

# A culture under fire

[William Dalrymple](#) 1 Mar 2016

Palestinian artists have suffered more than physical hardship - they have also had to deal with censorship, harassment, and the destruction of their work. In the third of a series of major articles on the intifada, William Dalrymple looks at the struggle to keep art alive in wartime

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It is never easy running an arts centre in a small provincial town. Overcoming indifference and getting the punters in, attracting good work and making ends meet - these are the problems faced by such places across the globe. What most arts administrators do not have to face is rampaging enemy troops, occupation, F-16 bombing runs, siege and curfews: "The first time the Israeli army paid us a visit was at Easter," says Adila Laidi, the chic, French-educated 36-year-old who founded and runs the Sakakini cultural centre in central Ramallah. "Voilà! They broke in and trashed the place. Though peut-être we should be grateful they didn't actually blow it up."

In this they were relatively lucky. The previous day, on a visit to Bethlehem, I had seen a similar arts centre run by the Lutheran Church. The pastor had taken me around, showing how Israeli troops had completely smashed up the new \$2m Lutheran centre, blowing up workshops, smashing windows and fax machines, shooting up photocopiers, and bringing down ceilings with explosive charges in an oddly pointless bout of thuggery that caused over half a million dollars' worth of damage. Compared to that, the Sakakini got off lightly, with permanent damage only to doors and computers.

Despite such trials - indeed, partly because of them - the Sakakini is an extraordinary place. Founded in 1988 on the wave of optimism that followed Oslo, it is a vibrant centre of Palestinian creativity, housed in a beautiful early 19th-century Ottoman villa made of stone the colour of feta cheese. It sits at the top of a hill in one of the more wealthy middle-class areas of Ramallah, surrounded by villas and bars and private schools. Upstairs there are spaces for poetry readings and film screenings, while downstairs there are a series of well-lit exhibition spaces. The energy of the place defies the stringent constraints imposed on it by the state of siege. "It's difficult to do this work under constant curfews," admits Laidi, "though it is true that the occupation has provided some Palestinian artists with wonderful material."

The ceramicist and installation artist Vera Tamari, who turns up for a chat in Laidi's office as we are speaking, is a case in point. Vera has spent half her life as an artist under Israeli occupation: "Up to Oslo, the Israelis used to monitor all our exhibitions. There were very few Palestinian art galleries, so we used to hold our shows in schools, churches, municipal halls - whatever was available. People piled in - students, labourers, political people, shepherds. It was so crowded that there was hardly any room to see the paintings. It was the first time in their lives that many of these people were seeing actual works of art. Their noses were rubbing against the paint as if they wanted to smell the oil.

"It was very exciting, but the Israelis soon became aware of the importance of these exhibitions and started hitting the League of Palestinian Artists. They made us get permits to show our work, censoring art and invading artists' studios. Several of us were imprisoned, usually on charges that they were painting in the colours of the Palestinian flag. They would say, 'You can paint, but don't use red, white or black,' and they would imprison you if you used those colours. You couldn't paint a poppy, for example, or a watermelon: they were the wrong colours. Often it was up to the artistic judgment of the

particular officer in charge."

The occupation has always lain at the heart of Tamari's art, but recently she found that the Easter incursion provided her with some unexpectedly rich subject-matter. When the Israeli tanks rolled into Ramallah, they made a point of trying to punish the Palestinian civilian population by destroying as many private cars as they could: "It was just a game to them," says Tamari. "Sheer bravado. The tank commanders would drive along the pavements rather than the roads, taking out as many cars as they could. Then they started driving up into people's drives and garages, wrecking anything they could find. For weeks afterwards, all these smashed-up cars were lying around: people kept them, hoping to sell bits of the engine, or perhaps the seats. They didn't want to face the fact that something so expensive was completely lost. Of course, there is no insurance for an act of war.

"A friend of mine had a little red Beetle that we used to go out for drives in. It was one of the cars that was destroyed, and when I saw it all smashed up with its legs in the air like some dead insect, I had the idea of making an installation with these cars. I got the PA to lay a stretch of tarmac on the edge of the El Bireh football field - a road symbolically going nowhere - and arranged the crushed cars in a line, as if in a traffic jam. We had a big party to open the exhibit - le tout Ramallah - and went home at midnight.

"Then, at four that morning, the Israelis invaded again. My house was opposite the playing field and I could see the Israeli tanks passing. They would stop when they got to the installation, and you'd see these two heads pop out of their turrets and you could see them transfixed by this sight, trying to make sense of it. Eventually, after about a week, a whole cohort of Merkavas turned up and the tank commanders got out and discussed what to do. Then they got back into their tanks and ran over the whole exhibit, over and over again, backwards and forwards, crushing it to pieces. Then, for good

measure, they shelled it. Finally they got out again and pissed on the wreckage.

"I got the whole thing on video, and was delighted - of course. I have always been a great admirer of Duchamps. He had a nihilist-dadaist show in Paris once in the 1930s. And when they were putting it up, one of the workmen dropped a case of his paintings, smashing the glass. Duchamps was thrilled: 'Now it is complete,' he said. I felt exactly the same. The cars were now in tiny, tiny pieces. Before the second incursion I had had to make simulation tracks to mimic the path of the tanks. Now we had real ones. This was the ultimate metamorphosis for my work."

Across the corridor from Laidi's room is the office of Hassan Khader, a John Simpson lookalike who works as managing editor of al-Karmel, the leading Arabic literary magazine and the most prestigious arts journal in the Middle East. In style and typeface, the magazine is closely modelled on Granta: a thick, serious-looking paperback book with long prose articles interspersed with poems and grainy black and white photographs. Khader's office is piled high with papers and unopened Jiffy bags full of unread submissions. His desk is a sea of A4, though much of this relates to his other life as a translator: he greatly admires David Grossman's work and has translated his first novel into Arabic.

Khader was born in Khan Yunus camp in Gaza in 1953. Five years earlier his parents had lost everything - including their extensive ancestral landholdings - when his family was ethnically cleansed from their (now bulldozed) village of al-Jaladyah on the creation of Israel in 1948. But Hassan was a clever child, and a series of scholarships got him out of the camps and into university in Cairo. It was there that he made contact with the PLO, and before long he had risen to edit the PLO literary magazine. He continued to edit it throughout the siege of Beirut, as the Israelis pounded the offices with phosphorus shells.

Compared with which, he says, bringing out al-Karmel under occupation is child's play.

"When they broke in here at Easter, they knew the place was a cultural centre, but they still smashed it up. They broke open the door with explosives, destroyed all our computers, took all the hard disks. When the curfew was lifted, I came back to find papers all over the floor. They had upended all our filing cabinets and wandered back and forward over our latest proofs. There were the marks of jackboots all over our poetry."

Khader is a sociable sort, and his office is a beacon for the writers and novelists of the West Bank, several of whom dropped in for a chat as we were talking: Ramallah is under curfew so often these days that everyone seems to take the opportunity to get out and see friends on the few days the Israelis allow them to do so. While I am there, the talented Palestinian film-maker, Mai Masri, wanders through, discussing her latest project in the Ramallah camps, and five minutes later the novelist Yahia Yakhlef drops in for a cup of coffee. Together he and Khader sit bemoaning the state of the Ramallah bookshops. "The Israelis have always stopped books coming in from Jordan and they censor what they do allow in," says Khader. "It's almost impossible to get any decent novels in Ramallah these days."

"The al-Shouq bookshop hasn't managed to get new stock for two years," adds Yakhlef. "There hasn't been a single delivery since the second intifada. Only cookbooks are left."

"We all try to get around the problem by ordering stuff from Amazon," says Hassan, "but the Israelis still hold up deliveries for two or three months. You can't get anything until long after you have lost interest in it."

If Hassan is the man who does most of the daily grind of putting together al-Karmel, then the figurehead who started the magazine and whose name gives

it its prestige is Mahmud Darwish, the most celebrated modern Arabic poet and the man who represents the apex of Palestinian artistic achievement. He has sold more than a million books of poetry and is such a hero in the Arab world that, when he gave a poetry reading in Beirut, they had to move the venue to a sports stadium: more than 25,000 people attended. Even in Ramallah, besieged as it is, he attracts capacity crowds of more than 1,000 when he reads his work at the local Kassaba theatre.

Darwish, a thin, handsome, articulate man of 60, was out of Ramallah during the incursion and was aghast when he found that the Sakakini had been trashed and that his manuscripts and poetry had been ransacked: "The Israelis wanted to give us a message that nobody and nothing is immune - including our cultural life," he says. "I took the message personally. I know they're strong and can invade and kill anyone. But they can't break or occupy my words. That is one thing they can't do. My poetry is the one way I have to resist them. I have to deal with this with the pen, not by stones."

Here he raises his hands in exasperation: "For us the tunnel is so dark that you cannot even see the light at the end. In a different situation I would like to give up my poetry about Palestine. I can't keep writing about loss and occupation for ever. I feel it deprives me of my freedom as a poet. Am I obliged to express my love for my country every day? You have to live for love, for freedom. The subject of occupation itself becomes a burden. I want, both as a poet and as a human being, to free myself from Palestine. But I can't. When my country is liberated, so shall I be.

"When that happens, all Palestinian artists can go off and write about love and hope and all the other things in the world. But until that time, our duty is clear. We have no choice."

- William Dalrymple's book, *White Mughals: Love & Betrayal in 18th-Century*

India is published next week by HarperCollins, price £19.99. He will be lecturing on the book at the Royal Geographical Society on Friday October 25. Tickets from Stanfords, 12-14 Long Acre, London WC2E 9LP. Tel: 020-7836 1321. See also [www.williamdalrymple.uk.com](http://www.williamdalrymple.uk.com)

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