

Songs that Stay: Palestinian Political Art for a New Generation of Fighters

By Hazem Jamjoum

*If my voice leaves, yours will stay
My eyes look upon tomorrow and my heart is with you
If the singer leaves, the songs will stay
Healing the broken and suffering hearts*

Naji Al-Ali, the Palestinian refugee and political cartoonist who best captured the experiences, goals and struggle of the Palestinian people, wrote these words just before his assassination on 22 July 1987. The Palestinian revolution that produced these and countless other works of art faced an abrupt break with the signing of the Oslo 'Peace' Agreements in the early 1990s and the implementation of Israeli apartheid. Before the 1990s, Palestinians in exile* were linked together and to those inside Palestine through the General Unions and political factions that made up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). With the peace process, these institutions that were built with the struggle of generations were hollowed out, and the generation of Palestinians growing up in exile since the 1990s left without an organized national liberation movement to build and belong to.

If anything, the reasons to continue the struggle have only intensified since the 1990s. The refugees have not yet won our right to return to Palestine; the land of Palestine itself has been carved up into Bantustan-like open-air prisons surrounded by walls, settler blocks, and military installations; and Israeli atrocities continue on a daily basis with air-raids, mass-arrests, killings and daily humiliation. As a result, Palestinian and Arab youth have begun the process of connecting with each other and getting organized. One of the most effective means through which this is done has been art.

One of the main functions of political art has been to reconnect youth to the history of the struggle, the thoughts and feelings of previous generations, and the events, the battles, the destroyed villages, the massacres, and the people who make up our story. The songs of *Firquet El-Ashiqin* are a good example. The first phase of their works was predominantly made up of songs of struggle from the 1920s and 1930s, including the anthem of the first Palestinian labor union and those of the Qassam revolt of the 1930s. The second phase of their songs expressed the group members' experiences in Israeli occupied Lebanon of the 1970s and 1980s.

Popular political art has always been a medium through which the true feelings and aspirations of the oppressed are uncompromisingly expressed. In an era of political compromise, the artwork of the revolutionary period serves as the political benchmark by which the political decisions of the present are judged. From the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Fadwa Touqan to the songs of Abu 'Arab, Sheikh Imam, and Marcel Khalifeh, and the artwork of Ismail Shammout and Naji Al-Ali, the Palestinian consensus shines through to remind us that to compromise on what was occupied of Palestine in

* The majority of Palestinians are the children and grandchildren of refugees, forcibly expelled from Palestine in the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and 1967.

1948, on the release of our prisoners, and on the return of the refugees would be an insult at least as much to our martyrs and ancestors as it would be to the living.

In the current state of fragmentation, the emergence of young Palestinian and Arab artists in different places of exile is a reflection of the resurgence of the struggle and the rebuilding of the liberation movement. It is also a tool for reconnection between a new generation of liberation fighters, armed with words, sounds, rhythms and images of a struggle that will continue to fulfill Naji Al-Ali's poetic prophecy.

Hazem Jamjoum is a member of *Jawqet El-Sheikh Imam* which works to revive the memory of Sheikh Imam and the principles for which he stood and for which he was banned and imprisoned. He is also a member of Al-Awda Toronto: the Palestine Right of Return Group and Sumoud Political Prisoners Solidarity Group.