

## Painting “The Return” — Hopes and History on the Gaza Border

“Everyone resists in their own way — the revolutionary youth with slingshots and stones, the photographer with the camera, and the artists with their pencils. All of us are delivering the same message to the world: we have the right to get our homeland back.” – Artist Amna Alsalm

By [Ramona Wadi](#)

Global Research, May 17, 2018

[MintPress News](#) 16 May 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

*Featured image: Original art by Amna Alsalmi. (Photo: Karim Naser)*

*As Palestinians marked the 70th anniversary of the Nakba — or theft of their land by the creation of Israel in 1948 — the U.S. celebrated the transfer of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in another victory for Israeli colonialism.*

Palestinians participating in the March of Great Return have been organizing since May 14 in Gaza to demand the right for exiled Palestinians to return to their ancestral lands, but have faced Israeli snipers that have killed 62 and injured 2771 thus far, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health. During a White House [press briefing](#), Deputy Press Secretary Raj Shah dismissed the killings of Palestinians at the border as an “unfortunate propaganda attempt,” which he blamed on Hamas.

Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan also blamed Hamas for the killings. [According](#) to Erdan,

“with Nazi anger, [Hamas] endlessly shed blood to erase from people’s memories their own failures in the management of the Gaza Strip.” The death toll, he said, “didn’t indicate anything.”

The international community remained tethered to its usual condemnations while ignoring the existence of [UN Resolution 194](#).

Between the stipulated right of return as enshrined in UN Resolution 194, and the outcomes inflicted upon Palestinians by Israel and the international community, there is a vacuum that is inhabited by dreams and legacies. Art provides the medium for communication when words alone seem insufficient.

On May 5, the [Palestinian Conceptual Art Forum](#) organized an event on the Gaza borders at the return encampments in Malacca, east of Gaza City, which brought together Palestinian artists expressing their right of return through art. [Thaer al-Tawil](#), the principal of the organization, spoke to *MintPress* about the origins of the Forum and its initiative to participate in the Great Return March through what he terms “art protest.”



Artists work on original pieces in the art protest tent near the Great Return March protests on the Gaza border. (Photo: Karim Naser)

The artistic project organized by the Forum is reminiscent of a perpetual struggle. Themed “For the Return, we draw,” Al-Tawil explains the inspiration behind the event is rooted in a right that has sustained itself through generations since 1948:

The idea of this artistic project was formed when Palestinian artists wanted to participate in the Great Return March by organizing a big event that reflected the shedding of Palestinian blood on the Gaza borders.”

Al-Tawil expounds upon the link between art, resistance and return:

The art protest is also about sending a message to the Zionist occupation. The rifle, the painting and the artists’ pencil are all symbols of Palestinian unity. The Palestinian artist is humane in the fullest sense of the word. The artist is like the bird of peace that paints to impart the suffering of Palestinians over the years, to emphasize our right to return despite the persecution imposed on us by the Zionist occupation.”

Al-Tawil explains that the Forum has aims and ambitions — in terms of both psychological and artistic empowerment, as well as to enable Gaza’s artists’ recognition abroad. Sharing experiences and narratives through art is one of the main aims. The Forum provides courses for artist-students up to university. It also seeks to establish a union for artists, to safeguard their rights as well as provide protection for their creative expression. Al-Tawil continued:

The Forum was founded due to the political vacuum caused by the Palestinian political divisions between Hamas and Fatah and the absence of anybody, or party, that cares for the artists or supports them. A number of artists came up with the idea of founding a platform through which the young artists’ creativity can be channeled. That is how the Palestinian Conceptual Art Forum started.”

Communication through art is key for Al-Tawil. Despite the blockade, which has prevented Palestinians in Gaza from traveling freely, one of the Forum's aims is to connect with artists abroad:

The Forum aims to bridge between artists inside and outside of Palestine and strengthen their relations. It also aims to have an existence abroad through artistic expeditions, traveling abroad and participating in artistic exhibitions."

"For the return, we draw"

On March 30, which marks the commemoration of Land Day among Palestinians, the Great Return March protests started in Gaza. Israeli snipers targeted and murdered 19-year-old Palestinian artist [Mohamed Abu Amr](#). Well known for his sand sculptures on Gaza's shores, his last depiction, created and posted on his Facebook page on the eve of the protests, read "[I will return](#)."

Al-Tawil remembers Abu Amr's legacy and unfinished dreams. One of these was to sculpt a massive map of Palestine on Gaza's shores:

The Palestinian artistic movement lost the martyr Mohamed Abu Amr – the sculptor who, a few days before being murdered by Israeli sniper fire, sculpted the words 'we are returning.' To remember his legacy, we artists collaborated to sculpt the Palestine map he had planned. We fulfilled what he had wanted to do. The largest map of Palestine ever sculpted."

Al-Tawil explains that Palestinian collective memory has found an expressive avenue through art. Referencing the Nakba of 1948, when Palestinians were massacred, ethnically cleansed, and forcibly displaced from their lands by Zionist paramilitaries to pave the way for the establishment of colonial Israel, Al-Tawil says it became an artistic duty "to portray and depict all of this collective memory through paintings and artwork."

He mentions Ismael Shamoot, Ismael Ashoor, Bashir Sinwar and Fathi Ghabn as being among the first to utilize art as a form of resistance, and whose influence has lasted throughout the decades. Palestinian artists, he says, have been routinely persecuted by Israel, with methods ranging from restricting their freedom of movement to being targeted for assassination, like Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali.

Art, resistance, and return

Palestinian artists Somaia Shaheen and Wae Ziada discussed their participation in the art protest in terms of their art and the ongoing colonization of Palestine.

For Shaheen, her presence affirmed a message to the international community, as well as a constant yearning to return to places of which she has been deprived by Israel. Lifting the siege on Gaza and praying at Al-Aqsa constitute Shaheen's main thoughts about the right of return. Her art, she says, conveys her feelings:

It's a harsh feeling — knowing you would love to visit the mosque and pray there, but you find yourself unable to do so due to the occupation and the political situation that prevent us from reaching a place so close to our hearts."

Ziada echoes al-Tawil's musings:

I was motivated to come to the Eastern borders in order to prove to the whole world that the art, the rifle and the stone are together in the same vein."



A view inside in the art protest tent near the Great Return March protests on the Gaza border. (Photo: Karim Naser)

Artist [Amna Alsalmi](#) shared her inspiration with *MintPress*. She learned about the Forum through events organized for artists and describes her experience in the art protest as "so different."

Her art depicts a revolutionary young man with a slingshot:

As you see, the man is standing bravely in front of the occupation. I painted the background to mirror our reality — see the smoke coming out of the burned tires. The painting seeks to portray bravery and strength, in spite of the difference between our home-made weapons and the Israeli military's latest technology."

Alsalmi adds:

Everyone resists in their own way — the revolutionary youth with slingshots and stones, the photographer with the camera, and the artists with their pencils. All of us are delivering the same message to the world: we have the right to get our homeland back."

[Basel el-Magosui](#), whose art depicts a man wearing a keffiyeh against a Palestinian background, explains his use of monochrome:

The painting is done in black acrylic. It is an expression of strength and



challenge. The man masked with a keffiyeh is a Palestinian symbol that is known by all the world's free people — it symbolizes good morals and values, and a behavior that is derived from these qualities.”



Basel el-Maqosui stands in front of his one of his paintings. (Photo: Shareef Sarhan)

Of the artist's role in resistance, el-Maqosui states:

The artists is always the first to resist and the last to be beaten. As a conceptual artist, I work on spreading my message to the whole world — we are a nation that deserves to live. In Gaza, there is an abundance of artists, actors, authors, poets and people from every artistic field, who are conveying our message internationally. Our art is a means of resisting the occupation until return and freedom.”

## Metaphor of the phoenix

[Ismaeel Y Dahlan](#) discussed his participation and artwork in profound detail, evoking discourse steeped in inspiration, resistance and metaphors. His painting depicted an abstract background that, at the fore, is dominated by a brightly colored phoenix.

He describes his participation in the art protest as having two distinct messages, a critical commentary that highlights the discrepancy between alienation and human rights with regard to the Palestinian right of return:

There are two messages in my participation – one to the usurper entity that we are the owners of rights and owners of this land.”

Dahlan’s emphasis on the right of return for all generations of Palestinians, encompassing the entire social structure, is the premise for his next point:

The other message is to the international community, which is not immune to this issue. Palestinian refugees have been under siege and oppression, deprived of their basic rights and forced to die, just so that the world’s attention can be drawn to their just cause.”



Ismaeel Dahlan paints his phoenix, inspired the Great Return protests in Gaza. (Photo: Karim Naser)

His painting, he says, was inspired by the Great Return March and its mobilization of Palestinians:

The movement was a source of inspiration for this painting. The youth were heading to the border — to the area of death — in order to identify their lives through the connection with the land and the history of their ancestors. The Canaanites’ symbol was the phoenix, which, according to myth, burst into flames to regenerate.

The new approach of these young Palestinians is reminiscent of this — they are



pushing themselves towards the fire. Their options are returning with an injury or an amputation of one of their limbs, and a wheelchair or a crutch will accompany them for the rest of their lives. Otherwise, they return on the shoulders of Palestinians, to heaven to live a new life, just like the phoenix.”

Of his art, he speaks of continuity — both in terms of artistic expression as well as memory — that is crippled by the blockade on Gaza. The artist faces the same challenges as the rest of society and no privilege is associated with art:

I was hoping that this work would become a sculpture made out of the remnants of war and located at the return encampments to eternalize this movement. However, I couldn’t achieve this because the artist is not a separate component; he is part of the society under siege. The Great Return March protests may provide the opportunity to achieve this aim.”

Ultimately, Dahlan concludes:

“We are fighting the culture of force with the culture of power.”

\*

*Bisan El-Yazuri from Gaza assisted with translating interviews in this article from Arabic to English.*

*Ramona Wadi is an independent researcher, freelance journalist, book reviewer, and blogger. She writes about the struggle for memory in Palestine and Chile, historical legitimacy, the ramifications of settler-colonialism, the correlation between humanitarian aid and human rights abuses, the United Nations as an imperialist organisation, indigenous resistance, la nueva cancion Chilena and Latin American revolutionary philosophy with a particular focus on Fidel Castro, Jose Marti and Jose Carlos Mariategui. Her articles, book reviews, interviews, and blogs have been published in Middle East Monitor, Upside Down World, Truthout, Irish Left Review, Gramsci Oggi, Cubarte, Rabble.ca, Toward Freedom, History Today, Chileno and other outlets, including academic publications and translations into several languages.*

The original source of this article is [MintPress News](#)  
Copyright © [Ramona Wadi](#), [MintPress News](#), 2018

---

**[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)**

**[Become a Member of Global Research](#)**

Articles by: [Ramona Wadi](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will

not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)