

Fireworks: Fragments of Resistance

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Uprisings and Wars

Fireworks is situated in an unnamed Palestinian town ‘in the early part of the twenty-first century’, meaning that it takes place sometime during the second intifada (2000-2005). The word *intifada* is usually translated as uprising, but in the original Arabic it refers to the act of ‘shaking something off’, much like you would shake dirt off your shoes. When used in the context of Palestinian human rights and national liberation, *intifada* is a major concept referring to an organised, widespread uprising against Israeli occupation. The term includes both armed and unarmed acts of resistance.

Since 1948, when the state of Israel was established, an event Palestinians call the Nakba (or ‘catastrophe’), there have been two such uprisings. The first intifada (1987-93) began when, on 8 December 1987, an Israeli military truck drove into a civilian car carrying Palestinian workers, killing all of them. While the Israelis claimed that the collision was an accident, Palestinians saw it as both arbitrary punishment for the murder of an Israeli two days earlier and a sign of Israel’s disregard for Palestinian lives. The subsequent weeks saw spontaneous riots erupt all over the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, collectively known as the ‘occupied Palestinian territory’¹. Protestors pelted Israeli soldiers with stones and Molotov cocktails, barricaded their streets to prevent the army from accessing buildings where they could arrest and detain anyone, even children. In response, Israeli soldiers used live ammunition on protestors of all ages, killing or maiming them. The Israeli army also imposed curfews and checkpoints to control people’s freedom of movement, and soldiers arrested, assaulted and tortured thousands of civilians. Soon the *intifada* moved from spontaneous riots and attacks on Israeli military infrastructure to more organised, political forms of resistance such as boycotting Israeli products, refusing to work in Israel (i.e. general strikes), and withholding taxes. Local groups, mostly led by Palestinian women, organised neighbourhoods

¹ The word ‘territories’ is often used. However, ‘occupied Palestinian territory’ is the legal term adopted by the UN, the EU, the International Court of Justice and other international bodies. This indicates the indivisibility of the West Bank (East Jerusalem) and Gaza.

into co-operatives to provide education (where schools had been closed by the Israeli army), medical care, food aid, the collection of rubbish, and much more.

According to estimates published by the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, in the six years that the first *intifada* lasted, 1,070 Palestinian civilians were killed, including 237 children. A further 54 Palestinians were killed by Israeli civilians.² Over 130,000 Palestinians suffered injuries, beatings and other abuse at the hands of Israeli forces; more than 2,500 houses were demolished as a form of collective punishment; and over 120,000 Palestinians were arrested and detained, many without trial or access to lawyers.³ According to one report published by Save the Children, in the first two years of the *intifada*, almost 30,000 children—many of them under ten—required medical treatment for injuries inflicted by the army. The majority of these children were not participating in any acts of violence. Yet, almost all of them were injured by directed fire.⁴

Much more violent than the first, the second *intifada* resulted from a number of triggers, such as the Oslo Accords' failure to provide peace and economic development and widespread dissatisfaction with the peace process. Despite their hopes for a better future just seven years earlier, Palestinians felt much worse off. Rather than improve, they realised their lives were more closely controlled by Israel. The occupation, for example, had not ended, and the Israelis had increased building Jewish-only settlements on Palestinian lands. Resentment against Israel and the Palestinian leadership started to reach tipping point.

The catalyst for the uprising came on 28 September 2000. Attempting to win support in the upcoming general elections, and hoping to strengthen his dream of becoming prime minister, Israeli politician Ariel Sharon and several members of his political party turned up at the Al-Aqsa Compound with hundreds of Israeli riot police. Both Muslims and Jews claim the entire area of the compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, as a holy site. Claims and counterclaims around ownership have been a highly controversial issue in the Palestine-Israel conflict. Yet, standing outside one of the gates to the shrine, Sharon said: 'The

² B'Tselem, https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables, accessed 31 July 2020.

³ Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, <https://www.wrmea.org/1997-december/middle-east-history-the-intifada-erupts-forcing-israel-to-recognize-palestinians.html>, accessed 31 July 2020.

⁴ Anne Nixon, *The Status of Palestinian Children During the Uprising in the Occupied Territories* (Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden, 1990).

Temple Mount is in our [i.e. Israeli] hands and will remain in our hands.⁵ Fearing an Israeli takeover of the site, Palestinian politicians immediately condemned the visit. Meanwhile, ordinary Palestinians attacked the riot police who responded in kind. The violence quickly escalated into riots.

A few days later, Hamas and other Palestinian groups started to engage in gun battles with Israeli soldiers, launching bombs on Israeli towns. Both Israelis and Palestinians engaged in assassinations of political leaders. Most notably, Palestinian groups started to carry out suicide bombs, targeting Israeli buses, restaurants and hotels. Israel responded by launching large-scale airstrikes on Gaza and the West Bank, bombing civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and apartment blocks.

Less than three weeks after the violence erupted, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 1322 condemning Israel for using excessive force against Palestinian civilians. By that point, hundreds of Palestinians had already been killed and many more injured. According to B'Tselem, 3,223 Palestinian civilians were killed during the second intifada, including 631 children.⁶ In addition, more than 10,000 children were injured as a result of the violence. The majority of these deaths and injuries occurred as they were going about their daily lives, such as attending school, playing or simply being at home.⁷

The end of the second *intifada* has not resulted in the end of violence against civilians. The human rights organisation B'Tselem tracks fatalities in the conflict, and has collated figures covering the period from 1987 up to June 2020. In the last decade alone, according to B'Tselem, there have been approximately 9,789 Palestinian fatalities in the Israeli-occupied territories of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Of these, around 2,098 were minors (aged 18 or younger) who did not take part in any hostilities.⁸

Palestinian children and youth are the most innocent casualties of the conflict. The figure above (2,098) represents just under a quarter of all deaths. Whilst Israeli media often portray them as the instruments of terrorists who use them as human

⁵ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/29/israel>, accessed 31 July 2020.

⁶ BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3694350.stm, accessed 31 July 2020.

⁷ Miftah, <http://www.miftah.org/Display.cfm?DocId=3451&CategoryId=5>, accessed 31 July 2020.

⁸ B'Tselem, <https://www.btselem.org/statistics/fatalities/before-cast-lead/by-date-of-event>, <https://www.btselem.org/statistics/fatalities/during-cast-lead/by-date-of-event>, and <https://www.btselem.org/statistics/fatalities/after-cast-lead/by-date-of-event>, accessed 31 July 2020.

shields or the children of parents who don't love them enough to let them live, international media often depicts them as either stone throwers or statistics. As *Fireworks* shows, the reality of their lives under a brutal occupation and endless cycles of violence is far more complex. Not only does the Palestine-Israel conflict affect their physical and mental wellbeing, it also impacts their future, their dreams, their desire to live a 'normal' life like children anywhere else.

Making Theatre in Palestine

Palestinian artists face many obstacles to their freedom of expression. Many Palestinian artists describe how they have had to struggle and fight in order to produce their work.

Within Israel, Palestinian theatres regularly face funding cuts and closure whenever they are critical of Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza or if they discuss Palestinian human rights. Public funding awarded to Palestinian artists and groups is generally far lower than for Israelis.⁹ In 2018, Israel's then minister for culture and sports Miri Regev proposed the Loyalty in Culture Bill which sought to withdraw public funding from any cultural organisation that criticised Israel or commemorated the Nakba. In the end, the bill failed to pass into law, but it demonstrates the extent to which Israeli politicians are prepared to go to suppress Palestinian artists.¹⁰

During the second *intifada*, Israeli forces invaded the West Bank city of Ramallah. As part of their operations, they ransacked the Sakakini Cultural Centre and Al-Kasaba Theatre. Computers were destroyed, windows were smashed, and the auditorium was vandalised. Staff later found human faeces in desk drawers. As far as the evidence goes, cultural organisations were considered legitimate targets during the *intifada*, which is a crime under international law.¹¹

In my own research on Palestinian theatre, I have found that every Palestinian artist with whom I've worked has experienced restrictions on their creative and

⁹ Middle East Eye, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/two-arabic-language-theatres-face-funding-cuts-israeli-government>, accessed 31 July 2020.

¹⁰ New Israel Fund, <https://www.nif.org/blog/the-collapse-of-the-anti-democratic-loyalty-in-culture-bill>, accessed 31 July 2020.

¹¹ 91st Meridian (University of Iowa), <https://iwpc.uiowa.edu/91st/vol4-num1/imagination-behind-the-wall-cultural-life-in-ramallah>, accessed 31 July 2020.

professional work as a result of the occupation.¹² The list of difficulties Palestinian artists face in producing work is almost endless. In 2012, Nabil Al Ra'ee, the artistic director of Jenin's Freedom Theatre, was arrested and detained.¹³ In December 2015, Israeli soldiers arrested Palestinian Circus School trainer and performer Mohammad Abu Sakha. He was imprisoned without trial for two years.¹⁴ Palestinian theatre-makers are also routinely prevented from travelling abroad. In 2016, Mustafa Sheta, a senior staff member of The Freedom Theatre, was denied exit permits to travel abroad for performances.¹⁵ With checkpoints and roadblocks dotted all over the West Bank, and entry into East Jerusalem heavily restricted, Palestinian artists face impossible difficulties just moving around and connecting with each other and their audiences.

Israel's attempts to restrict artistic collaboration also work in the other direction. When international theatre-makers want to collaborate with Palestinian artists, they may also have restrictions placed upon their visas. For example, their visas might expire long before the standard 90 days; or they may not even be allowed to enter the West Bank. In November 2013, Al-Harah Theatre was about to start rehearsing its play *Shakespeare's Sisters*. The director was an Italian called Pietro Florida. After airport security checks revealed he would be working in the West Bank, Florida was deported back to Italy and banned from entering the country for five years. The theatre then had to conduct nine weeks of rehearsals on Skype.

As you read *Fireworks*, bear in mind that making theatre in Palestine isn't simply about putting pen to paper or gathering a group of actors and creatives in a room to produce a play. Writing something too critical of Israel could land you in jail with no trial and no access to a lawyer.

The Play

¹² Rayya El Zein, Irene Fernández Ramos, George Potter, and Gabriel Varghese, 'BDS and Palestinian Theatre Making: A Call for Debate within the Discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies', *Theatre Survey*, 59, 3 (September 2018), pp. 409–418, p. 413.

¹³ HowlRound, <https://howlround.com/death-and-art-palestine>, accessed 31 July 2020.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/palestinian-circus-performer-mohammad-abu-sakha-palestine-clown-israel-administrative-detention>, accessed 31 July 2020.

¹⁵ The Freedom Theatre, <http://thefreedomtheatre.org/news/senior-staff-member-and-student-prohibited-from-travelling-abroad/>, accessed 31 July 2020.

Originally written in Arabic and translated into English, *Fireworks* was first performed in 2015 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. It grew out of the series of playwriting workshops the theatre has been organising in Palestine since 1998.

Fireworks is a claustrophobic play. It follows the families of 12-year-old Lubna and 13-year-old Khalil who are stuck in their apartment building as the siege intensifies outside. Neither family can escape from this nightmare situation in which Lubna's brother Ali has already been killed. Outside, buildings are being destroyed by missiles. Schools have been closed. The streets, where the children used to play, are no longer safe. Even the cemetery in which Ali was buried has been reduced to rubble. Nowhere is safe, and nobody can escape.

Told more as a series of vignettes rather than as a linear chain of events, the absence of a straight narrative points to how life in a war zone becomes incoherent, fragmented, loosely held together under the stresses and strains of violence. Khalid and Nahla, Lubna's parents, are constantly arguing as Nahla is unable to come to terms with Ali's death. In one argument, Nahla mentions that Ali is a martyr living in heaven, waiting to be reunited with her. Khalid gets angry and shuts down this illusion, telling her that their son is simply dead, gone forever—foreshadowing Lubna's monologue at the end of the play. Meanwhile, Ahmad and Samar, Khalil's parents, talk about moving to a shelter but Ahmad thinks it's unsafe. At the same time, neither of them can agree on how to bring up their autistic son.

The parents try hard to protect their children, despite the constant threat of death. They tell them that the flare of the missiles they see at night are just fireworks in anticipation of Eid. But the children are growing up, and Lubna soon discovers this is just a lie—a sort of coming of age for her. The violence of war has become so ordinary that even the children's games are suffused with violence, military interrogations, amputations, and racing in the streets to see who can escape getting shot. These are the 'ordinary' things the children have witnessed. So ordinary, in fact, that Khalil's 'pet' is a dead pigeon that he punches when he thinks Lubna isn't looking, and he can't even imagine the first thing he'd like to do when the war ends.

Just as the play shows us what it's like to grow up in a time of war, it also shows us the difficulties of being a parent and holding a family or marriage together. As Nahla's mental health deteriorates, it is Lubna who must point this out to her father who does everything he can to minimise her fears. Everyone is desperate for a normal life, of finding intimacy with the people they love. But the most intimate moment in the play, when it comes, is also its saddest: Khalid finally admits to

Ahmad that he isn't coping, and tries to shoot himself with the pistol he's been hiding in the bedroom. Unable to bring himself to pull the trigger, he breaks down in tears. Instead of protecting their families, which is what they want to do more than anything else, the two men can only hug each other and cry their hearts out.

The grounding event in the play is the festival of Eid. All the characters allude to its coming. There will be new clothes, presents, a cake, and even the chance for Lubna and Khalil to visit the playground. The irony, of course, is the paradox in looking forward to a celebration whilst mourning a dead son whose grave you can't even visit. In July 2014, this is exactly what happened in Gaza when Israeli forces killed more than a thousand Palestinians, including over two hundred children, in just twenty days. This was just weeks before a ground invasion would kill over 1400 Palestinian civilians, and destroy homes, hospitals and schools. As Muslims around the world were preparing to celebrate the end of Ramadan, the traditional greeting of *Eid sa'eed* (or 'Happy Eid') was changed to *Eid shaheed* (or 'martyr's Eid') in a global act of solidarity. In the end, war destroys everything—even the chance to enjoy those private happy moments with our families.

Further Reading

- Laetitia Bucaille, *Growing Up Palestinian: Israeli Occupation and the Intifada Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- Samih K. Farsoun and Christina E. Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1997).
- Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003).
- Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict (Seminar Studies)*, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
- Gabriel Varghese, *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

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