

When artists go to war: inside the PLO's information department

The Palestinian Revolution was fought with posters and films as well as rocks and bullets. As a new exhibition opens, Nicholas Blincoe looks at the work of the PLO's information department



A detail from Day of Solidarity with the People of Palestine, 1968, by Faustino Perez. Scan courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA). [Click to enlarge](#)

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"I was 24 years old. We were in danger. The Israeli planes were flying raids overhead. And I was designing posters." Hosni Radwan won't easily forget the conditions in the Beirut offices of the PLO Information Department, as an exhibition of the work it produced opens in London. *The World Is With Us: Global Film and Poster Art from the Palestinian Revolution, 1968-1980*, covers a tumultuous and violent time, but one that saw an extraordinary flowering of creativity.

Radwan remembers seeing figures like the poet Mahmoud Darwish, who edited the journal *Palestinian Affairs*, or the novelist Elias Khoury, who, despite being Lebanese, had fought with a PLO unit and was almost blinded on the battlefield before he took a job in Radwan's offices. "There were Arabs from everywhere," Radwan says. "Volunteers just kept coming."



Heroic Revolutionaries of Fatah, 1979, by Hosni Radwan.
 Photograph: Scan courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project
 Archives (PPPA)

Many are now famous. The Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, who enjoyed a one-woman retrospective at Tate Modern in 2013, designed covers for PLO publications. The Jordanian sculptor Mona Saudi has two posters in the show, as well as a film she made in collaboration with Iraqi-born director Kais al-Zubaidi, *Testimony of Palestinian Children in Wartime* (1972), an affecting, abstract production that uses children's drawings to tell the story of an air raid on a refugee camp.

The PLO operated as a nomadic state. Its power was rooted in the camps, first in Jordan and later in Lebanon, where the Palestinians won the formal right to self-government. The PLO ran schools, trained fighters and ran cultural and research programmes that funded film-makers and distributed posters. By the time Radwan began work in Beirut, the PLO had fought a series of major military battles, including Karamah (1968), Black September (1970-

71) and Operation Litani (1978), none of which remotely resembled victories.



Day of the Palestinian Struggle, 1976, by Mona Saudi.

Photograph: Scan courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA)

Propaganda films from the period present an indomitable front - *With Soul and Blood* (1971) and *We Are the Palestinian People* (1973) contain alarming sequences of young children receiving weapons training in a warning that the revolution would continue with each new generation - wrapped up in the anti-imperialist language of the cold war. One of Radwan's earliest posters, from 1979, celebrates the solidarity between Palestinian and Vietnamese students, with lettering in perfect Arabic and poorly spelled English.

The posters cover a wide range of styles and imagery. Ghasan Kanafani, the spokesman for the Marxist-Leninist group the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), designed one that shows a death-like figure wearing a bicorn hat and epaulettes of blood, decorated with western flags and swastikas to illustrate the equivalence of capitalism and fascism. Kanafani was assassinated by Mossad in 1972 after a PFLP attack on tourists at Lod airport, carried out by young Japanese recruits. Muaid al-Rawi uses more contemporary imagery, the gunman as rock star in psychedelic colours.

A more subtle form of mythologising is evident in the work of Rafic Charaf, a Lebanese artist from Baalbeck, as well as the works of Palestinian refugees Ismail Shammout and Mustafa al-Hallaj, two of the most loved and celebrated Palestinian artists. Here, imagery is

borrowed from Phoenician, Hellenic and other classical periods to create a new visual language for the Palestinians that is sometimes called Canaanism. (Ironically, at the same time, revolutionary Zionists in Israel were attempting to create their own neo-Canaanist style.)

Al-Hallaj lost his personal collection of his work in one of the Israeli air raids on Beirut, so when an electrical fire threatened his work anew in 2002, he ran into his studio and died trying to save it. He is buried in the Yarmouk camp in Syria, currently in the news because the inhabitants are starving while under siege by Assad's forces.



Revolution Until Victory, 1978, by Muaid al-Rawi. Photograph: Scans courtesy of the Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA)

Mona Saudi's poster for 15 May, known as Nakba (Catastrophe) Day in the Palestinian calendar, illustrates the strategy known as the olive branch and the gun - a combination of armed struggle and negotiations. At the centre of her image is a scimitar-shaped dove modelled with all the weight and solidity associated with her large-scale marble works. The offer to negotiate, delivered by Yasser Arafat at the UN in 1974, was rejected by the PFLP and led to a split in the PLO. Until then, films and posters had been produced by individual party machines. Afterwards, they were produced by a new Unified Information Department, the office where Radwan worked. Al-Zubaidi became the film supervisor. The Fifth War

(1980), featuring a pale and intense Vanessa Redgrave as a narrator, is a war documentary of such unremitting violence, the production lost two of its members during filming.

Al-Zubaidi will introduce three of his shorts at the Barbican during a three-day film programme that kicks off the month-long exhibition. *The Visit* (1970) is especially haunting. In the film, soldiers appear from nowhere in the pool of a car's headlamps. They are not identified as Israelis; indeed, they could represent the security force of any anonymous regime. As one of the show's curators, Nick Denes of the Palestine Film Foundation, says, "The Palestinian Revolution had an allegorical power. It represented liberation for all Arabs." It all ended in 1982, when Israel invaded Beirut. "We left by ship to Tunisia, and other places," Radwan recalls. The revolution marked an intensely fertile period of pan-Arab cross-pollination, but it was over.

● *The World Is With Us*, curated by the Palestine Film Foundation, runs from 16-18 May at the Barbican Cinema, London EC2, and continues from 19 May to 14 June at Rich Mix, London E1. Details: theworldiswithus.org

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