever stop a mother dreaming of a better life for her children.

I have always been fascinated by Palestinian women's ability to successfully navigate their way through hardships. Not only do they have to fight the discrimination against women that is deeply entrenched in their own society, but they must also resist occupation and the compounding effect it brings along with it.

One woman from a village near Ramallah once told me her involvement in fighting occupation gives her the courage to fight discrimination and abuse at home. “When I fight oppression, I fight it everywhere” she proudly declared. For years she took part in weekly demonstrations in her village against the expanding nearby settlement. Settlers took over a water spring that belongs to her village, despite it being outside the boundaries of the settlement. Israeli high court decisions were repeatedly ignored and the settlers continued to control the spring and deny the rightful Palestinian owners access to it, until women in the village one day said enough is enough.

They organized a women’s-only picnic at the spring and were determined to liberate it from the settlers no matter what. They were determined to do whatever it takes to regain access to the spring even if only for a couple of hours. Word spread and about seventy women marched down to the spring. Nothing was going to stop the group of determined women from having their picnic at the spring, not even heavily armed soldiers. Just as they sat down by the spring to eat their Hummus and Falafel sandwiches and dip their feet in the fresh cool water, a group of curious Palestinian men stopped by. They told the women this was their first visit to the spring in four years and reluctantly acknowledged the power of women.

Fifty years of military occupation wouldn’t have survived for so long had it not been for the thousands of ordinary men and women in uniform who dutifully followed their orders. Whether it is the pilot flying over Jerusalem, the soldier at the checkpoint, the guard at the gate, the judge in a military court or the settler at the spring, occupation wouldn’t have lasted for so long without their consent and participation.

Likewise, surviving fifty years of occupation and breaking its bonds, is all about winning small battles, one at a time and never letting any of them go by unchallenged. It is the women’s picnic at the spring, the argument with the judge and the message that the law students took back home with them, that may eventually add up and bring about change. Winning these small battles, while not losing sight of the bigger picture, is the fuel that Palestinians rely on to survive and persevere because giving up and losing hope is a luxury they know they cannot afford.