

RANA ANANI

Don't Forget How to Fly



In 2006, the Palestinian conceptual artist Khalil Rabah introduced a satirical project titled *The United States of Palestine Airlines*, announcing the opening of four airline offices in London, Beirut, Kuwait and Hamburg. Each office consisted of a large model of a fiberglass plane with a logo made from fragments of airline brands, aluminum clocks frozen at different times, a glazed world map on the wall with vague borders, and a leather sofa. They looked like stylish 1960s airline offices, except there were no clients. In this project, Rabah, whose art practice is based on linguistic manipulation, navigates through the ironies of living under occupation and touches upon the notion of isolation. *The United States of Palestine Airlines* project compels one to confront the impossibility of realizing such a project, for not only the creation of a 'Palestine Airlines' is out of question, but also the unification of the fragmented 'states' of Palestine is impossible, or so it seemed then.



But what if Rabah had clients who managed to source a flight to Palestine, where would they fly to? In Palestine, there are no airports at which Rabah’s planes might land. The only airport that Palestinians were permitted to build and operate was the Yasser Arafat International Airport in Gaza. Constructed in 1998, it operated until October 2000 until the Second Intifada; Israel bombed it the following year and bulldozed it in 2002. Recently, a Palestinian Authority decision was made to close the Palestinian Airlines company and to sell its two planes parked for over twenty years in Amman and Cairo. There was a hope that both would operate if the two-state solution materialized, yet maintenance costs became high, and the pilots are now retired due to their age and lack of “modern flight training.”¹

In the past, Palestinians used two airports constructed during the British Mandate to connect with the world—Jerusalem and Lydda Airports, but both are also no longer accessible to Palestinians. Jerusalem Airport, also known as Qalandiya Airport, is the oldest and is being turned into an Israeli settlement. It was built several kilometres north of Jerusalem next to Qalandiya village in 1925² and connected Jerusalem to Beirut, Cairo, Kuwait, Aden and other cities, receiving pilgrims from Jerusalem and the Arab world. Following Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in the Six-Day War in 1967 it seized the airport, flights to and from the Arab countries stopped and Israel used the airport for internal flights until 2000.

Today, the abandoned art deco building is turning into a ruin due to negligence. Cracks and grass cover the runway. High rise buildings surround the airport on one side and the industrial zone of Atarout settlement and the eight-metre high Separation Wall encloses it from the other sides. Entry to the site is forbidden. The young Palestinian generation who grew up with the Separation Wall blocking their view of the airport know hardly anything about its existence, let alone its history.³

As part of its policy to re-shape the demographics of the Jerusalem area in particular,⁴ Israel announced plans in February 2020 to build a settlement on the airport site and the surrounding area consisting of 11,000 housing units.⁵ Land confiscation and building demolition are expected to make space for the settlement and its road network. The connection with the world that the airport once represented will be transformed into a source of dispossession, obstruction and an ever-shrinking geography. The name Qalandiya is now associated with the infamous checkpoint, built in early 2000s adjacent to the airport site to limit Palestinians access to Jerusalem.

In 2012, an art initiative used the name Qalandiya to draw international attention to the area and the contradictions it represents. With the title *Qalandiya International*, the initiative was led initially by Jack Persekian, as Artistic Director and launched by eight Palestinian art institutions: Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, A.M. Qattan Foundation, Palestinian Art Court-Al Hoash, International Art Academy Palestine, Sakakini Cultural Center, Riwaq, and Eltiqa and Shababeek initiatives in Gaza. At a later stage more institutions joined, including the Arab Culture Association in Haifa, Dar El Nimer in Beirut, and Darat Al Funun in Amman. Their aim was to consolidate resources and work collectively to promote Palestinian visual art across the fragmented Palestinian geographies and to build bridges with the international art sector. The initiative was launched in Qalandiya village, as a reminder of the origins of the name. Why Qalandiya?

Qalandiya has been associated with the infamous Israeli checkpoint that continues to suffocate the West Bank, disconnecting it from Jerusalem and the rest of the world... However, Qalandiya has other connotations that have been deliberately smeared or totally erased over the years... There is the Qalandiya Airport, for example... the Qalandiya refugee camp, and Qalandiya village (which the Wall has divided into two separate parts). Qalandiya is where many paradoxes meet. It was the point of connection with the rest of the world until 1967, but has become the symbol of disconnection, isolation, segregation, and fragmentation.⁶

Qalandiya International represented the power and agency of a group of art professionals and artists in creating change: rather than giving in to isolation, they sought ways to connect with the world. The reputable *The Jerusalem Show* came under the umbrella of *Qalandiya International* as well as the Riwaq Biennale and the Young Artist of the Year Award. The resulting biennale-type event managed to attract both Palestinian and international artists through four editions, organized between 2012 and 2018 (now paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic). It attracted international visitors and media, but most of all instigated collaborative artistic projects and offered a platform for young Palestinian artists to engage with international art sectors despite their isolation and disconnection. *Qalandiya International* also prompted international artists to produce artworks inspired by the Palestinian Cause. A series of art works by Australian artist Tom Nicholson, who participated in three editions, referenced the historical connection of colonialism in both Australia and Palestine. British artist Cornelia Parker presented a video work *Made in Bethlehem* (2012) in which she drew a comparison between crowns of thorns made by craftsmen in Bethlehem for Easter pilgrims, with the barbed wire found throughout the West Bank. Swiss artist Uriel Orlow presented *Unmade Film* (2013), an audio-visual project on the Deir Yassin massacre⁷ committed by Zionist paramilitary groups near Jerusalem in 1948. Another Australian artist, Richard Bell participated in *Qalandiya International* in 2016, presenting his *Embassy* (tent) project on the rooftop of Al Ma'mal in the old city of Jerusalem, highlighting the plight of Australian aborigines and the Bedouins in Araqib village in Naqab, both of whom have been subject to continual attempts of erasure.

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Comparable to the attempts of erasure of the Qalandiya Airport from the landscape and historical narratives, Lydda Airport's history has also been obliterated. Located in the northern outskirts of the Palestinian city of Lydda, southeast of Jaffa, the airport was constructed in 1930 as a stop along the Empire Route for the British national airline, Imperial Airways.⁸ In 1948, a few days before committing the massacre in adjacent Lydda killing 400 Palestinians, the Israeli army seized the airport.⁹ They also seized the town and forced out thousands of its indigenous inhabitants. The airport's name was altered to Lod Airport until 1973 when it was renamed after Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. Now it is the main international airport in Israel. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not allowed to use it as part of segregation policies.

Interested in silenced historical narratives, Palestinian artist Emily Jacir chose this site as an imaginary location of her work *Lydda Airport* (2009). In the black and white single-channel animation video, she echoes a story told by Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari about his father Edmond Tamari from Jaffa. Edmond Tamari, who was a transport employee in the 1930s, was asked to take a bouquet of flowers to Lydda Airport and wait for the arrival of the aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart to welcome her to Palestine. Tamari waited for a long time but Earhart's plane never arrived. Jacir, who performs in the video, stands in front of the empty airport building—which appears to be under construction—then she reappears on one of its terraces holding a bouquet of flowers waiting for someone to arrive. No one can be seen in the airport except her. An aircraft emerges on the runway, and another ascends into the sky, yet still no one arrives. On the aircraft front we see the words *Palestine Airways Limited*, written in Arabic English and Hebrew. The rotation of the



plane's propellers in the looping video generates a sense of repetition amid silence and anticipation, as Jacir keeps looking into the empty void of the horizon. Her continued presence exhibits an acute sense of anxiety, of helplessness and inability to control the pace of events, and a repetition of inaction and non-arrival that echoes the endless act of 'waiting' in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Jacir's artwork can be seen as a reflection of an endless situation of waiting for the unknown, of the Palestinian situation, her bouquet of flowers an optimistic look of high expectations.

LINGERING PRESENTNESS

Although Palestinian airports do not exist, they remain a strong metaphor for the ongoing Palestinian condition. They represent the current moment, of interstitial spaces for transition, places of temporality where passengers do not undertake any action; instead they wait for the future to arrive. In these anonymous zones solitude and individuality manifest as opposed to communality. Palestinians live in an airport state of mind: although they live in "Palestine" they still dream about (the other, real) Palestine. The Palestine they live in is occupied, while the one they dream of is free.¹⁰ Palestinians living in exile experience a similar situation, they can see Palestine on a map but in reality it is not accessible to them. They cannot return to their homes.

Regarded as the Palestinian national poet, Mahmoud Darwish, originally from Al-Birweh village near the Acre coast, which was occupied and depopulated by Israeli forces in 1948, lived in exile long enough to sum up the absurdity of living in a lingering present. Eloquently he writes about Athens airport, as a metaphor for Palestinian exile:

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*Athens airport disperses us to other airports. Where can I fight? asks the fighter.
Where can I deliver your child? a pregnant woman shouts back.
Where can I invest my money? asks the officer.
This is none of my business, the intellectual says.
Where did you come from? asks the customs official.
And we answer: From the sea!
Where are you going?
To the sea, we answer.
What is your address?
A woman of our group says: My village is my bundle on my back.
We have waited in the Athens airport for years.
...
Athens airport welcomes its visitors without end.
Yet, like the benches in the terminal, we remain, impatiently waiting for the sea.
How many more years longer, O Athens airport?¹¹*

Numerous Palestinian artists have explored the concepts of suspended time, and waiting. Living in exile, artist Taysir Batniji explores the static present and disconnected geographies in his artworks. After moving to France, Batniji attempted resettling in Gaza three times, the last being in 2005. Soon after in 2006, he had to abruptly leave following the kidnap of an Israeli soldier and the subsequent bombardment and siege of Gaza by Israeli forces. Overnight Batniji found himself in Paris without his belongings, losing both sense of time and geography. Batniji produced a series of artworks inspired by this phase of disorientation. In *Suspended Time* (2006), Batniji used an hourglass to reflect time that has come to a standstill. He placed the hourglass on its side, the sand resting at the bottom of the two conjoined glass orbs. Gravity interrupts the sand's movement; time freezes, the sand ceases to progress from the future to the present. Instead it remains static in the two glass orbs, demonstrating the discontinuation of time and the disconnection between two geographies; homeland and exile.

Majd Abdelhamid has similarly used an hourglass, in *Hourglass* (2012), in which he substitutes sand with crushed cement taken from the Separation Wall in the West Bank. In recent decades, this cement barrier has been invading the landscape, becoming instrumental in Israel's expansion of controlling structures and colonization of Palestinian land. Using cement powder in the hourglass conveys the artist's pessimistic perspective of both Palestinian present and future. Unlike sand, this deep grey powder passes slowly down the handmade hourglass creating a heavy ambiance. Abdelhamid's hourglass gives a feeling of a bleak present and future in occupied lands.

From a different perspective, Hani Zurob examined the concept of waiting from the viewpoint of his relationship with his son Qoudsi, in two series of artworks titled *Waiting* (2009) and *Flying Lesson* (2009). Qoudsi has to fly with his mother from Paris where they live, to Jerusalem twice a year, each time for three months, for them to be able to keep their Jerusalem residency which Israel would otherwise revoke if they did not, and so they would never be able to return. Since Zurob has a Gazan identity card he cannot join them on these trips; like every Gazan, he is not permitted to visit Jerusalem, nor the West Bank. In *Flying Lesson* and *Waiting*, Zurob discusses exile, separation, virtual means of transportation, as well as virtual spaces of encounter. During the visits to Jerusalem, his son imagines various means of connection with his father by acquiring different



transportation toys to recompense their parting. The father attempts to overcome this separation by suggesting imaginative spaces of encounters. Attempts to traverse the Separation Wall are strongly present in the artworks while the layers of colours and lines on the canvas emphasize emotional and material barriers.

On the rubble of a demolished home, artist Raeda Saadeh sits knitting, using an oversized ball of yarn, in *Penelope* (2010). The photographic self-portrait shows Saadeh vaguely looking towards the horizon as she patiently works to complete her knitting. Her posture and expression reflect a mixture of determination, calmness and contemplation amidst the surrounding devastation. In this work, Saadeh is practically trapped in a long present moment, as long as the thread of yarn she is weaving. She is waiting for something to happen, perhaps to salvage herself from the enclosing destruction. Saadeh, who normally places herself at the core of her artistic practice, relying heavily upon performance, reflects a familiar scenario of the Palestinian landscape that has been repeatedly documented by media and human rights organizations. Yet it still shocks, and accentuates the contradictions of this reality. It also suggests the necessity to carry on armed with patience and determination. Her looks are full of hope that salvation is on the way.

Lecturer of philosophy and cultural studies at Birzeit University, Rami Salameh finds the Palestinian obsession with documenting Israel's violations of their human rights has actually substituted their act of resistance against this colonial regime. In his opinion, it has contributed to the present state of waiting, that Palestinians have been living in since the Oslo Accords.¹² Writing about imagining the future of Palestine, analyst and writer Yara Hawari explains that by "facing a constant process of erasure, Palestinians find themselves in a situation in which their past and their futures are denied. They are locked in a continuous present in which the settler colonial power, Israel, determines temporal and spatial boundaries."¹³ Hawari places emphasis on this by suggesting that in seeking to control perceptions of reality, the settler-colonial project aims "to bind Indigenous and colonized people in a seemingly perpetual state of being, or normalized stasis. Imagining a future beyond this state is thus a rebellious and radical act and is by no means an easy one."¹⁴

UNITED GEOGRAPHIES

In *Divine Intervention* (2002), Palestinian film director, Elia Suleiman proposes a rebellious moment, in a sardonic setting at an Israeli checkpoint. Suleiman, who performs in the film, endlessly waits for his girlfriend at the checkpoint. Sometimes she arrives, many other times, when the checkpoint is closed, she does not. As the situation becomes frustrating for the two lovers, the girlfriend decides to act. She parks her car at the closed checkpoint and decides to cross it on foot, no matter the consequences, against the instructions of Israeli soldiers. She steps out of the car in an elegant outfit with sunglasses and crosses the checkpoint with steady confident strides. The shouting soldiers stand in a line and fire shots into the air, but she doesn't stop. The watchtower suddenly collapses leading to the destruction of the entire checkpoint structure, as the girlfriend passes to the other side without even noticing.

Dividing a land into geographies and applying different laws in every section, under the umbrella of the colonial state, is geared towards preventing moments of collective rebellion from taking place. *Qalandiya International* was a revolutionary attempt in the visual art arena which connected geographies, even for a limited period of time. Yet, what has become more obvious recently was the Jerusalem Uprising in May 2021. In that moment the 'States of Palestine', of Khalil Rabah's imagined project, became united for the first time. Palestinians living in fragmented geographies realized their collective power and their ability to act rather than wait for someone to act on their behalf. The people, wherever they lived, *became the map*, rather than living within the lines and borders designed to restrain their movement. This culminated in the General Strike on 18 May 2021, when Palestinians in historic Palestine exercised their agency, went on strike and marched in protest against the Israel's continued violence and discrimination.¹⁵

In 1996, shortly after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Palestinian artist, Mona Hatoum presented her installation *Present Tense* in Gallery Anadiel in Jerusalem. Hatoum used 2,200 square blocks of Nablus soap, a traditional olive oil soap, as her canvas. She applied tiny red beads on the surface to create an outline of the new shrunken map of Palestine which came about as a result of the Oslo Accords. The fact that soap dissolves with water emphasizes the temporality of this suggested version of the map of Palestine, its title conveying a form of tension, or unstable present.

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A decade later, Hatoum produced a work titled *Waiting is Forbidden* (2006). The blue enamel sign in Arabic and English is similar to the signs found on streets giving directions to passersby. Not only does this work symbolize the perpetual state of waiting of Palestinians, as time has taken possession of them, but it is also a clear invitation against subordination to the present. It can be understood as a warning against accepting the status quo: waiting to return home (in the case of millions of Palestinians in the diaspora and refugee camps) or waiting for home to return (in the case of millions of Palestinians living in occupied Palestine). Waiting has become integral to the Palestinian condition since 1948: and this is when Hatoum's work gives directions: Do not wait. It is forbidden.

Notes

¹ Ahmad Abu Amer, 'PA shuts down Palestinian Airlines, shuttering hopes for airport', *Al Monitor*, 6 January 202; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/palestinian-airlines-cease-operations-airport-financial.html>; accessed July 2021

² Eldad Brin, 'Gateway to the World: The Golden Age of Jerusalem Airport, 1948–67', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 85, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, Spring 2021, p. 63

³ Nahed Awwad, *Five Minutes from Home*, documentary film, 2007. Produced by Akka Films, Monarch Films and Caravan Films

⁴ Check the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'tselem) website section on Jerusalem; <https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/>

⁵ Daoud Kuttab, 'Another push to make Qalandia Airport a Jewish settlement', *Al Monitor*, 26 February 2020; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/israel-plan-settlement-qalandia-airport-jerusalem-palestine.html>; accessed July 2021

⁶ Qalandiya International, Biennial Foundation; <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/qalandiya-international-palestine-2/>; accessed July 2021

⁷ For more information about the Deir Yassin massacre see; [https://www.paljourneys.org/en/timelineoverallchronology?synopses\[\]=21194&nid=21194](https://www.paljourneys.org/en/timelineoverallchronology?synopses[]=21194&nid=21194)

⁸ Emily Jacir, *Lydda Airport* (2009); see <http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/lydda-airport>; accessed July 2021

⁹ 'Lydda, 9–13 July 1948: A city-wide massacre culminating in the Death March', *Palestinian Journeys, Timeline*; <https://www.paljourneys.org/en/timeline/highlight/24073/lydda-9-13-july-1948>; accessed July 2021

¹⁰ Rana Barakat, 'The Right to Wait: Exile, Home and Return', *Seeking Palestine, New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh eds, Northampton MA: Olive Branch Press, 2013

¹¹ Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, eds and trans. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2003

¹² Rami Salameh, 'Place, Law and Daily Life Awareness in Palestine', lecture given at Sakakini Cultural Centre, 27 August 2019. Rami Salameh is a lecturer of philosophy and cultural studies at Birzeit University

¹³ Yara Hawari, 'Radical Futures: When Palestinians Imagine', *Al Shabaka: the Palestinian Policy Network*, 24 March 2020; <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/radical-futures-when-palestinians-imagine/>; accessed July 2021

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'In Pictures: In show of unity, Palestinians go on strike', *Al Jazeera*, 18 May 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/5/18/in-pictures-palestinians-unite-with-a-general-strike>