

Statehood In Mind

Free-form posters are a prime means of promoting the Palestinian cause. Their tenor, quality and authorship may surprise you.

By Dan Walsh

Editor's Note:

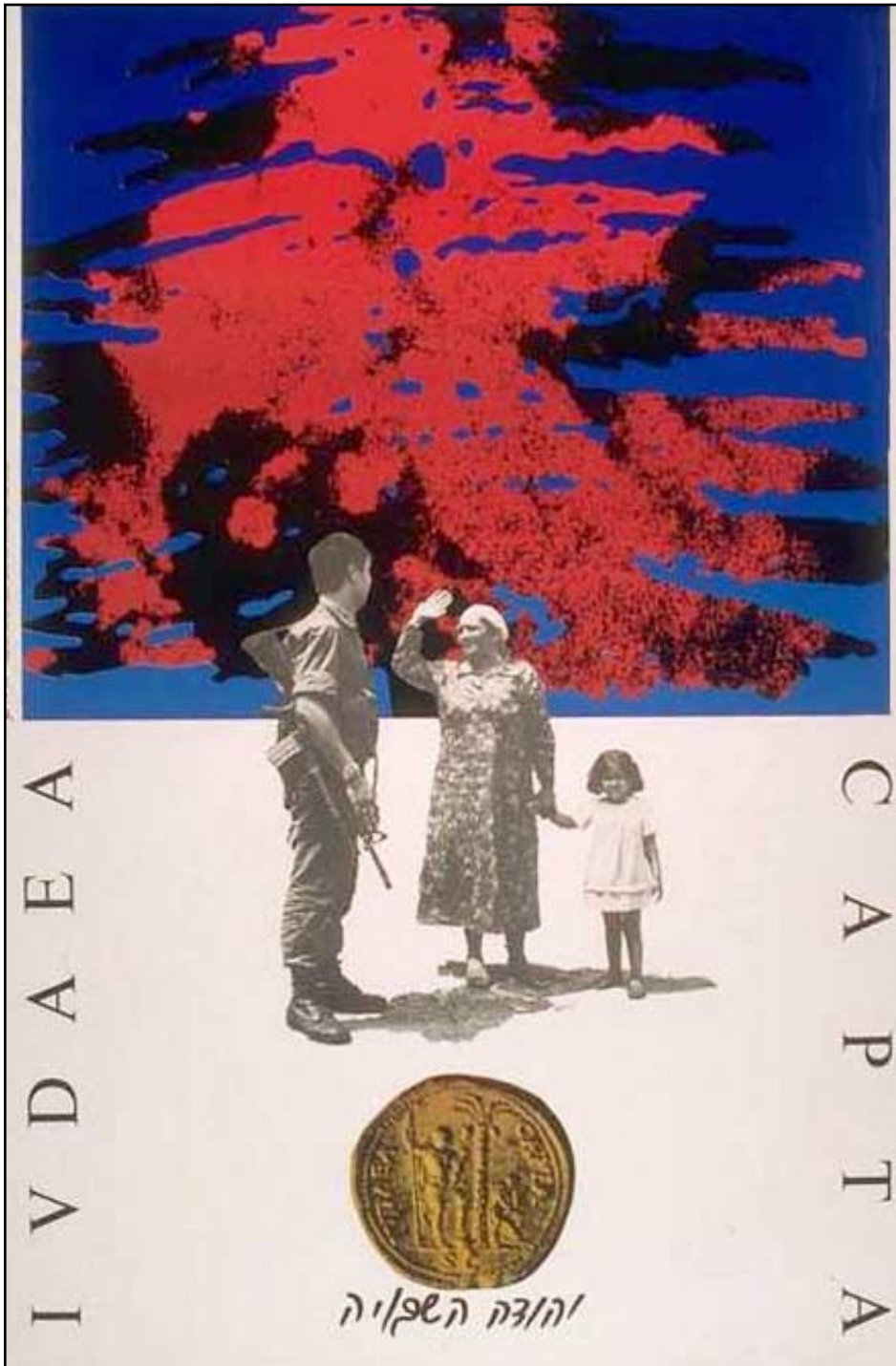
The author, as a Peace Corps volunteer serving in Morocco in 1974, began to collect and translate Arabic-language posters as a way of rendering his in-service Arabic training more interesting. His acquisitions included Palestinian posters and by the time he left Morocco, in 1976, he had collected 300 of these. Several years later, Walsh founded a political design company called Liberation Graphics, and ever since has archived, translated and conserved Palestine-related poster art, amassing a collection that now comprises almost 2,500 titles. He also founded the Palestine Poster Project and the Cuba Poster Project as vehicles for introducing U.S. audiences to the poster art of these two nationalities and is currently writing a book on Palestinian poster art to be published this year.

As this issue went into production, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process erupted into violent skirmishes between the two sides. We have decided to present this article exactly as it was prepared before the flare-up began, in the expectation that the march toward mutual accommodation, however slow and tortuous, must inevitably be resumed.

A recent flurry of articles on political change in the Middle East, related at least in part to the inconclusive Camp David II peace talks, have focused on a number of positive, though by no means secure, trends towards democratization in the region. The media appear fascinated with the way the Internet is being used by a number of Arab newspaper editors, as well as some Palestinian journalists in the West Bank, to combat efforts to limit free speech.



While I agree with the central premise of these articles—that democratization is the best way to develop latent individual and national potential—I disagree with the idea that this trend began, at least as it relates to the Palestinians, with the Internet.

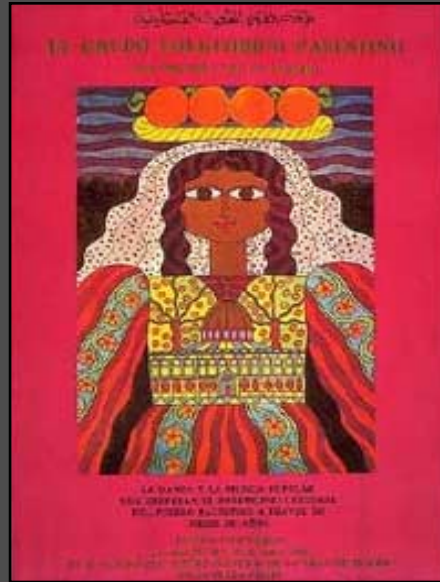


Captions:

1. Doug Minkler, US
2. Ilan Molcho, Israel
3. Paul Peter Piech, UK
4. Hilmy Touni, Egypt —
Poster announces a
Palestinian cultural event
in Spain.
5. Marie Delaby and Yves
Willocq, Belgium
6. Sliman Mansour, Palestine
7. David Tartakover, Israel.
Hebrew text reads: "If you
should come to inherit your
homeland, then do not
approach it as an enemy.
Rather, come to the inhabi-
tants in the spirit of peace.
Not by malice, transgres-
sion or animosity will you
build the homeland of your
forefathers, but by love,
mercy, righteousness and
faith. And you will love the
inhabitants for they are
your brothers of your own
flesh and you will not disre-
gard them." Quote is from
Rabbi Binyamin (pseudonym
of Yehoshua Radler-
Feldman), who was active
in fostering Jewish-Arab
relations.
8. Matta, Chile
9. Raili Laiho, France
10. Jakub Erol, Poland
11. Marc Rudin, Switzerland



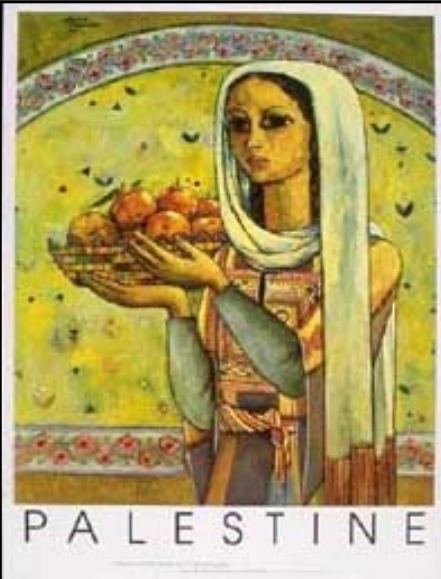
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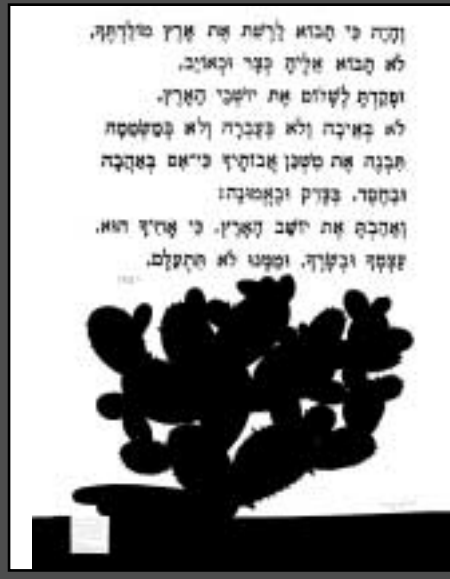
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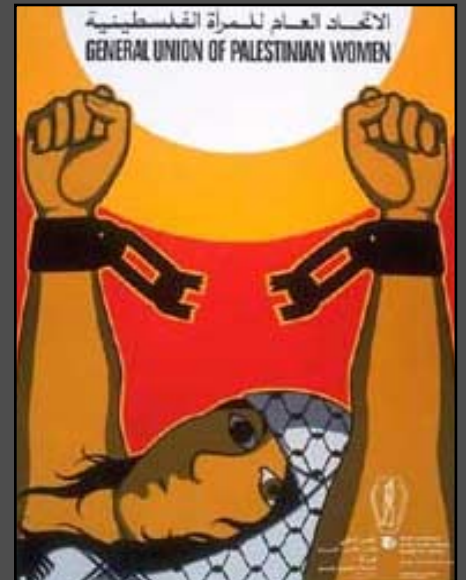
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12. Published in 1936 by the Tourist Association of Palestine, an early Zionist trade promotion agency, this is the earliest Palestine poster on record. Designed by Aron Advertising. Artist: Franz Kraus.

13. Lisa Kokin, U.S.

14. Jacek Kowalski, Poland.

15. Designer unknown. Published by Fateh.

16. Pedro Laperal, Spain.

17. Charles Davies, UK.



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Beginning in the early 1960's, the Palestinians embraced what for many other liberation movements was a marginal, episodic resource—the poster—and turned it into an ingenious, censor-confounding art form. Palestinian artists' collectives, solidarity organizations, student unions, political fronts and professional associations of every stripe—left, right and center—began printing and distributing posters in what can only be described as a good, old-fashioned democratic free-for-all that has raged on uninterrupted for forty years. Several generations of

Often denied other means of mass-communication Palestinian poster artists, and their supporters, drew deeply from history and combined what they found there with a dazzling array of design, typesetting and printing skills—employing everything from hand cut wood-prints to the latest version of Adobe Photoshop.

Of all the national liberation movements that emerged after WWII, only the Palestinians regularly welcome non-Palestinian artists to design posters that represent Palestine politically, ideologically and historically, resulting in a rich, multi-cultural graphic Esperanto.

This openness explains the presence in the Palestine oeuvre of exquisite solidarity posters from Canadian, French, Italian, Greek, Chinese, Finnish, Norwegian, Nigerian, Polish and Dutch nationals, among others. Owing to the efforts of these artists, many with international reputations, such as Matta, of Chile, and Paul Peter Piech, of the UK, the poster art of Palestine has become an integral part of the contemporary art history of scores of countries, many far removed from the Middle East.

The preconditions for producing solidarity posters vary widely from place to place. In Europe, for example, the legal use of public space to post political posters is considered a deeply embedded popular right, by all elements of society. There, any individual or group may use kiosks, walls or even the windows of public agencies, for putting up posters. The guarantee of safe space to post results in a vigorous, feisty and street-smart poster press.



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Palestinians have been exposed to this fascinating national open-air art gallery and, at least as it pertains to posters, the democratizing genie is out of the bottle.

For a people who did not even have a graphic arts tradition until the second half of the twentieth century, Palestinian poster art has matured rapidly, perhaps as a result of its relationship to political conflict.

Many of the European-published Palestine solidarity posters originated as entries in poster contests sponsored by art schools, local governments, student solidarity associations, trade unions and a host of other agencies with left-leaning sympathies and anti-imperialist credos. Many others are the products of individual initiatives—a lone artist producing works that are then posted, donated or sold as fund-raisers.

Oftentimes, the posters created in the contests are organized as a gallery exhibit complete with reprints, awards and press coverage. The whole process is very similar to what is done in the US: the main difference being that unlike the US, Third World and European poster contest themes are unapologetically political—even radical—by the standards of America’s self-censoring cultural elites.

Among the many US artists who have created posters on Palestine the work of two—Doug Minkler and Lisa Kokin, stand out for their political audacity. Using his own silk-screen studio, Minkler projects an independent political voice on a wide range of issues, both domestic and international, from anti-corporatism to Nicaragua solidarity. Two of his Palestine titles—“Stop US Aid to Israel” (1987) and “Palestine” (1988) are among the earliest works on this subject by any American artist.

Commissioned by the Emergency Committee for Palestine, a grassroots solidarity effort with a largely Jewish-American labor membership, “Stop US Aid to Israel” was meant to articulate the growing unease felt by some in the US with Israel’s harsh response to the *intifadah* (uprising).

The poster designed by Kokin and published by the Jewish Alliance Against Zionism, articulates what its sponsors believe is the departure point for any rationale discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. (Caption reads: “Being Jewish is not the same as being Zionist! Our own history of persecution as Jews helps us understand and support the struggle of the Palestinians to determine their own destiny”)

It may come as a surprise to many that internationally renowned Israeli graphic



designers, like David Tartakover and Ilan Molcho, have made significant creative contributions to the Palestinian solidarity poster genre. Works created by these and other Israeli artists represent one of the most trenchant, and politically daring, categories in the Palestinian poster archive.

Official displeasure notwithstanding, some very important and positive alliances between Israeli and Palestinian artists have emerged.

Israeli artists working together with Palestinian artists such as Sliman Mansour, Taleb Dweik, Emad Abdel Wahhab, Tayseer Barakat, Nabil Anani and many others, have mounted several major joint exhibits in recent years, such as “Down With the Occupation” and “Peace—It’s Possible”. Another collaborative exhibit, “Portraits of the Intifadah Martyrs”, which was reviewed by *The New York Times*, had many of its posters confiscated by the Israeli military authorities.

Defenders of such actions point to the lack of free speech in neighboring states. However, that is not the salient point here: at issue is whether or not artists, Palestinian and Israeli, will be permitted to add their voices to the popular debate on the evolving nature of their respective societies?

Lacking a national television service or reliable print press operations in their own Diaspora, the Palestinians developed a vibrant poster press in compensation. The resulting visual record is not only a unique national treasure it is also a compelling educational resource, one that tells the story of contemporary Palestine, and the wider Middle East, from the perspective of the artists.

Taken collectively, these posters provide evidence of a deep cultural and political commitment among Palestinians to public debate—and the will to democratize.

What issues, exactly, do Palestinians address via their poster art? So vast is the historical terrain covered by the posters in Liberation Graphics’ Palestine poster archives—land issues, military and political anniversaries, women’s rights, poetry, peace treaties, foreign relations, films, public health, refugees and the right-of-return—to name but a few—that there are scores, often hundreds, of entries for every one of



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the Library of Congress’ nine relevant data bases listed in its “Poster Categorization Tables”. I know of no other liberation movement that can claim even a fraction of such topical diversity.

It is also worth mentioning, that in the entire Palestine archives there is not a single

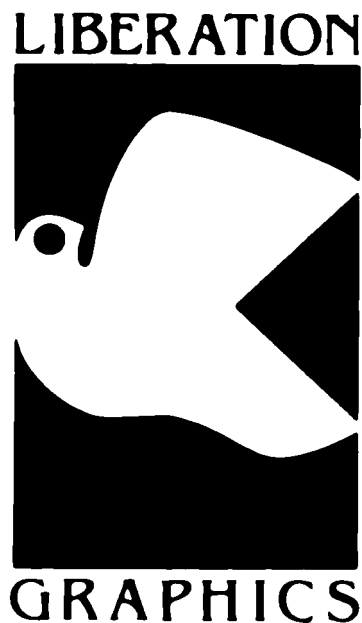
poster given over to anti-Semitism, racial hatred or a call for *jihad*, or religious war. I am not saying that such a poster does not exist—merely that I have never seen it. Which is not to say that all the posters in this archives are aesthetic masterpieces or that a good number of them aren't overtly militant and graphically provocative. Some, indisputably, are.

Political poster movements have always unsettled the powers-that-be for exactly the same reason that the Internet unhinges them: they are indifferent to externally imposed taboos. Like the Internet they pass information *horizontally* through society, often ignoring existing lines of authority altogether. It is the implicit risk of retaliation, which poster artists regularly take for the right to be heard, that gives the genre its impeccable democracy-building credentials.

Palestinian artists responded to occupation and exile by creating the most visually powerful and thematically cohesive national oppositional poster art genre since the Spanish Civil War. In so doing they have devised a new iconic and symbolic vocabulary—one that few Americans have had the opportunity to see.

The late French dramatist, Jean Genet, once said, “I respect the Palestinian revolution because the more I learn about Palestine, the more I learn about my own country.” As the US moves towards formal recognition of an independent Palestinian state, and as old taboos and stereotypes are cast aside, Americans may wish to learn about the contemporary Middle East as Genet did—by listening to some of the authentic, democratic voices of Palestine—the artists.

A rotating exhibit of Palestine posters may be viewed at: www.liberationgraphics.com



Advancing Popular Democracy,
Downwards and Outwards,
via the Arts