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## Nakba Day: The Ephemera of Martyrdom

Philip Hopper

University of Northern Iowa, [philip.hopper@uni.edu](mailto:philip.hopper@uni.edu)

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## **Nakba Day: The Ephemera of Martyrdom**

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Philip Hopper "Nakba Day: The Ephemera of Martyrdom”

1. Nakba Commemoration Day for Palestinians is the counterpart of Israel’s Independence Day, which takes place one week earlier. These days respectively mark the forcible expulsions of Palestinians from the nascent state of Israel and the declaration of statehood by Israel. One tribe’s independence is another tribe’s disaster. One person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist. Parallel yet inverted narratives are everywhere in history and the present, from Manifest Destiny to the Ukraine, the Sudan, Northern Ireland and elsewhere today.

2. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in Israel and Palestine. In 2014, Israel’s annual Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day) began on the evening of May 5th and ended in the evening of May 6th, 2014. Yom HaAtzmaut celebrates the declaration by future Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion that established the State of Israel on May 14th, 1948. In Israel, Palestinians commemorate the Nakba, or the Catastrophe on the same day as Yom Ha'atzmaut. In the West Bank, Gaza and the rest of the world The Nakba is commemorated every year on May 15th. There are frequent demonstrations and clashes often resulting in fatalities. The counter-narratives of statehood versus catastrophe are echoed in almost any interaction between Palestinians and Israelis. This history propels multi-layered contradictory texts of all kinds, from stories of national and personal identity to names upon the land. The dominant actor, Israel, is writing its own history but cannot erase other history. Palestinian artifacts and collective memory remain in many places and people as a palimpsestic phenomenon. Palestinians erode Israeli overwriting even as it is continuously super-imposed literally and figuratively from above. There is no collective amnesia in the hills of Palestine. (Blair and Dickson, 2010)

3. Because at the heart of it this story is about children, Ayed Abu Eqtaish is in a unique position to comment on these competing narratives and some of the recent consequences. He is the Ramallah-based Accountability Program Director of Defense for Children International a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Switzerland.

*Oh, yes, it's different, yanni, (Arabic: “it’s like” or “you know”) almost in all cases there are two stories, the Palestinian story, and the Israeli story. And because the Israelis are behaving in an illogical way, so when we tell the truth we appear that we are telling the illogical thing. So, people tend more to believe that, and our story can't be isolated from the whole context. The Israelis is (sic) more smart and clever in*

*telling their story. For example Israel deals with the media in a very smart way, because they regard that as part of the war between them and the Palestinians.*

Ayed Abu Eqtaish, Defense for Children International – Palestine, interview May 29th, 2014

### **Nakba Day: May 15th, 2014**

4. When I arrived home in Ramallah on Nakba Day 2014, the local market was closed and the owner's wife sat outside. "They killed two in Beitunia," she told me as an explanation. Members of the youth wing of Fatah, The West Bank's largest political party, often roam the streets of Ramallah after the death of Palestinian demonstrators, enforcing a general strike. Ramallah on a Thursday afternoon normally bustles with activity. Palestinians who work in the de facto capitol city fill shared taxis known as serveechs on their way home to various West Bank cities and villages. Others crowd into the large open-air souk where everything from fruits and vegetables to shoes and cell phones are sold. Still others crowd the coffeehouses and restaurants. Thursday evening in a predominately Muslim area is like Friday evening elsewhere, the beginning of a weekend.

5. But on May 15th, 2014 Ramallah was strangely quiet. Storefronts were shuttered. If the shabab (youth) happened to be nearby these shops stayed that way. If not merchants furtively let known customers enter to make purchases, closing heavy metal hinged shutters or roll-down gates again after transacting whatever business happened to be at hand. So it was on this day that I was able to obtain groceries for dinner. The two feral cats I had been feeding greeted me as usual. I called both of these mangy animals Sam, short for Sumoud, meaning steadfastness or those that remain when others leave. Arabic electronica, music with traditional instruments and contemporary samples, floated through the grapefruit and fig trees. It was strangely peaceful.

6. The next morning, posters depicting Nadeem Nuwara and Mohammed Daher as shaheed, or martyrs, appeared in Ramallah's city center. These images typically composite photographs of the victims with icons and symbols of Palestinian nationalism, Quranic verses and other elements. In the past they have been derived from family photographs, or if the martyrdom was intentional images posed by the shaheed prior to their death. Neither Nadeem nor Mohammed was an intentional martyr in that way. In recent years social media has become a source. Whatever the provenance, these images are always, framed or manipulated in some way. In one of these constructed poster-images Nadeem is smiling, his baseball cap on backwards and a traditional keffiyeh around his neck. At the same time he lies on the ground in the moments immediately after an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) bullet found his heart, the same keffiyeh hides his face. Demonstrators often mask their faces to protect their identities. This poster also bears text, including the name of Saint Georges School in Ramallah, which Nadeem attended. Other text notes his status at the school. A background image in the upper right hand depicts a burning tire and an individual who appears to be about to throw something. Burning tires are often rolled toward Israeli positions during clashes. Rocks are often thrown. Nadeem was simply walking at the time he was shot, though this part of the poster image's construction suggests active resistance. It is important to note here that in this image he is positioned as shaheed without

ascribing overt religiosity. It is also important to note that the image contains elements of both the “heroic” and “tragic” Palestinian discourses. (Khalili, 2006). The heroic message is primarily aimed at a local audience. The tragic message is primarily aimed at so-called “internationals.”



Fig. 1 The text in red reads “Hero Martyr of the Catastrophe.” The text in black that he was a “son of the classroom” in the “literature track” and finally “one year before Tajeeki” (graduation).

7. Nadeem Nuwara and Mohammed Daher were taking part in a demonstration supporting Palestinian hunger strikers at Israel’s Ofer Prison in Beitunia a few kilometers from Ramallah in the West Bank. Nadeem was shot in the chest at approximately 1:45PM local time. Mohammed was shot in the back at approximately 2:58PM. Surveillance footage from a nearby business

subsequently revealed that neither of these two teenagers were actively engaged in violent or threatening behavior at the time they were shot and killed. Some would say murdered.

8. These events foreshadowed other violence in the West Bank and Gaza during the subsequent summer months. They are not isolated but rather part of the complex narrative and counter-narrative generated by Israelis and Palestinians. Most of the images and texts discussed here appear to be vernacular. However, in a place where a people have struggled to attain statehood for over sixty years the distinction between the institutional and the vernacular becomes blurred. According to the 1993 Oslo Accords the Palestinian Authority (PA) was meant to be a temporary administrative body. It remains in place today as the primary governing apparatus of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian National Committee (PNC) (Parsons, 2012) This is at best an opaque political arrangement.

9. The PLO and the PNC are composed of various political parties. The largest of these, Fatah, essentially controls the PA and the West Bank. Fatah along with other political parties, including Hamas in Gaza often claim ownership of the dead as shaheed or martyrs, with their own posters and visual artifacts. Such was the case with Nadeem and Mohammed. Elevation to this status as part of Palestine's visual and political culture has a long history of consolidating local public opinion. However for some the practice has become a cynical manipulation of that same public opinion or worse, an empty automatic gesture of little historical value. One academic has called it the "shaheedification" process. (Rolston, 2015)

10. I will not pretend to be an expert in the history, sociology or psychology of intentional and unintentional martyrdom. In Christianity the prominence of martyrdom dates to the crucifixion of Jesus for some and the stoning death of Saint Stephen a few years later for others. In Islam this history goes back to the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of the prophet Mohammed's grandson Imam Hussein in 680 AD. For some Muslims "everywhere is Karbala." (Kahlili, 2006) Anyone of the faith may become shaheed at any time.

11. The closest translation in English for the term shaheed is martyr or martyred. More specifically someone who is shaheed in the Muslim faith has died doing battle with enemies of another faith. In Christian narratives the victims more often have been put to death through torture for their beliefs. In Judaism "the closest way to render the term for martyr is kadosh me'uneh, which literally means "answering saint". (Taylor-Basker, 2015) All three Abrahamic religions then seem to approach this issue with variants of closely related though not directly translatable words or phrases. Speakers of Arabic and English often use the terms shaheed and martyr interchangeably. To a linguist this is not entirely accurate. Another linguistic point is that these terms, martyr from the Greek and shaheed from the Arabic have root meanings as the term for "witness." (Habib, 2014)

12. Palestinian representations of shaheed are not new and have, in a historical sense, served as highly effective messages. In the words of the artist and educator Oraib Toukan: "the Palestinian revolutionary seemed to know the velocity and behavior of the reproduction of technical images all too well." (Toukan, 2013a) Toukan, who is Jordanian of Palestinian heritage, questions

whether the genre continues to be effective and if there may be other ways to challenge the Israeli occupation. Not only to signify resistance to the occupation itself but also to provide a counter-hegemonic response *within* Palestinian society which addresses the Palestinian Authority. Khaled Hourani, an internationally recognized Palestinian artist, creates nuanced work that does both. His process-oriented response to Nadeem and Mohammed's deaths rejects problematic notions of political-religious martyrdom and critiques both Israeli policies and, in relationship to events of May 15th, 2014, the local shaheedification process. In a way both these artists, Toukan and Hourani, are asking the question: what may be the unintended effects of shaheed image making as it is perpetuated into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

13. Palestinian dominant and subordinate ideologies are complicated by a military occupation. Internal ideological discourses are defined by this occupation in a ways that affect, intercede, and often supersede local governance, civil society, art, or almost anything else. Only local residents may help us understand this. Arab scholars and artists who have looked at and analyzed images of the shaheed have already done much work. Artists like Toukan, Hourani and others provide guideposts here throughout this essay, where my primary purpose is to facilitate Palestinian voices and air them for a Western audience using my own personal experience as a framework. To decode the subtle political underpinnings of apparently vernacular image-making in an entrenched often violent conflict is an on-going process, which I am not capable of accomplishing alone.

### **Khaled Hourani**

14. Khaled Hourani was born in Hebron in 1965. His artistic work has been widely exhibited, including a recent retrospective during the spring of 2014 at the Center for Contemporary Art in Glasgow, Scotland. He is also the co-founder and former Director of the International Academy of Art in Ramallah. As both a working artist and a facilitator of the arts, Hourani's work has been important to the growth and perception of contemporary art in Palestine. His own work includes both traditional elements of calligraphy and highly conceptual productions.

15. One such production, *Picasso in Palestine*, brought an original Picasso painting to the West Bank from a museum in Belgium. After a long, complex and highly negotiated process, Picasso's 1943 painting *Buste de Femme* was exhibited in Ramallah at the International Academy of Art from June 24th until July 22nd, 2011. Hourani and filmmaker Rashid Masharawi created a documentary film, *Picasso Visits Palestine* and significant attention was paid to the exhibit by local and international press. The documentation and narrative then became as important, if not more important, than the work of art itself. Bringing an original Picasso to occupied territory was difficult and could have failed at almost any juncture. In doing so Hourani, and the large group of people he worked with on the project, used the process of creating a traditional fine art exhibition in Ramallah to explicate Israel's repressive state apparatus for the international media.

*"The process was the most important issue. The journey of the painting from a museum in Europe to a war zone through all these checkpoints, airports. At the same*

*time when you put a Picasso and Palestine together in a small room in the middle of the most important Palestinian city, in Ramallah, it causes a discussion about politics and art. What kind of museums, what kind of art collection? The shipping companies, the institutions, the governments, they all have their own rules, ways of seeing it. The insurance company refused at first. What matters in the whole thing is the story.”*

Khaled Hourani - interview, June 3rd, 2014



Fig. 2 Michael Baers, with permission

16. Some Israeli hegemonic claims include land that discourse refers to a Judea and Samaria. Palestinian counter-hegemonic claims include the same land and call it Palestine. Everything within any discussion about this conflict and occupation manifests itself in the contestation of land and names upon the land. This is all part of the parallel yet oppositional narratives that clearly mark this conflict. Maps with the same outline read Israel in Hebrew and Palestine in Arabic. (Wallach, 2011) Picasso in Palestine addressed these large issues by focusing on logistics. European television news segments, articles in mainstream media and on various websites are part of this narrative. With an understanding that the process of physically transporting an original Picasso was of prime importance, the artist Michael Baers executed a graphic novel, *An Oral History of Picasso in Palestine*. (Baers, 2012) Baers' graphic novel

draws out the meaning of Hourani's Picasso narrative in a way that would be almost impossible for the mainstream press. (Though television News segments broadcast in Europe, articles on various websites and in *The Economist* are certainly also part of this narrative) (CS, 2011)

*"In being reduced to a couple of paragraphs or a minute-long news report, this means (the logistical process) would inevitably fail to be explicated, and consequently, the project's most interesting aspect employing the protocol of museum loan policy to unmask the administrative relationship between Israel and the West Bank, would remain largely untold."*

Michael Baers (Baers, 2012)

17. Khaled Hourani is widely recognized for other art works that subtly challenge repressive political ideology. In 2013 he was co-recipient of the prestigious Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change. He lays down challenges not only to the occupier but also to the occupied. In regard to the deaths of Mohammed Daher and Nadeem Nuwara on May 15 2014, Hourani questions why Palestinian vernacular image making continues to rely on the tropes of victimization, making political and religious martyrs out of secular children.

18. According to Hourani, Nadeem was not shaheed by *intention*. He was a "kid," playing hooky from school. When I mentioned this to a colleague, he asked me how I could be sure his martyrdom was *unintentional*. In truth, I cannot. In the back of every resident young Palestinian's mind is the notion, and I would argue the acceptance, that they may die from an Israeli bullet. There is of course a right-wing Israeli counter-narrative that Palestinians raise their children to be terrorists. As widely reported in the press "terrorists" in the Israeli Settler Movement are suspected in the recent arson deaths of two young children in the village of Duma. (Hadid & Rudoren, 2015) Violence begets violence. There is an extremism and are terrorists within both narratives.

### **The Vigil**

19. A poster, which appeared in Ramallah on May 16th, depicts Nadeem surrounded by Koranic verse, smiling at the camera and pointing to heaven with his right forefinger, as he seems to stand in front of the Dome of the rock. The insignia of Fatah frames the upper corners of this image and floats translucent behind the text. Nadeem's gesture seems to indicate an affinity with heaven or the divine. The text anchors the images and implies a narrative that Nadeem's death was somehow preordained, holy and at the same time nationalistic. Fatah has long used religious iconography under the banner of secular nationalism. A hand pointing skyward is ironically also a symbol of Fatah's political, theocratic rival Hamas. The deeper irony here is that these manufactured images, both of them - Figure 1 was produced by Nadeem's school and Figure 3 was produced by Fateh - are the only way many people, myself included, came to know Nadeem and Mohammed.





Fig. 3 A translation of the Koranic verse on top reads “Do not think when someone is killed, they have died. Their soul lives on forever in heaven”.

20. Below the uppermost holy verse additional text reads “The National Liberation Movement and Civil organization in Ramallah, Fatah.” Finally at the bottom just above the Dome of the Rock, he is pronounced shaheed: “The Procession of the Heroic Palestinian Martyr, Nadeem Siam Nuwara who was martyred in the commemoration of the Great Catastrophe (Nakba) May 15, 2014.”

21. Late in the day on May 16th, classmates of Nadeem held a vigil in AlManarah Square. Candles on the pavement encircled photographs of the victims. A group of students stood in a semi-circle behind this makeshift shrine wearing footwear that would be common in their age

group almost anywhere. Dispense with the obvious political ideology and these young people could have been from any community, including neighborhoods in Tel Aviv, New York or Chicago.



Photograph, Philip Hopper

Fig. 4 In this image you can see the source for the poster image of Nadeem smiling in Figure #1. The inscription on the left-hand photograph of Nadeem reads, “You only live once.”

22. Palestinians do not universally appreciate these images proclaiming the shaheed though few are likely to say so in public. This is much in the same way that corruption within the PA is privately acknowledged but not openly discussed. Criticism of the images ranges from how they may perpetuate a culture of victimhood masquerading as tragic martyrdom to the mimetic encouragement of violence. Whatever one’s position may be on the issue it is entirely safe to say that few protracted struggles for statehood have been free of violence or personal and tragic consequences. Sontag and others claim, “all photographs are memento mori.” (Sontag, 1973) The inscription, “You only live once”, in one of photographs within the photograph above prefigures Nadeem’s death and affirms this claim. Nadeem seems to have lived and died within the heroic ethos of a previous generation yet he is claimed by the next as a tragic victim. The Palestinian shaheed, were very important at one time. Whether or not they remain so is debatable.

*It used to be stipulated that joining the revolution entailed being handed a gun, by your local photographer, in your local studio, with a working class Keffiyeh on your shoulders, along with a cue from your photographer to fight back with a gaze that is the mother of all gazes: a gaze that looks straight through the tomb of every viewfinder, into the malice of the optical universe and all that it deserves.*

Oraib Toukan –*Political Posters From Two Private Collections* (Toukan, 2013b)

## CNN

23. Karim Cado, a CNN producer, was at the demonstration and clashes in Beitunia when Nadeem and Mohammed were killed on May 15th, 2014. He recorded an Israeli soldier firing a rifle and then in unedited footage his camera pans from the shooter to a group of Palestinians carrying mortally wounded Nuwara into an ambulance. Unbeknownst to anyone else at this point, CCTV surveillance video was also being recorded. Fakher Zayed's home and carpentry business stands within sight of Ofer military prison and the Israeli separation barrier. Eight security cameras, operating 24 hours a day, are installed on the perimeter of his building, which is next to the scene of the shootings. Ayed Abu Eqtaish, from Defense for Children – Palestine, obtained Zayed's surveillance video of the Daher and Nuwara shootings and distributed these disturbing images to the press. On May 22nd a report by CNN Senior International Producer Ivan Watson aired. It contained images from both the CNN producer on the ground May 15th and surveillance images of both boys at the times they were shot. The IDF finally then started an internal investigation. This means that the proceedings of the investigation will not become public.

### **Ayed Abu Eqtaish**

24. In his Ramallah office on May 29th Eqtaish spoke of the “culture of impunity” which he and others claim exists within the IDF and the Israeli security apparatus. He also accurately predicted that despite the surveillance footage and the CNN report that the IDF inquiry would “find a scapegoat, a single soldier” upon whom to lay the blame for the May 15th murders. This is what happened. The soldier's name is officially undisclosed.

*“The soldier, whose job and unit cannot be disclosed due to a military gag order, is connected primarily to communications... Commanders of troops shooting people, even if “only” with rubber bullets, let a “visitor” accompanying them target human beings to increase his “enjoyment” of the mission? The awful moral failure underlying this incident requires the IDF to take a thorough account of itself, not only regarding the moral norms it inculcates in its soldiers, but also regarding military discipline.”*

Haaretz Editorial | May 30th, 2014 | 3:24 AM

25. An autopsy of Nadeem Nuwara on June 11th confirmed that his death was caused by live ammunition. Siam Nuwara, Nadeem's father, found a spent live round in his son's backpack when it was returned to him with his son's personal effects. Ballistics later confirmed this to be the bullet that killed Nadeem. In the words of the emergency room doctor who tried to save Nadeem, the bullet “destroyed” his heart. (Mackey, 2014a) A recent forensic video analysis (Mackey, 2014) available on Youtube (2014) further implicates a member of the Israel's Border Police Force who has been arrested and charged with manslaughter. Siam is pressing for a charge of murder. Based on the CNN video there appears to be six or possibly seven Israeli military

personnel visible in a cluster behind the shooter. Before the camera pans away it also appears that another soldier or border police officer takes the rifle with the shooter's compliance.

*"Israel justifies all its behavior under the pretext of security, and people hear "security" they think that security is a neutral mission. But I believe that it's not a neutral mission, it's part and parcel with the identity of the state as Israeli state."*

Ayed Abu Eqtaish - interview, May 29th, 2014

## **Coffee and Politics**

26. On June 12th, in a story widely reported by the western press, three young Israeli Yeshiva students who had been hitchhiking at night in the West Bank near Hebron were kidnapped. (In Israel and in the Western press Israelis are usually "kidnapped" while Palestinians are usually "captured.") There is ample evidence in the Israeli press and through official acknowledgements that hitchhiking or "tremping" in the West Bank is part of Settler ideology. (Gottlieb, 2014) It is a cheap way to get around in an area where there is little or no regular public transportation. It is also a way in Settler Movement discourse of "owning" land, which has historically been Palestinian. Within mainstream Israeli discourse the Settler Movement is an outlier. One reason for this is that evidence of Palestinian occupancy of land between the Litani River to the north in what is currently Lebanon, the border in Sinai to the south with Egypt and the Jordan River to the east is well documented, including four centuries (approximately 1520-1920) as part of the Ottoman Empire. Ownership of this land only comes into question with the imposition of French and especially British colonialist rule after World War I, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of militant Zionism.

27. The search for the hitchhikers was termed operation Brother's Keeper by the Israeli military. Brother's Keeper turned into a crackdown on a wide range of Palestinian institutions and individuals that went largely unreported in the West. I visited the Ibdah Cultural Center in the Dheisheh Palestinian Refugee Camp on June 22nd, 2014. During the previous night an IDF unit had ransacked the office. When I arrived staff members were picking up the contents of filing cabinets and desks that had been emptied onto the floor. The safe had been forced open and, according to staff members, the money inside taken.

28. On June 24th I met with Khaled Hourani for coffee at Zam'n Café in Ramallah. He was with a group of friends, and an opinion aired that two known members of Hamas from Hebron, Marwan Kawasmeh age 29 and Amer Abu Aisha age 32, were responsible for the hitchhiker abductions. It was also stated that the kidnap victims in all likelihood already dead. Then on June 30<sup>th</sup> the bodies of Naftali Fraenkel and Gilad Shaar, both 16, and 19-year-old Eyal Yifrach were found. They had been executed and buried under rocks on farmland near a road outside of Hebron, not far from where they were last seen. The Israeli response, already intense during the search and rescue phase, intensified into a widespread manhunt throughout the West Bank.

29. Hourani later explained that this coffee-shop conversation about the abductions and murders also revolved around the hidden political machinations in the region. According to Hourani the “real power in Hamas remains in shadow” despite the recent reconciliation and coalition with Fatah. He also continued that Palestinian technocrats representing Hamas in the current government are “puppets.” Hamas leaders who are not in hiding are usually either in exile or in an Israeli prison. Prisons everywhere breed radicalization and criminal activity. Sometimes these activities are one and the same, depending upon which bifurcated narrative you tell, which ideology you adhere.

*“...this action was planned in the prison. The Hamas prisoners, this action, they are the ones who were responsible about it. These two missing guys, they were prisoners before. They were released. So Hamas has kind of a dark side, which nobody knows and they are more important than the leaders who we see. They are the ones who play the game.”*

Khaled Hourani interview, June 24th, 2014

### **Khaled and Nadeem**

30. Khaled Hourani’s daughter attends Saint George’s School in Ramallah, the same school attended by Nadeem Nuwara. During an interview on June 26th, Hourani revealed that the source of Nadeem’s image pointing skyward was a photograph of the boy on Facebook, spinning a basketball on his forefinger. The exact source of the photograph itself is unknown at this time although Nadeem’s cousin Lina Nuwara told me it was taken at the First Ramallah Group Center, home to Boys and Girls Scout clubs. The unaltered image is nondescript, recorded against a plain background and illuminated with the flash function of a cheap point-and-shoot camera. In the constructed photo-illustration where Nadeem is proclaimed shaheed, the image gains false perspective and depth with a number of icons and texts. In this version the Dome of the Rock, a verse from the Koran, and a date replace the basketball. The date notably is in English and in Arabic, indicating that the image was produced for a wide audience. Replacing the basketball with a symbolic, religious icon and holy text removes Nadeem from the secular. He is displaced into a tragic homogeneity and stasis along with so many others. Like Peter Pan he is now the boy who can never reach adulthood. The Fatah coats of arms in the upper corners of are cut off in Hourani’s Facebook image. This insignia though, representing the largest most powerful political party in the West Bank, frames the image as in Figure #3. A political party is addressing a captive audience about a young man’s death, constructing his image to gain favorable public opinion.





Fig. 5 Composite by Khaled Hourani, with permission

31. Hourani told me that when he put both the original and the manipulated images of Nadeem on his Facebook page, a visitor's comment suggested that Koranic script was inappropriate on a basketball. His response was to literally put this text on a basketball. His English translation is, "In the name of Allah, think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their lord."

*This is the day after (his death) when, as if he's religious and honest Muslim and all this and they are not proud of him being a kid playing basketball or something. So what I did, I put the image of him with the basketball on Facebook and one of the comments was saying, "maybe they don't want to write holy words in the basketball." So I did write holy words in a basketball. This is from the Koran on a basketball. It's a real basketball. So the family, they are sitting in Ramallah, everybody noticed about the basketball. I did one, so I have to do like seven for the family for the school for the city of Ramallah, for me as a response.*

Khaled Hourani interview, June 24th, 2014



Fig. 6 Khaled Hourani, with permission

32. In an interview with Haaretz, a liberal Israeli newspaper, Hourani once asked his interviewer the rhetorical question, “should we stop dancing or should they stop bombing.” Much of Khaled Hourani’s work speaks about the intersections of art and politics in occupied territory. In the case of his basketball the work of art is also about refuting the public performance about being a tragic victim by those lucky enough to still be alive. A point that bears repetition and amplification is that Hourani’s basketball as a conceptual work of art is an example of resistance to the occupation and Israeli hegemony that also provides a counter-hegemonic response *within* Palestinian society to the Fatah dominated Palestinian Authority. Perhaps the manufacture of martyrs is one of the weapons of a subjugated people. However, despite the important history of these images of resistance in Palestine, the practice of an assembly line of photo-shopped martyrs is problematic.

*“For a start, the contemporary poster belongs to a whole new class of images. And that class is that of the masked face, the masked body, in black army wear, with a Kalashnikov, cut out and cloned in Photoshop to represent the feeling of a mass, laid out on posters with nondescript graphics and zero historicity and dotted on an assembly line of Epson printers. The problem is: printers do not have ideological positions. They print what they are technically capable of. It is therefore very easy to get desensitized to the economy of these posters in a class war of prints and poster politics without realizing one is in the midst of that war.”*

Oraib Toukan - *Political Posters From Two Private Collections* (Toukan, 2013c)

Toukan continues: these works are part of a “genealogy that has lent itself to utter image exhaustion and cruel icon-trap.” The numbing effect of a military occupation, which has lasted for over forty years, is obvious in many ways. The “image exhaustion and icon trap” she speaks of is one of them. When images of martyrdom become regular updates within a visually constructed urban landscape like Ramallah or West Belfast or any other enclave within a zone of conflict, they cause a kind of visual anesthesia. In locations like these there is a sense of seeing but not seeing images of the dead.

### **The Ephemera of Martyrdom**

33. Both the school and Fatah seek to consolidate local opinion respectively for social and political reasons. However, it is one thing for Saint Georges School to mourn one of their own and quite another for a political party to claim him as a political, secular and yet somehow religious martyr. The former seems to be a legitimate part of a public grieving process. The latter seems to be cynical manipulation and another case, in the words of Toukan, of “nondescript graphics and zero historicity.” In Ramallah this causes further desensitization. The actual effect of at least some of these images is the opposite of their maker’s intentions. As Khaled Hourani notes, the real tragedy here is that these teenagers cannot be celebrated as normal and in his words “a kid playing basketball.” According to Lina Nuwara “Nadeem liked almost everything, basketball, swimming, camping.” Also though, that he was “touched by the martyring of Saji Darwish,” a Birzeit University student shot and killed by IDF personnel in early March 2014.

34. Shaheed images as they appeared in Ramallah and elsewhere of Saji, then Nadeem and Mohammed and as they continue to appear are doubly troublesome because they are ephemeral. Unlike a treasured family snapshot, a true memento mori, shaheed posters appear taped to buildings with clear packing tape then are left to decay in the weather or to be covered by the next victim who becomes shaheed. There are peeling layers of posters in prime locations around AlManarah Square, Arafat Square and on the main streets, which radiate off these two central locations in Ramallah. Fatah operatives, and others who create and distribute these images in public places, know that under current conditions they have an endless supply of shaheed whose images may be affixed to walls in the public sphere then subsumed, written over yet with traces remaining as palimpsests. The irony is that this is a response to the Israeli narrative which is in itself, as noted earlier, an attempt to over-write history. The families and friends of course continue to mourn and remember. The image-machine moves on. The “non-historicity” Toukan describes speaks to these types of images as ephemera. More is the pity.

35. In July 2014 during Ramadan, a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy named Mohammed Khdeir was kidnapped in East Jerusalem then doused in an accelerant and burned alive by three Israeli settlers who are now under arrest. Several other Palestinians were killed during subsequent demonstrations and in clashes with Israeli security forces over the summer. Hamas responded with more rockets from Gaza and in September Israeli missiles, bombs and artillery shells reduced significant portions of that enclave to rubble. On September 23rd Israeli forces in Hebron killed Marwan Kawasmeh, 29 and Amer Abu Aisha, 32, the two suspects in the triple abduction and execution of the young Israeli hitchhikers. Abductions and executions are vicious



and criminal. Torture and murder of a child is barbaric. There is no moral high ground in a scenario like this.

### **A Pretense of the Living**

36. Palestinian flags wrapped the bodies of Mohamed Daher, Nadeem Nuwara and Mohammed Khdeir as they were buried. Flags of Israel covered the coffins of Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrach as they were buried. All of these young men are now martyred to the same horrible fiction. There are no inversions of history for them in death. Only the narratives of the living maintain this pretense. Perhaps it is time to reexamine and reconsider the parallel yet opposed narratives, the “two stories” Eqtaish refers to, which ultimately go back to Palestinian expulsion and Israel’s foundation. It will be difficult for both parties but, at this point in time, for better or for worse, one cannot exist without the other. An earnest discussion between Israelis and Palestinians about the foundation of Israel and the Nakba is a starting point both parties consistently ignore. Only when the narratives can agree in some way will their deathly embrace relax enough to become something else. As long as narrative grips counter-narrative in a mutually assured chokehold, the violence will continue. A resolution of these opposed narratives is difficult under any conditions. However dialectical resolution is happening in Northern Ireland and South Africa. The Good Friday Agreement allowed Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, a place at the bargaining table. (Mackay, 2010) After the abolition of apartheid the Truth and Reconciliation Commission allowed South Africans a safe place to confront each other and to be heard. There are huge differences in all of these situations. The acceptance of military adversaries as negotiating partners should however not go without note.

37. The term “cycle of violence” has become a cliché through overuse but also because of its simple and horrible truth. Only when the inverted historical narratives are exposed and then in a difficult process abandoned, as they have been or are being elsewhere, can peaceful solutions be reached. (O’Rawe, 2002) Do any of these images and words suggest a way out of this cycle? Perhaps not, though it is my hope that they do suggest an important question. Not to be redundant but how can Palestinians and Israelis abandon their parallel yet inverted narratives of victimhood? During our June 2014 discussion Khaled Hourani spoke to me about a “middle way” in regard to art that addresses the occupation. A way that does not embrace “overt ideology” but seeks to find “resolution in a process.” A process that can be, in his words, neither “black nor white.” Perhaps it is time to allow shades of grey and negotiate a blended narrative.

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