

## THE ART OF RESISTANCE: ART AND RESISTANCE IN PALESTINE

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### Abstract

Resistance can take many forms. In Palestine, to exist is to resist. For the last fifty-four years Palestinians have found many inventive and innovative ways to resist the Israeli occupation, and one of those ways, but certainly not the only, is art. Palestinian art and the Israeli occupation walk hand in hand inasmuch that and the historical and political encounters of the conflict have influenced the Palestinian cultural scene and vice versa. This article aims to explore how art, in its various forms, is part of the arsenal of everyday resistance techniques employed by the Palestinian. It addresses not only how art has challenged the outcomes of the conflict, but also how the conflict has impacted the Palestinian artistic scene. To this end, it explores the case of contemporary Palestinian graffiti as a relevant tool of resistance that provides an insight into the nature of Palestinian resistance but also into the evolution of the conflict itself.

### Keywords

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Political Art, Palestinian Art, Graffiti, Everyday Resistance.

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### Introduction

Art has always been a space where communities express their political-ideological beliefs and advocate for change. In all its forms, artistic production has been used as a tool of socio-political struggle and as a catalyst for mobilization and dissent, and in this Palestine is no exception. Living under harsh conditions of violence, repression and censorship, Palestinians have found in art one of their most important and empowering tools of nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation.

Through art, Palestinians have challenged the hegemony of the Zionist narrative and its associated attempts to deny their existence. Furthermore, art has contributed to the construction of the Palestinians sense of togetherness and national identity and has been one of the driving forces behind many relevant moments in the history of Palestinian resistance by mobilizing Palestinians to act.

This article, which is derived from my Master's dissertation in International Studies at ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, offers an overview of the Palestinian resistance art production under occupation, with a special focus in *graffiti*. The political role and characteristics of Palestinian *graffiti* have evolved throughout the conflict with its most expressive form being reached in two historic moments: The First Intifada and after the construction of the Separation Wall.

As an object of study, *graffiti* can offer a great level of understanding about the artist's motivation, ideology and political aspirations, but also about community concerns and issues. According to James Scott (1985), the intentionality behind an act of resistance is often a better indicator of resistance than the outcome derived from the act itself (Scott, 1985: 290). With this in mind, and driven by a willingness to understand the meaning, intentionality and personal experiences behind artistic creations in Palestine, an interview of a young Palestinian *graffiti* artist was conducted. Through a phenomenological approach, my goal was to understand the intentions behind the artist's creations as well as the reasons that led him to represent certain symbolic elements instead of others. Deriving from a post-positivist interpretive perspective, this article develops a comparative analysis of three murals produced by Mohamd Alraee. It focuses on the signs and symbols used by the artist, relates them to the Palestinian context and resistance history and, finally, offers a semiotic interpretation of their meaning.

The analysis of Palestinian *graffiti* does not intend, by any means, to disregard the political and activist art produced by countless Israeli artists or those from neighbouring



countries that might have strongly influenced the Palestinian cultural scene. It aims, instead, to delve into the characteristics that are unique to Palestinian resistance efforts, and hopefully offer a deeper understanding of the state of the Palestinian resistance movement of today.

## **1. Everyday Resistance and the Palestinian Sumud**

Because resistance is a socially constructed concept, in which different actors, observers and dimensions contribute to its understanding, it has no broadly accepted definition (Gordon, 1993: 142). However, social scientists seem to generally accept that resistance is an “oppositional act”, where an active behaviour (either verbal, cognitive or physical) and a sense of opposing, questioning, and challenging the existing power structures are expected (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 538).

According to Foucault, “if there is power there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power” (Foucault, 1978: 95), meaning that the relationship between power and resistance is not static but rather cyclical and dynamic (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 548). This “mutually constitutive” relationship evolves over time and as the power dynamics change rulers look for new and ingenious ways to control the oppressed who, in turn, adapt their resistance strategies to the new context (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013: 31).

Although power structures tend to be favourable to those in power, the power dynamics are not always defined by power holders. According to the *theory of consent*, the authority of any ruler is dependent on the voluntary obedience of the ruled, meaning that by withdrawing this consent through resistance, opposers are limiting the degree of support the governing can count on (Dudouet, 2008: 4; Hardt & Negri, 2004: 54).

This theory may explain the power dynamics in democratic systems. However, in undemocratic and oppressive contexts, the tangible effects of resistance are limited and opportunities to openly resist are scarce (McAdam & Tarrow, 2000: 151; Zunes, 1994: 420). Therefore, resistance may be overt and recognizable as such, but it may also be covert and intended to go unnoticed. Depending on the socio-political circumstances, resisters may be encouraged to strategically manipulate their behavior to avoid recognition and escape retaliation from those in power (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 540-545).

This is often the case with less obvious forms of opposition such as “everyday forms of resistance”. According to James Scott (1985), who first coined the term, “everyday resistance” encompasses a set of acts or resistance activities that are ordinary and mundane in its nature (Scott, 1989: 33-34). They are often adopted by those who, due to a lack of resources or opportunities, mask the rebellious nature of their acts while continuing to resist (Scott, 1985: xvi).

This is often the case with humour, songs, or literature when used to covertly express resistance within a context of censorship and punishment (Sanger, 1995: 179; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 540). Without being “politically articulated or formally organized”, everyday resistance can prepare the ground for more visible acts of resistance, such as demonstrations, protests and insurrections as these events often find their roots in



“stories, poems, songs, visual arts and other local acts of defiance and resistance, unseen by authorities or by outside observers” (Tripp, 2013a: 5; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013: 10).

It is from a sense of *sumud*, i.e. an “active form of willingness to sacrifice oneself in order to achieve justice” that the Palestinian experience of everyday resistance emerges. *Sumud* is an “active form of popular resistance” that highlights “steadfastness, persistence and success in the face of adversity” and not mere passive tolerance (Qumsiyeh, 2011: 11). Simply by going through the mundane acts of daily life - laughing, crying, getting married, having children, going to school, tending their sheep in what remains of Palestine - Palestinians are resisting Israeli occupation (Qumsiyeh, 2011: 235).

## 2. Palestinian Art, Sumud and Everyday Resistance

It is often in culture that oppressed communities find the political space to express their ideas, opinions and emotions (Scott, 1990: xiii). Culture offers a safe alternative space where, through “hidden transcripts”, the weak can express themselves relatively freely within the existing power structures (Scott, 1990: 164-65). These “hidden transcripts”, in the form of literature, music, paintings and folklore, often provide the oppressed with the ideological underpinnings needed to rise up against their oppressor (Scott, 1990: 80).

Particularly in contexts of censorship, violence and occupation, cultural production is not only used to express political and ideological opposition, but also functions as memory tools in which historical episodes are remembered and values are passed on between generations (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014: 15; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995: 127).

The ability to contribute to the collective memory is particularly relevant in the Palestinian context since the Zionist foundational myth deliberately erased the Palestinian presence from the land by framing it “as a land without a people to a people without a land” (Piterberg, 2001: 31).

Palestinian culture represents a challenge to this narrative. And if we agree with Hamdi’s interpretation that everything that helps to keep the idea of Palestine alive is a type of *sumud*, then artistic production certainly falls into this category (Hamdi, 2011: 40-41).

The potential of art as a form of everyday resistance rests on its ability to transform and shape the “political behavior among the Palestinians in their everyday resistance” (Ali, 2018: 148-9). By contributing to the embodiment of the Palestinian collective memory, to the communal sense of belonging to the land and to the emergence of innovative counter-narratives, artistic interventions may contribute to shaping the subaltern’s attitudes not only towards power holders but to resistance itself (Hamdi, 2011: 40-41; Tripp, 2013b: 16).

## 3. Palestinian resistance and the role of culture

From the beginning of the military occupation (1967), Israel has applied a range of techniques designed to assert control over the Palestinians, their land and its narrative



(Ali, 2018: 148). What began as the destruction of entire Palestinian villages in 1948<sup>1</sup> grew into an elaborate scheme of domination based on the construction of borders, checkpoints, and Israeli settlements along with house demolitions and land confiscations over the years (Ehrenreich, 2016: 206), accompanied by the establishment of a complex system of permits limiting movement across the Palestinian border that drastically curtail the flow of people and culture (Stiline, 2018: 50).

Between 1967 and 1993<sup>2</sup> a complex system of military censorship designed to destroy all social elements that could evoke the Palestinian collective memory, sense of community and belonging to the land was established (Swedenburg, 1989: 268). Israeli censorship of Palestinian self-expression went as far as prohibiting the raising of the Palestinian flag, the public display of Palestinian national symbols, such as the *kufiyya* (Palestinian head scarf), or the use of Palestinian national colors (red, white, and green) in artistic productions (González, 2009:205; Tripp, 2013b: 118). These impositions, however, made it easier for every Palestinian to engage in smaller acts of resistance. Flags, stickers and *graffiti* appeared everywhere. And in failing to prevent these acts from emerging, the image of control projected by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was undermined (Tripp, 2013b: 118).

Because these gestures were smaller in nature they helped to engage a larger segment of the population who would otherwise not have been drawn into acts of resistance and were essential in preparing the ground for larger grassroots collective actions such as the First Intifada (Tripp, 2013b: 119-20).

In the Palestinian context, the creation of culture assumes a multitude of political functions, from mobilization, to evoking feelings of nationality, to bearing witness to the Israeli occupation (Tawil-Souri, 2011b: 6; McDonald, 2013: 31).

If art is crucial to the construction of community, national sentiments and shared narratives, the domination of artistic production is crucial to control the “publics’ shared imagination” (Tripp, 2013a: 187). To that end, the effort applied by the Israeli authorities into censoring cultural expression is nothing but testimony to the tangible effects of artistic resistance (Tripp, 2013b: 259-60).

The creation of the Palestinian League of Artists offers a good example. Ignoring the impact the League would have on the general public, Israeli authorities allowed its creation in 1973. This collective of artists organized group exhibitions which were considered as insignificant by the occupying forces. To the Palestinians, however, every piece of art made public in the presence of the Israelis became a source of “national pride and self-reassurance”. As these exhibitions came to be perceived as symbols of resistance, artists became targets of harassment and were often imprisoned and their works confiscated or subject to censorship (Boullata, 2004: 72).

As the possibilities of engaging in direct political activism are limited, Palestinian’s resort to cultural activism which, according to Ilan Pappé, equips Palestinian society with a

<sup>1</sup> This event also referred to as *Al-Nakba*, consisted on the destruction of more than 500 Palestinian villages and resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land (Masalha, 2014: 34).

<sup>2</sup> Following the Six-day War in 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, which lasted until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, after which the Palestinians were given limited governance and autonomy: [https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/palestineremix/timeline\\_main.html#tl-4](https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/palestineremix/timeline_main.html#tl-4).



“sense of internalized strength that the Israeli government cannot easily prevent nor erase” (Pappé, 2011: 75).

#### 4. The Palestinian artistic landscape under military occupation

For the Palestinians, art is an integral part of resistance. And just as the political and historical events of the conflict have shaped the techniques of resistance, they have also impacted the aesthetics and themes embraced by the Palestinian cultural movement (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014: 9).

In 1948, following the *Nakba* – many Palestinians were forced to flee and became refugees scattered throughout the world. Those who stayed in Palestine, were now under the sovereignty of Israel, Egypt or Jordan. This geographical distribution of Palestinian society contributed to the weakening of its internal and political unity, and to the loss of a common cultural center. By being geographically dispersed, Palestinians had different experiences of the same conflict (Qumsiyeh, 2011: 236).

The first generation of Palestinian resistance artists emerged from this traumatic event, and so their experiences of loss, dispersal and destruction were strongly echoed their artistic output (Boulatta, 2004: 71). A new moment for Palestinian culture came with the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964. With the appearance of this entity art became the primary space of political intervention. The 1960s were associated with the emergence of prominent Palestinian artists such as Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish and Suleiman Mansour (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014: 9; Desai, 2020).

Until the 1980s, however, most Palestinian resistance was armed and mainly orchestrated by Palestinian organizations operating outside the occupied territories (Tripp, 2013b: 117). From the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the early 1960s until the First Intifada (1987-1993), armed resistance and martyrdom were celebrated and the *fida'yi*<sup>3</sup> was the most lionized figure of the Palestinian resistance (Kahili, 2007: 142-6).

The First Intifada, however, brought new life to the Palestinian resistance and its celebrated figures (Kahili, 2007: 142-6). During the first uprising Palestinians from all walks of life engaged in acts of civil disobedience such as strikes, demonstrations and stone throwing, which resulted in the figure of the *fida'yi* being replaced by that of the *shahid*<sup>4</sup> (Kahili, 2007: 142-6). From this moment on armed resistance would be avoided and instead be replaced by “unarmed civil disobedience on a massive scale” (McDonald, 2013: 118; Ehrehreich, 2016: 83).

The disproportionate use of violence against Palestinian civilians by Israel during the First Intifada provoked a wave of criticism of the Israeli Government worldwide and stimulated the emergence and growth of “boycott Israel” campaigns and increased support for the Palestinian people. As a result, Israel began to reassess its policies in Gaza and in the West Bank. It was within this context that the Israeli Government, now led by Yitzhak

<sup>3</sup> *Fida'ya* stands for the guerrilla fighter, the redeemer who sacrifices him/herself for the common cause (Khalili, 2007: 145).

<sup>4</sup> *Shahid* is a term used to refer to the Palestinians civilians who have been killed in the conflict ([Shahid | Just Vision](#)).



Rabin, and the PLO chairman Yasser Arafat started the peace negotiations that resulted in the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 (McDonald, 2013: 131-132).

With the signing of the Peace Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 “the cultural scene was infused with a new energy” and a new artistic period was born. The new cultural paradigm broke with traditional Palestinian art very much focused on the themes of “nation, refugeehood and trauma” (Boullata, 2004: 72; Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014: 9). The time was now of peace and reconciliation and so the “culture of mourning, sacrifice, and revolution” felt no longer necessary (McDonald, 2013: 133-35).

The Accords were intended to end the Israeli occupation, however “attempts to silence and erase the Palestinian identity and culture did not stop” (Tawil-Souri, 2011b: 5). Less than a decade later, the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) erupted as Palestinians gave vent to their frustration at the “broken promises and failure of the Oslo Accords” and widely felt disenchantment with the recently established PA (Pappé, 2011: 229).

The second uprising, though initially peaceful, soon turned violent as both sides resorted to deadly force (Mason & Falk, 2016: 171). The Palestinians, however, suffered considerably more condemnation in the international media when compared to Israel which allowed the Israelis to regain support and sympathy from the international community (Ackerman, 2001: 64).

Another major outcome of the Second Intifada was the unilateral construction of the 700km Separation Wall<sup>5</sup> between Israel and the West Bank in 2002 (Tripp, 2013b: 122). The Wall became a “blank canvas” for Palestinian artists and resisters. Powerless to stop its construction, Palestinians revealed their resilience and adaptability as the Wall became the primary site where *graffiti*, and other forms of protest art, are exposed (Larkin, 2014: 156).

## 5. Contemporary Graffiti in Palestine: a case worth studying

*Graffiti* has always been an important element of the Palestinian resistance movement. Palestinians employ *graffiti*, as noted by Love and Mattern (2013), as the “pervasive commodification of art and culture” for political purposes (Love & Mattern, 2013: 298). *Graffiti* has been, and still is, used by the Palestinian resistance movement as a form of political activism, through which an intentional effort to challenge the political future and community development is made (Love & Mattern, 2013: 339).

Furthermore, *graffiti* has many advantages for its creators. Firstly, the costs are low and the necessary tools (e.g. spray cans) are easily available. Secondly, by being situated outside mainstream media, it benefits from freedom of speech, and thirdly the anonymity protects the author from potential retaliation (White, 2001: 257; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999: 2).

The advantages of *graffiti* are not exhausted with the *graffiter*. As an object of study, *graffiti* has the potential to offer relevant insights into the mind of those who create it,

<sup>5</sup> Israel began the construction of the Separation Wall in 2002. The “security fence” is 708 km long and annexes 9,4% of Palestinian territory of the West Bank (Larkin, 2014: 134).



but also into social issues and community concerns (Ferrel, 1995: 75; Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974: 492), Thus, *graffiti* can provide a level of understanding of a community or group that should not be underestimated (Klingman & Shalev, 2001: 405; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013: 378).

Essentially, *graffiti* allows ideas ignored by other media to enter the public discourse and offers an avenue of political expression to anonymous individuals and marginalized groups (Hanauer, 2004: 30). Within the relationships of power, *graffiti* represents a direct challenge to authority and its attempts to assert control over the public space (Waldner & Dobratz, 2013: 379).

*Graffiti* is what Bayat describes as “street politics”. According to the author, street politics represent the conflicts between the populace and authority that are formed and expressed in the physical and social space of the streets. The streets offer those without access to a formal political arena a stage where they can express their political ideals and concerns (Bayat, 1997: 63).

As a form of communication, *graffiti* intentionally interacts with an audience to incite civic engagement, political participation and resistance (Bruner & Kelso, 1980: 241; Rodriguez & Clair, 1999: 2). By being visible in the public space, *graffiti* is a significant tool of resistance as every passer-by is a potentially new challenger to the status quo (Rodriguez & Clair, 1999: 3).

The “street” is the place where individuals mobilize or are mobilized by others with whom they do not necessarily share an “active network”. Instead, “street mobilization” is possible due to what have been defined as “passive networks”, i.e. the unspoken acknowledgement of a shared identity between individuals that permits the creation of a web of communication between others that are unknown to the *graffiti* artist. The possibility of spontaneous group action turns the streets into an important element of any resistance effort, and it is for this reason that unpopular governments watch them so closely. Even if authorities prohibit public demonstrations and gatherings, they cannot forbid people from walking, working, driving and experiencing street life (Bayat, 1997: 64-6).

In Palestine, *graffiti* found its most notable expression as a political act during the First Intifada (1987-1993) and after the construction of the “Security Wall” by Israel in 2002 (Peteet, 1996: 139; Hanauer, 2011: 301).

As explored previously, by the time of the First Intifada a complex system of media censorship had been established which forced everyday political activity to move underground and *graffiti* to become the major means of communication and mobilization (Bishara, 2009: 5-7). During this period, the language most commonly used in *graffiti* was Arabic which suggests that the content was directed at an internal audience (Peteet, 1996: 150).

In addition to encouraging resistance, inciting action (e.g. “Monday is strike”), updating the community on the progress of the uprising and celebrating martyrdom, *graffiti* was in itself an act of civil disobedience. Deemed illegal under Israeli Military Regulations, writing on walls was a clear act of defiance and a challenge to Israeli territorial claims (Peteet, 1996: 140-6).



The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the end of the First Intifada did not mean an end to the production of *graffiti*. With the creation of the PA, Palestinians were given a certain degree of self-governance and official Palestinian broadcast media, namely the radio station Voice of Palestine and Palestine TV, were established in 1994 (Bishara, 2009: 8-9). Consequently, *graffiti* stopped being such a crucial communication tool, and writing on walls was no longer as dangerous leading to *graffiti* losing some of its appeal as a way of resisting the occupation. Nonetheless, *graffiti* continued to denounce the Israeli occupation but was also focused on criticizing the PA government and expressing the general disenchantment with the Oslo Accords (Tripp, 2013b: 275-6).

The outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 led to the construction of the Separation Wall in 2002. The Wall brought a new depth to the role of *graffiti* as part of the Palestinian resistance struggle (Larkin, 2014: 135-6).

In contrast to the First Intifada, the main language now present on the Wall is English<sup>6</sup>, suggesting a change not only in the demographic of the artists, mostly foreign, but also that the targeted audience is now the international community (Gould, 2014: 9).

As a blank canvas for political intervention, the Separation Wall attracts many international artists who use it to express solidarity with Palestinians or to criticize Israel and its political allies. Interventions on the Wall by internationally renowned artists, such as Banksy<sup>7</sup>, receive much international attention and praise and have helped to generate tourist, media and public interest in the Palestinian cause<sup>8</sup> (Larkin, 2014: 143-157).

Another indicator that Wall *graffiti* is meant for international consumption is the common use of internationally recognized symbols of liberation and resistance, such as Nelson Mandela, Ghandi or the Statue of Liberty in murals. If artists frame their message and manipulate symbolic elements in ways that will resonate more with the target audience (Toenjes, 2015: 57-9), then by using these internationally recognized symbols of resistance and emancipation, artists are framing the Palestinian experience not as unique to them, but rather as an integral part of the global struggle for freedom and liberation (Alim, 2020: 74-5).

Despite attracting a lot of international attention, the local community has received the work of foreign artists on the Wall with ambivalence as some consider that it not only beautifies and legitimizes the most symbolic element of the occupation, but also receives more scholarly and media attention than that created by local artists (Larkin, 2014: 144). Others have also remarked that framing the Palestinian struggle in universalized terms diminishes its message as it obscures its unique specificities and makes it harder for the Palestinian perspective to be heard and risks diluting the power of *graffiti* as tool of resistance (Gould, 2014: 13; Alim, 2020: 75). An example of this was an intervention on

<sup>6</sup> In a 2011 study of the *graffiti* present on the Separation Wall, in the area surrounding the neighbourhood Abu Dis (Jerusalem) it was found that 66.7% of the *graffiti* present were in English, and that only 3.8% was in Arabic (Hanauer, 2011: 308).

<sup>7</sup> Since 2005, several *graffiti* linked to Banksy can be seen in Palestine. Banksy's interventions in Palestine are not unique to the Separation Wall. They can also be found in the streets of Gaza, Bethlehem and Jerusalem (Tapies, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> *Graffiti* on the Separation Wall, particularly those signed by internationally acclaimed artists, such as Banksy and JR, attract many political and conflict tourists to Palestine. The higher demand for "conflict tourism" encouraged various non-governmental organizations and tourist companies, both Palestinian and Israeli, to organize "Wall tours" and prompted locals to open souvenir shops and other tourist related businesses (Larkin, 2014: 143-157).



the Wall named "Face 2 Face"<sup>9</sup> by the French artists JR and Marco that, despite receiving much international praise, was not as well received by the Palestinian community. Consisting of the "largest illegal photography exhibition ever", the project contained large photographs of Palestinians and Israelis that shared the same profession, next to each other, on both sides of the Separation Wall, as well as in several Palestinian and Israeli cities. The objective was to highlight the similarities between the two people and, by doing so, affirm that the dialogue between them and the achievement of peace was possible<sup>10</sup>. Yet, in an interview conducted by Larkin in 2010 of a Palestinian mechanic named Hani, the feedback about the exhibition was not as hopeful: "Of course we are similar, but we do not have the same rights or the same lives" (Hani *in* Larkin, 2014: 145).

Substantial differences exist between *graffiti* on sections of the Wall that surround popular tourist spots from that aimed at an internal audience and found in Palestinian villages or refugee camps. When directed at the domestic audience, *graffiti* is used to give visual support to the political struggle. The focus tends to be on supporting political prisoners, celebrating martyrdom and drawing attention to historically important events. Aesthetic considerations are perceived as secondary (Alim, 2020: 70; Larkin, 2014: 151-2).

*Graffiti* produced by Palestinian artists can offer a deeper understanding of the Palestinian perspective on the occupation, of the struggles that are unique to them and on the nature of the local resistance movement. However, far more media and scholarly attention is given to the *graffiti* on the Wall directed at the international audience (Larkin, 2014: 144).

I suggest that analysis of *graffiti* produced by local Palestinian artists outside areas of mainstream media and tourist attention is relevant as it can reveal important details about the Palestinian resistance movement today and the Palestinian's political demands and aspirations. Moreover, I argue that the interpretation of the symbolic elements used and martyrs celebrated by artists in their *graffiti* can reveal their political positions and affiliations, the type of resistance techniques they are willing to pursue and what future they envisage for Palestine (Young, 2020: 43-45).

To that end, I used social media, namely Instagram, to contact a twenty-five-year-old Palestinian *graffiti* artist named Mohamd Alraee (@mohamd\_alraee), living in the Aroub Refugee Camp<sup>11</sup>. I asked Mohamd if he could share some pictures of his work with me and had the opportunity to ask him some questions. I was interested in understanding how often Mohamd created *graffiti*, if he was doing it individually or as part of a group and, finally, what message he was trying to transmit. Mohamd told me that he created *graffiti* alone and on a regular basis, and further explained that:

"Most of the time it is a political message, like resistance, you know... [The message] can't be subjective in Palestine. [Resistance] is part of our daily life and reality. Other

<sup>9</sup> More information about the "Face 2 Face" project is available here: <https://www.jr-art.net/projects/israel-palestine>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Aroub refugee camp is located in the southern West Bank, between the cities of Bethlehem and Hebron. Around 10.000 live in the camp, which is characterized by high unemployment rates, overcrowding and poor living conditions: Aroub Camp | UNRWA.



times it is connected to a community matter... but it is always political, specially living in a refugee camp” (Mohamd Alraee, *in* Young, 2020: 44).

From this statement alone, it becomes apparent that, contrary to the *graffiti* present on the Wall, Mohamad is seeking to speak to the local community, to encourage resistance by his peers and to criticize authority, not only Israeli, but also Palestinian (Young, 2020: 44).

Furthermore, what is common to all Palestinian parties and political organizations is the revolutionary struggle against colonialism. There are, however, differences between them, particularly their role models and alliances which vary according to their agendas and ideologies (Khalili, 2007: 49). Moreover, another indication of different political positions is the martyrs they idolize (Khalili, 2007: 133). I suggest that the same logic can be applied to analysis of the *graffiti* created by Mohamad: the idolized martyrs, symbolic elements and signs present in his work are indicative not only of his political views and affiliations, but also of what type of resistance he expects from the Palestinian liberation movement (Young, 2020: 45).

In the pictures, Mohamad provided me with three distinct but nonetheless cohesive symbolic figures: Che Guevara, the *Fida'yi* and Basel al Aa'raj (covered with the red and white *keffiyeh*). What is cohesive in these symbols and colors is that they are frequently associated with the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine).

The PFLP is a paramilitary and secular Palestinian political organization ideologically based on liberation/Marxist principles whose origins date back to the late 1960s. The party, as a collective, rejected the notion of “victimhood” and instead replaced it with the heroic narrative of the guerrilla fighter and defended the use of arms (Khalili, 2007: 164).

Figure 1. Mural of Che Guevara, Aroub refugee camp, 2020.



Credits: Photograph courtesy of Mohamd Alraee.



Che Guevara (Figure 1) is a very important symbol within the common perception of the PFLP. As a revolutionary figure, Che Guevara is associated with the adoption of guerrilla techniques as opposed to “conventional armies” and to the celebration of martyrdom as a core element of resistance (Khalili, 2007: 132; Che Guevara, 1961: 25-46).

Figure 2. Mural of a *fidai’yi* (guerrilla fighter), Aroub refugee camp, 2020.



Credits: Photograph courtesy of Mohamd Alraee/ Bulletin N° 48 from the PFLP, 1981. Designer: Marc Rudin.<sup>12</sup>

In the same vein, in the PFLP narrative of armed resistance the image of the *fidai’yi* was celebrated as heroic and the image of the martyr associated with the figure of the guerrilla fighter (Figure 2) (Khalili, 2007: 111).

Although the importance of this figure faded with the outbreak of the First Intifada, Mohamd still celebrates Basel al Aa’raj, the “educated martyr” (Figure 3). He explained that Aa’raj was a young political activist, highly educated, who was killed by the Israeli military in 2017. Mohamd then proceeded to explain that Aa’raj was not only vocal against Israel but also against the PA<sup>13</sup>, because, in his words:

“They stopped fighting against the Israelis and instead followed a neoliberal way, settling for economic freedom... [The dissatisfaction with the PA is] a sentiment shared by a lot of Palestinians but not by all of them” (Mohamd Alrae *in* Young, 2020: 47).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/pflp-bulletin-number-48>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net/content/dismantle-it-and-let-them-fall/31281>.



Figure 3. Mural of Basel al Aa'raj, Aroub refugee camp, 2020



Credits: Photograph courtesy of Mohamd Alraee.

Aa'raj was part of the new generation of young Palestinian leaders determined to "revitalize the stagnant Palestinian national movement"<sup>14</sup> and, since his passing, became one of the best-known symbols of youth resistance in Palestine, not only as a symbol of opposition to the PA but also as the modern embodiment of the Pre-Oslo revolutionary sentiment.

Additionally, Aa'raj has been compared to Ghassan Kanafani (Figure 4), a novelist, journalist and martyr from the late 1960s<sup>15</sup>. Kanafani, killed by the Israeli military forces in 1972, was a spokesman for the PFLP and acknowledged as the "archetype of the nationalist intellectual". It was his belief that both "penmanship and fighting" should be employed in the Palestinian resistance efforts (Khalili, 2007: 133; Desai, 2020).

The image of Kanafani, his literature and revolutionary ideals are associated with a period in Palestinian history in which art was conceived as a fundamental element of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and in which resistance was seen in a collective sense, a sentiment that many considered was lost with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 (Desai, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> [The Assassination of Basel al-Araj: How the Palestinian Authority Stamps Out Opposition - Al-Shabaka.](#)

<sup>15</sup> [https://electronicintifada.net/content/bassel-al-araj-icon-lost-generation/31051.](https://electronicintifada.net/content/bassel-al-araj-icon-lost-generation/31051)



Figure 4. Ghassan Kanafani at his office in Beirut (1970).



Credits: Bruno Barbey.<sup>16</sup>

Like Kanafani, Aa'raj was also committed to the revolution and believed in the power of both the pen and the gun. He rejected the adoption of the post Oslo defeat as an ideology and advocated for the pre-Intifada revolutionary spirit (Desai, 2020). And, similarly to Che Guevara, he believed that the struggle should be carried out by the *fida'yi*<sup>17</sup>.

Critics have suggested that the Palestinian resistance "grew tired of itself", that *graffiti* lost its appeal as of tool of resistance and mobilization as it no longer offers messages of hope nor concrete solutions (Gould, 2014: 9). However, if we acknowledge that *graffiti* offers powerful insights into the mind and political-ideological orientations of its creator, and that on a higher level it reflects community concerns, then the *graffiti* produced by artists like Mohamd Alrae deserves great consideration. I suggest that by interpreting the murals made by Mohamd, we can determine his attitude towards the contemporary Palestinian resistance movement: Mohamd celebrates Basel al Aa'raj, who is seen today as symbolizing the struggle of the new generation. He was a strong critic of the post Oslo mindset and instead celebrated the culture and morals of the First Intifada, in which resistance was marked by collective struggle and sacrifice. He also celebrated Che Guevara, a figure that became one of the most celebrated icons of the Palestinian liberation movement from the 1960s until the eruption of the First Intifada.

Lastly, Mohamd revives the figure of the *fida'yi*, which as previously argued, lost its importance with the First Intifada. To bring back this once so important symbolic element, I believe, is to state that the pre-Intifada spirit is not lost, that the guerrilla fighter is still a relevant figure today and that the revolution continues. By the martyrs he celebrates

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/ghassan-kanafani-in-his-office>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://electronicintifada.net/content/dismantle-it-and-let-them-fall/3128>.



and symbolic elements he chooses to represent it would seem fair to conclude that Mohamd is in step with the new wave of Palestinian youth that contests not only the Israeli military occupation but also the authority and legitimacy of the PA.

## Conclusion

Resistance in Palestine is part of a collective effort born of an awareness of *sumud* that is deeply rooted in every Palestinian's sense of self. Simply by continuing to exist and live their lives, Palestinians are resisting the occupation and jeopardizing Israeli claims over the land. Since the beginning of the occupation, Palestinians have resorted to nonviolent means, one of which is art, to resist the constant violent onslaught against them. Palestinian art mostly produced under extreme scrutiny and censorship has been integral to the construction of the Palestinian identity and sense of togetherness and to challenging the Zionist version of history.

As a political act and a challenge to the *status quo*, Palestinian art finds its most expressive form in *graffiti*. *Graffiti* was one of the most important means of communication in the Palestinian community during the First Intifada (1987-1993), and its importance as an element of resistance continues to this day.

The construction of the Separation Wall in 2002 provided a blank canvas on which, not only Palestinians but also international artists and activists, could express opposition to the Israeli government and its international allies through murals, *graffiti* and posters. Predominately written in English and located in areas popular with tourists, these messages often frame the Palestinian experience in universal terms in the hope of bringing the Palestinian struggle into the international political arena.

To focus only in these messages, however, may lead to a deeper understanding about the Palestinian perspective on the occupation being lost. To avoid this, it is important to consider *graffiti* produced by local Palestinian artists and located outside the mainstream sites of tourist and media attention, as this analysis can offer insights into the artists political-ideological orientation but also clues to Palestinian political demands and aspirations, and relevant conclusions about the state of Palestinian resistance today.

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