

Essay

Palestine, West Bank: Co-Resistance at a Crossroads

Thursday 18 April 2024, by [ROSEN Maya](#) (Date first published: 16 April 2024).

As anti-Palestinian violence in the West Bank reaches new heights, a beleaguered movement gathers to reflect.



A screening of No Other Land in the village of Tuwani in Masafer Yatta, March 14th.

BEFORE OCTOBER 7TH, those of us who are part of the Palestinian-Israeli civil resistance community in the occupied West Bank saw each other often: sometimes at protests or civil disobedience actions, sometimes at large community gatherings, sometimes just to spend an afternoon together. But especially in the past six months, many of these interactions have vanished in the face of growing state and settler violence, confining our togetherness to less frequent visits and small [protective presence](#) trips. So it was somewhat of a shock to the system to find myself, one early spring evening, in the schoolyard of the village of Tuwani in the Masafer Yatta region of the southern West Bank, surrounded by what felt like the entire joint resistance community—hundreds strong—that has been fighting the forced depopulation of the area. For years, those gathered in this courtyard had together blocked roads, been tear-gassed and beaten, faced batons and stun grenades, accompanied shepherds, slept in tents ahead of anticipated demolitions, cleared the rubble of destroyed homes, rehabilitated roads and schools and gardens, and waited outside police stations to file complaints or to receive arrested comrades. We had harvested olives, eaten iftar meals on hot summer nights, shared more cups of sugary tea than I could ever count, attended funerals and weddings, spent long days sitting under the trees in the summer and huddled around ovens in the winters, and sat in so many meetings planning protests and campaigns. Along the way, we helped bring [international attention](#) to the ongoing displacement of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta—and created a rare community of Palestinian-led co-resistance in the process.

But our efforts have not been enough to slow the relentlessness of Palestinian displacement, a recognition that is at the heart of the documentary screening that brought us together that evening. We were gathered to watch [No Other Land](#), a movie created by four of our co-resistors: Masafer Yatta residents Basel Adra and Hamdan Ballal, and Israelis Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor. The film—which follows the local community's struggle against forced expulsion, as well as Adra and Abraham's growing friendship—is often wistfully mundane, lingering on the sloping hills of Masafer Yatta, Adra's younger sisters falling asleep as he and Abraham talk, his young nephew playing with

sheep in the village. But, like much Palestinian life in the West Bank, the film's ordinary moments are always accompanied by harrowing ones: women begging soldiers to stop as bulldozers raze their homes to the ground, protests crushed with extreme violence, the shootings of close friends. Throughout, the civil resistance movement is shown trying to halt, or at least document, these events, but is often stymied by the sheer brutality of the attacks. The documentary opens with an acknowledgment of this impossible situation, as Adra tells us: "I started filming when we started ending." I shuddered when I heard this line, devastated by the thought that Palestinian life in Masafer Yatta, and the community we've built around protecting it, might be "ending." Indeed, within a month of the screening, the Israeli government has initiated some of its largest-ever takeovers of Palestinian land, while settlers [burn down homes](#) in broad daylight and a far-right minister [forms](#) a special police squad to target solidarity activists. *No Other Land* probes this ongoing "ending"—offering a portrait both durational and complex, reflecting back our deepest questions about our joint movement, and helping us think through what might lie ahead.

SINCE ITS RELEASE in February, *No Other Land* has only been shown on the European film festival circuit, where it [generated controversy](#) winning Best Documentary at the Berlinale film festival in Germany. The [special screening](#) in Adra's home village of Tuwani marked the first time the film was shared with local residents and the broader joint solidarity community it depicted. The evening was punctuated by children shouting in excitement when people and places they recognized appeared on screen; their reactions underscored the shared surreality of watching our own recent history, which has nevertheless seemed distant since October 7th.

This is a challenging time for a story about Palestinian and Israeli co-resistance. The choice to resist together can be perceived as rubbing up against the principle of anti-normalization, which holds that relations with Israel and Israelis should not be conducted "normally," as if there were no occupation or inequality. Anti-normalization guidelines argue, for instance, that "coexistence" programs normalize the occupation, bringing Israelis and Palestinians together under the false guise of equal sides. Our work has responded to this principle by offering a framework of "co-resistance," which, unlike "coexistence," is predicated on a shared commitment to fighting for Palestinian liberation and an acknowledgment of differentials in power. But despite our attempt to enact this new paradigm, inequalities of power between Israeli and Palestinian activists have continued to shape our work, and how it is understood.

No Other Land—itself a joint Palestinian-Israeli venture—approaches these questions with helpful specificity, rooting them within the particular struggle it depicts. In making this move, the film clarifies the simple fact that discussions about normalization look different based on where one is standing. In Masafer Yatta, the urgency of the depopulation threat, and the lack of viable alternatives, means that debates around normalization often manifest in the course of joint action rather than in the question of whether to engage in this work at all. At one point, for example, Ballal turns to Abraham and notes, "Your brother could destroy our home," referring to the likelihood that Abraham, even if he is a "good guy," almost certainly has family who have served or are serving in the Israeli military, and questioning what that proximity and complicity means for the possibility of working together. The two then start to debate the political relevance of this claim, all while they carry a tabun oven to the center of the village to help with dinner preparations. By featuring this discussion—which occurs within the framework of cooking together in an area both participants care about but which only one of them can leave at will—*No Other Land* illustrates that true co-resistance depends on the sometimes fraught, but often mutually nourishing, day-to-day work of relationship building, where trust comes from getting arrested side by side, and, when released, spending the night to ensure that retaliatory nighttime raids are not borne alone.

The documentary is sensitive to the fact that relationships of trust and care, even once established, are still always shot through with power differentials. For instance, in multiple scenes, Adra asks

Abraham why he is leaving Masafer Yatta for the evening, or asks him not to leave. This entreaty is multivalent, at once political and personal. It stems from Palestinian hospitality culture; from the fact that Israelis' presence offers some measure of increased safety overnight; and from the reality that as a West Bank Palestinian, Adra cannot visit Abraham, which means that Abraham's decision of when to come to Tuwani is the sole determinant of how much time the two friends will spend together. Watching these exchanges, I felt a jolt of recognition; living in Jerusalem, these are scenes I have lived so many times that the question "Why are you leaving?" sometimes appears in my dreams as a haunting specter, especially on days when I've quietly contemplated leaving this land. I try to come to Masafer Yatta as often as I can, but no frequency is enough to avoid the question, which itself points to the limits of a collectivity where some people have the choice to leave and others do not.



Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham, Basel Adra, and Rachel Szor. Photo by Oren Ziv

The option to leave also means that outside activists often relate to the movement to save Masafer Yatta differently from the residents struggling generation after generation to hold on to their land. While preventing displacement is a shared goal, for the former group, the struggle can appear finite, if sharply uphill; for the latter, it often feels continuous and without end. "I feel you're enthusiastic. You want to solve everything quickly and go home in ten days. You want it all so fast," Adra accuses Abraham at one point in the film. "What's wrong with that?" Abraham responds. "Nothing," Adra answers, "but you'll fail. You need patience." At another point, Adra chides Abraham for expecting too much out of social media posts about the campaign when Abraham complains a particular post didn't receive enough views.

While some of these differences in orientation persist years into shared struggle, others are bridged by experience. For my part, having tried to bring the story of the destruction of Masafer Yatta to the news for years—editing dozens of articles by Palestinian residents, sitting in countless meetings about social media strategy, appearing on podcasts and webinars with partners from the region—I now understand Adra's caution about patience well. The work of documentation is certainly urgent: Without it, the wider world would not know about the daily violence in Masafer Yatta, and the possibility of present-day political pressure and future recompense would both be diminished, if not lost altogether. However, documentation is often a losing battle when it comes to preventing immediate harm to Palestinians. Every day brings horrors: homes demolished, roads destroyed, cars confiscated, activists detained, shepherds threatened, animals killed, water lines cut. But it's the same forms of violence again and again, which means that no single incident is big enough to capture attention or become a news "story," even as the cumulative effect is crushing—a slow layering of horror upon horror.

A stark example of the limits of our work is the story of Harun Abu Aram, a young man from Masafer Yatta who was paralyzed after an Israeli soldier shot him in the neck in 2021, when Abu Aram was 24 years old. Despite his severe injury, Abu Aram continued living in a cave because Israel did not allow building permits for new homes in his village, in addition to denying connection to running water and electricity. We tried to fight against the brutality Abu Aram faced. I remember one protest in Masafer Yatta the summer after he was shot where we clashed with Israeli soldiers on some

hillside, and as they shot tear gas at us, I could see Abu Aram sitting in his wheelchair outside the cave, watching us. Friends urged him to go back inside, but he wouldn't, insisting, through his refusal, on remaining part of the resistance. But the protest, though it brought us together and breathed life into our small movement, changed nothing for Abu Aram's material conditions. Nor did countless journalists' visits and interviews. He eventually died of his injuries in 2023, and although his shooting, and later his death, were mentioned [in a few scattered articles](#), it's hard to find any solace in what journalist visits did for him or the struggle for his home. Watching his story in the documentary, including interviews with his mother bemoaning the journalists who came and left, I was overcome—by anger at a cruel system, disappointment at the structural inadequacy of our work, and sorrow for how deep the loss runs.

WALKING DOWN THE VILLAGE PATH back to our car after the film, I remembered that this was the same path we used to take to leave Tuwani in order to protest against forced expulsions in the area the Israeli military deemed "Firing Zone 918." At the time, we were already beleaguered and no one—ourselves included—thought we would win. But now, I felt nostalgic for those protests of not so many years ago: for the era of the documentary, when we were busy and focused and full of the invigorating feeling that we were building toward something. It's a feeling that's hard to imagine now, in the overwhelming devastation of a post-October 7th world: where residents now move sparingly between villages out of a fear of violence; where night raids, arrests, and torture are daily occurrences; and where we haven't even spoken a word about planning protests in Masafer Yatta because the risk to people's lives would simply be too high. In this world, the path I am walking is no longer associated with protests; instead, it has become the road where Zakariyah Adra, Basel's cousin, was shot in the abdomen at point-blank range by a settler soon after October 7th. The moment of the shooting is featured at the end of the film, part of a post-October 7th epilogue; despite the [clear video evidence](#) of the attack, the settler who shot Zakariyah has faced no charges.

This is not to say that shared struggle has ended. There are activists—Palestinians, Israelis, internationals—still doing vital work in Masafer Yatta, still risking their lives in an increasingly violent environment to help the communities living there, still sleeping overnight in villages facing threats, still trying to accompany shepherds and schoolchildren facing harassment, putting their bodies between them and soldiers and settlers. The work our movement has continued to do in this moment is a testament to the strength of these relationships of co-resistance that have been built in Masafer Yatta over the course of decades. And as long as the commitment to Palestinians staying on their land is shared by at least the few hundred people packing a schoolyard in Tuwani, the question of "the end" of co-resistance is not one I must answer or even have the power to decide. Our friends remain in Masafer Yatta, and so we will continue to come.

But as we parted that evening in Tuwani, I reflected on Adra's provocation in the beginning of the film—his naming this time as an ending—and wondered if a new era did lie ahead. Even before October 7th, we were a disheveled group of a few dozen activists protesting as settlers surrounded us, guns in their holsters. With settlers now [wearing military uniforms](#) and [holding guns](#) freely handed out to them by the government, the tension—between the smallness of our protests and the vastness of the repression—feels even more untenable. In this moment, Adra's reminder to be patient resonates. In any future scenario where we don't lose definitively, our path forward will be a very long one, characterized by moments of progress and retreat. Perhaps the old, grinding status quo will return, and we will go back to the days of coordinated campaign planning, of weekly protests in the firing zone; or perhaps this new level of horror will become the norm; or maybe, somehow, we will chart a path out of this current catastrophe. For now, I simply miss the feeling of working together toward something and fear the emptiness of dissolution and inaction.

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P.S.

- *Jewish Currents*. April 16, 2024:
<https://jewishcurrents.org/co-resistance-at-a-crossroads-masafer-yatta-west-bank-resistance>
- Maya Rosen is the Israel/Palestine fellow at *Jewish Currents*.