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# Photographing Life, Love and Laughter in Palestine

4 MINUTE READ



Hayat (left) teaches yoga to the residents of her village, Zataara, on the outskirts of Bethlehem in the West Bank. The women are increasing in number each week. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos

BY JEN TSE X

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**I**t was just like a Bollywood movie, the man said. He, a Palestinian groom, was smuggling his bride from Jordan into Gaza. The whole wedding party was with them, underground in the tunnels. And she was standing there, trembling, in her white dress and under erratic lights, dust falling into her hair, when he ran to her and kissed her.

The Texan and Jordanian photographer Tanva Habjouqa was listening to this

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way to live, love, even laugh. We will always find a way to keep our dignity and more than survive.”

Something in that instant, recalls Habjouqa, struck her deeply and stayed with her, even a year later. It was 2011, and she was expecting her own Palestinian child. She had worked as a photojournalist across the Middle East, dipping in and out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, before formally relocating to East Jerusalem and marrying a Palestinian man.

As she grappled with her own lived reality, still brooding over his words, she couldn’t help but see her new home differently. “It would be during a lot of these sort of black, operatic, Kafkaesque moments waiting at checkpoints that I would see really funny scenes around me, of how people were letting the stress out,” she tells TIME.

And then, in a eureka moment, Habjouqa had a title—*Occupied Pleasures*—that straddled passive and active meanings: to *be* occupied under Israel, and to occupy oneself, joyfully and defiantly, in pastime and simple pleasures. From there, she says, the rest of the photo project fell into place.

Now, *Occupied Pleasures* is making its debut in book form, swirling poetry, proverbs, essays, and new images into the original **2014 World Press Photo Award-winning photo series**. With support from the Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund, FotoEvidence, and a Kickstarter campaign, Habjouqa presents a nuanced, multi-dimensional portrayal of humanity’s ability to find pleasure—

in itself a form of resistance—in the face of trying circumstances, rather than in their absence.

The printed work features photographs made between 2009 and 2015 of daily life in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. They are sprinkled with little delights and sorrows: “Tomorrow there will be apricots,” an Arabic proverb promises (but meaning “never” or “in your dreams”); “I’m writing to you from a far-off country, a place where letters never arrive, a place where all the mailmen have died,” reads another piece, by poet Sousan Hammad.

With words adding rhythm and mood, Habjouqa’s images perform complex, yet subtle dances. Each scene unfolds in the context of the Israeli occupation, and so is tinged with its bitter implications. But it is only before this backdrop that the curious light of these moments is visible. These are pictures of small freedoms, majestic in their humor, casual in their rebellion and significant in their sum.

Women, unintimidated by settlers’ attempts to thwart their meetings, fold into yoga poses before desiccated olive groves on the outskirts of Bethlehem, dubbing their practice “inner resistance”. A university student in the West Bank hurls a javelin at the sky at the last team practice of the summer, her spear piercing the harsh line of the separation wall behind her. An infant, conceived with sperm smuggled out of an Israeli prison, appears as a quiet bundle in Habjouqa’s photo, though one can all but hear the ecstatic moment he entered the world, howling the defiance of his very existence.

Hadjouqa hopes that Palestinians tired of seeing the usual tropes of the conflict will recognize themselves in her work, and especially that the book will resonate between Western, local, and regional perspectives. “I hope that people who think they already have a very politicized opinion would stop and consider something different,” she adds. “Or even people who aren’t interested at all, and aren’t from the peanut gallery on Israel and Palestine. I’m just hoping that this book can be an avenue towards curiosity, to consider a conversation.”

*Occupied Pleasures* is available for preorder via [FotoEvidence](#).

***Tanya Habjouqa*** is a photographer with ***Panos***, based in East Jerusalem.

***Jen Tse*** is a photo editor and contributor to *TIME LightBox*. Follow her on Twitter ***@jentse*** and ***Instagram***.



A woman in Gaza, without a travel permit, passes through an underground tunnel on her way to a party in Egypt, carrying a bouquet of flowers. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





Hayat (left) teaches yoga to the residents of her village, Zataara, on the outskirts of Bethlehem in the West Bank. The women are increasing in number each week. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



Students from the Al-Quds University javelin team wrap up the last practice before summer vacation in the West Bank city of Abu Dis, next to the Israeli Separation Wall. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





After grueling traffic at the Qalandia checkpoint, a young man enjoys a cigarette in his car as traffic finally clears on the last evening of Ramadan. He is bringing home a sheep for the upcoming Eid celebration. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



Gazan body builders jovially strike poses after a workout. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





A mother says good-bye in an emotional moment before her daughter's new husband comes to take her to the wedding and to their new home and life. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



A young boy attempts to bathe his reluctant donkey in the sea, directly beside his home on the outskirts of the Deir al-Balah Refugee camp. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



The Gaza Parkour And Free Running team practice in a cemetery on the outskirts of their refugee camp in Khan Younis, Gaza. The walls show damage from past Israeli incursions. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



A young girl plays on the beach in the party dress she wore the night before at a wedding, at the Deir al-balah Refugee camp in Gaza. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





A woman plays with two baby lion cubs born in the Rafah Zoo in Gaza. Gazan Zoo keepers are renowned for creativity, faced with limited options; having famously painted a donkey as a zebra, smuggling in animals through the tunnels, and stuffing them once they are dead, as animals are difficult to replace. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



Toy delivery van on Gaza Beach Highway. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





Teenage girls try on dresses for an upcoming dance. Ramallah. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



A father plays with his son at the beach, a typical scene on Friday afternoons in Gaza. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos





Young women, fully dressed in “jilbab,” exercise in a gym in Gaza. The women say they cover at the gym because they have no privacy in the public sphere due to limited economic options. They say they cannot afford private gyms and they’re tired of being stuck at home. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



Musicians for hire lead a procession of cars to a wedding party. Traditionally, they accompany the groom to pick up the bride and jump out and play for the arrival of the bride and groom at wedding hall. Tanya Habjouqa—





Sabah Abu Ghanem, 14, waits for a wave on a slow surf day. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



Two young women take a journey up the “mount of temptation” in Jericho in the West Bank. Biblically, it is regarded as the mountain on which Christ was tempted by the devil, during his 40-day fast. Today, you can



order a coke and relax in a restaurant. The cable car is the most high-tech tourist infrastructure owned by Palestinians in the West Bank. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos



A Palestinian youth from Hebron enjoys a swim in Ein Farha, considered to be one of the most beautiful nature spots in the entire West Bank. It, like many other nature reserves and heritage sites, is occupied by the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority. Palestinian tourist enterprises are not allowed. Tanya Habjouqa—Panos

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