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Essay

NUR ARAFEH

‘Resistance Economy’: A New Buzzword?

The political economy of development in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) has received a lot of academic and policy interest, especially following the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993-1995). In opposition to the orthodox scholarship that has prevailed since Oslo, which viewed development as a technical process that could improve Palestinian socioeconomic conditions without challenging the status quo, a growing number of critical voices have emerged to challenge this apolitical view of development. Opposing the conventional thinking about development, these voices have reframed the analysis of Palestinian development in the broader context of Zionist settler colonialism, while contesting the neoliberal policies advocated by the donor community and espoused by the Palestinian Authority.

This critical understanding of development has gone hand in hand with the search for alternative development models and strategies that are in line with the Palestinian struggle against settler colonialism. It is within this context that an increasing number of researchers and policy analysts have been employing the term ‘resistance economy’ (‘RE’) as an alternative development model.

What is ‘RE’? Is there a clear articulation of the idea or is it another buzzword in the Palestinian development discourse? How does ‘RE’ compare with other approaches to development from the 1980s’ development scholarship on Palestine? What are the main weaknesses of the ‘RE’ policy literature?

This essay will answer these questions in three sections. The first section gives an overview of the definitions and objectives of a ‘RE’ based on a few articles that advocate a ‘RE’ as an alternative development model. The

second section shows that the idea of a ‘RE’ did not emerge in a vacuum, since it draws heavily on approaches to development from the pre-Oslo period. The final section critically engages with the concept of a ‘RE’ by discussing three serious weaknesses of the ‘RE’ policy literature.

I. ‘Resistance Economy’: An overview

This section attempts to make sense of the concept of ‘RE’¹ based on a few published articles and policy briefs that put forth the idea of a ‘RE’ as an alternative development model (Tartir et al. 2012; Dana 2014; Tartir 2015; IFPO 2015). Three questions – which will be addressed in this section – are central to our understanding of a ‘RE’: How is ‘RE’ defined in the policy literature on Palestine? What are the main objectives of a ‘RE’? And what are the local and global experiences that have shaped the attributes of a ‘RE’?

Dana (2014) defines ‘RE’ as “an institutionalized form of economic struggle that envisages a transitional reorganization of the economy and social relations to be in harmony with the political requirements and objectives of the Palestinian national liberation process”. There are two key ideas in this definition: firstly, the concept of a ‘RE’ is based on a rejection of the disconnection between development/economics on the one hand, and Palestine’s historical context and colonial realities, on the other. ‘RE’ is thus seen as a counter-hegemonic strategy that rejects economic unity with Israel and the neoliberal development policies undertaken by the Palestinian Authority (Dana 2014; Tartir 2015). Secondly, ‘RE’ is not the end goal. It is rather a transitional political project that is part of a broader strategy of resistance against Israeli settler colonialism. According to Dana (2014), ‘RE’ would lay the basis for “the emergence of an emancipatory social order and solid political base in order to assist Palestinians in their struggle to achieve liberation and self-determination”.

Being embedded in the larger historical struggle of Palestinians for self-determination and freedom, ‘RE’ is viewed as a “multifunctional and multidimensional strategy” (Dana 2014) with political, social and economic objectives. There is a consensus among researchers that the main goal of a ‘RE’ is first and foremost a political one. The main political objec-

tive is to establish a solid political foundation for the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle, by restoring *Sumud* politics, promoting local Palestinian products as an alternative to Israeli goods, and decreasing dependency on donor aid, among other dimensions (Dana 2014). With regard to the social objectives, Dana (2014) maintains that 'RE' would lead to "progressive social change" by promoting principles such as social cohesion, solidarity, social justice, and redistribution of resources. Tartir (2015) thus refers to 'RE' as an emancipatory development strategy, based on indigenous and grassroots participation, with people or "active citizens" (IFPO 2015) as its main agents.

In terms of economic objectives, the key aspect is to decrease the structural dependency of the Palestinian economy on the Israeli economy and improve Palestinian socioeconomic wellbeing (Tartir et al. 2012; Dana 2014). Much literature on 'RE' thus places the development of self-sufficiency and sovereignty at the heart of the economic objectives as a way to decrease dependency on Israel and promote local production. For example, a conference (2015) by An-Najah University and the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) on 'RE' sets food sovereignty as "the first" form of sovereignty "to be restored, important as the ultimate frontier of territorial, political and economic dispossession". The agricultural sector is thus seen as "the core of a RE" (Dana 2014) and as "a mechanism of national resistance" (Kurzom 2001), while Palestinian farmers are placed as "a last stronghold of resistance" (Tartir/Sansour 2014).

However, while the agricultural sector is the main focus of much of the literature, other sectors and economic activities have been identified by An-Najah University and the IFPO conference (2015) as part of a 'RE'. These include the tourism sector, community funding systems, social entrepreneurship, heritage projects, and renewable energy.

These attempts to conceptualise the idea of a 'RE' have been largely shaped by local and global experiences of resistance. The key local reference in the 'RE' policy literature is the first Intifada (1987), which connected economic activity to political vision. Palestinians employed several collective actions of economic resistance, such as widespread boycotts of Israeli products, tax resistance, establishment of grassroots committees, commercial strikes, and labour boycotts, among other measures. The principles of the first Intifada have especially shaped the vision of the Palestinian society

conceived in the 'RE' policy literature. These principles include cooperation and group solidarity, egalitarianism, democratic and consensus building in decision-making, political awareness, boycott, and collective action.

Global references are also used to give more substance to the attributes of a 'RE'.² For example, An-Najah University and the IFPO conference (2015) referred to global concepts such as 'social economy', 'sharing economy', 'collaborative and circular economy', 'renewable energy', and 'alternative education' in an attempt to explore the different potential dimensions of a 'RE'. Similarly, Dana (2014) explored global experiences of economic resistance practices to set the vision for a 'RE'. These experiences include economic resistance in India under colonialism, and current forms of resistance to neoliberal policies in Brazil.

2. From 'Self-reliant development' to *Sumud Muqawim* to 'Resistance Economy'

Not only have local and global experiences of resistance informed the practices of a 'RE'; the idea of a 'RE' as an alternative model of development also draws heavily on approaches to development that were prominent in the academic literature in the pre-Oslo period. The following section highlights some of the ideas that are common to both literatures.

2.1 A politicised understanding of Palestinian development

While the conventional thinking about development that emerged after Oslo framed development within the status-quo, both the pre-Oslo development scholarship (Mansour 1983; Abu Kishk 1988; Dakkak 1988; Dick 1988; Samara/ Shehadeh 1988; Abed 1989; Sayigh 1991) and the 'RE' policy literature share a politicised understanding of development. They contest the positivist, technical approach to development that is disconnected from the historical Palestinian struggle against the occupation and settler colonialism. Development and economics are thus seen as inherently linked to political and social issues, leading authors to call for the subordination of economic considerations to political and national ones.

The politicised analysis of Palestinian development has entailed an instrumental approach to development in both the pre-Oslo and the crit-

ical post-Oslo/ 'RE' literatures. Development is seen as a transitional political project that is part and parcel of Palestinian struggle against Israeli policies of "integration-destruction"³ (Mansour 1983); uprootedness and dispossession (Abed 1989); and dependency and pauperisation (Sayigh 1991; 1993). The main difference is that the critical post-Oslo development literature has gone further than the pre-Oslo literature by situating its analysis of development or de-development in the settler-colonial framework (Naquib 2003; Al-Botmeh 2013; Tabar 2015; Hanieh 2016). Using settler colonialism as the main analytical framework implies incorporating notions of power relations and Zionism's different structures of subordination when examining the state of Palestinian development.

2.2 Development as an antidote to dependency

As discussed in the first section, decreasing dependency on the Israeli economy is one of the main objectives of the idea of a 'RE'. This goal is also at the core of many academic approaches to development that were advanced in the pre-Oslo period, with scholars proposing different strategies to reduce dependency on Israel.

For example, Yusif Sayigh's (1991) cogent analysis of underdevelopment in the Arab world was framed within the dependency paradigm, since Sayigh viewed dependency as the main reason behind underdevelopment. Influenced by the basic-needs and normative approaches to development, Sayigh proposed an alternative strategy of 'self-reliant development' as the main solution to dependency. He thus called for a plan of radical change that includes economic, political, legal and social reform, within the framework of self-reliance. The main components of his development model include independence of economic decision-making; satisfying basic human needs; achieving a high degree of security (economic/food, technological, and military); harmony with the environment; inner-directed development; political participation; guarantee of social justice; and collective action among Arab countries (Sayigh 1991).

Similarly, reducing dependency on the Israeli economy was one of the basic principles of the strategy proposed by Antoine Mansour in 1983. Dubbed "Une économie de résistance" or "an economy of resistance", this strategy is a political project that rejects the economic integration and unity with Israel, especially through the employment of Palestinian workers in

Israel. The strategy is thus based on two main pillars to decrease dependency on Israel: land and labour. It aims at protecting land and labour by keeping Palestinians on the land; protecting productive sectors (agriculture and industry); limiting the immigration of Palestinians; and strengthening economic relations with Jordan.

Likewise, the main underpinning of Samara's and Shehadeh's (1988) concept of "development by popular protection" was *Insihab*, or the withdrawal of Palestinian labour from the Israeli market. Indeed, dependency on the Israeli economy, in the area of trade and labour, was seen as one of the major obstacles to Palestinian development and independence. They thus called for decreasing dependency on the Israeli economy by generating job opportunities in the local market; boycotting conspicuous consumption of Israeli goods; and overcoming individualism.

2.3 Land and people: The main pillars of development

Land and people are two common pillars of development that appear in both the pre-Oslo and 'RE' approaches to development. Both literatures emphasise the role of the agricultural sector in keeping Palestinians on the land. Moreover, both literatures advance approaches to development that are rooted in people, thus stressing the need for indigenous participation and social mobilisation.

However, the two literatures differ in their account of labour as a component of an alternative development model. As argued by El-Zein (2017), while the 'RE' literature has largely focused on the role of producers and consumers in undermining dependency on the Israeli economy, it has overlooked the role of labour, and more specifically the withdrawal of Palestinian workers from the Israeli market. As El-Zein (2017:8) notes: "If not accompanied by desperately needed, yet insufficiently discussed, alternatives for Palestinian laborers, however, the emphasis on production and alternatives for consumption risks certain political cynicism."

2.4 Reviving *Sumud*

The call for the revival of *Sumud* and '*Sumud* politics' in the 'RE' policy literature suggests that the 1980s' development model of *Sumud Muqawim* has also largely shaped the idea of a 'RE'.

Sumud (or steadfastness) – the strong determination to remain on the land – has long been a national Palestinian symbol and strategy. It has signified several meanings over the years (Rijke/van Teeffelen 2014). In the 1960s, the term started to be regularly used to represent the militant message of armed resistance that was at the core of the Palestinian national movement at the time, particularly in Palestinian refugee camps. Later, in the 1970s, *Sumud* became more associated with Palestinians living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip. Since it focused on helping Palestinians survive and fight the occupation rather than developing the society and transforming economic conditions, the 1970s' *Sumud* strategy was heavily criticised for being conservative (Roy 1995).

Therefore, in opposition to the 1970s' strategy of 'static *Sumud*' (Dakkak 1988), Palestinian scholars and professionals held a conference in the West Bank in 1981. The goal was to find a new development model that was more offensive and that transformed Palestinian political and economic life, and in which Palestinians actively participated in challenging the occupation. The conference also sought to build alternative institutions that resist the Israeli occupation. It was within this context that *Sumud Muqawim* – 'resistive' or 'dynamic steadfastness' – was introduced as a new development model, based on the view of development as the main form of resistance.

Sumud Muqawim was defined as an 'interim' and indigenous development strategy, rooted in self-reliance (Dakkak 1988). It was seen as 'a necessity' to counter Israeli measures and enhance the ability of Palestinian society to withstand Israeli pressure. If not, the establishment of a future Palestinian state was considered to be in jeopardy (Dakkak 1988).

In other words, the vision of *Sumud Muqawim* was guided by the Palestinian national project to build a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders. This understanding of development within the state-based framework, in the pre-Oslo academic literature, is one of the main differences to the post-Oslo critical development scholarship, including 'RE' policy literature. Indeed, since the economy is intrinsically linked to the political frontiers and the creation of a nation-state (Mitchell 2002), the dominant understanding of development and the economy, in the pre-Oslo literature, was geographically limited to the 1967 borders.

In contrast, the post-Oslo critical development literature does not confine its understanding of development to the nationalist, state-based framework, in line with the reconceptualisation of the Palestinian struggle as an anti-colonial, rights-based struggle rather than a nation-state project. Scholars have thus been calling for transcending the limited focus on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in order to reintegrate all human resources from the Palestinian body politic, including Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians in the Diaspora (Farsakh 2016).

3. Weaknesses of the ‘Resistance Economy’ literature

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned difference, the strong links between the development literature in the 1980s (pre-Oslo) and the ‘RE’ policy literature compels one to suspect whether there is an attempt to conceptualise *the* alternative development approach under an all-encompassing term or a new buzzword like ‘RE’, while the term remains vague and poorly defined. Besides the fact that this could be seen as deterministic and risks labeling other expressions as resistance, the main issue is that the literature on ‘RE’ has several weaknesses.

The following section critically engages with the ‘RE’ literature, in the hope of stimulating critical thinking and raising questions to help advance the debate on this concept. Due to word limitations, only three serious weaknesses of the ‘RE’ literature are discussed: the lack of a defined Palestinian economy; the failure to pay enough attention to how a ‘RE’ could materialise; and the ambiguity regarding what is being resisted.

3.1 Defining the frontiers of the Palestinian economy

As noted above, the idea of a ‘RE’ does not restrict its understanding of development to the nationalist, state-based framework. Nevertheless, one of the main weaknesses of the ‘RE’ policy literature, and of the post-Oslo critical scholarship more generally, is their failure to define or even question the ‘Palestinian economy’ and its frontiers.

This question is especially relevant given Israel’s ongoing and intensifying colonial policies of fragmentation, which have resulted in the emergence of different ‘peripheral economies’ in Palestine: East Jerusalem;

Northern West Bank; Ramallah; Southern West Bank; the Gaza Strip; and the Arab economy in Israel (Khalidi/Alsattari 2014), with each 'economy' subject to different conditions and structures of domination.

Within this context, one is compelled to ask a number of questions: how does the model of a 'RE' address the current fragmentation? Is the goal of a 'RE' to delink from the Israeli economy and to establish horizontal relations among the different 'peripheral economies'? Should different models of 'RE' be employed so as to take into account the specificities of each economic area in Palestine? Would a 'RE' be based on a centralised or decentralised approach to development? Moreover, could the idea of a 'RE' extend to refugee camps in the Arab world or is it confined to Palestine?

3.2 The operationalisation of a 'Resistance Economy'

Another important question largely overlooked in the literature is related to how a 'RE' can materialise. As mentioned above, the 'RE' literature relies too heavily on the first Intifada when making practical suggestions of resistance. However, no serious consideration is given to how such practices can be operationalised in the present conditions.⁴ After all, history is not linear and the political and socioeconomic conditions, locally and globally, have drastically changed since the eruption of the first Intifada.

Similarly, while the agricultural sector is heavily cited as a cornerstone of a "RE," calls for promoting agriculture to ensure self-sufficiency have been criticised for being "increasingly disconnected from the reality of land use in the oPt" (El-Zein 2017:12). For instance, although Palestinian farmers have for long reached the limits of farming (Awartani 1988), the 'RE' literature overlooks the farmers' needs of financing mechanisms to help them produce. El-Zein (2017:14) has critiqued this point in particular and tried to take the discussion further by asking about the kind of "coordination of capital and state-like intervention [that] would be needed" to help promote and deepen Palestinian farming.

In addition, the 'RE' policy literature disregards other questions relating to the materialisation of a 'RE'. For example, how will the tasks or burdens of pursuing a 'RE' be allocated? Within which socio-economic system is 'RE' or development in general to be undertaken? What kind of political structure would support a strategy of resistance?

3.3 Resisting what and who?

Another key question that deserves more attention relates to defining what is being resisted. Is it settler colonialism, apartheid, occupation, neoliberalism? Does 'RE' extend to include the Palestinian crony capitalists and their political patrons? Should we resist at the local, national and regional/international level at the same time? If resistance is directed against several power relations simultaneously, can it be materialised in Palestine without wider social and economic transformation? What are the class interests in a 'RE'? Does the idea of a 'RE' account for class struggle and hierarchy? In other words: what/ who is being resisted and what are the boundaries of a 'RE'?

The disregard of these issues and many others is reflective of the ambiguity of the idea of a 'RE', which can mean different things to different people. 'RE' is thus becoming a buzzword, employed by critical researchers of the PA and its development project, and by the PA itself. For example, the then Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, whose neoliberal economic policies are heavily contested in the critical development literature, talked about "the importance of transitioning to a 'Resistance Economy' given the political impasse facing Palestinians" (Marsad 2012, translation N.A.).

However, since the idea of a 'RE' is intrinsically linked to a political strategy, the vagueness, and what might seem as romanticism, of the policy literature on 'RE' is not surprising, given the demise of the Palestinian national project and the lack of a political vision that is essential to guide a socio-economic development vision and strategy.

- 1 The term 'resistance economy' was introduced in Iran in 2010 to describe the economic strategies developed in the context of US-imposed sanctions against Iran (Piran/Dorche 2015).
- 2 It is outside the scope of this paper to examine these global concepts and experiences.
- 3 According to Mansour (1983), destruction happens through land expropriation, settlements construction, and control over natural resources, while integration occurs by employing Palestinians in the Israeli market, and control over foreign relations, among other measures.
- 4 Some authors have explicitly questioned the feasibility of applying the ideas they advance. For example, commenting on Kurzom's (2001) strategy of agricultural development, the Director of the Development Studies Programme at Birzeit University noted that "there are question marks as to whether this strategy can be applied realistically".

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