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## The Role of Revolutionary Intellectuals is of Utmost Importance: *Imagining Palestine*

Tahrir Hamdi Interviewed by Louis Brehony

### Introduction

With the flames of anticolonial resistance raging in occupied Palestine, those on the receiving end of Zionist repression have continued to develop cultural and intellectual counterparts to the armed struggle. *Janus Unbound* is proud to have on its Editorial and Advisory Boards a number of scholars whose work has sought to platform this struggle, analyzing its history, and understanding its trajectories. Hailing from a family of displaced Palestinians and fighters including her late father Khalil, Tahrir Hamdi is a leading professor of literature and decolonial studies at Arab Open University, Jordan. Her new book *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* (2023)<sup>1</sup> gives a historic and contemporary survey of Palestinian resistance culture. This conversation between Professor Hamdi and Dr Louis Brehony took place after the book's publication, in the context of a renewed Palestinian counterattack against an ongoing wave of settler-colonialist massacres.<sup>2</sup>

### Interview

**Louis Brehony:** Introducing your book, you describe imagining Palestine as “a *conscious act* of resistance and defiance, which involves the constant process of reconfigurations and reformulations of Palestinian national and cultural collective identity” (10). This is a succinct summary of your work, its main themes of analysis, and the catalogue of revolutionary and intellectual figures who personify the acts and positions that you introduce. Your focus here is on Palestinian culture, including, but not limited to critical theory, literature, music, and visual arts, and, through a serious analysis of each, it becomes clear how each is assembled into a collective politics and history. It is particularly striking how your emphasis on consciousness in the making of different strands of Palestinian narrative shapes the approaches of new generations of exiles to the core issues facing questions of dispossession and liberation.

I'd like to begin this interview by breaking down and exploring particular strands of the statement I quoted earlier. Firstly, the word *resistance* is used repeatedly throughout your work, whether to describe the poetic and artistic contributions of Mourid Barghouti, Susan Abulhawa, or Naji al-Ali, or as a term recognizing the function and spirit of the armed movement to decolonize Palestine. Readers may be familiar with recent “debates”—for want of a better

term—whereby Palestine solidarity is criminalized in the West and apparently progressive social forces position themselves against descriptions of Palestinian culture and protest as resistance. But how do you see the importance of the term? Or, put another way, why must imagining a different Palestine involve resistance?

**Tahrir Hamdi:** I emphasize words like “resistance,” *sumud* (steadfastness). I call it “Palestinian *sumud*,” and “defiance” to clarify that this is more than protest; resistance entails a total rejection of the status quo, not only of the Zionist settler colony, but also Arab officialdom, which enables the perpetuation of the dispossession and oppression of the Palestinian people. Many Arab states have security arrangements with the Zionist entity, arrangements targeting revolutionary Palestinian intellectuals and freedom fighters inside occupied Palestine. To imagine Palestine involves serious resistance—all forms of resistance—and this is something that some (in the West, “apparently progressive social forces”) in the international Palestine “solidarity” movement seem to ignore. Resistance, of course, involves all forms of cultural resistance, BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions), and teaching and speaking about Palestine, but it also involves the armed struggle, which for Ghassan Kanafani cannot be separated from cultural resistance. The two must work together, in unison, with one feeding into the other: cultural resistance and armed resistance.

To imagine is to make real. So imagining Palestine is empowering: the colonized feel empowered when they can strike and hurt the colonizer, and this allows the colonized to undergo a kind of empowering rehumanization, whereby we have the creation of new human beings, if you will, who do not beg for their freedom, but freedom fighters who act and become agents of their own destiny. One needs to be able to imagine the very possibility of this ultimate act of resistance, *sumud*, and defiance, a transforming and empowering act that makes it possible for the colonized/oppressed to *imagine* victory. In *Imagining Palestine*, I write about this very possibility of resistance and the ability to imagine victory and liberation, not the humiliating and dehumanizing defeat and defeatism of the so-called “moderate” Arab regimes. Of course, they are not moderate by any means; they are “moderate” in the sense of being under the total control and influence of the imperialist colonizer. So, the term “moderate” is a word taken out of the political playbook of the imperialist Western (neo)-colonizer.

**LB:** So, in opposition to this demand for moderation comes popular defiance to those attempting to quash their struggle. At other points in your book you find *sumud* in the cross-community defense of al-Aqsa mosque, in the acts of self-decolonization found in Ghassan Kanafani’s novels, or in al-Ashiqeen’s songs depicting families’ endurance of martyrdom. The concept of *sumud* was developed in the period of the Palestinian revolution, which gained steam as an armed resistance movement after 1967. It has been interpreted in many ways, including by liberal Zionists as somehow taking on defeatist or fatalistic con-

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notations. Can you expand on your definition of *sumud*? And how do the acts you describe contribute to an ongoing Palestinian movement?

**TH:** Let me tell you something, Louis. When the enemy, the “liberal Zionists” you mention, describe *sumud* as “defeatist or fatalistic” you know that the enemy fears this phenomenon because they do not understand it and because it does not exist in their culture. They fear Palestinian *sumud*.

*Sumud* in Arabic literally means to stand firm, to remain steadfast in the face of brutal occupation and criminal settler-colonialism. This is not defeatist. This is the greatest form of heroism, bravery, and defiance. This is something that the Zionist enemy lacks. This Palestinian *sumud* represents the energy that will help power the ongoing Palestinian movement. New generations of Palestinians inside and outside occupied Palestine do not look to the occupier’s policeman, the Palestinian Authority (PA), or any so-called “leader/leadership” supported by Arab regimes that have signed treaties of surrender and alliance with the Zionist entity.

This new generation of Palestinians has chosen their leaders—revolutionary intellectuals—such as the martyr Basel al-Araj, and freedom fighters from already established and newly formed resistance groups, such as al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the Lions’ Den, the Tulkarm Brigade, and others. This generation of Palestinians live in *sumud* and resistance where the defeatist (il)logic of the PA and Arab regimes is totally rejected. It is defeatist and fatalistic to accept defeat, but for those who have chosen the path of resistance and *sumud*, there is an absolute refusal to surrender. For this generation of Palestinians, it is Palestine, all of Palestine from the river to the sea. The so-called two state solution is no solution; it has always been a big lie. Palestinian writers/poets/artists/intellectuals, such as Kanafani, Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Izzidin al-Manasra, Naji al-Ali, and Mourid Barghouti, spoke about *return*, the urgent return of the Palestinians to Palestine and the return of Palestine to the Palestinians. The Palestinian revolution continues, and the millions inside and outside occupied Palestine are awaiting their return; as Barghouti writes in *I Saw Ramallah*, the “return of the millions, that is the true return” (2005, 38). This return of the millions will indeed be realized by the collective resistance and *sumud* of the millions and not the capitulation, surrender, and defeatism of Arab officialdom.

**LB:** I am interested in the important insights you make into the role played by singing, and followers of Palestinian music will be grateful for your contributions to our understanding of movements in this vital form of expression. When you speak of reconfigurations and reformulations, this is arguably seen (or heard) most clearly in evolving Palestinian approaches to music. Again, the reader becomes aware of how Palestine is imagined in exile and the aesthetic approaches you draw on range from the traditionalized sung poems of revolutionary folklorist Abu Arab to US-based poet Suheir Hammad, who has forged connections with black and migrant cultures. In places of exile—which are frequently governed by racism, poverty, and the denial of space to open narratives

of exile—your use of bell hooks’ analysis of “the margin” is pertinent. It reminds us that forms of resistance culture have forged their own spaces to create, and to revolutionize the masses. In times of consumerist culture and social media saturation, do you see attempts to “mainstream” the Palestinian issue as contradictory to this concept? I am thinking in particular of the pressure of mass media to water down or compromise notions of resistance in order to get a hearing.

**TH:** You are absolutely right, Louis, and this I fiercely dislike, this mainstreaming and watering down. Not only that, but also not supporting or conveniently ignoring Palestinian resistance if this resistance ideology, which is the ethical right of any colonized people, does not fit into the Western framework of what is politically correct in the liberal West. The fact that Palestinians are dispossessed, living under brutal siege and in extreme poverty in refugee camps that are now 75 years old without any form of normalcy does not seem to matter. These refugees have to fit into the Western liberal mindset to gain Western sympathy, if you will. Palestinians do not need this sympathy. Sympathy is like begging, begging for mercy, and this is not what the Palestinian cause is about. This is not to say that there are not people in the international community who do not genuinely stand with the Palestinians and their moral right to resist; there are, and they are many. The danger, I believe, is when Palestinians in exile fall into the trap of mainstreaming the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian people are not fighting for scraps of land on the so-called “West Bank.” Even the use of diction is very important and can be quite dangerous when unwittingly repeated: for example, the use of OPT (Occupied Palestinian Territories). This implies that only these particular territories (some parts of the “West Bank”) are Palestinian and occupied. With this simple phrase, the whole 4,000-year history of Palestine is intentionally erased. This is definitely something that newer generations of Palestinians have to be cognizant of. All of Palestine is occupied/colonized. “Israel” is a racist and brutal settler colony, and this Zionist entity must be totally dismantled.

At the beginning of your comment, you mention music and the repurposing of song and dance, and I know that you’ve done some very important work in this regard (keenly awaiting your book on this!). Yes, this is essential. Revolutionary Palestinian music helps to connect the Palestinian community across space and time: Palestinians in exile with those living under occupation. As I discuss in *Imagining Palestine*, there are several layers of reconfigurations/repurposing of song and dance. Much of the Palestinian songs and dances today that have taken on a very revolutionary fervor are deeply entrenched in the heritage of Palestine. However, when sung anew wherever there are Palestinians, they become songs of defiance and resistance, a declaration of Palestinian national identity.

Other poem-songs of the Palestinian revolution, which were originally written during the British Mandate, such as “Min Sijn Akka” (“From Akka Prison”) have been repurposed by bands, such as al-Ashiqeen after the 1970s. A very popular song of resistance nowadays is called “Shuftu al-Batal, Shuftu?”

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(“Did You See the Hero, Did You See Him?”), sung by al-Ashiqeen in honour and praise of the young heroic martyrs of occupied Palestine, such as Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, known as “The Lion of Nablus.” The 19-year-old al-Nabulsi has become a symbol of heroism and fortitude for a new generation of Palestinians the world over. To slightly alter Barghouti’s phrase, “poetry travels,” I would say that these revolutionary songs travel and help to shape the mindset of a new generation of Palestinians who believe in their right to resist and return to their homeland, and there is no compromising or watering down the Palestinian right of return.

**LB:** Remaining on the theme of reconfiguring, there is a politics of defiance evident in your own narrative, shaped in separation from the freedom to return to Palestine. A crucial part of this approach comes up in your highlighting of voices opposed to the PA, to which you add your own voice. You cite Barghouti, who was a fierce critic of the “moderate” (doublespeak for imperialist-backed) forces presiding over the region. The PA banned the books of Edward Said, who attacked the Oslo “peace” deal in the 1990s, and I think you are correct in writing that this elite feared Basel al-Araj, in whose Zionist murder they collaborated in 2017. They feared Said too. You describe Basel al-Araj as a “revolutionary intellectual.” Would you mind unpacking this term? In thinking of the balance of forces in Palestine and across the Arab world, what role should revolutionary intellectuals play? And in which way does this differ to the kinds of “revolutionaries” promoted by the West in places like Syria or Libya during the imperialist interventions of recent years?

**TH:** Both the Zionist occupiers and the PA feared/fear revolutionary intellectuals like al-Araj. A revolutionary intellectual is one who is oppositional in the sense that he/she cannot be contained or absorbed into the hegemonic, imperialist mindset/ideology of the oppressor/colonizer and cannot be supported by them. The revolutionary intellectual stands with the oppressed and fights on their behalf and is willing to pay the price for it—as Basel did with his heroic martyrdom. Basel, a pharmacist by training, was not only an activist, but also an educator; he understood all too well the importance of Kanafani’s teachings on the culture of resistance and its natural fusion with the armed struggle. Basel could not teach his revolutionary ideas at formal universities, so he formed his own underground university called the “Popular University, an informal education project that goes against the mainstream of what is taught at formal Palestinian universities” (Hamdi 198). Basel taught resistance, specifically a course called “Palestinian resistance since the inception of settler-colonialism” (Hamdi 198). This kind of revolutionary education does not bode well with the occupier and the local enforcer, who preaches and teaches defeat and surrender. Perhaps the title of an article by Victoria Brittain, “They had to die: assassination against liberation” (2006) best describes why revolutionary intellectuals like al-Araj and Nizar Banat had to die—it is an attempted assassination of resistance and liberation, an action coordinated by the colonizer/occupier and the PA, the local enforcer.

So, the role of revolutionary intellectuals is of utmost importance in the Arab region; in fact it is essential because there is so much intentional misinformation that is encouraged, if not designed, by the West and spread by Arab regimes allied to the West by means of what Louis Althusser called “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs). Revolutionary intellectuals in the Arab region, like al-Araj, resort to non-traditional routes since most of these regimes are controlled by Western imperialist powers. As for the Western supported “revolutionaries” of Syria or Libya in recent years, it goes without saying, you cannot be a revolutionary if you are supported by the imperialist West—that is a contradiction in terms. Imperialist powers do not support revolutions in the Global South, and to believe that this could ever be true is delusional. However, as I mentioned above, the hegemonic powers can gain the consent of the masses in the Global South when they are able to spread their false discourse through the state apparatuses of the Arab regimes, such as the religious apparatus during Friday prayers, universities and schools, media and other state apparatuses. Of course, media has proved to be a powerful tool in the destruction of Arab states, especially with the promotion of Sunni/Shiite divisions not only between states, but also within the same state.

**LB:** Said is frequently looked upon as a great thinker and in your text, I think we see another, rarely emphasized side to his work, in the concrete, principled position he took towards Palestinian resistance. I also think you are correct in making passing criticism of Bashir Abu-Manneh as seeing Kanafani’s support for armed struggle as merely an expected “standard.” As you show, this support was part of a broader outlook, which saw the armed resistance movement as a key tenet of his outlook, comparable to the contributions of other anti-colonial, revolutionary, and socialist fighters, including Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral. Readers may be interested to know that we are currently working on a selected political works of Kanafani, which I believe will offer his work greater exposure and contribute to fervor for Kanafani’s work among Palestinian youth. In light of the renewed armed struggle currently being led in Nablus by the Lions’ Den movement, how do you see the relevance of these contributions today?

**TH:** You know what I would like to see happen—especially with the new Kanafani volume that we are working on right now—is to better contextualize Kanafani, not only as a great novelist and storyteller, but also as a great thinker and revolutionary theorist. Kanafani’s ideas on cultural resistance and the armed struggle, which were already forming in the 1960s, were of great significance to the Palestinian resistance movement and other anti-imperialist movements around the world. An important difference between Frantz Fanon and Kanafani is that Fanon was translated and promoted in the West, but Kanafani was not. It seems that Palestine must remain silenced, even within the context of revolutionary theory. Said believes that Western Marxists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (who wrote the introduction to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*), were hopelessly disappointing when it came to Palestine: “Sartre struck me as worth

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the effort simply because I could not forget his position on Algeria, which as a Frenchman must have been harder to hold than a position critical of Israel. I was wrong of course” (2000). In the same way that Palestine has been long silenced, its great thinkers, such as Kanafani, have until quite recently, been silenced in the West—again the idea of “they had to die” that I mentioned earlier. Kanafani, of course, was assassinated by the Mossad in Beirut along with his niece Lamees in a car bomb in 1972. Kanafani’s ideas on resistance and liberation are especially relevant today. You mentioned the young, fearless *fdayees*, such as the Lions’ Den movement. These young people represent the new generations that Kanafani theorized about in his important essay “Thoughts on Change and the ‘Blind Language’” and narrated in his fiction, especially in his novella *Returning to Haifa* (2000).

Kanafani’s message in *Returning to Haifa* is clear. His character Khalid represents the future Palestine. For Kanafani, the cause is not a sentimental memory or part of an atavistic and nostalgic past; it is something *living*, and it entails agency and empowerment, the creation of new men and women. Khalid, in *Returning to Haifa*, represents the empowered, re-humanized Palestinian:

I was just saying to myself: What’s Palestine with respect to Khalid? ... Palestine is something worthy of a man bearing arms for, dying for ... We were mistaken when we thought the homeland was only the past. For Khalid, the homeland is the future. That’s how we differed and that’s why Khalid wants to carry arms. Tens of thousands like Khalid won’t be stopped by the tears of men searching in the depths of their defeat for scraps of armor and broken flowers. Men like Khalid are looking toward the future, so they can put right our mistakes and the mistakes of the whole world. ... Khalid is our enduring honor. Didn’t I tell you from the beginning that we shouldn’t come—because that was something requiring a war? Let’s go! (187)

Thus, when the critic Bashir Abu-Manneh says that Kanafani here is offering the “standard advocacy of armed struggle” (2016, 86), he’s obviously wrong. For Kanafani, cultural resistance would provide the steeliness, the *sumud*, and the fearlessness required to ensure a successful armed struggle. Kanafani believed in the moral right of the colonized to resist, using all means possible. The turning point in *Returning to Haifa* is when the main character Said (Khalid’s father) realizes that Palestinian return to the homeland entails having “tens of thousands like Khalid,” a war of liberation, not meaningless negotiations with the brutal colonizer, and it is the responsibility of revolutionary intellectuals (cultural resistance) to prepare for this (187). New generations of Palestinians, such as the Lions’ Den of Nablus, understand this lesson. It is of the utmost importance for Kanafani’s fiction and political writings to be taught inside and outside occupied Palestine. Hopefully, the Kanafani volume on which we are currently working will be important in this regard.

**LB:** The enduring hunger for the right of displaced Palestinians to return to their homeland, which you emphasize, is ever-present in many of the political, cultural, and intellectual works you cite in the book. And, it must be said, that



Leila Khaled, who has steadfastly clung to a politics of socialism and liberation, truly deserves her place among them. Are you optimistic that this right—including, of course, your own right of return—will be obtainable? Or do new generations imagining Palestine through resistance cultures of their own suggest that liberation or *tabrir*, may one day be in reach?

**TH:** The answer is a resounding YES! Let me spell it out here: THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE WILL RETURN TO PALESTINE. Like Kanafani, I believe in this new generation of Palestinians, and their experience, which I would define as Late Style. If I were to rework Said's concept of Late Style, I would include the Late Style resistance of the *young*, and not only the resistance and defiance of the old and dying, as Said would have it. Late Style represents a defiant refusal to surrender under any circumstance. The Late Style resistance of the young, the new generations of Palestinians in Nablus, Hebron/Al Khalil, Jenin, Jerusalem/Al Quds, and other towns and villages in 1967 occupied Palestine and even inside 1948 occupied Palestine is fierce and unstoppable. This fierce resistance is based on the experience of these young people: historical knowledge (passed down from one generation to the next) and the present experience of the brutality of Zionist settler-colonialism. Palestinians live the daily pain and suffering. Many of them live in refugee camps: the steadfast and fiercely defiant Jenin refugee camp is one example. Their lives are their education. No form of oppression and suffering can continue as such. And no exclusivist, apartheid, settler-colonial state can continue to exist. Zionist oppression and colonization must and will come to an end.

Having said the above, it is important to emphasize that Palestinians need to unite and unify their resistance efforts; divisions cause weakness. This is actually happening now with the popular movement the Lions' Den, which is attempting to unite the resistance, bringing together all ideologies under one umbrella—that of a unified Palestinian resistance. Imagining Palestine entails the restructuring of the current state of affairs—restructuring also means dismantling what is there. There is no room for a PA with security arrangements with the enemy within a revolutionary liberation movement. I quote al-Araj on the PA in *Imagining Palestine*: “Let us dismantle it and let them fall” (199). This brings us back to the role of the revolutionary intellectual who can instill a revolutionary ethics that emphasizes victory and liberation and not defeat and surrender. The Palestinian people will not surrender, and they are growing in power and resistance in their millions. Said wrote one word in Arabic on the museum memorial cloth at the District Six Museum in South Africa when he was asked to sign his name: *return* (عودة). Liberation and return are indeed obtainable. Palestinian resistance and *sumud* will inevitably lead to liberation (*tabrir*) and the return of the millions to Palestine.

## Biographies

Tahrir Hamdi is a professor of decolonial and resistance literature and theory. Hamdi is currently the Rector at Arab Open University in Jordan. Her new book *Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* was published by

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Bloomsbury in January 2023. She is currently co-editing a book (with Louis Brehony) on Ghassan Kanafani's revolutionary political and theoretical essays.

Louis Brehony is an activist, musician, researcher, and educator from Manchester, UK. He is the author of an upcoming monograph on Palestinian musicianship in exile and is director of the award-winning documentary film *Kofia: A Revolution Through Music* (2021).

### Notes

1. See the review essay in this issue by Ilan Pappé titled "The Agency and Resilience of the Palestinians Shines" on page 69-79.
2. The conversation took place in writing electronically.

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