

*Instrumentalisation of the arts in “the national interests”:
Is intercultural dialogue worth conscripting the arts?*

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Art can liberate, it is a form that guarantees freedom. Through art, one can rehearse the effect of creation and recreation, and can play safely different ways of transformation, revolution, change and growth.

When art is conscripted, the condition of freedom falls from it, and thus art without its integral freedom is not art...

There are many ways of conscripting the arts and the artists, the easiest and foremost is the declared public conscription, whether it is for a national, human or developmental cause. However, the most perilous conscription is that which happens at an unconscious level, formed by an entire scheme of concepts and indicators, supported by political, economical and media systems.

Palestine that was in 1946 looking like this (see the MAP) and ended today as '*The Palestinian Territories*' in this shape (see the MAP); is in fact the effect of a war that is not merely political but outstandingly cultural.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said stated:

“Earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

The replacement of the word “Palestine” and its removal from the map is not done with a political will only but is prepared for, ideologically. The formation of ideas is culture and culture has its narratives literature and art forms, both visual and auditory.

Ever since the famous quotation of Theodore Herzl ‘A state without people for a people without a state’; the Zionist movement and Israel, worked vigorously to prove this statement on the ground and print it in the minds of the international community, through media and culture.

Palestine that was A lively, vibrant cultural spot in the Near East over a hundred years between 1848 till 1948; with more than 17 cinemas and theatre venues hosting plays from Egypt, Lebanon and Europe, and with 29 printing houses printing books and magazines in Arabic and translate books from English, French, Italian, and Russian had a major blow off during the Nakba in 1948 where almost a million Palestinian had to flee the massacres committed by the Jewish Hagana troupes and became refugees.

This cultural loss gave space to Israel over years to falsify the reality on the ground, starting from changing the narration of the place, into censoring the Palestinian cultural work, to banning books from entering the occupied territories and even imposing

educational curricula on the remaining Palestinians in Israel that denies the Nakba and the previous history of Palestine.

Palestinian culture in historical Palestine used to be a single homogenous unity... Yet the occupation managed in many ways to create a new reality on this homogenous culture... now when we talk about Palestinian culture we have to bear in mind four categories; those who remained in their land –now Israel, those in the Diaspora, and those in the OT that is now split in two Gaza and WB. This forced split inside our harmonious society imposed new working systems, where we become in need of an “*inter-cultural dialogue*”, supported by international initiatives,

Anna Lindh foundation, for example, that was formed in the Mediterranean region with an objective to create “intercultural dialogue” between the people of the region. One of its aims is also to integrate Israel, culturally, into the Arab world. On the ground today this foundation has initiated a Palestinian art festival for an inter-cultural dialogue between Gaza and the West Bank?!!

What an irony?! An act that raises many suspicions, isn't this a clear conscription of the art that fixes a reality forced by Israel on the Palestinians in the first hand and on the rest of the world on the other hand? So what is the role of the artist in this case? Do we submit or do we refrain? Well, here comes the debate, so some accept while others don't.

More so, post Oslo accord between the PLO and Israel, the international community led by the US decided to invest in the intercultural collaboration between Palestinians and Israelis under the people to people program, this approach was adapted immediately by most of the international funding agencies.

This attempt was called later by most Palestinian and Arab intellectuals ‘NORMALIZATION’ and was rejected.

Nevertheless, for years, some diplomatic missions in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) -- including East Jerusalem -- have sponsored, organized, or otherwise facilitated joint Palestinian-Israeli projects that confuse and ignore the reality of Israeli colonial and racist policies against the people of Palestine.

Even when these diplomatic missions seized this attempt after pressure from the Palestinian art community, the Palestinian art organizations have not stopped receiving propositions from the international artists and art organizations and funding agencies to get involved in joint cultural projects and activities with Israeli artists under different titles peace initiatives, nonviolence coexistence, intercultural dialogue and so on.

Regardless of the intentions, such projects only serve to promote a false image of Israel as an “enlightened democracy,” rather than an occupying power that has for decades violated international law and basic human rights and pursued an illegal agenda of completing the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people of Palestine.

The paradox is when the international art community deals with Israel, they do not necessarily link them to the Palestinians... but almost every time we are addressed by the

international arts community the first question would be, do you collaborate with Israeli artists? Or if we are to be invited to a festival, the organizers would book an Israeli group for the 'balance', but it is never the case on the opposite side. I believe that this comes from the fact that the world - in general - is unconsciously conscripted through the powerful media, and the fear of being labeled as anti-Semite. So the world grew insensitive, unquestionable and un-critical towards the occupation?

But it is our role as artists to reverse this reality and counter these fears with brave attempts such as the cultural boycott of Israel.

The UNESCO says: "Equitable exchange and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect and the equal dignity of all cultures, is the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations."

However, the UNESCO did not move or condemn Israel when it bombarded the old city of Nablus in 2003 and destroyed gates and markets two centuries old, neither did it when Israel bombed and destroyed a music school, two theatres and two art organizations for children in Gaza, in January 2009. But was righteously very articulated when Taliban destroyed the two Buda statues in Afghanistan, is this how UNESCO see "respect and equal dignity of all cultures?"

On the other hand, the Palestinian scene has a lot of players in its field. As in war, it is in post-war, development and war are two sides of a coin, two controversial dichotomies which go hand in hand; aid agencies flourish at times of destruction.

So donor institutions, especially those concerned with development in Palestine, try to conscript Palestinian artists openly to work on agendas that do not necessarily interest the Palestinian society; fighting AIDS for instance, when there is no AIDS in Palestine... breastfeeding when all the women in Palestine breastfeed, raising awareness towards water precautions when there is barely water to drink, because Israel forbids villagers to use their water resources for the sake of the Israeli colonies in the West Bank. And when the artists try to change the approach and raise the political problem of water, the response of these '*international organizations*' would be, "we are not here to talk about politics"... Excuse me?

Then the agendas of these development agencies often changes completely, so the cultural organizations and the artists have to follow the new agenda, because money is necessary for surviving.

Millions of dollars are invested in diluting the political situation in Palestine like in all other third world countries, under the pretext of development...

What is really happening is that this patient is been slowly and steadily pacified until it dies, instead of finding a quick remedy and a just solution for it.

Bearing all of the above in mind, still the best product out of Palestine is the cultural product, one that has been able to communicate, compete and excel in the world. It has also been able to receive the world in its small home, through various international projects, co-operations, and cultural events and diverse international festivals of dance, music theatre and cinema.

As we are gathered here to look with a critical eye upon culture, I would conclude that we are all bond to cooperate and dialogue, to establish a healthier and more just world. When a part of a body is in pain, one tends to heel it not to get rid of it.

I perceive my role in the inter-cultural dialogue, as to lay foundations of freedom. Freedom that is not granted, neither taken by force - as learned in revolutions, but rather adopted through conscious and critical practice.

Thank you...

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Iman Aoun', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Palestine 2009