

Ilham Zeda



Gardens and Upcycling Products as Symbols of Resistance

Defiance of Al-Walajah's women against Israeli occupation—The human face of an unbearable situation

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Ilham Zeda, born in 1980, lives in Al-Walajah in the occupied West Bank. Israel is planning to extend illegal settlements in her area and has already annexed large parts of the Palestinian village. But a women's committee is defiantly opposing the occupational forces. These Palestinian women remain in their houses, around which they cultivate beautiful gardens, and they run a workshop to produce up-cycled handicraft items. Their very existence thus becomes an act of nonviolent resistance. The initiative "Sumud" (steadfastness) has been supported by KURVE Wustrow since 2016.

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44 **T**he best thing in the world is to have a house for yourself with some land around and some space and calmness. This is ultimate stability!” Ilham Zeda from Al-Walajah in the occupied West Bank can certainly not take stability for granted. Like all other villagers, she is constantly facing the risk of being evicted and having her house demolished. Yet, Ilham and other Palestinian women won’t give in to the threats of the Israeli army. Defiantly, they remain on their plots and have created beautiful gardens around their houses. “Each garden is a symbol of resistance”, reads their message.

Al-Walajah near Bethlehem is surrounded by Jewish settlements, checkpoints and the wall between Israel and the West Bank. As the area is of high strategic importance to Israel, the military au-

thorities have kept full sovereignty over security matters. This implies, amongst other things, that Palestinians are usually not granted any building permits. Many houses that were built nevertheless were subsequently destroyed, and large parts of the village were annexed for the construction of settlements which violate international law. All this is creating a climate of fear amongst the villagers. However, more and more women from Al-Walajah are absolutely determined not to be intimidated: “We are frightened, of course, but our resolve to stay is stronger.”

Steadfastness means “Sumud” in Arabic, and this is the very motto of this women’s initiative which has been supported by KURVE Wustrow since 2016: “Existence is resistance”, they proclaim. Their gardens give a human face to an otherwise unbearable situation in their village, and this alone is a contribution to change and nonviolent resistance. Notwithstanding all political and social obstacles, the women have also started a small income generating project: They have founded the carpenter’s shop “RWEISAT for Wood Art” in which they produce upcycling craft items out of used wood. The workshop is named after the nearby hill of Rweisat which Israel wants to annex for the extension of settlements. The women’s committee now calls itself the “RWEISAT Team”.

To make a life-long dream come true, Ilham wanted to start building her own house on her husband's family plot in Al-Wajalah more than a decade ago. Only with a lot of patience could she convince her husband that it was worth a try. However, she had a long way with many obstacles to go before her aspirations could be fulfilled. "Soon after we had started, we received a call saying that Israeli military soldiers were at our house. When they left, I reached the house and found a final notification of demolition within 24 hours", Ilham recalls. "We were mentally destroyed. We were scared and sad and lost, on our nerves."

Miraculously though, Ilham's family was spared the destruction of their future home. Although Israeli soldiers came to the immediate vicinity with their bulldozers, Ilham's building structure was not touched. Yet, it took several years before the outstanding construction works were continued. Ilham's husband just couldn't bear the thought of working so hard for a house that might then be demolished by the Israeli occupying forces. But Ilham persisted. As money was scarce, she took up a loan from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and finally her husband gave in.

"I would never forget the first day of construction, when he came back

home from work and I insisted on going to see the house", Ilham recalls. "He said it is only the first day, you cannot see anything yet. But I insisted. We went there, and I truly cannot describe my feeling back then. I will never forget it. It has been more than seven years already, and I still remember it very well. The best feeling ever!"

The house is still not totally completed, but Ilham is very happy there, as she stresses: "I was always focusing on having a house for myself with some land around, even if it was in a besieged village." Such perseverance of a woman faced with objections from the authorities as well as her husband is undoubtedly remarkable in Arabic society, but it characterises all the women from the Al-Walajah initiative. By staying in their homes, despite harsh living conditions and permanent pressure

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from the military, these villagers live “Sumud”. Al-Walajah has thus gained great importance for the Palestinian resistance movement.

In their gardens, many women grow fruits and vegetables to provide better nourishment for their families, and with their upcycling products they have increased the wealth of the whole village. Alone the fact that women run a carpenter’s shop has raised much attention. Proudly, the “RWEISAT Team” offers alternative tourists’ trips through Al-Walajah in order to showcase the success of this unusual project and raise awareness for the social and political challenges local people are facing. Again, this generates some income for the village community—as well as more visibility.

The women love to compare themselves to a more than 5,500-year-old olive tree in their village: “I’m staying put like the tree. I can resist. The tree doesn’t bid defiance just for its own sake, no, it is there for others as well. It provides shade and is thus helping all those around. I see myself as part of this tree, as if I were the tree. Beautiful, strong and proud. I defy any weather conditions and all other abject circumstances, no matter what happens.”

46 In cooperation with KURVE Wustrow, the women’s committee has also produced a photo book. It gives a deep insight into the life in Al-Walajah and describes how the garden project has strengthened the women’s resilience, enabling them and their families to stay where they are. Like the subsequent workshop project, it can be viewed as a form of effective and creative resistance which is characterised not by fury but by beauty.



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