

BRISTOL **SHORTS** RESEARCH

UNARMED CIVILIAN PROTECTION IN PALESTINE

MARWAN DARWEISH, MAHMOUD SOLIMAN
AND ANDREW RIGBY



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**We dedicate this book to the Palestinian
communities of Masafer Yatta in recognition
of their courage and resilience.**

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ONE

Unarmed Civilian Protection in the South Hebron Hills: The Changing Research Environment, 2022–25

Anyone with any familiarity with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the life led by Palestinians under military occupation knows there is a close relationship between developments at the macro level of state and inter-state affairs and the micro level of everyday life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). During the period of our research, there were major changes at the macro level which had a significant impact on the research environment and the experiences of the subjects of our research – Palestinians living in the South Hebron Hills and the volunteer companions from different agencies working to create a protective presence for Palestinians living in the area.

We started planning this research project during the summer months of 2022. Our aim was to explore the challenges faced by volunteer activists seeking to act as a protective presence for Palestinians facing ethnic cleansing in the South Hebron Hills area of the occupied West Bank. This semi-arid area, also known locally as Masafer Yatta, lies at the southern tip of the West Bank.¹ In September 2022, just a few weeks prior to our first field trip, we learned that one of our key contacts had been attacked by a group of vicious thugs from a nearby Israeli settlement. Despite suffering serious injuries, he was arrested and held in a detention centre for interrogation, accused of attacking and injuring one of his assailants. The thugs were

from an illegal settler outpost (Havat Ma'on) planted on a hill-top site above the small village of At-Tuwani (Rigby, 2022).

At one level, his experience was a mundane, everyday occurrence – evidence of the ‘routinization of terror’ that has taken place over recent years (Shulman, 2018: 5). One more instance of the abuse of basic human rights that is an integral dimension of occupation – especially when the occupying power is intent on cleansing the South Hebron Hills of its Palestinian inhabitants (Cook, 2013). But there is a wider significance to this beyond the pain and suffering inflicted upon a Palestinian community activist. It illustrates what can be called the ‘contagion of impunity’ that has been one of the dominant features of the deepening Israeli occupation. The settlers that broke the limbs of our friend acted with complete confidence that they would face no legal sanctions for their acts of violence. Secure in their knowledge that they have God and the state on their side, immune to any moral judgements based on universal values of fellowship and care. They know the violence they perpetrate against Palestinians serves as a major tool of the Israeli state in the pursuance of its annexationist policies. In the words of a report by the Israeli human rights agency B'tselem, ‘settler violence is a form of government policy, aided and abetted by official state authorities with their active participation’ (B'tselem, 2021).

The impunity the settlers enjoy at this micro level reflects and is to some extent enabled by the impunity with which the Israeli state pursues its expansionist project at the macro level. (Rogers, 2024). In 2022, Russia invaded and occupied further Ukrainian territory, and the states of the world coordinated a sanctions regime in response. Israel continues its policies of ethnic cleansing in occupied territory such as the South Hebron Hills and suffers no international sanctions of any substance beyond the efforts of the international Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement.

This was the research environment we worked in during our first fieldwork visit in October 2022. Shortly after that,

another macro event took place that had a significant impact on the everyday lives of Palestinians and others in the South Hebron Hills. On 1 November 2022, Israeli voters went to the polls after four inconclusive elections since April 2019. The result was victory for the extreme right-wing coalition headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. The new coalition government, characterized as ‘ultra-conservative, transparently ethno-nationalist and expressly anti-Arab’, championed formal annexation of the West Bank ([International Crisis Group, 2022](#)). The elevation of their own political leaders to senior cabinet posts within the new coalition acted as a powerful catalyst for Israeli settlers in areas such as the South Hebron Hills, who subsequently intensified their attacks on Palestinian communities in their state-sponsored efforts to cleanse the territory.

When we returned to the South Hebron Hills in June 2023 for our second period of fieldwork, all our contacts told us that the threats and attacks from settlers had intensified. In addition to the threat of their homes being demolished, the residents of Masafer Yatta were facing an escalating level of violence from settlers, often assisted by the Israeli occupation forces, which, in the words of a United Nations (UN) report, was ‘undermining their physical security, negatively affecting mental and psycho-social health, lowering their standard of living, and increasing the dependence on humanitarian aid’ ([UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \[OCHA\], 2022c](#)).

Springtime and early summer in Masafer Yatta is when the vegetation on the hills is growing, and the shepherds are out grazing their flocks. We found there was a heightened emphasis on shepherds going out as a group for self-protection from attacks by settlers (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Occasionally, they would request accompaniment by international volunteers if they felt the need for their protective presence. What we found was a marked increase in clashes between local Palestinian herders and Israeli settlers, who were using sheep as a tool for expropriating

Figure 1.1: Shepherds in Masafer Yatta go in groups to protect themselves, 2022



Source: Andrew Rigby

land with the minimum effort. These settler-shepherds are based in the agricultural outposts that have mushroomed in number over recent years. According to a report by the Israeli nongovernmental organization Kerem Navot, ‘Israeli sheep and cattle grazing in the West Bank has gradually become Israel’s most significant mechanism for dispossessing Palestinian communities’ (2022: 7).

One day, we drove out into the hills to visit a family which had recent experience of the new level of attacks by settlers. Here is the story as told to us by the head of the family, Bassem, and recorded in our fieldnotes:

Bassem’s son had gone out with the sheep. Some settlers attacked him and prevented him from gaining access to the well, which is on family-owned land. The clash escalated, and one of the settlers killed one of their sheep. Neighbours responded to the shouts and the settlers

withdrew. Later, the son tried to lodge a formal complaint with the Israeli police and formally identify the settler who had killed the sheep. The police took no action.

On subsequent days, Bassem, accompanied by international and Israeli volunteers, tried to gain access to his well. Each time they were prevented from watering their flock by the settlers, who were masked and supported by Israeli soldiers in attendance. On one occasion, the confrontation escalated, tear-gas was used by the army, and one of Bassem's sons was arrested.

According to Bassem, he repeatedly tried to show the soldiers documentary evidence that the well was on family-owned land: 'Why does this keep happening? We have the legal right to use the well and proof of land-ownership – but they keep preventing us from accessing it.'

The day after one of the confrontations with the settlers, at 3.00 am, a squad of soldiers raided the family home and arrested Bassem's 19-year-old son, accusing him of injuring one of the settlers.

Since then, the settlers have been using Bassem's land for grazing their sheep, while the stress of gathering documentation, lodging complaints with the police, coping with the ongoing threats of violence from the settler-shepherds and dealing with the court case against his son had taken a significant toll on the mental health and physical well-being of the family.

This was just one of the cases reported to us as indicative of the escalation of settler-state violence during 2023 and the close collaboration between the settlers and the army (Rigby, 2023). We also learned that during this period, the settlers had started targeting international accompaniers who were seeking to act as a protective presence for Palestinian herders. There was evidence the Israeli military were sharing information about the identities of international accompaniers with settlers.

All this added to the general level of tension and insecurity felt by the locals and the companions.

Then, on 7 October 2023, a new macro-level trauma impacted on the research environment. In the early hours of 7 October, Hamas launched what it called Operation al-Aqsa Deluge, a multipronged attack on Israel, including Israeli border towns ringing the Gaza Strip. Hamas militants broke through Israeli military posts and the security fence around Gaza or flew over the barrier in motorized hang gliders, penetrating urban areas and killing or kidnapping Israelis, many of them civilians, including children and elderly people. In response to the attack, Israel declared a state of war, initiating a relentless barrage of airstrikes targeting a wide range of locations across the strip, including hospitals, universities, public spaces and residential compounds.

This declaration of war also heralded the intensification of violence in the West Bank. The settler at the head of the National Security Ministry authorized the distribution of rifles to settler militias and ‘civilian security teams’. Soldiers usually stationed in the West Bank were transferred to the Gaza border and replaced by reservists, most of them settlers. The reality on the ground was that settlers and soldiers had become indistinguishable as they teamed up to attack Palestinian communities. This violent campaign unfolded with full force in rural areas such as the South Hebron Hills. Some Palestinian communities were forced to leave their residences under the weight of settler attacks. Homes were burned, livestock stolen, roads blocked and property vandalized. As David [Shulman \(2024\)](#), an activist with the Israeli solidarity group Ta’ayush, wrote:

The settlers’ mantra – ‘Get out or we will kill you’ – has been repeated in nearly all the villages in the Jordan Valley and the South Hebron Hills. Usually it is uttered in the course of attacks on Palestinian homes, sheep pens, food supplies, water tanks and wells, wind turbines, and

anything else the invaders can wreck. Sometimes these settlers shoot at the villagers and kill sheep and goats. We know of at least sixteen Palestinian villages that have been evacuated over the last few months because of ceaseless settler violence backed by the army; many more are barely hanging on.

In the village of At-Tuwani, which was one of the bases of our research activities, an Israeli from a neighbouring settlement, armed with an assault rifle, shot a villager at point-blank range on 13 October 2023 (Shezaf, 2023). Some days later, on 25 October, Israeli settlers and soldiers invaded the land belonging to a Palestinian family in the village and used a bulldozer to uproot trees and destroy the family's garden. The next day, 26 October 2023, there were reports of a drone flying over villages broadcasting in Arabic 'We can see you everywhere. Wherever you are, we are coming for you' (B'tselem, 2024). On 28 October, in the hamlet of Susya, settlers threatened the residents – if they did not abandon their homes within 24 hours, they would return and shoot them (Al-Hurani, 2023). In other locations, soldier-settlers planted Israeli flags on Palestinian land and property and forced the local men to sing patriotic Israeli songs while videoing them.² Under the shadow of the Gaza War, the Israeli state and settlers launched what has been described as the most successful land-grab strategy since 1967, while most of the local Palestinians in Masafer Yatta gathered together within their homes praying for safety. For many, the focus on protecting their fields and grazing land was a thing of the past – the priority after 7 October 2023 was on protecting their actual dwellings (Killing et al, 2024).

We have to confess that the horror of the war in Gaza immobilized us. Like so many other concerned people, we were aghast and horrified as the slaughter throughout the Gaza Strip took on the characteristics of a genocidal war (Amnesty, 2024). It was difficult to write up our findings when we were hearing reports of our friends being arrested, seeing

news-footage showing fields that we walked around with the Palestinian owners now dotted with Israeli flags and military observation posts. We heard that our Israeli friends from Ta'ayush had been distributing fire extinguishers to villagers, but we also heard they had been intimidated by the sight of armed settlers entering villages and hamlets. It seemed that all normal life had been brought to an end, and we worried about the safety of people we had come to know and respect.

The Israeli slaughter in Gaza was widely condemned as genocidal in its methods and its aims. Meanwhile, under the camouflage of the war, settlers and soldiers in the West Bank ramped up their violence and intimidation against Palestinians, particularly in Masafer Yatta. It became increasingly clear to us that, especially after the election of Donald Trump for his second term as US President, all restraint on the settlers had evaporated. One shepherd, when interviewed in October 2022, had told us of how empowered he had been by the protective presence of international and Israeli volunteers who accompanied him as he grazed his sheep on the hills. Speaking to us in early 2025, he had a different tale to tell:

I used to graze my sheep on all the hills around Tuba and could even reach At-Tuwani. But the army slowly started to restrict access, especially near Ma'on. Since 2015, the settlers began establishing pastoral farms – outposts – which have now surrounded Tuba from the north, west and south.

These outposts are inhabited by radical settlers, some of whom are on EU and US sanctions lists. They often bring their own sheep to graze in the area, displacing local Palestinian shepherds and denying them access to essential water sources. Settlers regularly harass Tuba's residents, attack shepherds, steal livestock and prevent the use of water wells for animals.

Just five years ago, we could graze our sheep up to a kilometre west of Tuba. Now, we cannot go more than

300 metres. If we approach the closest hill with an Israeli flag, settlers will come and attack us and our sheep.

This harassment has reached our doorsteps. In January 2025, settlers invaded the village, smashed our animal feed, and burned my nephew Ali's car. They now graze their sheep right in front of our homes, using our wells without permission. We are left with overgrazed land, forcing us to buy expensive animal feed just to keep our sheep alive.

We had begun drafting the main sections of this book prior to the horrors of war being unleashed once again in Israel/Palestine. It became clear to us that the situation on the ground had changed to such a degree after the outbreak of the war that we should devote a new chapter to cover the post-October 2023 period. It appeared that all restraint on settler aggression had evaporated, and that what was happening in areas like Masafer Yatta was best understood through the frame of 'frontier genocide' (Madley, 2024). The 1948 UN definition of the crime of genocide included in its five categories of genocidal action the deliberate infliction of conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the targeted group in whole or in part (UN, 1948). We realized that what we had been witnessing in Masafer Yatta was a coordinated state project to create the conditions necessary to displace the local Palestinian communities. Accordingly, in the final phase of our research, we found ourselves exploring the implications for unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in areas that had become – in effect – active war zones. As one of the villagers we interviewed expressed it:

The situation has left the villagers in a state of constant fear. We are afraid to respond to settler attacks ... We know that if we do, the settlers, army and police will retaliate harshly. But if we stay silent, they will keep pushing us back, hill after hill, until nothing is left for us.

What we discovered is that in the months following the outbreak of the Gaza War, local villagers and those who accompanied them in an effort to create some level of protection faced a very real life-and-death dilemma – any active protest against settler aggression risked provoking the settlers to new levels of violence. This was brought home to us in the most painful and horrific manner when we learned that on 28 July 2025 a well-known community activist and journalist from the village of Umm al Khair in Masafer Yatta had been shot and killed, reportedly by an Israeli settler who had been sanctioned by the EU, the UK, France and Canada for his abuse of Palestinian human rights.³ Awdah Hathaleen, the victim of the shooting, had been an important member of the team responsible for making the award-winning documentary film *No Other Land*. According to eyewitnesses, the settler, armed with an automatic weapon, was accompanying a bulldozer that was destroying olive groves and village property. When villagers started throwing stones at the vehicle in an attempt to stop it, the settler ran towards them and fired off two shots, the first of which hit Awdah as he was standing some distance away documenting the confrontation. He died before he could be taken to hospital. Israeli soldiers who arrived at the scene proceeded to arrest a number of villagers, while the settler was taken to Jerusalem in custody. The next day, he appeared before a judge on suspicion of ‘reckless manslaughter’ and was placed under three days’ house arrest. By the time he was released and free to roam, the police were still refusing to release Awdah’s body for burial, having declared the village a closed military zone – claiming such measures were necessary to preserve public order (Adra, 2025b).

A note on field research in the OPT

As a team, our particular expertise and experience lie in the study of Palestinian unarmed resistance to the Israeli occupation. Marwan, a Palestinian, and Andrew first collaborated on a study

of the First Palestinian Intifada (Rigby, 1991; Darweish and Rigby, 1997). The research collaboration was resumed on an EU-commissioned survey of the unarmed resistance movement in the OPT in 2011–12. This survey formed the basis for further research on popular resistance in the West Bank which was published in 2015 (Darweish and Rigby, 2015). It was during this period of research that Andrew and Marwan first worked with Mahmoud. At that time, Mahmoud was a prominent activist with the Popular Struggle Coordination Committee, one of the networks of popular resistance committees in the West Bank. He was also a key organizer of popular protest in his home village of Al Masara, a few kilometres to the south of Bethlehem. He became a significant advisor in our research and subsequently enrolled for a doctorate under Marwan's supervision at Coventry University. Mahmoud and Marwan then collaborated on an oral history project involving young people from the South Hebron Hills.

It was this extended period of comradeship between the three team members and our shared history of involvement with the unarmed resistance initiatives of Palestinians that laid the basis of trust we established over time with networks of political activists throughout the West Bank and with Israeli solidarity activists. For us, the research into UCP in the South Hebron Hills was essentially the most recent phase in our ongoing study of Palestinian civil resistance to occupation, building on the working relationship already established with a number of the local community leaders whose trust and endorsement we deemed essential to the research process.

Over the years working together as a team, we have developed a functioning division of labour. Marwan has fluency in Arabic, Hebrew and English and has taken the lead role in coordinating the overall research programmes on which we have collaborated. Mahmoud took the lead in identifying key informants and arranging our interview schedules during the field research. He also acted as a key research resource complementing the material we gathered in our fieldwork with

his own experiences and insights. Andrew's role was basically to follow the lead of Marwan and Mahmoud as their scribe, equipped with notebooks, pens and recording devices.

A typical day in the field would involve driving south from our base in Bethlehem, hoping to avoid the delay and hassle of encountering Israeli checkpoints or roadblocks. The day would then be spent interviewing local Palestinians, either in a more or less formal interview setting or as we walked and talked, accompanying local shepherds, farmers and activists in their daily activities (see [Figure 1.2](#)). In total, we conducted 45 interviews with local activists, farmers, shepherds and key local leaders. In addition, we interviewed key personnel from Israeli and international organizations and networks whose main focus was on providing a protective presence in Masafer Yatta. We read the interview material and identified themes

Figure 1.2: Walking and talking – accompanying local shepherds, farmers and activists in their daily activities, 2022



Source: Andrew Rigby

and sub-themes significant to our lines of enquiry. We used software to code the material, which was a great help in the identification of emergent themes. As part of the overall research project, we commissioned two young film makers, female and male, from Masafer Yatta to create a film that would portray the experience of Palestinian farmers and shepherds facing up to the threat of expulsion and dispossession from Israeli settlers and soldiers, including footage of the activities of unarmed civilian accompaniers committed to their role of providing a protective presence for the local villagers (*Civil Protection in Masafer Yatta*, 2024).

Sometimes, the interviews would be carried out in English, which made the note-taking process reasonably straightforward. If the interviews and conversations were in Arabic, Marwan would do his utmost to provide some form of simultaneous summary translation for Andrew's benefit. In general, we would manage three or four interviews per day, each of them lasting an hour or more. Evenings were spent transcribing and translating the recorded interviews and notes, reflecting together on what we had witnessed during the day and identifying the main points to have emerged. Every few days, we would take 'time out', convening a team meeting when we would review progress, identify the research questions that had come to the fore and discuss how the emerging issues might be pursued further during the remaining period of fieldwork.

One of our experienced colleagues used to describe his approach to fieldwork as 'Doing the best you can in the circumstances' – this certainly is an apt portrayal of our fieldwork experience. Initially, we had decided on two periods of fieldwork at significant times of the calendar in the lives of Palestinian villagers in the South Hebron Hills – October 2022 to coincide with the olive harvest and June 2023 to cover the spring period, when the locals were expected to take advantage of the new growth of grass to take their flocks up on the hills. Both periods were when the incidence of clashes between Israeli settlers and Palestinian locals became more likely, and as

such would present opportunities for us to observe the reality of UCP in action.

We had also anticipated a third visit to share our findings with our Palestinian hosts and co-workers. This proved unfeasible after the outbreak of war – the cost of insurance cover rocketed way beyond our budget. Consequently, we became heavily reliant on Mahmoud, who was still living with his family in his village south of Bethlehem. He remained in regular communication with networks of Palestinian community leaders and those responsible for coordinating the activities of Israeli and international solidarity activists and volunteers. Mahmoud would share his findings with Marwan and Andrew via regular Zoom meetings and message sharing through our WhatsApp group. It was during this period that we also carried out some video-linked interviews with coordinators of UCP as part of our research into the changed circumstances on the ground after the outbreak of the Gaza War.

The months following the outbreak of war were particularly problematic for Mahmoud, as travel was severely restricted and new security measures were applied throughout the West Bank, including the construction of a metal barrier at the main entrance to his village. There was one occasion when he shared with Marwan and Andrew a photo of an Israeli military vehicle parked directly outside the front door of the family home. At such times, it became particularly clear to the three of us just how much we depended on each other for emotional support during the stressful times that are an inevitable dimension of participant fieldwork in a conflict zone.

Witnessing distressing occurrences on a daily basis takes its toll, and while each of us has developed our own ways of coping, the main source of resilience emanated from our solidarity as a team. Despite our different social and national backgrounds, we were united in our commitment to strengthening the significance of Palestinian unarmed resistance to occupation. We have never seen ourselves as ‘neutral’ observers – the occupation of the West Bank is based

on the abrogation of the basic human rights of those who live under the iron fist of Israeli military rule. As concerned human beings, we have engaged in this research in the hope and belief that our research might contribute in some way to empowering the struggle of Palestinians and concerned Israelis for liberation from the evil of occupation. For us, this is a given: it is the fundamental grounding of our work. Moreover, in our commitment to this mission, we are completely convinced that in the process we are also working in some small way towards the emancipation of Israeli citizens from the evil they have brought into being by their active involvement and complicity with the inhumanity of the occupation. We share with others the fundamental conviction that ending the occupation is a necessary prerequisite for the liberation of both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Conclusion

As with other peace researchers, our work is informed by the belief that our research has the potential to promote the realization of 'peace by peaceful means' (Galtung, 1996). To be honest, there have been times over the past years of research when our belief in the significance of our work has relied more upon the optimism of our will than the reasoning of our intellect. In what ways might our work sow the seeds for some kind of sustainable peace and human security for the people of Masafer Yatta?

- It is abundantly clear to us that without some form of international protective presence at the grassroots as well as the state level, the complete expulsion of Palestinians from vast areas of the OPT is only a matter of time.
- By their documentation of human rights abuses and their advocacy, UCP practitioners can raise awareness, mobilize public opinion in their home countries and thereby help feed the growth of popular pressure necessary to sway

policy makers and others to exercise the pressure necessary to undermine the level of impunity that Israeli settlers currently enjoy.

- By their presence alongside those facing genocidal threats, UCP practitioners can help locals maintain the level of resilience and determination necessary to resist the erosion of their basic human rights, helping to sustain at least some space for human dignity.
- The research has documented the resistance that has taken place over a period of three years in one area of the West Bank which has been at the forefront of Israeli efforts to implement the de facto annexation of large areas of Palestinian land, thereby frustrating any possibility of a meaningful Palestinian state being established in the future. The ‘micro struggles’ we have documented are at the heart of a process with far wider implications for the future.

TWO

Contemporary Palestinian Unarmed Resistance to Occupation

In 2022, we began our research presuming the focus would be upon the activities and motivations of those Palestinian, Israeli and international volunteers who sought to act as a protective presence for Palestinians living in the region of the South Hebron Hills. As the research progressed, however, the emphasis of our enquiries changed somewhat. We found ourselves repeatedly asking ourselves: *How was it that the local Palestinians managed to sustain their struggle to resist the ever-increasing pressure from the Israeli state and settlers to drive them from their lands and their homes?*

As we continued to puzzle over this question, we began to reframe our understanding of the role of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) in the area. It appeared to us that the main function of the activist-volunteers was to support and strengthen the resolve of the local Palestinian communities as they sought to resist the worst depredations of the occupying forces – civilian and military. It became clear to us that the presence of ‘outside companions’ impacted in a very meaningful manner on the morale and hence the resolve and resilience of the locals to continue with their unarmed resistance. Consequently, we decided that it was important to provide the reader with some insight into the main features of the recent history of Palestinian unarmed struggle against domination and oppression.¹

The First Intifada

The highpoint of Palestinian popular resistance in recent decades was in the years 1988–90, when the First Intifada was at its peak. From spontaneous clashes with the occupation forces in Gaza City in December 1987, the confrontations spread to the West Bank and developed into a sustained struggle to throw off the yoke of occupation by means of mass popular protest, non-cooperation and various forms of unarmed resistance. Coordination came through the establishment of a Unified National Command (UNC) composed of representatives of the different political factions. The UNC was complemented by a network of popular committees that organized active resistance in neighbourhoods and villages while coordinating the provision of basic services within their localities. With such an organizational structure, the Intifada escalated into a mass mobilization embracing all sectors of society (Rigby, 2015: 26–43).

For various reasons, the intensity of the struggle waned during 1990, but in June 1992 a Labor-led coalition came to power in Israel that was committed to ‘land for peace’ (Kurzman, 1998). Negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization ensued, and on 13 September 1993 a joint Declaration of Principles was signed affirming the commitment of both sides to ‘a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historic reconciliation through the agreed political process’ (United Nations [UN], 1993)

The Oslo peace process and the fragmentation of the Palestinian territories

There followed various rounds of negotiations which culminated with the signing of what became known as the Oslo II Agreement in September 1995. Considered a transitional agreement, it divided the West Bank into three administrative divisions categorized as Areas A, B and C, each to enjoy a

different degree of Palestinian self-government until a final peace agreement was established. Area A (18 per cent of the West Bank) encompassed the main Palestinian population centres, excluding East Jerusalem, and was to be under the full civil and security control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Area B, where control was to be shared between Israel and the PA, covered 22 per cent of the West Bank consisting primarily of those rural areas where there were no Israeli settlements. Area C covered the remainder of the West Bank, around 60 per cent of the territory, and here Israel was to continue to exercise complete civil and security control (Beinin, 1999).

It was widely presumed that once the interim agreement was in place and progress towards a final settlement underway Israel would gradually transfer increasing tracts of territory over to Palestinian control.² Such hopes proved to be groundless. By the summer of 2000, the occupation seemed more firmly entrenched than ever. The confiscation of land and the expansion of settlements had continued at an accelerated pace. The West Bank and Gaza Strip had been divided into cantons separated from each other by Israeli-controlled territory. Innumerable checkpoints and barriers had been set up throughout the territories, controlling the movement of Palestinians and enabling the Israelis to confine them within their particular enclaves, with disastrous consequences for economic activity and general living standards.

The Second Intifada

In September 2000, the resentment and anger at the deepening dispossession and deprivation that had been brewing amid the Palestinian population overflowed in an outburst of protest that soon became violent. The occasion was Israeli politician Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa compound in the Old City of Jerusalem, considered to be the third holiest site in Islam. The protests spread rapidly, and the Israeli security forces responded with disproportionate violence, which was

a contributory factor in the uprising taking on an increasingly violent character (Hussein, 2017).

During the ensuing clashes between Palestinian militias and the Israeli military, there were repeated calls from some sources for a return to civilian-based popular unarmed struggle, but the conditions for such a movement were no longer present. The fragmentation of the Palestinian territories, enforced by the burgeoning growth of military checkpoints and other restrictions on free movement, undermined the level of social solidarity necessary for widespread civilian mobilization. Furthermore, there was no unified leadership to coordinate such a struggle. There had been a deepening division between the main movements of Fatah and Hamas, while the PA was seen as corrupt and ineffectual, its prime role seeming to be the self-advancement of the political elite and the control of dissent and resistance to the occupation within the Palestinian population (Roy, 2007: 245). As one veteran of the First Intifada observed: 'There is no unified command, no programme, no real coordination between the different political forces. The 1987 Intifada was a complete system, which ruled our lives. And the objective of the movement was clear. Today nobody knows what we want' (Bucaille, 2004: 125).

The struggle against the Segregation Wall/Barrier

Throughout the Second Intifada, unarmed civilian resistance was extremely limited, but by 2003 the instances of popular unarmed resistance had begun to multiply, sparked by the Israeli decision to construct a physical barrier between the West Bank and Israel. They commenced construction in the spring of 2002, and within a very short while its impact was being felt by villagers who were denied access to their fields, saw their trees destroyed and their land expropriated.³ It was this new challenge to their well-being and way of life that sparked a wave of protest. At no stage was there anything comparable to a mass movement of protest – at the height of the popular resistance during 2010–11, a maximum

of 40 to 50 villages and neighbourhoods were engaged in some form of organized unarmed resistance. Some of these pockets of resistance, such as Masafer Yatta, Budrus and Bil'in, gained an international profile during the peak of their resistance, but this declined with the passage of time.⁴ Despite the difference in scale compared with the period of the First Intifada, there were some features worthy of note.⁵

- In the First Intifada, the main international presence had been the flood of journalists who covered the first months of the uprising. One of the significant aspects of the post-Second Intifada period was the involvement of international and Israeli solidarity activists. Palestinians welcomed this involvement as a sign they were not alone, and because the Israeli occupation forces and settlers seemed to moderate their violence when internationals and Israelis were present. In this manner, the internationals acted as a kind of protective shield for the Palestinian protesters.
- Another notable feature of the wave of popular resistance sparked by the construction of the Segregation Wall/Barrier was the increased use of new forms of communication and technology to monitor and record abuses by Israeli occupation forces and settlers, with footage uploaded to websites within minutes of their being recorded, and thereby made available to networks across the globe.⁶
- A significant aspect of the struggle during this period was the increased use of the Israeli legal system as a means of challenging attempts to expropriate land and confiscate properties, invariably with the assistance of Israeli human rights groups such as Yesh Din (There is law).⁷
- The unarmed resistance during the post-Second Intifada period was confined largely to various pockets of resistance within the West Bank, with little or no civilian-based resistance within the Gaza Strip. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and in June 2007 Hamas seized control following months of clashes between Fatah and

Hamas militias. The immediate outcome was international condemnation of the coup and the new Gaza-based administration and support for the Israeli blockade from many international states. As a consequence, the Gazan population was forced to survive in a 365-km² prison-compound. In such circumstances, resentment against the Israeli gaolers grew, as did the desperate rhetoric of the Hamas administration. Rockets were launched at Israeli population centres, which provided the Israelis with the pretext for launching the four wars that took place prior to the most recent slaughter that commenced in October 2023 in response to the Hamas armed incursion into Israel.

Palestinian unarmed resistance post-2014

On the basis of this analysis, it would seem clear that the leverage power of Palestinian unarmed popular resistance on its own has been significantly weakened by changes that took place after the Oslo ‘peace process’. However, this does not mean that unarmed resistance ceased with the decline of the protest against the Segregation Wall/Barrier. The Palestinian struggle against the occupation over recent years can be likened to the ‘whack-a-mole’ arcade game – no matter how hard the Palestinians are ‘whacked’ in efforts to suppress them, localized instances of resistance keep recurring. This certainly has been the pattern in the years between 2014 and 2025 – no coordinated mass movement but persistent outbreaks of protest and campaigns of resistance. Here are just a few such instances.

July 2017: Struggle over access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex

On 14 July 2017, three Palestinians from inside Israel killed two Israeli police officers in the Al-Aqsa complex before being killed by armed police.⁸ After this incident, the Israeli government increased its security presence in the Old City, including the

installation of metal detectors, CCTV cameras and turnstiles at the entrances to the compound. They also announced a ban on men under the age of 50 attending Friday prayers. In protest at the new measures, the Islamic authorities responsible for managing the compound refused to hold prayers in Al-Aqsa. They called on worshippers to gather and hold regular prayers outside of the compound until the Israeli government removed all of the newly added security measures. Hundreds gathered to pray outside, and clashes ensued between the worshippers and Israeli police. This pattern continued for the next few days, with women particularly prominent in the protests. Friday, 21 July was declared a ‘day of anger’ by the religious authorities, and people were urged to hold their Friday prayers in public squares throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

Clashes took place throughout the day, with some fatalities caused by the Israeli army. The issue was discussed at the UN, and pressure mounted on the Israeli and Jordanian leadership, which was nominally responsible for the functioning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex, to negotiate a way forward. On 26 July, Israeli workers began to remove all of the barriers, gates, scaffolding, and infrastructure for cameras. When the Waqf officials confirmed that workers had removed all the recent Israeli security measures, they called on worshippers to go to the mosque in mass numbers to celebrate. Accordingly, on Friday, 28 July, thousands of Palestinians returned to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The ‘victory’ came at a cost. By the end of the protests, police had arrested 33, killed at least three and injured around 500 demonstrators in the Old City alone. The Red Crescent reported that throughout the rest of the West Bank, Israeli forces had injured 1,300 and arrested over 300 Palestinians ([Amnesty International, 2017](#)).

The Sheikh Jarrah struggle, East Jerusalem

In the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem, there has been a long-running conflict going on

since the 1970s, with Israeli settlers seeking the eviction of Palestinian families from their homes. This conflict reflects, in microcosm, Israel's wider efforts to 'cleanse' East Jerusalem of its Palestinian population – and as such it has become a cause célèbre for the Israeli expansionists and for the Palestinians and the Israeli solidarity groups that support their struggle to hold on to their family homes.

The settlers have been claiming that the properties in question were owned by Jews prior to 1948 and that they have the right to reclaim them under Israeli law. The threatened families have been disputing such claims, and the ensuing clashes, vigils, petitions and court cases invariably result in rulings in favour of the settlers. Similar clashes have been taking place in Silwan, the Palestinian neighbourhood directly adjacent to the Old City which has also been targeted for cleansing by the Israeli state.⁹

Gaza – March of Return 2018–19

Our third illustration is a particularly salutary one in the light of subsequent developments.

Every Friday for over a year, Palestinian protestors gathered along the fence that since 1996 had separated the Gaza Strip from Israel, demanding an end to the Israeli-imposed blockade and proclaiming their right of return as Palestinian refugees. The protest had started as a vision of a powerful nonviolent protest that would draw world attention to the suffering of Gaza's population. It ended as one more example of how powerful political forces, Hamas in this case, can take over idealistic initiatives and mould them into vehicles for their own purposes.

The protest grew from an idea by a Palestinian poet who proposed a nonviolent march at the separation fence to draw attention to the humanitarian situation in Gaza and UN Resolution 194 affirming the 'right of return'. The idea spread rapidly, and an organizational network grew involving

people from all sectors of Gazan civil society and the political movements, including Hamas. It was proposed that the action would be launched on 30 March 2018 – Land Day in the Palestinian political calendar – and continue until 15 May 2018, the day on which the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948 is commemorated. Different sites were chosen at points along the separation fence, and at each location a ‘camp of return’ was created, each named after villages from which Palestinians had been displaced. There was a clear commitment that the action should be ‘fully peaceful from beginning to end’, and the demonstrators would be unarmed (UN Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2019: 4).

The first action was launched on 30 March 2018 with a reported participation of 30,000. There was something of a festive air in the different camps that were located around 300 metres from the wall. However, smaller groups approached closer to the fence, and there was some stone throwing and tyre burning. The Israeli security forces responded with live ammunition, resulting in 18 deaths and close to 800 injured (UNHRC, 2019: 9). Each week, the pattern was repeated, with most of the participants demonstrating peacefully some distance from the fence. But on each occasion a minority would attempt to breach the fence, throwing stones and launching incendiary kites or balloons carrying burning coals wrapped in chicken wire. Israel continued to respond with deadly force, and 183 protestors had been killed by 31 December 2018.¹⁰ The protest had evolved into something significantly different from what had been envisaged at its birth. It had been taken over by the Hamas governing body in the Gaza Strip and been transformed into one more element in its repertoire of means to affirm its credentials as the dominant Palestinian political faction.¹¹

The challenges facing popular resistance in the OPT

It is clear that while the First Intifada succeeded in shaking Israeli decision makers and touching significant sections of

Israeli and international public opinion, the waves of popular unarmed resistance since that time – particularly the resistance to the construction of the Segregation Wall/Barrier and associated expansion of settlements – failed to impose sufficient cost on Israel to cause any re-assessment of the wisdom of continued occupation of Palestinian territory. At the same time, this does not mean that popular resistance has been pointless and futile. The resistance is an ongoing symbol of the Palestinian refusal to acquiesce to the status quo of occupation and a means of communicating that refusal – and the justness of their cause – to wider constituencies globally.

As such, direct comparisons can be made between the popular unarmed resistance of the Palestinians and the nonviolent resistance to Nazi occupation in occupied Europe during the Second World War. Europeans who engaged in different forms of unarmed resistance against German occupation never thought their activities would somehow drive out the enemy. Liberation, they knew, would have to come through outside intervention in the guise of the military might of the allied forces. The significance of their resistance lay in the way the different acts of dissidence and defiance demonstrated that significant sections of the subject population refused to accept the legitimacy of the occupiers' regime. As Jacques Sémelin noted, the goal of such activities was 'to preserve the collective identity of the attacked societies; that is to say, their fundamental values. ... [C]ivilian resistance consisted primarily of a clash of wills, expressing above all a fight for values' (Sémelin, 1993: 3).

The growing significance of international networks of solidarity

Reference has been made to the increased involvement of international solidarity activists in the more recent waves of popular resistance compared with the First Intifada, when often the most obvious international presence was the number of

journalists and media personnel covering the uprising. The significance of the international activists as a protective shield on the ground and as longer-term companions has also been identified. But perhaps more important than their protective function has been their role as advocates for the Palestinian cause. There can be little doubt that the lived experience of international solidarity activists in Palestine strengthens their capacity for advocacy among their own networks in their home countries. This has been a significant factor in the expansion over recent years of a global grassroots movement of solidarity urging an end to the Israeli occupation. The growth of the transnational campaign for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions targeted at Israel and initiated by Palestinian civil society organizations in 2005 is perhaps the most obvious illustration of this phenomenon (Rigby and Darweish, 2018).

However, the international networks of advocates for the Palestinian cause rely in turn on the popular resistance of the Palestinians – and their Israeli partners – to feed into their campaigns. That is, while Palestinian popular resistance might be relatively weak in relation to its direct impact on Israeli decision makers and publics, their presentation of themselves as brave people struggling for their basic rights by unarmed means against an illegitimate and brutal occupation can resonate strongly through international networks of sympathizers. They, in their turn, can use the examples and the stories of resistance to shame the Israeli occupation regime in the eyes of wider constituencies around the world. In their turn, such people – links in the great chain of nonviolence – can exercise pressure on their own politicians and policy makers to take action.

Social movement analysts have likened this type of process to that of a boomerang, insofar as local movements that want to increase the pressure on their targets can ‘throw a boomerang’ out to external actors and networks in the expectation that the boomerang will return to smite their opponents in the form of international pressure and sanctions. As Howard Clark once wrote: ‘In its flight the boomerang might pass through NGOs

[nongovernmental organizations] and activist constituencies, media, government departments and intergovernmental institutions before returning to make a difference at the point from where it was thrown' (Clark, 2009b: 15). In subsequent chapters, our aim is to convey something of the lived experience of those volunteers who have been prepared to devote time and energy into supporting the resilience of Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills who have been struggling to resist the efforts of settlers and other state actors to expropriate their land. Their work as UCP practitioners has been important, but of more significance has been the stories they share with others beyond the borders of Palestine and Israel.

THREE

Unarmed Civilian Protection under Occupation

The aim of this chapter is twofold. In the first section, we try to locate our study within the existing body of literature relating to the theory and practice of unarmed civilian protection (UCP). We conclude by identifying some of the gaps in the literature which our study starts to address.

As was noted in the [previous chapter](#), we have a shared history of involvement with the unarmed resistance initiatives of Palestinians struggling against occupation, and this laid the basis of trust we established over time with networks of political activists throughout the West Bank and with Israeli solidarity activists. We approached the research into UCP in the South Hebron Hills as a continuation of our involvement in and commitment to Palestinian civil resistance to occupation, building on the working relationship already established with a number of the local community leaders whose trust and endorsement was essential to the research process.

Four main categories of UCP literature

Through our earlier work, we were familiar with the literature on Palestinian unarmed civilian resistance and with the basic writings on nonviolent action for peace and justice. However, we were not familiar with the literature relating specifically to the theory and the practice of UCP – so addressing this weakness became one of our early research priorities. Our first

foray into the literature resulted in us identifying four broad categories within the bulk of the published material devoted specifically to UCP:

- introductory overviews of the field's development including definitions of the concept and ideal-type portrayals of the practice;
- case study material, including evaluations of UCP projects in different conflict zones around the world;
- attempts to draw out lessons for best practice in UCP;
- metatheoretical work seeking to contextualize UCP theorizing and practice within a wider understanding of the social dynamics of nonviolent efforts to transform violent conflict situations.

Introductory overviews

A significant number of published works consist of basic introductory outlines of the field, including conceptual definitions of UCP and references to some of the case study material to be found in the wider literature.

Writing in 2014, Furnari defined UCP as 'efforts by unarmed civilian third parties [mostly from the global north], in the field, to prevent or diminish violence by influencing or controlling potential perpetrators for the purpose of protecting people and making it safe for local people to engage in peace and justice efforts' (Furnari, 2014: 38). Two years later, in a 2016 co-authored monograph, she introduced an additional element to her definition – UCP referred to the work of '*trained civilians* who use nonviolent, unarmed approaches to protect other civilians from violence and the threat of violence and support local efforts to build peace' (Furnari et al, 2016: 5). In 2018, the emphasis on 'trained civilians' had been enhanced in a definition of UCP that referred to 'the practice of deploying professionally prepared unarmed civilians before, during, or after violent conflict, to prevent or reduce violence; to provide

direct physical protection to civilian populations under threat; and to strengthen or build resilient local peace infrastructures' (Duncan, 2016: 4). This definition was proposed by one of the core staff of the Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), an organization that has been particularly active in promoting the training and deployment of UCP practitioners over recent years – as such, the increasing emphasis on the element of training in working definitions of UCP should not be too surprising.¹

The important issue with regard to conceptual definitions is their utility and heuristic worth as a source of insight and understanding of phenomena. It is important to recognize that such definitions of UCP challenge the traditional dominant paradigm of international peace keeping as the preserve of states using military forces and the threat of violence to suppress violence (Keenan and Beadle, 2017). However, in our view the emphasis on training in certain definitions of UCP serves to confuse more than enlighten, reflecting as it does an aspiration rather than empirical phenomena. Furthermore, it does beg questions such as 'Training in what? Professionally prepared with regard to what?' Oldenhuis et al (2021: 216) list the following as key competencies: listening, engaging in dialogue, analysing conflicts, managing information, facilitating and negotiating. As we discovered in our research, the nature and degree of training undergone by the activists we interviewed varied considerably. Moreover, most of the people we encountered who were seeking to act as a protective presence for the Palestinian communities of the South Hebron Hills would tend to view themselves as solidarity activists rather than professionally trained UCP practitioners. Does this mean that they were not engaged in UCP? They certainly saw themselves and their activity in such a light – seeking to create a protective presence for the local Palestinians facing dispossession and harassment.

NP, of course, does not hold a monopoly in the field of UCP. Other organizations involved in UCP portray their core activities (and aims) in terms that make no reference to training.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) characterize their core method as protective accompaniment, ‘a strategy pioneered by PBI for protecting human rights defenders and communities whose lives and work are threatened by political violence’.² The Meta Peace Team defines its method as ‘third party nonviolent intervention’, embracing ‘protective accompaniment, observation/documentation, peaceful presence/modelling peaceful behaviour and reaction, and inter-positioning (putting our bodies between conflicting parties)’ (Hanna, 2016).

The focus on the role of third parties in so many of the definitions reviewed tends to direct attention away from the expertise and agency of those directly affected by conflict: the local people themselves (Bliesemann de Guevara et al, 2023). This overlooked agency has been recognized by Oldenhuis et al in their definition of UCP as ‘the practice of civilians protecting other civilians in situations of imminent, ongoing, or recent violent conflict. It involves international civilians protecting local civilians, local civilians protecting each other, and even local civilians protecting international or non-local civilians’ (Oldenhuis et al, 2021: 18).

In our study of UCP in Masafer Yatta, we were most struck by the symbiosis that existed between the ‘outsiders’ and the locals – theirs was a relationship of mutual reinforcement and interdependency, a complex dynamic that will be the focus of much of the study in later chapters. Indeed, there are grounds for arguing that the significant impact of UCP practitioners in such conflict zones as the South Hebron Hills lies not so much in the techniques and methods of civilian protection offered by trained accompaniers but rather in the impact their solidarity presence had on the morale and the resolve of the local Palestinians to continue with their resistance.

Case study material

A simple ranking of the frequency with which particular conflict zones feature in the UCP literature would show

Colombia at the head of the listing, which is not surprising given that the country has suffered over 50 years of civil war. Lower down the list, we find accounts of the work in Mindanao (Philippines) and interventions by a range of organizations in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and, more recently, South Sudan.

The most accessible source of case study material on UCP is Furnari's edited publication *Wielding Nonviolence in the Midst of Violence: Case Studies of Good Practices in Unarmed Civilian Protection* (2016), which contains an insightful chapter on UCP in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by McCarthy and Pinckney (McCarthy and Pinkney, 2016). This work relates most directly to our research on UCP in the South Hebron Hills. However, the chapter does have certain unavoidable limitations, given the nature of the research exercise upon which the report was based. McCarthy and Pinckney spent two weeks in 2015 interviewing a range of informants, including 35 practitioners representing 14 agencies – international, Israeli and Palestinian. As such, their work was necessarily time bound. Furthermore, the people they interviewed were involved in a wide range of activities that might be classed as civilian protection of Palestinians covering a range of different forms of accompaniment in different parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). While this approach helped to portray a broad picture, the level of analytical insight was necessarily limited, particularly as the nature and dynamic of the violence is quite context-specific in the OPT.³

A further problem with McCarthy and Pinckney's contribution is that they only interviewed representatives of two Palestinian agencies which, to the best of our knowledge, have had very limited involvement with civilian protection in the South Hebron Hills. Another limitation of the study was that they did not explore the methods of self-protection pursued by communities threatened by the settlers and the soldiers. One of the significant findings of our research was that the extent to which 'outsiders' became involved in civilian protection in the South Hebron Hills was closely related to

the degree of community self-protection practised by the local inhabitants. In other words, Palestinian, Israeli and international activists tended to focus their efforts on communities that had displayed a preparedness to engage in various modes of community protection and resistance to Israeli expansionism.

Moreover, we realized during the course of our research that a kind of symbiotic relationship could develop between external UCP practitioners and the local communities. While external accompaniers attempted to use their presence to enhance the level of security experienced by the locals, they in turn depended to some degree on the local people for their own security and protection. A maxim we heard many times during our research was ‘When Palestinians run, you run – there will be a good reason!’ Another dimension of the symbiosis we identified between locals and accompaniers was the manner in which the volunteers could be empowered by the tenacity and resilience manifested by the local Palestinians. As one accompanier told us: ‘They teach me how to keep my head up.’⁴

Attempts to draw out lessons on best practice in UCP

Christine Schweitzer’s documentation of a workshop held in Beirut in 2018 with UCP practitioners based in the Middle East contains a number of observations that resonate with our own research findings (Schweitzer, 2018). Among these, we might mention the following:

- *The distinction between local and international organizations, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, is not always clear cut.*
In our research, we made a threefold distinction between accompaniers: internationals, Israelis and Palestinians. We found this distinction far more insightful than a simple dichotomy between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.
- *Some of the international organizations focused on facilitating the intervention primarily of solidarity activists concerned with supporting the Palestinians in their struggle against dispossession.*

As noted elsewhere in this text, virtually all the accompaniers we encountered saw themselves as solidarity activists pursuing their commitment by means of UCP.

- *Many of the internationals involved in UCP were volunteers, primarily from Europe and the United States, on short-term 'activist' visits.*

In our research, we came across a range of different types of 'internship' – relatively short term through to periods of three months.

- *Most of the international groups emphasize the primary significance of the advocacy function of volunteers on their return home.*

This view was almost universally shared by the coordinators and volunteers that we came across. As one coordinator expressed it: '[T]he work of accompaniers serves many very important purposes, but it is a minor consideration compared to the advocacy we hope and expect that they do once they return home.'

UCP and non-partisanship

One of the key principles of good UCP practice identified by NP is that of non-partisanship (Oldenhuis, 2021: 104). They endorse the understanding expressed by Mahoney and Eguren that to be non-partisan is to say, 'We will be at your side in the face of injustice and suffering, but we will not take sides against those you define as enemies' (Mahoney and Eguren, 1997: 236). The presumption underpinning this principle would appear to be the belief that constructive communication can foster relationship building between parties to a destructive conflict situation and as such is an important dimension of peace making. We can understand the importance of non-partisanship in contexts where the parties to a conflict are committed to the establishment of a sustainable peace based on mutual recognition of certain basic human rights for all. But in the context of Area C in general, and the South Hebron Hills in particular, a most aggressive form of settler-colonialism

is taking place. Settlers and soldiers in the service of the Israeli state are expropriating land and property, denying the Palestinians the most basic civil rights and committing gross abuses of international humanitarian law in the process. The rule of law is totally absent for Palestinians, and in such a situation advocates and practitioners of UCP who seek to foster relationships with the Israeli settlers would lose whatever legitimacy they had in the eyes of the local Palestinians. As Schweitzer notes, internationals risk losing the trust of their Palestinian partners if they also pursue relationships with Israeli agencies (Schweitzer, 2018).

Inter-organizational coordination among UCP agencies and activists

There is a certain amount of literature examining the relationships between ‘external’ UCP intervenors and the people and the communities they are seeking to protect/help protect themselves. However, one dimension that seems to be relatively under researched is the relationship that can develop between different actors and agencies participating in UCP in the same conflict situation. As we know from studies of peace-building interventions in societies emerging out of violent and destructive conflict, there can be a significant degree of competition and tension between international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), each seeking to stake a ‘claim’ to significant contributions to the peace-building processes. Likewise, there is evidence of tension between local civil society organizations and the international agencies. Part of this tension is a result of them finding themselves in a competitive situation with regard to access to funding. There is no reason to believe that agencies focusing on UCP can be immune to such pressures.

In our research, we also encountered problems with cooperation between different agencies due to their different ‘terms of engagement’ – some agencies required their

volunteers to confine their role to observation and monitoring, while other volunteers were able and willing to intervene when clashes took place. We also discovered that in the period after October 2023, different agencies implemented different approaches towards the resumption of their programmes under the more dangerous conditions that pertained during the months of war and settler-driven land-grab. We found it was possible to locate different agencies along a continuum between a ‘movement’ at one end and an ‘international non-governmental agency’ on the other. In general, those agencies that were closer to the INGO end of the spectrum proved to be more cautious in their re-deployment post-October 2023 than those which were located towards the ‘movement’ pole.

Metatheoretical literature

One of the most interesting bodies of literature relevant to UCP is that which seeks to contextualize the praxis within broader fields of social theory and analysis of the dynamics of nonviolent action in the context of violent conflicts. What are the core assumptions underlying different models of UCP? How might UCP praxis be enriched and strengthened by insights from broader fields of social theory and conflict analysis – including especially the field of nonviolent resistance studies?

There are a number of sources that trace the history of nonviolent intervention across borders, when people have sought to place themselves between disputing parties to try to end conflicts and oppression.⁵ The contemporary practice of UCP builds on this tradition of people acting on the basis of human concern and being prepared to cross boundaries and borders in an effort to enhance the security of fellow human beings. International action in support of the victims of violence and oppression can take many forms. [Burrowes \(2000\)](#) proposed a ninefold typology ranging from forms of locally based nonviolent campaigns to mobilize people and raise concern about a struggle in another country, through forms of

humanitarian assistance and attempts to promote reconciliation and on to modes of nonviolent interposition such as UCP.

The most common presumption underpinning the different forms of protective accompaniment at the heart of UCP is that it possesses a significant power of deterrence. The presence of internationals and other witnesses in conflict situations where there is a high risk of human rights abuse can serve notice on the perpetrators that they cannot act with impunity – ‘the world is watching!’ As [Mahony and Enrique Eguren \(1997\)](#) have shown in their study of PBI, accompaniment embodies and represents the international concern for human rights.

Brian [Martin \(2009\)](#) has drawn on his insights regarding the importance of media coverage in relation to nonviolent civil resistance to suggest a framework for understanding the power of accompaniment – ‘backfire’. The concept refers to phenomena where an attempt to achieve a particular purpose, like weakening the position of human rights defenders, ‘backfires’ and has the opposite effect from that intended. In his work, Martin has identified five main methods perpetrators use to prevent domestic and international outrage in response to their repression and suggests that accompaniment can undermine the efficacy of such efforts.

[Eguren \(2009\)](#) has employed the concept of ‘space’ to understand some of the dynamics of accompaniment in the context of civil resistance. When people who have been subjected to forms of repression begin to organize to achieve certain objectives, they are claiming a new ‘social space’ for themselves. Accompaniment can play a significant role in supporting and strengthening the resilience of such claims to a new space, whether this be a physical safe space or the symbolic space claimed by those adopting a new identity as equal citizens of society with a claim to basic human rights.

[Wallis \(2015: 38\)](#) has argued that most people find it uncomfortable to have witnesses when they are performing acts of violence and repression. He posits that ‘having people around and visibly watching is in and of itself an effective

deterrent to indiscriminate violence and all kinds of abuses against the civilian population’.

Social distance and the ‘great chain of nonviolence’

Drawing on insights from Johan Galtung, we would add a necessary qualifying insight regarding the deterrent effect of accompaniment and witness: the factor of social distance. In his study of the First Intifada, [Rigby \(2015: 249\)](#) noted:

We know that soldiers can go on obeying morally unjustifiable orders – so long as they define their victims as ‘other’, separate from themselves and thereby less than fully human. It follows from this that there is very little chance of the nonviolence of the dehumanised stirring the consciences of oppressors. As a general rule the degree of ‘shame power’ exercised by nonviolent resisters is directly related to the social distance between the parties to the struggle. The shorter the distance, the more likely are the oppressors to perceive their victims as human, recognising them as fellow members of a common humanity.

This insight drew on the work of Galtung, who had developed his model of ‘the great chain of nonviolence’, with its imagery of nonviolent action communicating its message from group to group, social layer to social layer, until it reached the loci of the political power being challenged ([Galtung, 1989](#)). From this, it would appear that the efficacy of the deterrence exercised by accompaniers is crucially influenced by how the potential perpetrators perceive the ‘humanity’ of their likely targets and also how they perceive the status (and associated leverage power) of the accompaniers and their network of contacts with whom they might share their witness. As a general rule, we might also hypothesize that the deterrent effect of accompaniers is directly related to the level of legitimacy they are perceived

as possessing by the parties to the conflict. Conversely, where accompaniers are attempting to act as a protective presence for one of the parties and are perceived as illegitimate participants by those threatening the well-being of the people they are trying to protect, then their presence can be a cause of heightened emotions and harassment. During our research, there were a number of occasions where Israeli accompaniers were deemed to be ‘traitors’ by xenophobic settlers such that their presence was a kind of provocation to the attackers. In a similar vein, there was always a risk that solidarity activists standing alongside local Palestinians would be demonized as ‘anarchist trouble makers’ and thereby deserving of a beating. This phenomenon became more common after the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023.

Significance of this study

This study is the first in-depth analysis of the praxis of UCP in a settler-colonial setting with increasingly violent conflict taking place in the South Hebron Hills. Consequently, it represents a significant contribution to a developing field, particularly in its focus on the interrelationship between Palestinians threatened with dispossession and eviction and international and Israeli activists seeking to establish a level of protection by their presence alongside those facing ethnic cleansing. The study also represents an original contribution by contextualizing the work of UCP practitioners in the South Hebron Hills within the framework of genocide studies, identifying the parallels between the dispossession and displacement of indigenous populations elsewhere in the world and the processes that intensified throughout the period of the research as the levels of violence and intimidation faced by local Palestinians and their accompaniers rocketed following the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023.

Much of the published work on UCP seems to be based on relatively short-term evaluation exercises carried out on

behalf of the agencies engaged in providing international accompaniers and unarmed peace keepers for work in conflict zones. By contrast, this work is based on three years of engagement by a team of researchers with long experience of fieldwork in the OPT analysing the dynamics of unarmed resistance to occupation in a colonial context. This background established a basis of trust between the researchers and key informers and activists in the field. Interviews, formal and informal, combined with participant observation and an ongoing coverage of primary and secondary sources constituted the basis for the research. That the research covered a period of three years provided the researchers with a unique opportunity to trace the changes in the conflict situation and the lived experience of accompaniers and locals over a period which has seen the de facto annexation of vast areas of Palestinian land by Israeli settlers, supported by the state.

FOUR

Mapping the Conflict in the South Hebron Hills

The aim of this chapter is to map the conflict situation in the South Hebron Hills – its historical origins and the main contextual features.

Oslo Interim Peace Agreement – the fragmentation of the West Bank

As noted in [Chapter Two](#), one of the most important outcomes of the Oslo peace process was the fragmentation of the West Bank into Areas A, B and C. Under the terms of the Interim Agreement, Area C was defined as ‘areas of the West Bank outside Areas A and B, which, except for the issues that will be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations, will be gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction in accordance with this Agreement’.¹ Areas A and B include most of the Palestinian population centres in the West Bank, but there is no territorial congruity between the different sites, which are surrounded by Area C land. As one Israeli human rights specialist observed: ‘All of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank are in Area C. The major Palestinian population centres are like holes in Swiss cheese, where the cheese itself is Area C, engulfing everything: the Jordan Valley, the South Hebron Hills, part of the northern West Bank’ ([Chatiner, 2023](#)).

Under the Oslo Accords, it was presumed that land in the West Bank would gradually be transferred from Area C to Area B, and then finally to Area A, thereby increasing the land and population directly under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). According to the Interim Agreement, the gradual transfer should have been completed by 1999. This was the anticipated transitional process – it was not to happen. Area C has remained under full Israeli control with regard to security and all land-related civil matters, including land allocation, planning, construction and infrastructure.

The interim nature of the 1995 agreement made grabbing lands in Area C an urgent matter for all those who sought to derail the process, of whom there were quite a number – including Benjamin Netanyahu, who became Israel's prime minister in 1996. All the Israeli settlements authorized by the Israeli state, although deemed illegal under international law, are located in Area C, as well as the large tracts of land Israel has defined as being under the jurisdiction of the local and regional councils of the settlements. These areas cover some 210,000 ha – around 63 per cent of Area C – and include the majority of state land (B'tselem, 2013b: 12).

Double marginality of Palestinians within Area C

As a consequence of this process, Palestinians in Area C live under conditions of 'double marginality'. The PA has no formal role to play under the terms of the Interim Agreements, while the Israeli state has made little secret of its goal of 'cleansing' Palestinian communities from as much of Area C as possible. As the World Bank noted in a 2013 report, the restrictions enforced by Israel within Area C have resulted in the underdevelopment of any kind of Palestinian economic activity, thereby forestalling the emergence of any sustainable economic basis for a future Palestinian state: 'Since Area C is where the majority of the West Bank's natural resources lie, the impact of these restrictions on the Palestinian economy

has been considerable. Thus, the key to Palestinian prosperity continues to lie in the removal of these restrictions with due regard for Israel's security' (Niksic et al, 2014: 2). In pursuit of its goal of cleansing Area C of as much of the Palestinian population as possible, the Israeli state has relied on a number of measures. Prime among these has been an ongoing systemic implementation of ideologically driven violence against the local Palestinian communities (Kuttab, 2022).

Ideologically motivated violence

According to the Israeli human rights agency Yesh Din, acts of Israeli violence against Palestinians, particularly within Area C, constitute 'a system of ideological crime that is designed to dispossess Palestinians of their lands and expand Israeli control in the West Bank' (Yesh Din, 2025). According to the United Nations (UN), in the year up to 20 September 2024 Israeli forces had killed 776 Palestinians in the West Bank, including at least 160 children. During the same period, the UN also recorded that Israeli settlers had killed 12 Palestinians, wounded 281 and caused property damage in 594 incidents (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024). Those responsible for such violence, whether military or settlers, are rarely brought to account by the Israeli authorities. Indeed, according to Yesh Din, since 2005 only 3 per cent of investigation files opened following ideologically motivated offences by Israelis against Palestinians in the West Bank led to convictions (Yesh Din, 2025).

The violence and intimidation are perpetrated by Israeli settlers who are confident they will face no legal sanctions for their actions. Their mindset is such that they are immune to any moral judgements based on universal values of fellowship and care. They are emboldened by the belief that God is on their side and the knowledge that the violence they perpetrate against Palestinians serves as a major tool of the Israeli state in

its pursuance of its annexationist policies. In the words of a report by the Israeli human rights agency B'tselem:

[S]ettler violence is a form of government policy, aided and abetted by official state authorities with their active participation. ... The combination of state violence and nominally unofficial violence allows Israel to have it both ways: maintain plausible deniability and blame the violence on settlers rather than on the military, the courts or the Civil Administration while advancing Palestinian dispossession. The facts, however, blow plausible deniability out of the water: When the violence occurs with permission and assistance from the Israeli authorities and under its auspices, it is state violence. The settlers are not defying the state; they are doing its bidding. (B'tselem, 2021)

In direct contrast to the impunity enjoyed by Israeli settlers, Palestinians in Area C are subjected to a violent military occupation, without access to legal and civil rights. According to Human Rights Watch: 'Israeli authorities govern West Bank Palestinians, excluding Jerusalem residents, under harsh military law. In so doing, they deny them basic due process and try them in military courts with a nearly 100 per cent conviction rate' (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The level of oppression can be gauged by the numbers of Palestinians incarcerated within the Israeli prison system. As of January 2025, according to Palestinian human rights organizations, there were 10,400 Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including 3,376 administrative detainees held without trial (UN OCHA, 2025).

As researchers, we became aware of the systemic nature of the ideologically driven violence perpetrated particularly against Palestinians in regions of Area C such as the South Hebron Hills. Again and again, we were struck by the sense that the local Palestinians were living without any of the normal protective covers of the rule of law, due process and

independent judiciary that people living in liberal democratic regimes take for granted. We found ourselves comparing the conditions under which our informants lived with the stereotypical image of the ‘Wild West’ – the lawlessness and violence that accompanied the westward expansion of the American frontier and the expropriation of Native American land in the process (Madley, 2024).

It is important to understand that the Israeli state’s endorsement of settler violence and harassment of Palestinians within Area C is only one dimension of the overall strategy to cleanse regions like the South Hebron Hills of their Palestinian population. One of the most effective means of clearing Palestinians from their homes has been to declare large tracts of territory as military zones. In the eyes of the Israeli courts, the declaration of a given area as a closed military zone necessary for security and training purposes supersedes all other considerations, especially in Area C. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated by the manner in which the Jordan Valley has been depopulated of Palestinians (B’tselem, 2017).

Ethnic cleansing in Area C: the case of the Jordan Valley

The Jordan Valley is a fertile strip of land that runs along the West Bank, east of the central highlands. Israel has exploited almost all of the Jordan Valley for its own requirements and bars Palestinians from entering or using about 85 per cent of the area for such purposes as construction, laying infrastructure, shepherding or farming. Overall, about 46 per cent of the area has been designated a closed military zone.² A further 20 per cent of the area has been expropriated by designating it as nature reserves, while other areas have been deemed to fall within the domain of settlements’ regional councils.

Restricted to their own communities, Palestinians living in the Jordan Valley have been denied building permits for housing, agricultural construction, public buildings and infrastructural development. The authorities deny Palestinian

communities any possibility of ‘lawful construction’ to meet their collective needs, refusing even to connect them to power and water supplies. Left with no choice but to undertake construction without the permits required by the occupation forces, the Israeli authorities then issue demolition orders for building without a permit, which they may or may not carry out. The outcome is the same regardless of whether the decision is implemented – the local Palestinians continue to live their lives in a constant state of fear and insecurity. Living within a designated military firing zone also means that Palestinian communities are subjected to repeated military orders to vacate their homes and their property on the pretext that the military needs to train in those particular areas. Once again, the repeated upheaval and disruption takes its toll not only on the local domestic economy of the Palestinian communities but also adds to the level of distress and anxiety experienced.

These seemingly impersonal and bureaucratic abuses of the basic civil rights of the Palestinians living in places like the Jordan Valley are integral dimensions of the coercive environment the Israeli state has sought to create in pursuance of its goal of emptying Area C of as many Palestinians as possible, without attracting the unwelcome attention of the world’s media. The strategy involves creating circumstances that are so draining, humiliating and tiresome that Palestinians will lose hope and leave of their own volition due to the unrelenting pressure. This has been the experience of the Palestinian inhabitants of the South Hebron Hills, who, unlike their compatriots in the Jordan Valley, still remained in their homes and communities in 2022 when we started our research project.

South Hebron Hills (Masafer Yatta)

The area in which we pursued our research, the South Hebron Hills or Masafer Yatta, was designated as part of Area C back in 1995.

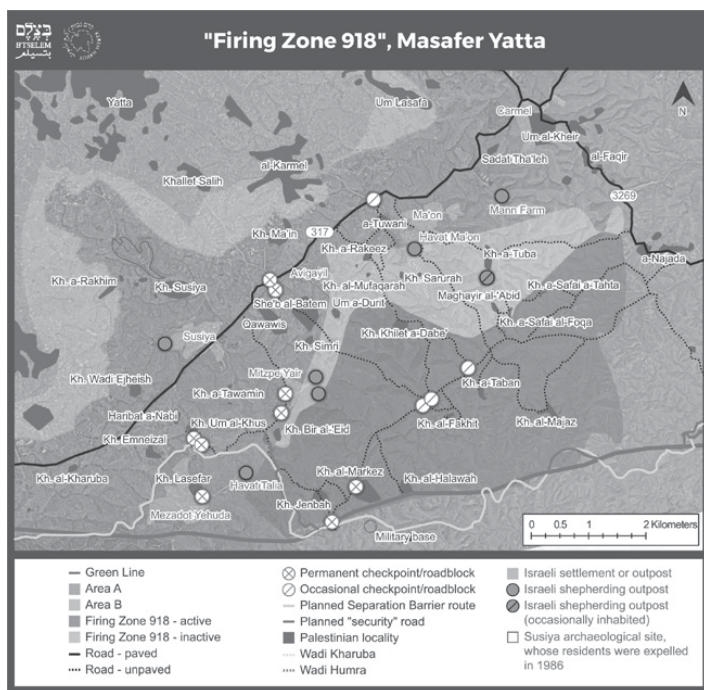
At the southern tip of the West Bank, the area is home to around 4,000 Palestinians living in 32 villages and hamlets under constant threat of eviction. The region is one of the most rural areas in the West Bank, and most of its Palestinian residents rely for their subsistence on small-scale cultivation and the grazing of their flocks, supplemented by income from work in Israel or other forms of employment (B'tselem, 2013a).

In a pattern similar to that practised in the Jordan Valley, Israel has systematically sought to deprive the Palestinian population of the basic means of making a living and sustaining community life – preventing access to running water, prohibiting connection to the electricity grid and other basic utilities and the denial of building permits. All this is endorsed by the Israeli legal system as part of a coordinated state project to create the conditions necessary to force the Palestinians to relocate to the urban centres of Area A.

Firing Zone 918

Since 1948, Israel has systematically used military orders to declare areas as closed military zones to evict people and confiscate their land and between 1948 and 1966 imposed military rule and regulations on the Palestinians who managed to stay in Israel. Much of the stress and uncertainty that plagues the lives of the Palestinian inhabitants of the area stems from their vulnerability to the destruction of their property, loss of livelihood and expulsion. As in the Jordan Valley, a prime 'legal' instrument for this has been the declaration in the late 1970s of a significant part of the area, including 12 villages, as a closed military zone, Firing Zone 918 (see Figure 4.1). Minutes from a 1981 meeting of the Ministerial Committee for Settlement Affairs noted that Ariel Sharon, the agricultural minister at the time, explained that firing zones were created for one purpose: 'land reserves for settlements' (Abraham, 2022). In 1999, the Israeli government issued eviction orders to around 700 residents for 'illegally living in a firing zone',

Figure 4.1: Map of Masafer Yatta south of the West Bank, 2013



Source: https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/2022_masafer_yatta_map_eng.pdf

and a significant proportion of the population had their homes destroyed or confiscated. In May 2022, the Israeli Supreme Court endorsed the original 1999 declaration of the firing zone, affirming that Masafer Yatta residents had no right to the land because they were not ‘permanent residents’ at the time of the original declaration (Diakonia, 2022) (see Figure 4.2).

However, unlike in the Jordan Valley, a sustained resistance campaign was launched in response to the 1999 decision. Local community leaders went round urging the residents not to be duped by the promises from the Israeli occupation authorities that if they acceded to the legality of the firing zone they would be allowed to remain. One of the local community leaders

Figure 4.2: Israeli army training in the firing zone and setting checkpoints to prevent residents from going to their homes, 2023



Source: Mahmoud Makhamreh

explained in an interview in 2017: ‘It was a trap ... to evict us, and we knew it because of what happened in the Jordan Valley when they did something similar. Then we asked people not to sign and until now the Israelis did nothing to evict the people’ (Soliman, 2019: 120).

In October 2022, one of the Palestinian community leaders described the situation they had been facing for over two decades:

For those living here, we see that the only power is in the hands of the soldiers. The facts here are created only by the soldiers and the settlers. We know why we are threatened – it is about the land. We have two options – to give up or to fight. Until now we have chosen to fight. Even living with these threats and being targeted, we have hope. The hope is that we are showing this reality

to the international community – the people on the street. (Interview, 23 October 2022)

Popular resistance in the South Hebron Hills

Following the issuing of eviction orders to residents in 1999, local community leaders were approached by Israeli solidarity activists and lawyers who offered to assist in challenging the order by petitioning the Israeli High Court of Justice. This came as something of a shock to local people, as one of them explained when interviewed in 2015:

We were confused – Israelis offering to work with us and at the same time the Israelis destroy homes and confiscate land. They are not the same Israelis. But little by little we established good relations with them. Now they help us in following up legal cases in the Israel court. (Darweish and Rigby, 2015: 160)

In 2000, the Israeli court issued an interim order affirming the right of the people to return to their villages. This success constituted a significant achievement which boosted local people's preparedness to resist the ongoing efforts to expropriate their land by means of ethnic cleansing. However, as noted earlier, more than 20 years after the interim judgment, the Israeli High Court endorsed the original 1999 decision, ruling that Masafer Yatta residents had no right to the land because they were not 'permanent residents' at the time of the original declaration. This decision once again placed local people at imminent risk of forced evictions, arbitrary displacement and forcible transfer – rendering the residents of Masafer Yatta among the most vulnerable in the occupied Palestinian territory.

In addition to a constant shortage of the most basic necessities, restrictions on movement, access to land and water resources and home demolitions initiated by Israeli authorities,

the area's Palestinian residents also suffer from recurrent settler harassment. According to our Palestinian informants, if local Palestinians respond to settler-intimidation in any way that involves physical clashes, then the army invariably comes and arrests the Palestinians. Despite the mounting threats to their human security, significant numbers of Palestinian residents in the South Hebron Hills have continued to resist – a phenomenon that seized our attention as researchers and inspired our admiration as fellow human beings.

In choosing to resist the pressures to give up their homes and their livelihoods, the Palestinians of the South Hebron Hills have followed a different path from their contemporaries in the Jordan Valley, which, according to one of the solidarity activists we interviewed, has been 'essentially emptied of Palestinians'. Acknowledging that there were probably many reasons for the contrast, this informant went on to emphasize the role played by unarmed companions:

Here ... we see that a lot of the grazing land has been taken over, there's many problems, there's demolitions, there's settler violence – and yet there are still relatively a lot of people who have remained to live there. ... I'm sure there's a lot of other reasons for that as well, but I do think that the robust presence not just of our group but of all the groups ... and the relationships built do something to kind of support people in staying in Masafer Yatta and not leaving. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

This analysis was echoed by a member of the Israeli solidarity group Ta'ayush (co-existence in Arabic), who pointed out that in the Jordan Valley there had been very little solidarity work for a number of years, whereas in the South Hebron Hills there was a long-term engagement going back over 20 years:

In Masafer Yatta it has been a long-term relationship. ... Now there is a second and even a third generation that

know us and are accustomed to see us regularly. Over time we have developed the trust and they know that we are there with them in the bad times and also in the good times. I mean if there are demolitions we are there, if they are being stopped by the army, if settlers arrest them – we are there. (Interview, 14 June 2023)

In 2003, members of Ta'ayush approached the Christian Peacemakers Team (CPT) based at that time in Hebron to convey a request from the villagers that they accompany their children from the hamlet of Tuba to their school in At-Tuwani in order to deter settlers from the nearby Ma'on settlement from harassing the children as they walked to class.³ A year later, in 2004, the Italian peace initiative Operation Dove visited the area following up on links they had with the Israeli solidary group Ta'ayush.⁴ A few weeks after this visit, in September 2004, Operation Dove and CPT began their joint accompaniment programme, escorting the local children to and from school.⁵

In 2011, CPT ceased its involvement, and Operation Dove took over responsibility for the international presence, supported by volunteers from Ta'ayush, who, alongside the network of Rabbis for Human Rights, continued its solidarity work and provided some of the links to Israeli legal resources, which has been one of the main ways to combat the expropriation of land and livelihoods.

Culture of resistance

A key role in the popular resistance movement in Masafer Yatta has been played by a small number of community leaders, who have created a model for subsequent generations to follow. One of the community leaders was very active in the network of activists involved in the struggle against the expropriation of land caused by the construction of the Segregation Wall/Barrier and the associated expansion of settlements during the years following the Second Intifada.

In 2006, Israel commenced building a wall along Route 317, cutting off the South Hebron Hills from the local city of Yatta and other parts of the West Bank. The local villagers banded together and began demonstrating on a weekly basis for two years – until the section of barrier was eventually removed. It was during these years that local activists formed bonds of solidarity and comradeship with a wider network of activists throughout the West Bank campaigning against the construction of the Segregation Wall/Barrier and the associated expropriation of Palestinian land. During this struggle, links were also established with international solidarity activists such as those from the International Solidarity Movement. All these factors fed into the growth of a culture of resistance within the Palestinian communities of Masafer Yatta.

Building on the links established between local community leaders, activist networks within the West Bank and international and Israeli networks of solidarity activists, the culture of resistance that has grown within Masafer Yatta has been passed from one generation to the next. In an interview, one of our associates from the village of At-Tuwani recalled how influential the examples set by his grandmother and his father had been in his development: ‘I grew up in this context, I was raised on those principles, ... It taught me to have faith and commit to nonviolence as an effective and influential way to achieve peace and justice’ (Samir and Blowosky, 2021). In 2017, he and his sister, along with some of their friends, established a small network they called Youth of Sumud. The group was formed at the Sumud Freedom Camp, during which Palestinian, Israeli and American Jews worked in partnership to create a space where ‘all those who believe in a future founded on justice, freedom, and equality can come together to build a foundation that will sustain a just peace’. A more tangible aim was to help to renovate housing and cave-dwellings at the hamlet of Sarura in the hope that the original inhabitants, who had been driven out by settler harassment, would be willing to return.⁶

One of the activists with Youth of Sumud wrote of his experiences escorting children to school from his hamlet of Tuba to the village of At-Tuwani. He was reminded of the years he was one of the schoolkids being accompanied (Awad, 2021). In 2004, following a brutal assault on the schoolkids and their international volunteer accompaniers, the Israeli government was shamed into assigning a military patrol to ensure the pupils' safety. He recalled the anxiety he experienced each school day: Would the military escort turn up on time? Would he be late for his classes? Because of the uncertainties, there developed a practice of international volunteers waiting with the students for the arrival of the military escort, ready to accompany the children to school if the military failed to appear on time. This became part of the daily routine of international volunteers from Operation Dove, based in At-Tuwani.

During the pandemic years of 2020–22, the international volunteers from Operation Dove and other agencies such as the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel returned to their home countries. Accordingly, activists with Youth of Sumud attempted to fill the gap on the 'school run'. They also took on a more prominent role accompanying shepherds grazing their sheep and goats on the hills, acting as a protective presence to deter settler-harassment, monitoring and documenting any clashes that did occur. However, by the start of our field research in October 2022, the international volunteers with the unarmed civilian protection agencies had returned to the South Hebron Hills, and in the [next chapter](#) we review the range of actors and agencies involved in the effort to provide a protective presence for the Palestinians of Masafer Yatta.

FIVE

Accompaniers: Who They Are and What They Do

During the main period of our research prior to October 2023, there were three broad unarmed civilian protection (UCP) networks seeking to act as a protective presence within the South Hebron Hills – Palestinian, Israeli and international. Each group brought to their role different resources and faced different types and degrees of challenge. However, before exploring the distinctions, it is worthwhile identifying the commonalities between the three groups.

Commonalities

- They acted in the belief that their presence could enhance the level of safety and security of the local people. The simple fact that they were there to bear witness to any threats or violence directed at the locals could act as a deterrent to attacks, particularly if there was a significant contingent of accompaniers – ‘there is strength in numbers’ we were told on various occasions.
- The deterrent effect of their presence could be enhanced if they also had the cameras and smart-phones necessary to record and capture images of assailants. This added to their credibility as witnesses if they reported assaults and human rights abuses to the Israeli occupation authorities and to different international human rights agencies.

- Members from all three groupings viewed their participation as acts of solidarity with the local Palestinians. As a protective presence, they were seeking not only to deter Israeli settlers and other assailants but also to strengthen the resolve of the local people in their resistance to dispossession and expulsion from their land. As one shepherd told us in October 2022, after comparing taking his sheep to graze with going to war: ‘I felt safe when the volunteers were with me. The settlers were unable to use violence even if they came close to me. I was making tea in front of the settlers, I didn’t have a fear’ (Interview, 25 October 2022).

Palestinian activists

As noted in the [previous chapter](#), community leaders in Masafer Yatta have developed significant links with networks of political activists throughout the West Bank who were committed to unarmed resistance to the occupation. Most of them came together during the mobilization against the construction of the Segregation Wall/Barrier and the associated expropriation of Palestinian land. As the focus of resistance has changed over time, with Masafer Yatta coming to the fore as a locus of conflict and contestation, those activists – especially from the south of the West Bank – became involved in the resistance.

They brought with them a number of significant resources. They shared the language and, to a significant degree, the culture of the local population. As such, they invariably had a fuller grasp of the interpersonal dynamics and lines of tension within the local communities not readily available to ‘outsiders’. Furthermore, they were more adept than ‘outsiders’ at forecasting the different scenarios that could unfold in the interplay between local Palestinians and Israeli settlers, army and police. Based on their experience of resistance – in the words of more than one interviewee – ‘they knew when to run and when to stand firm!’

Furthermore, such activists were familiar with solidarity networks beyond Israel and Palestine and were in a position to create bridges between local community leaders and wider international activist networks. What many of them also brought to their role were the links they had established over the years with media outlets and human rights organizations – Palestinian, Israeli and international. Indeed, some members of the Palestinian activist network in the South Hebron Hills worked as journalists and photographers. Their resistance activities and acts of solidarity with the local communities fed directly into their professional activities. One of their number interviewed in October 2022 described an aspect of his daily life – ‘going with shepherds and farmers to protect them, to document what happens, what the army and settlers are doing. We accompany them with the camera. ... We do what we can – write articles about what we have seen’ (Interview, 23 October 2022).

In some cases, a report lodged with a Palestinian news network could attract the attention of the Israeli media and become an ‘issue’. Local stories from Masafer Yatta might be published in sympathetic Israeli media, such as +972, and then be taken up by mass circulation outlets such as *Haaretz* and fed into press and policy statements issued by organizations such as B’tselem. It was through such links in the chain of influence that incidents in a hamlet in Masafer Yatta might be communicated far beyond the confines of the local communities and fed into transnational solidarity networks.¹

Furthermore, Palestinian activists and local community leaders often possessed certain skills and competencies that distinguished them from most of the locals. As one activist explained to us:

We are not different from the local residents when we are in the field. But being there we can bring a degree of safety ... We have experience of how to deal with the incidence of violence and how to stop this violence.

The local people here do not have the language or the negotiation skills that we activists have. So if there is something we want to tell the army – we speak Hebrew. Sometimes it is we as activists who bring a lawyer to the police station. ... We also carry out the documentation. (Interview, 25 October 2022)

It became very noticeable during our fieldwork that local activists were empowered by their awareness that they were part of a communications network that reached beyond their local community. They were not alone – they knew that if they were arrested, it would not go unnoticed and unreported. Someone would send word through their network of contacts to ensure that some kind of legal representation process would be initiated, and they would not be forgotten.

The downside to their role as accompaniers has been their lack of any identity-related protective carapace that internationals might enjoy. As Palestinians, they were viewed as legitimate targets by soldier-settlers seeking to intimidate and harass the local population.² Consequently, they experienced the same threats of violence and abuse as the locals with whom they were trying to create a protective presence. They also shared with the local population the lack of any meaningful access to the protection of the law and the canons of due process.

Israeli solidarity activists: Ta'ayush

Ta'ayush came into being in 2000 during the first weeks of the Second Intifada when some of those committed to a shared future between Israelis and Palestinians came up with the idea of organizing food convoys for Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods under imposed lockdown – a form of constructive nonviolent direct action in a crisis situation (Shulman, 2007: 10).

The first contacts with the communities of Masafer Yatta had been in late 1999 following the issuance of eviction

orders to those directly affected by the declaration of Firing Zone 918 as a closed military zone. Israeli activists, who were among those who were to found Ta'ayush a year later, offered to help challenge the orders in the Israeli court system. The locals were confused at first with this offer coming from Israeli citizens. However, the success of the subsequent legal challenge constituted a firm foundation upon which the activists could continue their work, gaining credibility and legitimacy as they did so. That history of working together has been the basis of the fundamental trust forged between the local community leaders and the Israeli activists:

We have been working in this area more than 20 years, so basically most of these people we're talking about were children when we met them. People like Omar, when I met him – he's 27 now – so I met him at the age of 14. And Adam – I met him as one of the children we used to accompany to school, now he is one of the accompaniers himself. Therefore first of all there is a trust which is the most important thing and the most difficult one to obtain. (Interview, 14 June 2023)

As one of the members of Ta'ayush explained to us, it was not just the length of time they had been working in the area but also the intensity of their work that laid the basis for the trust relationship:

One of the reasons that we have a degree of success in Masafer Yatta is because of the intensity of the work. OK – you don't come one day and then disappear for two weeks and things like that. We are there – a very small area – on a regular basis, sometimes almost daily, and this makes a difference. (Interview, 14 June 2023)

During one of our periods of fieldwork, we accompanied a group of Israeli activists on a Ta'ayush-organized activity – a relatively

Figure 5.1: Israeli activists from Ta'ayush keeping watch, 2023



Source: Andrew Rigby

uneventful morning spent accompanying a Palestinian farmer who had permission to cultivate one of his fields once a week under the eye of the Israeli military and very close to an illegal settlement (see [Figure 5.1](#)). One of the coordinators explained to us that the purpose was to ensure that the military respected the agreement to allow the farmer to cultivate his field and guard against any incursion from settlers. After a few hours' work, the farmer and his family headed for their home, and we withdrew, following the activists as they walked over the rocky ground to their next assignment – a few hours of constructive work helping a local Palestinian prepare his land for planting. When we met up a few days later, the two Ta'ayush veterans explained to us the nature of their commitment:

We are engaged in a mix of solidarity activism, constructive work and legal work. Basically we have

two functions. One is more or less what many of the younger activists are doing – fieldwork, staying close to the shepherds and the farmers – the sort of thing you saw us doing and which we have been doing over a long time. Very often this involves working with them to clear up after a demolition, or even building things, and agricultural work. This is the sort of hands-on work that is the main thing we do.

The other thing is that since we are all the time on the ground, we are in a place where we can coordinate the rest of the things that happen. OK – ‘here we need a lawyer’ – this is just because we are there. ... There is a lot of actually walking together. (Interview, 4 June 2023)

They then went on to argue between themselves about the significance of their advocacy work. They did agree that perhaps the most significant achievement in relation to advocacy was the manner in which, over the years, they had introduced younger generations of Israeli activists to the solidarity work, the ‘walking together’ with Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills and elsewhere in the occupied West Bank.

As Israeli citizens, the members of Ta’ayush were very aware that they, along with their fellow Israeli activists, enjoyed privileges and civil rights denied their Palestinian comrades. Not only did they share a language with the settlers and soldiers they encountered in Masafer Yatta but some of the activists also shared a background in the military and were familiar with the organizational culture of the Israeli occupation forces. In addition, they could lay claim to their rights as Israeli citizens, enjoying an identity-related protective layer denied their Palestinian comrades. However, it has to be recognized that they also risked experiencing an identity-related level of threat, given that in the eyes of many settlers they were considered traitors.

We had our own experience of Israeli solidarity activists being targeted by rampant settlers during our first period of

field research in October 2022. We joined a mixed group of about 25 people – Palestinian activists and students, Israelis and some Italian volunteers with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). The intention was to accompany a local farmer who had sought support when he went to harvest the olives from a small plot he had established close to a settlement called Ma’ale Amos, near Bethlehem. We walked for about 15 minutes over the rocky terrain. When we arrived at his land, we found the owner in great distress. The trees had been stripped of their fruit, presumably by local settlers, and some of the trees had been damaged. Some of the volunteers began watering the trees and picking those olives that remained on the branches but were interrupted by an alert – a gang of settlers were running down the hill from the settlement above, armed with staves, baseball bats and the like. As observers, we started to make our retreat. It was only when we gathered together at the spot where we had left the cars that we discovered that a 70-year-old Israeli woman had been seriously injured in the attack. Apparently, she had thought that because of her age and identity as an Israeli Jewish woman she would be safe. Not so. She was knocked to the ground when hit on the head by a rock hurled by the advancing settlers. They began to beat her while she lay prone on the ground. In her words: ‘They took my backpack and my camera from me, and screamed that they would kill me and that we have no right to exist in this country’ (Freidson and Kubovich, 2022). She ended up in hospital in Jerusalem with broken bones, a punctured lung and stitches in a head wound.

‘Resident Israeli companions’

During the period of our field research, an Israeli couple were living in At-Tuwani as ‘resident companions’ – documenting the daily instances of attacks from settlers. When we interviewed them in June 2023, they had just returned from attending a dispute between a Palestinian landowner

and settler-shepherds who were grazing their sheep on his land. For them, a typical start-of-the-day activity. Much of their everyday life seemed to be spent documenting and then attempting to file complaints on behalf of Palestinians whose land was being encroached by settlers.

For Palestinians themselves to file a complaint was virtually impossible. They would need to travel to the Israeli police station in Kiryat Arba – an Israeli urban settlement on the outskirts of Hebron. There, they would be left to wait for hours and would have to deal with documents and official forms that were all in Hebrew – and also face the risk that the police would claim they had received a complaint against the Palestinian petitioner and demand payment of a fine before they were allowed to leave. The alternative was to lodge complaints online using the good offices of one of the Israeli residents in At-Tuwani who had succeeded in registering with this system. They explained to us that navigating the bureaucratic maze to document the latest transgression committed against a Palestinian farmer by Israeli settlers was time-consuming and tiresome work, particularly when they so rarely experienced any identifiable positive outcome for their efforts. In truth, they did not expect anything to happen as a result of the complaints they filed – unless there was a lawyer working on a particular case who might then be in a position to cite the number of times complaints had been lodged with the police about the settler-encroachment on Palestinian-owned land.

Despite the frustrations, they continued to spend part of most days taking photos, gathering evidence, documenting instances of settler attacks. Invariably, they would call the police if requested to do so. For them, this was a ritualistic game they performed on a regular basis, one they engaged in without much expectation of achieving a satisfactory outcome. The police might arrive, and sometimes it would be the same officer who had been involved with the same issue on previous occasions. The officer might put it to the settlers that they were grazing their sheep on private Palestinian land, only for the

settlers to claim innocence: 'We are just passing through, on our way back home, this is the only route possible.' There was a routinized quality to such infringements – a daily occurrence. Occasionally, the police officer in attendance might admit there was nothing they could do: 'Go to the Knesset, get them to change the rules' was his advice.

Sometimes, it would be the army that turned up in response to a call to the police. The prime responsibility of the Israeli army is to defend and ensure the safety of Israeli civilians. So if a Palestinian is grazing his sheep near a settlement, then he could be considered a 'threat' to the safety of the Israeli civilians living in the settlement, thereby running the risk of arrest. On other occasions, the army might arrive when a confrontation was brewing between settler-shepherds and Palestinians over access to grazing land. The army might well respond by declaring the land a closed area for 24 hours. This meant that for 24 hours the Palestinians would not be able to graze their flocks – one more challenge for those living on the economic margins, one more burden to be borne as part of the escalating pressures to push Palestinians to relinquish their land and their way of life.

These are the kinds of instances that the couple spent their days dealing with. As one of them remarked: 'It sometimes feels as if we living in an absurd movie!' What came across as they shared aspects of their lives with us was the frustration they endured, engaging in what at times seemed like a pointless ritual of documenting abuses and filing formal complaints to the Israeli occupation authorities – seemingly without any apparent effect. Another feature of their experience which they touched upon was the very localized nature of the issues that played such a significant part in their lives and those of their neighbours. The Israeli expropriation of Palestinian land and the accompanying ethnic cleansing in Masafer Yatta was taking place field by field, almost sheep by sheep. Each abuse, each clash, taking place on the micro level. But the process was being replicated in a multitude of other localized encounters.

Their suspicion was that all such micro expropriations were part of a coordinated campaign to force the Palestinians from their land.

An obvious question for us as researchers was how did they sustain their morale and their commitment? With great difficulty, was the answer! But they did draw strength from their Palestinian neighbours, who endured so much but could still laugh, joke, play with their children. The Palestinians' resilience reinforced their own resolve.

Internationals – accompaniment as a form of solidarity

During the course of our research, we met with and interviewed international volunteers associated with a range of different organizations: the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), Operation Dove, Center for Jewish Nonviolence (CJNV) and ISM.

EAPPI

EAPPI was founded after church leaders in Palestine issued a call for support in their quest for a just peace. A year later, in 2001, the World Council of Churches organized an exploratory delegation to review possible initiatives. It was decided to initiate an accompaniment programme involving an international presence, linked to local churches and communities, and in 2002 EAPPI was launched. Since that time, hundreds of Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) from around 25 countries have served three-month placements in over 250 different localities throughout the West Bank.

Each country sending volunteers has its own system of recruitment and training, prior to them going on placement. But according to the EAPPI coordinator in Jerusalem, interviewed in June 2023, EAPPI devoted more energy to training than other agencies: 'They are trained extensively in their home countries, and they receive ten days of training and

handover when they are here as well. ... Other organizations – they might do a day orientation or half a day – some of them don't even do that, and they pay a price' (Interview, 12 June 2023). He went on to affirm that compared with volunteers from other organizations, the EAs were not only exposed to a more intensive training programme but also had a relatively clear mandate regarding their role as accompaniers. As he explained to us:

Our methodology of accompaniment when it comes to Palestine is probably the most conservative in the level of interference that we have as accompaniers. What I mean by this is that our mandate and our invitation by the churches is to accompany the people, not to protect property. We are not human shields and we do not contravene military orders ... that is not our role. Our role is to accompany, to observe and to witness, and eventually to advocate. ... We tell the EAs, 'What is your role in a certain situation? Stepping in front of a bulldozer is not going to end the root causes of the human rights violations that we're seeing. It's your engagement once you go home that is important.'³ (Interview, 12 June 2023)

Operation Dove

Operation Dove is the nonviolent peace force of the Pope John XXIII Community Association.⁴ Its origins date back to the start of the Balkan War in 1992, when nonviolent activists and conscientious objectors felt the need to put their values into practice within the war zone – trying to build bridges across the divisions of hate. Since 1992, Operation Dove has had a presence in various conflict zones, involving over 1,500 volunteers ([Operation Dove, 2025](#)). Their presence in Masafer Yatta started in 2004 following discussions with the CPT based in Hebron and with Israeli activists from Ta'ayush.

Initially, their main activity was escorting the children to and from school.

Typically, the volunteers we encountered shared a background of political activism in Italy, which also involved engagement in advocacy for Palestinian human rights and the end of the occupation. Once accepted for the programme, they received a week's training in Italy before taking up their placement. This was described to us by one of the volunteers:

The first training related to the organization – its vision, its mission, mandate, guidelines. Then there is another training before you leave dealing with the context, background. In total, there is one week of training. We do role-plays and simulations, also a kind of meditation. How to deal with anger and rage that can make you feel uncomfortable.

In the training, they have a stick, and you are required to hit a pillow. I couldn't do it the first time. Hitting the pillow for five minutes – not just hitting but being angry with it and screaming for five minutes. I didn't want to do it. Then you have to stand in front of someone and shout the same things you shouted at the pillow – foul language and everything for five minutes.

After, we processed the experience – why we did it? To find where your anger is and how to use it. In our society we do not have good ways to deal with anger – there are ways anger can be constructive. You have to find ways to deal with it, otherwise you would just explode dealing with the soldiers and settlers. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

The Operation Dove volunteers were usually based in At-Tuwani for a period of three months, where they enjoyed the use of a small dwelling as their base.⁵ The organization has been sending volunteers for 20 years, establishing a basis of trust with the local Palestinian communities, thus easing their entry to the region. In fact, a number of the volunteers have

done more than one placement in At-Tuwani – one of our interviewees had been coming for three-month placements on a regular basis since 2018.

Whereas the EAPPI ‘rules of engagement’ restricted the EAs to the role of observing and documentation, the Operation Dove volunteers enjoyed a wider remit. The volunteers with whom we talked in October 2022 were quite clear that part of their responsibility was to intervene in the attempt to defuse situations and avert violence. They had few doubts about the worth of their efforts while also being realistic about the limitations:

We began to accompany the shepherds. Things are changing very quickly since I first came here in 2018 – the settlements are larger, and more land has been taken. We came to understand the importance of their attachment to their land. So, if the shepherd and family want to cultivate their land, they can do that. We help them go to their land, cultivate it and live there. ...

We share with the local people their daily life, their experience. We cannot stop the army or the settlers, but we can lower the tension with our cameras. Because when they see us with our cameras, they stop what they are doing or are more cautious.

Many people feel safer having us with them, even if nothing is happening. Today, many shepherds will go out close to the settlement, and they are getting more confident. They say ‘If you are with us we should try, if you are not with us we will not try. They will come and push us and arrest us if you are not with us.’

They come in the middle of the night, and we try to put ourselves in the middle and document it. With our European passports, the army will think twice before they act. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

As with so many volunteer unarmed accompaniers from overseas, the activists from Operation Dove, while acknowledging the

limitations of their civilian protection work, considered it to have significance – particularly insofar as it amplified the impact of their advocacy work back home. As one of our informants told us:

It will not stop the occupation. But when I go back to Italy I can speak about it there – mobilize people. Not just me but all the people who come here can do that – boycott Israeli goods – little things that an individual can do to influence others. I take back 20 keffiyehs from a cooperative here and sell them in Italy. It doesn't stop the occupation but it helps a small business. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

CJNV

The origins of CJNV date back to 2014 after the Israeli military wreaked destruction in the orchards and olive groves at the Palestinian Tent of Nations, an internationally known educational and environmental centre just south of Bethlehem owned by the family of Daoud Nasser. Asked what Jews around the world might do to help support the work at the farm, Nasser urged them to exemplify the true nature of Jewish values of solidarity, justice and equality by helping replant the trees (Sumka, 2014). Some months later, in May 2015, a party of 25 Jews from around the world spent a week at the farm replanting trees, marking the birth of the CJNV.

CJNV has a different character from the other international agencies sending volunteer accompaniers to Masafer Yatta. Their aim, to quote the strapline on their website, is unequivocal: 'CJNV brings Jewish activists from around the world to Israel/Palestine to join in Palestinian-led nonviolent civil resistance to occupation, apartheid, and displacement.' Underpinning the different aspects of CJNV's work has been their commitment to the nonviolent leverage of Jewish privilege: 'Within a system that is built upon a notion of Jewish supremacy, we – as Jews from around the world – carry immense

privilege that we can leverage to undo that very system' (CJNV, 2025). The other recurring theme informing their whole approach to UCP has been the practice and the value of co-resistance – the belief that solidarity and co-resistance between Palestinians, Israelis and Jews from around the world can undermine the pillars that support and sustain the oppression of Palestinians living under occupation.

One of the main initiatives of CJNV has been the organization of annual delegations of Jewish participants from around the world who spend ten days familiarizing themselves with the dynamics of the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian resistance. Usually, some of their time would be spent with the communities in Masafer Yatta, physically accompanying the Palestinians in their daily activities. Another initiative has been to organize three-month placement programmes for Jewish volunteers who stay in Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta, engaging in daily solidarity work, trying to act as a protective presence through their accompaniment and documentation. This 'Hineinu' (Hebrew for 'We are here') programme takes place during the late winter/early spring months of late February to May. This is the period when, after the winter rains, the 'desert starts to bloom' and the grass to grow.⁶ These are the months when the shepherds travel further afield with their flocks, and, consequently, the risk of clashes with settlers increases. Hence, it was during these months that the presence of solidarity activists alongside the shepherds out on the hills was most appreciated by the local communities. As one of the two coordinators of the CJNV programme told us in June 2023:

The first year the group came during the shepherding season and for us it became clear that it was really important. If we were going to bring a group once during the year, that was the time to have people there to be accompanying, to be present in the field. So now every year it's been February to May. Three months which is the time of year ... the shepherds are out and going

distances, and the settlers are causing more problems, and there's more friction. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

For the volunteers, the main period of training took place in Jerusalem during the early days after their arrival. Following the initial induction, they would live in one or more of the villages and spend the ensuing days primarily responding to calls for their presence coming predominantly from the shepherds out in the hills.⁷ Being Jewish, with some of them speaking Hebrew, provided some leverage to the activists associated with CJNV in relations with the Israeli police. As one of the coordinators explained:

It is not a simple thing to call the police. It is using a system that is not there to protect Palestinians. But in our experience, if the police arrive, the settlers will be much less likely to be violent. If the army arrived that is not the case, so there is some interest in calling the police to potentially diffuse the potential for violence in a situation. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

Drawing on their experience, the two coordinators reasoned that being Jewish and speaking Hebrew could create a different dynamic with the police – at least initially. They felt the police took the calls more seriously when delivered in Hebrew. But eventually the caller would have to acknowledge they were alongside Palestinians and the disturbance they were reporting was caused by a settler. Then the relationship changed – ‘Ok, we are dealing with an anarchist’ – and that would be the end of any sympathetic response.

ISM

ISM was launched in August 2001, during the height of the Second Intifada, to act as a conduit through which solidarity activists from around the world who wanted to participate

directly in the popular resistance might be linked with Palestinian centres of unarmed protest. Its declared aim was to support and strengthen Palestinian popular resistance by enabling internationals to stand alongside 'Palestinians in olive groves, on school runs, at demonstrations, within villages being attacked, by houses being demolished or where Palestinians are subject to consistent harassment or attacks from soldiers and settlers as well as numerous other situations' (ISM, 2025).

As it happened, a group of seven to eight volunteers with ISM were just about to return home when we started our first period of fieldwork. We had an evening meeting with them in Ramallah the day before they left in October 2022. The volunteers we met ranged in age from early 20s through to people in their 60s. As far as we could judge, all of them were very active with Palestinian solidarity movements in their home countries, which fed their desire to witness Palestinian life and resistance on the ground and, maybe, make some kind of difference. Some of those present at the meeting had made multiple visits. An Italian schoolteacher had made her first visit in 2009 with Pax Christi, since when she had been back nine times. She had wondered about volunteering with Operation Dove, but eventually decided to volunteer with ISM – a decision influenced in part by the fact that a fellow-Italian, Vittorio Arrigoni, kidnapped and killed by a Palestinian Salafist group in Gaza in April 2011, had been a volunteer with ISM. As someone with significant experience of volunteering with ISM, she had organized a two-day training programme for the members of the Italian group before they left. They also had a short orientation programme on arrival in Ramallah.

In contrast to EAPPI, CJNV and Operation Dove, each of which involved a three-month posting, ISM has been much looser in the commitments expected from volunteers. Typically, applicants would agree to a minimum of two weeks, but beyond that the organizational culture seemed to be quite loose. It was left to the individual volunteer as to how directly they wished to intervene in clashes between Israeli settlers/

soldiers and Palestinian villagers. The coordinator for ISM was closely linked with the popular resistance network throughout the West Bank, and it was through such links that volunteers would be directed to locations where locals had requested an accompanying presence. As a consequence, it appeared that ISM volunteers did not have a regular routine centred on a particular location. Responding wherever and whenever their presence was requested by local activists thereby entailed a level of unpredictability that at least one young volunteer we met found to be challenging (Interview, 20 October 2022).

What became clear to us during our fieldwork was that ISM was more of a movement of solidarity activists than a nongovernmental organization with relatively clear structures and guidelines for action. As far as we could tell, the ways in which the ISM volunteers sought to contribute to the level of security enjoyed by locals was quite open, with them taking their cues from local leaders and the more experienced Palestinian and international volunteers. This meant that they might enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than, say, volunteers with EAPPI, who acted under a reasonably clear set of rules of engagement. But it could also result in them facing more dangerous and stressful situations with which they were inadequately equipped to cope. In the [next chapter](#), we examine more closely the main challenges faced by those engaged in UCP in the South Hebron Hills during the years immediately prior to the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023.

SIX

Challenges Faced by Accompaniers, 2022–23

The aim of this chapter is to review the different challenges faced by unarmed civilian accompaniers seeking to create a protective presence for Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills during the main period of our field research, 2022–23, prior to the outbreak of the Gaza War.

Mixed motives of accompaniers

There is an unpredictable dimension to any form of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) activity, and one can never be certain how events will unfold. One reason for this is that people engage in modes of protective accompaniment for different reasons and with variable degrees of familiarity with the situation they are entering.

This was most clearly demonstrated when we participated in a collective action to assist villagers in At-Tuwani in their olive harvest in October 2022. In the olive fields themselves, there were groups of Israelis, Palestinians and internationals enjoying the sociability of working together in a worthwhile collective activity. Further up the *wadi*/valley – less than 100 metres away – a contingent of students who had come out from Hebron were engaged in a clash with soldiers who were preventing them from approaching an olive grove close to the illegal settlement established on the hill-top above. The youths threw their stones and rocks, and the soldiers shot their stun

grenades, rubber bullets and tear gas. It really was a quite bizarre experience – two worlds alongside each other. Eventually, the clashes came to an end, and we kept on picking olives and socializing with those who had come out for a day's excursion and exercise in constructive solidarity.

Earlier in the text, we referred to one of our experiences accompanying a Palestinian farmer, from the village of Kisan, in October 2022 as he tried to harvest his olive trees on a plot close to the illegal settlement of Ma'ale Amos some 15 miles south of Bethlehem. An experienced Israeli solidarity activist suffered significant injuries on this occasion at the hands of settlers. Our experience that day alerted us not only to the significant risks run by volunteer UCP practitioners in Masafer Yatta but also illustrated the problems that can arise when different participants in an exercise to create some kind of protective presence are informed by different motives and orientations towards the action. We were about 20 in number, including three Italians from International Solidarity Movement (ISM), about three Israeli women of different ages and some younger Palestinian women. The remainder of the group was made up of quite seasoned Palestinian popular resistance activists, a number of whom were known to us from previous research activities. We left the cars and began walking over the rugged terrain for about 15 minutes. As we approached the location, a small fenced area below the hill-top settlement, we encountered seven or eight masked settlers standing in a line with their staves, a threatening presence.¹ At the site of the olive trees, we started a conversation with a young Israeli woman who explained she was there as a way of atoning for the sins of her father's generation by 'doing the right thing'. It was while we were chatting with her that we noticed that some of the Palestinian activists had gone over to confront the settlers, who remained in silent formation, watching and filming. It was a face-to-face confrontation – both sides seeking to demonstrate that they were not intimidated by the other.

It seemed that for some of the Palestinian activists, the purpose of the action had become one of challenging the settlers to withdraw. Then, as we watched this confrontation unfold, someone noticed about 30 people descending the hillside from the settlement above, armed with sticks. While we, the researchers, withdrew, the Palestinian activists headed to an adjacent hill-top as a more defensible space against the attackers, throwing stones to deter the advancing settlers. Unfortunately, while all this was happening, the veteran Israeli woman activist was left on her own, to be attacked by the settlers, suffering serious injuries that required her hospitalization in Jerusalem for a number of days ([Times of Israel, 2022](#)).

Reflecting on our experience later that day, we realized that we had taken for granted the simple brief that we were going to accompany a farmer picking his olives. We had not been properly briefed about the action we had agreed to observe. Naively, we had not anticipated the possibility of a clash developing between settlers and Palestinian activists. For at least one participant, this action was an opportunity for atonement. For we researchers, it was to be an opportunity to observe UCP in progress, while for others it was an opportunity to resist the encroachments of the settlers. It is clear that any action to which an open invitation is extended through different activist channels, without detailed prior briefing about the risks entailed in different scenarios, is bound to attract people with divergent views and motives for participating.

To step forward or step back?

As in any walk of life, UCP volunteers encounter situations where choices have to be made. In protective accompaniment work in contexts such as Masafer Yatta, one of the most significant choices to be made centres on how to respond to perceived threats of violence. At its most basic, the choice in such circumstances might be a simple one between flight and

fight. In reality, different contexts present different ranges of options for those engaged in providing a protective presence. In the case study just described, the sight of settlers advancing, armed with staves and baseball bats, elicited different responses from different participants. As participant observers, we did not consider it to be part of our role to become engaged in an encounter that showed signs of impending violence. We withdrew from the site with as much dignity as we could muster, alongside other participants (predominantly women), and waited by the cars for the return of the others. Meanwhile, the Palestinian activists (all male) withdrew to higher ground, the best available defensive site from which they could repel their assailants. They joined us within a short spell of time and were desperate to get away – their fear was that the settlers would have alerted the police and army, who would have had no difficulty sealing off the access roads to the location. Suffice to say, we all got away without further incident. But it did bring to mind the decisions that unarmed accompaniers have to make on the spot when clashes threaten to occur – what level of engagement is appropriate for unarmed accompaniers to take in such encounters?

When to step back and when to step forward? The guidelines for the volunteers with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) were reasonably clear. Their task was to observe and document, not to engage with settlers, soldiers or police. There can be no doubt that the Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) were there to support the Palestinians in their struggle for basic human rights and dignity by their monitoring presence and, in particular, through their advocacy at home once their three-month placement had finished. But the clear sense we got from our encounters with a group of ISM volunteers was that they experienced a strong feeling of solidarity and comradeship with the Palestinian activists with whom they stood ‘shoulder to shoulder’. The ISM volunteers we met with were predominantly Italians with a long history of political activism in their homeland.

They were clear that their prime role was not to be on the frontline of any confrontation but to witness and document. However, they also understood that whenever a Palestinian was arrested during an action, their place was to stand alongside their Palestinian comrade as a protective presence.²

It was clear to local Palestinian community leaders that different agencies followed different ‘rules of engagement’ in their efforts to act as a protective presence. As one of our key informants observed:

They all have different roles. EAPPI, for instance, they do not want to put themselves in dangerous places. Mainly they come afterwards to record and write it up. This is totally different from ISM, some of whom want to come and be in the frontline and they do not mind about their visa, their safety.

Other organizations like Operation Dove, they are like in-between. They do not want to go all the way and risk losing their visa to come to Palestine, go in front of the soldiers and be arrested. But at the same time they are ready to come at any time, because they are here, to come with us.

I think the way Operation Dove works is good way for internationals to do this work. Not to go all the way and lose the visa. The reason I say this – if you have three volunteers and they get arrested, then you do not have anyone to help the community. To come after an event, like EAPPI, and write about it – it is not different from OCHA [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] or other organizations. (Interview, 20 October 2022)

It was our experience that Operation Dove volunteers, who lived among the Palestinians, sharing aspects of their daily lives together, developed a strong sense of camaraderie with local Palestinians. Accordingly, they were prepared to be more proactive than the EAs in ‘stepping forward’, intervening

physically in tense encounters. As one of the volunteers told us, when interviewed in October 2022:

We are not armed and cannot act as protectors. But if we are there and the settlers attack, we can do a lot – we can put ourselves in the middle. ... We will not stop the occupation, but with us there people feel safer, and we go when and where they want us to go. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

Israeli activists have a different status from international companions, which allows them greater space for action, including intervening in confrontations between Palestinians and settlers. They generally have a deeper understanding of the nature of the occupation and a broader familiarity with the organizational culture of the Israeli occupation forces and the mentality of the settlers. Furthermore, as Hebrew-speakers with all the civil rights of Israeli citizenship, they enjoy a layer of legal protection denied to Palestinians and international companions. Consequently, they can add a layer of protection, however thin, to their Palestinian friends and co-resisters by intervening on their behalf when threatened by settler violence or arrest by the police or the military. Their status as Israeli-Jewish citizens also means that they run a reduced risk of severe sanctions if their intervention in a confrontation results in their arrest. As one of our Palestinian contacts explained: ‘Israelis have a more powerful position than internationals – they are citizens with rights. They have more courage because of their position. With internationals, they can just put them in a car and expel them’ (Interview, 20 October 2022). For internationals who are arrested, there is always the risk of deportation and being barred from future entry for several years. For Israeli citizens arrested because of their role in the provision of a protective presence, there is the possibility of them being fined, and they might be banned from the area for a certain period. In extreme cases, they might face

imprisonment – but these are all costs that are part of the price that a significant proportion of Israeli anti-occupation activists would be prepared to pay. Moreover, the arrest of Israeli activists due to their efforts to defend the human rights of Palestinians can lead to unwelcome media coverage in certain sections of the Israeli and international media.

Problems of coordination

The fact that different groups of volunteers engaged in civilian protection activities operate with different rules of engagement can create problems of inter-group coordination and cooperation. This can be particularly problematic in a wide area like Masafer Yatta with its difficult terrain and small hamlets and villages scattered throughout. For example, EAPPI guidelines were clear that EAs were not to engage with Israeli police, military and settlers, and they were instructed to respect orders denying entry to civilians in areas designated as closed military zones or firing zones. On occasion, when they felt it was necessary for Israeli police to intervene in a situation, they were required to ask co-accompaniers from other agencies and networks to make the contact on their behalf – a form of everyday contextually specific cooperation. But this could prove problematic in emergency situations. When one of our key contacts, a community leader from At-Tuwani, was assaulted by thugs from a neighbouring illegal settlement armed with metal bars, the attack was caught on camera by a local ISM volunteer (Rigby, 2022). Other accompaniers rushed to the scene. One of the Operation Dove activists recalled the occasion:

We were with other internationals from EAPPI and ISM. We said ‘This is an emergency. We need to act, call for assistance.’ But EAs are not allowed to go near settlers or soldiers – we had no time to explain – so we did it. EAs do a good job with documentation, but they are not allowed to go in closed areas, for instance. This means

that they are not allowed to go to villages within the firing zone to accompany the children to school. So we ask them to stay in At-Tuwani and we go to the village. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

All the accompaniers with whom we talked during our fieldwork saw that their prime responsibility was to respond to the calls from the local Palestinians for accompaniment. As such, they felt their work was very much 'Palestinian-led' and described to us an informal system of arranging a daily division of labour among themselves: some would be responsible for escorting children to school, some might head off into the hills to accompany shepherds and others would remain 'on call', ready to respond to any urgent request for their presence. Of course, there were various factors that needed to be taken into account in such an allocation of daily responsibilities, apart from the limitations placed on EA roles by their rules of engagement. The participation of Israeli activists could also create problems. We were told in October 2022 that some of the more isolated communities in Masafer Yatta were not accustomed to the presence of Israeli citizens. In such communities, the role of Israelis as a protective presence was viewed with suspicion by those whose only experience of Israelis was as an occupation force.

Trust

Reference has already been made to the strong trust relationship established between the Ta'ayush activists and the Palestinians in the area. A similar relationship has developed over the years with volunteers attached to Operation Dove. As one of the Italian volunteers explained to us, the trust created over the years by earlier generations of activists was passed on to those that followed:

We have been here for 20 years, so they trust us 100 per cent as an organization. I can go somewhere new

and no problem, because they trust us because we are Operation Dove. Many do not trust some of the newer Israeli groups or ISM because they are newer arrivals in town. But slowly they are gaining trust, being with them on a daily basis. You pass on the trust. For me it is the first time in Palestine. The first week I was introduced to people as Operation Dove. I have the trust. (Interview, 21 October 2021)

Cultural sensitivity and interpreting the Palestinian ‘yes’

For many years, one of the issues of concern for advocates of unarmed peacekeeping and civilian protection has been that historically the membership of most teams of volunteers has been drawn from politically and economically influential countries of the global north – an issue that Pat Coy referred to as the ‘privilege problematic’ (Coy, 2011). This issue was raised by the coordinator of EAPPI, who posed the question: ‘What does it mean to accompany with privilege? How can we try as much as we can to decolonize the way that we accompany?’ (Interview, 12 June 2023).

Palestine is part of the Arab and Islamic world, and, as such, its culture, as viewed through secular, liberal eyes, is patriarchal and conservative. It is a collectivist and family-oriented culture, with clear roles ascribed to men, women, old and young, with loyalty to the family and the extended family network paramount. It is also a culture where hospitality to the outsider is a matter of pride and family honour. The EAPPI coordinator recalled one instance that he used as a case study to illustrate the points he was trying to make:

I went olive picking with an Israeli organization, and many of the Israeli women were dressed inappropriately. They were making a community that was very conservative feel uncomfortable. They would not confront them, but they would tell me because I’m not part of the organization.

The first time I raised this with the organization they rejected it. They said ‘No, we can’t tell women what to wear, men and women are equal in our organization, and we believe in the liberation also of Palestinian women by having Israeli women dressed this way.’ (Interview, 12 June 2023)

The dress code displayed by women is perhaps one of the more obvious symbols of their cultural identification. But it was our impression that the women working as international accompaniers in Masafer Yatta dressed in a manner that would not cause offence to their Palestinian hosts. As one of the Operation Dove volunteers we interviewed observed: ‘The main goal is to gain trust, so we dress according to the local culture. As internationals, we can do more things, but we want to follow the rules ... If I have your trust and respect, it justifies following local culture’ (Interview, 21 October 2022).

EAPPI devoted a part of their training to such matters as dress and everyday practices in Palestinian society:

We have a cultural session for an hour and a half ... which addresses everything from how you should dress and how do you physically greet people – when is it alright to give someone a kiss on the cheek, a hug or shake a hand? We do sessions on how to deal with Palestinian hospitality, because some of our accompaniers gain a lot of weight – how do they say ‘no’. There’s different ways and techniques, how not to offend someone when they host you. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

We have to confess that being circumspect we never discussed the question of dress code with Israeli women activists. But we did summon the courage to raise the issue with experienced Ta’ayush male activists – who took a radically different position from that articulated by the EAPPI coordinator. Their viewpoint is represented in the following edited extract from an interview with them:

In our early invitations to join us in an action we used to have a reference to ‘Please consider cultural differences when deciding what to wear.’ But nowadays we don’t feel the same need to stress this. But there were times when we would keep shawls and things like that in the car for people. There were times when we really got into arguments – especially with the women who would come and say ‘I don’t want anyone telling me what I should wear!’

Our partners here in Masafer Yatta, they are really exposed to things they are not used to. They will ask questions like ‘Are you married?’ and things like that. ... And suddenly they realize people are not always married, and sometimes they have children but are not married. Little shocks!

What about your privileged position as an Israeli citizen coming here?³

We think less about that than we did in the past. ... Ten years ago in Masafer Yatta there were hardly any TVs, people were very closed, especially the women. Nowadays there are much more connections, it is much more open, more awareness, so it is less of an issue.

One thing we still struggle with – the Palestinian ‘Yes.’ It can mean both ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and it’s very, very difficult to make plans this way. Because you talk to someone and you discuss plans together, and he says ‘Yes’, which we understand as meaning ‘OK. What do we do?’ But in this culture it is not polite to say no, so you say yes – but you do not really mean yes. (Interview, 14 June 2023)

Neutrality and impartiality

As has been noted, many of the volunteer accompaniers we encountered during the period of our research saw their role as a natural extension of their identity as Palestinian solidarity

activists. As such, questions about neutrality and impartiality never occurred to them – their role was to stand alongside their Palestinian comrades and support them in their unarmed struggle for basic human rights.

The only occasion when the issues of neutrality and impartiality arose was in discussion with the local coordinator of EAPPI. His observations reflected his broader project of ‘professionalizing’ EAPPI’s work by establishing a clear organizational culture (‘Do no harm’) with clear guidelines for the activities of EAs in the field, particularly in relation to the issue of impartiality. In his words: ‘We are not neutral in relation to human rights violations. We are not neutral when we say that the human rights violations all have their roots in the occupation of Palestinian territories, and so in that sense we are not neutral’ (Interview, 12 June 2023). According to his perspective, EAs practised what he termed ‘humanitarian neutrality’ – they were expected to document any incident of violence or serious human rights violation, even on the occasions when it was committed by Palestinians. His stance could be encapsulated in the simple observation made by a British aid worker interviewed in Jerusalem in 2015: ‘You cannot be neutral but you can be impartial’ (Darweish and Rigby, 2015: 134).

Managing emotions during accompaniment

Anyone who has spent any length of time in Area C of the occupied West Bank will appreciate how stressful everyday life can be. This is particularly so in Masafer Yatta, where the whole area is under occupation, with the Palestinian communities under the pervasive threat of violence from settlers and soldiers. While international and Israeli accompaniers do not encounter the same level of threat to their security as the local Palestinians, they do face their own risks. Unlike in many conflict zones around the world, where the intervention of civilian peacekeepers is enabled with the consent of all parties to the conflict, this is not the case in Masafer Yatta.

Here, the accompaniers are viewed by Israeli settlers and state officials as illegitimate, trouble-making intruders rather than peace keepers.

Accordingly, one of the stress factors internationals face is the risk of deportation if they are arrested as a consequence of an encounter with Israeli settlers.⁴ Another source of emotional stress for accompaniers is fear and apprehension about the possibility of physical violence and injury. There is an unpredictability about encounters with settlers. One incident was particularly outrageous. In March 2023, a 64-year-old woman volunteer with Operation Dove, from Wisconsin in the United States, was attacked with a stave by a masked youth from the illegal outpost of Havat Ma'on as she and an Italian volunteer waited to escort children from the hamlet of Tuba to school in At-Tuwani. She fell to the ground unconscious and was hospitalized with a fractured skull and internal bleeding (Abraham, 2023). Escorting children to school should not be an occasion for physical assault in any context, but this is the unpredictable nature of life in Masafer Yatta. As one of the volunteers with Operation Dove described it when interviewed in 2023:

Sometimes it is very scary to go out with the shepherds. It is not so frightening to go with the children. I am not afraid of soldiers, they have to follow orders and don't want to be exposed internationally. We are more scared of the settlers; they can do whatever they want. With them, it is very difficult to predict – there are changes all the time.

Aren't you frightened?

Yes – a lot. It drives us crazy.

How do you deal with it?

Take a deep breath and trust the Palestinians to advise us – where to run, where is the road, the settlement. ...

Basically, if you see Palestinians run, you run. There will be a good reason. (Interview, 20 October 2022)

As many of us have probably experienced, dealing with this kind of fear-based stress can be easier if you have friends and comrades with whom you can share your feelings. Together, you can start to reframe the experience in such a manner as to occasion a more constructive reaction than terror. As our interviewee from Operation Dove went on to explain, humour and the reframing process went together:

Sometimes we laugh after tense situations – about the soldiers. We laugh together – kind of seeing the violence in another way. You come here and at first everything seems black and white – but there are hundreds of shades of grey in both societies. In the settlements, they are teaching the children how to use sling-shots. The children did not choose to be born in a settlement.⁵ (Interview, 21 October 2022)

‘There is strength in numbers’ was a refrain we kept hearing during our periods of field research, often from Palestinian shepherds. But companions can also feel the need for accompaniment in order to heighten their sense of security in unpredictable circumstances. After we witnessed the Israeli army demolishing some agricultural buildings, we noticed how volunteers from different agencies gathered together once the military had started their withdrawal, talking with each other and the local villagers – a form of mutual support. As one of the companions we interviewed observed:

We all meet when we all end up at the same incident, people from all the different groups. We want protection in numbers, because in the South Hebron Hills in particular the soldiers sometime ... go straight for our companions, who are given a very hard time. So, to

have other actors on the ground is a support. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

Mutual support between different groups of accompaniers was also evident in the way they would provide cover to allow others to have a break from their regular duties. As one of the coordinators of the Center for Jewish Nonviolence (CJNV) explained:

This year [2023] there has been more coordination than in the past, which I think was really mutually supportive ... If Operation Dove had a few days off in Bethlehem, then we knew to fill in for them. If we were away for the weekend, they knew to fill in. (Interview, 12 June 2023)

Carrying out this research was at times a very humbling experience – witnessing the remarkable resilience of Palestinians alongside the impressive dedication and motivation of so many of the volunteer accompaniers. The accompaniers we met had all chosen to be there, and it became clear that the motivation that led them to volunteer was also a source of strength and commitment when the going got tough. This point is illustrated by the remarks of an ISM volunteer:

Being here is the right thing for me to be doing: as Europeans, we have a responsibility for the injustice and the occupation of Palestinian lands. As such, we have a responsibility to act. We need to see things with our own eyes, witness what is happening rather than just watching it at home on TV. I feel that being here is the right thing. (Interview, 20 October 2022)

Another major source of emotional resilience upon which volunteers drew was the example of the local people themselves and the way they not only managed to endure the many challenges posed by the settlers but also succeeded in preserving

aspects of normal everyday family life in the midst of such debilitating and dispiriting circumstances. This was expressed by a number of our interviewees but perhaps most strongly by one of the Israelis who lived in At-Tuwani as a resident accompanier. We had been discussing all the frustrations felt as they repeatedly lodged official complaints to the police, with little or no result – how dispirited and frustrated they could become:

It is getting more annoying and making the work more challenging. ... I used to have more patience. Now I am calling the police and they are starting to fuck with me ... and in less than a minute I'm starting to shout at them over the phone. I never used to ... Now it is because I am so over frustrated.

But staying here we get to see Palestinians living their life, sitting round together of an evening, laughing and doing stuff. This after seeing them going to their fields every day with the army and the settlers fucking with them ... It is not that they are always happy ... but living their life, and seeing that they can do that, really helps me. Let's say the army raids at night with tear-gas. The locals might be laughing while it is happening – they are so used to it.

We are part of the community here. We work together, eat together ... People laughing, playing with their kids ... So how can we sit here depressed if people are experiencing this every day and continue living with it. ... But the everyday work here can be very depressing. (Interview, 14 June 2023)

An ISM volunteer expressed his appreciation for the emotional learning he derived from the local Palestinians very succinctly: 'They teach me how to keep my head up.' An Operation Dove volunteer provided us with a specific emotional management lesson she received from a community leader in At-Tuwani, a lesson that many of us should absorb:

One night, we were expecting a settler attack in At-Tuwani. I was so angry. I asked Hisham how he deals with this every day. He talked about humanity, the need to protect and preserve it, his family. You can't respond to anger with anger – our resistance is to live our life and for you to keep living your life. The next time I was in a situation and very angry I tried to remember this and it helped a great deal. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

‘Our resistance is to live our life’ – this is the kernel at the heart of Palestinian resilience: the determination to hold on to certain values and dimensions of everyday life in the face of oppression, exploitation and domination. This relatively quiet form of resistance activity, continuing to live their lives, is what Palestinians call *sumud*. As our research developed, we came to the realization that the real strength of the protective presence that volunteers tried to perform lay in the way their accompaniment strengthened the resolve of the local Palestinians to continue with their resistance. In the [next chapter](#), we examine the roots of community resilience among the Palestinians of the South Hebron Hills.

SEVEN

***Sumud* and Community-Based Protection**

***Sumud* – to exist is to resist**

In one of his early books, entitled *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank*, the human rights lawyer and writer Raja Shehadeh included on the title page an explanation of the title: ‘Between mute submission and blind hate I choose the third way – I am *Sumud* (steadfast)’ (Shehadeh, 1982). In his books, he has continued to explore the challenges of finding a way to live under the ever-tightening stranglehold of the occupation without losing one’s humanity. After half a century of life under the sway of the Israeli occupation, he was forced to acknowledge that the Palestinians had not succeeded in forcing Israel to end its occupation, but ‘the struggle is neither over nor won, and what keeps it going is nothing other than our *Sumud*’. (Shehadeh, 2019: 182).

Shehadeh has written about *sumud* as an individual response to occupation, the struggle to hold on to his humanity and his identity, refusing to be consumed by hatred or despair. In this chapter, we focus on *sumud* as a collective, community-based response to oppression and a form of community self-protection. In Arabic, *sumud* means persistence or steadfastness. In the context of the Israeli occupation, the term refers to the commitment necessary to hold on to ways of life and associated values that are threatened by the relentless pressures of Israeli policies of dispossession and

ethnic cleansing.¹ As such, *sumud* involves farmers replanting olive trees uprooted by settlers, families rebuilding homes demolished by the Israeli military, people determined to resist by continuing to claim their right to live their everyday life on as much of their own terms as possible. These elements are captured vividly in the words of a Palestinian from Aida refugee camp (Bethlehem):

Sumud is continuing living in Palestine, laughing, enjoying life, falling in love, getting married, having children. Sumud is also continuing your studies outside, to get a diploma, to come back here. Defending values is Sumud. Building a house, a beautiful one and thinking that we are here to stay, even when the Israelis are demolishing this house, and then build a new and even more beautiful one than before – that is also Sumud. That I am here is Sumud. To reclaim that you are a human being and defending your humanity is Sumud. (Rijke and van Teeffelen, 2014: 90)

Community resilience and social solidarity

It was this understanding of the centrality of *sumud* in the Palestinian resistance to occupation that informed our decision to devote some of our research time to the exploration of those factors, apart from the protective presence of international and Israeli accompaniers, that have contributed to the resilience displayed by so many of the small Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta.² It became very clear to us that the degree of steadfastness displayed by different communities related quite directly to the level of social solidarity between the community members. In the remainder of this chapter, we review the different factors that have contributed to the degree of community cohesion that we identified as the basis for community resilience and community self-protection.

Family and kinship ties

In areas such as Masafer Yatta with small centres of population dispersed over a semi-arid and rocky terrain, with poor transport and communication links, local communities require a degree of self-sufficiency to meet their basic everyday requirements – there is no shopping mall or hardware store round the corner. As in so many small rural communities around the world, people depend on their neighbours and fellow community members for support and assistance as and when needed. In Masafer Yatta, such relationships of reciprocity and mutual aid are particularly strong because they invariably involve family and kinship ties. In some of the small hamlets, all the inhabitants are related to each other as part of the same family network. For example, in Susya the bulk of the households belong to the Nawaja clan or *hamula*. In other villages such as Jinba and Al Mufaqrara, the inhabitants are from two extended family networks. What this means is that when settlers attack a particular household dwelling, the victims can call on their relatives/neighbours for assistance. These links also extend to the local urban centre of Yatta, where other family members can be called upon to provide support when needed. As the head of the village council in At-Tuwani told us: ‘In a conflict with the settlers, members of our extended family networks will come from other villages and from Yatta to support us’ (Interview, 6 June 2023).

Attachment to the land

Most of the Palestinian households in Masafer Yatta depend for their livelihood on small-scale cultivation and the grazing of livestock. Fundamental to their sense of identity, and their steadfast resistance to efforts to drive them from their land, is their sense of place, their relationship to the land itself, the land that they own and work and from which they derive produce and an income (see [Figure 7.1](#)). One of the community-leaders in At-Tuwani tried to convey to us the significance

Figure 7.1: Attachment to the land: young Palestinian ploughing the land, 2023



Source: Mahmoud Makhamreh

of this relationship to the land as a source of social cohesion within the village:

Our first priority is protection of the land. We are a peasant community, we depend on the land. So this is our priority. The land is part of our genetic make-up. We are part of the land. People might know that you own the land, but you need the willingness to keep this land, the will and the energy to keep it. In our community, if you do not have land, you do not have a source of income and security. In every way the land is at the centre of our existence and being. ... Everyone in the village has some land. There are no big landowners. (Interview, 6 June 2023)

A community leader from the village of Al Mufaqrara made clear the linkage between maintaining their way of life and resistance to dispossession:

Sheep are the soldiers of the land. While we have sheep grazing on the hills and we plough and cultivate the land, this is how we resist – on the land, not by staying at home. It is not resistance to sit in the house. You do not see me, and I do not see you. But you see me, and I see you when I am out with my sheep and cultivate the land. (Interview, 8 June 2023)

As the Israeli drive to expropriate land and property accelerated in the months after the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023, local Palestinians had to be prepared to pay a heavy price to defend their land. On 17 April 2025 Sheikh Saeed Rabaa spotted three armed Israeli settlers near his family's land in Al Rakeez, a hamlet in Masafer Yatta. He later recalled, when interviewed by Al Jazeera:

Settlers came to my land and removed the fence I had put up to protect my olive trees from their sheep. When my son went to see what was happening, they attacked him. I followed to help him, and one settler pushed me and fired two bullets in the air before shooting me in the leg. The pain during the transfer was unbearable. They threw me into an army vehicle designed to transport detainees, not injured people. My hands and legs were cuffed. ([Al Jazeera, 2025](#))

He was taken to a medical centre in Israel, where his right leg was amputated. He was eventually handed over to the Palestinian Red Crescent and taken to a hospital in Hebron for further treatment ([Adra, 2025a](#)). When interviewed by Al Jazeera on his return to his home in Al Rakeez, his defiance seemed undimmed: 'This is God's will. My land is my honour. I will return to it. This land is part of me, just like my body. They may have taken my leg, but they will never separate me from my home and my land.'

A shepherd from the hamlet of Tuba told us: 'We stay here on our land. For us the flock is a major factor. This is the only

way that a Palestinian living in this area can have a source of income, a livelihood. If we lose our sheep, we lose our way of life' (Interview, 25 October 2022). When that happens, the most likely outcome is that they will move to the urban reservations of Area A, vacating their land and thereby leaving it open for expropriation by settlers.³

Faza'a

As detailed previously, Palestinian culture in rural areas such as the South Hebron Hills is collectivist. An individual's sense of identity is embedded within their extended family network and local community. This is evidenced in all sorts of everyday practices and routines, but on occasions this collective bond is manifested in concerted collective action, such as when the whole community might join together for the olive harvest. The Arabic term for this traditional form of collective action is *faza'a*, and it is particularly significant in relation to community resilience and resistance to external threats from marauding settlers (see [Figure 7.2](#)). As one of our key informants explained to us: 'There is no way you can guarantee protection, we are threatened every day. Unity is the key factor, solidarity among Palestinians. When people want protection, we organize *faza'a*, people come together to protect the local community' (Interview, 6 June 2023).

The main threat to the villagers of At-Tuwani has come from the illegal Israeli settlement established on a hill-top adjacent to the village. As one community leader explained:

One of my uncles lives at the end of the village close to the settlement. They act as lookouts for the rest of the community. When they attack my uncle's property, everyone will go to assist. This is a form of *faza'a* – a traditional form of collective action, people going together to complete some task. If I don't join, I will be shamed – but the settlers will attack any one of

us. Resistance by one family is part of the collective resistance. It affects us all. (Interview, 6 June 2023)

Shame and honour

In Palestine, as in other traditional collectivist cultures, much of the everyday social interaction is shaped by a shared code of appropriate behaviour. Central to this phenomenon is the value community members place on maintaining their reputation and standing within the community and the associated sense of self-worth and honour. In such societies, honour, and the shame incurred by its loss, is not just an individual attribute. A whole family network or community might carry the stain of shame over generations. People in Palestine have long memories, with stories from the past reproduced and passed on to new generations as part of the oral tradition. An illustration: a well-known activist in the struggle against

Figure 7.2: Community response: *faza'a* to rebuild house demolished by Israeli occupation forces in the village of At-Tuwani, 2023



Source: Mahmoud Makhamreh

the expropriation of land and the construction of the Israeli Segregation Wall/Barrier still carried the taint of dishonour incurred by one of his grandparents who collaborated with the Israeli occupation forces during the late 1970s in their attempt to promote Village Leagues as an alternative leadership to the Palestine Liberation Organization.⁴

As in other societies, this prioritization of maintaining one's honour and standing in the community can be a very conservative force, with established social norms and expectations about what constitutes proper behaviour in different contexts. But a corollary of this is that it also constitutes a powerful force for social solidarity and community resilience, especially in the context of areas such as Masafer Yatta with the pervasive threats to people's individual and collective well-being that pertain throughout the region. When the call for *faza'a* is issued to join with others in resisting a settler attack, not to respond would be unthinkable – it would incur a shameful loss of honour and the consequent weakening of one's family's standing in the local community that could well persist over generations. As a community leader in the village of Susya told us: 'If I relinquished the struggle and moved to the local urban centre of Yatta, I would be shamed. It would be shameful, just like when people relinquish their land' (Interview, 6 June 2023).

Lessons of history

Again and again during the course of our research, we would enquire of our contacts, in as sensitive manner as we could, just how did they manage to sustain their steadfastness while facing such pervasive threats to their security? The answers we received invariably referred to their commitment to the land and to the personal and collective shaming, loss of face, that would result if they relinquished the struggle. But another important factor was the lessons learned from their familiarity with Palestinian history – particularly the collective memory

of the Nakba, the dispossession of 1948. This was expressed most powerfully by one of our female interviewees, Umm Nidal, as we talked together in her family home:

If we leave, they will take the land. We will not make this mistake again, as happened in 1948. We are part of the Palestinian people, we do not want to give up our land, and this is part of our struggle. We feel that there is a purpose to our life being here. If we chose the easy way and left to live in Yatta, they will take our land and the neighbours' land. Our existence here also supports the others. We are defending all the area.

Living for a cause gives us hope and resistance. It is my duty to defend my land. I have got used to it. I will not surrender. They took most of Palestine. When the settlers know that you will not compromise, they will leave you, they will respect you. To be honest with you – I will only die once, so I'm going to die, but I will die with my head up with pride. (Interview, 5 June 2023)

The centrality of women in sustaining community resilience and resistance

For Umm Nidal, and for many people around the world, the home is a repository of memories, a memory site that plays a vital part in the reproduction of identities, culture and social relationships. As such, the home is a core space of resistance, and in Masafer Yatta it is the women who are primarily responsible for the daily upkeep of the home – cooking, cleaning, looking after children. And in a semi-arid region like the South Hebron Hills, all these everyday tasks require access to water, and managing water scarcity is another responsibility borne principally by women. All this is carried out under constant pressure, harassment and uncertainty – abnormal conditions. And yet this life has to be lived as 'normal' to

be sustainable. We plead guilty to the charge that we have tended to view resistance as the preserve of those who engage in oppositional activities of protest and confrontation. But so much of Palestinian resistance in areas like Masafer Yatta is camouflaged in the everyday activities of mundane life. Hence, the maintenance of a home, carrying on with everyday life despite the abnormal circumstances, is an assertion of Palestinian steadfastness, just as the practising of traditional crafts such as embroidery is an affirmation of Palestinian identity and its heritage (Richter-Devroe, 2011: 32–46).

However, in the communities of the South Hebron Hills, the resistance activities of women have not been confined to the domestic sphere. In 2004, a decision was taken to build a small elementary school in At-Tuwani. The occupation forces tried to prevent the men from working on the construction site, threatening them with arrest. One of our interviewees explained how the women took collective action: ‘We decided that the women would transport building materials during the day and the men work during the night. When the soldiers came and asked “What are you doing?”, we replied “We are bringing water to our houses, not making a bomb!”’ (Interview, 17 April 2023).

In the same conversation, we were told about another instance of women from the village engaging in public collective resistance activities:

One day, many settlers attacked At-Tuwani on a day when all the men were at work. They went to the mosque ... they wanted to take down the loudspeakers in the mosque which we used to call people for a prayer. All the women in the village went to the mosque to try and stop them. We started screaming and shouting to frighten them and get them to leave. Then the international volunteers who were staying in the village came. They shared the information on social media and quickly reached others who came to stand up and support us against the settlers. (Interview, 17 April 2023)

We are concluding this section with an extended extract from our fieldnotes from a visit to interview a remarkable woman (Widad) living with her mother in a one-roomed dwelling and cave close to the hamlet of Tuba. The visit took place in April 2024. For us, it highlighted not only the amazing courage of these two women but also illustrated how, in the period since the outbreak of the Gaza War, any attempt to live a mundane life as a pastoralist in the face of sustained settler violence and harassment required engagement in active oppositional protest. Here is their story as recorded in our fieldnotes:

They have a small flock of sheep. There are two sons in prison. They face daily attacks in the night by the settlers. The harassment intensified after 7 October 2023. The most dangerous attack by settlers happened on 28 October 2023. The settlers came in the afternoon and went into the kitchen and stole all the cooking utensils.

What did you do when they came into the kitchen?

Nothing, I didn't do anything. It was just me and my mother. They returned on the same day about midnight and took the rest of the kitchen stuff with them in the car and then destroyed the lights that we have outside to make it possible for us to see what's happening and to see the sheep. The electricity is generated by the solar panels. I couldn't take any photos or films. They were laughing, and they said we are going to come back so it's better that you leave.

We decided to stay. But what we did is that we went to sleep in the nearby hamlet which is about a mile from our home, and returned in the morning. We walked about an hour from our home to the nearest hamlet and returned in the morning. The family there were very helpful and let us to stay the night.

Can you describe to me in detail what happened?

When they arrived, they destroyed the lights first so that it was dark. They had torches with them, and then they started the attack and taking stuff from the kitchen.

Did you say anything? Did you respond to them?

No because they had guns with them and also they had acid water. I tried to film, but they took my phone from me and poured the acid water over it to destroy it.

There was one time when they came with a vehicle and took six sheep from our small flock. ... On that particular day, one of my brothers was here, but he didn't intervene as he had just been released from prison. I told my brother not to do anything or intervene.

A week later, the settler returned with a flock including our six sheep. It was like telling us, you know in front of our eyes, that I stole your sheep, they are here with me grazing, and you can't do anything.

Some internationals were present when they arrived. I told them the story, and they started filming, but the settlers left.

Why do you think they're doing this to you?

They want us to leave. They told me that we don't want you to stay here. My mother and brothers, they are trying to persuade me that we should leave. I said no I don't want to leave.

Why do you refuse to leave?

Because it's a very important place for me, I value this place. If we leave, then we have to sell our sheep and then lose our source of income.

Aren't you afraid?

Yes. But I find the strength to overcome this fear and stay in our home and on our land.

Before 7 October, they used to come and harass us, but it wasn't that bad. We would ring the army and tell them, and most of the time it would be stopped. Today it is a different level of escalation and violence – they come with guns.

Did you ring the police or the army when they came and took your stuff from the kitchen?

Yes I did, I rang the army few times and the police and they did nothing. I went to the police station and reported it with a neighbour.

You are not afraid to stay alone overnight, just you and your mother?

We used to have international volunteers who would come and stay the night with us. Both, males and females. We felt safe when they were here. The times when they were not here, I didn't sleep until 3 am. Most of the time that the internationals were here the settlers didn't come. I think maybe they knew that the internationals are here that's why they didn't come. It is strange, when the international don't come the settlers come and attack us.

Tenacity and bloody-mindedness

Our time with Widad was one of the occasions when we found ourselves amazed at the strength of spirit that informed the resilience of many of the people we met. We were reminded of the characterization of Palestinians as the human equivalents of 'whack-a-mole' – no matter how hard you hit them, no matter how seemingly hopeless and desperate their plight might seem,

they keep raising themselves up from the depths, driven by some kind of indomitable spirit that refuses to accept defeat.

Widad's story reminded us of a meeting we had a year earlier with someone living just a few miles away. We talked with him in a very bare, sparsely furnished concrete block of a dwelling, more like a storeroom than a living space, at the end of an unmade track. Our host was a graduate who decided to relocate from the city to the family-owned land adjacent to an Israeli settlement in 2017, after the death of his father. Initially, he had a few sheep and used a tent for shelter – although he told us he used to sleep on the roof of his car some nights as he was afraid of wolves! After a year, an Israeli official came to tell him that he could not live on the land where he had built a primitive sheep-pen for his flock alongside his tent. He told us: 'This was a challenge to me. It strengthened my determination. This is my land!' (Interview, 5 June 2023).

He remained on his land, increasing the size of his flock while withstanding ongoing threats and harassment from local settlers. In July 2022, the occupation authorities served him with another notice to quit. On the day it was served, he was away in Jerusalem, where one of his daughters was having an operation. When he returned, he found his tent destroyed and his sheep-pen damaged. Despite this ongoing harassment, in September 2022 his brothers and relatives came out from Yatta and spent four days building the simple concrete structure where our interview took place, equipped with a generator. The settlers reported this to the military, who arrived one day – 'Do you have a permit?' They confiscated the generator. Then in January 2023, a demolition order for the dwelling was issued, giving him 96 hours to vacate the premises. Meanwhile, the settler-harassment continued:

The settler-harassment is ongoing. They watch when I am out with the sheep. Throw stones. I am an easy target. The war is back and forth – they withdraw and then they come again. They have come as a group in the

night – uprooting the trees and plants that I have been cultivating. The settlers are not held accountable. They tried to poison my dog.

My level of determination depends on what happens in Masafer Yatta – if the struggle there weakens, then my resolve will also weaken. If there were more people around, then there would be more protection. The more landowners living out here, the stronger we would be. We need the Palestinian Authority to stand up for us. I am more Palestinian than the head of the Palestinian Authority!

People fear the loss of their permits to work in Israel if they protest. I don't need their permits. But two of my brothers who came to visit me here were threatened in this way. The permit system is the most powerful form of control the Israelis have – you require permits for so many things.

I worry about the safety of my family. Once the settlers turned a spotlight on my dwelling – what to do? I told my daughters to run away, and I approached the settlers.

Of course I am worried that the demolition order will be carried out at some point. There are demolition orders being issued everywhere in Masafer Yatta – even to the very outskirts of Yatta itself. If this process continues, then in two years we shall all be living in Yatta. We need more people living here, more families around us. This will increase our resilience. (Interview, 5 June 2023)

Local leadership

A key factor in community resilience as manifested in the South Hebron Hills (and elsewhere throughout the world) is the quality of local community leaders. As noted at various points throughout the book, community leaders have been central in the creation of networks of communication and resistance within Masafer Yatta and beyond. Often drawn from influential families within the community, the local leaders

we interviewed had all had a significant history of active involvement in resistance struggles against the occupation.⁵

Some of the people we encountered would not identify themselves as community leaders, but they exerted an influence over others by their exemplary action. One such person was Hassan, who had exercised significant influence as a role model for Mahmoud. Here is Hassan's story as recorded in our fieldnotes:

Hassan is in his 60s and has been a witness to the many changes in Masafer Yatta. He has lived through the area being declared a military firing zone in the 1980s and the mass displacement in 1999. He has always played an active role in protecting his community.

He has been a dedicated volunteer in unarmed civilian protection campaigns. In 2012, during the 'Re-Exist' campaign launched by the popular committees – focused on building basic shelters for residents – Hassan was a constant presence and tireless worker. When asked why he hadn't built his own room, he replied, 'My room will be built after everyone else has theirs.'

On 29 October 2012, the Israeli army and police raided his home in Al Rakeez to demolish his water cistern. They beat and arrested him. Though they destroyed the cistern, Hassan rebuilt it and continues to use it.

Conclusion

The resilience and tenacity of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta was to be tested to the limit during months following the unprecedented attack on Israel launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023. Israel's subsequent declaration of war impacted dramatically on the lives of the people we had met, observed and interviewed during the period of our fieldwork. As in other parts of Area C, Palestinians living in the South Hebron Hills were subjected to what has been variously called the largest

land-grab in Israel's history and the second Nakba. The onset of war took place as we were writing up our final research manuscript. We made the decision that we should continue with our research. The central question that had driven our research – how can you enhance the security of civilians, and how can they protect themselves amid conflict by unarmed means? – seemed even more pertinent (and challenging) as the Israeli state and its citizens moved on to a war footing. Extremist settlers used the 'camouflage of war' to launch what the head of Israel's security agency, Shin Bet, condemned as a 'terror campaign' of murder, arson and intimidation that constituted 'a large stain on Judaism and on all of us' (Berger et al, 2024). In the [next chapter](#), we attempt to explore how the escalation of settler violence was experienced by the Palestinian communities of Masafer Yatta and the resultant challenges faced by those activists and volunteers who sought to provide some sort of protective presence for the local Palestinian population.

EIGHT

Unarmed Civilian Protection in a War Zone

A second Nakba?

As part of the general mobilization that took place in Israel in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attack, 7,000 settler-reservists were called up, issued with weapons and charged with protecting the settlements in the West Bank. In addition, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's National Security Minister, purchased 10,000 assault rifles to arm settler militias ([Middle East Monitor, 2023](#)). What followed was a dramatic rise in the number of reports of settler-soldiers abusing the power and position that came with the uniform and the automatic weapons issued by the state ([Bowen, 2023](#)). It became increasingly problematic for Palestinians and international companions to distinguish between civilian settlers and military personnel. As one of our interviewees, writing in the *New York Times*, explained:

We have always felt that the work of the military, which demolishes our houses and prevents our ability to move freely, was intimately intertwined with and reinforced by harassment from settlers. However, since the war started more than a month ago, the settlers and soldiers in the region seemed to have fused into one entity. Settlers whom we recognize from years of harassment in our villages have suddenly become soldiers, as reservists or as part of Itamar Ben-Gvir's civilian security teams. Army reservists who are new to the area are apparently now

taking their orders from local settler-soldiers or security teams. Together they patrol our communities with their M16s and threaten anyone who tries to bring his flock to graze or leave the village for work or errands. I do not know how much longer I and the other members of my community will be able to live here. (Awad, 2023)

Initial Palestinian response in Masafer Yatta – confusion and fear

During one of our research visits to Masafer Yatta in June 2023, we spent an enjoyable few hours helping a friend from At-Tuwani clear the ground and plant watermelon seedlings close to his family home. Just four months later, we learned that on 11 October 2023 settlers from a neighbouring illegal settlement had brought a bulldozer and destroyed the terracing, the watermelon seedlings and the olive trees (see [Figure 8.1](#)).

Figure 8.1: Israeli settlement built on Palestinian land where settlers regularly attack Palestinians and their property, 2023



Source: Mahmoud Makhamreh

They then constructed a military observation post and planted Israeli flags on the land owned by our friend. When he went to remonstrate, he was driven off by settlers with assault rifles, and the army declared the area a closed military zone. All this took place less than 150 m from his home. As he later confided to us: '[T]he community in At-Tuwani was really scared and frightened at that time, which paralysed them – therefore they did not resist the settlers but stayed at home' (Interview, 16 April 2024).

One of our co-workers reported to us in October 2023 that in the villages and hamlets of the South Hebron Hills, there was 'tremendous disappointment and fear among the wider public – they feel that the only help they can hope for is from God. They only see change coming from the sky, not from the ground.' He continued:

Now is the time for the olive harvest. Last year [October 2022] we all witnessed action with Israelis and internationals helping with the olive harvest in Tuwani – this is not possible this year. Likewise, no winter wheat has been sown, the land is left uncultivated. [Which will enable Israelis to claim it has been abandoned and legitimate their expropriation.]

Palestinian activists cannot leave their villages to support people in Masafer Yatta – over 2,000 have been arrested during October and November 2023. There are checkpoints at major points – you have to show your phone. ... Anyone who voices protest is attacked. No one is going out into the fields. If you want to survive, to protect yourself – do not leave your house. (Interview, 25 April 2024)

October 2023 brought seismic changes to the everyday life of people in Masafer Yatta. Breadwinners could no longer travel to work in Israel. Nor could they risk taking their sheep out to graze on the hills – to do so would be to invite assault

by settlers. The focus shifted to defending their homes and trying to avoid provoking settler-soldier attacks. When people gathered together, it was to protect their dwellings, not their grazing rights. As one of our co-workers told us:

The people are in deep fear waiting for revenge from the settlers. ... It's the same feeling of fear that the Palestinians had in Deir Yassin, when Zionist forces massacred the population.¹ Who is going to protect us? The army, the police? Clearly no. ... We try to withdraw, to be quiet, not to provoke ...

Palestinians used to throw stones as self-protection, but after 7 October this has ceased to be effective. In fact, it's become more dangerous because of the availability of arms in the hands of the settlers, so you throw stones they shoot at you. (Interview, 13 April 2024)

One of the most shocking incidents of settler-soldier violence took place in At-Tuwani after Friday prayers on 13 October 2023. Two Israeli civilians were seen entering the village, accompanied by a uniformed soldier. Zakaria al-Adra went up to them to find out what they intended. Video footage of the incident showed one of the Israelis, armed with an assault rifle, confronting al-Adra, striking him on the shoulder with the barrel of his rifle. He then took a step backwards and shot him point-blank in the stomach. Al-Adra was rushed to hospital; it was 82 days before he was well enough to return home (Sharon, 2024). It has been reported that the attacker was interviewed for a mere 20 minutes by the Israeli authorities, and eight months after the shooting there was still no evidence of any further action being taken against the assailants – evidence of the level of impunity enjoyed by the settler-soldiers (Bergman and Mazzetti, 2024).

In addition to the increased level of violence directed at the local Palestinians, there were new abuses of human rights.

It became common practice for settlers to enter communities and confiscate people's mobile phones. Not only did this prevent locals recording their activities; it also stopped them phoning for support. As one of our co-researchers recorded: 'Two weeks ago, they attacked one of the communities in Masafer Yatta. They came early morning. Mainly settlers, wearing their black "uniforms" ... The first thing they did – they took their mobiles, so you cannot contact or document. Then they punish the people, humiliate them, destroy their belongings' (Interview, 13 December 2024).

One of our informants recalled the humiliation to which he and fellow villagers from the village of Umm Al Khair had been subjected:

On 30 October 2023 at 6.00 pm, three settlers wearing army uniforms came to the village, they gathered all the men in one room at gunpoint and asked us to stand against the wall. They confiscated our phones and looked at the messages. They asked 'What do we think about the attack of Hamas? Why we have these messages on our phone?' They forced me to record a statement on the video against my will condemning Hamas and praising Israel while holding up the Israeli flag. (Interview, 31 October 2023)

The withdrawal of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) volunteers

The local Palestinians were not the only ones to be immobilized by the shock, fear and intimidatory violence experienced in the immediate aftermath of 7 October 2023. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) made the decision to withdraw its volunteers within a few days, and they were evacuated to Jordan. Operation Dove volunteers took the decision to withdraw in mid-October as a direct result of the escalating violence and the awareness

that in such a situation there was no safe space for their UCP work. As one of their volunteers explained:

The situation became very dangerous and was escalating rapidly. The army was aggressive, and the settlers were shooting. Then there was the shooting of Zakaria al-Adra in the middle of At-Tuwani and the settler invasion of people's houses. All this pushed our volunteers to leave, and after 7 October all our activities ceased, there was nothing for our volunteers to do. (Interview, 14 April 2024)

Both EAPPI and Operation Dove volunteers had institutional guidelines and support in organizing their evacuation, unlike the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) volunteers who were responsible for organizing their own travel arrangements. As a result, although some returned to their home countries, six ISM volunteers remained in the West Bank, mainly staying in the ISM coordinating centre in Ramallah. This meant they maintained a degree of communication with contacts in the South Hebron Hills in the weeks following the outbreak of the war.

The general lockdown and restriction on movement, alongside the ban on Palestinians travelling to work in Israel, had a deep impact on the economic situation within Palestinian communities. There was a drastic reduction in living standards, particularly among marginal rural communities such as those in Masafer Yatta. In such circumstances, humanitarian aid and assistance to help local people meet their basic needs becomes a vital part of any UCP work.

Facing the challenge: the return of Israeli and international accompaniers

As noted elsewhere in the text, a common maxim relating to UCP in zones of Area C such as Masafer Yatta was 'there

is strength in numbers’. This was the reasoning behind the early responses of local communities to the heightened threat from settlers after 7 October – they gathered in the dwellings most exposed to assault as a form of mutual aid and collective security. As one of our co-researchers told us, in the village of Jinba, on the southern edge of Masafer Yatta, the youth ‘would come together in shifts. Settlers are more reluctant to attack a village like Jinba where there are more people – unlike some more isolated spots where there might be just one family’ (Interview, 13 December 2023).

The ‘external’ presence in Masafer Yatta in the period immediately following 7 October was virtually non-existent. It was too dangerous for Palestinian activists to travel, given the lockdown conditions imposed by the occupation forces and the escalation in the level of violence from settler militias: ‘The danger for the Palestinian activists had gone up so far ... that for a while it didn’t feel safe for the Palestinian activists to travel between the villages’ (Interview, 15 July 2024).

There was no organized sustained Israeli solidarity presence in the area during the early period. Israeli citizens were affected by the drastic shrinking of the space for protest within Israel itself, with right-wing groups publishing the addresses of anti-war activists, a marked increase in police brutality against demonstrators and a wider public convinced of the need to ‘support our troops’. In such circumstances, the protective presence of Israeli solidarity activists in the South Hebron Hills in the period immediately after the outbreak of war was confined to individual visits by activists concerned about the well-being of their Palestinian friends and comrades. We were told that the two long-serving activists from Ta’ayush who had been working with local Palestinians for over 20 years were severely intimidated on their early visits to Masafer Yatta as they witnessed armed settlers seeking revenge and prepared to use live ammunition in the process. There were also reports of Israeli activists being ‘kidnapped’ by settlers in uniform and beaten up ([Middle East Eye, 2023](#)). In the face of such risks,

those activists who did reach out to the communities of the South Hebron Hills restricted their activities to short visits to deliver humanitarian aid and fire extinguishers to those villagers afraid of their homes being targeted for arson attacks by settlers.

However, within a few weeks the Israeli solidarity networks began to reorganize themselves and resumed their presence in the South Hebron Hills. As Israeli citizens, they found it easier to negotiate their way through the military checkpoints and roadblocks set up to control movement in the West Bank. They could always claim they were going to visit family or friends in one of the settlements around Masafer Yatta. One of the activists traced the development when we interviewed her in January 2024:

On 11 October, four of us went for a first visit there. Then there was a period of only visits, that slowly included people staying overnight again. By 29 October, there has been constant protective presence there again, with a focus on night shifts. For the first month, it was about 15 to 20 people a night, in four to six communities every night, depending on need and the number of people we had. Since then, the numbers have dropped a bit (four to eight per night, two to three villages), but the nights became less the issue, and there's more work around accompanying ploughing currently, but it's ongoing. (Interview, 9 January 2024)

The Israeli nongovernmental organization Comet-ME also played a part, providing CCTV cameras for installation outside family homes, allowing people to see anyone approaching the dwelling via an app on their phone.²

The international presence during this period remained very low. One important factor was that there were very few flights into Israel during the early days of the war. However, there were two or three ISM volunteers who had not evacuated after 7 October and had a presence in Masafer Yatta during

the October–November 2023 period. On 25 October, some of them accompanied one of the community leaders in At-Tuwani as he tried to reclaim use of one of his fields that had been fenced off by the settlers. On this occasion, the settlers chased them off, but the ISM presence as a support crew was clearly important.

It is relevant to point out that the presence of ISM volunteers reflected their status as activists with a solidarity movement rather than volunteers with an institution. Unlike volunteers with organizations like EAPPI and Operation Dove, the ISM activists were not subject to the directions of administrative officers and sponsoring organizations in their home countries. As activists within a movement, they were free to go where they felt most needed. This relative ‘ease of access’ was undoubtedly a factor in the upswing in the number of ISM activists in Masafer Yatta after the outbreak of the Gaza War.

By the spring of 2024, we were told there were close to 20 ISM volunteers active in Masafer Yatta. Although these volunteers appreciated the relative freedom they enjoyed as activists with ISM, they were also aware of the downside of participating in a relatively loose ‘movement’ rather than a structured organization. As one of our interviewees expressed it: ‘In terms of the organization for the volunteers, we feel that there is lack of organization, lack of coordination and lack of training’ (Interview, 16 April 2024).

An additional downside to the relative autonomy enjoyed by ISM volunteers was the lack any significant institutional support when they faced Israeli sanctions. The weeks following the outbreak of the Gaza War saw a sharp escalation in the efforts of the Israeli authorities to restrict the activities of UCP volunteers. Checkpoints and roadblocks, with the attendant risks of being arrested and administratively detained, were a massive deterrent to the movement of Palestinian activists, while a number of ISM activists were deported. Israeli nationals were being banned from entering the South Hebron Hills area, and border officials at Tel Aviv airport were being more

diligent in their efforts to deny entry to ‘trouble makers’. As an Operation Dove volunteer observed: ‘Our presence is a problem for the army and the settlers, and they don’t want us. The army is finding more and more excuses, especially under the emergency laws, to deport more people and prevent us from reaching certain areas’ (Interview, 14 April 2024).

Given the dramatic changes in the situation in conflict zones like Masafer Yatta, with the escalation of violence against Palestinians and anyone accompanying them, international agencies and networks devoted to providing a protective presence in the area faced serious dilemmas when it came to deciding when and how to resume their activities. EAPPI had been the first to withdraw its volunteers after 7 October. It was January 2024 when the decision was made to resume activities. This was partly in response to the enquiries from the Palestinian communities where the volunteers had been located – when were they returning? But equally important was the growing concern within the World Council of Churches that the longer the suspension of the programme persisted, the greater the likelihood that it might never be revived.

The resumption of EAPPI activities was marked by a significant degree of caution, reflecting the concern felt for the safety of the Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) in the field. Accordingly, it was decided that the first cohort of volunteers, only six in number, should be based within the district of Jerusalem, where, it was reasoned, the threats to their physical safety and the challenge of their evacuation in the event of some emergency situation were more manageable. It was also decided that to minimize the risk of provoking Israeli settlers based in the Old City of Jerusalem, they should abandon their blue vest identifiers and begin wearing a wooden pin-badge portraying a dove of peace, which enabled local Palestinians to identify them as EAs but did not draw the attention of settlers or soldiers. This low-key approach continued to inform the plans for the next cohort of volunteers who commenced in April 2024. The 12 EAs were divided between placements in

Palestinian population centres including Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron – Masafer Yatta was considered too dangerous for the EAs (Interview, 15 April 2024).

EAPPI faced numerous challenges as they attempted to resume their programme. Volunteers found it increasingly difficult to get into the country through the Israeli border control. We were told that a quarter of the group due to start their work in April 2024 failed to obtain the three-month visa that would allow them to complete the full term of their placement. There was also the challenge of how to re-establish the trust relationship with local communities and maximize the safety of the EAs themselves while developing their role in UCP without provoking the settlers. As their coordinator explained: ‘Since the October war, we have done less of the accompaniment functions. We cannot accompany shepherds in the hills anymore, and accompanying children to school is unwelcome during this phase. We ask our volunteers not to intervene – it is important for them to be there and to document’ (Interview, 15 April 2024).

Given this cutback in the areas covered by their programme and in their portfolio of activities, it is perhaps not too surprising that when we asked the coordinators of another network of UCP volunteers in July 2024 whether they had any communication with EAPPI, their reply was ‘No – they have kind of disappeared’ (Interview, 15 July 2024).

EAPPI was not alone in having to re-examine its approach to UCP in the new environment occasioned by war. Operation Dove volunteers returned to Masafer Yatta in early January 2024, and when interviewed three months later they were still trying to devise a worthwhile role for themselves as UCP practitioners in the changed circumstances they faced. In conversation, one of them reviewed the issues they faced:

It is risky, our presence raises the tension more than reducing it. We are trying to be more helpful. Palestinians want us here, but in a smart way – which means to take a step back, just by being there without any

engagement. It is not as it was before when we would argue with the soldiers, now we are there to continue the documentation. The dynamic has changed between us and the settlers turned soldiers. We can't do any more mediation between the locals and the army. ... Still, we believe that our presence is useful, sometimes it can lower the tension, sometimes not. (Interview, 14 April 2024)

Adapting to a new script – UCP practice in Masafer Yatta after 7 October 2023

In conversation with the coordinators of the Center for Jewish Nonviolence (CJNV) in July 2024, they referred to the challenge they faced in adapting to the changed circumstances in conflict zones like Masafer Yatta after 7 October:

We have been doing this for quite a long time, and you get used to some kind of script or dynamic in the field. So, for example, you have the settlers and you have the soldiers and then you have the police – and they are all the players with well-defined roles. And even if they are working together, we've learned how to kind of navigate that situation. What's happened since 7 October is that that playbook has been thrown out the window, and we're also finding it really difficult to try and navigate the situation and try and train volunteers to navigate that situation. (Interview, 15 July 2024)

In this section, we explore the key features of this new script that those seeking to provide some kind of protective presence to the people of Masafer Yatta have had to address since 7 October 2023.

Settlers and soldiers no longer distinguishable

The erosion of any distinction between settlers and soldiers had a tremendous impact on the work of UCP practitioners –

not least because they could no longer appeal to the army for some sort of protection from the attacks of settlers. Here is an illustration from one of our interviews:

There have been times when settler-soldiers raid a village that we are in and are acting in a very violent and aggressive way. There's a very high probability of an escalation. So then we'll call the police, and the police will say, 'Well, the army is there already.' 'No not really, they're settlers!' And then you get 'It's emergency wartime and they are the army. So we're not going to come.' (Interview, 15 July 2024)

Sometimes this erosion of any distinction between settler and soldier can lead to surreal situations. Here is one such example:

A friend in Susya told us that he was shepherding at some point, and the settler came and was harassing him and his flock. He called the police, and they said we're sending the army. Eventually, no one was showing up, so the shepherd went back to his village. Then, a short while later, the settler showed up in army uniform saying, 'What's the problem here?' This was the same settler who had been harassing him! (Interview, 15 July 2024)

The fact that settlers and soldiers became barely distinguishable had a severe impact on the leverage effected by Israeli and international volunteers seeking to act as a protective presence. It was no longer possible to look to soldiers to act as a restraining influence on settler militias. Indeed, the presence of UCP volunteers alongside Palestinians could act as a red flag to a bull, so that the Israeli and international activists became targets for the settler-soldiers. As someone who had experienced such situations told us:

[I]n terms of our position as international and Israeli volunteers ... we have much less impact in de-escalating

the situation, the ability to maybe reduce the violence. ... Before 7 October, there would be soldiers that we had the chance to communicate with, soldiers who you maybe had the chance to argue with, and maybe change the dynamics. Now, every single time you go out and encounter settler-soldiers, settlers or soldiers, everything in between, they're sort of the most, most aggressive version of themselves, and our role is much more limited. (Interview, 15 July 2024)

Protection without provocation?

We have already noted how volunteers with EAPPI sought to lower their profile, eschewing their emblematic blue vests, in order to avoid provoking settlers.³ We were also told that in at least one location they had stopped escorting children to school at the request of the school principal on the grounds that by providing an escort they attracted the unwelcome attention of settlers. Conscious of the threats to the security of EAs, the organization also restricted the resumption of their accompaniment work to certain neighbourhoods and population centres which they felt posed less of a risk. The EAs were also instructed to avoid any kind of engagement with settlers and soldiers, and to concentrate their energies on documenting human rights abuses (Interview, 15 April 2024).

Volunteers from other agencies and networks also found their role circumscribed by the realization that they should no longer seek to engage with, let alone confront, Israeli settlers and soldiers as part of their commitment to defusing potentially violent encounters. There was a growing awareness that in certain circumstances their very presence could act as a provocation to the settler-soldiers. The result has been the adoption of a more quietist approach to the provision of a protective presence, focusing more on documentation than engagement. As an Operation Dove volunteer observed:

We took a step back because we don't want to engage with the settlers and army ... because they target us as internationals ... They are finding more and more excuses to deport us ... Our presence raises the tension more than reducing it. We are trying to be more helpful. Palestinians want us here, but in a smart way. Which means taking a step back, just being here to continue with the documentation – without any engagement as we did before when we argued with the soldiers.

She continued to expand on the nature of the challenge they faced, coping with the new situation:

The dynamic has changed between us and them – the settlers turned soldiers. We can't do any more mediation between the locals and the army. ... The question is how to be useful in such a situation. It varies from one situation to another, although our presence is useful and sometimes can lower the tension. But if we become the target and the attention is on us, we could very easily be arrested and deported. We need to be smart to avoid that. (Interview, 14 April 2024)

A number of international volunteers, particularly those from an activist background, found it difficult to adjust to the more quietist role they were obliged to adopt. The big question for so many of them was: 'Are we achieving anything?' Such doubts are ever present in so many efforts to pitch unarmed resistance against an opponent equipped with lethal weaponry. However, we did hear anecdotal evidence that UCP work in Masafer Yatta, however quietist it might be, did have an effect. One of the coordinators for CJNV told us that they had noticed that when there was a gap in the protective presence provided by Israeli and international volunteers in Masafer Yatta, there was an upturn in settler activity: 'When they notice a gap in our presence somewhere, there's often

really an escalation there and they go all in on harassing and intimidating. So, although it feels like our impact is limited ... when we're not there, we see that things often are worse' (Interview, 15 July 2024).

The call for 24/7 protection

One of the changes after October 2023 noted by some of the UCP practitioners was the increase in demand for round-the-clock protection. This reflected the escalation of settler-soldier violence and intimidation, and the consequent rise in levels of fear and insecurity experienced by local Palestinians. But for international volunteers it could seem that sitting outside someone's dwelling was not the best use of their time. One of our interviewees, associated with ISM, shared her concerns about the efficacy of her protective presence as a UCP volunteer:

The people in the community think that our presence brings protection. Maybe our presence and the Israelis brings some sort of peace, small peace. Personally, I don't feel my presence brings protection, but the local people say that it does. In some places, people don't want us to leave.

In one of the hamlets, I didn't do anything, I sat all day. But every time the settlers passed by and saw us, they carried on and didn't do anything. I feel this was helpful, it was deterrence. The settler-soldiers can see that there is international solidarity and presence, and they change their behaviour against locals. (Interview, 16 April 2024)

The demand for 24/7 protection placed new strains on the resources of those responsible for coordinating the work of volunteer UCP practitioners in Masafer Yatta – one that was eased to some degree by the increase in the number of volunteers offering their services after 7 October.

Increase in volunteers

The growth of a global movement shocked by the genocidal war being carried out in the Gaza Strip and demanding a complete ceasefire fed into a growing concern about the injustices and barbarism of the Israeli occupation and dispossession of Palestinians in the West Bank. One consequence of this was an increase in the number of people wanting to ‘do something’ in support of the Palestinians. An outcome of this was an upturn in the number of internationals volunteering to participate in UCP work. Interviewed in July 2024, the coordinators of CJNV commented:

There has been a kind of an uptick in interest among internationals to join protective presence. So for example, we’ve had a lot more people reaching out to us who are interested to join us. ISM has had a really big influx of volunteers as well. So that comes with the campaign – bringing a lot of people in.⁴ (Interview, 15 July 2024)

One of the ISM volunteers we interviewed in April 2024 explained:

After October, as ISMs, we have more motivation to come to Palestine as a result of the international solidarity movement in the world with the Palestinians. The more there is violence by Israel against the Palestinians there is more anger among people in the world and more protest. More activists would like to come. (Interview, 16 April 2024)

To meet the increase in demand for their presence, CJNV launched a new initiative of ten-day ‘summer shifts’ in 2024. The aim was that the short-term volunteers would help meet the demand for a 24/7 presence, thereby complementing the work of the more experienced international volunteers

and Israeli activists that constituted more of a rapid response protective presence network in Masafer Yatta. The coordinators of the ‘summer shifts’ were encouraged by the experience. As they told us:

It’s a lot more people coming through being impacted, seeing what’s happening first hand and then going home and galvanizing their communities. And feeling some sort of connection and staying connected, a live connection to those places and to those stories.

We’ve been talking to them, and I think it’s been a really meaningful experience for many people. They want to come back to the same community, where they’ve started building relationships. And so that actually feels quite impactful also in terms of our recruitment, that our pool of recruitment is growing and for us it’s much more effective if we have people who return. (Interview, 15 July 2024)

Greater coordination

The increase in the number of volunteers in 2024 had been accompanied by an improvement in the level of coordination between the different organizations and groups involved in providing a protective presence in Masafer Yatta. Undoubtedly, a major cause of this development was the intensification of the pressure occasioned by the escalation of Israeli settler aggression, and the felt need to find ways to respond and meet the ever-growing demand for some degree of protection from local Palestinian communities. This was one of the more positive changes to have taken place in UCP activities in Area C after 7 October 2023. As one of our informants acknowledged:

[W]e have a lot more coordination among ourselves than we did before 7 October. Like, for example, there’s a Signal group that has all of us together in it, and all day

long there are updates about what's going on, moving people between different places. One night ISM is there, one night CJNV is there, one night the Israelis are there, really covering as a network. I think the shift since the 7th has been significant – it's like it's really coordinated as one solidarity presence which has been very positive for us. It means that the different groups can ask each other to step in when there's a problem. (Interview, 15 July 2024)

Challenging settler impunity – the international dimension

Whatever doubts UCP practitioners might have had about the significance and efficacy of their presence alongside Palestinians as the months passed in 2024, their presence alongside Palestinians should not be undervalued. Particularly in the challenging post-7 October context, their presence constituted an important factor in helping Palestinians sustain their resolve and steadfastness. While some of the internationals and Israelis were clearly frustrated at what they felt was a restriction of their role to that of monitoring, the local Palestinians continued to appreciate their accompaniment and documentation of the violence perpetrated by the settlers and the soldiers.

This monitoring of abuses and associated advocacy, the sharing of stories with wider constituencies and publics, helped to feed the marked growth of media interest in the manner in which the Israeli state apparatus used the cover of the Gaza War to launch a violent land-grab in so many locations throughout Area C, including the South Hebron Hills (Edwards, 2023). The wave of outrage expressed through the media coverage, aligned with the unprecedented street protests around the globe calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, fed into a growing concern within the US State Department and among policy makers elsewhere about the wider consequences of the ongoing 'land-grab' in the West Bank. As a consequence, the Biden administration in the United States started to impose sanctions

on extremist settlers deemed to be responsible for the violence against Palestinians in Area C.

One of the CJNV coordinators conceded that, despite initial scepticism, they had witnessed the effect of the targeted sanctions:

Settlers were much more cautious about carrying out attacks and things like that. I think it didn't have any structural impact – like they just moved their money to other places or other settlers stepped in. But it did mean that the names that were on the list, we don't see anymore, and those were the individuals who were causing a lot of problems, it did have an impact in that way. (Interview, 15 July 2024)

Unfortunately, the sanctions were cancelled in one of the first executive orders announced by Trump on his return to the White House on 20 January 2025, thereby signalling that as far as the US administration was concerned the settlers and the Israeli state had free rein to continue their strategy to cleanse areas like Masafer Yatta of their Palestinian inhabitants.

NINE

Concluding Observations

Frontier genocide in Masafer Yatta

The recurring question that came into particular focus as we examined the main features of the post-7 October 2023 period was how could those activists and volunteers who were seeking to act as a protective presence for Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta enhance the human security of those threatened with dispossession and expulsion when any form of unarmed protective action ran the risk of provoking the settlers and the army to violence?

The second issue that came into sharp relief as our research progressed was the sense that the dedicated and courageous work of the volunteers from different agencies and organizations in support of local Palestinians was essentially a holding operation – a desperate attempt to resist for as long as possible the advancing wave of Israeli expansionism and conquest. A memory comes to mind. We were with a group of Israeli activists who were gathered on a hillside above a cultivated area below. We were there to ensure that the agreement with the army that the Palestinian landowner might gain access to his field on a designated day of the week was honoured. One of us turned to the veteran Ta'ayush activist who had coordinated the accompaniment, remarking on how this struggle was being waged on such a small-scale micro level – here we were, a dozen or so solidarity activists, a unit of the army, the farmer and his family and a male from the local Israeli settlement advancing to challenge the Palestinian

presence – all focused on such a small plot of land. ‘Yes,’ our Israeli comrade replied, ‘[i]t is field by field, sheep by sheep!’ Here in microcosm was a representation of the wider struggle taking place in so many locations throughout Area C, as Palestinians attempted to resist as best they could the ongoing incremental expropriation of their land and living space. The pressure has been relentless – reminding us that while ‘extremist settlers’ might be targeted by international sanctions of one form or another, they were acting as agents of the Israeli state, encouraged in particular by their political leaders occupying key positions in the Israeli government.

A third theme has dominated our reflections – the growing conviction that what we have witnessed in the South Hebron Hills over the period of our research has been one phase in a genocidal project to drive the local Palestinians from their homes and their land. In this, we have been powerfully influenced by our reading of the work of Benjamin Madley on ‘frontier genocide’. Madley’s research primarily focuses on the genocide perpetrated against the Native Americans of Northern California, but he has also made a comparative study of ‘frontier genocide’ involving case studies of the Tasmanian Aboriginals, the Herero of Namibia and the Yuki of Northern California (Madley, 2016). In his historical studies, Madley identified a pattern consisting of three phases:

1. Colonists start an invasion of land they claim to be ‘empty’, with resulting economic and political friction as the invaders and the indigenous struggle for limited resources and political power. Unable to compete with the invader’s technology, wealth and power, the indigenous inhabitants find their economy threatened and their political rights eroded under the settler regime.
2. In the second phase, the original inhabitants resort to attacking the settlers in an attempt to reclaim lost land, restore political rights and exact revenge. In response to the violence, the settlers retaliate against the insurgents,

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- making full use of local militias and vigilante groups, in addition to state power, to intimidate and subjugate the original inhabitants while denying any legal redress to the ‘natives’, defined as ‘non-citizens’ by the dominant power.
3. In the final phase, the settlers’ government, seeking a ‘final solution’ to the troubles and disturbances caused by the ‘natives’, incarcerates the aboriginals in camps and reservations. The genocidal project is continued through the denial of access to adequate economic resources, food supplies and health care alongside the continuing resort to violence.

We are not suggesting that the patterns of history are set in stone, but our research on the situation in the South Hebron Hills since 7 October 2023 has shown how rapidly, under the cover of war, processes of dispossession and ethnic cleansing can be accelerated and normalized. In such a desperate scenario, it became clear to us that unarmed civilian protection (UCP) had a significant role to play, but for it to be effective it needed the support and engagement of international states and agencies.

Any grounds for hope?

As a research team with different talents and attributes, we share a value base that involves a commitment to nonviolence as a means of change and a vision of Palestinians living their lives free from occupation and enjoying the basic human rights they are currently denied. The reason we have devoted so much time to this project, and to other studies of Palestinian unarmed resistance, has been our fundamental commitment to these values and the vision. A corollary of this is a felt need to conclude our book on a positive and hopeful note – not least because the absence of hope for the future implies the relinquishment of any belief in the power of human agency to shape that future in a constructive manner. But this is not an easy task, as anyone who has got this far in the text can

grasp. Let us start by identifying the main challenges facing Palestinians and those Israeli and international solidarity activists trying to support them in their struggle for basic human security.

1. *State sponsorship of settler violence*

The Israeli coalition government in power at the time of writing is considered by many informed observers to be the most xenophobic, racist and extreme right-wing government in the state's history (Benn, 2023). It has as government ministers settlers who have openly advocated genocidal measures against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank (Amnesty International, 2024). The extremist settlers responsible for the worst human rights abuses in the West Bank in general, and in Masafer Yatta in particular, are actually implementing state policy. This is one of the prime reasons why they feel free to act with complete impunity.

2. *Impunity of settlers*

Again and again during the periods of fieldwork, we were struck by the 'Wild West' character of the South Hebron Hills. Settlers and soldiers committed the most heartless and immoral human rights abuses, while their victims had no recourse to the rule of law and the practice of proper procedure. They were, in effect, mirroring the actions of the Israeli state with regard to its utter disregard for the canons of international humanitarian law.

3. *The vulnerability of international accompaniers*

As part of its strategy, particularly after 7 October 2023, the Israeli state has been more vigilant in policing border control, being more prepared to deny visas to those they believe to be potential 'trouble makers'. In addition, over the period of our research, there has been a growing preparedness to deport internationals identified as active in creating some kind of protective presence for local Palestinians (Ziv, 2024).

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4. *Limited number of volunteers to act as a protective presence*

The South Hebron Hills is a sparsely populated area, with numerous small villages and hamlets spread widely across the semi-desert arid terrain. Communication between the communities is not easy, and the feelings of insecurity caused by the threat of settler attacks can be completely enervating. The upsurge in assaults after 7 October, as settlers intensified their pogroms, led to an increased demand for round-the-clock protection from Israeli and international volunteers. Put quite simply, there were not enough volunteers to meet the demand coming from all the different locations. Given the level of monitoring carried out by the settler networks, they could target their assaults at locations where there was no ‘external’ protective presence.

5. *The risk to life and limb*

As we were thinking about the challenges faced by those seeking to enhance their protective presence in support of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta, news came through of the killing of a 26-year-old US citizen, a volunteer solidarity activist with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). Aysenur Eygi was shot in the head by Israeli forces while witnessing a weekly protest against the Israeli outpost Evyatar near the Palestinian village of Beita (Krever, 2024). In a separate incident in a town a few miles away, a 13-year-old Palestinian girl was shot and killed as she watched from a window while Israeli settlers and troops violently clashed with Palestinians.

Whatever restraints settlers and soldiers might have experienced in the past seem to have disappeared after 7 October 2023. Even the companions’ mantra of ‘safety in numbers’ seems to have lost its relevance. Our colleague Mahmoud shared with us a story of an occasion when a significant number of Palestinians gathered in a hamlet to the south of Bethlehem to protest after an Israeli settler had shot and killed a local resident – the settler proceeded to shoot randomly at the assembled throng!

A way forward? The 'big If'

The killing of a volunteer with ISM while witnessing a protest against an illegal settler outpost established on land expropriated from Palestinians serves to remind us of the thread of impunity that runs from the macro level of the Israeli state's pursuance of its genocidal war in Gaza down to the level of the individual settler or Israeli soldier targeting and killing unarmed companions and Palestinians (Berger et al, 2024). It seems clear to us that the main challenge for anyone concerned with the human cost of the Israeli occupation is how to undermine the impunity enjoyed at all levels, from the Israeli state to the individual soldier-settler. How can they be held to account? Given the causal thread between the failure to bring the Israeli state to account for its actions in Gaza and its ongoing expropriation of Palestinian land in the West Bank, and the pogroms perpetrated by settlers, with the support of the Israeli occupation forces, any significant challenge to that impunity must be multi-level too.

At the grassroots level, it is imperative that the Palestinians in areas like Masafer Yatta continue to resist the efforts of settlers and soldiers to drive them from their land and their way of life. They must continue to display the resilience and determination that has become such a significant part of their culture over past decades. The varied manifestations of *sumud* might appear as quiet and undramatic, but they constitute the foundation of community-based resistance in areas like the South Hebron Hills. Furthermore, it is the example of community-based resistance and steadfastness that attracts the support and active involvement of concerned people around the world, some of whom continue to offer their time and energy as UCP practitioners, which serves to empower the local communities.

The challenge also needs to be addressed at the macro level of international states and agencies acting to restrain and leverage the Israeli state. Painfully and paradoxically, it

could be that the unimaginable slaughter in Gaza alongside the escalating barbarism of Israeli settlers and soldiers in the occupied West Bank has helped set the conditions for such a process. When we look back at all the previous Arab–Israeli wars, we see that the ceasefires and settlements have all been mediated and enforced by outside powers. Hence, a starting point would be that those powers upon which Israel depends for the supply of its arms and weaponry, the United States in particular, should exercise leverage on the Israeli state to agree to a sustainable ceasefire. Integral to such pressure should be an insistence that any ceasefire in the war in Gaza should be accompanied by some kind of multilateral peace process involving key Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Kaplan, 2024). A precondition for any peace negotiations must be an unequivocal acknowledgement by Israel of Palestinian rights to self-determination, and a preparedness to start negotiations on that basis, with the United Nations (UN) as guarantor of any agreement. If – and it is an enormous ‘If’ – some kind of international involvement in a ‘peace process’ was agreed in principle, then the framework for a re-imagined UCP programme could be developed, informed by lessons from the past.

Lessons from the past – the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH)

In September 1995, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel signed the Oslo II Accord which included a call for the creation of a TIPH, where, in February 1994, an Israeli settler had slaughtered 29 Palestinians and wounded over a hundred others in an assault at the Ibrahimi Mosque in the city. By February 1997, agreement was reached on the establishment of an observer mission with members from six countries, with a mandate subject to renewal every three months. It was a multi-functional peace-keeping mission. The declared aim was to strengthen the Palestinian sense of

security in Hebron and by their presence promote stability and economic development – the conditions necessary for peace. It was made clear from the start that the members of the TIPH were there purely as unarmed observers monitoring the situation in Hebron and that they possessed no military or policing function. Their reports were not made public but were shared with the PLO and Israel.

There were clear problems with the mandate from the start – not least the question of the morality and the appropriateness of outsiders seeking to ‘normalize’ the life of Palestinians living under occupation. Furthermore, as observers in an occupied city, they witnessed and documented many instances of human rights abuses and activities contrary to international humanitarian law. As a consequence, the Israeli authorities began to accuse them of pro-Palestinian bias, while Palestinian frustrations grew with their failure to intervene to prevent the human rights abuses (Aggestam, 2001: 53–69).

In January 2019, Prime Minister Netanyahu refused to renew the mandate (Lazaroff, 2019). Netanyahu’s action was backed by the United States, which blocked a proposed UN Security Council statement criticizing the decision (Reuters, 2019). Netanyahu’s decision was undoubtedly occasioned by the leaking to the press of a damning internal report by the TIPH in December 2018 which detailed the manner in which Israel regularly broke international law in Hebron such that ‘normal life’ was nowhere to be found in the city (Blau, 2018).

What can we learn from the TIPH experience?

- The TIPH grew out of a quite specific context, where peace negotiations to which both sides were committed would not have been resumed without the consent of Israel to the observer presence being established. It follows that such an initiative can only be launched with any degree of effectiveness when all parties are committed to a common

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goal – in this case, the cessation of settler violence against Palestinians in Area C.

- In a deeply asymmetrical conflict, like that between Israel and the Palestinians, it is perhaps inevitable that any international observer corps established to act as a protective presence for Palestinians at risk of violent assault and dispossession will be labelled as ‘pro-Palestinian’.
- It is imperative that any observer force established as part of a peace negotiation process must be the result of a multinational agreement. The TIPH was established through a bilateral agreement between Israel and the PLO, and as such was always at risk of its mandate being terminated due to the dissatisfaction of one of the parties.
- One of the problems with the TIPH mandate was its imprecision – it was charged with enhancing the Palestinians’ sense of security, promoting stability and economic development as necessary bases for a sustainable peace in Hebron. In retrospect, it would seem that two key questions were never seriously considered: Are the goals of the mission compatible? What activities are most appropriate for reaching the declared goals? For this reason, it would seem important that any initiative to launch an internationally coordinated effort to create a protective presence for Palestinians in Area C by means of their unarmed presence should not have any wider remit than the protection of the physical security of local Palestinians by unarmed means.

Enhancing the protective presence of unarmed peace keepers

The key factor in enhancing the power of unarmed peace keepers deployed as part of a negotiated peace process would be their status as an internationally recognized and sanctioned presence. Whether the force be composed of international volunteers from civil society networks or seconded security officers from the states party to the agreement, or any mix of

the two, the members would enjoy a level of protection denied the current generation of accompaniers. They would also enjoy a degree of infrastructural support not available to previous generations of accompaniers. But this hopeful scenario depends on the ‘big If’ – If Israel could be pressured into accepting the right of Palestinians to self-determination and accepting a multi-state peace negotiation process towards that end.

Internationalization from below?

We have to hope and work for change at the macro level, but it is important to try to identify the steps that might be taken outside of the level of a formal multi-state peace negotiation process to enhance the effectiveness of those seeking to create an effective protective presence for threatened Palestinian communities. Are there changes that might take place at the micro level which can impact on the security of Palestinians hanging on in areas like the South Hebron Hills? We began to consider what might be termed ‘interim measures’ – ways in which international states and transnational agencies might start to play a more supportive role in assisting civil society groups and agencies in the unarmed protection of Palestinians within the South Hebron Hills and the wider Area C.

In one of our team discussions, we began to talk about the impact of the intensified efforts of the Israeli forces to bar entry to UCP volunteers and the risk of deportation faced by such volunteers as they attempt to effect some kind of protective presence. Fresh in our minds was the recent deportation of an Italian volunteer with Operation Dove. One of us bemoaned the fact that international volunteers were like orphans: they entered the country on three-month visas and consequently had no call on their embassies for diplomatic support and assistance when faced with Israeli sanctions like deportation. We began to explore how volunteers might be ‘adopted’ by their national governments and agencies in ways that would enhance their capacity as agents of UCP.¹

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The following are some of the ways in which this might be achieved:

- Sponsoring states might recognize particular nongovernmental organizations and civil society groups as ‘implementing partners’ in the unarmed protection of civilians in Area C. This type of formal recognition of the status of volunteers would go some way to addressing the challenge faced by UCP volunteers – they would be able to call on their embassy for support when needed, particularly if the sponsoring state advises Israel of the state-endorsed status of the volunteers.
- Sponsoring states could provide financial assistance to UCP agencies and volunteers in recognition of their status as implementing partners.
- Volunteers could carry official documentation/identity cards as evidence of their state-endorsed status – to be shown to Israeli security personnel and reduce the likelihood of unwarranted interference in their activities.
- Diplomatic pressure from international states and transnational agencies could be applied to enable UCP volunteers to obtain special visas, thereby enabling them to avoid the duplicity of presenting themselves as tourists at Israeli border-posts in order to obtain 90-day visas.
- States sponsoring and/or in sympathy with the work of UCP volunteers could let it be known that violators of human rights identified by UCP volunteers and human rights agencies would face sanctions. Such sanctions could be extended to Israeli political leaders deemed to have supported and encouraged human rights violations against Palestinians.

Final word

There is no doubt in our minds that without significant internationalization of UCP activities in the South Hebron

Hills and Area C in general, these areas will be ‘cleansed’ of Palestinians within the foreseeable future. What we have witnessed and documented in our research has been very much a ‘holding operation’ – concerted efforts by local people supported by solidarity activists and volunteers to resist the ongoing expropriation of their land, the destruction of their way of life and the dispossession of their homes. Within the three-year timespan of this research project, we have seen a depressing and disheartening transformation of the ‘battle-zone’. In the autumn months of 2022, when we started the fieldwork, the focus of local Palestinians was the defence of their grazing lands where they roamed with their flocks. By the autumn months of 2024, the space that the local Palestinians sought to defend had been reduced to their actual homes, their physical dwellings. To prevent settler mobs from stealing their sheep was to risk lethal violence to life and limb. The priority had become the protection of one’s home and one’s loved ones – not the livestock.

Our research has documented the resistance that has taken place over a period of three years in one area of the West Bank which has been at the forefront of Israeli efforts to implement the de facto annexation of large areas of Palestinian land, thereby frustrating any possibility of a meaningful Palestinian state being established in the future. The ‘micro struggles’ we have documented are at the heart of a process with far wider implications for the future. At times, we have felt that what we have witnessed and documented are the pre-conditions for the ‘second Nakba’ – the ethnic cleansing of homes, villages and whole tracts of land such as the South Hebron Hills. This genocidal project will have been carried out by the Israeli state and its agents, but those states that failed to exercise effective leverage to put a stop to such barbarism will be partners in what we consider to be an ongoing crime against humanity.

Notes

one Unarmed Civilian Protection in the South Hebron Hills: The Changing Research Environment, 2022–25

- ¹ The origin of the local name for the area of the South Hebron Hills, Masafer Yatta, is thought to derive from the Arabic term for ‘travelling’, referencing the area’s distance from the town of Yatta. We use the two terms interchangeably throughout.
- ² Personal communication with local activist.
- ³ He had been sanctioned by the United States until President Trump rescinded all sanctions on Israeli settlers shortly after his return to office. See [Christou and Kierszenbaum \(2025\)](#).

two Contemporary Palestinian Unarmed Resistance to Occupation

- ¹ It is possible to trace the thread of Palestinian unarmed resistance to occupation to the early years of Jewish immigration in the late 19th century. See [Rigby \(2010\)](#).
- ² It was presumed at the time that the transitional period would last five years!
- ³ According to B’tselem, 85 per cent of the segregation wall was constructed on Palestinian-owned land ([B’tselem, 2017](#)).
- ⁴ The struggle in Budrus was portrayed in the 2009 documentary film *Budrus*. The unarmed resistance in Bil’in was documented in the 2011 film *5 Broken Cameras*.
- ⁵ This section draws on previously published work by [Darweish and Rigby \(2015\)](#).
- ⁶ Activists with Youth Against Settlements in Hebron received training in film making to document human rights violations and post them on social media ([Darweish and Rigby, 2015](#): 84–5).
- ⁷ One of the best-known cases was that of Bil’in: in December 2008, the Israeli High Court ruled to restrict the route of the Segregation Wall/Barrier so that the villagers could access land that would otherwise have been expropriated ([Jerusalem Post, 2008](#)).
- ⁸ This account is drawn primarily from the [Global Nonviolent Action Database \(2017\)](#).

- ⁹ According to UN estimates, in 2021 close to 1,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem were at risk of eviction due to cases brought before Israeli courts (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022a).
- ¹⁰ Israel claimed that the demonstrations provided cover for the attacks by militants. See [Cunningham and Balousha \(2018\)](#).
- ¹¹ For example, on 14 May 2018 Israel killed around 60 protestors. Hamas claimed that 50 of the victims were Hamas activists. See [Khoury \(2018\)](#).

three Unarmed Civilian Protection under Occupation

- ¹ NP have published their own substantial course manual; see [Oldenhuis et al \(2021\)](#).
- ² PBI (nd). It is interesting to note that in the executive summary of a report of a workshop on good practice held in Beirut in 2018, Christine Schweitzer used the term ‘accompaniment’ interchangeably with ‘UCP’ ([Schweitzer, 2018: 3](#)).
- ³ For example, during the period when McCarthy and Pinckney were carrying out their research, it was relatively easy for Israelis and internationals to gain access to areas of the West Bank close to the old ‘green line’, particularly in the central region of the West Bank. By contrast, access to the relatively remote region of the South Hebron Hills and the Jordan Valley presented greater challenges to those seeking to participate in the protection of Palestinians on the ground. See [Darweish and Rigby \(2015: 76–7\)](#).
- ⁴ For more details on the different roles of the accompaniers and the relationship with the local Palestinian communities, see [Elce \(2023\)](#).
- ⁵ For a historical overview, see [Weber \(2000: 15–44\)](#). See also [Schirch \(1995\)](#).

four Mapping the Conflict in the South Hebron Hills

- ¹ The 1995 Israeli–Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, article XI, para 3(c), Available from: <https://tinyurl.com/mrxcfdre>
- ² Around 20 per cent of the West Bank has been designated as ‘firing zones’, affecting over 5,000 Palestinians from 38 communities. [UN OCHA \(2022b\)](#).
- ³ The CPT had been involved in this kind of accompaniment – escorting children to school in the Old City of Hebron, where they faced threats from Israeli settlers. In 2022, Christian Peacemaker Team changed their name to Community Peacemaker Teams.
- ⁴ For information about the work of Operation Dove in the South Hebron Hills, see Community of Pope John XXIII Association (nd).

NOTES

- ⁵ In 2004, the Israeli military agreed to escort the students on their walk to and from school, but volunteers stay with the children while they wait for the soldiers to appear.
- ⁶ The sponsoring organizations of the Freedom Camp included the Center for Jewish Nonviolence, the Holy Land Trust, Youth Against Settlements, All That's Left, Combatants for Peace and the Popular Resistance Committee of the South Hebron Hills. See [Podolsky \(2017\)](#).

five Accompaniers: Who They Are and What They Do

- ¹ See [Clark \(2009a\)](#).
- ² The distinction between soldiers and settlers became increasingly problematic as our research proceeded.
- ³ Unlike volunteers from other international organizations and agencies, the EAs wore readily recognizable multi-pocketed gilets – khaki in colour with the logo of EAPPI prominently displayed.
- ⁴ The Pope John XXIII Community Association was founded in 1968 as a community of those dedicated to sharing their lives with the least in society, trying to remove the causes of poverty, marginalization and injustice. See <https://tinyurl.com/2ssnuvww>
- ⁵ They also had an apartment for ‘weekends’ in Bethlehem.
- ⁶ For 2024, the Hineinu placement programme was extended to four months.
- ⁷ Some of the women in At-Tuwani received basic training in teaching Arabic, with CJNV volunteers as their students.

six Challenges Faced by Accompaniers, 2022–23

- ¹ Learning from the Palestinian activists, the settlers equip themselves with cameras to record encounters and invariably cover their faces to avoid identification.
- ² We witnessed ISM volunteers on the frontline in confrontations with Israeli settlers and occupation forces.
- ³ CJNV recognize their privileged position as American Jews and understand that this privilege is not distributed equally. They seek to ‘use this power to play a connecting role for Jewish, Palestinian and Israeli groups and individuals who stand firmly against the occupation’. See [CJNV \(2025\)](#).
- ⁴ One of the reasons so few, if any, EAs had been deported prior to October 2023 can be attributed to their rules of engagement, which minimized the risk of clashes with Israeli police, military and settlers.
- ⁵ The Operation Dove volunteers could also seek some relief from their everyday stress during their three-month placement by ‘withdrawing’

to an apartment in Bethlehem rented by Operation Dove as a ‘weekend retreat’ for the volunteers.

seven *Sumud* and Community-Based Protection

- ¹ For a brief overview of the changing meaning attributed to *sumud*, see Rijke and van Teeffelen (2014).
- ² For more about *sumud* and the relationship to the land, see Darweish et al (2024).
- ³ This puts development aid in a new light: agencies can contribute directly to the enhancement of civilian protection in Masafer Yatta by providing the kind of aid and assistance that will enable people to remain on their land.
- ⁴ The Village Leagues were created in 1978 by Israel as rural leadership organizations. It was part of an Israeli attempt to undermine the influence of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Those involved were considered to be collaborators by Palestinians and they were all dissolved by the mid-1980s (Carmon, 2016).
- ⁵ We were aware that tensions existed between different local leaders, usually involving rivalry for status and influence.

eight Unarmed Civilian Protection in a War Zone

- ¹ Deir Yassin is a village near Jerusalem where 107 Palestinians, including women and children, were massacred by Zionist paramilitary forces on 9 April 1948.
- ² For details of Comet-ME’s ‘Stopping the Quiet Transfer, One Camera at a Time’ campaign, see <https://comet-me.org/programs/>
- ³ The decision to discard the blue vests was also to minimize the risks of provoking a reaction when EAs were travelling on public transport.
- ⁴ We met 20 ISM volunteers during our visit to Masafer Yatta on 15 July 2024.

nine Concluding Observations

- ¹ We reasoned Israel might find the option of UCP civilians acting in a peace-keeping role more acceptable than the deployment of a multinational police presence.

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