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## Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers

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# **Acts of Solidarity:**

## **Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers**

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**Keywords:** Ethnography, Israel/Palestine, activism, frontiers

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### **Abstract**

*In academic and public discourses on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict prevails still a 'methodological nationalism' based on a separatist imagination that overshadows the existence and role of Israeli-Palestinian forms of communality and solidarity. This article analyzes micropolitical practices that cross existing frontiers both within Israel and between occupied Palestinian territories and Israel. Through recent conceptualizations of 'acts', I read these ethnographic episodes in their intentional and performative dimension. What is the role of these 'acts'? What are their effects on both the participants and the wider public? Through two interconnected cases, different functions of acts are explored. The first case relates to encounters between Israelis and Palestinian in the embattled city of Hebron in the occupied Palestinian territories; the second investigates moments of a Gandhi-inspired peace march at the 'internal' frontier of the Israeli Negev desert. The ethnographic perspective reveals what lies behind and beneath the acts, going beyond the obvious structures of power of the conflict. Acts function primarily as a valve of catharsis for the participants themselves, both overcoming and reproducing hegemonic discursive elements of the conflict. Paradoxically, acts of solidarity are often crucial in creating public knowledge about the conflict in more sectarian terms.*

**Keywords:** Ethnography; Israel; Palestine; micropolitics, acts, peace activism;

### **'It is better to listen' (Hebron, Spring 2007)**

'I'm glad you came. I cannot talk to the settlers, so I have invited you'. With these words an Arab-Palestinian man from Hebron welcomes the group, I recorded in my field notes<sup>1</sup>. He

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1 These notes are selected from different episodes of long-term ethnographic fieldwork of transborder activism in Southern Israel Negev desert and the Southern Westbank in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt).

appears as a middle-aged, thin man with a gaunt face, moving his eyes move nervously around the living room. Our group comprises mostly young people, many left-leaning students from central Israel and some older, experienced human rights activists with gray hair and long beards. Some take a seat on the sofa, others on the white stone floor. Our host boots up an old and dusty computer situated in one corner of the room. Photographs and short-films taken with a mobile phone appear; blurry pictures, low sound.

‘Here, here, now, ... Look, now they attack’ he cries out, moving his hand over the screen to indicate several shadows. ‘These are settlers throwing stones at the windows of his home and then, shortly after, they came into his home and destroyed a good part of the furniture’, he explains. His voice is now quiet, soft, maybe a little depressed. ‘There’s a lot of people. Here. A lot. Now they’re trying to enter the house. Here, my Palestinian friend receives a call from the police. The police want to know what’s going on, but he cannot speak’.

The young Jewish-Israeli visitors do not say a word; some seem to feel uncomfortable or insecure. He looks out for more files and narrates similar stories; time passes. Then, suddenly, a young Jewish-Israeli student stands up and asks in a voice full of emotion: ‘I would like to know something else. I’ve been here for just one morning and I cannot stand it anymore. I am already full of anger and rage. Where do you put your anger? I mean, how do you control your feelings with all that mess around you?’ Ahmed replied immediately: ‘Where do I put my anger? I have children. I continue to live here because I can teach my children that there will be a different future. I hope for, I believe in a better world. [...] Do not worry. We want to speak the truth: we can make peace’. Like his fragile appearance with an old jacket that seems far too big for his thin body, the atmosphere in the packed room seems to become too immense and desperate, for both him and his visitors. On our way back, the disrupted Palestinian landscape passed by. Only one

sentence interrupted the silence. ‘It is better to listen and be silent instead of judging’, commented one travel mate next to me. His eyes were absent, looking out of the window into the hills characterized by barbed wire, army posts and white lighting new settlements.

### **Introduction: sleeping with the enemy?**

Encounters between ‘enemies’ like the one in the ethnographic vignette above, are not uncommon in the Israeli-Palestinian space<sup>2</sup>. According to the Peace NGO Forum, over the last decade more than a hundred different groups and institutions Israeli and Palestinians have been working across the Israeli-Palestinian frontiers in different forms.<sup>3</sup> The vitality of such activities show how the radical separation of Israelis and Palestinians is in itself attainable only on the basis of actively forgetting and the repression of forms of commonality (Hochberg, 2010). Moments like the contemplative silence on our way back from Hebron highlight how such encounters can push participants to their own psychological limits. The dense dialogue above about ‘where to put the anger’ sheds emblematically light on the performative dimension of these ‘acts of solidarity’: they deeply shape the attitudes of participants towards their ethnonational political positioning.

In literature on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such acts are often overseen or under-theorized: They are either idealized and associated with utopias of resistance or they are

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2 Throughout this article, I use the term Israeli-Palestinian space for the region that encompasses both the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) and the state of Israel. This notion reflects the shifting and fluid border arrangement, the hybrid aspects of Israeli presence in Palestine and, vice versa, the complex conditions of Palestinian citizens living within the state of Israel. Drawing on the work of Parizot (2009), this notion also reflects well the continuous forms of cross-border exchanges between the different populations present in the area.

3 See ‘Peace NGO Forum’, <http://mepeace.org>, consulted 22 June 2013.

3 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

neglected as politically ‘insignificant’ under the factual conditions of partition and colonization. This article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the plethora of activities of solidarity<sup>4</sup> and cooperation across enemy lines. In what follows, I outline how an emerging critique of ‘methodological nationalism’ of the separatist imagination in urban studies of the Israeli-Palestinian space opens up spaces to situate these acts in their context. The core part of the article explores different functions of ‘acts’ of activists that cross Israeli-Palestinian divides in their performative and intentional dimensions. The first case relates to the Israeli-Palestinian divide between the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) and what has been labeled as ‘proper’ Israel within the ‘Green Line’ (Smooha, 1997; Caplan, 2011). The second case addresses episodes at the ‘internal frontier’ in the Israeli Negev desert where Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizens and Jewish-Israeli citizens organized a so-called ‘peace march’ inspired by the methods of Mahatma Gandhi. For those who participate in these activities, how are boundaries of Israeli and Palestinian ethnonational subjectivity are undermined, perpetuated or reconstructed? What is the role of these acts of solidarity in the wider context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts? When do acts succeed to break with dominant assumption of ethnonational interpretative categories and when do they reproduce them?

### **Israeli-Palestinian frontiers and ‘methodological nationalism’**

The Israeli-Palestinian space constitutes one of the most visible examples for apparently self-evident forms of ethno-national segregation and collision. In popular discourses, group identities are constructed as mutually exclusive cultural domains. ‘Arabness’ is supposed to be represented

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<sup>4</sup> In activist practices, different connotations of solidarity are at play. Solidarity can be understood as the support that people in a group give each other because they have the same opinion or aims (MacMillian Dictionary, ‘Solidarity’), thus as a feeling and the ties that bind people together. With different connotations in social thought, ranging from Durkheim’s more mechanical notion to the spiritual values of Catholic social thought, solidarity highlights the emotional and discursive aspects of cooperation across frontiers.

4 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

by Palestinian nationalism and ‘Jewishness’ by mainstream Zionism. This unequal polarization contributes to the construction of two separated traumatic collective memories where the mutual negation each ‘narrative’ is constructed in order to view itself as a victim contradicting the victimhood narratives of the ‘other’ side (Suleiman 2011; Ben-Porat 2008). The construction of an ethnonational tainted memory of the conflict plays here a pivotal role. Bouillon (2004) demonstrates how the use of such generalized contributed to the failure of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. Based on the ‘two people, two states’ principle, such categories overshadow a reality where Arabness and Jewishness does not correspond to the Israeli-Palestinian divide. A bulk of literature on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict indeed emphasizes how a more complex and interdependent group boundaries transcend the ethnonational partition. Prominent authors and academics including Said (1994, 1995), Habibi (1986), Pappé (2006), Yiftachel (2006) and others have dedicated much of their career to analyze how the conditions of the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza affects virtually all aspects of Palestinian everyday life (Weizman 2012).

The Arab-Jewish polarization materializes in the highly fragmented territorial reality of the Israeli-Palestinian space. Jewish inhabitants of the settlements and the Palestinian citizens in the West Bank and Gaza are subject to the state-building project of the Palestinian Authority. Within the state of Israel, official and unofficial boundaries mark the separation between the 23 % strong Palestinian minority and Jewish-Israeli citizens.<sup>5</sup> Authors such as Yiftachel (2006) consider these divisions as embedded in an ‘ethnocratic’ regime that privileges, under a democratic façade, Jewish ethnic dominance, creates a regime of factually differentiated

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5 Overviews of the ambiguous role of the Palestinian citizens of Israel can be found in Rabinowitz (1997), Haklai (2011) and Ghanem (2001).

5 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

citizenship and remains inherently ‘expansive’ and ‘colonizing’ of its frontier regions. The highly fragmented Zionist national voices have underplayed the role of Palestinian nationalism, embracing these politics of difference (Matthews 2011). No political party and few institutionalized movements in Israel or the oPt reach over the Green Line, the armistice line that divides the West Bank and Israel.

In light of these politics of difference, a common perception of activists as ‘dissidents’ or ‘traitors’ to the ethnonational aspirations of their ‘group’ becomes salient. Because of their attempt to frame rights in more cosmopolitan terms, participants are stigmatized, according to a well-known expression in widely mainstream public rhetoric and a thought-provoking documentary<sup>6</sup>, as ‘sleeping with the enemy’. However, ethnographic insights into micropolitical conflict dynamics demonstrate that forms of solidarity exist in every ethnonational conflict and often indicate possibilities for future reconciliation (Wolfe and Yang 1996).

### **Beyond the separatist imagination: Israeli-Palestinian urban studies**

The assumption that a similar segregation might reflect naturally given entities has been identified in studies of globalization as a particular insidious form of methodological nationalism (Yuval Davis, 2006; Glick Schiller and Wimmer, 2002: 305-306). Similar forms of ‘methodological nationalism’ have been challenged particularly in urban studies of the Israeli-

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6 Avoiding any speculative psycho-political considerations, I am not referring here to the commercial thriller ‘Sleeping with the enemy’ (1991) featuring Julia Robert’s attempt to escape her nightmarish marriage, but to Dov Gil-Har’s ‘Sleeping with the Enemy: An Israeli-Palestinian Journey to Japan’ (1991) that narrates a journey to Japan of Israeli and Palestinian citizens, including a journalist and police commanders, who struggle to overcome the implications of their own ethnonational identities.

6 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

Palestinian space. By discussing these challenges, my aim is not to underplay the impact of politics of partition or colonization. I rather point to those elements that ‘question the unquestionable’, to paraphrase Judith Butler (1993), that push our thinking forward into mined terrains.

Two interrelated tendencies that go beyond a separatist imagination can be identified. First, a well-established and growing body of literature shows, from different angles, how Israeli ethno-nationalism remains fragmented due to the historical Palestinian presence within the boundaries of Israel itself and not only the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), most visibly in so-called ‘mixed’ Israeli-Palestinian towns in Israel (Monterescu, 2005; Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker, 2005) and with regard the definition of Israeli citizenship for Palestinians (Shafir and Peled, 2005; Rabinowitz, 2000). Several realms of scholarship have attempted to deconstruct the mutually exclusive character of Arabness and Jewishness on various grounds. A cornerstone has been the attempt to unearth the Arab-Jewish (*mizrahim*) histories or to investigate the role of Palestinian citizens in Israel. The literature on these two themes is vast and steadily growing, often based on the ground-breaking work on marginalization of Arab-Jewish identities in Western-centric Zionist national discourses of Shohat (1999) and Khazzom (2003). Particularly interestingly, Motzafi-Haller (2012) sheds light on the complex strategies of survival in hybrid Arab-European spaces in peripheral ‘development towns’ in the Negev. In short, internal ethnonational divisions are less evident than they often made to appear. In this context, important insights that weaken the ethnonational categories in Israel stem also from the focus on the dynamics of ‘internal’ colonization of the remaining Palestinian population within the boundaries of Israel (Yiftachel, 2000). This approach shifts attention to the ‘conflict within’ that undermines the concept of a homogeneous Israeli ethno-national polity (Peleg and Waxmann, 2011; Ben-



Porat, 2008). This struggle transforms the spatial practices of the Israeli-Palestinian ‘borderland’ into a metaphor, an ethos or a mentality of spiritual and material expansion, even development and growth (Shafir and Peled, 2005). The ‘center’ of the ethno-nationalist polity expands through these ‘frontier practices’ (Yiftachel, 1996: 40-41), reflecting a mentality that characterizes not only classical imperial societies, but also modern capitalist societies. In a more recent poststructuralist turn, the Israeli-Palestinian frontier has been represented as evasive, fluid and dynamic (Sufian and LeVine, 2007).<sup>7</sup> In short, this literature has opened-up the understanding of dynamics of collision and divisions in a more overlapping and relational way than a previous set of literature.

The second challenge to the separatist imagination emerges from writing related to everyday practices of crossing frontiers. Influenced by classical writing on individual forms of resistance<sup>8</sup>, this body of research highlights the range of ‘everyday’ tactics that subvert official discourses and practices. Garb’s (2006) study of taxi-drivers in Jerusalem narrates the ‘softer side of collision’ made up of cross-cutting everyday relations of love and affections crossing the multiple borders of the city. Abourahme (2011), Bishara (2015) and Parizot (2009) offer insightful, detailed ethnographic insights from suburban refugee camps, ‘mixed Israeli-Palestinian cities’ and contested regions about what it means to move across the Israeli-Palestinian divide. A growing number of ethnographic contributions challenges a monolithic

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7 Some authors use different expressions to denote the ‘internal frontier’ as a zone rather than a line, such as the term ‘borderland’ used by Saada-Ophir’s (2006) work on Jewish-Arab cultural expressions in the Israeli periphery.

8 I am referring here to the work influenced by De Certeau, Giard and Mayol (1990) Scott (1985) and Scott and Kerkvliet (1987) and the subsequent prominent debates on the role of ‘everyday resistance’ in human geography and anthropology.

8 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

and/or one-sided perspective on Israeli-Palestinian ethnonational divisions. The recent work of Fischer (2006; 2008) proposes analytical paradigms that situate transversal to Israeli or Palestinian ethnonational narratives. However, critical scholarship of intentional, politically-motivated agency is even more rarely to find. With a few exceptions (Amir and Kotev 2015; Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2008; Koensler 2015), such activism tends to be idealized or romanticized from an engaged activist perspective. Emblematically for a growing body of literature<sup>9</sup>, in *The Other Israel*, Carey and Shainin (2004) represent the voices of internal dissent of peace and human rights activists. From another perspective, activism is dismissed as insignificant in light of the overwhelming impact of partition and colonization (cfr. Pappe, 2006; Nasara et. al., 2014). Both approaches leave little room for the intricacy of what can be called ‘acts of solidarity’.

### **The power of acts**

One not much explored way to grasp theoretically the significance of solidarity activism in conflict zones offers the concept of ‘act’. For citizenship scholar Engin Isin (2008), ‘acts of citizenship’ concern the question of how subjects become claimants of rights through ‘various acts that were symbolically and materially constitutive’ (2008: 18). Isin acknowledges that while the term ‘act’ has been widely neglected in social science literature, similar terms such as ‘practices’, ‘actions’ and ‘agency’ have received both broad and substantial attention. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu (1991) on the practices and dynamics that lead to the reproduction of inequalities has introduced the term ‘habitus’. Useful for the conceptualization of how

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9 In a similar vein, see also Hallward and Normann (2011), Pallister-Wilkins (2011) and Dahan-Kalev and LeFebvre (2012).

9 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

inequalities are incorporated and embodied, the concept habitus has shaped much of the writing in social sciences (Rabinow, 2008). But can this concept be used to understand disruptive, performative and intentional agency? Citing Farnell (2000), Isin (2009: 18) states that ‘acts cannot be reduced to practices because to enact oneself as a citizen involves transforming oneself from a subject into a claimant, which inevitably involves a break from habitus.’ Acts of solidarity describe how subjects became claimants of right. Thus, acts can be defined as material and symbolic practices to constitute claims that aim intentionally to disrupt or overcome existing socio-political constellations. It is their intentional and performative dimension of acts which is overlooked in similar notions such as habitus, agency, or ‘everyday practices of resistance’.

However, the disruptive dimension of acts is sometimes overstated and idealized. Political philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2000: 125) employs the term ‘act’ to refer to a unilateral declaration of a new social order, in other words to a revolution. According to this idea, ‘an authentic act is not simply external with regard to the hegemonic symbolic field which it disturbs: an act is an act only with regard to some symbolic field, as an intervention into it’ (2000: 125).

But the association between acts and the incipit of social innovation should not be taken for granted. The debate on performative acts as initiated by the writing of Judith Butler (1993; 1997) sheds light on the role of performativity in constituting dynamics of subjectivity (‘self-making’) beyond pre-constituted categories. The ambiguous role of performativity as a mean of political acting has been debated widely (Lloyd 1999). Importantly, one underlying theme in the writing in Michel Foucault (cfr. Dreyfus, Rabinow and Foucault, 1983) remains how different forms of agency, despite their intention to ‘disrupt’, end up actually to reproduce current power and identity dynamics in other terms. As we will see, solidarity activities in conflicts, rather than

being ‘revolutionary’ *per se*, need to be understood both beyond their declared intentions and beyond the binary of disruption/reproduction.

### **The ethnographic perspective**

Exploring in detail what Gil Z. Hochberg (2010: 18) calls the ‘haunting presence of alterity’, I now to consider two different episodes of Israeli-Palestinian acts of solidarity. Both are forms of mobilization ‘from below’ that create, to varying degrees, experimental spaces of autonomy. These emblematic episodes that can shed light on the broader dynamics in which these acts are embedded, on their implications for the participants and on their (rather limited and often ambiguous) impact on broader political discourses. The first case relates to crossing the frontier between ‘Israel proper’<sup>10</sup> and the oPt, while the second relates to the ‘internal frontier’ between Arab-Palestinian Bedouin citizens and the Jewish-Israeli majority in the Southern Israeli Negev desert. The cases derive from ethnographic projects realized in different periods between 2004 and 2011. As neither an Israeli or Palestinian citizen, between 2006 and 2011, I carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork over different periods and regularly participated in different forms of Israeli-Palestinian meetings, including guided tours, house reconstruction, informal visits and demonstration-style protest events. Based in the Israeli Negev/Naqab desert, I realised long-term participant observation, open-ended interviews and informal conversations with activists, politicians, NGO officials and stakeholders throughout Southern Israel and the Southern Westbank. Recent ethnographic writing has shifted attention to the multitude of

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10 Authors like Shafir and Peled (2005) consider ‘Israel proper’ those territories of the Israeli state within the Green Line, a line that marks the boundaries prior to the annexation of the Westbank and the Gaza Strip in the war of 1967.

11 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

individual subjectivities in rapidly changing environments and how the ‘uprooting’ of traditional identities creates new forms of subjectivity (Fischer 2009; Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007; Waterston, 2011). Here, the ethnographic eye on the dynamics of acts aims to go beyond the ‘obvious structures’ of power relations (Herzfeld, 2015), highlighting insights into just some of the functions that also acts of cross-frontier solidarity in conflicts can have.

### **Acts as a practice of ‘distancing’**

A first function of acts can be described as a practice of ‘distancing’, particularly evident during a visit of a group of Israelis with their Palestinian friends in the unique setting of the occupied, partly destroyed urban center of Al-Khalil (or, to use its Western name, Hebron) in the oPt. During one of the visits in March 2007, the main road was interrupted by a new checkpoint. We noticed the first signs of the construction of what eventually would become the ‘wall’. Elsewhere a nine-meter high concrete wall, here in the desert, only a double line of fences marked the border.<sup>11</sup> Palestinian workers were covering a seemingly endless line of poles with barbed wire. Several concrete blocks on the center of the road forced our small minibus with five people to slow down. Not unsurprisingly, a little further we were stopped by an Israeli soldier of Ethiopian origin, an eighteen years old teenager with an automatic weapon in his hands. ‘We’re going to Kiryat Arba! To Kiryat Arba’, Eyal, our driver, shouted through the window. The armed boy did not answer. He opened the back door of our vehicle and gave a quick look at our faces. Then he said: ‘It’s okay. Everyone to Kiryat Arba, right? Have a good trip’. The faces of travel-mates relaxed visibly. Kiryat Arba is an Israeli settlement. A dozen miles further on, we took the road towards the Palestinian town of Al-Khalil and not the one to the Israeli settlement. This example

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<sup>11</sup> Field notes, 23 March 2007.

is not unique. Ordinary people engage in various practices and tactics to move between different dividing lines, like pretending ‘politically unsusceptible’ destination, tuning into the Israeli army radio station before approaching a checkpoint or exhibiting an appropriate national symbol on the front window. According to some authors, these everyday practices demonstrate the fragility of hegemonic dividing lines and how dividing lines can be circumvented (Bishara, 2015; Garb, 2006; Parizot, 2001). However, in contrast to intentional ‘acts’ to disrupt mainstream understandings themselves, these practices do not necessarily question the existence of the ethnonational ‘boundary’ itself, thus leaving the separatist imagination untouched.

The group I joined does not belong to a political group or NGO. Some met at university, others in alternative cultural circles of Be’er Sheva. In interviews and informal conversations, I reflected with individuals frequently about their motivations to cross the border at weekends. We talked about what it means to expose themselves to what appears as ‘the other side of the story’. A sense of ethical responsibility seemed to play a part. ‘The first time I came here, I could not believe what was happening in Palestine. Now I try to come every Saturday. [...] I am not coming with an organization. I come simply as a friend and we meet our friends in Hebron. That’s all’. In these rather simple words Maya, a student of desert sciences from Be’er Sheva who grew up in a ‘mixed’ *misrahim/ashkenazim* family in southern Israel, explained her role in the trips.<sup>12</sup> The decision to engage in these acts is here an expression of individual ethic attitudes in the first place rather than collective beliefs. However, her interest in the Westbank has been initially mediated by a political organization. Four years earlier she participated in a trip to the Westbank organized by the Israeli human rights NGO *B’tselem* that ‘opened her eyes’, as she puts it. Her mate and university colleague Eyal, on his part, grew up in one of the most deprived

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12 Field notes of an informal conversation during a trip to Sede Boker, 23 April 2007.

*mizrahim* cities in central Israel and made his way up to university thanks to several grants for ‘disadvantaged’ people. His experiences of deprivations, he contends, made him particularly ‘sensitive’ for questions of social justice. Also motivations of both activists seem at first glance to differ, both Eyal’s and Maya’s word show that, in one way or another, the motivation to engage in acts of solidarity remains related to the wish to assert their own ‘difference’ from mainstream ‘Israeli’ public discourse: a particular ‘sensitivity’ for social justice, an ‘eye-opening’ event are the experiences that lead to further acts of ‘distancing’.

### **Acts as catharsis**

The performative dimension of acts reminds in many instances of a catharsis, that ‘purifies’ and renews participants ‘radical’ positioning. This function becomes particularly evident in another episode. The outskirts of the historical city center of Al-Khalil/Hebron in the Palestinian Territories became over the last decade one of the hotspots for pro-Palestinian ‘solidarity’ activism (Clarke 2003). According to a common narrative, Jews, Christians and Muslims all lived together in the city under the Ottoman Empire until the 1920s and during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine (1920-48). By the end of the British mandate, the city became part of Jordan. However, with the war of 1967 the area came under Israeli control. During the 1970s, Israeli settlers from an ideological extremist wing occupied a part of the *casbah*, the ancient Arab city center. The Israeli authorities, in fact, legalized their presence in a compromise with the settler movements and Jewish-Christian evangelists (Morris, 1999). Israeli and international

NGOs (such as *B'tselem* and the International Solidarity Movement, ISM) have focused much of their work on violent attacks by settlers from extremist factions in the city.<sup>13</sup>

This particular setting generates unique frictions in activist encounters. On one emblematic occasion<sup>14</sup>, tensions arose between activists and Jewish-Israeli ‘settlers’ that had a deep impact on participants. I participated with Eyal and Maya in what was originally supposed to be an informal, personal visit among their Palestinian ‘friends’ in the city. After a coffee, Eyal noted on social media the announced visit of Hebron of a group from Jerusalem who came with *B'tselem*. We decided to join the group. Not an hour later, we walked together with about twenty Israeli citizens from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem towards the historic center of the destroyed city. Some of them had been here previously in similar ‘tours’, for others it was their first time to be exposed to the ‘Palestinian side’. The streets were strewn with rolls of barbed wire and household waste. Concrete blocks had been placed by the army along the streets in order to protect soldiers and by-passers from potential gunfire. In this area, a group of extremist settlers had taken over some blocks of houses. However, in the same streets as the settlers some Palestinian Arab families continued to live between the many closed and abandoned houses in a unique setting of frictions. As one of our group approached some anti-Arab graffiti, a man with a long beard and wrapped in long clothes, undoubtedly a religious Jew, shouted: ‘You have come just to defame the settlers? This is a sacred city.’ Then the religious man scratched his beard and gazed at the clear sky. He followed us through the ruins, delivering a constant exegesis of various sacred texts at a loud voice. Most of us tried to ignore him. At a certain point one of the leaders

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13 See for example, ‘Ghost Town: Israel’s Separation Policy and Forced Eviction of Palestinians from the Center of Hebron (May 2007), retrieved from [http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/200705\\_hebron](http://www.btselem.org/publications/summaries/200705_hebron), June 2013.

14 Field notes, 08 June 2007.

15 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)



turned back interrupted him, explaining the meaning of human rights. Both began to shout, without listening. As a metaphor for the growing divide within the Israeli polity between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ political forces over the definition of the Israeli state, this encounter seems to highlight the significance of transversal tensions that go beyond the Israeli-Palestinian divide.

Shortly after, a woman shouted something incomprehensible from a high window. Then an egg fell near us. The tension rose. Some members felt threatened and asked to turn back. ‘It’s an egg,’ said Eyal, the guide of the group from Jerusalem, watching the egg break down on the ground, between the asphalt and the waste. Next to the egg, lay some nails. Eyal picked up one of the nails and showed it to us. ‘They are from last week. The army tried to clear a house that was illegally occupied by settlers. The settlers scattered bags of nails on the road to burst the tires of the army cars. ‘Why do you not stop your friends there?’ asked someone from our group, addressing the elderly religious man. The man, apparently confused or irritated, disappeared silently between the rubble of the houses. In this threatening atmosphere, every rational thought, every mild word, sounded ridiculous, out of place and useless. However, many participants remained extremely calm and focused.

Shortly afterwards, our group visited the home of a Palestinian family who live a few hundred meters away from the old town. As in many other cases, informal peer-contacts between journalists and activists had facilitated their visits. While we were entering the home, our host showed the destroyed vineyards. ‘That is the work of the settlers’, he explained to the incoming visitors with a calm voice. Some looked embarrassed at the ground, one man mourned ‘It’s a shame’. Shortly afterwards, the living room was filled with about thirty Israelis, some sitting on the ground, others standing. A young boy distributed glasses of tea and everyone exchanged a

few polite words. The children of Ahmed greeted the students of Be'er Sheva; they knew each other well from previous visits. Eyal tried to drag them into the garden and they began to play. However, this was a not completely normal play. These activities do not always allow an unconditioned expression of what people might 'really' think about the 'other'; the exchange of visions remains necessarily fragmented. Many sensitive issues are left untouched.

Every encounter, every word seemed perfectly to fit into the roleplay of stereotypes: the 'religious fanatic', the 'aggressive settler', the 'well-intended activist'. At a superficial level, the setting of the visit did not allow participants to go beyond a black and white scheme of Israeli-Palestinian relations. What needs to be noted here is that the lines of division can be located between two diametrically opposite understandings of Jewish-Israeli identity, and not along the classical Israeli-Palestinian national divide. In this case, this reconfiguration creates bridges of communality between secular Israeli and Palestinian citizens, while at the same time reinforcing the secular/religious rift in Jewish society; this is a common point also with other forms of Jewish-Palestinian solidarity (Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2008). It remains arguable, whether on the other side the Fatah/Hamas divide facilitates the capacity of moderate Palestinians to reach out or if it weakens the overall Palestinian position.

At a deeper psychological level, meetings like the one mentioned above often produce profound self-changing experiences at the personal level, which in turn opens up new spaces for other forms of exchange. In the episode above, the tensions that surround the Israeli-Palestinian encounters contribute to a situation that appears as a 'grassroot' or inverted 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005)<sup>15</sup>, able to partially subvert hegemonic power asymmetries: Palestinian citizens

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15 As it is known, Agamben investigates the dynamics of how a pretended or real 'crisis' allows governments to increase their power by suspending classical civil liberties and shifting power to less transparent bodies that

vis-a-vi frightened Israelis take up the role of generous hosts. Their sovereign voices function as one of 'justice'. Walking with a group of activists in the highly loaded frictions of Hebron provide an occasion of catharsis, to purify and clarify the own 'radical' positioning of participants. Performing this walk means to engage with extreme emotions, providing a 'renewal' of participants' understanding as 'dissents'.

### **Acts as mediation**

Beyond the impact on the participants themselves, acts of solidarity can also stimulate change in broader political discourses, opening new opportunities of activism. During our visit in Hebron, along the activists of B'tselem, also an Israeli television team joined the group (Figure 1). As it happens in many similar other cases, the access of journalists to Westbank events is often a result of contacts to Israelis who are engaged in solidarity activism. Many international journalists are based in Jerusalem where they develop social network that reach typically into the Israeli left. Probably everyone who knows the social scene of Jerusalem's secular nightlife is aware about the delicate intermingling's between international peace activists, journalists and left and secular Israeli subcultures. Journalist's accounts are based on hectic schedules and often these leave no space to engage in direct friendship within Palestinian citizens, so the 'activist' contacts turn out to be more efficient. Vivid accounts of divisions and collisions, including in mainstream television and accounts of advocacy organizations are an almost direct outcome of acts of solidarity. For example, one indirect outcome of the encounters described has been the

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govern the temporary 'exception' under the pressures of urgency. Inverting this dynamics, the episode above shows how acts of solidarity create temporary and limited spaces of 'exception' that redefine power relations between colonized and colonizers.

documentary *Hebron: This is My Land*<sup>16</sup> who brings the violence of Jewish settlers against Palestinian to light. However, the producers of the documentary have chosen to silence the role of activists and ex-soldiers who have been crucial in enabling to documentary makers to meet their subjects. In fact, the mediation of Israeli activists have enabled the documentary-maker to gain access to the field. This is not an exception. The positivist attitudes of journalism towards ‘information’ tendency excludes these vital mediation in their final representations (Hannerz 2004). Here, the representation of the conflict perpetuates a strictly dichotomous vision of Israeli-Palestinian relations, overshadowing precisely those cross-cutting relations which enabled the documentary to be realized. This example shows how the impact of acts of solidarity on public discourses remains ambiguous: very often they enable public attention, but this attention in turn reinforces the separatist imagination or stereotypes. These spaces of acts of solidarity are lived by individual social actors with their hopes and fears, frustrations and small success stories.

### **The ‘internal’ frontier**

The performance and catharsis generated by action-oriented acts in highly loaded contexts like the one described above is surely not the only way to engage in cross-frontier solidarity. During my decade long research, one of the most significant acts of activism took place during a three-day peace march to several Arab-Bedouin villages in the Naqab/Negev desert, part of the Israeli state. Few other events can demonstrate better the multidimensional dimension of activism that challenges the separatist imagination. In November 2006, a group of about twenty young women and men, including Palestinians, Israelis, Arab-Palestinian Bedouin and Druze citizens met for an

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16 ‘Hebron: This is My Land’, by Giulia Amati and Stephen Natansontells, Israel-Italy, 2010.

event vaguely inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Eastern philosophies<sup>17</sup>. Combining very different forms of mobilization, this event illustrates first and foremost the significance of acts of solidarity within what has been defined as the ‘internal frontier’ (Shafir and Peled, 2005; Yiftachel, 2006) and reflects the high degree of shifting socio-political fragmentation of Israeli peripheries that is difficult to outline in a short paragraph.<sup>18</sup> In short, about one-quarter of Arab-Bedouin citizens live in the Negev desert along a Jewish-Israeli majority (about 27% of the current population of the Negev, about 120,000 people). Defining and labeling of Arab-Bedouin citizens in itself is a contested and evolving issue, moving from a rather unproblematic label of ‘Bedouins’, considered part of ‘Israeli Arabs’ towards a growing emphasis of the Palestinian heritage (cfr. Amara, Abu-Saad and Yiftachel, 2012; Nasasra et. al., 2015; Meir, 2010). After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Arab-Bedouins found themselves as a minority within Israeli territory and relatively disconnected from their Palestinian neighbors (Marx, 2000; Dinero, 2010). Approximately over half of the current Arab-Bedouin population have settled in so-called ‘Bedouin towns’, built by the authorities with the double-edged aim to accommodate cultural needs and, at the same time, keep the vast lands of the Negev open for other forms of Zionist-driven development (Marx, 2000; Meir, 2005; Dinero, 2010). The remaining Arab-Bedouin citizens live until today in so-called ‘unrecognized’ villages similar to self-made shanty towns with only have basic government services.

The Bedouin-state conflict mobilizes a broad range of different advocacy organizations, activists and individuals who articulate their claims in the name of different values and beliefs,

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17 Fieldnotes, 30 November 2006.

18 A growing realm of studies focuses, from different angles, on the Bedouin-state conflict and emphasis the fragmented and conflictual situation that challenges both Israeli and Palestinian ethnonational framings. See Koensler (2013; 2015).

for example the preservation of ‘Bedouin culture’, the respect of ‘human rights’ or the goal to archive ‘coexistence’ and ‘equality’ (Amara, Abu-Saad and Yiftachel, 2012). In the case of the peace march, some residents of Arab-Bedouin villages had requested the support of their Jewish-Israeli activist friends. The regional authorities threatened to demolish some buildings located within a zone declared as a ‘protected area’. Ali and Raid, two youngsters in their early twenties of Palestinian Arab-Bedouin origin, had organized the logistics of this three-day event with the help of Yhna, a Jewish-Israeli girl who grew up in a wealthy suburb of Tel Aviv. The preparations for this impressive effort included the provision of places to sleep in tents or huts of different Bedouin villages for a group of about fifteen participants. Also transport needed to be arranged in shared cars, and meetings needed to be set up meetings with experienced activists and authoritative Bedouin figures. The march started in a small Arab village composed of shacks, tents and containers. Just when we headed outside of the village, the organizers began with a so-called ‘talking circle’ that gave the participants the opportunity to introduce themselves (Figure 2). Some participants were Palestinian youths from Galilee; some were Israeli students; some experienced Israeli political activists appeared with long beards and John Lennon glasses. Some of the Palestinian participants mentioned that this was the first time they had met Arab-Bedouin citizens, pointing out that the existence of an Arab-Bedouin society in Israel is a little known fact, or is misunderstood in mainstream Palestinian discourse. These comments demonstrated that the cultural differences experienced between ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Bedouin’ collective boundaries has been re-affirmed and reified, rather than overcome. Like in the case of the Hebron visit, the fortification of internal group boundaries has been part of the process<sup>19</sup>, a

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19 In contrast, the ‘cultural difference’ of Arab-Bedouin groups has become increasingly deconstructed in academic literature, emphasizing the common Palestinian roots of both Arab-Bedouin and Palestinian citizens (Abu-Rabia-

division that has been interpreted as the result of a ‘divide and rule’ approach of in Israeli politics.

### **Acts as redefining the terms of the conflict**

These activities unveil also deeper insights into the sometimes ambiguous functions of acts. After two days of marching through various desert spots a final ceremony took place. To this end, our group has been hosted at another unrecognized village. When we arrived it was already evening. Dark shadows of destroyed cars decorated the entrance of the village; pieces of metal, smashed walls, piles of household rubbish. All kinds of objects were to be found around the place, including three burnt cars, a broken tractor and a couple of containers. Due to the lack of other sources of income, inhabitants recycle the dispersed metal items, which they usually collect in Israeli cities. Across this surreal landscape, we were led into a wooden building, with a metal wall on one side, while the rest was covered with long pieces of clothes. At the center of the building was a fire. Tea and water was offered first, then coffee, then *humus*, pita, *tahina* and other foods. That evening the organizers prepared the most important moment of the march, referred to simply as the ‘ceremony’. The basic idea was to offer a stage for everyone. Some of the proposals were prepared in advance; others were developed spontaneously in the course of the evening. This kind of ceremony was, in some way, inspired by the secular rituals developed by the kibbutz movement. Children and a couple of elder Arab-Bedouin citizens joined us. The spokesman of the village, a friend of the organizers, gave a long speech of welcome. His tone was one of dignity, modesty, and solemnity, apologizing for the absence of electricity. After half an hour the generator was restarted and a farmer from a nearby organic farm opened the

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Queder, 2009; Frantzman, Yahel and Kark, 2012).

ceremony. He distributed the seeds of a particular plant, though did not reveal its name, inviting us to plant it to find out. In his speech he offered a singular interpretation of the term ‘recognition’, key terms in pro-Arab-Bedouin activism. For him, ‘recognition’ had to start in the first place by the inhabitants themselves rather than by the government. His words expressed optimism and enthusiasm. Social change, for him, could begin at an individual level, changing the relationship between people and the environment. Significantly, the unique setting of the final ceremony allowed a creative process to redefine the terms in which the conflict is usually be understood. In this case, the term ‘recognition’, central to the mobilization of Arab-Bedouin right groups, assumed new meanings, able to break with more limited ‘zero-sum’ assumptions about the conflict (Fischer 2009). In an enlightening book, Ghandour (2010) has underscored the importance of the underlying symbolism and imaginary that shape the Israeli-Palestinian discourses in perpetuating injustice. The example above underscores the ability to change this symbolism through the redefinition of widely used terms such as ‘recognition’.

At the end of the ceremony, a prolonged silence remained. This silence, as a ‘lived presence’ with political significance (Kidron 2009), allowed that something ‘new’ could emerge, something profoundly different from the mainstream mode of understanding the conflict. In this silence, a sense of profound solidarity among the group members became visible in small gestures, in eye-contacts, soft touches or smiles; I observed how some started to hold hands, others looked at each other with open, interested eyes. At one point, a few children started to play in the middle of the stage.

### **Ambiguous implications**



However, such situations are not free of friction or unintended consequences, and remind of what Amir and Kotef (2015) have described as “perils of activism” that remains caught in dominant structures of power and thought. After the silence the turn of our host approached, a thin man with a face marked by the harsh environment. He read verses from the Koran in classical Arabic and invited us to bow in the direction of Mecca. Without exception, everyone respected his proposal and bowed. Immediately after he finished, an obese rabbi with a *kippah* in psychedelic colors stood up, introducing himself as a ‘religious rabbi and a peacemaker’. He later confided in me that he belonged to a school of Judaism that was inspired by Eastern religions, but which was not ‘recognized’ by official Jewish or Israeli institutions. In his contribution, he explained in great detail the matches between two ‘holy books’, the Koran and the Torah. In my notes, I acknowledged how it was almost impossible to follow his rather complex outline. I observed how, from fatigue in trying to find the right words to make his case, his head turned slowly red. His on-going search for suitable quotes in the two books involved his whole body, his speech became a theatrically physical experience. Beside me, a young student whispered me in my ear: ‘I feel ashamed for what that rabbi does. We are in a Bedouin village, and he comes up with these stupid things’. This bold comment is just one of the indications that show the friction related to the multidimensional character of reconciliation practices. ‘The stupid thing’ highlights the difficulty to enact solidarity in practice without that new boundaries or misunderstandings may resurface in unexpected ways.

While still immersed in my thoughts, Mohammed, the spokesperson of the village sat down on the ground. He hold happily holding hands with Yhna, a feminist-leaning doctoral student from Tel Aviv. His face seemed almost enlightened. In a quiet moment, when Yhna took a break, Mohammed stood up slowly and solemnly put aside his baseball cap. He began a long

monologue. He told the story of his extended family, describing a long list of lost court cases related to land disputes. He spoke of his fear and uncertainty, recalling the arrival of the bulldozers of the border police. Then, with a proud look, he affirmed how previously the presence of a large number of diverse activists during a court session had prevented more house demolitions in his village. His story was serious, rational, and pragmatic. Dry words, in sharp contrast to the previous effervescent new age rituals. Suddenly the syncretic harmony seemed to disappear. A girl sat beside me, her curly hair flowing in all directions, and her small intelligent eyes covered by thin square glasses. When Mohammed finished his speech, she told me in a low voice:

This story was so depressing. We are happy and they are not. We are happy to travel and to come here and get to know people like the Bedouins. But they are not happy. They have to stay here and we will leave tomorrow. It is a little bit like being in Gaza or in Africa.

Only a few minutes later, it became clear how this ‘we’ and ‘they’ division has been overridden by another line of boundaries. She stated:

However, I do not feel called upon to speak here. I feel that I should bring my husband, or someone else, to talk to the Bedouin. They are all men and they do not even look at me. And the women, what do they do? That’s the cultural difference, which we cannot change today.

Before I could answer, Mohammed invited all the girls and women to a separate tent. There they met the Bedouin women of the village and they spent also the night there. The next day, in another meeting, the same girl described to me the tenderness of the Bedouin women, the physical contact between them and the curious questions they asked. She commented that 25 – Alexander Koensler, *Acts of Solidarity: Crossing and Reiterating Israeli-Palestinian Frontiers*, in: “International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies” (in press)

spending the night among the women had changed her vision of the social position of ‘Muslim’ women. The gap between the spiritual effervescence and the happiness of the visitors and the serious, soberer concerns of Mohammed highlights the rather ambiguous implications of the event: here, the broader power relations in which Israeli and Palestinian subjectivities remain embedded seem to be perpetuated.

## **Conclusion**

Writing and thinking about ethnonational conflicts remains still permeated by a separatist imagination conveyed by different forms of ‘methodological nationalism’, not only in the Israeli-Palestinian space. However, activists in conflicts continuously create ties of solidarity and communality, forcing us to think beyond dichotomies of self/other, Jews/Arabs and think of, as Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish (1996: 196, in Hochberg 2007, 128) puts it, as “dwelling into each other”. Both in academic and public discourses, activists and individuals who cross frontiers in conflicts remain often ignored. When not ignored, their significance is either diminished and understated (‘insignificant vis-a-vi the power of partition’) or idealized and overstated (‘disrupting the separatist imagination’). In this article, I have shown how insights from recent urban studies of the Israeli-Palestinian space begin to question the hegemonic separatist imagination from two directions. First, a growing attention sheds light on everyday practices of mobility that cross ethnonational boundaries in terms of ‘resistance’ or ‘agency’. Second, many scholars attempt to re-conceptualize ethnonational boundaries in terms of an evolving area, a zone of shifting power dynamics or even as a ‘fluid’ space.

Taking these insights further, this article investigates different functions of Israeli-Palestinian activities of solidarity and communality. By conceptualizing them as ‘acts’, it

becomes possible to understand their intentional and performative dimension. This perspective situates the acts beyond ‘everyday practices’ of resistance and sheds light on their capacity to discuss ethnonational belonging in conflicts. In both cases, experimental spaces of autonomy allow participants, in many instances, to redefine their own subjectivity in relation to the way how the conflict is understood. The ethnographic lens sheds light in how, performing a walk in the tense atmosphere of Hebron along the many risky moments exposes participants to a situation that is reminiscent of a psychological catharsis: Through strong emotions, participants renew their own self-understanding as dissents before returning to ‘normality’. Experiencing a sort of inverted Agambian ‘state of exception’ (2005), the encounters both in the oPt and along the ‘internal frontier’ in the Negev desert subvert partially dominant power asymmetries and the dominant ethnonational imaginary: Palestinian and Arab-Bedouin citizens take up a role of generous hosts, they appear as the voices of justice. In contrast to mainstream images, Jewish-Israeli citizens appear often frightened, timid or self-reflexive. In other words, these acts contribute to distance participates from central elements of the mainstream ethnonational imaginary. During the Gandhi-inspired silent peace march, instead, it is the atmosphere of an effervescent ‘bubble’ of solidarity that allows the creation of experimental spaces of autonomy, able to redefine the terms in which the conflict is understood. The latter is a particularly valuable aspect with long-term yet indirect implications on public discourses.

Moreover, the ethnographic perspective is able to go beyond the obvious structures of power of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the military occupation. It allows a more nuanced understanding of those inter-personal dynamics that, ironically, rather perpetuate some boundaries rather than overcoming them. During the Hebron visit, despite long-standing friendships across enemy lines, not everything can be said openly. Many ‘sensitive’ arguments

are not touched on. Also during some effervescent moments of the peace march, some stereotypes about the ‘other side’ are perpetuated, including a romanticized image of Bedouin culture. Here, acts that aim to overcome ethnonational boundaries end up of reiterating them in different ways.

Interestingly, the public impact of these acts of solidarity produces often ambiguous effects. In many circumstances, journalists often gain access to their field only through their valuable contact to activists. The encounters chosen here are not ‘high-profile’ activities, but nonetheless they mediate broader public attention on specific issues of the conflict. Experimental forms of collaboration, friendship and solidarity have been crucial in creating widely circulating media accounts about the perpetuation of violence, including the demolition of houses in Hebron, the violence of particularly radical settlers and other aspects. However, representations like the above mentioned documentary *Hebron: This is My Land* demonstrate also a paradoxical aspect of Israeli-Palestinian solidarity. The experimental spaces based on different forms of cooperation and solidarity produce knowledge framed in more sectarian ethnonational terms, reinforcing those divisions that they actually aim to overcome.

Navigating in-between the Charybdis of considering such acts of solidarity in their dimension of an emancipatory ‘disruption’ and the Scylla of a ‘perpetuation’ of the hegemonic order of ethnonational partition, the ethnographic lens to ‘acts of solidarity’ allows to go beyond the dichotomist picture that allows either celebrate or ignore their significance. Within the material and political structures of partition and colonization that sustain the separatist imagination, crossing frontiers remains a risky and challenging endeavor, as the ethnographic episodes aim to convey. Acts of solidarity have often the most significant impact on those who participate in them, while their broader socio-political effects remain often ambiguous. With this

article I hope to contribute to a more accurate acknowledgment of solidarity activism, in the Israeli-Palestinian space and elsewhere.

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