THIS WEEK IN PALESTINE

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A Generation of Hope: Nurturing and Defending Palestine's Children

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Cover: On stage, a child steps forward and takes space. Courtesy of Ashtar.

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

News from Gaza has moved to the background, if reported at all, amid troubling developments in the region. Those who are most vulnerable are again suffering the most, likely for some time to come, as two unhinged political leaders try to establish hegemony over the region and the wider world and its resources. We pray that the destruction that world audiences of nightly news and witnesses of social media posts have ignored, allowed to happen – or were unable to stop – in Gaza, will be prevented in Lebanon. We hope that children in all areas that have recently seen the normalization of war crimes may return to their homes and live a childhood that enables them to experience the peace and freedom that every child deserves. Millions of people in Gaza (and the region) and tens of thousands in the West Bank remain displaced or have been newly displaced, losing their homes, a basic sense of security, and access to education, even basic healthcare. What these young human beings are experiencing, no person, and certainly no child should have to endure! They need us adults to help prevent such atrocities. Our admiration and gratitude goes to those who have cared for and continue to tend to the health and mental well-being of Gaza's children, and all children impacted by trauma and war.

The inspiration for this issue has been Palestinian Children's Day, observed annually on April 5, which was established by the late President Yasser Arafat to highlight the rights, struggles, and resilience of children living under occupation. It is a day of solidarity, often marked by advocacy for protection, education, and safety amid ongoing humanitarian crises, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank. It gives a glimpse into what Palestinian children, particularly those living in Gaza, have experienced, showing how they have dealt with the immense trauma and loss and how institutions and individuals have supported them and helped them to navigate through the turmoil.

This Week in Palestine thanks all those who have used these pages to advertise their services and help support us, securing our sustainability. We also thank the authors of this issue, including Palestine Children's Relief Fund; Jason A. Terry, the vice president of programs at UNRWA USA; Tamer Institute for Community Education; Majdi Hadid, a graphic designer who serves on Al Kamandjati Association's board of directors; Iman Hammouri, the director of the Popular Art Centre; Konrad Suder Chatterjee, who serves as communications manager and resource developer for ASHTAR Theatre in Ramallah; Amahl Bishara, a professor of anthropology at Tufts University; Julie Abdallah, the communications coordinator at the Palestinian Circus; PACES Sports for Development Program; Sarah Zahran, a cultural researcher and education program officer at the Palestinian Museum; Gabriel Kattan Abusleme, a political scientist and Palestinian expat who lives in Chile; Deema Ershaid, the executive director of Ramallah's Visual Arts Forum; Muntaser Ayoub Said Edkaidek, the executive manager of Burj Al-Luqluq Social Center Society in Jerusalem; Alice Abdo, a Palestinian development professional; and Ahmed Masoud, an award-winning Palestinian author living in the UK. Our Book of the Month is *No Warmth in the Tent*, and our Artist of the Month is Raniah Amodi.

The entire team at *TWiP* thanks you for your continued interest and engagement with Palestinian concerns. We wish peace for everyone.

Warmly,

Tina Basem



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Navigating Trauma and Loss



From *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

The Conditions of Childhood in Palestine amid the Ceasefire

By Juliette Bejani and Ambarina Zenab

The Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) aims to guarantee the right to life, safety, and well-being for children around the world. Unfortunately, however, this convention and the international community have failed Palestinian children. Displacement, lacking access to healthcare and food, interruptions in their education, and unlawful arrests plagued Palestine's children even before the start of the 2023 war. But October 7, 2023, has exacerbated the unjust conditions that Palestinians have endured under the Zionist occupation. The siege on Gaza, imposed since 2007, and repeated wars over the past two decades have not only destroyed homes, educational facilities, healthcare, and access to resources and nutrition – they have also left a psychological impact on the mental wellbeing of children, who over the past years have been subjected to unimaginable trauma and loss.

October 10, 2025, marked the beginning of the first phase of the latest ceasefire in Gaza, yet attacks by the Zionist entity have persisted, and the agreement has been violated daily –which is underreported by mainstream international media.[1] These ceasefire violations continue to endanger the right to life of Palestinian children and reflect the deep failure of the international community to enforce international law. In late December 2025, the IDF announced that it would block from entering the occupied territories 37 aid organizations that have – as much as possible within the longstanding restrictions and blockades imposed by Israel – facilitated the distribution of necessary food supplies, shelter, and medical support.[2] Without these resources and amid the daily ceasefire violations, children continue to suffer.

According to OCHA's latest Humanitarian Situation Report, 1.7 million Gazan Palestinians remain displaced from their homes in late March 2026.[3] Gaza's children have found temporary shelter in the remnants of destroyed homes, makeshift tents, and overcrowded schools, with living conditions deemed "unfit for survival" as far back as late 2024.[4] The CRC asserts the right to adequate housing. But while over 330,500 housing units have been completely destroyed,[5] only 125,000 tents suitable for temporary shelter are currently inhabitable.[6] This past winter, rain and storms have flooded and shattered tents, leaving families exposed to the elements, and 14 people including children have died in freezing temperatures due to the lack of accommodation.[7]

Even though blocked crossing have imposed severe limitations, the UN Shelter Clusters have attempted to provide adequate resources and temporary housing to the displaced in Gaza, and offered assistance to those impacted by weather-based damages. Thus, 7,720 households have received aid in late February and early March, which included 240 sealing-off kits for tents, 1,595 bedding items and kits, 711 tarpaulins, 983 clothing kits and vouchers, and some tents.[8] At least 1,500 hygiene promotion sessions and 400 cleaning campaigns by UNRWA have benefited at least 400,000 displaced people in the Gaza Strip.[9] Yet this is in no way sufficient.

Following the unprecedented destruction and displacement in the Gaza Strip, education is severely challenged. Even though the right to education is explicitly mentioned by the CRC, it has become a luxury that only the most fortunate children can enjoy. According to UNICEF, 97 percent of schools in Gaza have been destroyed since 2023,[9] and PCBS reports that as of March 10 of this year, 143 schools and universities have been completely obliterated, and 366 universities and schools have been partially destroyed.[10] In late October 2025, the Palestinian Ministry of Education reported that 20,080 students had been killed in Palestine since October 7, 2023.[10] Furthermore, UNICEF stated in November 2025 that 658,000 school-age children had had limited access to face-to-face education for over two years.[11]

In light of funding cuts and damaged educational facilities, educational activities have been relocated to new spaces.

UNICEF has reported that at least 1,000 children in Gaza had their limbs amputated with insufficient or without anesthesia due to Israel's blockade of aid. Image courtesy of The Electronic Intifada | Moaz Abu Taha, APA News.[42]



Despite the October 2025 ceasefire in Gaza, living conditions for Palestinian children remain unsustainable. As of February 2026, UNICEF reports that over 120 Palestinian children in Gaza have been killed despite the ceasefire.[38]

Makeshift classrooms have been created in tents and damaged buildings in the attempt to continue education, and create some sense of normalcy, amid uncertainty and war. For the first time in two years, UNICEF launched a Back to Learning Campaign across Gaza in January 2026. Within this initiative, kits for early childhood development and wellbeing were introduced. Adaptive learning systems have been implemented to help children catch up on their studies amid unpredictability and reconstruction efforts, however limited. But access to basic materials such as pens or notebooks is scarce, and the children who are able to access education are finding it extremely difficult to focus on coursework due to trauma.[12] In the first week of March 2026, UNRWA reports, 58,543 students participated in basic literacy and numeracy learning endeavors.[13] The week after, 59,980 children, including 838 with disabilities, received their education across 75 UNRWA shelters, as per the organization's register.[14] All this while UNRWA is facing attacks from the Zionist entity, including the targeted destruction of physical structures and attempts to delegitimize the organization's work.[15]

In the West Bank, widespread displacement and movement restrictions are limiting safe access to education. As Al Jazeera reported in February 2026, Israel has for years withheld the customs revenues it owes the Palestinian Authority, rendering the latter unable to pay Palestinian teachers more than half their salaries. This has limited children's access to educational resources and hampers the functioning of public schools, where teaching days have been reduced to three and four instead of five days per week.[16] Moreover, teachers at many village schools face restrictions when commuting due to checkpoints and safety concerns. In some instances, and currently due to the war against Iran, children attend online courses, which places a heavy burden on parents, particularly if they are working, and poses its own problems for large families when not enough devices are available. The forced evacuation of refugee camps in Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nour Shams has left children struggling to attend school. Due to mass displacement from Jenin alone, 1,200 children from the refugee camp have been left without schooling, while students in government schools lost 100 days of classes during the first semester of the current school year.[17]

Since October 7, the conditions faced by Palestinians in Israeli prisons have deteriorated severely. As of late December 2025, 351 children were detained in Israeli prisons, 51 percent of which were held in administrative detention without charge. (This number does not include children detained in Israeli military detention sites or interrogation centers; no data is available regarding the number of children or adults detained in these locations).[18] Arrests are most often carried out through illegal methods such as blindfolding, night raids, or physical assault. Moreover, they are often arbitrary, and children are denied a lawyer.[19] In the Gaza Strip, 10,000 children are missing, but there is a lack of data on if they are buried under rubble, maimed beyond recognition and buried in a mass grave, separated from their families and lost, or detained by Israel, as the UN raised concerns about the possible mass detention of thousands including children.[20] Child prisoners have reported being beaten and denied healthcare, food, and water, which could lead to severe illnesses or even death, as in the case of Palestinian teenager, Walid Ahmad.[21] This structural violence represents a form of psychological warfare.[16] Children are separated from their families, tortured, and denied their right to a healthy childhood, impairing their psychological growth and health.

These data suggest clear violations not only of children's rights but also of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Like every other child, Palestinian children have the right to be protected from violence and abuse. Even in a war zone, it is illegal for arrests to be carried out without access to lawyers and courts.[22] In such circumstances, Palestinian children may grow up without any reason to believe in human rights or the value of law. The Israeli prison system, which should represent the execution of the law, operates in total illegality and with unspeakable violence.



Statistics on displacement, malnutrition and starvation, killings, illegal arrests, and limited access to education and healthcare facilities indicate that Palestinian children are denied their rights.

After Israeli bombardment, children retrieve belongings from what remains of the tent where they had found temporary shelter, March 2025. Image courtesy of The Electronic Intifada | Doaa Albaz, ActiveStills.

Children's health has deteriorated to an unimaginable level. As of early September 2025, the Ministry of Health reported, at least 42,011 children were injured, and at least 21,000 children suffered permanent disabilities.[23] PCBS reports that children have lost sight, hearing, mobile function, and limbs during the genocidal war on Gaza, and 18 percent of 4,800 amputees are children.[24] Since the ceasefire, however, reportage on the health conditions and injuries of children has been severely limited.

With medical aid and access to resources destroyed by the IDF, and a near total blockade on the entry of humanitarian aid imposed for months, children have been pushed into survival mode. As of March 2026, only 17 hospitals are functional, and access to medication and treatment is limited, if available at all.[25] Despite the heavy limitations placed by the Israeli government and protesters on the entry of humanitarian aid, the United Nations and other aid agencies are attempting to provide medical resources and treatment to children. UNICEF has provided mental health treatment through counseling and psychological outreach, and UNRWA reports that 520,000 displaced children have received mental health support services. But only six UNRWA health centers, four temporary health centers, and 28 medical points remain operational.[26]

As most of the water infrastructure has been destroyed by Israeli bombardment, and pollution and contamination are infiltrating drinking water sources – with 83 percent of water tanks deemed nonfunctional – UNICEF and its partners are attempting to repair water pipes and reopen water pump stations to counter illnesses such as hepatitis A and acute watery diarrhea. Many children have developed waterborne illnesses amid limited access to potable water and functioning healthcare centers. PCBS reports that, as of July 2025, 95 percent of households were unable to access safe drinking water. Due to contamination, 43 percent of children suffer from diarrhea,

If the international community upheld its values and respected its vows to abide by international law, it would move beyond words and take action, be it through economic sanctions, weapons embargoes, or diplomatic measures.



A Palestinian child taken by Israeli soldiers. Image courtesy of Al Mayadeen, 2022.

58 percent struggle with fevers, and 25 percent have experienced acute respiratory infections.[27]

According to UNICEF, 101,000 children require treatment for acute malnutrition.[28] Before the ceasefire was announced, almost all imports of food into Gaza had been halted, with OCHA reporting that in September 2025, Israel allowed less than 26 percent of the daily requirement to enter.[29] Moreover, when a very limited number of food distribution centers was implemented by the US-supported so-called Gaza Humanitarian Aid Foundation, the IDF frequently attacked and killed civilians collecting food.[30] Thus, in mid-August 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) estimated that through June 2026, 41,000 children in Gaza would face the risk of death from hunger and malnutrition, while 132,000 children under five might face severe malnutrition, as 26 percent of Gaza's population was facing IPC phase 5 (the most severe level of food insecurity).[31] The situation slightly improved following the ceasefire, when 5 percent of Gaza's population was estimated to face IPC Phase 5; Gaza's population was almost entirely in IPC phases 3 or 4 in late 2025.[32]

Even though the food security situation improved following the ceasefire, it remains extremely fragile. UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned in December 2025, that 1.6 million people (more than 75 percent of Gaza's population) "are projected to face extreme levels of acute food insecurity and critical malnutrition risks."[33] Children and breastfeeding women are most affected, with around 101,000 children aged six to 59 months expected to suffer from acute malnutrition through mid-October 2026, and 37,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women are projected to require treatment by the same date.[26]

With world attention focused on the joint US-Israeli attack on Iran, the aid situation has deteriorated further, particularly when Israel in early March closed all crossings to Gaza for four days. But the amount of aid Israel permitted subsequently has been reduced even more than what had entered before the assault on Iran. Euromed Monitor declared these measures "not only a breach of the ceasefire agreement but [possibly] also … a grave violation of international humanitarian law."[34] Moreover, Israel is currently studied for genocide at the ICJ for the mass killings and famine levels it has created in Gaza.[35] If done intentionally, the imposition of living conditions intended to bring about the physical destruction of a population in whole or in part constitutes a genocide.[36] Children are the first victims in these conditions, as they are most vulnerable to hunger and related illnesses.

Thus, although a "ceasefire" has been declared in Gaza, the situation for Palestinian children remains beyond dire. When children's rights are so openly and continuously disrespected, legal systems lose their credibility. Protecting Palestinian children is therefore a matter that touches upon children of the entire world, as they can no longer rely on the legal order. The continuous lack of accountability has enabled the war and attacks on children to be extended to other countries, such as Iran and Lebanon. While reporting on Palestine and Gaza has decreased, it remains crucial to stay alert and raise the issue, as the situation continues to represent a threat to childhoods and legal systems. The international public must pressure their governments for well overdue action and oblige Israel to uphold international law and protect the children of the region.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reports that between October 7, 2023, and March 1, 2026, at least 18,592 children were killed in the Gaza Strip, and thousands remain buried under the rubble.[39] Relief Web reported that in the West Bank, 233 children were killed between October 2023 and March 2026.[40]



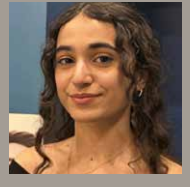
Children wait in line for food distribution amid Israel's full blockage of all aid, including food, March 2025. Image courtesy of The Electronic Intifada.

In late December 2025, the Israeli Prison System held 351 Palestinian minors on "security grounds" and 106 for being illegally in Israel, as documented by B'Tselem.[41]

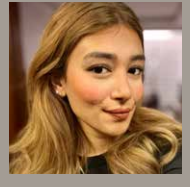
Aid agencies must be given access to Gaza to provide necessary medical treatment, food packages, and resources to the displaced. Instead of temporary solutions, a permanent, abided-by ceasefire is the first step. Humanitarian aid, medical supplies and personnel, water and food, alongside alternative spaces for education, must be prioritized to create stability. Consistency in the implementation of these initiatives requires structure and continuity, rather than temporary band-aid solutions to the violence and destruction that Palestinian society has faced by the Zionist occupation.

While the international community must ensure accountability, we must also give agency to the voices of the Palestinian children. Initiatives such as The Gaza We Want by UNICEF demonstrate that the dreams and aspirations of Palestinian children are connected to peace, safety, and security.[37] Many children have expressed, through their art and in interviews, the simplest of wishes – walking safely to school, being with friends in the classroom, and sleeping soundly and safely at night. These are the very fundamental rights that the CRC promises every child, but for the survivors amid the ceasefire, these rights still feel inaccessible. Living under conditions of survival under the Zionist occupation reconditions a life to uncertainty and violence, which in turn impedes healthy development and well-being, reinforcing a cycle of trauma and struggle that will impact a child well into adulthood. While we look towards the future of Gaza's children, reconstruction and recovery involves the consideration and input of children, as their existence and life beyond survival guarantees the continuation of the Palestinian nation.

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Living Trauma, Finding Strength



PCRF Highlights the Mental Health of Gaza's Children on Palestinian Children's Day

PCRF
Palestine Children's Relief Fund
جمعيـة إغاثة أطفال فلسـطين

Courtesy of
The Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF)

In a place as small and densely populated as Gaza, nearly every child has grown up under the weight of the blockade, repeated escalation, and loss. For many, childhood has unfolded amid airstrikes, displacement, and constant uncertainty. According to UNICEF, even before October 2023, nearly half of Gaza's children were estimated to need mental health support, with many exposed to repeated trauma.

The scale of need is now even more urgent. Across Gaza and the West Bank, children are living through a deepening crisis. While global attention may fade in the shadow of a fragile ceasefire, the psychological toll on children does not pause. It deepens over time, becoming more complex.

Mental health specialists at the Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF) describe a shift. What began as shock and acute distress has become persistent anxiety, disrupted sleep, withdrawal, and a constant sense of fear. "Children are no longer reacting to a single event, but living within a prolonged state of trauma," says Moushera, a PCRF mental health specialist.

Within this reality are thousands of stories. Seven-year-old Farah, for example, lost her mother during the war and suffered severe facial and limb burns. In the months that followed, she showed clear signs of trauma, including fear, separation anxiety, and difficulty speaking about what she had experienced. Through sustained psychosocial support by PCRF, she slowly began to find her way back. In safe spaces built around play, drawing, and conversation, she started to express what once felt unspeakable, gradually returning to moments of childhood, playing and joining activities again. Her father describes that shift, saying, "She used to refuse to go to the sessions, and I struggled to convince her [to go]. Now, she's asking me when we're going, and runs ahead of me."

Since 2014, PCRF has expanded community-based mental health care to include one-on-one counseling, group sessions, and play- and art-based activities. Each month, these efforts reach nearly 2,000 children across Gaza City and the central and southern Gaza Strip, helping them process fear and grief.

This support extends to caregivers, helping parents navigate their own trauma while supporting their children. In many families, trauma moves through relationships, shaping how safety and fear are experienced at home. Mohareb, a father in Gaza and a mental health specialist with PCRF, lives both realities. At home, he hears his children say, "Dad, we don't want to die." Outside, he supports other children facing the same fears, carrying both roles each day.

There is undeniable resilience in Gaza's children, seen in their return to play and connection even after profound loss. But it must not be mistaken for the absence of harm. Prolonged exposure to violence shapes children's development in lasting ways, even across generations, making sustained support essential.

On this Palestinian Children's Day, the message is clear: These children must remain in our minds. Their wellbeing is a shared responsibility that calls for continued care and commitment.



Every child deserves more than survival. They deserve the chance to heal, to grow, and to simply be children again.

Farah, 7, from Deir al-Balah, Gaza, lost her mother and suffered severe burns to her face and limbs.

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PCRF
Palestine Children's Relief Fund

Scan to Help

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A Community for Child Mental Health


From HeArt of Gaza exhibition.

By Jason A. Terry

On a cold Valentine's Day morning in Atlanta, Georgia, over 1,200 people gathered to carry on what is now a 14-year-old tradition – though they didn't know it. To them, the UNRWA USA Gaza 5K was a new experience, never before seen in their city. To those of us behind the scenes, the Gaza 5K is a fundraising event that UNRWA USA brings to a number of cities across the United States each year; it is also a labor of love that brings us closer to the large communities of Americans who support our mission.

The Gaza 5K supports mental health care services for refugee children served by UNRWA in the Gaza Strip. For many years, UNRWA's mental health and psychosocial support program was run out of its schools, with counselors – all of whom are Palestine refugees themselves – providing one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and outreach to parents and caregivers.

For decades, Palestinian children in Gaza have been deprived of a normal childhood. Today, a 15-year-old child in Gaza has already lived through five wars in their short lifetime. For the last nearly three years, growing up has been an unending horror show. The youngest children – just toddlers – have faced bombing, famine, and fear their whole lives.

At the Atlanta Gaza 5K, participants came from all walks of life. Maybe the word Gaza made them sign up. Maybe it was the word refugee. Maybe they wanted to burn some calories for a good cause. Or, maybe they just wanted to feel the joy of community. For those who advocate for the rights of Palestinians here in the United States, community sometimes feels like it's all we have left.

US government policy toward Palestine since 2023 has wound a bipartisan path from enabling atrocity to humanitarian complacency. In the halls of power in Washington, DC, even the pretense of including Palestinian voices in conversations about Gaza's future has largely disappeared. With the stroke of a pen, President Joe Biden froze all US government funding to UNRWA in January 2024. His successor, President Donald Trump, has reinforced that policy. Suddenly, the largest annual monetary contribution to the largest provider of humanitarian aid to Palestine refugees, over $300 million each year – peaking at $420 million in 2023 – was gone.

At UNRWA USA, a small nonprofit with only about 15 people on staff, the mission is simple: Do what we can to uplift the lives and livelihoods of Palestine refugees through the vehicle of UNRWA. In the last 30 months, donations have poured in from over 200,000 ordinary people, almost all of whom are in North America.

The Gaza 5K has become a huge event, with over 5,000 people running in New York City last fall, including Zohran Mamdani who is now the mayor. Celebrity voices such as Macklemore, Susan Sarandon, Mark Ruffalo, and Stephen Colbert and his staff through a donation from their Americone Dream Foundation (a partnership with Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream), have offered their advocacy and their generosity. As multiple domestic crises unfold in the United States, more and more people are seeing the links between Palestinian oppression abroad and the oppression of marginalized groups here at home. If community is all we have left, at least that community is bustling with strength, energy, resolve, and fortitude.

That community has enabled UNRWA USA to contribute over $81 million to humanitarian relief efforts in Gaza since October 2023. Of that, several million dollars have gone to support UNRWA's mental health work in Gaza. The counselors are heroic. Through their own displacement, hunger, and loss, UNRWA's school counselors have been working almost daily for

Participants at the UNRWA USA Atlanta Gaza 5K sign a Valentine's Day card for UNRWA staff in Gaza. Photo by Ashton Garner.





Rana Abu Jabara, the school counselor, gently guides Naif through a creative activity, providing the emotional support he needs to express his feelings, build confidence, and reconnect with learning despite the challenges of displacement.

If community is all we have left, then each of us must do what we can. That community will deliver hope. And one day soon, it will deliver freedom.



Shaded, a displaced student living at Al-Swarha School, actively participates in class, her confidence and love for learning growing each day thanks to ongoing psychosocial support.

the last 30 months to bring some semblance of calm and care to children living through unimaginable trauma. These counselors have circulated through schools-turned-shelters, conducted group sessions amid tents, and worked tirelessly using methods such as play and art therapy to help children process the horror of growing up in what experts agree is a genocide.

Some are surprised to learn that UNRWA is one of the largest providers of mental healthcare in the Gaza Strip. A team of 236 counselors, supported by 300 assistant counselors, have conducted over 340,000 mental health sessions since October 7. During that time, over 520,000 children have been reached through these services, along with another 210,000 adults.

An additional 49 psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselor supervisors address more serious cases that require individualized care. When not providing direct care, UNRWA's mental health team bolsters community awareness through information sessions on parental management of child psychosocial stressors, protecting women and children from gender-based violence, and caring for people with disabilities and special needs in a period of protracted displacement.

The last uninterrupted period of schooling in Gaza was the first six weeks of the 2023–2024 academic year. According to 13-year-old Omar, "School stopped, fear replaced safety, and many things I loved disappeared." For many months, the only "lessons" offered were warnings about unexploded ordnance. UNRWA counselors worked quickly to fill in the gaps, organizing group activities, creating play time, and helping children try to make sense of the devastation being imposed on them.

Rana is one of UNRWA's school counselors in Gaza. While working with a young student, she shared, "Psychosocial support is not an addition to education in times of crisis – it is its foundation. When children arrive at school carrying fear, displacement, and memories of violence, learning cannot begin until they feel safe, seen, and understood." UNRWA began a limited Back to Learning program in October 2024, but expansion was difficult until the two-month ceasefire in early 2025. When that ceasefire was unilaterally broken, children again experienced interrupted education and compounding mental health impacts. The tools of genocide – indiscriminate killing, repeated forced displacement, famine and malnutrition, and deprivation of healthcare – fall most heavily on children. Gaza has the largest number of child amputees anywhere in the world.

With another so-called ceasefire in place, UNRWA's Back to Learning efforts are now moving at scale. Temporary learning spaces in 75 shelters now serve around 65,000 students each week for in-person instruction. An additional 280,000 students are served through UNRWA's Digital Learning Platform, supported by 7,500 teachers who stay in touch with their students via WhatsApp. Printed self-learning materials are distributed to students enrolled in online instruction so they can keep up with their studies.

Shahed, an eighth-grade student whose father was killed early on, shared about her UNRWA counselors: "They encouraged me to join activities and school celebrations, and over time, I began to feel safe and hopeful again. Today, I attend school and psychosocial sessions regularly, and I even support my friends and family when they face challenges. Their guidance has taught me to manage my emotions, communicate better, and embrace life with courage."

It's not just students who receive mental health support. UNRWA counselors also support parents and teachers in identifying signs of distress in children who are facing constant trauma. Living in temporary shelters is in itself a stressor on children and adults alike. Maher, who serves as an UNRWA mental health focal point, describes the agency's holistic approach: "We address multiple dimensions of well-being, including building self-confidence, emotional expression, and anger management, and improving communication and social skills."



Atlanta Gaza 5K participants beginning their run/walk to raise funds for child mental health in Gaza.
Photo by John Arthur Brown.

Young Omar puts it more succinctly: "Returning to school has given me hope again."

Back in Atlanta, children at the Gaza 5K were playing a trivia game to learn more about Palestine and UNRWA's essential role since the *Nakba*. Winning a sticker or a pin designed by a Palestinian artist helped them feel more connected to the cause. Their parents and caregivers, meanwhile, were writing letters to their members of the US Congress, demanding a restoration of government funding to UNRWA. And when the children learned that they were there to help care for their peers in Gaza, many put on a serious face and pledged to do what they could to be supportive.

Davis, one of the children participating in the Gaza 5K, raised over $1,000 from his family and friends for the event, saying humbly, "I learned something and I wanted to do something about it."

That is, ultimately, all we ask of anyone who joins us in supporting Palestine refugees: to take up the mantle of community, stewardship, and care. It's never too late to join in, and no action is too small. Whether you've got a spare $5 to donate to the cause, or you're sitting on $500,000 and are thinking about your legacy here on earth, it's all needed. Elected officials the world over, but especially in the United States, need to keep hearing from us.

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Jason A. Terry is vice president of programs at UNRWA USA, a nonprofit organization dedicated to showing Palestine refugees that Americans care. To learn more and get involved, visit www.unrwausa.org.



Susu and the Colored Duck by Sehaam Mohammed (age 6). Drawing courtesy of *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

Storytelling and Art



From *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

Collective Healing and Creative Resistance Through a Palestinian Child's Lens

Courtesy of Tamer Institute for Community Education

This article comes to you under the weight of the genocidal war waged against the Palestinian people by the Israeli occupation. This genocide transcends the borders of the homeland, extending to the Arab region and global solidarity movements. The occupation has targeted the physical and human existence of Palestinians, killing and arresting them, and destroying homes, schools, libraries, mosques, churches, and hospitals. The genocide perpetrated by the occupation continues against the Palestinian presence as a whole. But amidst this tragic and surreal scene, the children of Palestine simultaneously insist on their dream of life and imagine returning to their homes and homeland. Working with children was a learning experience for us as a team at Tamer Institute for Community Education. The experience was filled with a complex mix of emotions: pain and humor, fear and determination navigating the struggle for survival and humanity in a reality that was anything but human. It also became a source of motivation and inspiration for further work and expansion, both regionally and internationally. Tamer Institute not only provided these spaces that enable children and young people to express themselves, it also publishes and documents these works in various forms, including books, studies, videos, translations, and posts on Arab and international forums.

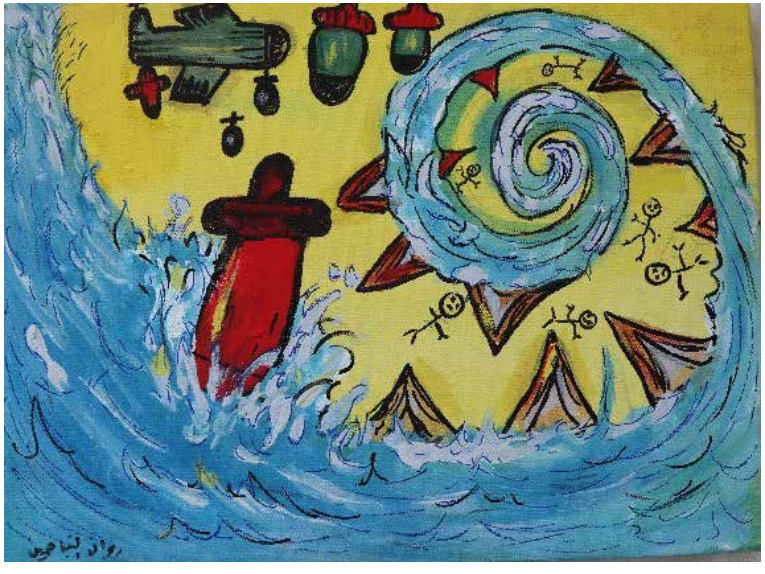
The "Return to Home Path" initiative, developed by Tamer Institute and implemented in Gaza, created vital spaces where children expressed their experiences through storytelling and art. Tamer prioritized reading, writing and painting as the most intuitive languages for a child, offering a natural bridge to convey complex emotions that are difficult to verbalize. In these sessions, children are not just victims; they are storytellers and historians of collectively lived experience. While many depicted the war itself, their works are both reflections of fear and visual testimonies of shared resilience. By placing overwhelming experiences onto paper, children transform fragments of memory into a collective journey of healing and solidarity. These creative expressions serve as a psychosocial outlet, documenting a communal strength that refuses to be silenced and ensures that the human impact of war is understood by future generations.

One facilitator recalls a moment that captures the significance of these creative acts. After one of the sessions ended, a young girl ran after the group trying to say something. Eventually it became clear that she had become deeply attached to the drawing she had created. She asked if she could keep it so that she could "carry it with her everywhere." Amid displacement and uncertainty, the drawing had become something more than a piece of paper. It had become something she wanted to protect.

Moments like this show how children's drawings can hold meanings that go far beyond the image itself. When so many familiar

مؤسسة تامر للتعليم المجتمعي
Tamer Institute for Community Education

Rawan Al-Nabaheen, age 12. Photo courtesy of Tamer Institute.





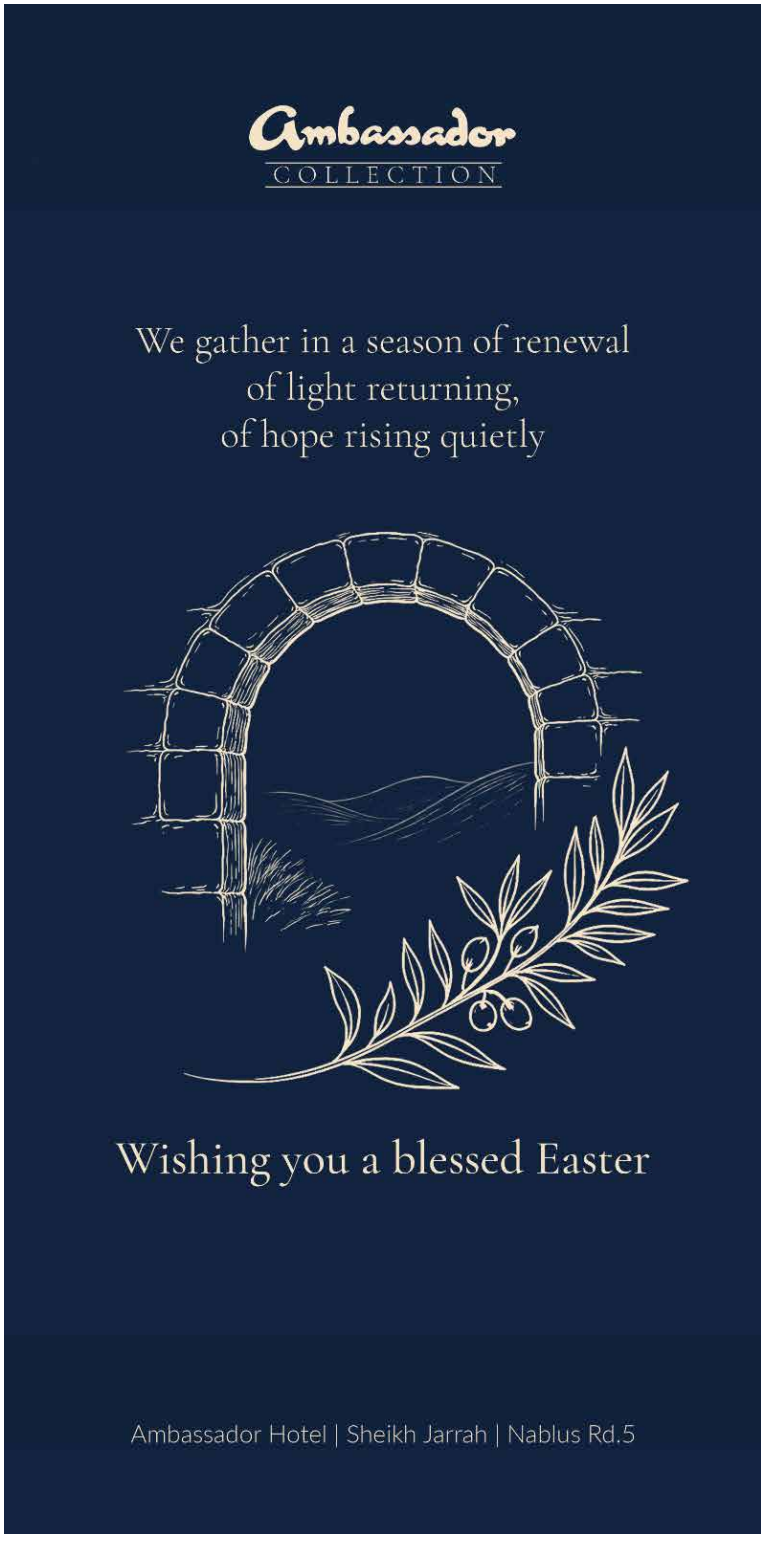
Drawings by children in Gaza are not only expressions of pain. They are acts of witnessing; small but powerful records of the reality that children are living through and refuse to remain silent about.

Shad Ma'rouf, age 14. Photo courtesy of Tamer Institute.

objects, homes, toys, classrooms, are lost or left behind, the drawing becomes something stable, something that belongs to the child. It carries memory, emotion, and a piece of their experience.

Just as important as the drawings themselves were the collective spaces in which they were created. Children did not draw alone; they drew together, surrounded by other children and supported by facilitators and community members. In these spaces, they were able to talk, observe one another's drawings, and realize that others were experiencing similar fears and uncertainties. Through this shared process, the drawings became part of a collective effort to make sense of chaos. They allowed children to transform overwhelming experiences into stories and images that could be held, shared, and remembered. What these drawings ultimately reveal is that children are not passive observers of war. They are witnesses who actively interpret and represent what they see. Their art does not erase the violence around them, but it insists on recording it.

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Al Kamandjati



From HeArt of Gaza exhibition.

Building a Journey of Resilience and Freedom for Palestinian Children Under Occupation

By Majdi Hadid

For nearly two decades, Al Kamandjati Association has been committed to teaching music to children across Palestine and in refugee camps in Lebanon. In a context where music education serves as a powerful form of existential resistance, and childhood is often marked by uncertainty, opportunities for stability, growth, and self-expression are not always guaranteed. Al Kamandjati has developed a program that goes far beyond traditional education. Its initial aim of making music accessible to Palestinian youth and children has evolved into a sustained effort to influence young lives by encouraging creativity, discipline, and expression. Being a Palestinian child under occupation means growing up in a harsh reality that shapes identity and daily life. Movement can be limited, routines are frequently disrupted, and pressures deeply affect family and community life. In such conditions, even the idea of a predictable childhood can seem distant, and children often have to mature early. This is where Al Kamandjati plays a vital role. By creating a simple and meaningful space where children can learn, gather, and grow together, the association supports their well-being and resilience despite the surrounding circumstances.

Music education, in this context, is much more than a cultural activity or a lesson focused solely on learning notes or instrument technique; it is about structure. A rehearsal is not only a preparation for a performance; it is a shared commitment that teaches responsibility and a sense of belonging. In classrooms that are filled with the sounds of tuning violins, when rhythms are forming and voices are rising, children experience a different kind of order, one that is shaped by harmony rather than disruption. It provides time to learn, focus, enjoy, and find relief, which counters the challenging reality behind the walls. This is achieved through the association's approach that combines formal instruction with flexibility. Students learn instruments, music theory, and ensemble performance, following a structured path that mirrors conservatory-style education. Teaching methods are adapted to meet the realities on the ground, ensuring that learning continues despite structural, logistical, or social challenges. This balance between discipline and adaptability is central to the organization's success.

Through music education, children develop skills that extend well beyond the classroom. Learning an instrument demands patience, focus, and perseverance. Playing in an ensemble involves listening, cooperation, and an awareness of others. These are not just abstract lessons; they are real experiences that shape how children face challenges, interact with peers, and view themselves within a group. Such qualities qualify them for a successful life journey that is built on resilience and order. Another important aspect of Al Kamandjati Association's work is the emotional space that music provides. For children who are growing up in difficult circumstances, expression is not always easy. Music offers a language that does not rely on words. Through melody and rhythm, children can explore feelings, release tension, and find moments of calm.

Music appreciation class held in Deir Ghassaneh, Palestine.





A performance of Al Kamandjati's Orchestra Ramallah.

This is where music becomes, in a very real sense, therapeutic, not as a separate intervention but as an integral part of learning.

In Palestine, music holds a unique significance that differs from elsewhere in the world. It functions as both a cultural expression and a form of resistance and resilience. This resistance is not about conflict but about presence, cultural continuity, and existence. It involves creating, learning, and performing despite structural barriers and restrictions. It is about preserving and advancing culture through sound. For Palestinian children, engaging with music in this way strengthens their sense of identity and continuity; it helps them better understand the music and cultures of both, their own society and the world. Resistance through art and music has a quiet but powerful impact. It allows children to see themselves not only in terms of the challenges around them but also through what they can create. It affirms that their voices matter, their stories can be told, and their culture has a place on both local and global stages. In this sense, music becomes both a personal and collective act of resilience.

Al Kamandjati association's involvement in musical events and exchanges, both locally and internationally, further enhances this dynamic. Performances and festivals are more than just showcases; they serve as opportunities for connection and growth. Students experience different musical traditions, work with others, and share their own cultural expressions. They introduce their music to new audiences while also being exposed to new influences, fostering a continuous exchange of knowledge, values, and creativity that builds self-confidence and shapes children's personalities, encouraging them to grow into leaders on any path they take in the future.

Over time, the impact of the journey with Al Kamandjati becomes evident in the directions its students take. Many who initially joined the program as beginners have become educators, performers, and leaders. They return to teach, mentor, and give back to their communities, extending the reach of what they themselves have learned. This cycle of learning and teaching is one of the most enduring outcomes of the association's work, and it is proud of it. Having served on the board of the Al Kamandjati Association for the past 14 years, I have witnessed such transformations firsthand. I have seen children pick up instruments for the first time, with curiosity and hesitation, and then grow into confident musicians. Among the most powerful moments are watching young students lead orchestras, standing before their peers, guiding the music, and embodying a level of confidence that reflects years of dedication and support.

These moments hold a significance that goes beyond performance. They reveal potential in environments where it is often limited. They demonstrate what can be achieved when children are given the tools, space, and encouragement to grow. The broader societal benefit is equally important. Music programs open doors to connection as they bring families and communities together through performances and shared experiences. They foster a sense of pride and collective achievement, offering moments of joy that counter daily challenges and create a space of hope. Children carry the values that have been cultivated through music – such as discipline, perseverance, and

A qanoun class held in Burj al Barajneh refugee camp in Lebanon.





A musical activity with children who were displaced from Jenin Camp.

collaboration – into their education, relationships, and future work, ensuring that Al Kamandjati's influence reaches far beyond the rehearsal room. The words of Rafeef Ziadah, "We teach life, Sir," capture the essence of this approach.* They reflect an understanding that education is not only about knowledge, but about shaping individuals who can think, create, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

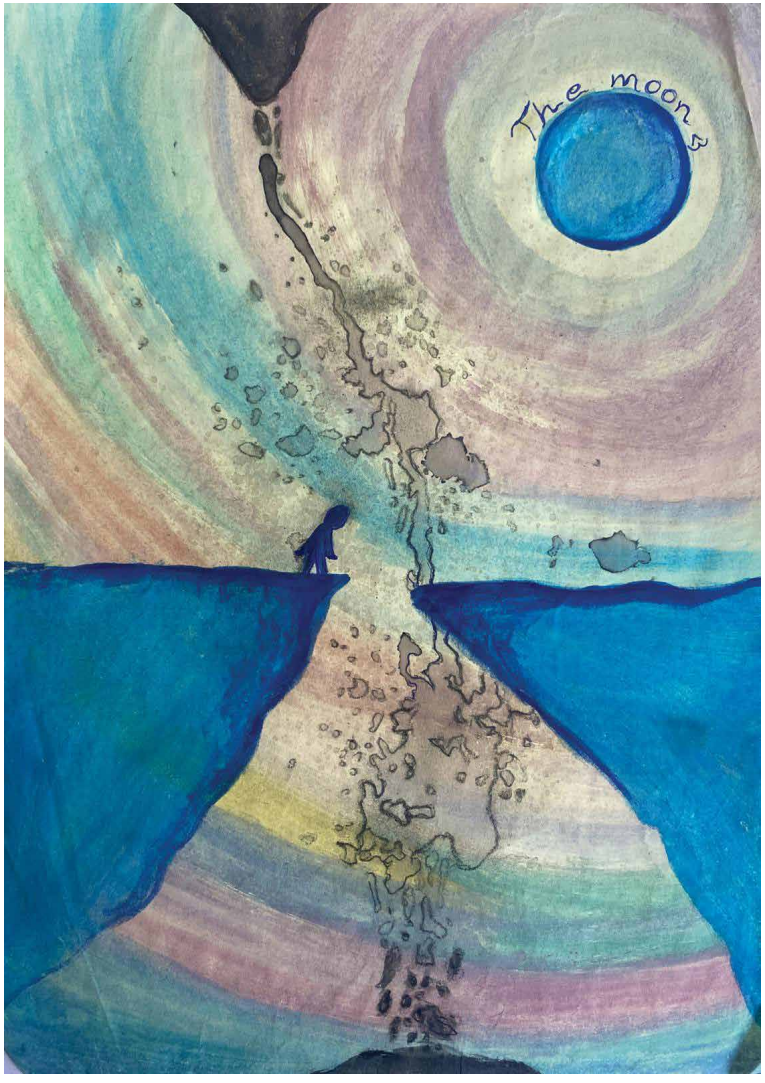
Ultimately, Al Kamandjati's work goes beyond music. It involves creating safe spaces where children can find stability, freely express themselves, and envision futures beyond their harsh circumstances. It focuses on building resilience through creativity and affirming the importance of culture and identity when facing adversity. For Palestinian children who are learning music under occupation, each note holds significance. It represents a step in education, a moment of self-expression, and a quiet act of resistance. Through these notes, they are not only honing musical skills but also fostering confidence, shaping identity, and, in the deepest sense, learning how to live freely like other children around the world.

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Majdi Hadid is a graphic designer who serves on Al Kamandjati Association's board of directors.

* Rafeef Ziadah, "We teach life, Sir," London, 12.11.11. YouTube.



The Moon by Qamar Timraz (age 17). Drawing courtesy of *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

Growing Through Culture



From HeArt of Gaza exhibition.

How PAC Empowers Palestinian Children Through the Arts

By Iman Hammouri

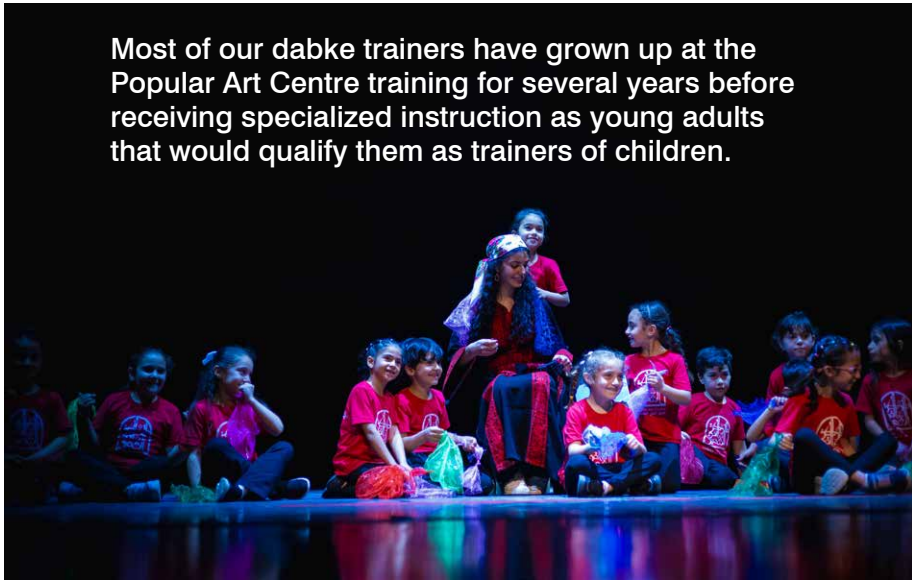
The Popular Art Centre (PAC) has since its foundation placed a strong emphasis on children, dedicating significant attention to nurturing their development, shaping their personalities, and contributing to the formation of their identity, so they may grow into well-balanced individuals with sound mental and physical health. Guided by the belief that it is important to work with children from an early age, PAC engages children aged 5 to 16 years in activities that are related to Palestinian intangible heritage and traditional performing arts to reinforce their sense of belonging to their cultural heritage and homeland.

Most notably among the activities the center supports is *dabke*, the Palestinian folk dance, and over time, PAC's initiative has created a specialized dance school that is now serving 490 children who enrolled last year. The dance school program is one of the core pillars of PAC's work and more than a training program: It is a cultural education space with the vision and mission to help raise a generation that is aware of its identity, rooted in its heritage, and capable of carrying this legacy into the future, which has been, and remains today, particularly relevant during intensifying political and social challenges for Palestinians.

Children's learning is not limited to *dabke* alone; other skills are developed as well. Alongside the strengthening of their national and cultural identity, the training also enhances their ability to work as a team, strengthens their personalities, and builds their self-confidence, especially when they perform what they have learned on stage in front of their families. Moreover, PAC involves parents actively as well, inviting them to *dabke* sessions in which the children become trainers for their parents and *dabke* becomes a shared family activity.

Many children who enroll in the dance school visit the center daily during the nine months of the school year, and thereby become part of PAC's social fabric. When a child skips two *dabke* classes, we contact their parents to make sure they are okay and that nothing is wrong. When the dance courses are completed at the beginning of summer, and the children graduate in their respective levels, we feel that PAC's building becomes empty. We miss their voices, their laughter, and hearing their steps as they are going up and down the stairs. Because children need support during the long summer period when they are out of school for three months, PAC organizes summer camps with the aim to alleviate psychological stress, support their mental well-being, and help them cope with difficult circumstances. The summer camps offer children the opportunity to express themselves through creative and artistic pursuits while developing their skills and making meaningful use of their school holidays. Activities include music, dance, puppet making, theatre, recycling, planting, cooking, exploratory excursions, and hikes to deepen their connection with their homeland.

The positive impact of PAC's activities has been reported by many parents. One mother wrote, "My daughter is with you in the *dabke* school and the summer camp. Year after year, I feel how important this place is. My daughter is learning *dabke*, making new friends, and developing many skills. Most importantly, she comes back home happy. I am proud of you and love you. I wish there were a Popular Art Centre in every governorate."



PAC dance school graduation ceremony, 2025.

Believing that children should be not only recipients but also active contributors in program planning, PAC established a Children's Council whose members participate in the planning processes and contribute to PAC's activities. Their role extends to active involvement in designing and developing programs.



Psychological support through art in Gaza, 2025.



Popular Art Centre summer camp, 2024.

With the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, PAC expanded its work to include outreach programs for children across Palestine. These integrated arts programs aimed to alleviate the psychological stress caused by long days of bombardment and siege during the Israeli invasion of refugee camps, villages, and towns. Grounded in the belief that art is also a vital tool for healing, such efforts continue to this day, particularly in support of the children in Gaza who are facing genocide and forced displacement.

PAC also recognizes the importance of engaging children internationally and thus enables their participation in cross-cultural exchange. Art serves as an immediate and powerful means for children to express themselves, present a creative and culturally grounded image of Palestine, and engage meaningfully with other cultures. In line with this vision, PAC has connected with Arab and European community and cultural NGOs to host Palestinian children in their summer camps, where they meet peers from different parts of the world. The participations in such activities makes a profound impact, enabling children to acquire new skills, gain valuable experiences, and build new friendships. Some parents expressed that these exchanges were life-changing for their children. One mother wrote, "This has been an exceptional experience in every sense for my daughter Leen and for us as parents. The level of cultural exchange, the knowledge, stories, and experiences [we have gained] reflects the success of the program. Leen felt the importance of *dabke* in representing our heritage and sharing it with others, and she felt honored to carry and present our identity in the best way. It was such a rich experience at her age to travel, meet others, and dance. She describes it as the best experience of her life. Thank you for giving her this opportunity and for making us feel reassured as parents."

Since its establishment, PAC has consistently promoted a culture of volunteerism and instilled its values among the children it engages. For example, some children enrolled in the *dabke* school volunteer in the summer camps that are organized by PAC, while others, as they grow older, contribute their time and efforts by volunteering in festivals, activities, and various programs implemented by PAC.

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Iman Hammouri is the director of the Popular Art Centre. With a master's degree from the London School of Economics, she is actively engaged in various nonprofit initiatives and a co-founder of the Palestinian Performing Arts Network, where she served as the chairwoman for six years. She has also been a board member of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations' Network. Iman is a social activist and a passionate advocate for art and culture; she has presented numerous papers and served on the juries of several competitions that acknowledge achievements in art and culture.

Holding the Line Between Silence and Voice



From *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

ASHTAR Theatre and the Work of Re-Humanizing Childhood in Palestine

By Konrad Suder Chatterjee

A child stands in a school courtyard in the West Bank, hesitating before stepping into a circle. Around that child, others are already moving, running, laughing, improvising scenes that seem at first like play. But this is not play as it is commonly understood. It is a structured attempt to release what has no easy language. It is an attempt to return the body to itself.

In Palestine, childhood does not unfold gradually. It is interrupted, accelerated, and repeatedly forced into confrontation with realities it was never meant to hold. Checkpoints precede classrooms, loss precedes language, and fear settles into the ordinary rhythms of life. This condition has been described by the scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian as "unchilding": the political process through which children are systematically stripped of the protections, the meanings, and the temporal space of childhood itself.[1]

In this framing, childhood is not simply disrupted; it is actively revoked, as children are recast simultaneously as threats to be controlled and lives that can be rendered expendable. The voices emerging from Gaza over the past years make this painfully clear. One young writer reflects: "Every minute during the assault we were afraid and ready to die… we want to live, we want to dream, we want to build our future like other children around the world," only to ask later, with devastating simplicity: "Aren't these legitimate rights for us?"[2] Within such a context, the question is no longer only how children survive, but how childhood itself can be reclaimed.

Yet within this fractured landscape, spaces continue to emerge where children are not only protected but heard. Among the most sustained of these efforts is the work of ASHTAR Theatre. This Ramallah-based institution has, for more than three decades, positioned theater not as entertainment, but as a cultural, political, and psychosocial necessity.

Founded in 1991 by Iman Aoun and Edward Muallem, ASHTAR has evolved into something difficult to categorize. It is at once a theater company, a training institution, a psychosocial intervention actor, and a node within a global network of cultural solidarity. Its work sits at the intersection of art and urgency, responding to a context in which children make up nearly half the population and grow up under conditions widely recognized as incompatible with any notion of a protected childhood.



Theater as psychosocial infrastructure in a context of unchilding and systemic disruption.

Children meet through play, rebuilding connection and trust.

At the heart of ASHTAR's philosophy lies a demanding proposition: that theater can serve as a space in which reality, however unbearable, can be processed, reshaped, and rearticulated. In its own framing, theater transforms abstract political conditions into personal narratives that are capable of generating empathy and action. This is not a metaphor. It is a method.

In recent years, particularly following the genocidal war on Gaza and the escalation of violence across the West Bank, not only since late 2023 but also before, ASHTAR's work has increasingly centered on psychosocial support delivered through theater-based methodologies. Among these, what the organization terms Sport Theatre offers a particularly revealing entry point.

In school courtyards and classrooms, refugee camps and community centers, children gather not around scripts, but around movement. They form circles. They move, compete, improvise, and narrate. Through structured exercises that merge physical activity with theatrical expression, they begin to release what facilitators often describe as "stress held in the body." The shifts that follow are subtle but profound. One child-participant in a refugee camp in the West Bank reflects: "I felt like I could finally speak; I was someone else, but I was also myself." Another admits: "I don't always understand why I'm sad, but it helped to move and play."[3]

Teachers report children who had withdrawn beginning to participate; conflicts that once escalated now pause; a child who refuses to speak begins to move, then to laugh, then, sometimes, to lead. These are not transformations that lend themselves easily to measurement, but they are visible. They unfold in posture, in attention, in the willingness to remain in the circle. In environments where daily life is defined by unpredictability, these



In Gaza, a *Gaza Monologues* writer, now a psychosocial trainer, leads a session where children move, speak, and are listened to.

sessions introduce rhythm, repetition, and something increasingly rare: a sense of contained time.

This work does not present theater as therapy in a clinical sense. Rather, it operates within a broader understanding of psychosocial support, where expression, embodiment, and collective experience become tools for rebuilding internal and social coherence. Since late 2023, ASHTAR's programs have reached hundreds across the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza, while training teachers and facilitators to sustain this work beyond the lifespan of individual interventions. The emphasis is not only on response, but on continuity, on ensuring that the space does not disappear once it is created.

If ASHTAR's work begins in intimate circles of children gathered in motion, it extends outward into one of the most significant global cultural mobilizations to emerge from Palestine in recent decades, *The Gaza Monologues*. Written by young people in Gaza in 2010 and revisited in 2014, these texts have taken on renewed urgency in the present moment. Their continued relevance is not coincidental; it reflects the persistence of the conditions they describe. In response to October 2023 and what followed, ASHTAR issued an international call for artists, institutions, and communities to read and perform these monologues publicly.

The response was immediate and expansive. Across 70 countries, hundreds of groups, ranging from established theater companies to student collectives and independent artists, gathered in theaters, universities, streets, and digital platforms to bring these voices into public space. From Beirut to London and Mumbai, from Madrid to Cape Town and Santiago, the *Monologues* were read, translated into 25 languages, staged, and shared, crossing not only borders but languages, contexts, and political climates, enabling hundreds of artists and activists worldwide to engage meaningfully in acts of cultural solidarity with Palestinian children. What emerged was not simply a series of performances, but a distributed network of cultural action. Through coordinated digital infrastructures, livestreams, online platforms, and transnational communication channels, ASHTAR facilitated a form of global collaboration in which storytelling became both a medium of solidarity and a mechanism of mobilization.

From 2023 onwards, the original *Gaza Monologues* writers continued to write from within the conditions of war, displacement, and repeated evacuation, their adult voices now accompanying those first articulated in childhood. Some, temporarily relocated to Cairo, have since facilitated workshops with younger children from Gaza, survivors of the ongoing genocide, contributing to the emergence of a new generation of *Gaza Monologues*.

One writer described Gaza in 2010, tragically relevant from 2023 onwards, as "a plane carrying people… travelling towards the unknown; landing neither in heaven nor in hell."[4] Another writes from within the current war: "We've reached a point where you might die, and everyone watches you die… because they are afraid they'll die with you."[5] These are not metaphors. They are testimonies.

The project has since expanded into a global dialogue, *Letters to Gaza*, inviting reciprocal communication in the form of poems, messages, and reflections sent from around the world. In this shift from testimony to dialogue, the work extends beyond amplification toward relationship, toward the creation of a shared, if fragile, cultural space. As the introduction states, the project forms "a chorus of voices… that refuse to be silent in the face of injustice."[6] What emerges is not simply performance, but a transnational space where voice circulates, is received, and returns transformed.

It would be a mistake, however, to read ASHTAR's work only through the lens of intervention. Its artistic production remains central, and it is here that its complexity becomes most visible. Recent works such as *Guernica, Gaza: Visions from the Center of the Earth* – developed in collaboration with playwrights Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi and directed by Emile Saba, generously supported by the Consulate General of Spain in Jerusalem and AFAC – situate Palestinian experience within a broader artistic and historical lineage. Drawing on Picasso's *Guernica*, the production assembles fragmented narratives emerging from war into a layered theatrical form that integrates text, image, and sound, poetically engaging with the dehumanizing slur "human animals."

At the same time, touring productions such as *Oranges and Stones*, a nonverbal work built on movement and symbolism, have travelled across Palestine, the region, and Europe, engaging audiences not only through performance but through structured dialogue. Across more than 200 performances, each becomes a site of encounter, where spectators are invited not simply to watch, but to respond.

This dual commitment, to artistic integrity and social intervention, produces an ongoing tension. Theater must remain art, even as it carries the weight of representation, trauma, and expectation. It must allow for ambiguity, even when the surrounding reality offers little. Yet this work unfolds under pressure. As one Gazan testimony recounts, "I used to hold children's hands and play with them on stage, not carry their missing parts."[7]

Underlying both the psychosocial and artistic dimensions of ASHTAR's work is a long-term investment in training. This investment in training addresses a wider structural gap. A recent feasibility study found that more than half of young Palestinians surveyed considered existing training opportunities in the performing arts insufficient, while 56 percent viewed university-level offerings in the field as inadequate.[8] Drawing on diverse methodologies, including the practices of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which ASHTAR had pioneered and popularized in the Arab world, as well as traditions associated with Stanislavski and physical theater, participants are not only taught how to perform, but how to facilitate, analyze, and lead.

This model is cumulative. Children become youth participants; youth become facilitators; facilitators become

In a context where Palestinian children are systematically denied the conditions of childhood, theater emerges as more than an art form. Through its psychosocial programs and global initiatives such as *The Gaza Monologues*, ASHTAR Theatre has developed a model that bridges trauma, expression, and collective resilience, raising urgent questions about what it means to reclaim childhood under conditions of ongoing genocide, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing.



Working together, children build confidence, focus, and presence.

trainers, with trajectories such as that of Emile Saba, now ASHTAR's artistic director, who began as a young participant in its training programs. In this way, ASHTAR functions as a parallel educational system, one that cultivates both artistic skill and social agency.

The issue is not an absence of interest. The same study found that while long-term commitment remains difficult under present economic and social conditions, nearly 90 percent of interested youth were willing to engage in shorter-term performing arts training, suggesting that the challenge is less desire than access, continuity, and institutional support.

The development of a Performing Arts Academy and Village in Birzeit, in partnership with the Palestinian Circus, reflects this ambition at an institutional level.[9] It signals a shift from program-based work toward long-term cultural infrastructure: a space where theater and circus can be taught, practiced, and sustained as disciplines that are rooted in Palestinian experience.

To understand ASHTAR's work fully is to recognize the conditions under which it operates. Financial precarity, movement restrictions, and the pressures of responding to the ongoing conditions of fragmentation and crisis shape both the scope and the limits of what is possible. One-off funding enables expansion; sustained support enables continuity. The difference is not administrative; it is experiential, determining whether a child encounters a single intervention or an ongoing space of return. There is also a quieter tension: between the need to represent trauma and the risk of reproducing it; between amplifying voices and protecting them from instrumentalization. ASHTAR's work moves within this tension, attempting to create spaces where expression does not become extraction. What emerges from ASHTAR's practice is not easily defined. It is not solely theater, nor solely education, nor solely psychosocial support. It is a liberatory system that operates across these domains, intersecting them, translating between them, with children at the center of its focus.

This work also unfolds within a limited national cultural infrastructure. A recent study counted only 17 operating theaters across Palestine,[10] a reminder that institutions such as ASHTAR do not function against a backdrop of abundance, but within a field marked by scarcity, fragility, and uneven access. At a local level, it creates spaces where children can move, speak, and begin to process their realities. At a national level, it contributes to a cultural landscape in which art remains a site of resistance and expression. At a global level, it activates networks through which Palestinian voices circulate, resonate, and return.

In the context of this issue, dedicated to nurturing and defending Palestine's children, ASHTAR's work offers both a case study and a challenge. It asks what it means to invest not only in survival, but in expression; not only in protection, but in participation. If childhood in Palestine is marked by interruption, then the work of institutions such as ASHTAR lies in creating forms of continuity, however temporary, however fragile, within which children can reclaim something of what has been taken from them. Not as an abstraction, but as a sustained practice over more than three decades.

Article photos courtesy of ASHTAR.

SCAN TO SHARE



Konrad Suder Chatterjee is a Polish-Czech cultural practitioner, educator, classics teacher, and researcher in the political economy of violence, focusing on childhood, theater, poetry, and creative practice in contexts of conflict, trauma, and collective resilience. He has served as communications manager and resource developer for ASHTAR Theatre in Ramallah since 2024.

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Creativity Against Extinguishment



From HeArt of Gaza exhibition.

Activities for Children at Aida Refugee Camp's Lajee Center

At Aida Refugee Camp's Lajee Center, seizing the day has been important since its establishment in 2000, and creativity has always been a group effort – a kind of child's play that is recognized as integral to building vital futures, both in Aida and in Palestine at large.



An aerial circus jump performed by a student from the Revolutionary Circus School, showcasing the children's developing skills and artistic growth.

By Amahl Bishara

At the end of an unusual summer camp in Aida Refugee Camp, Palestine, in the summer of 2024, children were fighting off the entrenchment of the midday summer sun to stage a performance that contained a few adaptations from their usual program. Somehow, they had to react to the terrifying time of war. As always, the performance included a simple art exhibition as well as musical and *dabke* (Palestinian folk dance) performances. From the gymnastics program, the smaller children somersaulted across the stage in lumpy loops, and then older youth tumbled across a mat as though they were made of rubber. It was the final performance that stood out, a short play that had been created by its participants. It featured a Palestinian journalist who was documenting destruction and death – until Israeli forces killed the journalist. Colleagues then gathered around to mourn their friend, and another young journalist stood up to carry on the work. In portraying the funeral, the children were acting out a scene they had surely seen many times on their living room televisions. On this day, as frequently happens at Lajee Center, creativity was a means of grappling with the threats and fears with which Palestinian children are forced to live.

Leaders of the youth organization had hesitated to hold the summer camp at all because any kind of activity seemed almost obscene while an active genocide was taking place in Gaza. However, the children in Aida Camp still needed support and enrichment during the long summer. In the end, organizers took their cue from Palestinians in Gaza. Mohammad Al-Azza, Lajee Center's director, recounted that he had seen videos of Eid celebrations, organized for children in Gaza. This motivated him: "If they still make time for joy in Gaza, in the shadow of all the difficulties they are facing, this is important. It encouraged us to continue with our programming as well. And frankly, I started thinking, "We must persevere, because now we can still do things for the children and for the community as a whole. Tomorrow, or even in an hour, everything could change, and we could be in the same situation as Gaza. So we should take advantage of the opportunity to work on programs that could help strengthen the steadfastness of people in the camp."

Lajee Center is a community-based, grassroots creativity and cultural center that serves people of all ages in Aida through educational, health, and cultural initiatives that are rooted in Palestinian traditions and priorities. Lajee promotes public health, environmental justice, and creativity, as well as values of social equity, national liberation, girls' and women's empowerment, and dignity for all. It maintains several treasured community spaces that include a library, a kindergarten, a playground, a rooftop garden, and a soccer field. Lajee Center also has a thriving music ensemble that performs original music and well-known Palestinian classics. It is home to a *dakbe* dance troupe that performs proudly in Palestine and has traveled to Europe many times. Moreover, the center hosts arts activities and has produced bilingual Arabic-English children's books. All of these activities aim to give children outlets for expression and develop their creative skills while also encouraging them to contribute to their community. Thus, the music troupe performs for Mother's Day celebrations, the dance troupe performs for a prisoner's release, and the children's books help share a perspective on Palestinian life with visitors from abroad.



Children perform a traditional *dabke* dance as part of the summer camp activities, expressing cultural identity and resilience despite challenging conditions.

The community around Lajee Center offers an important vantage on Palestinian society. Aida Refugee Camp, where Lajee Center is housed, is located on the outskirts of Bethlehem and home to people whose families were dispossessed of their houses and lands in the Palestinian Nakba of 1948. They come from 27 different destroyed villages, some of which are just a few kilometers away but entirely out of reach due to Israel's apartheid system that prevents Palestinians access beyond the green line. According to UNRWA, the United Nations agency that provides basic services to Palestinian refugee camps, 7,244 Palestinian refugees were registered in the camp as of 2023, although not all of them live in the camp today. Since 2005, the separation wall has loomed over the camp. The eight-meter wall embeds watch towers and a military base, which leads to a constant presence of Israeli soldiers in and around the camp. The Israeli army frequently raids the camp and arrests people, often holding them under administrative detention (the policy of imprisoning people indefinitely without charge). Violent raids often occur at night and sometimes involve the use of large amounts of tear gas. The camp is severely overcrowded due to land shortages that were exacerbated by the Oslo Accords (that effectively prevent Palestinians from expanding beyond municipal borders set in the early 1990s), high unemployment (due to colonial closure policies that either restrict or prevent the movement of persons and goods both within the occupied territory and between the West Band and Israel), and the ongoing effects of dispossession from generations ago. In recent years, the education system that had long been the engine that drove many Palestinians' success has faltered, as the Palestinian Authority has been unable to pay teachers' salaries (which has resulted in the reduction of teaching days), and COVID closures and wars have disrupted the school year over and over again.

In this atmosphere, community-based organizations play an especially important role, as they provide children with spaces for enrichment, ways to develop skills, and a sense of trust in an institution. One of Lajee Center's most exciting new initiatives has been a book publishing project for youth aged eight to fifteen years. Some of the children are focusing on visual arts and others on creative writing. The project, which is supported by the Mennonite Central Committee, aims to give students the confidence and skills to tell their stories by collaborating in the production of ten children's books over five years. Kifah Al-Ajarma, Lajee Center's librarian, has coordinated the efforts. The participants also work closely with Ahlam Bisharat, an artist and author from Tamoun village in the northern WB, who has published books for both children and adults. Furthermore, the children take art lessons from Mohammad Al-Ra'i, an artist from Arroub refugee camp, who has collaborated extensively with Lajee Center, including on outdoor murals. It is exciting for children to learn from these talented writers and artists and also get to know people from other parts of the West Bank.

The center considers it important that the children are invited to approach these extracurricular writing activities as a kind of play in a safe space that encourages personal expression. Thus, children have played a "magic box" game to choose words that are then woven into a story; they take turns adding on to a story that grows among the group; and they write stories that are inspired by images. Workshop coordinators encourage them to go deep into their writing by delving into description and dialogue.

Finally, they write stories with an eye to publication. This year will see the publication of at least four



A *dabke* performance is presented by children after two years of halted public activities due to the war on Gaza.



A spontaneous march in the streets of Aida Camp in solidarity with Gaza, organized by children during the 2024 summer camp.

different books that the children have created. The first tells a story that is both mystical and rooted in their lived reality of closure: Children, sitting in the streets of the camp, talk about a magical gateway that their grandmother has told them about. They locate the gateway and find themselves in a magical, green place. A bird introduces itself to them as a Palestinian sunbird who loves to help children. The bird then leads them toward Jerusalem, and from a lush field, they see the gleaming Dome of the Rock in the distance. They walk toward it, pass through the majestic archway of Damascus Gate, and explore the Old City's markets. The children then go to Al-Aqsa Mosque to pray and visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Having enjoyed their day, the magical bird encourages them to return home before dark, assuring them through tears that the fields, Jerusalem, and he himself will be awaiting their return. This beautifully illustrated story expresses children's connection to Palestine and their longing for mobility and freedom.

Lajee Center director Mohammad al-Azza reflects on the importance of the creative writing project, explaining, "The children's creative writing has a special significance that is not only tied to education; it is also connected to their identity and to children's daily experiences in the camp and in Palestine as a whole. Writing can help them express something about the crises they have experienced. It is much more than a hobby, and helps build a generation with awareness and creativity that can reach the world." In the coming months, three more books will be finalized. Whatever these children go on to do, being able to see their dreams on paper brings these dreams a bit closer. At Lajee Center, children learn essential lessons about creativity as an activity that is rooted in their history and culture and as a skill that they can explore together.

Article photos by Shiraz Omar.

A photography exhibition that features images produced by children during their photography training sessions in the summer camp.





Group music training sessions involve around 40 children within the music unit, covering both instruments and choir.

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Amahl Bishara is a professor of anthropology at Tufts University. She is the author of Crossing a Line: Laws, Violence, and Roadblocks to Palestinian Political Expression *and* Back Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics*. Working with youth at Lajee Center, she has co-produced three bilingual children's books.*

Finding Balance Through Circus



From *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

20 Years of Circus as a Safe Space of Support for Children in Palestine

By Julie Abdallah

Across Palestine, children grow up under Israeli occupation, where military violence, restricted movement, and systemic limitations affect and shape to varying degrees their everyday reality. These conditions undermine children's sense of safety and restrict their access to safe recreational spaces, cultural activities, and opportunities for creative expression. Many children also face social pressures and daily stress that can impact their confidence and emotional well-being. In such contexts, spaces that allow children to play freely, express themselves, and build supportive relationships become essential for their healthy development and sense of belonging.

While schools and families play a central role in children's development, creative spaces are equally essential. Beyond academic learning and daily responsibilities, children need opportunities to move, imagine, and freely interact with others. Movement, imagination, and collective play can offer children ways to release tension, build relationships, and express feelings that are often difficult to put into words. In such environments, children are not only learning new skills but also discovering how to trust themselves and others.

Creative activities that involve the body and the imagination can help children reconnect with a sense of joy and curiosity. Through shared play and physical exploration, they learn to cooperate, listen to one another, and navigate challenges together. These experiences contribute to a deeper sense of belonging and emotional balance, especially in contexts where everyday life can be demanding.

Founded in 2006 as the Palestinian Circus School and rebranded as The Palestinian Circus in 2025, the organization has worked for the past twenty years to help fill this gap. Through circus arts, it has created spaces where children and young people can explore movement, challenge themselves, and connect with others in supportive environments. Rather than focusing on competition or perfection, circus activities encourage experimentation, patience, and collaboration. In this environment, children are invited to try, make mistakes, laugh, and try again, transforming the learning process into a shared journey of discovery.

So what happens when children are given the freedom to explore, move, and express themselves without fear of failure? They encounter moments that reveal their own potential. Quiet kids find their voice through fun movements and become confident leaders. Shy ones learn to trust friends, work together in group activities, and laugh over every success. Kids from faraway villages discover their strengths through simple challenges, building curiosity, patience, and self-confidence. These moments create strong emotions, real friendships, and a deep feeling of belonging that stays with them.

Over the years, the circus has reached communities where access to artistic and physical spaces is limited. Children from remote areas come together to learn balance, coordination, and teamwork for the first time in a structured, supportive environment. In remote areas, children encounter challenges that restrict access to play and arts activities. A child who is learning to spin plates, for instance, celebrates the first moments of keeping a plate balanced: a small but meaningful triumph that fosters patience, focus, and a sense of accomplishment.



Children from Alujah enjoy the balancing of plates. Photo by Julie Abdallah.

Similarly, children with physical disabilities experience new possibilities in circus activities. One boy with cognitive challenges discovered how to coordinate acrobatics and object manipulation with peers, turning what might have seemed like limitations into opportunities for skill-building, pride, and excitement.



A girl enjoying the trapeze while holding her doll. Photo by Julie Abdallah.

For two decades, the Palestinian Circus has transformed the lives of children across Palestine. Through circus arts, they develop confidence, creativity, and resilience while learning to support each other and take risks in a safe space. Every moment of play, movement, and performance helps children discover their strengths, build friendships, and experience joy, imagination, and self-belief, even under the challenges of life in occupied Palestine.



A child is mesmerized by The Wonderland Show at The Palestinian Circus. Photo by Malak Takruri.



Children with disabilities building balance. Photo by Julie Abdallah.

For many children, these activities offer a rare opportunity to express themselves physically and emotionally. Movement allows them to release tension and channel energy in a positive way. Working in pairs or groups helps build cooperation and empathy. As children support each other in learning new skills, they also develop confidence in their own capabilities.

Trainers working in circus programs often observe subtle but meaningful changes over time. Children who initially appear shy or hesitant gradually become more engaged. Others who struggle with concentration begin to develop stronger focus through repetitive practice and playful challenges. This safe space becomes a place where everybody learns, makes mistakes, and each participant grows at their own pace … within a family-like environment.

Another important dimension of circus practice is imagination. In the circus space, creativity transforms into a physical language. Children are encouraged to tell stories and express themselves as they design and carry out movements under the guidance of the trainers. This process allows them to explore emotions, experiment freely, and discover new depths of their own emotions beyond words. In doing so, children are not only reacting to their surroundings but actively shaping their own narratives through creativity and play.

Through these experiences, the circus helps children to develop physical skills and nurtures emotional resilience, confidence, creativity, and social cohesion. Every moment of trying, falling, and rising again reflects how safe, creative spaces respond directly to children's needs for expression, recognition, and community support. Parents often notice that children return home more communicative, confident, and eager to share their learning, showing that the impact extends beyond the training space into daily life.

These observations are supported by internal research conducted by the Palestinian Circus.* The study highlights the significant impact of circus participation on children's psychosocial well-being. According to parent surveys, the percentage of children demonstrating improved social skills increased from 63 percent before participation to 94 percent after joining the program. Children also showed reduced emotional distress and greater positive behaviors, such as cooperation, sharing, and connecting with others. These changes extended beyond the circus space, influencing daily interactions at home, with peers, and within the wider community, demonstrating how safe, creative spaces can foster both personal growth and stronger social bonds.

As the Palestinian Circus celebrates 20 years, it continues to grow in ways that truly reach children's hearts. In 2026, the Mobile Tent will bring circus arts to even more children across Palestine, creating spaces where they can move, play, and dream freely. But it's not just about being local; the circus also opens doors to international experiences, youth exchanges, and encounters with



Children trying new warm-up exercises. Photo by Julie Abdallah.

other cultures. These moments give children a sense of connection beyond the borders and a way to resist the isolation imposed by the occupation.

The magic of the circus is best seen in its people. Many of today's performers first came as children, watching shows with wide-eyed wonder, and now they are the ones on stage, inspiring the next generation. Each performance carries a story of growth, resilience, and hope, reminding every child watching that they too can imagine, create, and belong. More than just fun or performance, the circus is a home for curiosity, courage, and creativity. It is a place where children learn that falling is part of learning, that supporting each other makes everyone stronger, and that joy, imagination, and self-belief can flourish even in the most challenging circumstances.

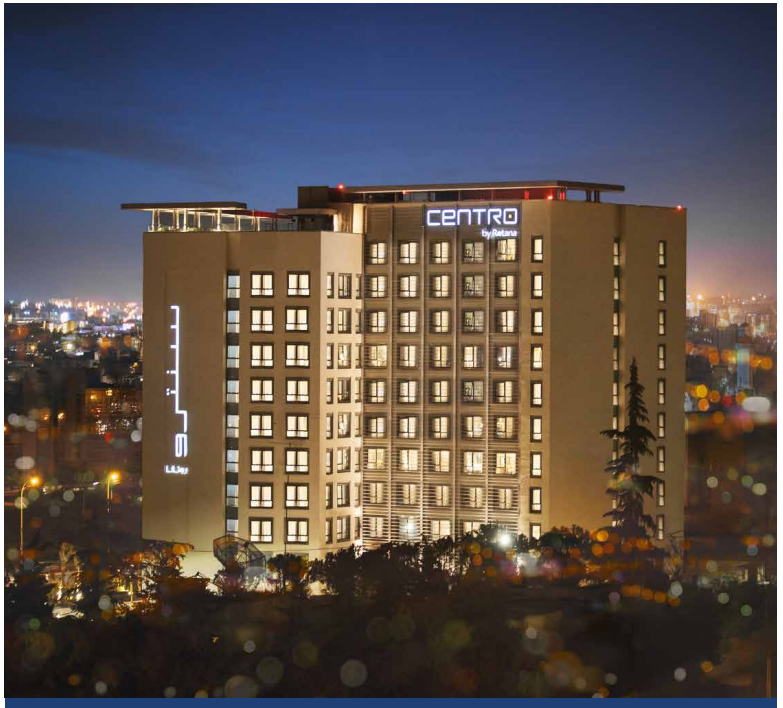
Through two decades of dedication, the Palestinian Circus has proven that every child deserves the chance to move freely, dream wildly, and find their hidden strength. The legacy continues, one laugh, one trick, and one step at a time.

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Julie Abdallah is the communications coordinator at the Palestinian Circus, working on programs that support the growth and creativity of children and youth.

*Sunbula Aranki, "Palestinian Circus School and Psychosocial Well-Being," Palestinian Circus School, November 2022.



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From Player to Mentor



From *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition

Why Sports Matter

Courtesy of PACES Sports for Development Program

When Hala Sarawi first joined PACES' Sports for Development Program in 2011 at the age of seven, she was just like any other young girl from Nablus who loved to play football. Today, at 23, she is a player on the Palestinian women's national team, a coach for young girls, and a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in physical education. Her journey reflects how sports for development programs can shape confidence, opportunity, and leadership in young people's lives.

For Hala, the program she grew up with was more than a sports initiative. It became a second home. "PACES is not just an organization," she says. "It is a home, a dream, and a place of safety for every player." When Hala joined the program, the aim was for her to join her peers in playing football at her local sports club, but coaches quickly recognized her dedication and potential. In 2016, she was selected for the first time as one of the players representing the PACES team at the Norway Cup. "It was an amazing experience," she recalls. "That was the beginning of everything for me." She continued to grow with the program, participating in tournaments again in 2017 and 2018. By 2019, her role had already begun to shift from player to leader, when she joined the team as a volunteer during a trip to Jordan to participate in a tournament.

Years later, Hala's responsibilities continued to expand. In 2023, she again travelled with PACES' team to Norway; not as a player this time, but as an assistant coach with the girls' team. For her, that moment symbolized how far she had come. "It was a big achievement for me to go from being a player to becoming an assistant coach for the team," she says. That journey from participant to leader is exactly what sports for development programs aim to nurture: confidence, responsibility, and the ability to inspire others.

Hala's development through the program was not limited to football. As she progressed academically, PACES supported her education as well. After finishing high school, the organization financially supported her obtaining a bachelor's degree in physical education. When she graduated, they continued that support so that she could pursue a master's degree in the same field. Today, she is completing that master's degree while coaching young girls, many of whom are now beginning the same journey she started years ago. "PACES cared about me not only as a player but also as a student," she says.

In 2023, Hala officially began coaching girls' teams within the PACES program. For her, the role carries deep meaning. "Being chosen as a coach for the girls' team is a big achievement for me," she says. Now she stands on the sidelines not just as a coach, but as a role model, someone who once stood exactly where her players are today.

Looking back, Hala says the program shaped far more than her athletic skills. It helped her build confidence, develop life skills, and connect with young people from across the region. Through the program, she met players from Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine, expanding her sense of community and possibility. "It played a big role in developing my personality and my self-confidence," she says. "It also helped me build life skills and meet so many people and players." For Hala, the impact of the program goes far beyond the field. "PACES will always remain the place that embraces every girl and boy who has a dream in sport," she says. "I'm very grateful that I was a player there and that I am now a coach."

Hala's story is one example of how sports for development programs can open doors, not only to athletic achievement, but also to education, leadership, and a lifelong sense of belonging. And for the next generation of girls stepping onto the field, Hala's journey shows just how

Hala volunteering with PACES as a mentor, in Nablus, 2022.





Hala displaying true sportsmanship while helping out a player from the opposing team at the 2017 Norway Cup in Oslo.

For children growing up in challenging environments with limited opportunity, the value of sports for development programs is immeasurable. They help young people believe in their own potential, foster a sense of belonging, and remind them that even in the most difficult circumstances, there is always space for hope, teamwork, and their dreams.

far those first small steps can lead; it is only one of many that highlight the transformative power of structured sports programs. For countless children and youth, especially those living in refugee camps or marginalized areas, such programs offer far more than recreation. They provide a safe space to move, laugh, and play; a rare sense of normalcy in uncertain environments.

Organized sports teach critical life skills: discipline, leadership, communication, and resilience. For many young participants, these lessons extend beyond the field, shaping how they approach education, relationships, and future opportunities. The insistence on inclusion, ensuring that as many girls as boys participate, sends a powerful message of equality.



Hala representing Palestine and PACES at the 2018 Norway Cup.

It challenges stereotypes, builds confidence, and opens doors for girls to see themselves as leaders. Research has shown that girls who play sports are more likely to stay in school, join the workforce, and develop higher self-esteem, reinforcing the long-term ripple effects of empowerment.

Over the past 20 years, PACES has demonstrated how sport can be a powerful tool for education, resilience, and community development. By reaching children aged 6 to 16 in Palestinian refugee camps and marginalized communities across Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, the organization has created safe spaces where young people can learn teamwork, confidence, and leadership. At the same time, PACES invests in talented youth from these same communities, training them to become coaches, mentors, and positive role models for the next generation.

Through partnerships with local sports clubs and associations, PACES not only delivers its programs but also strengthens the capacity of community organizations to continue similar initiatives independently. This approach ensures that the impact extends far beyond individual activities, helping programs grow and reach a broader segment of the community. As a result, PACES is not just running sports programs; it is building sustainable networks of empowered youth and local partners who can continue to inspire and support children for years to come.



Coach Hala with her players during a training session in Nablus in 2025.

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Strong Children



Representations of Life and Survival in Palestinian Art

By Sarah Zahran

How does a child see the world – and how is the world carried to them in return? These are not simple questions. They have long shaped the field of childhood studies and guided attempts to understand a realm that is formed through imagination and play, curiosity and discovery, imitation and invention. As children live in a world where learning unfolds through both personal experience and collective interaction, these questions also open onto something more: a space dense with possibility. A world that does not merely resist darkness but actively produces new forms of healing and survival. Its strength lies in its ability to generate joy, to inhabit it, and to circulate it even within complex and fractured realities. Within this world, children are not passive recipients of experience. They are active agents – shaping meaning, affirming life, and contributing to the very conditions that sustain it.

Much of Palestinian art is entangled with the world of childhood, with children frequently depicted as symbols of survival and strength. These representations at the Palestinian Museum shape the experiences of both children and adult visitors. Drawing on images, posters, and paintings from the Palestinian Museum's exhibitions, collections, and digital archive, this visual journey moves beyond analysis to open deeper questions about art: its ability to generate cultural and aesthetic experience, to reflect a world full of life, and to imagine pathways of survival.

In these works, the child emerges as an active agent within culture, articulating strength, courage, and endurance. These representations do not simply mirror reality; they draw on artistic expression to shape a social imagination that resists dominant narratives. Instead of positioning children solely as victims, figures in need of constant care, education, and protection, or as sources of fear and anxiety for adults, this perspective reclaims their presence through the language of art. It foregrounds the forms of strength that emerge through artistic representations, where childhood becomes a site of metaphor, rooted in lived experiences across the history of Palestinian art. In this sense, children are not merely subjects of depiction, but partners in the production of meaning and carriers of the story, of our story in Palestine.

Strong children. At first glance, the phrase may seem almost fictional when set against the lived realities of children in Palestine, or within imaginaries that actively strip them of their childhood and all that it entails. Yet, if we approach childhood as a methodological lens for historical analysis, a more layered picture begins to emerge. Across time, representations of children in art have shifted with changing social and political contexts, moving from symbols of innocence and redemption in the eighteenth century to figures of vulnerability and care in the twentieth, shaped largely by critiques of industrialization and child labor. In liberation contexts such as Latin America and South Africa, this trajectory expands: Children appear not only as victims and witnesses to war and injustice, but also as political actors and carriers of collective memory, embodying both history and the possibility of a future.

Contemporary understandings of childhood, informed by theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, further reposition the child as an active producer of meaning. Within this broader arc, Palestinian art offers a complex articulation where play intersects with danger, imagination with reality, and life with survival. Here, the child is not confined to vulnerability, but emerges as an active subject capable of imagining, confronting, and producing meaning at once. This is not an escape from reality, but a way of enduring it.



Mohammad Al-Samhouri, *Gaza*; acrylic on canvas, 142 x 85 cm.
Courtesy of the Mohammad Al-Samhouri Collection.

In the works of Mohammad Al-Samhouri, presented in *This Is Not an Exhibition*, children appear in closely packed spaces, adjacent homes pressed against one another, yet they share an enduring ability to celebrate life through dance and play, even as the city around them is being devoured. They are not depicted as easy prey. Instead, their immersion in childhood becomes a pathway to survival.

As Piaget suggests, children possess the capacity to reconstruct reality, not merely



Nabil Anani, *The March of Trees*, 2024; leather, henna, dyes, inks, and other local materials on wood, 17.5 x 3.5 m.

receive it. They build their worlds through symbolic spaces that reflect an ability to reinterpret and reimagine what surrounds them. In another of Al-Samhouri's works, children sing and dance outside, beyond the confines of walls, perhaps as a metaphor for the expansiveness of life and its openness to possibility through the eyes of a child.

As we explore an expanded concept of childhood, we inquire how art constructs the very notion of childhood. Is it shaped by time, defined by a fixed age, such as from infancy to eighteen? Or, in Palestine, is it determined by experience? In this sense, time loosens the relationship between the concept of childhood and its representations, allowing it to be redefined through the contexts in which experience is formed.

This approach is articulated by Majdal Nateel in her painting *The Last of Men*, where childhood is paradoxically completed through a leap beyond it. Children assume the roles of adults in acts of endurance and survival, inhabiting positions that exceed their age. Here, art does not present children simply as children, as figures of innocence, softness, and curiosity. Rather, it reimagines them within a more complex terrain, where childhood is reconfigured in response to lived realities.

In the museum's exhibition, visiting children stood for long times, lifting their heads to look at Majdal Nateel's *The Last of Men*. They laughed at the man holding a toy, with his very long mustache exaggerated yet strangely weightless. The figure appeared delicate, afraid, clutching a doll. "*Perhaps he is mad*," some of them said. They did not speak of the children who had grown far too quickly over the most recent two years of war on Gaza. Of those who had left behind their toys and homes, some displaced more than ten times across the geography of Gaza, a landscape that has consumed their ability to play, to move, to live. Nor did they speak of an occupation that sees in them the future, judging them across time, not for who they are now, but for what they might become.

Sliman Mansour, *And the Convoy Keeps Going*, 2016. Sliman Mansour Collection, courtesy of the Palestinian Museum.







Majdal Nateel, *The Last of Men*; acrylic on canvas, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the Mahmoud Abu Hashhash and Maysoun Sharqawi Collection.

In Palestinian art, children do not simply appear, they endure, imagine, and begin again. Between play and danger, loss and possibility, they carry fragments of life and reshape them into something that can still be held onto. In their gestures – whether they are raising a flag, drawing a house, or dreaming of flight – childhood becomes more than a stage of life; it becomes a language of survival, a quiet insistence on joy, and a way of imagining freedom, even when the world closes in.

Children also appear as carriers of memory. Mona Saudi's workshops with children, titled "*In Time of War: Children Testify*," were conceived not only as a method of release or catharsis but also as an act of recording, of documenting the story from the children's own perspective. In Saudi's own work, children appear larger than occupation, rising above missiles, their role unfolding in balance with nature's capacity to regenerate. They become an ongoing story, carrying Palestine in their hands, breathing gently onto pain so that it might heal.

This insistence on action is echoed in Nabil Anani's *The March of Trees*, where a child carries a house – its stones and its stories. The house appears light, almost weightless, like an idea that cannot be destroyed or erased, but relocates wherever its bearer goes.

Similarly, in the enduring visual language of Sliman Mansour, which moves across generations, children and adults walk toward their homes in Jaffa and Haifa as active agents of the land, reading, resisting, struggling, tending olive groves, and carrying within them the symbols of Palestine and the embroidery of its thobes. It is a condensed symbolism that



Mohammad Al-Samhouri, Untitled; acrylic on canvas, 158 x 158 cm. Courtesy of the Mohammad Al-Samhouri Collection.

defines the Palestinian subject in relation to their enduring project of liberation.

Through the experience of imagination and play, the children in these works appear as experts, bearers of solutions that are capable of saving the world. Imagination deepens this expertise through visual narratives that resist constraint: Children leap over walls, cross barriers, and move across geographies without identity cards or permits.

In Hani Zurob's *Lesson in Aviation 1* (2009), the artist's son Qudsi offers him ways to cross borders, moving from Gaza to Jerusalem, and then to the wider world. He asks him to climb onto his back so they can fly, or to ride a bicycle and pass through every red light. At its core, the child's wish is simple: to visit his grandfather's home, like any child in the world. Yet the painting reveals something far more complex. The visit is the subject, but the path toward it demands radical solutions, gestures that reach toward freedom through the act of flight.

In representations of survival, imagination offers extraordinary pathways, drawing its tools from the very fabric of reality. Children appear in their most familiar roles: riding bicycles, playing on swings, climbing walls and terraces, watching the stars. Yet beneath this apparent simplicity lies a deeper register: These gestures carry the weight of children's dreams and their longing for freedom. Imagination works quietly but persistently, gathering strength, pulling toward that horizon, toward freedom.

Across paintings and posters, children carry the flag as a sign of victory, survival, and strength, one of the most powerful visual motifs produced by Palestinian art. In Mohammad Joha's works, children raise the Palestinian flag in the face of death. The flag often wraps the bodies of victims of occupation violence, buried with them, yet this presence does not signify disappearance. Rather, it points to growth from beneath the earth a potent symbol of the future and an anticipation of freedom. In this sense, both the child and the flag emerge as central elements



The General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) Collection, the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive (PMDA).

within these visual narratives, appearing in works made for children, as well as in those created by children themselves.

As the museum regularly offers workshops for and with children, the experience of working with them is grounded in multiple forms of engagement with art. Through these encounters, children explore exhibitions, contemplate artworks, ask questions, and develop ways of reading what they see, attuning themselves to the stories each work carries. These meanings take shape through their own modes of expression, as they begin to define concepts such as childhood, freedom, and war in their own terms. Even when death is present within the artworks, their readings consistently lead back to life, to a deeper rootedness in the land. Children respond to their environment and experiences by creating visual messages that pulse with life and hope, often inscribing them with the Palestinian flag and the textures of the land itself. It is as if they are part of an inevitable procession, one in which they stand as essential actors. They move forward as writers, artists, engineers, and fighters. They redefine the margins as sites of agency and transformation, carrying the future within them. In art, children emerge as strong, not only as representations of survival, but as a redefinition of life itself.

SCAN TO SHARE



Sarah Zahran is a cultural researcher and education program officer at the Palestinian Museum. She holds a master's degree in sociology with a focus on the intersections of culture and childhood. Sarah's work approaches the world of children through writing, both about them and for them.

Olive Seeds in the Andes



From HeArt of Gaza exhibition.

The Epic Struggle of Raising Palestine at the Edge of the World

By Gabriel Kattan Abusleme

Raising Palestinian children in the diaspora, thousands of miles from the land of their ancestors, is a titanic endeavor, an act of profound love, and a declaration of principle. To watch my sons Ildefonso and Gabriel Fuad, aged four and two, is to witness the miracle of human continuity. In their laughter, one can hear the echoes of two ancient and formidable worlds: the burning mysticism of an Andalusian heritage that comes through my wife's ancestry and the unyielding resilience of my Palestinian blood. They are not merely children growing up in Santiago de Chile, under the vast skies of the southern hemisphere; they are small guardians of ancient fire, carrying symbols and an energy woven from stories of deep-rooted belonging and displacement.

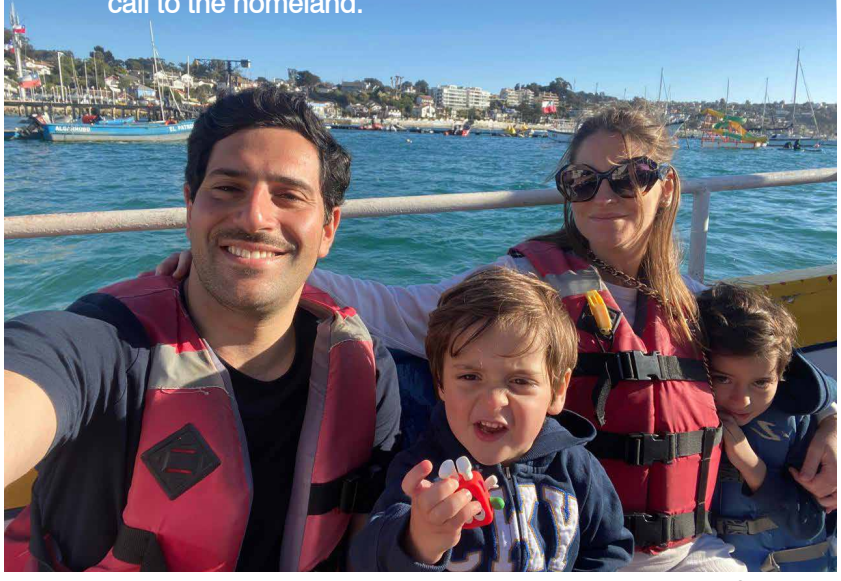
The greatest challenge of raising children in the diaspora is understanding the sheer immensity of the task that rests upon our shoulders. Without asking for it, each of us is born an involuntary ambassador of our homeland. We know that any misstep does not fall on our name alone, but threatens to feed erroneous perceptions of an entire people.

Success, in this context, is a peak that is difficult to conquer. Recognition rarely arrives immediately. The historical weight and current political complexity surrounding the word "Palestine" mean that the world tends to look upon us with initial caution. Facing that invisible barrier is a struggle. However, there is an undeniable magic when intellect and hard work finally break that circle. When people finally "realize," their recognition envelops you with an overwhelming familiarity, making you feel as if deep down, they had known the noble timbre of your character from the very first minute. This journey, viewed through a strategic lens, reveals that our daily lives are a form of constant, silent diplomacy.

In this corner of the world, however, we are not alone; we have transformed exile into a bastion. Chile is home to the largest Palestinian community outside the Arab world, a vibrant ecosystem of over half a million souls. This is our greatest strength. Over decades, perseverance, a sense of immense responsibility, and a limitless generosity have flourished, as we have become visionary entrepreneurs, political leaders, brilliant writers, architects, chefs, and workers in general, who elevate our culture to the level of art.

This heritage is projected into the future through institutions such as the Colegio Árabe, a combined primary and secondary school. This is our crucible, a place where children of all ages gather under a profound pan-Arab sentiment. Here, they are given the tools to understand that we are not scattered fragments but a single great region that is united by nonnegotiable values, shared strengths, and common horizons. In these classrooms, Ildefonso and Gabriel Fuad learn that their identity is not a relic to be stored away but a compass to navigate the world.

As we raise Palestinian children in the diaspora, parents carry the burden of being involuntary ambassadors. In this endeavor, we draw on the strength that lies in community and in our awareness of the pan-Arab horizon, as we foster to keep alive an unbroken link, a call to the homeland.



The author with his family on a boat off the coast of Algarrobo; a poetic coincidence, as this Chilean beach shares its name with the Andalusian Algarrobo, a name derived from the Arabic al-kharūb, carob tree.



A family photograph with the author's cousin Lucas and his grandmother, the matriarch of the family, Sonia Heresi Zarruk (Clan Hreizat of Bethlehem).

Despite these victories in exile, there is a void that makes our labor even more arduous. From the historical homeland, there is often a lack of a structural bond strong enough to make the diaspora feel like an integral part of the nation's processes.

It is inevitable to dream of a different scenario. If the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates truly embraced our yearnings – if it capitalized on our professional skills, our strategic vision, and our thoughts forged in resilience – it would help create an unbreakable bond. The diaspora is not merely a reservoir of nostalgia; it is a peaceful army of talent that, if summoned with true conviction, could build invincible bridges for our nation.

Sometimes, while gazing at the Andean horizon, a melancholic paradox strikes me: the feeling of being, at times, alien to the idiosyncrasies of our current homeland. In Chile, as in much of South America, the diaspora community did not evolve at the dizzying pace of the Middle East; it remained encapsulated, suspended in the purity of its original traditions, as if time had never passed.

When our ancestors crossed the oceans, they understood that in exile, luggage must be light, but the soul must be fully loaded. They brought with them the most fundamental essence, the foundational material to reproduce their world at the edge of the earth. It is this very instinct of survival that returns us both to the spirit of the *fellah* (فلاح), the Palestinian peasant, and to the untamed, pure connection with the clay and the root. We were taught that planting an olive tree in foreign soil is an act of spiritual sovereignty; that growing and harvesting your own *za'atar* is reclaiming a piece of the mountain; and that knowing how to bake a *ka'ek* with the patience of the ancients is honoring the memory of the hands that preceded us.

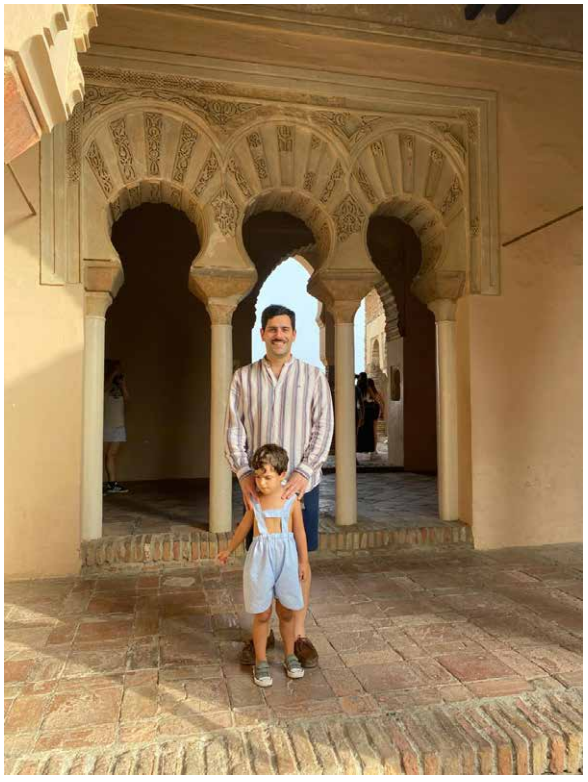
Thus, we learned to decipher the identity, the technique, and the living history of each dish according to its native city. We have loved Nablus, Gaza, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem through their aromas, venerating every street and every stone long before we ever set foot on them, with the devotion of those who love a paradise they know by heart. It is an eternal nostalgia, a profound echo that is chiseled into our DNA. But in Ildefonso and Gabriel Fuad, this sentiment acquires a double, epic resonance. In their veins converge the rivers of Palestinian heritage and the unfathomable depth of the Andalusian soul. Their roots, tethered to the land of Málaga, inevitably evoke the heartbreaking love felt by the honorable and audacious Hammet el Zegrí, the warrior who would go down in history as the last Muslim commander of Málaga, as he suffered the dispossession and injustices of a relentlessly changing world. He ended his days as a captive in the city of Carmona, his gaze lost in the horizon, consumed by the yearning to feel the breeze of the land that had borne him. That same loyalty to a stolen homeland is the heritage that now breathes within the chests of my sons.



A photo of the author's family at a football match, supporting Club Deportivo Palestino — the only team in the world that represents the Palestinian people. The club was founded on August 20, 1920, by members of the Palestinian community in Chile, and its main activity is professional football, with its first team competing in the top division.

Lately, however, in the quiet hours when the Andean winds howl like ancient desert storms, I find myself thinking and asking: "What am I to you, my homeland? Am I a Palestinian, a Chilean, both, or a *nakira* (نكرة , nobody in Arabic)? Am I Palestinian just as much as a person who was born and raised within your physical embrace? Or does being born and raised in South America make me less of a Palestinian?" I wonder whether my Chilean cadence steals my Palestinian-ness from me? "Where are you from?" remains one of the most agonizing questions to ever answer.

We are Palestinians, shaped by the soil of Chile. There is a very strong word that cuts straight to the bone: *mankoub* (منكوب) the stricken one, the catastrophe-bearer, the displaced victim. To translate *mankoub* into my own words is a near-impossible task, because to explain it is to attempt to translate a shattered heart – as that very heart is beating in your own chest.



A photograph of the author with his son, Ildefonso Kattan, at the Alcazaba of Málaga – a palatial fortress from the Islamic period, built on an earlier Phoenician structure. It is striking how history connects us, both through the Umayyad era of al-Andalus and the legacy of the Phoenician people.

Yet, within the sorrow of the *mankoub*, the eternal defiance of the *fellah* survives. The peasant's hands remember the exact shape of the earth, no matter the continent. This is where my bloodlines collide and harmonize in a beautiful, tragic symphony. The deep lament of the displaced Palestinian perfectly mirrors the ancient sorrows of my wife's Andalusian ancestors, a sorrow that gave birth to the purest essence of Flamenco. The *cante jondo*, the deep, guttural song of Flamenco was forged in the fires of exile; it is the cry of the Moors and the marginalized of Al-Andalus as they are yearning for their lost paradise, weeping for the homes they were forced to leave behind. It is the exact same frequency of pain as the Palestinian *mawal*.* The rhythmic, defiant stomping of the Flamenco dancer is the heartbeat of the *mankoub* as he refuses to be erased; it is the *fellah* striking the earth with his heel to declare to the universe, "I am still here."

Therefore, our most colossal and imperative duty is to raise our children not as victims crushed by the weight of the *mankoub*, but as the proud heirs of this resilient song. We must protect their radiant souls, taking surgical care not to pass down the perpetual lament, the venom of hatred, or the suffocation of the occupation. To burden them with that darkness would be to place a stone in their hearts. We must show them that we are a beacon of history, knowledge, joy, and unbroken tradition.



This local olive grove is a space that serves as a portal for our family, transporting us directly to the Kattan family groves in Bethlehem and Beit Jala.

In the meantime, the work continues in the warmth of our home. Every story told before bed, every traditional dish served at the table, and every word in Arabic whispered to Ildefonso, Gabriel Fuad, and Mariana Farah (she is on the way) is an act of poetic resistance. We are planting olive trees on the slopes of the Andes, ensuring that while their roots grow in Chilean soil, their branches will always, unfailingly, point toward Al-Quds.

For, as the profound Palestinian proverb assures,"لا شيء في الذاكرة يفرّقنا، كل ما فيها يوحّدنا" *(La shay' fi al-dhakira yufarriqna, kull ma fiha yuwahhiduna)* "Nothing in our memory divides us, everything in it unites us."

SCAN TO SHARE



Gabriel Kattan Abusleme is a political scientist with an MSc in international relations, specializing in multilateral negotiations and global trade. Throughout his career and public interventions, he has merged the rigors of diplomacy with the poetic resilience of his roots. He is a member of the Palestinian-Chilean community, and his work represents the effort to build an intellectual and emotional bridge between his professional background and his cultural roots.

*Mawal is a traditional Arabic vocal genre, slow and emotionally expressive in character, generally improvised and focusing on the themes of loss, love, and longing. It can be accompanied by the nai or rababa or sung a cappella.

Where Children Find Their Voice Through Arts



By Deema Ershaid

In Palestine, children learn very early that the world can shift without warning. A road closes, a wall appears where none stood before, a night becomes too loud, even the ordinary can become uncertain. And yet, in the middle of all this, children continue to do what children have always done: They imagine, they play, they notice, they invent. Give a child a pencil, a piece of clay, a brush dipped in color, or a wall to paint, and something begins to open.

This is why art matters so deeply in Palestine. It is not simply an extracurricular activity, nor a luxury to be postponed until life becomes easier. For many children, art is a language before it is a discipline; it is a way of saying what cannot yet be said clearly, or what feels too large, too complicated, or too fragile for ordinary speech. Through drawing, painting, crafting, printing, and making, children do more than create images; they make space for themselves inside a reality that often leaves too little room for childhood.

A child may draw a house, a tree, a road, a bird, or a face. To an adult, these may seem like simple subjects, but in the hands of a child, they can carry entire emotional worlds. A line can hold hesitation, a color can carry longing. Sometimes, children draw what they see; at others, they draw what they miss, and sometimes they draw the world as they wish it could be. Art allows all of this to exist at once, it does not demand that a child explain everything. Art gives form to what is felt, remembered, feared, or hoped for. In Palestine, this matters profoundly. Childhood here is too often described only through the language of hardship. Children are seen as vulnerable, burdened, anxious, and exposed. These descriptions are real, but they are incomplete. A Palestinian child is not only someone affected by difficult circumstances; a child is also a maker of meaning, a storyteller, an observer, a dreamer, and, when given the chance, an artist.

منتدى الفنون البصرية
VISUAL ARTS FORUM

The understanding of art's vital role has shaped the work of the Visual Arts Forum (VAF) from its very beginnings. During the second Intifada, Palestinian artists began organizing street and public art activities across villages and cities in the occupied West Bank. Art moved out of conventional spaces and into direct contact with children and youth. It became a way to express, release, gather, and connect. In those moments, children were not asked only to endure what was happening around them; they were given ways to respond to it, to mark it, and to speak through it. Out of that spirit, and out of a clear community need, the Visual Arts Forum was established in 2002 under the slogan "Art for All."

That history still matters, reminding us that art education in Palestine did not emerge only as a cultural project, but as a human one. The forum was built on the belief that art can be part of daily life, part of social life, and part of how children learn to see themselves and the world around them. Art was understood as a means of communication, a way of strengthening identity, and a way of building a more vibrant relationship between the individual and the community.

At VAF's School of Visual Arts, children are not treated as empty vessels waiting to be filled with technique. They are approached as individuals with their own feelings, talents, observations, and inner landscapes. For younger children, learning art is closely connected to play, storytelling, movement, music, and imagination. The goal is not only to teach them how to hold a brush or mix a color but also to help them trust their expression. As children grow, they are encouraged to experiment, observe more closely, and develop their own visual language. Technique matters, of course, but so does confidence, curiosity, and voice.

Girls aged nine to eleven years explore aquarelle painting on the theme of the Palestinian Landscape.



A student working on her version of the theme Longing for the Sea, acrylic on canvas.



Palestinian Sunbola (grain head): Pop art at the School of Visual Arts.





A young student drawing fruit with acrylic paint.



A student working on her still life drawing of fruit and a bottle.



Young VAF students proudly show off their handcrafted flowers.

This is one of the powers of art: It teaches children not only how to make but also how to see. A still-life drawing teaches patience and attention. Watercolor teaches sensitivity to tone and mood. Clay teaches form through touch and transformation. Public art teaches collaboration and collective presence. These are artistic lessons, but they are also life lessons. They strengthen concentration, decision-making, and the ability to remain present in a task. They teach children that their choices matter, that where they place a line, how they shape a form, and what image they bring forward all have meaning.

However, art does something else as well, especially in the Palestinian context. It gives children a way to process reality without being trapped inside it. Not every child can speak directly about fear, grief, confusion, or anger. Sometimes words arrive too late, or not at all. Art offers another path; through art, a child can approach difficult feelings indirectly, safely, and honestly. This does not mean that every artwork should be read as a symptom of pain. Children also make fun and playful art and, most of the time, surprising unconventional art. They experiment and invent entire worlds.

Over the years, this has become one of VAF's core programs: using arts-based work in psychosocial support; believing that art can create a safe, nonverbal space in which children begin to release tension, process emotion, and reconnect with themselves and with others. Through drawing, collage, clay, painting, movement, and reflection, children are offered the chance to be present, expressive, and seen. In a reality where so much is interrupted, these moments become forms of continuity. They help children feel that something inside them can still move, still grow, still take shape.

Public art holds a special place in this process. When children paint together on a wall or take part in a community-based artistic activity, their ideas become visible to the wider community, as a child's imagination takes on public presence. In a place where public space is often burdened or fractured, this has its own power. It says that children belong not only in private, protected spaces, but in the life of the community. It says that they, too, have something to contribute to the visual language of a place.

Palestinian children engage culture not only by inheriting it, but by living and reshaping it through art. In their creative work, they reflect both the tangible and intangible elements of Palestinian life: olive trees, landscape, embroidery, grandmothers' stories, weddings and

What matters when we encourage and support children in creating art is not only the activity itself, but also what it makes possible. A child in an art session is not merely being occupied. That child is practicing attention, expression, and trust in their own hand, their own eye, and their own interpretation of the world. They are learning that they can make something, that they can choose, that they can respond. For children living in conditions where so much is outside their control, this matters enormously.



Still life with olive oil bottle and oranges, pastel drawing by a nine-year-old student.

funerals, memory, language, and forms of belonging tied to place. Yet this vibrant culture is not expressed only through traditional forms; it is also translated into the language of the present through illustration, photography, digital practices, and other contemporary modes that are shaped by technology and today's speed and realities. In this way, children's artistic expression carries both cultural memory and the pressures of the occupation, transforming them into something personal, alive, and newly imagined.

For this reason, art should never be treated as decorative or secondary in the lives of Palestinian children; it is part of what education should be. It develops perception, confidence, discipline, imagination, and the ability

Art does not erase hardship, but it offers children moments of freedom within constraint and presence within fragmentation. In the hands of Palestinian children, art becomes more than expression; it becomes a way of sustaining culture, affirming identity, and insisting on life.



Watercolor drawings of Palestinian flowers by students aged five to eight years.

to give form to feelings. Through VAF's programs, we create space for dialogue, connection, and emotional expression, allowing children not only to reflect the world around them, but also to respond to it creatively and on their own terms.

In a context where so many forces attempt to narrow a child's horizon, art insists on expansion. It protects something essential in childhood: the right to wonder, to experiment, and to make meaning.

SCAN TO SHARE



Deema Ershaid is the executive director of the Visual Arts Forum (VAF), a Palestinian contemporary art institution based in Ramallah since 2002. Through its School of Visual Arts and wider cultural programs, VAF creates spaces for learning, producing, creativity, cultural exchange, and critical expression for children, youth, adults, and artists.

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Depriving Children of Their Right to Play and Learn


From HeArt of Gaza exhibition

The Closure of Burj Al-Luqluq Social Center in the Old City

By Muntaser Ayoub Said Edkaidek

The Israeli government's decision to close Burj Al-Luqluq Social Center Society in the Old City of Jerusalem represents a profound shock to the local Jerusalemite community. However, the most painful impact falls on the children who have long relied on this space as a safe environment for play, learning, and personal growth. For many years, the center has provided specialized programs designed to directly support children, most notably the Play and Learn Program and the SAD Program, both of which have served hundreds of children within the walls of the Old City.

Children living in the Old City grow up in a challenging environment that is characterized by overcrowding, limited open spaces, and a shortage of recreational and educational facilities. In this context, Burj Al-Luqluq (Arabic for Tower of the Stork) has played a critical role as one of the few community spaces where Jerusalem's children could safely gather, participate in activities, and develop their skills in a supportive atmosphere.

Through the Play and Learn Program, children participated in a variety of educational and recreational activities that combined learning with play. These activities were carefully designed to enhance children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Play was not simply entertainment; it was an educational tool that helped children strengthen their problem-solving abilities, teamwork, creativity, and self-confidence.

The SAD Program focused on providing social and psychosocial support to children, particularly in light of the pressures and challenges faced by young people in Jerusalem. The program created a nurturing environment through interactive activities and guidance sessions that helped children cope with daily stress while reinforcing a sense of belonging, security, and resilience.

Over the years, we have witnessed the tangible impact of these programs on children's lives. Many participants improved their academic performance, developed essential life skills, and built healthy social relationships. For families in the Old City, the center also represented an important support system, offering a safe and constructive place where their children could spend time learning, playing, and growing.

The closure of Burj Al-Luqluq does not simply mean shutting down a building or an institution. It effectively deprives hundreds of children of vital programs that they depended on daily. It also removes one of the rare safe spaces available in the Old City where children can simply be children, free to play, learn, express themselves, and imagine a better future.

Protecting children and ensuring healthy environments for their development must remain a humanitarian priority. Community centers such as Burj Al-Luqluq play a vital role in strengthening social cohesion and supporting the well-being of young generations,

Children from around Jerusalem, including the Old City, during the morning gathering at last year's 'Eesh Al-Burj Camp.



Children of the Old City deserve to have a safe space where they can grow, dream, and build hope for the future. They deserve the continuation of programs that have supported them for years and helped shape a better path forward.



A sunset view from Burj Al-Luqluq stadium with Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock in the background.

particularly in communities with limited resources. Today, more than ever, it is essential to protect and support community institutions that work for the benefit of children. The future of any society begins with its children, and any decision that undermines their right to learn, play, and feel safe leaves a lasting impact not only on their lives but also on the future of the community as a whole.

SCAN TO SHARE



Muntaser Ayoub Said Edkaidek is a media professional and community leader from the Old City of Jerusalem. Since 2012, he has served as executive manager of Burj Al-Luqluq Social Center Society, leading programs for children and youth. His academic interests focus on Jerusalem's history and youth studies, particularly the Mamluk heritage of the city.



Lessons Beyond the Screen



Childhood, Resilience, and Hope in Palestine

By Alice Abdo

When classrooms move to screens and childhood unfolds amid uncertainty, education must safeguard not only learning but also identity, resilience, and hope. The story of Palestinian education during difficult times is therefore not only a story of disruption. It is also a story of determination.



Volunteer entertainer Ruaa Hassouna plays her oud to Palestinian children in one of the makeshift camps that are now home to most of the Gaza Strip's 2.4 million people. Photo by Said Khatib. Image courtesy of Al-Monitor.

For children everywhere, school is far more than a place where lessons are delivered. It is a social world, a space where friendships form, confidence grows, and identity slowly takes shape. The daily routine of walking into a classroom, greeting a teacher, and sitting beside classmates provides children with stability and a sense of belonging. But when conflict interrupts daily life, these familiar rhythms can disappear almost overnight.

In Palestine, recent escalations of violence have once again disrupted the educational lives of thousands of children. As safety concerns forced many schools to suspend in-person classes, families and educators turned to online learning as a necessary alternative. Digital platforms became temporary classrooms, and screens replaced desks and playgrounds. This shift allowed learning to continue, but it also raised important questions about what education truly means for children growing up in difficult circumstances.

Online learning platforms have been widely developed in recent years to ensure the continuity of education during emergencies. Following global experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and technology experts have invested significant effort in designing digital systems that allow students to attend classes, submit assignments, and communicate with teachers remotely. These tools provide an essential lifeline when physical schools are inaccessible.

Yet education is not only about the delivery of information. Children do not learn solely by listening to explanations or completing exercises on a screen. Much of their development occurs through everyday interactions: the exchange of ideas between classmates, a teacher's encouragement, subtle body language cues, and spontaneous conversations during group activities. The classroom environment offers countless moments that nurture curiosity, cooperation, and emotional intelligence. These moments are difficult to reproduce through a digital interface.

For many Palestinian families, the transition to remote learning has clearly revealed these limitations. Parents often find themselves juggling work responsibilities while simultaneously supporting their children's online schooling. Younger students, in particular, struggle to maintain focus during long virtual lessons. Technical problems, unstable internet connections, and unfamiliar digital platforms can quickly turn learning into a frustrating experience.

Teachers, too, face immense challenges. Many have had to adapt traditional teaching methods to online formats with little preparation or training. Lessons designed for lively classroom discussions must suddenly be transformed into digital presentations. Maintaining students' engagement becomes significantly harder when teachers cannot observe their students directly or respond to their reactions in real time.

Despite these obstacles, the commitment of Palestinian educators remains remarkable. Teachers continue to explore creative ways to keep students involved, using storytelling, visual materials, and interactive exercises to bridge the distance created by screens. Their efforts reflect a deep understanding that education is one of the most powerful tools for protecting children's futures.

The challenges of situations that require remote learning extend beyond academic performance. Conflict and instability can have profound effects on children's psychological well-being. Uncertainty, disrupted routines, and exposure to stressful events can lead to anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and feelings of insecurity. These emotional experiences inevitably affect how children engage with learning.

In this context, the role of families becomes even more significant. Parents are often the first line of protection for their children's emotional and educational

In times of crisis, education becomes more than academic instruction – it becomes a source of stability. Simple routines, supportive teachers, and engaged families can help children maintain their curiosity and confidence even when classrooms move online. By combining learning with emotional support, cultural connection, and community involvement, Palestinian children can continue to develop the resilience and identity needed to shape their future.



Music teacher Ahmed Abu Amsha makes music with his students in Az Zawayda, Gaza, September 2025. Image courtesy of Christian Science Monitor.

development. Even small actions can make a meaningful difference. Establishing consistent daily routines can provide children with a sense of structure when the outside world feels unpredictable. Encouraging open conversations about fears and experiences can help children process difficult emotions. Creating a calm corner of the home dedicated to study can help students focus and maintain a connection to their educational goals.

Beyond practical support, families also play a central role in nurturing children's sense of identity. In times of uncertainty, cultural traditions, family stories, and shared memories become powerful anchors. When parents speak about their heritage, their community, and their hopes for the future, they help children understand where they belong and why their education matters.

Teachers contribute to this process in equally important ways. Effective education during times of crisis requires more than adapting lessons for digital platforms. It also involves creating supportive learning environments where students feel seen, heard, and encouraged. Even through a screen, teachers can foster connection by inviting students to share their ideas, collaborate with classmates, and express their creativity.

Moments of recognition – a teacher praising a thoughtful answer or acknowledging a student's effort – can have lasting effects on a child's confidence. In challenging circumstances, these moments become even more valuable.

Communities and civil society organizations also play an essential role in supporting children's learning journeys. When schools and families face limitations, community initiatives can help fill the gaps. Educational centers, youth programs, and local organizations often provide safe spaces where children can read, play, and interact with peers. These activities reinforce the idea that learning is not confined to formal classrooms but is part of a broader social experience.

Access to technology remains another critical factor. Not every household has reliable internet connectivity or sufficient digital devices for multiple children. Community efforts that provide technological resources can help ensure that education remains accessible to all students, regardless of their circumstances.

Ultimately, sustaining education during periods of conflict requires cooperation between families, educators, communities, and institutions. Policies that support teacher training in digital education, invest in accessible technology, and integrate psychosocial support into school programs can help create more resilient educational systems.

Equally important are opportunities for children to engage in creative and recreational activities. Art, storytelling, music, and sports allow young people to express emotions, relieve stress, and maintain a sense of normalcy. These activities nurture resilience and remind children that their lives contain more than the challenges surrounding them.

Every parent who encourages a child to log into an online lesson despite daily challenges, every teacher who spends extra hours adapting a lesson for digital delivery, and every community volunteer who creates opportunities for children to learn and play contributes to the resilience of the next generation.

Education remains one of the most powerful forms of hope available to any society. It allows children to imagine futures beyond the circumstances they currently face. It equips them with the knowledge and confidence needed to shape those futures themselves. Protecting education during times of conflict is therefore not only about preserving academic progress. It is about safeguarding children's dignity, strengthening their identities, and nurturing the resilience that will allow them to rebuild and lead their communities.

The children who are growing up during these difficult years have been shaped by violence and uncertainty, yet they are also surrounded by families, teachers, and communities determined to ensure that learning continues. If supported with care, creativity, and compassion, these children will carry forward more than memories of hardship. They will carry knowledge, resilience, and a deep understanding of the value of education. And through them, the future of Palestine will continue to grow.

SCAN TO SHARE



Alice Abdo is a Palestinian development professional with an MBA from Birzeit University. She specializes in research, program management, and institutional development across education and community initiatives.

The Easter Rendition

By Ahmed Masoud

Resurrect
the quiet faith that justice still remembers our names.
Resurrect
the fierce insistence that life can rise again,
that blossoms may yet unfold over a land made barren,
that Gaza will continue to breathe
under the heavy weight of bombs
and the cold machinery of death,
sitting lifeless by the yellow line.

The night is long,
rubble draped in shadow,
but dawn keeps creeping in, stubborn and persistent.

Resurrect your belief
that children are not born to be buried,
that no people should be caged by the millions.

Resurrect your faith
that our hands can still light up this darkness,
even with a small candle.

Together, our hands can start new beginnings,
carve another future,
demand a world reborn,
where Easter becomes more than a symbol,
becomes a promise kept:
an earth freed from the machinery of genocide,
a dawn that finally arrives
and does not retreat.



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Ahmed Masoud is an award-winning Palestinian author living in the UK. His first novels, Vanished: The Mysterious Disappearance of Mustafa Ouda *and* Come What May *have received critical acclaim and have been translated into several languages. Ahmed is also a playwright and poet who has recently received praise from the UK's leading theater critics in* The Guardian.

Artist of the Month

Raniah Amodi



Raniah Amodi was born in to Palestinian parents in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She started drawing at a very young age, even before she learned to write, and at the age of five, completed her first mural, which astonished her family but was nevertheless not considered a significant achievement. She received her schooling in a strict, conservative environment that focused on science and academic subjects, while art was seen as merely a form of entertainment. Young Raniah's interest was less in academic studies, and she was more inclined to draw and fill her notebooks with sketches, frequently living in her own world during class, for which she was criticized and punished – even in art classes, where teachers did not believe that the works she submitted were her own. "So despite my early passion for art, I did not receive much support or encouragement to develop my talent at the time," she recalls. However, this lack of recognition did not keep Raniah from persevering, as she considers art her fundamental means of expression and communication.

Leaving her family behind, Raniah moved to Palestine to study fine arts at An-Najah National University in Nablus, where she excelled in her studies. Having initially traveled regularly between Palestine and Saudi Arabia to renew her residency, Raniah in her final year decided to give up her Saudi residency and settled in Palestine to continue her artistic and professional career.

Women occupy a central position in her work. They tend to be depicted in simple, practical, feminine clothing or in garments that feature traditional patterns, without extravagance. The sharp folds in these garments resemble crystal formations, signifying protection, while their flow remains restrained, much like life itself. Cats appear as another recurring element in Raniah's work. Symbolizing the stability she lacked in her life, they are cats of courtyards and homes. Her displacement during childhood, followed by her settling in Palestine, with all its complexities, led her to question the meaning of stability, a condition she finds only in her paintings.







Tiles have been a basic feature in Raniah's work. She explains that this stems from her conservative upbringing, when walking modestly and lowering her gaze was seen as a sign of adherence to societal norms and the conservative religious culture. This imbued her visual memory with images of tiles, patterns, and floors, which she transformed into a visual stage for her work upon which events, elements, and themes take shape. Each detail carries a carefully considered geometric symbolism that supports the overall concept and forms the basis for the other elements. More recently, Raniah has begun to incorporate pieces of jewelry, often from her own collection, to represent women's inner wealth. Her themes tend to spring from her imagination and frequently reflect real-life experiences.

Raniah has held numerous solo exhibitions both locally and regionally. She has participated in group exhibitions at Sharjah Cultural Center in Abu Dhabi, at Roger Gallery in New Orleans, Louisiana, the Cairo Amman Bank Symposium, the 9th Fine Arts Exhibition in Beirut, Lebanon, the Alexandria Symposium in Egypt, and the group exhibition "Jordan in Our Eyes" in Amman Jordan. She currently serves as head of the Department of Fine and Expressive Arts at the Palestinian Ministry of Education and conducts art training for students at several cultural centers.

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Book of the Month

No Warmth in the Tent

Stories written and illustrated by children from Gaza

Compiled by Aseel Salama

By Baraa Musabbeh

*The book can be borrowed at community libraries in the West Bank, purchased at Tamer Institute's Resource Center in Ramallah, or ordered from its website.**





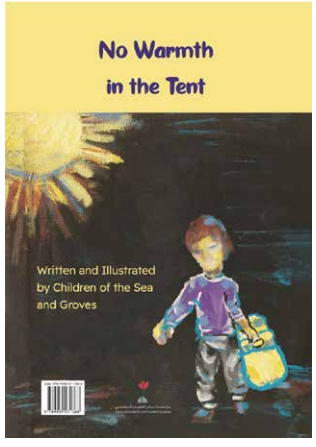
No Warmth in the Tent is the fourth book in the Children of the Sea and Oranges book series, launched by Tamer Institute for Community Education to preserve the voices of Palestinian children during the genocidal war on Gaza. In this book, compiled by writer Aseel Salama, we read 38 texts written by children who were displaced by the aggression to shelters in Khan Younis, where the temporary refuge became a space for writing amid harsh conditions.

These texts, presented in Arabic and English translation, are accompanied by artwork that was created by other children as part of the Return Track, one of the expressive pathways under the title Here We Remain. The track was carried out in collaboration with artists Hazem Al-Zumar, Mohammed Othman, Lamis Al-Sharif, Cleopatra Naim, Alaa Al-Ja'bari, Iman Younis, Rufaida Sahweil, Abeer Jibreel, Fidaa Al-Hasanat, and Jihad Jarbou. It also extended to include displaced Palestinian children in Egypt, who explored a fundamental question through acrylic on canvas: "What does it mean to return home?" The children produced approximately 140 paintings that depict their homes as they remembered or imagined them after the war. The institute used these works to form a visual testimony that accompanies the texts.









While the texts may not be fully complete artistically or linguistically, they convey the intimate details of daily life that cameras often fail to capture, ranging from shortage of bread to spending *Eid* without sweets. This book is not merely a form of documentation or psychological release; it is a living body of knowledge that captures the impact of war on imagination, language, and memory. The book targets readers aged 10 years and older.

*As Tamer Institute for Reading Development's website is currently under reconstruction, you can order the book by sending a WhatsApp message to Tamer Institute's literary production team at +972 59-791-1022.

SCAN TO SHARE

Exhibition of the Month

HeART of Gaza

A Traveling Exhibition That Can Also Be Viewed Online*

By the TWiP Collective



Hind by Qamar Timraz (age 17) and Misk Timraz (age 15).

The traveling exhibition *HeART OF GAZA* features drawings created by Palestinian children in Gaza, aged 3 to 17 years, during the ongoing conflict. Created in cooperation with Féile Butler from Sligo, Ireland, it is based on a project founded by Mohammed Timraz, a Gaza-based art therapy researcher at the University of Parma and the owner of Grey Café in Deir al-Balah, Gaza, which was destroyed by Israeli bombing in 2024.

Timraz embarked on this project with a clear goal: to allow children in the Gaza Strip to express their feelings and communicate their experiences through drawing and art amid the catastrophic humanitarian conditions that have been imposed by the Zionist entity. With these activities, he intended to help transform pain and suffering into a humanitarian art space that fosters creativity and encourages the free expression of trauma and complex emotions through an authentic visual language. Since 2024, the project has organized art workshops for children in the so-called Artists' Tent in the city of Deir al-Balah and in other art spaces located in various areas of the Gaza Strip. Over time, it expanded to include more than 17 art spaces, and it has involved over 2,000 children who find in art a way to express what they sometimes cannot express with words.

"Each painting tells a human story told by a child whose childhood was robbed by war. Since the beginning of the conflict, many children have been deprived of their fundamental right to education due to the destruction of schools and universities, and many have not been able to return to school, unlike most children in the rest of the world who live in normal conditions," Timraz explains. "These children are not simply numbers in the news, they are human beings with dreams, hopes, and a future that deserves life and opportunity, just like every other child in the world."



Reema by Reema Musbah Timraz (age 9) and Qamar Timraz (age 17).

The works in this exhibition contain dreams and hopes, and next to each drawing the name of the child artist is presented. Misk, 15, decided to capture on paper her memory of the red roses in Gaza's gardens, flowers whose color and scent have long since vanished from that tiny corner of the world. Next to it is one of the drawings that most vividly reflects the unimaginable physical and psychological trauma that Palestinians in Gaza are exposed to: a lifeless newborn baby held in the arms of a crying man, a flower in place of its head. The artist is seventeen-year-old Qamar, who depicted one of the atrocities she witnessed firsthand in Deir al-Balah.

Drawings courtesy of *HeArt of Gaza* exhibition.

Visiting this exhibition is a vital opportunity to acknowledge the horror that the Palestinian people continue to endure. It is an invitation to reflect on the immense suffering that has been inflicted on the boys and girls of Gaza who, in this space, have been given a face and a name. It is also, however, a necessary reminder that while the world looks away, the bombs continue to fall. While international media attention shifts elsewhere (Iran), the State of Israel intensifies its bombing of the Gaza Strip, carrying out its project of ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people with impunity.

Entering this exhibition means taking on the responsibility of not looking the other way and loudly demanding an end to massacres that no longer make the news.



Manine by Aysel Albana (age 3), Amna Mohammed (age 7), Shahed Al-Zaqzouq (age 5), Subhi Al-Zaqzouq (age 5), and Nour Al-Zaqzouq (age 8).

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* For more information, visit the project website hosted by Chuffed. For venues and dates, please visit HeART of Gaza on Instagram.

THE LAST WORD

Emperor Romulus Augustulus Was Deposed

The Roman Empire lived off its fat for centuries, and no one could imagine that it would ever fall. In 476, however, the Western Empire's last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. Citizens deemed that it was not worth the trouble of either killing or replacing him. The Roman Western Empire fell forever.

Drawing a comparison between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the waning American empire is not only premature, but could also be presumptuous. It is not inevitable that the American empire, the free enterprise system, will collapse. But similar to the Roman Empire toward its end, it is certainly not looking healthy. At the same time, one cannot but draw some similarities between the two structures, particularly when it comes to issues such as a grim financial crisis, going into endless wars (and winning none of them), becoming less and less efficient, placing short-term objectives over everything else, and, importantly, blaming someone else for failure and disaster to deflect attention rather than shouldering responsibility.

A month or so before today, I would have called it the Western war on Iran. But not now, after several Western European countries have closed their airspace to American planes. Yet the American-Israeli war on Iran continues to rage, and while no one knows when and how it'll end, some consequences of this war are already clear. For instance, most analysts agree that Iran will emerge as (at least) a regional superpower despite the destruction it has suffered. Possibly more repressive and less tolerant, Iran will most certainly rebuild its deterrent capabilities. It will also maintain control on the Strait of Hormuz, which will guarantee a lot of resources for Iran. Having failed to achieve the goals it had set out to accomplish, the US will suffer a humiliating and strategic defeat. Israel's role as the sole supreme power in East Asia will end, with dire implications on its positioning regionally and internationally. Israel's dream of a greater Israel will be shelved, and the new Middle East it had dreamt of will be closer to a nightmare. Global oil will no longer be traded at around US$70 per barrel; its price will be considerably higher. The Arab Gulf states will need to adapt and learn to live under the shadow of Iran. The US dollar will suffer another major blow, and the Chinese yuan will surge. Consequently, the US economy will take a good beating, and the US national debt will rise even more. Most importantly, however, the issue of Palestine is predicted to come back in full swing.

With a weak Europe and a considerably weaker US, coupled with the rise of Russia and particularly China, the world will witness a new era where Western hegemony will no longer reign. Most people of the world could not be more pleased will this global change. A while ago, a video circulated on social media of a European diplomat claiming that Chinese values do not align with Western values. The response from China was rich! "What Western values?" as they elaborated on the ethnic cleansing, genocides, and meddling in the affairs of world countries while usurping their resources. The Chinese response went on, and on, and on!

Long Live the State of Palestine!



Sani Meo
Publisher

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Their contributions have not only made this publication possible but also strengthened the voice of Palestine that is being deliberately suppressed.

Back cover: Music students in Az Zawayda, Gaza, September 2025. Image courtesy of Christian Science Monitor.



Music students in Az Zawayda, Gaza, September 2025. Image courtesy of Christian Science Monitor.