

Gaza: Inspiring new forms of resistance?

Gaza's 'war artists' adapt to occupation by using technology to create and share.

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Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once wrote that "against barbarity, poetry can resist only by confirming its attachment to human fragility, like a blade of grass growing on a wall while armies march by".

During what will likely become known as the "Third Great War On Gaza", whitewashed by Israel with its own name, "Operation Protective Edge", there was literally a field of resilient blades of grass - artists fighting back against injustice with their creativity. And in their own way, they are continuing a time-honoured tradition, following in the footsteps of other "[war artists](#)" around the world, from Francisco Goya to Pablo Picasso.

The ubiquitous protest art was among my primary impressions, right along with the devastating destruction, when I first entered Gaza immediately after Operation Cast Lead in March of 2009. Thereafter, during my frequent visits to Gaza, I always made it a point to seek out the few galleries that a few struggling artists had opened,

Story highlights

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along with the many public murals and protest graffiti that grace nearly every public wall. During this war, however, due to the expense of art materials and lack of safety in the streets, their art supplies were digital and their "galleries" were social media.

"Even with the difficulties, I felt strongly that I had to express what this brutal offence was doing to my people," artist Basel Emaqsui told me. "The Western news media were just talking about numbers and facts; they weren't looking the souls of people here, and the pain."

Screaming contradictions

He combined photographs he took of the destruction that now characterises Gaza, with images of classical paintings he found online - visuals that Americans and Europeans are used to seeing. The contradiction between the two screams for attention, as if to say: "How can such inhumanity be allowed to exist when the world seeks beauty?"

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Along with two other artists in Gaza, Elmaqosui formed a gallery called "Windows From Gaza", an entity that is rare in the Strip, since it is difficult to make a living with art when most residents struggle just to support themselves. A portion of their meagre proceeds goes towards workshops to nurture the expressiveness of children and the skills of aspiring artists. However, the hardships imposed by the recent Israeli assault have made social media his primary way of sharing his work with the world.

Another Gaza artist who found creative expression through imaginative

digital manipulation is Tawfiq Abdel Rahman Jibril, a 27-year-old lecturer in architecture at the University of Palestine. He has loved drawing since childhood, but pursued architecture as a profession because it was more practical as a way to make a living. However, his dream is to go overseas to exhibit, where there is more of an ability to care about good art.

Meanwhile, art continues to be a hobby for Jibril, and during the war, he became fascinated with the idea of converting the smoke from bombs into images that range from hope, to resistance, to dreams of another world. Soon, with the help of Adobe Photoshop, his "reimagining" of the after-effects of Israeli bombs were circulating on Facebook.

"Some people resist with weapons and violence," says Jibril. "This is my form of resistance."

The idea of transforming the ubiquitous smoke plumes into art has caught the fancy of several artists and it is difficult to say who was first. Another artist who has excelled in this particular "medium" and who has formed a sort of partnership with Jibril is 25-year-old Bushra Shanan - from Hebron in the West Bank.

"When the world looks at pictures of Gaza under attack, it sees only smoke and ashes and destruction," she says. "But Palestinians see the stories behind the smoke: the martyrs, and the children and women who must learn to live without the basic necessities of life."

Art as a 'unifier'

The Israeli assault on Gaza has indeed united Palestinians everywhere, perversely bringing them together even as Israel seeks to divide and conquer. In Jordan, the Israeli blockade and assault has reinforced the connection of 45-year-old Imad Abu Shtayyah to her homeland. Her parents were forced to emigrate from Palestine in 1948, and she was born in a refugee camp in Amman.

Abu Shtayyah has been interested in art since she was just eight years old, when painting helped her recover from a traumatic experience - just as it is being used today to help the children of Gaza overcome the effects of war. As she developed as an artist, a common theme in her work became the role of women in preserving Palestinian culture.

"The woman is at the centre of our culture. They create and nurture the next generation," she explains. The image she created of a woman rising up from a Gaza village, with a skirt made of destroyed homes, became one of the most shared artworks on Facebook, with many using it as their profile photo.

But even more popular on Facebook was the image known as the "four boys". The simple photograph shows an orange-hued sunset, with the reflections of four young boys in the water lapping on the beach below. What everyone who sees the image knows is that it was inspired by the [shocking killing of the four Bakr cousins](#), all between the ages of nine and ten, while they were playing football on a Gaza City beach.

The Israeli military acknowledged later that it had launched the strike that hit the boys. What many of the Palestinians and activists who share the image on Facebook don't know, however, is that the creator is an Israeli Jew - and a third-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors.

"The Holocaust is the ultimate Israeli excuse for why they have to be so suspicious of the 'other'. But it's no way to live a life. My parents didn't live this life and I refuse to as well," says Amir Schiby, a musician from West Jerusalem who describes his art as a hobby.

Art can indeed be a unifying force, building bridges between peoples who are separated by distance, walls or culture. If only there was a way to infuse this same spirit into the negotiations that began on September 23 between the Israelis and representatives for the Palestinians in Cairo. Rather than attempt to stunt these "blades of resilient grass" beneath the weight of

occupation, they should be cultivated and nurtured.

Pam Bailey is a freelance journalist and activist who has lived and worked in the Gaza Strip.

Source: Al Jazeera

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