

Creative Resistance: The Nassar Family's "Tent of Nations"

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AMID THE OLIVE trees and rocks, in the stone amphitheaters and shaded groves, young residents of Bethlehem's refugee camps working alongside European volunteers presented "Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare's immortal drama of the warring Capulet and Montague families. Families and friends followed the cast around, enjoying the fruits of the children's summer camp project. As the play came to a close, "Juliet" lay motionless on the sarcophagus; on the hillside behind her could be seen the red roofs of the Neve Daniel settlement.

In this small corner of Palestine, on land that is under direct threat of confiscation, the Tent of Nations project was doing what it does best: "connecting people to their land," in the words of co-founder Daoud Nassar. Indeed, both project and play embody the decades-long conflict in all its injustice, frustration, and hope.

The Nassars' land, on which the Tent of Nations is based, has been in the family's possession since 1916, a time span that encompasses Ottoman rule, the British Mandate, Jordanian administration and Israeli occupation. The story of this family land, neighboring the village of Nahalin in the Bethlehem district, is intertwined with the tumultuous history of Palestine.

The most recent chapter began in 1991, when the Israeli military initiated proceedings to confiscate the Nassars' land. Unlike so many unfortunate Palestinian landowners, however, the Nassar family still had its ownership documents from all the regimes that had come and gone in the region.

But while the court battle stagnated, and with the second intifada underway, Jewish settlers from the illegal Neve Daniel colony often took matters into their own hands, coming down into the valley with machine guns, vandalizing the infrastructure, and threatening to seize the property themselves. Nevertheless, it is in the courts that the land's fate ultimately looks set to be decided.

The Israeli military currently is "studying" the findings of a comprehensive report produced by an Israeli land expert hired by the Nassar family. His mission took him to the imperial archives of London and Istanbul to seek confirmation of the land's registration papers. These extraordinary measures—all undertaken so the Nassars can retain what is rightfully theirs—have made it unlikely that the Israel military committee can cite a plausible loophole, despite its time-wasting prevarications.

The legal battle is being waged not only for the sake of his own family's property, explained Nassar. Due to quirks of Ottoman land registration procedures, the struggle also has encompassed the land of several villagers from nearby Nahalin and Artas. This is

a “very important” aspect for the family, Daoud said, for it will be “a big achievement”—perhaps symbolically more than anything—to succeed in retaining all the land.

The cost to the Nassars has been high, with legal expenses to date estimated at nearly \$130,000, much of it still due. Indeed, the legal challenge was possible only as a result of the support the family has received from its fledgling international contacts, primarily in Germany and Switzerland, although reaching the UK and U.S. as well. “People have sent faxes to their governments,” Nassar noted, “as well as making donations through our associations in Europe.”

Most individual contributions have been small, he added, highlighting the fact that donors are usually “ideologically motivated” to see the land remain in the hands of its Palestinian owners. The annual olive tree planting campaign has helped forge further links abroad, he said, citing the participation in 2003 of Jews for Justice for Palestinians and European Jews for a Just Peace. There is also the ongoing presence of international volunteers, who live on the land for as long as a year, assisting in the upkeep of the property and various other activities.

Despite the violence of both the settlers and the occupation bureaucracy, the Nassars’ land has lay fallow—hence the development of the Tent of Nations project. Its focus is, simply, the land and the youth. With perhaps intentional irony, Nassar describes it as “building facts on the ground,” on land that is particularly vulnerable to confiscation; providing educational and cultural resources for local youth; and bringing together people of different backgrounds for the cause of peace and understanding.

During the course of the past summer, the land hosted camps that brought together Muslim and Christian Palestinians from Bethlehem and the refugee camps for games, activities, and—not least—Shakespeare. Nassar described the program’s intent “to bring people outside their prison, to move people outside the city,” as a way to counter the danger of a growing disconnection between urban Palestinians and their land—the result of the ongoing Zionist-driven fragmentation between “Palestinians from Palestinians, cities from cities, people from their land.” It is this people-land relationship that Nassar is most keen to strengthen.

In the fall, the Tent of Nations will be celebrating olive harvest season, and is considering hosting a local farmers’ market. The Nassars also have set up a computer literacy class for women in Nahalin village, led by Daoud’s wife, Jihan—a new undertaking that signals the family’s desire ultimately to move toward providing vocational training for Palestinian youth.

The creativity and resourcefulness of the Tent of Nations and the Nassar family is in stark contrast to Israel’s rapacious settlement expansion and the strangulation of Palestinian villages the area has witnessed in recent years. For decades, the Gush Etzion settlement bloc has spearheaded Jewish colonization south of Bethlehem, and with the construction of Israel’s annexation wall, villages such as Nahalin, Husan, Wadi Fukin and Battir are set to become a cluster of self-enclosed ghettos sandwiched between the Green Line and annexed Israeli colonies.

The long-term sustainability of life in the villages already appears to be disappearing behind loops of bared wire and fences, rendering expansion impossible and cutting off

vital agricultural land. During the course of the intifada the “boundaries” of the settlements in the area have been regularly expanded, and in 2003 the Betar Illit colony (which can be clearly seen from the Tent of Nations) received a fifth of all new settlers to arrive in the occupied territories during the first six months of the year.

All of which makes decisions made by Palestinians like Daoud Nassar about how best to resist Zionist colonization and occupation most pressingly pertinent. “Resistance” commonly is understood to refer to the violence of groups such as Hamas or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades—or, less frequently, to the civil disobedience engaged in by the likes of the local anti-annexation wall committees and the International Solidarity Movement. But it is another kind of “resistance” that most animates Nassar.

“Frustration has the potential to be translated into huge creative power,” he maintains. This kind of “positive building,” he believes, can “produce results that encourage me, as a Palestinian, to remain, and acts as a positive sign to others—it is resistance.”

Citing the Palestinian economy’s dependence on Israeli goods, he insisted, “This is unnecessary—we should focus more on developing our own industries and economy, and educating our children to look after their streets, their neighbourhood, their cities. This is also muqawama [resistance].”

As lawyers ruminate and Israeli bulldozers prepare the path for the latest section of the wall, the Tent of Nations holds fast to this vision of resistance—planting olive trees, connecting children to the land, bringing international witnesses and, perhaps most important of all, steadfastly remaining on the land.

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