

**Hammad, J. & Tribe, R. (2020) Culturally informed resilience in conflict settings: A literature review of Sumud in the occupied Palestinian territories. *International Review of Psychiatry***

**Jeyda Hammad<sup>a\*</sup> & Rachel Tribe<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> University of East London, UK

\* Corresponding author: C/O School of Psychology, University of East London, Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London, E15 4LZ, United Kingdom.

Email addresses: jeydahammad@hotmail.co.uk (J Hammad), r.tribe@uel.ac.uk (R Tribe)

**Abstract**

Investigating culturally specific views and experiences of trauma and resilience can offer new insights that can aid distress management, meaning making, coping and resilience in adverse conditions, and inform emergency and disaster responses. Sumud is a Palestinian cultural construct and component of resilience in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). Sumud in Arabic refers to steadfastness or perseverance. This literature review focuses on research studies on Sumud in the oPt, with particular attention on the meaning and manifestations of Sumud, the role of non-violent resistance, and how Sumud and non-violent resistance informs resilience and coping in the context of a military occupation, protracted political conflict, and chronic adversity. The peer-reviewed literature was surveyed using the PubMed and PsycINFO databases. The findings indicate how Sumud is a central component of resilience and provides a meta-cognitive framework which Palestinians use to interpret, cope and respond to ongoing injustice and traumatic experiences, engendering a sense of purpose and meaning. It is both a value and an action that manifests via individual and collective action to protect family and community survival, wellbeing, dignity, Palestinian identity and culture, and a determination to remain on the land. The implications of this study and the relevance of the findings to mental health and disaster relief are considered.

Key words: culture; Palestinian; political conflict; resilience; resistance; Sumud

**Introduction**

Current conceptualisations of resilience are considered to be culturally embedded (Marie, Hannigan, & Jones, 2018). Forms of coping and resilience vary from region to region, reflecting different traditions and the influence of systemic contexts, religion and culture on indigenous understandings and expressions of resilience (Fernando, 2014; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). The study of cultural, religious and systemic factors in mental health is growing. For example, Zraly and Nyirazinyoye's (2010) ethnographic study found that Rwandan constructs of kwihangana (withstanding), kwongera kubaho (living again), and gukomeza ubuzima (continuing life), promoted resilience and enduring with daily suffering among genocide-rape survivors. In Afghanistan, the religious concept of iman, strong religious faith, and the cultural construct of individual effort, koshesh informed resilience, fortitude and

hope in the context of adversity, structural inequalities, extreme poverty and political conflict (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010). Likewise, ubuntu (humanity), a source of resilience and connection to cultural heritage (van Breda, 2018), appeared to encourage resilience among South Africans living in townships (Theron, 2007).

Sumud is a culturally valued concept that underpins resilience for Palestinians (Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser, & Boyce, 2008). However, Meari (2014) argues that sumud has no fixed meaning because it incorporates various practices and representations to convey meaning. There remains a lack of research on resilience in conflict-affected settings and Arabic cultures (Marie, Harrigan, & Jones, 2016), as well as what constitutes coping in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) (Afana, Tremblay, Ghannam, Ronsbo, & Veronese, 2018). The military occupation and protracted conflict has a negative psychological impact on civilians, which highlights the importance of understanding how people cope and maintain resilience in this context (e.g. Afana et al., 2018). Coping plays a mediating role in the relationship between the stress and the trauma and the psychological well-being of survivors of war and conflict (Thabet, El-Buhaisi, & Vostanis, 2014). Accordingly, this literature review aims to provide an overview of research studies regarding culturally specific core constructs of resilience in the oPt – sumud and non-violent resistance, with a particular focus on the meaning and expression of sumud.

### **History and Context**

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been ongoing for over 70 years. In 1948, the state of Israel was created on approximately three quarters of the region that was, at the time, known as Palestine (Barber et al., 2014). The 1948 war is described as the ‘Nabkha’ (catastrophe; Afana et al., 2018), which resulted in mass displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians forced to flee their homes in Palestine, becoming refugee people (United Nations Relief Works Agency [UNRWA] & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2007). Since 1948, Palestinians have experienced continual collective trauma and loss, oppression, and political and socioeconomic issues (Afana et al., 2018). The Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem (oPt) has been ongoing for over 50 years; which involves Israeli control over access to resources, employment, land, and free movement of people (Amnesty International, 2018; Amnesty International UK et al., 2010; World Bank, 2012, 2016).

Contrary to international law, the Gaza Strip has been under an illegal Israeli blockade (sea, air and land) since 2007 (Amnesty International, 2018), whereby Palestinians are denied freedom of movement to travel, work, study, and visit family members outside of the Gaza Strip, with rare exceptions made (Amnesty International, 2018; B’Tselem, 2017; Gisha, 2018). Humanitarian organisations report that civilians in the Gaza Strip have been living in severe conditions: poverty and food insecurity, high unemployment rates, ongoing safety concerns and rapidly deteriorating living conditions, which lack essential infrastructure (e.g. water and sanitation systems), and with limited post-war reconstruction (e.g. Amnesty International, 2018; Amnesty International UK et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2014; Save the Children & Medical Aid for Palestinians, 2012; United Nations Country Team in the oPt, 2017; UNRWA, 2018). Gaza receives an average of two to four hours of electricity per day (Amnesty International, 2018). The Gaza Strip has experienced four wars within seven years. In 2007, a civil war emerged

between two Palestinian political factions; this was followed by three wars between Israeli military forces and Gazan forces; in 2008/2009 (22-day war), 2012 (six-day war), and 2014 (51-day war), which collectively resulted in the deaths of more than 3500 Gazans and up to 100 Israelis (Barber et al., 2014). In the West Bank, Palestinians also experience poverty, poor living conditions and unemployment but not to the same severity as Gaza. They experience restrictions on freedom of movement due to expanding settlements and having to go through various military checkpoints to get to places within the West Bank itself; they have daily encounters with the Israeli military and Israeli settlers, and are subjected to violence, raids, forced evictions, house demolitions, etc. (Amnesty International, 2018).

### **Methodology**

A review of the peer-reviewed literature and grey literature was conducted. These reviews aimed to identify and assess current research knowledge on sumud and adult Palestinians in the oPt. The peer-reviewed literature was surveyed using the PubMed and PsycINFO databases. In addition, the literature reviewed included that gathered during the first author's doctoral research. Identified articles and studies were screened for relevance concerning sumud, non-violent resistance and resilience in the oPt by article title and abstract and then full article. Additional relevant references were identified by reviewing the bibliographies of included articles. The inclusion criteria (search terms) used in the literature searches were: (Sumud) OR (resistance) AND ("occupied Palestinian territories" OR "Palestine" OR "Palestinian" OR "West Bank" OR "Gaza" OR "Jerusalem"). The exclusion criteria were articles unrelated to adults, sumud, and articles referring to Palestinians living outside of the oPt, due to different contexts and challenges. Analysis of studies included reflecting on aims, sample, data collection, procedure, limitations and key findings.

### **Findings**

Historically, according to Meari (2014), Palestinians who survived the nakbah manifested sumud. During the first Palestinian non-violent intifada (Arabic for 'shaking off') from 1987 to 1993 (Barber et al., 2014), Palestinian resistance according to Sousa et al. (2014) was marked by the suspension of celebrations (e.g. weddings, religious celebrations, birthdays), joyful events and everyday activities to affirm the abnormality of the occupation, alongside collective mass demonstrations, strikes, and committee work. Restoration of normality and pleasure would take place once independence was achieved. Fifteen years later, conditions for Palestinians had not improved, and hostilities continued, giving rise to the second intifada in 2000 (Barber et al., 2014). During the second intifada, daily crossing of military checkpoints was considered to manifest sumud (Meari, 2014). Following failed peace-and state-building, resistance was redefined to seeking normality, finding hope and enjoying life (Sousa et al., 2014) during this period.

Indeed, some studies found that sumud was considered as affirming life and seeking joy and normalcy in life. Framed as acts of resistance against the occupation, Palestinian women living in the West Bank travelled and crossed into Israeli imposed restricted spaces to enjoy these spaces and connect with a sense of normality (Richter-Devroe, 2011). Resistance also compromised of coping strategies at an ideational level, and materially informed survival

strategies. Richter-Devroe (2011) framed resistance as infra-politics. This study consisted of a larger sample size compared to other qualitative studies; 70 semi-structured interviews and several focus groups were conducted with predominately female participants from Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. However, this study lacked details on its methodology.

Similarly, a qualitative study conducted in Bethlehem found that enjoying life was a fundamental component of sumud due to suffering; sumud also involved resisting the occupation, focusing on the future and affirming one's status as a human being via exercising human care and celebrating culture (Rijke & van Teeffelen (2014). Openly celebrating identity, dignity and life were considered acts of resistance. Sumud was found to represent the struggle to persevere in a colonial context, protecting dignity, preserving Palestinian identity and a Palestinian way of life; emphasising humanity, freedom, care and justice, and a strong determination to remain on the land (Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014). Small acts were considered 'everyday heroism', such as smiling when standing in line at checkpoints early in the morning to get to work, or standing up to soldiers at checkpoints when asked to undress. Sumud was also associated with social relationships and maintaining community survival. This study utilised a combination of focus groups (N=33) and individual interviews with women (N=16) and non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders and scholars (N=8). However, there was no mention of the age of the sample and the form of data analysis used.

Sumud is considered synonymous with resistance, taking the form of daily coping, an insistence on continuing with life, struggling whilst refusing to cower (Halper, 2006). Resistance was found to be consistent with sumud for a group of 32 Palestinian women experiencing violations of their home (e.g. home invasions, threatened or actual destruction to home, surveillance) in the context of political violence in the West Bank (Sousa, Kemp, & El-Zuhairi, 2014). Focus groups revealed that sumud appeared to help cultivate and underpin resilience. A concern about the use of focus groups is that people may report desirable responses, particularly as sumud is a desired state and is culturally and nationally promoted in the oPt. However, it is evident from the data that participants spoke openly, as reflected by them sharing less desirable states referring to their struggles, humiliation, fears and anxieties (Sousa et al., 2014). The study found that despite feelings of fear, anxiety and humiliation, women reported challenging soldiers during home invasions to mobilising the home for familial, economic and cultural survival. They found creative ways to obtain food and money, such as selling traditional Palestinian products. Resistance was embedded within the struggle to counter the material effects of the occupation to protect dignity, wellbeing, identity and the survival of Palestinian land (Sousa et al., 2014). It was expressed in everyday acts to maintain the nutritional and economic wellbeing of families and by extension the collective community, highlighting how the home was both a site of and symbolic of resistance. Strategic perseverance manifested in two primary ways: 1) physical and figurative defence of individual and collective claims to home; and 2) women's reappropriation of homes for nutritional and economic caretaking (Sousa et al., 2014).

Sumud was found to be a tactic of resistance to the occupation for a group of 18 women aged 20 to 77 in the West Bank and was conceptualised as 'resistance resilience' (Ryan, 2015). It encompassed flexibility, adaptive practices and fostering enduring relationships and community building to make life under occupation as normal as possible for their families, whilst rejecting the legitimacy of the occupation. Palestinian women described how sumud was

a distinctly Palestinian practice that aided coping with daily life; it allowed them to reaffirm and maintain their honour and dignity and remain on the land in spite of the adverse conditions. Sumud was also associated with asserting and celebrating Palestinian culture and identity. This study lacked detail regarding its methodology.

Similarly, a study conducted in the West Bank explored the resilience processes among Palestinian refugee families living under Israeli occupation for multiple generations using a combination of group and individual interviews (N=30); participants were aged 18 to 90 (Atallah, 2017). The study found that family resilience was connected to indigenous cultural constructs of sumud/perseverance. It was also linked to muqawama, resistance to the military occupation and awda, a return to cultural roots despite ongoing and historical settler colonialism. Sumud was specifically related to practicing patience and persistence (e.g. harnessing determination and patience grounded in legends, national beliefs, and/or religious faith) particularly during intense situations like torture in prison; creating cultures of care within the community and family (e.g. sharing resources and building capacity for crisis response); and /processing emotions (e.g. processing accumulated traumas as part of life). Social support within the extended family provided a platform for resilience. Resistance manifested via individual and collective action to protect family survival, dignity, community integrity and psychological wholeness. Awda manifested by having hope that self-determination would be attained, and rejecting borders, resettlement and exile, alongside families returning to harvest their fruit trees and utilising indigenous plants from their former native lands. Food using indigenous produce was used to cope with historical trauma and served as a source of empowerment. Atallah's study benefitted from a collaborative partnership with an NGO, cultural consultation, cross verification of data codes to enhance validity and a detailed methodology to enable replication.

The findings regarding sumud referring to enduring relationships and persevering family and community survival and wellbeing links to the research on social support as a source of resilience (e.g. Marie et al., 2016; Thabet, Dajani, & Vostanis, 2013; Thabet, Elheloub, & Vostanis, 2015; Thabet, Thabet, & Vostanis, 2016) and a strategy of coping with conflict related stressors and traumas in the oPt (e.g., Afana et al., 2018; Hammad & Tribe, 2020b; Joma'a & Thabet, 2015; Khamis, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). The importance of community mobilisation, support and solidarity featured in many of the studies (e.g. Atallah, 2017; Hammad & Tribe, 2020b; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). For example, during times of war, social cohesion and support increased (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b). Shared identity and collective suffering increased social cohesiveness (Marie et al., 2016), facilitated coping, community solidarity, kinship ties and protected against negative affect (Afana et al., 2018).

Sumud was considered a continuation of the struggle, as opposed to the end for Palestinian survivors of torture (Meari, 2014). An ethnographic study that accessed a hard-to-reach group examined the role of sumud among male and female Palestinian torture survivors historically imprisoned in Israeli prisons. The study revealed how they created strategies to exercise sumud (e.g. recalling loved ones and revolutionary songs, imagining oneself as dead or inanimate) (Meari, 2014). Sumud was used as a means of reorganising oneself to endure torture in order to protect others, not surrendering or providing confessions during interrogation and refusing to recognise the integrator's structural colonial power. The methodology of this study was not specified.

The majority of research has focused on the West Bank and therefore, these findings may not always be generalisable to the Gazan context. Daily life and experiences of the conflict varies geographically and temporally (Ryan, 2015). Palestinians exposure to political violence may vary and consist of different frequency and severity (Haj-Yahia, 2007). Research supports that Palestinians have different levels of exposure and experience of the conflict depending on what town they lived in in the West Bank (Barber et al., 2016c). There is a lack of studies exploring sumud in blockaded Gaza and during major wars. Hammad and Tribe (2020b) explored the role of sumud in the context of war, occupation and military blockade. The study found that Palestinians in the Gaza Strip practiced sumud through patient perseverance, enduring suffering and remaining on the land. Everyday acts were conceptualised as resistance to the occupation, such as exercising patience, providing social support, attaining education, and withstanding military attacks. The motivation to persevere manifested in ensuring family survival and motivation to develop, progress and achieve, alongside other adaptive coping responses to the adverse living conditions. Coping strategies identified in this study include accepting reality, adapting, exercising patience, problem-solving, utilising social support, and faith in God (iman) and religion. Religion was a source of resilience that helped them to frame their suffering, alongside sumud, which was considered to produce great rewards. Although the sample size was small (N=7), the study benefitted from accessing a hard-to-reach group and accessed a mixed gendered group of professional graduates from various regions across the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian civilians cope with political violence and war in addition to day-to-day life under military occupation. Qualitative research carried out in East Jerusalem explored how 15 Palestinians coped with the death of loved ones whilst living under occupation (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). Bereaved families were involved in the data analysis and psychosocial trauma experts were consulted to validate the analysis. The study revealed how communities mobilised to offer support; community members showed solidarity and helped families navigate and collectively resist injustice and restrictions on their movement given that Israeli forces prevent family visitation of the dying due to not having a permit to be in that area, or prevent them from burying the dead in select cemeteries. Participants felt empowered by collective resistance and communal acts of fulfilling burial rituals, resisting injustice and oppression and the ways in which it attempted to impede the rites of the dead or dying. Social relationships, community support, and solidarity through their everyday actions were found to help people cope with managing life after their loved one's death. Similarly, in light of movement and residency restrictions, Palestinian parents were found to affirm Palestinian presence in Jerusalem by navigating restrictions regarding giving birth in Jerusalem hospitals, to enable residency to be passed onto their new born, which was considered as transforming sites of suffering to sites of resistance (Hammoudeh, Hamayel, & Welchman, 2017). Interviews were conducted with 27 women and 20 men aged 24 to 52. The study benefitted from triangulation of data. Purposive/snowballing sampling was used to access this hard-to-reach group, however, this could have potentially created a sampling bias, such as the clustering of similar characteristics.

#### Studies

investigating sumud in the context of livelihoods under occupation are few in number. Simman's (2017) ethnographic study consisted of 11 interviews and found that olive growing, a traditional Palestinian occupation was framed as resistance to the occupation, exercising

attempts to hold onto native lands and navigating restrictions that obstructed olive growing. Olive growing provided sustenance that enabled family survival and well-being, thus daily acts like olive growing were considered resistance to the occupation. Sumud is considered both a value and action of perseverance and endurance, holding on to their land, expressing Palestinian identity and enabling the continuation of their communities (Simman, 2017).

A qualitative study in the West Bank focusing on resilience amongst nurses working in community mental health revealed four main sources of resilience: 1) sumud and Islamic cultures; 2) supportive relationships; 3) making use of available resources; and 4) personal capacity (Marie et al., 2016). The study consisted of 32 hours of observations in the workplace, consulting workplace documents regarding job related policies and 15 interviews with staff aged 24 to 60. Sumud was conceptualised as steadfastness in a challenging environment and commitment to attaining inner resilience; sumud included not breaking down or leaving their homeland and was used to develop and strengthen their personalities to enable coping. Islamic faith was found to help them survive in a challenging environment and allowed them to make use of other sources of resilience. Islamic rituals (e.g. praying and ablution) helped them to relax and feel happy. The nurses expressed the expectation of receiving rewards from God in the afterlife if they exercised sumud, tolerance and carried out good deeds in the Holy land (Palestine). Both the Islamic and sumud culture encouraged them to continue learning and enhancing their education in order to fulfil their full potential. Linked to the research on coping, religion was found to be a main source of resilience and a strategy to cope with collective trauma and loss in the oPt (e.g. Hammad & Tribe, 2020b; Thabet et al., 2013, 2015, 2016).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Sumud is intimately connected to resistance and cultural roots (e.g. Atallah, 2017; Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014; Ryan, 2015). The essence of sumud is endurance and perseverance in an anti-colonial struggle, opposing and resisting the occupation and the pervasive impact it has on everyday life. It is both a value and an action that manifests via individual and collective action to protect family and community survival, wellbeing, dignity, Palestinian identity and culture, and to remain on the land (e.g. Atallah, 2017; Ryan, 2015; Sousa et al., 2014). The consensus is that practicing sumud destabilises power dynamics and colonial order; it is a refusal to surrender manifesting in acts of everyday resistance (Meari, 2014), even if it does not prevent the occupation, it impacts on daily life (Ryan, 2015). It is a revolutionary way of being under oppressive conditions (Meari, 2014). Studies illustrated how sites of suffering were transformed to sites of resistance, such as navigating imposed restrictions on movement and access to spaces (Hammoudeh et al., 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014), enduring torture (Meari, 2014), military attacks and the military blockade (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b); thus highlighting the fluidity of sumud. These transformations emphasise the importance of meaning making of suffering in the context of collective trauma and oppression.

It appears that the concept of sumud and resistance has evolved in its expression and manifestation. Historically, Palestinian resistance during the first intifada, according to Sousa et al. (2014), was marked by the suspension of celebrations, joyful events and everyday activities to affirm the abnormality

of the occupation. During the second intifada, following failed peace and state-building, resistance was redefined to seeking normality, finding hope and enjoying life (Sousa et al., 2014). A small number of studies support the contemporary redefinition that sumud and resistance is exercised via seeking enjoyment and normality in life (Richter-Devroe, 2011; Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014). However, other studies have found resistance and sumud referred to enduring suffering; not surrendering or submitting to colonial powers (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b; Marie et al., 2016; Meari, 2014); patient perseverance (Atallah, 2017; Hammad & Tribe, 2020b); strategic perseverance (Sousa et al., 2014); exercising human care (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b; Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014; Simmons, 2017), nutritional and economic caretaking (Sousa et al., 2014) to ensure cultural, economic and familial survival and wellbeing (Atallah, 2017; Simmons, 2017; Sousa et al., 2014); attaining education (Hammad & Tribe, 2020b); adaptive responses, enduring relationships (Ryan, 2015); focusing on the future; and the celebration of culture and identity (Rijke & van Teeffelen, 2014; Ryan, 2015). Some studies highlighted how sumud was used to strengthen and develop personalities (Marie et al., 2016; Meari, 2014). The studies on sumud used a qualitative methodology, which enabled an exploration of culturally informed resilience and coping. Some of these studies provided detailed methodology and employed methods to ensure validity of their data analysis. In contrast, some studies lacked details on their methodology. Many of the studies focused on women's experience of exercising sumud, which may vary from men's experiences. Also the majority of studies were conducted in the West Bank. Further studies exploring experiences of sumud among males and in the Gaza Strip are needed.

The literature review indicates how sumud is a central component of resilience and provides a meta-cognitive framework that Palestinians use to interpret, cope and respond to ongoing injustice and traumatic experiences, engendering a sense of purpose and meaning. Indeed, Barber's (2009) large scale qualitative study with conflict-affected Palestinian youth indicated the importance and protective function of meaning making in conflict-affected settings. Other studies have found that the benefits of religion and culture informed meaning making of painful experiences in the oPt (Afana et al., 2018; Hammad & Tribe, 2020b). Sumud was found to be a source of resilience (Marie et al., 2016), whilst other studies indicated that sumud was a grassroots indigenous practice of resilience (Ryan 2015), or that it helped to cultivate and underpinned resilience (Atallah, 2017; Sousa et al., 2014). Sumud as a form of resilience was also connected to resistance, cultural roots, enduring relationships within the family and wider community (e.g. Atallah, 2017; Ryan, 2015), and some studies found that the Islamic faith and culture supported sumud (Atallah, 2017; Marie et al., 2016). This literature review adds to the growing body of literature highlighting the role of cultural constructs and forms of resilience in the global South, emphasising context and collective communal values, as opposed to focusing on the individual and internal traits (e.g. Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Simmons, 2017; Theron, 2007; Zraly & Nyirazinyoye, 2010). It also highlights how indigenous grassroots resilience can be found in ongoing conflict settings. Criticisms have been made that imported Western conceptualisations and interventions used to foster resilience in the global South often neglect indigenous understandings and forms of resilience because they may not conform to the dominant Western narrative on resilience (Ryan, 2015). Studying indigenous forms of resilience can help increase valuable knowledge that can be used to inform culturally appropriate responses, particularly



during times of crisis and ongoing collective trauma. Further research on indigenous forms of resilience and cultural constructs that inform resilience is encouraged.

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