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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN PALESTINE

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Contents

- 4 HELMUT KRIEGER
Nurturing Alternative Development:
Agricultural Cooperatives in Palestine
- 14 PHILIPP SALZMANN
A Food Regime's Perspective on Palestine: Neoliberalism and the
Question of Land and Food Sovereignty within the Context of
Occupation
- 35 AYMAN ABDULMAJEED
Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Reading the Realm
of Cooperatives in Occupied Palestine
- 62 EILEEN KUTTAB
Alternative Development: A Response to Neo-Liberal
De-Development from a Gender Perspective
- Essay and Interview*
- 91 NUR ARAFEH
'Resistance Economy': A New Buzzword?
- 103 HIBA AL-JIBEIHI
'Protecting our lands and supporting our farmers'
(Interview with Philipp Salzmänn)
- 112 Editors and Authors of the Special Issue
116 Publication Details

Interview

HIBA AL-JIBEIHI

‘Protecting our lands and supporting our farmers’

This interview was conducted by Philipp Salzmann with Hiba Al-Jibeih, International Advocacy Coordinator of the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) in Palestine. Besides the contextualising article *A Food Regime’s Perspective on Palestine: Neoliberalism, the Question of Land and Food Sovereignty within the Context of Occupation* (see Salzmann in this issue) this interview aims to give additional information on food sovereignty and peasantry in Palestine, as well as on resistance against the occupation from an agricultural perspective.

Salzmann: Can you please describe your organisation? What are its historical developments and in what context does the Union for Agricultural Work Committees operate today given the ongoing Israeli occupation regime? Does the UAWC operate in Gaza as well?

Al-Jibeih: The Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) is the largest agricultural development institution in Palestine. The UAWC was established in 1986 as a non-profit organisation by a group of volunteers and agronomists in response to the vulnerable socio-political circumstances faced by Palestinian farmers, due to the ongoing Israeli occupational policies, that include confiscation of lands, water and natural resources, and therefore directly harm the interests of all Palestinians, particularly farmers. Since its establishment, the UAWC has steadily gained confidence of a range of very influential international donors in our effort to develop projects and programmes which annually benefit more than 30,000 small-scale farmers. Being all located within the

vulnerable and conflict-affected regions of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, our projects vary from agricultural land development, implementation of water supplies, capacity building, development of rural women's livelihoods, legal awareness, emergency response, and other agricultural development projects. The successes of the UAWC's projects have gained it three international awards in one year (2014/15), namely the "Food Sovereignty Prize", the "Equator Prize", and the "Arab Creativity Award in the Economic Creativity".

UAWC has 12 branches distributed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In Gaza Strip the compass of UAWC's activities is directed toward the support of both farmers and fishermen and supports their steadfastness in the face of an occupation that tries to drive people from their own land and transfer the historical Palestine to Israel.

Salzmann: What are your main tasks, programmes, and achievements, and the contradictions you face?

Al-Jibeih: All the UAWC's projects and programmes are located within the vulnerable and conflict-affected regions of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, this applies mainly to the area classified as 'C'. According to the Oslo agreement¹, this area constitutes 62 per cent of the West Bank's lands and is under full Israeli military and civil control; it is the most vulnerable land in the West Bank. It can be cleared at any moment for the use of Israeli military or for the expansion of settlements. UAWC's agricultural land development projects mainly aim to protect the land from confiscation under the Israeli Absentees' Property Law, which is one of Israel's major instruments for seizing Palestinian property. Thus, the UAWC reclaimed and protected 100,000 dunam (100 square kilometers) of the Palestinian lands. In addition, this programme provided a source of income for tens of thousands of Palestinian small-scale farmers. The second main project that UAWC works on is the provision of water resources, as Israel controls 95 per cent of the Palestinian water resources. Therefore, the UAWC creates alternatives for these water resources through establishing water tanks, waste water management projects, and water wells. UAWC also concentrates its efforts on capacity building activities to create a Palestinian farmer who is aware of their own rights, fully aware of the new,

modern techniques used in the agriculture sector, and who is committed to the global quality management criteria that increase their ability to compete and generate further incomes. Moreover, the UAWC has environmental projects, such as pastoral reservation, hydroponic units, demonstration farms and a seed bank. The UAWC's seed bank is the first and only of this kind in Palestine, and aims to protect and preserve local seeds from the threat of extinction, to distribute seeds for free, and in so doing, enhances both the food security of poor farmers as well as their access to seeds.

The UAWC also adopts gender-mainstreaming in all its activities and programmes. Thus, the UAWC concentrates its efforts on the development of rural women's livelihoods programmes through establishing 45 women cooperatives that have benefited 4,000 rural women. UAWC also works in legal follow-ups. It established its legal unit in 2013 because of the intensity of Israeli violations against farmers. The legal unit works in several areas: raising the legal awareness of the farmers, monitoring crimes of the Israeli occupation force and settlers against farmers, poor, and vulnerable people in the occupied Palestinian territories, defending people's legal cases in the courts, as well as standing against occupation policies of racism aimed at emptying the land of its indigenous population and compromising their identities.

The main challenge that the UAWC faces in its attempts to protect the land is the Israeli occupation. The occupation forces try to hamper the UAWC's work through their violent attacks on the UAWC's staff or through their military orders to stop the UAWC's projects. Despite all these challenges, the UAWC has proven its ability to protect its slogan of "Protecting our lands and supporting our farmers". Currently, it leads the largest agricultural project implemented in Palestine, the "Inclusive Access to and Sustainable Management of Land and Water Resources".

Salzmann: Since when have you been a member of La Via Campesina and what does the concept of food sovereignty and its international movement mean for your work?

Al-Jibeih: Actually, the UAWC's belief in the concept of food sovereignty and the right of small scale food producers to control the mechanisms

and policies of food production and distribution is what triggered UAWC to join this great movement called 'La Via Campesina'. Since its establishment in 1986, the UAWC has focused all its efforts to support small-scale farmers and poor people, and support their rights to access land and water resources and control their own source of income. Not only through the projects that are implemented on the ground, but also through its grassroots networks, its policies, and its advocacy department, that works to confront corporations' policies and their quests to weaken small-scale farmers.

Perhaps people outside Palestine may ask what the significance of the concept of food sovereignty is for a country that is under the full control of an occupier, since 'sovereignty' is in opposition to 'occupation'. The UAWC's answer to this contradiction is represented by the UAWC itself, its values, its projects, and its great history. The UAWC was established to achieve food sovereignty for all Palestinian farmers through its continuing projects, which are based on the UAWC's belief in the right of small-scale farmers to control their own lands and natural resources. As the UAWC declared in its 2016 annual report, it has been able to improve the access of 200,000 farmers to their own lands, and help them to have a sustainable source of income; thus, we can say that there is a possibility to achieve sovereignty over occupied land. The UAWC has an anti-occupation plan and policy and will fight until we achieve our full sovereignty over our own land.

Salzmann: Can you please describe the food and agricultural system in Palestine? What are the developmental approaches of the Palestinian National Authority and International donors towards the food and agricultural sector?

Al-Jibeih: The agricultural sector is an important driver in the Palestinian economy, as it creates job opportunities in the local Palestinian market. As of 2010, this sector employed 11.5 per cent of the Palestinian labour force, of which 33 per cent were women. The agricultural sector's contribution to the Palestinian gross domestic product (GDP) was only 4.1 per cent in the year 2013, and constituted 3.4 per cent of the GDP of the West Bank. The agricultural sector's contribution to GDP has been declining over the years,

due to growth in other sectors, such as services, construction, and information technology, as well as due to the continuous ongoing Israeli policies that have led to the marginalisation of the Palestinian agricultural sector through land confiscation. Climate change and harsh weather conditions have also resulted in fluctuations in the production of some of the main Palestinian agricultural products, such as olives, olive oil, and vegetables.

Despite the deterioration of the Palestinian agricultural sector, the PNA still does not have a solid policy to support the agriculture sector. Less than 0.1 per cent of the PNA's overall budget is allocated to the agricultural sector. Therefore, the sector is dependent on the support of non-governmental organisations. This very small amount will not help the government to confront Israeli policies aiming to confiscate more and more land. The PNA's approach will not help to compensate the small-scale farmers who have lost their land and will never be able to support those who have lost their productivity due to climate change. Therefore, the first step that the government must adopt in order to support small-scale farmers is to increase the budget allocated for the agricultural sector.

Salzmann: Can you explain the impact of agribusiness in Palestine?

Al-Jibeih: A main obstacle that is facing the marketing of Palestinian small-scale farmers' products is Israeli agribusiness. It is estimated that the volume of Israeli exports to our markets is about \$ 3 billion annually. Furthermore, there is a restriction on exporting Palestinian products abroad, and the Israeli closure policies within the West Bank make the trading of farmers' products between governorates nearly impossible – because of this, the loss in agricultural products has increased. In essence, all these impediments are part of a plan to force the Palestinian farmers to leave their lands.

The Palestinian agribusiness contribution in GDP reached 3.3 per cent in 2015. The cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli agribusiness is limited to some Palestinian businessmen who are forced into this cooperation, since Israel controls the borders and consequently, the export and import transactions. These cooperations have never supported the Palestinian economy.

Salzmann: What role did/does Palestinian peasantry play in the resistance against the occupation? Has it changed, and if so, why?

Al-Jibeihi: Indigenous people in Palestine have been suffering from a great injustice for nearly 70 years, all caused by the Israeli occupation on their own lands, which has left more than 60 per cent of them homeless. Since then and up to this day, Palestinians have suffered from racial discrimination and ethnic cleansing. Palestinian farmers, who constituted the majority of Palestinian people and whose lands are stolen on a daily basis, are considered to be one of the biggest victims of the Israeli occupation, in absolute violation of international law. The Palestinian farmers are not allowed to use their own land, their own water resources, or even their own agricultural roads in order to access his land. Furthermore, the apartheid wall², 700km in length and in places 10m high, separates Palestinians from their lands and natural resources. In fact, the wall divides Palestinian lands into small cantons, effectively transforming them into large collective prisons. Therefore, it is our honor to state that, since the beginning of our struggle at the time of the British mandate, the Palestinian farmers have been on the front line of the resistance movement in Palestine, and that many martyrs and detainees were farmers. For example, in 1936 a group of farmers led the Great Palestinian Revolution that lasted 128 days and was able to regain control over many cities that were under the British mandate and under Zionist groups' control. Moving to 1948, the Palestinian farmers were on the frontline in the fight against Zionist groups. This has been the case until now, as the Palestinian farmers are the main affected group of occupation, since their lands are the main target of the occupation. They insist on remaining on their lands, which entails a great deal of violations and attacks against them. Many farmers still die as martyrs or are detained in prisons.

Salzmann: How would you describe the Palestinian peasants' access to and control over natural resources (particularly land and water)?

Al-Jibeihi: The facts regarding Palestinians' access to their own land and natural resources are the following: 85 per cent of our land is under Israel's full control, 85 per cent of our water is under Israeli control, 62 per cent of

the West Bank's land is classified as area 'C', which is under the constant threat of confiscation at any moment.

In addition to Israel's control over our land and water resources, the occupation force tries to get hold of what is left on Palestinian lands, and Israeli settlers attack Palestinians and put pressure on them to leave their own lands.

Salzmann: In what way do agricultural cooperatives constitute alternative and emancipatory forms of development in Palestine?

Al-Jibeih: Cooperation is a well-known aspect of Palestinian tradition and values. Palestinians are raised on the concept of 'voluntarism and cooperation' from birth. Nevertheless, in economic terms, cooperatives' contributions to the economy are very low, due to their small-scale coverage, and the effects of a capitalist system that converts all societies to consumer societies, where brands are more highly valued than local products. The UAWC is aware of the impacts of capitalism as regards the destruction of cooperative principles. Therefore, the UAWC adopts the strategic objective of 'introducing an economic alternative' and has established 46 cooperatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These serve more than 9000 people, who have received a comprehensive awareness of the importance of cooperation and of the effects of capitalism on our nature. These 46 cooperatives specialise in many fields, including embroidery, food production, candle production, soap production, sheep farms, etc. These cooperatives have been able to reinforce the belief that cooperation can replace individualism. Cooperatives can help people to live freely and to have a viable source of income.

Salzmann: Put into perspective, how are you trying to achieve food sovereignty in Palestine?

Al-Jibeih: 250,000 men and women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have benefited from the UAWC's various projects, that all aimed to ensure food sovereignty, starting from the reclamation and rehabilitation of 83,000 dunums of agricultural land, thus enhancing farmers' access to land and enabling them to benefit from their own land in order to have a

source of income for them and their families. In addition, we have established and rehabilitated 4,000 water collection wells, and installed 81 km of water pipelines. Furthermore, the UAWC has contributed to the establishment of 81 cooperatives and 20,000 small family projects, to ensure more prosperity for the society as a whole and farmers' lives.

The UAWC has a well-functioning grassroots network, advocacy, and a policy department which is considered as to be a valuable tool to pressure the government and private sector to correct any unfair or harmful policies that affect people. This department works on two levels – locally and internationally. On the international level, it works to enlighten the international community on Palestinian issues and to increase the number of people who support Palestine and the rights of its people. At the local level, the department monitors Israel's constant violations against farmers, supports peasants in courts, and conducts solidarity activities with them. Also, this department keeps track of the Palestinian National Authority's (PNA's) and private companies' policies and practices. Therefore, it leads many campaigns against any policy that may negatively affect farmers. For example, the UAWC's advocacy and lobbying campaign has succeeded in preventing a large company from converting green land into a quarry in the Tulkarm governorate.

Salzmann: Which steps (political, economic, international solidarity etc.) would it take to establish a self-determined food system in Palestine?

Al-Jibeih: The most crucial step that the international community must take in their quest to ensure a self-determined food system in Palestine is to fight Israeli agribusiness through supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), and to put pressure on governments via effective demonstrations to end Israel's constant violations of human rights. The BDS campaign will weaken the Israeli occupation. The international pressure on the Israeli occupation will make Israel accountable for its responsibilities and for International laws that, for example, prevent Israel from settlement expansion. For instance, UN Security Council Resolution 2334 declares that Israel's settlement activities constitute a flagrant violation of international law and have no legal validity.

- 1 The Oslo process began in 1993. Firstly, the process marks an historic starting point for the realisation of a state formation process within parts of the occupied territories. Secondly, the Oslo agreements enable(d) the restructuring of the Israeli occupational regime but not its termination. Therefore, the Oslo process has been embedded within the continuity of the occupation of Palestine since 1967. Krieger perceives Oslo's strategic essence as the prevention of Palestinian sovereignty and full independence. (Krieger 2014: 22) Furthermore, Oslo institutionalized the fragmentation of the oPt into area A, B and C (see Salzman in this issue).
- 2 The building of the wall began during the second intifada in 2002. Approximately 80 percent of the barrier is built, or planned to be built, on the occupied Palestinian territory. Therefore, it constitutes another architectural component of the fragmentation of the West Bank. (Krieger 2014) In 2004 the International Court of Justice in The Hague found the building of the wall on occupied Palestinian territory to be a violation of international law.

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