“The land is talking to me”: An interview with Jamal Juma’ on meanings of land, decolonization, resistance and solidarity from Palestine

Chandni Desai

Chandni Desai: It is an honour to be in dialogue with you Jamal. Can you begin by describing the current situation on the ground in Palestine?

Jamal: Yes of course. Things are very tense at the moment, especially between the people and the Palestinian Authority because of Israel’s targeted killing of one of the leaders of the youth movement Basil Al-Araj. Basil was assassinated in an Israeli raid in Ramallah on March 6, 2017. After killing him, they took him [a martyr] to court for being accused of having an illegal weapon. Can you imagine? It’s like a sad joke. So the youth are in front of the courts saying, “Fuck you,” you know? “You are stupid.” In response, the Authority will beat them. They beat them in a very bad way, even the girls, even the father of Basil – which is when the line was crossed. Attacking and beating the father of Basil made our people very angry. In the history of our struggle, I don’t think that a martyr’s father has ever been beaten by our own. We have an Authority who are collaborators, from the policeman to the president. So, the current situation is tense with demonstrations against the Authority, which is a big message as the Authority is being criticized and denounced for their security coordination with Israel.

As the coordinator of Stop the Wall Campaign in Palestine you support, document and share stories of the Zionist projects encroachment upon Palestinian lands, specifically through the construction of illegal settlements and the apartheid wall. You often share the story of Abu Nidal as an inspiring figure of resistance in Palestine. Can you describe how his land was confiscated and how his resistance and struggle was informed by his relationship to the land?
You can read the history of Palestine through the story of Abu Nidal. The history of the exodus, the expansion, the determination, the struggle, the steadfastness - all attached to the land. All of this is in one. It’s this kind of heroic resistance as he gives examples that seems almost impossible to do. This man, they are from Kafr Qasim next to the Green Line from ’48, he and his family had been expelled in ’48. He was still a boy, very young, but this is when his grandfather and his father had been chased into the mountains. During this period his grandfather was killed. The rest of the family stayed in the mountains under the trees, eating from the grass for two months, until they got to the closest village in ’67 where they had land.

When Abu Nidal’s family got there, they started to establish themselves again as refugees. In ’67, in the village they started planting, as a way to sustain themselves on the land. I think his father died early, so it was difficult for Abu Nidal to sustain his family and therefore during his youth, he left Palestine for fifteen years for work. Upon his return, Abu Nidal went back to that village and invested whatever money he made, there in this village, where they are staying now. His house is located on the main highway from Salfi to Qalqilya which is now blocked by a settlement – so his home is inside the settlement. Then the Zionists started confiscating the area there, and the settlements started to come closer and closer to his home. He first established a nursery that sold seedlings in that area. The Israeli military came suddenly and decided that his nursery is not under proper place, so they destroyed his nursery because his house was the last house in the village, where a [Jewish] settlement was coming. So, after they destroyed the nursery, then he started a small cafeteria selling tea and coffee, and they came and they destroyed that as well. He tried to move between his home and the coffee shop, until the apartheid Wall came [and was erected in the center of his life and livelihood]. The Israelis destroyed his coffee shop, and decided that his house will be destroyed as well.

However, Abu Nidal started to fight. At that time, we were starting as a movement [referring to Stop the Wall] so we started going there, participating and standing up with him. There was a solidarity tent set up there. Abu Nidal came under huge pressure from the military, the intelligence and the settlers who were attacking his home. His home was only about ten meters near to the settlers’ homes, so his life became a mess, and the family life became endangered. During the construction of the apartheid Wall, Israel decided to destroy part of Abu Nidal’s house and build the wall just one meter from the door of his home, which started another fight, until he was able to push the wall, something like twenty meters away from his door - but they wanted to block it totally.

When the military came to bulldoze the house, Abu Nidal was laughing while laying down on the ground. The military officer was looking at him like and said, “Are you going crazy?”

Abu Nidal responded: “No, I’m not crazy, but would you shut up because the land is talking to me.”

The military officer responded: “The land is talking to you?”

Abu Nidal said, “Yes. The land is talking to me, but someone like you will never understand the language of the land. You’re not belonging to this land.”
The military officer asked, “What has the land told you?”

Abu Nidal responded: “The land is telling me, it’s smiling and telling me, don’t worry. The more that I will stick to it, it will stay with me, I will be with you. And though they will come. They will leave anyway. They are not belonging to it, not belonging to me.”

The military officer became a little bit angry and said: “How much do you want for this house, is the land here worth to you? Is it one hundred thousand? Fifty thousand? What if we give you like a million? What if we give you an open check and you write the number that you want?”

Abu Nidal responded: “Look, if you bring all the money in the world and you put it here up into the sky, you will not get it.”

Abu Nidal ended up winning in that struggle, and the Zionists were not able destroy his home, and the wall was going to be pushed back. But after that, they wanted to close him inside his house. They made a barbwire fortress military camp around him, and they put a gate there and at that time they first said he’s not allowed to go in and out until the soldiers are at the gate. So that started another fight and Abu Nidal didn’t accept this in any way, so he told them, “I can die here but I’m not going in and out. I can go on a hunger strike. Me and the family are not going to leave home.” And he continued the fight with them.

Of course, he’s not alone in this. All the people were him. Abu Nidal informed the United Nations, and Red Cross. Then there was a meeting held, where the UN, Red Cross and Israeli military personal came to Abu Nidal to bargain about who should control the gate. Abu Nidal wanted the key and control over the gate and would not accept the soldiers letting him in and out. They tried to put conditions on him, like he can’t have young people at his home. So Abu Nidal told them, “No. This is my home and I decide who’s coming and not coming to my house. You can’t tell me who can come and who can’t come. So they will come here.” And after bargaining they said, “Ok, but no one is allowed to take pictures.” He said, “Also, I’m not accepting this. People who come to my house, they should feel free and they can take pictures of whatever they want. It is not your business. It is I who hold responsibility for that.” [Jamal emphasizes: This is not as easy as I’m talking about it]. It’s not like just one sitting, not just one time bargaining. It’s like a back and forth until he got what he wanted, especially the key to the gate. Soon after this situation, this site began to receive many delegations. Just two months ago, I took forty people there. We got inside the wall and of course I call him so he opened the door for me. And he wrote on the door there: “Welcome in the state of Abu Amar [referring to the deceased Yassar Arafat – former Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority]. He made it his state. So in a way, he was telling me once, you know, “I should give lessons to the Palestinian Authority about how to negotiate because they don’t know how to negotiate.”

So this is one part of the story and the most important part was what happened to the land which became isolated behind the wall. They insulated thousands of dunums, all this beautiful intensely cultivated land, different foods and vegetables, isolated behind the wall. They also isolated another village. So then Abu Nidal built there, during this fight, he built another small
farm, chicken farm in 600 square meters, and the Zionists came and they destroyed that as well. Abu Nidal approached the Palestinian Authority many times to be able to help him but they didn’t listen to him. He was about to be killed many times, like when the Israeli bulldozers were there, one time they started bulldozing behind the wall and his land, and he had to fight with them. He was alone there, and they beat him, and that was a major threat to his life. So to go there and to see what he has achieved, this man, it’s amazing. He’s going there without permission. And the land, another like, one thousand two hundred dunums that became planted with several kinds of foods because he was able to rehabilitate that land there (with some artisans). So after this long struggle, I am really happy when I go there to see him and to see what he achieved. Usually I take people there and continue this relationship with this man.

Abu Nidal is the story of real resistance, steadfastness, patience [sabar]. You know, he’s passionate, he’s determined. He’s willing to sacrifice anything for winning his land. And he’s a kind of an inspiration story, that I tell everybody, particularly the youth. So I take the youth there sometimes, because it is important, and you don’t find these days somebody who has this capacity for such kind of steadfastness. And we have these fighters who are real examples, inspiring examples. When I start feeling desperate and complaining, I start to laugh at myself “What am I talking about?” Just look at these people and what they are doing.

What do you think such narratives of resistance can teach the current youth generation/movement of Palestine?

It’s not just an eye opener. It’s a turning in your life. It’s giving them confidence - confidence in themselves and in our people. The comparison with this old man [Abu Nidal] has had so many difficulties, even health-wise, because of what he had to facing, but he is with his stick in his hand all the time. He was able to do that - resist and create victories. This awakens the belief in ourselves of anything we can do. It’s just like any inspiring story, this is what Abu Nidal, as a model, is creating. His resistance is like a source of happiness and joy! When you dig in the land, when you walk in the land, you feel your feet deep in the earth. You feel like you are part of it, and there is love for it, and the love is coming to us from the land. So their most joy is being there and the little achievement that they are getting from the struggle to keep this land. For example, when they saw the seeds blooming, or when the generator started to function and go on. This land that was never allowed to do that, and it was a struggle to hear that engine working. And for them, you feel like this is a symphony, that they are dancing.

It is difficult for someone who doesn’t have this relationship to the land to understand this. What they [referring to the Zionist settler colonists] want, is to take your feet out of the ground, out of the land. They want to separate you from there. But our strength will be continued. You will be safe as much as you stick to this land, as much as you pain from your efforts, from your feelings, from your sweating. This is what it gives you back. This is a real relationship that you can create, with you and the land.
Even if this youth generation didn’t experience certain catastrophes [referring to the 1948 Nakba], deeply behind it is this connection, because they are here in the refugee camps, and their feet and their feelings are there. The orchards, the lemon trees, their goats, sheep and horses, the seasons and the harvesting, yanni this is what they are made of, and they have grown up in it. It is the flesh from their bodies. It’s this love, this connection that all the time will be there, and [settlers] changing the place is not going to change it. This is inherited in a way from the other generations, this love to the land, the songs, the dancing, the days and nights, the seasons, everything in connection to that.

*What you are describing seems to me as though you are also talking about your relationship to the land (not simply that of others). How do you describe your own relationship to the land that you live on, and why is this relationship significant to you?*

In spite of now being a bit away from the life of a shepherd and having that direct connection, my relationship to the land is still in the blood, in the heart, in the aims of the struggle that we [Palestinians] are for. I think the first days and years of my life is what influenced my way of life, and made me understand Abu Nidal and other farmers. They described their relation to the trees and their ancestors and how this is connected. It’s a simple experience as a child that you go through. You grow up with your sheep, goats and the mountains, the seasons, being part of that. I grew up understanding the seasons, like winter is coming, now spring is coming, and you know the sentence from the ground itself – it will tell you and you will understand it. When you see specific plants, you will know certain seasons are coming. For example, just a month before the winter, you see this kind of plant that is strange which has grown in a dry area without any water, suddenly when it stems out of the land, the land is telling you that the winter is coming. Also, with the sheep, the language that’s created between you and the animals - it’s amazing. Even like the relation between the animals, between the dogs and the donkeys, the sheep and the donkeys, the dogs, the chickens, the birds. It’s all like a kind of a nation, and we know its languages and everybody knows its boundaries, and communicate with each other very well, and this is all connected to nature. You know exactly when the birds wake up. You wake up to their noise. You wake up with them before the sun. They are very active, loudly singing, and then you see them going down, they go to sleep. In the morning before the sun rises, everybody wakes up the sheep and goats, the animals start giving the sounds that we want to go out. You can’t just keep us, lock us there. The same when they come back, the language between them and their babies. So without putting effort, you live with the environment and land and understand it. And you keep noticing that immediately.

Besides that, going out with every storm, every water fall, like any plant that you see growing up. You go back and you see it growing out from these rocks and between the rocks. It has also this thing that has been made inside you and you start feeling with it. The circle of life becomes part of your circle of life. And you became attached in a way, and so the following year you go to see the same plant and the same place to see what’s happening there. We are Bedouins
like that. We are nomadic by going. We are farmers as well. We have our horses, we have donkeys, we have mules. We are planting the land, planting vegetables and widely planting for animals, wheat and other kinds of seeds. While growing the land, you throw the seeds in there and the seed goes out, which is something also very important, when he throws the seeds on the land that he’s ploughing, and a very beautiful wish to nature and to God, putting the seeds there for us and for the birds and for all who needs that. Inside that, they know they are putting this in the ground and this is not going to be benefiting just for them but for the birds and animals. And even, when you see birds around you, during the farming process when you are putting grains in the ground, and the birds start to come around and pick at this, our instinct is to chase them, but the farmer would say: “No, no, no. Don’t do that.” They have their part, in a way. So this is relation. And you are committed to this land. This kind of living, being part of this, makes you commit to that.

For the generation who had been expelled from their lands. It’s not just like this land has been taken from them like this. It’s their memories, it’s their life, it’s their ancestors, it’s their history, and their emotions. There’s this connection to the stones, to the soil, to the trees, to the birds, to the animals that they can’t have anymore. It’s all their life. It’s like they take everything from inside you that makes you who you are inside. That is what will create this sadness and anger to resist. Because something is missing - it’s continuing, this endless missing to the land. That’s where the capacity of sacrificing comes from. The Palestinian revolution started from there, from the refugees, from those who lost their land. All the time, it’s this revolution, this wood for this fire that inspires the resistance of the people.

So when we think of decolonizing Palestine, from the current Authority to the Zionist Israeli settler colonial project, apartheid regime and occupation, if you were to think of a Palestine that is liberated or decolonized, what would that decolonization look like for you?

I see that our land has been raped from then [1948] until today. There are settler colonies occupying all the hilltops, and contaminating all our water, destroying the kind of relation we have to the land, you can’t get back there again, until you purify the land. When you move by car, and you see these old houses in Palestinian villages, how they were built, you realize it was built in a way that is in harmony with nature. Immediately, you don’t see the contradiction in the building. The houses are closer to the land itself. They built their house at the foot of the mountain, not at the top, not in the area that they are planting. So they choose a place where it’s easy access to the land, very well protecting them, and it doesn’t harm nature at all. To decolonize, you need to have a kind of surgical approach. If I could, I would remove all the settlements. I would not leave anything. So if you want to get back to the conciliation with the land, you have to do a lot of reparation.

Second, we need to alter the criminal mentality that leads to the situation - it has to be vanished. This colonization of the mentality - the capitalist mentality - is what has led us to the
situation that we are in now. This mentality has betrayed us, led them [the current Palestinian Authority] to betray their cause, betray their land, betray their people, and these things that come out as a result of this colonized mentality. For some people it’s a hopeless case, in a way. The Authority that’s controlling, that they consider themselves leaders to the Palestinian people, which they’ll never be. They are not in any way leaders to the people. And this is a shame in Palestinian history, and it’s a shame for the Palestinian people. And it has destroyed the reputation of the Palestinian people. That’s the first thing you have to do to decolonize.

Third we need to also decolonize the minds of our people, because the minds of the people are colonized. You need to bring them back to the reality. You need to bring back the confidence in themselves. We need to have wakened them up again.

*In your movement work you have had the opportunity to meet other colonized, oppressed and Indigenous communities around the world, can you share some memorable moments that you have had?*

When I first came to Canada to speak during Israeli Apartheid Week, the organizers arranged a meeting with an Indigenous community there. During that meeting, I opened my laptop and shared pictures of Palestine, the burning of the fields, confiscation of the land, colonizing and uprooting the trees and our resistance. The conversation became very dynamic at that point, and I remember very well the sentence that the chief shared with me (he was almost crying), he said: “Continue the fight and be sure you do not end up like us.” This was so sad for me. I feel the desperation in the voice of the man. They talked about what had happened to them, how the government opened highways from their land, and corporations are dumping chemicals in their places, and how they’re confiscated from their colonies as well. They mentioned that they felt it was the “same”. When you meet other oppressed communities around the world, you make connections in how the colonial power is oppressing the oppressed in the same way – exploiting, stealing resources, eliminating and killing the “other”. This is the savageness of capitalism, which doesn’t care about what catastrophes they can do to other people.

Another experience I will share is, once we had a delegation here in Palestine from United States, from the Indigenous communities there, most of them were youth. So I had to organize a meeting with our youth. We had this opportunity with this big delegation. It was amazing, getting us all together in one big room, sitting in front of each other in two lines. At first nobody wanted to speak about anything, and there was just silent because the youth were unsure about where to begin the conversation. To provoke them, I made a statement to see how everyone would react and said “the Indigenous people of the U.S. had lost their struggle”. This was enough to provoke the youth, who stood up and loudly said “No that’s not true,” and everybody started talking and sharing stories. There was a huge anger inside this youth generation. The youth from both places started to tell stories about their struggles, about what happened to them, the occupation, their villages, about their communities. No matter the geographic distance between them, and despite the difference in the time of suffering between us
and them, we had similar stories. The story of the Indigenous people of Turtle Island started 500 years ago. Our issue starts maybe 100 years ago, but it’s the same. When people were explaining what happened to them, it’s the same. It’s an issue of the land – we have been stripped from our land. That was clear, and we could see that. One of the things that Israel is trying to do here in Palestine is use the model of Native Americans. We have learned about how colonialism worked there, and we say that we do not want to be suffocated on reservations.

You know, I didn’t feel that I needed to meet the Indigenous people of Turtle Island to understand their struggles, to feel an affinity with them. Since I was a kid we had seen films promoting this “good American” and the “savage” who deserves being killed - calling them “red Indians.” The name that they gave them, disconnected them from their land base. The Indigenous people have been the ones responsible for the land. They are the ones who know how valuable the land is. They are the ones who have been made out of its soil - their beliefs, their moves, their dresses, their way of life, their culture. Their everything tells you these are the people that have been oppressed who have experienced one of the worst genocides. So all the time, they are in my heart, and you feel them. And it’s important for us to meet them, face to face to see what’s going on. For me, personally, I had this chance to meet Indigenous peoples there and connect to them. They are still standing and holding the flag of their cause, their struggle after all these years continues. I don’t believe they lost. They are still alive and their cause is still alive, and they continuously remind the world that this is the biggest shame of the face of humanity and human history. I don’t think that anybody can compensate them for that, from the destruction that has happened to them, their land, their connection to the land. But hopefully the time will come when they will get back their freedom, their freedom to be what they want to be.

Since my meetings with them, I was very keen to unify the struggle, to have the struggle all together. It has to go beyond solidarity, to unifying our struggles, not just supporting things when there is something going on. I believe in working towards a joint global struggle for people’s rights of Palestinians, Africans, Latin Americans, Asians and Indigenous people worldwide. So that’s where I think is one of the dreams, when we talk about globalizing the struggle, is to create one front worldwide (in spite of this seeming romantic). But worldwide against our enemy – capitalism.

*Do you think that there’s a possibility for a win (decolonization, liberation) in Palestine any time in the next few decades?*

Yanni, of course. I think this is the drive that has kept our people struggling. We believe strongly that a change is coming and this - you know, the people have a saying here, usually you hear it from the old people, “This land is holy and the oppression won’t sustain forever”.

One of the things that is sustaining and strengthening the Zionist colonization of our lands is other colonial powers, who have taken care of the Zionists. Now it is in the hands of the Americans. What is happening in the Middle East now, I think it’s part of this very, very, very hard and painful birth, that could take years, and will be costly, in which the region will pay a
very, very, heavy price. I don’t think this would be for nothing, or for restarting a new colonial era. This is the price for the new, better era for the people. People have been suffering from Yemen to Syria to Iraq to Palestine to Egypt to Libya. So for how long can they keep the people oppressed. And we believe in the people, the power of the people is what will end this.

My final question is what does freedom mean to you? If you could imagine freedom, what would your freedom look like?

Wow. [Long Silence]. This word is really big, and nobody knows how valuable it is until he/she has lost it; you don’t know the value of freedom until you lose it. Being free is living how you want to live, how you want to see your people living. Living free would mean not having anybody in front of you asking: “Where are you going? Where is your ID?” Wow. I never thought about how difficult it is to express what freedom is until now. You know, I feel it when I leave Palestine sometimes. That’s when I feel and realize how bad our situation is. When I have travelled outside, I have seen places without soldiers, without colonies, without seeing the anger in the eyes of the people. Sometimes we/I envy the birds. We/I envy the animals that they can fly without a border, without somebody who will stop them somewhere, without somebody interfering in your life and even in one’s dreams. When you are occupied, there’s something important taken out of you. You can’t even dream sometimes. You feel that dreaming is too much for you. Sometimes the dreams that you have are so simple. A dream is to see a gate in front of your house removed. To dream and awake in the morning and not see the wall anymore, to not see the soldiers, the military towers or even your Authority there. So, it’s complicated. It’s one systematic, complicated thing that has come together. You feel that it’s like a stranglehold. There is something big in your chest that you want to get rid of. You know, I don’t think, I will know freedom until I see it with my eyes. The time that I don’t see any of them here, any of our oppressors. So I feel that I can’t express what freedom will look like, until I don’t see them anymore. Maybe, that’s when I will be able to really answer your question. (this seeming romantic). But worldwide against our enemy – capitalism.
**Jamal Juma** is a coordinator for the Stop the Wall Campaign and the Land Defense Coalition. Since the Wall's inception in 2002 the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (or Stop the Wall) has been the main national grassroots body mobilizing and organizing the collective efforts against the Wall. It is based on the efforts of popular committees in the villages affected by the Wall where people can meet, organize, strategize and mobilize. A coordination mechanism in each West Bank district allows regional coordination as well as West Bank wide coordination.

The Stop the Wall coordination office works to ensure national networking, research and international outreach. The immediate goals of the Stop the Wall campaign have been sanctioned by the decision of the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of the construction of the Wall (July 9 2004) and are:

1. The immediate cessation of the building of the Wall.
2. The dismantling of all parts of the Wall and its related zones already built.
3. The return of lands confiscated for the path of the Wall.
4. The compensation of damages and lost income due to the destruction of land and property in addition to the restitution of land.

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