

Resisting displacement The examples of Al-Aqaba and Yanoun

By Anne Paq

Two villages, Al-Aqaba and Yanoun stand today as symbols of resistance to forced displacement. Their motto could be “to build is to resist.”

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories forced displacement results from various types of pressure on Palestinians by Israeli occupying forces, settlers and/or more recently, the wall. Following the events in the village of Yanoun, was the first time an entire community had to flee because of settler violence Ta’ayush, the Israeli movement of Palestinians and Jews, wrote the following “[...] transfer isn’t necessarily a dramatic moment, a moment when people are expelled and flee their towns and villages. It is not always a planned, well organised move, completed by buses and truckloads of people, such as happened in Qalqilia in 1967. Transfer can also be a deeper systematic process that is hidden from view. It may not always be captured on film. It is possible that it can be in fact hardly documented; and happen right before our eyes. In some, most extreme cases, those waiting for a dramatic moment are liable to miss it as it happens.”(1) Forced displacement with the aim of altering the demographic composition of the population affected is clearly forbidden in international law.

Two villages, Al-Aqaba and Yanoun stand today as symbols of resistance to forced displacement. Their motto could be “to build is to resist. The inhabitants came to the conclusion that in order to resist, they need to put facts on the ground. Building schools, roads, electricity and water systems, and also an international solidarity network. Both villages are small. But one that visits them can only be struck by their extraordinary strength and determination to stay on the land they cherish. The mayor of Al-Aqaba, Sami Sadek, was shot by Israeli forces when he was 16 years old during their training in the mountains near his village, and has since been in a wheelchair. The member of the local council of Yanoun, Adnan, was shot in his leg by settlers. They are the emblematic figures of the resistance for the very existence of their villages, the local heroes of a struggle that is never told.

Resisting extinction: Al-Aqaba

The village of Al-Aqaba is comprised of more or less 300 inhabitants, and is located in the eastern part of the occupied West Bank, close to the village of Tayasir, in area “C” (under full Israeli control) and is not recognized by the occupying power. Between Al-Aqaba and the border with Jordan, there is no other village, which makes its location in a mountainous area very strategic. On a clear day one can see the mountains of Jordan. Most inhabitants make their livelihood from agriculture and raising livestock. But sadly, most inhabitants have fled or left the village. Al Aqaba used to have 1000 inhabitants, but 700 persons left during and after the 1967 war and because of constant Israeli aggression and refusal to grant building permits. Many inhabitants from Al-Aqaba live in Jordan or in nearby villages and cities, such as Tayasir and Tubas, and many still come to the village and even send their children to the school of Al-Aqaba. Most are waiting for the opportunity to return.

For years Al-Aqaba’s existence has been under constant threat and pressure by the Israeli army. Very close to the village, there is a military camp where Israeli forces undergo training. Since the establishment of the training camp in 1970, around 5000 dunams from the village

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Al-Aqaba Village near Nablus, August 2006. © Anne Paq.

were seized and the area was declared a closed military zone. All the crops in this area were destroyed. The soldiers used to train inside the village and even between the homes. According to the mayor of Al-Aqaba, the proximity of the soldiers has caused approximately 50 accidents, as a result of which eight people died.

The village is also under the constant threat of extinction because of the denial of building permits. The Israeli government has denied any building permit to the residents since 1967, which is one of the many reasons why villagers are prevented from returning home. Currently 19 structures in the village have demolition orders. Buildings threatened by demolition include the mosque, the kindergarten, the new paved road and about 13 houses.

Until now, most villagers have been forced to live in animal shacks, as these are the only structures that do not require a building permit. The living conditions in these barracks are inadequate. People sleep on the floor, shacks are often overcrowded, and hygiene is poor due to the proximity of the animals.

One of these families forced to endure these living conditions, the Dabhaks, live in a small shack with cement walls. The roof is a large plastic sheet. In the winter, the plastic sheet is not enough to protect them from the wind and the rain. If they put up a proper roof, they are afraid the Israeli army will come and destroy their home. Last winter the tent they were living in collapsed because of the weather. They live modestly and earn their living from their livestock. They have no electricity and get water through water tanks, which are very expensive. They are afraid and fear for the future of their children but do not want to leave, “as long as people stand together, we will never leave.”

People who had built homes without permission have seen their houses destroyed. Two houses were destroyed in Al-Aqaba in December 2003, leaving 16 people homeless. Since then, one owner rebuilt a cement structure while the other moved to the neighboring village, Tayasir.

Haj Sami created 'facts on the ground' that enhance the visibility and sustainability of the village.



Al-Aqaba Village near Nablus, August 2006. © Anne Paq.

often harass the inhabitants; they attack them, take their animals or come into the village and search through the homes.

Second, Haj Sami created 'facts on the ground' that enhance the visibility and sustainability of the village. With the financial support of many foreign donors such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Canada, the United States and Japan, he has continued to build the necessary infrastructures for his community. Over the past few years, the Belgian consulate sponsored the kindergarten, the British consulate built the health clinic, and the Canadian financed the generator and a minibus. An impressive mosque, with a very high and distinctive minaret that can be seen a few kilometres away, was also recently built. All these new structures have received demolition orders. Haj Sami brought the case of demolition orders in front of the Israeli High Court, and a verdict is expected at the end of November 2006. Al-Aqaba has also tried to develop its economy, notably through its women's rural society, which provides women with occupational training. Haj Sami has also built a great network of solidarity all over the world. He recently became connected to the internet, and a new leaflet describing the situation of the village both in English and Arabic has been published. Haj Sami is very proud of his village and of the fact that as a result of the improvement of living conditions, some inhabitants have started to come back. He has maintained constant contacts with them, even with the ones living in Jordan.

All the inhabitants we met declared that they will never leave. Sitting under the shadow of a huge and beautiful tree, Sheikha explained how she stayed in Al-Aqaba despite the fact that her husband

The army has also prevented the village from finishing asphaltting the main road. Israeli occupying forces attempt to make life so miserable for the inhabitants that they will have no choice but leave. In fact, the mayor told us that an Israeli officer made it clear that they should all move to the nearby village of Tayasir.

Despite the hardship, the mayor Haj Sami has been steadfast, and made a decision that he was not going to let his village die. First, he did not hesitate to use legal means to challenge the actions of the Israeli army. He brought a case concerning the army's frequent training and raids inside the village to the Israeli High Court, and won. Since then, the situation has improved. However the proximity of the soldiers still creates many problems. During our visit, there were constant shootings while the training was in sight. The soldiers

died when she was only 29 and that her children moved to Tayasir. Her sister, Naïma, just came back to settle in Al-Aqaba after her husband died and has dared to spend all her earnings to build a nice small house while the house next door has a demolition order. “If they come to destroy my house, I will have nothing left. I will never leave, they can kill me inside.” Many villagers are worried about the future, especially with the rumor that the Wall will be built in the area and separate them from the rest of the West Bank. However they will not accept any compensation to move. They will stay no matter what it takes. Haj Sami’s next project is to expand the school, which currently has 80 students and to find a solution to the water problem of the village.

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The displaced inhabitants of Yanoun return

On October 18, 2002, in the middle of the olive harvest Rashid Murrar, the chairman of the village council recalled: “They came with dogs and guns, every Saturday at night. They beat men in front of their children. One Saturday they said they didn’t want to see anyone here next Saturday, and that we should move to Aqraba. The whole village left that week.”⁽²⁾

Yanoun is a tiny village, located west of Nablus, a few kilometres from Aqraba. The village is surrounded on all sides by outposts(3) and the Itamar settlement, which is known to be particularly violent and extreme. The village is divided into two parts. With approximately eighty inhabitants, upper Yanoun is located just a few hundred meters from the settlement while 40 persons reside in lower Yanoun. Six families are refugees from Ajour. Their worst nightmare would be to be displaced a second time.

The inhabitants have suffered from settler violence for many years. The first beating, during which an old man became deaf, took place in 1996. Since this incident, settler violence has only increased. Settlers physically and verbally abuse the inhabitants, throw stones at homes, attempt to set fires to property, prevent farmers from farming or grazing, poison animals, cut



Yanoun Village near Nablus, August 2006. © Anne Paq.