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Art in Revolt: Palestinian and Lebanese Activist Art in the 21st  
Century

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Τέχνη σε εξέγερση: Παλαιστινιακή και Λιβανέζικη ακτιβιστική τέχνη  
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# Art in Revolt: Palestinian and Lebanese Activist Art in the 21st Century

**Keywords:** Art, Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Gaza, West Bank, Beirut, Yazan Halwani, Banksy, Laila Shawa, Hayat Nazer, October Revolution, Waste Crisis, Beirut Blast, Protest

## **Abstract**

Following the Arab Spring that shook the Middle East and North Africa, artistic expression and activist art became a fundamental tool in protesting and uniting a people during a time of conflict. By looking at different crises in the 21st century within both Palestine and Lebanon and then analyzing any artwork born of the same period, we can truly identify the way visual representations were used and how effective they were. By pinpointing key moments in modern levantine history and focusing on the most active artists during that time, whether they were students of the fine arts or street artists whose graffiti spoke to a nation, we can gain insight and a more transparent view into the issue at hand and that how they affected the lives of the average citizen. Through the looking glass of these artists, we can blur the line between being a viewer and being a participant. We will look at both Palestine and Lebanon, their respective conflicts, and how art was used either as an act of defiance or a way to document the traumatic events. In doing so we will see that similar areas, while undergoing different cataclysms, had a vibrant artistic revival in response.

# Τέχνη σε εξέγερση: Παλαιστινιακή και Λιβανέζικη ακτιβιστική τέχνη στον 21ο αιώνα

**Keywords:** Τέχνη, Παλαιστίνη, Λίβανος, Ισραήλ, Γάζα, Δυτική Όχθη, Βηρυτό, Yazan Halwani, Banksy, Laila Shawa, Hayat Nazer, Οκτωβριανή Επανάσταση, Waste Crisis, Beirut Blast, Διαμαρτυρία

## Abstract

Μετά την Αραβική Άνοιξη, η οποία συγκλόνησε τη Μέση Ανατολή και τη Βόρεια Αφρική, η καλλιτεχνική έκφραση και η ακτιβιστική τέχνη κατέστησαν θεμελιώδη εργαλεία για τη διαμαρτυρία και την ένωση των λαών σε αυτή την περίοδο συγκρούσεων. Εξετάζοντας δύο διαφορετικές κρίσεις στον 21ο αιώνα, αυτές στην Παλαιστίνη και στον Λίβανο, και στη συνέχεια αναλύοντας οποιοδήποτε έργο τέχνης γεννήθηκε την ίδια περίοδο, μπορούμε πραγματικά να αναγνωρίσουμε τον τρόπο με τον οποίο χρησιμοποιήθηκαν οι οπτικές αναπαραστάσεις και πόσο αποτελεσματικές ήταν. Αναδεικνύοντας βασικές στιγμές της σύγχρονης ιστορίας της λιβανικής ιστορίας και εστιάζοντας στους πιο δραστήριους καλλιτέχνες εκείνης της περιόδου, είτε φοιτητές καλών τεχνών, είτε καλλιτέχνες του δρόμου των οποίων τα γκράφιτι μιλούσαν στο έθνος, μπορούμε να αποκτήσουμε ενόραση καθώς και μια πιο σαφή άποψη ως προς το ζήτημα που τίθεται, καθώς και το πώς επηρέασαν τη ζωή του μέσου πολίτη. Μέσα από τα μάτια αυτών των καλλιτεχνών, μπορούμε να θολώσουμε τη γραμμή μεταξύ του να είσαι θεατής και να είσαι συμμετέχων. Θα εξετάσουμε τόσο την Παλαιστίνη όσο και τον Λίβανο, τις αντίστοιχες συγκρούσεις που έλαβαν χώρα και πώς η τέχνη χρησιμοποιήθηκε είτε ως πράξη πρόκλησης είτε ως τρόπος αποτύπωσης των τραυματικών γεγονότων. Κάνοντας αυτό θα δούμε ότι παρόμοιες περιοχές, ενώ υπέστησαν διαφορετικές καταστροφές, διατύπωσαν ως απάντηση μια έντονη καλλιτεχνική αναβίωση.

## **DECLARATION FORM**

1. I explicitly and unreservedly declare that the dissertation I am depositing is a product of my intellectual endeavour, it does not breach the rights of third parties and follows the internationally recognized standards of scientific writing, adhering closely to the academic ethics.

2. The author is the only responsible for the opinions that are expressed and the supervisor, the examiners, the department and the University of Peloponnese do not adopt the opinions expressed neither are they responsible for any mistakes or omissions

The declarant

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this to the countless individuals in my life you supported me unequivocally with whom this would have been possible. To my husband, Fadi Derjany, and his never ending love, editing, care, compassion, motivation, and support. To Kiera K. Vaccaro for her encouragement and validation. To my Family who always believed in my abilities.

In support of the Thawra.

For Jad, who is my greatest creation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social, political, and economic conflicts can elicit a mix of reactions which then pave the way for different cultural movements and forms of artistic expression, known as activist art, to gain traction. This can help external audiences empathize and internal players reflect and criticize. When discussing both the pre and post Arab spring conflicts that affected the Levant, more notably the colonization in Palestine and political corruption in Lebanon, we have to consider not only how western media portrayed the situations but also how a certain rhetoric was spun around it. Seeing as western sympathies tend to orbit around the media and its reporting, we need to consider how favourable or not these situations are portrayed and which “side” they focus on. By looking inward instead, and focusing on local insight and experience, we can draw a much more levelled and raw conclusion. When looking at local opinions and reactions, we can see through the arts born of these hardships what the victims fought for and wanted to convey to the world. While art in the Middle East and North Africa has been heavily funded and subsidized by several western NGOs and organizations, (Toukan, 2021:22), it still does not allow us the right to assume that western media portrays these conflicts with the same care and understanding, these two entities share no ties together even if they can technically be linked in one way or another. What is most important is taking the time to understand what the artists are saying, and why they are saying it this way: what social and political bridges are they trying to tear down, and is their creative attempt at lifting the veil successful? What is their motive and what result are they expecting? Do they want to garner sympathy, awareness, or start a revolution? When looking at the art inspired by these circumstances, the violent, sometimes gruesome and painful visuals can humble a viewer while also lifting a veil coloured by a propagated narrative. Art within the Middle East had its own revival both following the tragedy of 9/11 and the Arab spring in the form of activist art. (Toukan, 2021:4). Activist Art, sometimes referred to as Protest Art, is art of any form that is created as “a form of political or social currency, actively addressing cultural power structures rather than representing them or simply describing them.” (Tate, 2008) While this was in part due to art being such a personal yet visual way of demonstrating their jarring and sometimes cruel

plight in a perversely beautiful and palatable manner. By documenting their and sometimes cruel plight in a perversely beautiful and palatable manner. By documenting their history, artists were able to not only inform the viewer about the harsh realities of the conflicts they were surviving, but they also served as a way to reach people who may be cut off from honest and unfiltered access to information. These representations also serve other purposes, such as aiding migrants with understanding life as a refugee but also helping other populations empathize with those same refugees. Whether it be fighting an institution or pacifying another, these artists were not left to their own devices. Western organizations such as Ford and Soros Foundations, the British Council, USAID and more funded both artists as well as cultural centers all over the Arab world. (Toukan, 2021:30). Now one can argue that this was just an altruistic system put in place to help a struggling society, but in reality, these organizations are also using these artists to serve themselves. By trying to fund systems in countries that are affected as well as fostering a feeling of patriotic duty through art, even in conflict there may be less need for external intervention and fewer migrants fleeing. (Toukan, 2021:31). By contributing to a budding cultural environment that helps create a connection between its population and the country at risk, citizens will be more reluctant to leave. As ludicrous as it may seem, there is an argument for funding a paintbrush over a weapon and what a positive effect it may have for all involved.

Activist art in high conflict zones such as Palestine, or areas undergoing frequent political and social troubles due to corruption such as Lebanon, is meant to not only target a viewer's sensibilities but also meant to act as a form of rebellion. By translating their struggles into something visual they are able to stay visible and relevant while they continue to fight their oppressors. Their art may also be used as a means against propaganda and false narratives that envelope their society. (Toukan, 2014:226). While each country is suffering through its own crisis, the similarities in their artistic expressions unite them. The addition of western funding into both these areas further amplifies their connection. While they have more opportunities now to cultivate a lively art scene with budding individuals aspiring to master the metier, the western views on their internal issues remain mostly unchanged. Many countries cast an unsympathetic view on their strife, and some even go as far as to create false narratives surrounding it or lie by omission in their reporting. I will be analyzing not only the source of these

conflicts but also how they have heavily inspired art and how that art has been used as its own form of revolution. A crucial part in understanding how impactful art and artists are when born from a need for representation instead of a path to artistic enlightenment is the context it provides. History without accurate and honest context can be considered a glazed-over version of events: telling the story of the great king who ruled over a happy kingdom leaving behind the reality of his starving, slaughtered, and exploited subjects. Not only does the art provide context, but it also gives us a glimpse into what is important to the individuals living within those conditions. Without Palestinian art, would we know how abandoned the Palestinians felt? How important was it to speak out against a regime banning even the use of the colours of their flag in art (Toenjes, 2015:57) in fear of them gaining sympathy as a colonized people? Without visual representations, would the West have continued to believe Lebanon was simply protesting a tax on a mobile application used by its citizens? Would the absence of street art and larger-than-life sculptures have taken away how imperative it was to bring about social and political change for the survival of the country as a whole? The art manifested from these issues, whether used for visibility or as a form of rebellion, helps provide insight and clarity to the viewer.

First, we will look at Palestine, the importance of art under Israel's occupation, and the works of Laila Shawa. We will analyze how these works came to be, what her message was across each piece, and how representative they are of the daily Palestinian struggle. We will also try to find what the western reactions and responses were to her more street art style images and how they were received globally. We will then look to Lebanon, and specifically highlight the artwork born of the 2019 protests and the Beirut blast of August 2020. We will be dissecting the work of an up-and-coming artist, Hayat Nazer and how her pieces were carefully crafted and to what purpose they serve, as well as known street artist Yazan Halwani and how his pieces "reclaimed" Beirut on behalf of the locals. By analyzing the pieces these artists have created as well as what inspired their creations, while simultaneously discussing the socioeconomic and political situation, we get a rare opportunity: instead of being a viewer, we can step into the place of a participant. Surrounded by the visual and understanding the literal, we take the place of someone on the ground, living through these moments. This can help our understanding, our approach, and our response to these situations.

# PALESTINE

## THE CONFLICT

In order for us to adequately understand the majority of “rebellious” art created in Palestine within the last 50 years, we must understand the conflict which motivated it. Context, as mentioned, is extremely important when analyzing the pieces artistically but also as a reference or source to the event, a telling of the history (Rabb and Brown, 1986:4). Although it is extremely difficult to sum up the history of the conflict, it is necessary to understand what purpose the art may serve and clarify for us, the viewer, what situations paved the way for its creation.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been going on for well over 50 years and continues relentlessly to this day. The discussion of allowing a section of land to be established within the region as an area for Israel to exist began as early as 1897 (Cohen, 187: 41), and was fully brought to fruition thanks to a British effort known as the Mandate for Palestine which ended in 1948, and led to the start of the first Arab-Israeli war following an official proclamation of the independence of the State of Israel. As a result, there have been a number of wars and violent outbursts from both sides as a result of this tension with the third Arab-Israeli war being The Six Day War in 1967. This led to Israel taking control of two important areas, Gaza and the West Bank amongst other key areas. (Oren, 2002: 206). Following this devastating loss, insurgency grew throughout the 1970's on the southern border of Lebanon due to its proximity to Israel. This was followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the first Palestinian uprising which came about in 1987, known as the first intifada.

After this long series of conflicts we witnessed a global effort to bring about peace, all of which fell short. The 1993 Oslo Accords which were not applied and the Camp David Summit in the summer of 2000 were not only non-starters, they also contributed to the second intifada in September of 2000. These were followed by the Taba Summit in 2001, the road map to peace in 2002, and the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002 (PBS, 2001:7). None of these really progressed past the first stage and neither of them truly acknowledges what would happen to the illegal settlers, what the fate of Jerusalem is, and where control of the land may lie in the end. In essence these are all half-constructed proposals asking for the violence to stop on both sides and for illegal constructions and settlements to

halt: two things which continue on to this day with both sides appearing resolute in their actions ruling out any possibility of a peaceful two-state solution. This is amplified with the beginning and growth of Hamas. Founded during the first intifada, Hamas assumed the role of freedom fighters for the benefit of Palestine. In reality, they can take an excessively violent stance which is not always to the benefit of those they claim to be fighting for, such as possibly using civilian dwellings and buildings to store ammunition which causes them to be targeted (Amnesty International, 2017). Hamas is a product of the environment created by the colonization, which allowed such an aggressive group to come to power. An unexpected development came about in 2006 when Hamas ran in the democratic elections and won. The EU and the US promised, amongst others, to support the democratically elected group no matter the results, but these promises were short-lived. After Hamas won their democratic seat in the Israeli government with 76 votes, the US refused any type of political backing and the EU pulled their promised support a few months later, even though they confirmed that the election was completely democratic and legitimate (Bouris, 2014:55). Hamas certainly did not aid the situation by claiming to offer a ten year ceasefire but also that it wouldn't stop other militant Palestinian groups from fighting, which essentially invalidates any promises they made. Militant members of Hamas or similar groups continue to respond to Israel with violence, and Israel uses their existence to justify attacking civilian centers and cutting off inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza from the most basic human rights. One can say that this amplified not only the feeling of abandonment and hopelessness among Palestinians but also showed that the western narrative will consistently side with Israel even after they commit atrocities. More wars, protests, and uprisings followed, and to this day we have increased tension and conflict in Sheik Jarrah and other illegally occupied areas.

Now this entire situation is obviously problematic for many reasons: we need to understand and acknowledge that following the criteria set by the Geneva convention, certain areas of Palestine are considered illegally occupied territories (Amnesty International, 2019). It is also important to note that the Israeli government and illegal settlers have been condemned for committing war crimes and crimes of apartheid numerous times and are currently being probed for war crimes by the International

Criminal Court (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Of equal note, Hamas was born from this conflict as well, and is now a political party with questionable motives and methods and does little to quell the conflict. While they may be considered a necessary evil in the Palestinian fight for freedom and equality, their use of violence and sometimes self-serving actions are an evil nonetheless. This conflict started with the need to find a place of belonging. What is difficult to accept however, is that the violent and illegal colonization and actions of the settlers are so widely accepted simply due to the fact that the threat of being considered an anti-semitic hangs above each of our heads, an invisible guillotine censoring our criticism. Another important distinction to make is the size of occupied territory and how much it has changed over the past 50 years, limiting the native Palestinians to a heavily monitored, constantly shrinking parcel.

Fig 1.

Graphic showing geographical changes within the set Israeli/Palestinian borders from 1918 to 2017 (Visualizing Palestine, 2017)



We must also acknowledge that Palestinians have limited access to services, healthcare, and resources, (Médecins Sans Frontiers, 2021) and are living under laws prohibiting who they may marry (Al Jazeera, 2022), where they can go, and if they can leave. All these realities help us better understand the hardship these artists face and why their message is such a necessary one to get across. In recent years, there has been a shift to a more sympathetic view of Palestinians, largely in part of these artists as well as the transparency that came along with the age of the internet. Even with access to millions via social media, censorship is still abound, and as such street artists, filmmakers, and musicians still play a crucial role in advocating for visibility and accountability in their issues. Artists were seen as such a threat that even the grouping of the colours of the Palestinian flag were banned from being used in art, and any pieces that included them were censored (Toenjes, 2015:57). This speaks volumes about the level of control and censorship Israel as a state wants to hold over not just artists but the populace as a whole. As one can imagine, this just sparked the artists further and pushed them to create as much of an underground cult following through their art as possible.

## ART IN PALESTINE

The idea of art being created to serve a specific political or social goal is not revolutionary in itself and has been used in that respect for centuries. In ancient times, Romans, Greeks, and other powerful empires would often instill their own version of history on invaded parties: commissioning elaborate sculptures, buildings, and temples to replace or supersede existing local works. These pieces served not only to immortalize their victory but also helped insert their history and footprint into an already existing culture. They would replace whatever existed beforehand with what they wanted to remember. Manipulating art so that it could be a tool for propaganda was the norm. If we look at the busts and sculptures of the Julio-Claudians, starting with Augustus, they all have familial traits and resemble Alexander the great. We now know that these individuals did not resemble their representations, and creating a likeness to another ruler they admired was to cultivate a feeling of credibility and achievement (Kleiner, 2008:148). By limiting or censoring Palestinian art, the same end goal is achieved: controlling the narrative. By focusing on creating a narrative via art that solidified Israel's right to exist on Palestinian land, they all but obliterated any physical evidence to say otherwise. When the Bezalel school of Arts and Crafts was opened in Jerusalem, its founder Boris Schatz was considered a saviour since he brought culture to a “country which was barren, desolate, and primitive.”(Alim, 2019: 52) Why primitive and barren, surely Palestinian culture existed before that moment? By degrading it as such, it erases the idea that Palestinians had any culture before that moment. This is another tool used to further detach any Palestinian rights from their own land and solidifying the occupiers as “saviours” rather than colonizers.

Art in Palestine continued to grow and developed its own seat at the head of the resistance, in particular street art and graffiti. While tensions continued to grow, and the Palestinian art scene continued to flourish, Israel censored everything they could. By blocking any chance of exhibitions and even so much as restricting the use of the colours of the Palestinian flag, (Toenjes, 2015:57) they believed to have found a new way to quell the visual aids which spurred a larger sense of rebellion. The use of art would bring together Palestinians, foster a sense of unity and belonging against a common threat, and help motivate them to retain their culture and existence all the while increasing visibility



and hopefully, accountability. We see on a daily basis calls for acknowledgement and for change through art. Even famed anonymous artist Banksy has left his mark within the west bank (fig 2), bringing international notoriety to the message he sends. The political aspect of these issues have been and continue to be ever-present in the artistic depictions that adorn walls, alleys, and doors. Images of a keffiyeh-clad woman (fig 3) or murals with images and messages of resistance (fig 4) serve as symbols of adversity in the face of their occupiers. These rebellious acts of artistic “vandalism”, known as activist art, thus described for their common manifestation in street art serve as a way for the artists to state quite plainly that they will not back down, and that they will not give up (Alim, 2019:54). The continued need for artists as a tool for the Palestinians is still necessary and due to Israel’s continued campaign of control, and there is no indication that the situation is changing within the near future. While external opinions and reactions crescendo and wain alternatively, the resilience of Palestinian artists continues on, whether the viewer is judging or praising them, they continue to do what is needed for survival.

Fig 2.

*Armored Dove of Peace*, Graffiti on the concrete wall of the West Bank (Banksy, 2007)



Fig 3.

*Keffiyeh-Clad Woman*, Stenciled piece on multiple walls in Jerusalem (Unknown, 2012)



Fig 4.

*To Exist is to Resist*, Graffiti Wall in Palestine (Unknown artists, Unknown year)



As altruistic as this may seem, we must also acknowledge the fact that many different organizations funded art in order to insert their own narrative into the situation by focusing on

pushing a pro-democracy agenda in war-torn Middle Eastern countries. In a post 9/11 world, trying to connect with Arabs and Muslims internationally as well as provide an alternative story to the ones they may have been fed by local extremist groups was crucial. Hannan Toukan said it best when she pointed out that:

“When international cultural funding organizations such as the Ford and Soros Foundations, the Dutch Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, as well as more traditional bilateral funding bodies such as Germany’s Goethe Institute and Heinrich Boll Foundation, the British Council, Spain’s Cervantes Institute, the French Cultural Center, and even USAID became increasingly involved in funding projects designed to encourage Arabs of the post-1990 new world order to question the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of their societies” (Toukan, 2021:4).

What this shows us is that, had there not been an incentive for trying to educate or enlighten the viewers, there may not have been any funding at all. Before the Oslo Accords in 1993, we see an influx of art dedicated to the concept of the Nakba, the Palestinian exodus of 1948. We see an array of pieces mostly centered around the theme of the great return, a call to the motherland, or the need to establish oneself at their place of origin, to set roots within the same ground as their ancestors. Following the first and second intifada, we see a shift in the artistic narrative. Suddenly, it is not about the return, but more about the fight to stay. Instead of focusing on the idea that displaced peoples should have the right to come “home,” we see the bloodshed of those who never left and what they have sacrificed to stay where they truly feel they belong (Alim, 2019:58). When external, more western groups came in to fund art and give it room to grow in Palestine it was not done altruistically, as generous and charitable as their intentions may seem. Creating a safe space for artists to depict more pro-west or pro-democratic pieces would work in the favour of all these organizations seeing as it would allow for a shift in sentiments to Western countries and ideals, and may promote a more peaceful and democratically elected government to act as a Western ally (Toukan, 2021:6). Does that mean we can equate Arab nationals, such as Palestinians, as being guinea pigs for some type of artistic and social experiment? Considering that so much of the more recent artistic endeavours by these individuals, or the ability to accomplish them, is funded by these groups, why then do they continue to accept the

mistreatment of occupied Palestinians by way of funding artistic spaces and not local welfare organizations? This, in part, has also contributed to the continued creation of street art and graffiti as an act of defiance within the activist art genre.

Modern street artists and graffiti artists continue to tag and leave their marks all over occupied Palestine. In particular, the separation wall of the West Bank has become a communal canvas of sorts, welcoming all artists, anonymous, unknown, or internationally renowned, to leave their mark. Pieces depicting the Dome on the Rock (fig 5) larger than life caricatures of Donald Trump (fig 6), or simple peaceful landscapes showing what life should be like for the residents (fig 7) have adorned the walls and caught the attention of international viewers. As much as all these pieces tell their own story and contribute in some way to the illustration of the Palestinian struggle, it is worth distinguishing Laila Shawa for her contribution to the Palestinian resistance through art.

Fig 5.

*Dome on the Rock, Mural on West Bank Cement Wall (Unknown Artist, Unknown Year)*



Fig 6.

*Trump and Netanyahu*, Mural painted on the Bethlehem Separation wall in the west bank (Lush-sux 2017)



Fig 7.

*Wall and Piece*, Mural painted on West Bank separation wall (Banksy, 2005)



## PALESTINIAN ARTISTIC PIONEER LAILA SHAWA

When discussing Palestinian art of the 20th and 21st centuries, it would be remiss to not mention or pay respect to Laila Shawa. Palestinian native from birth, her Islamo-pop art gained international recognition and brought new viewers to the edge of the Palestinian conflict. Her ability to translate suffering into beautiful visuals not only allowed for a new audience to be impacted, but also encouraged them to look deeper, past the more sugar-coated retelling in the art, to the core of the trauma at hand. A previously untapped viewership was raving and praising the works which conveyed the struggle, violence, and ugliness of the occupation with a light-hearted flair. By approaching a heavy topic in such a colourful and agreeable way, not only were her pieces more approachable, the meaning of her works was more attainable. Instead of using photo-realistic techniques, Shawa adds what we can consider a child's touch, evoking the innocence of the piece but still maintaining the harrowing subconscious reality. In order to understand and relate to her art style, we need to understand Shawa's training and upbringing as a Palestinian. Once again, the context is crucial in understanding the art and the issues that motivate it.

Born in Palestine before the Nakba and the creation of the state of Israel, Shawa had a unique and privileged upbringing. She was exposed to art in many capacities from a young age. Her family had wealth enough to separate her from the "average" Palestinian, even more so when we consider the harsh realities depicted in her pieces (The Resessionists, 2009). Her more privileged upbringing allowed her to attend the Leonardo da Vinci Art Institute in Cairo, Egypt and later the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, Italy. As one can deduce, Shawa was highly educated and could easily network herself as an artist allowing her to have a fulfilling career and become a household name in the art world. Instead, in 1965 after finishing her schooling, she returned to Gaza. She undertook teaching art classes and crafts to refugees scattered across the area. Instead of focusing on enriching her own career, she tried to enlighten displaced individuals and allowed them to learn how to communicate through art (Naima, 2019). Two years later, she moved to Beirut and painted full-time for nearly a decade. After the Lebanese civil war, she once again moved to Gaza where she focused her efforts on opening the Rashad Shawa Cultural Center in 1985. Following the completion of that project she moved to London,

where she continued to work out of and contribute to many exhibitions all over the Middle East well into the 21st century (The Recessionists, 2009).

While Laila Shawa tackles many subjects throughout her multimedia and artworks. Her most notable works which focus on the colonization of Palestine are *The Walls of Gaza*, *The Walls of Gaza II*, *Gaza III*, *Cast Lead*, and *The Other Side of Paradise* (The Recessionists, 2009). The first of these collections, *The Walls of Gaza*, not only brought her international recognition but also brought intense scrutiny and viewership to the Palestinian strife under occupation. By looking at a collection of these pieces, we can not only understand what the occupation meant to Palestinians, wealthy and free to leave like Shawa or local and locked in with limited resources or recourse. Further, we can see how her play on a more pop art feel drew more viewers in and how it contributed to the stark contrast in her pieces: using beauty to mask her delivery of horror. Instead of simple oil on canvas with realistic visuals representing death, war, and apartheid, Shawa's more lighthearted approach takes the viewer by surprise, allowing them to be immersed in a colourful yet dark message.

Throughout her collections *The Walls of Gaza I* and *II*, as well as *Gaza III*, Shawa uses similar mediums and methods. The background of her pieces are actual photographs from Palestine, which she uses as a foundation to build upon. She then amplifies her message, sometimes to the viewers' horror, using silk screen printing. In some pieces, she cuts out the photo to use on a canvas base, and then prints colourfully on top of it. Her methods still maintain the same purpose at the core: using real photos that document the horror and artfully using colour to alter its impact. This visually affects the viewer in many ways not just due to the actual aesthetics but also the meaning behind each image. The stark contrast between the dark photograph in subject and hue juxtaposed with the bright colours printed show the reality of daily Palestinian life: they must mask the dark with whatever light they can find. The images she uses are usually grotesque, graphic, and hard to look at. She chooses these images which sometimes haunt our memories just after one look and uses them as a canvas, then completely changes the impact they have thanks to her use of colour. As hard as these photos may be to stomach, we now find ourselves more drawn to them and have difficulty looking away and separating the image from the message (Fig 8 - 10). This combination of bright colors over dark subjects truly exemplifies



what it is like waking up in a colonized country on any given day: will today be dark, or will I be hopeful? Her consistency also ensures the pieces naturally group together, helping her intended audience remember the pieces as a collection and not single pieces, how Palestinians have endured many traumas and not just one specific event.

Fig 8.

*Blood Money*, Silkscreen print of American dollars over an image of destroyed Palestinian homes with remnants of graffiti, *The Walls of Gaza II* (Shawa, 1994)



Fig 9.

*20 Targets*, 20 copies of the same image of a young Palestinian child with Arabic graffiti, silk-screened over with the outline of a target, *The Walls of Gaza II* (Shawa, 1994)



Fig 10

*The Deal*, A photo of civilian bodies in a street with American dollar sign graffiti stylized in the background, Silk Screened over with a Palestinian flag, *The Walls of Gaza II* (Shawa, 1994)



While being only a sample of her pieces, we can see here how Shawa throws herself into her work. With the juxtaposition of painful images with full or “wealthy” illustrations we can see how it goes beyond representing the Palestinian struggle. Instead of simply depicting what an individual may suffer under occupation, it mirrors in some ways their reality. That no matter how colourful and beautiful the piece, underneath it lies sorrow, pain, and strife. It can draw a parallel to her own life: A Palestinian with privilege and financial means of escaping occupation is also emotionally affected and conflicted by it. While she may not be the Child depicted in *20 Targets*, a lack of homeland and belonging affects her in its own way (Naima, 2019). Instead of simply choosing to build her career and separate herself from the conflict of her homeland, she became even more enmeshed by it. Artists like these allow us a glimpse into the harshness of Palestinian occupation, the true realities of who is afflicted, as well as how invasive it is to their daily lives. By gaining traction globally and greatly expanding her audience, Palestinians can continue to be more heard and have been. While it may not have brought about a drastic overnight change, increased visibility has led to more accountability. One can only hope the artists of this generation may continue to amplify that by continuing in Shawa’s footsteps and using artwork and graffiti to get their message across anywhere, and everywhere possible.

## LEBANON

### THE CONFLICT

The social, economic, and political issues within Lebanon are what allowed a budding art scene to grow, in particular over the last decade or so. We need to understand that the issues and conflicts within Lebanon are vastly different than those in Palestine but are not any less important. While the situation is ever-changing, and maybe not as dire, it is still difficult and heavily impacts the day-to-day life of its citizens. Whether we are discussing the post-civil war feeling to the most recent and horrifying governmental tragedy known as the Beirut Blast, Lebanon has a long way to come before freeing itself of its temperamental and volatile state. Once a beacon of light, culture, and society, the “Paris” of the Middle East still retains some of its charms. Above the architecture, art, and culture that envelops any who crosses the threshold of Beirut lies one thing: the resilience of Lebanon, its people, and the younger generations that refuse to abandon all hope.

Historically, Lebanon has always been an outlier when discussing the countries within the Middle East for numerous reasons: its rich culture, history, and vibrant society have remained resilient through numerous periods full of hardship. Lebanon has long been plagued with an array of both internal and external conflicts. Bordered at the north by Syria and at the south by Israel, its geographic location makes it a hotbed of conflicts: refugees, collateral damage, and the development of insurgency groups all take place within its borders. Adding to its own internal conflict, Lebanon seems to be consistently thrown into a downward spiral. While in Beirut however, you would never know this to be the case. The downtown souks adorned with designer brands, new sky rises promoted, planned, and advertised juxtaposed with the bullet holes still visible in the older, decrepit buildings truly exemplify the social divide amongst its people. The appearance of any middle-class tier in Lebanon is being dismantled thanks to years of political corruption (Adwan, 2004:6), creating a system which allows the rich to prosper and the working class to continue getting pushed to the bottom of the echelon.

An anti-corruption sentiment has been growing in Lebanon since the civil war but peaked after the Arab Spring (Adwan, 2004:14). This has resulted in a number of protests, most notably the ones in 2015 and 2016 regarding the waste crisis and again in 2019 and 2020 in response to an increase in taxes.

The resistance of the Lebanese populace and support of the diaspora has proven to be unwavering in the face of all adversity. The major difference when discussing issues within Palestine and Lebanon is the fact that it is not a colonizer or occupier committing atrocious acts in Lebanon or enabling them: it is the Lebanese elected officials. This brings many other issues to light: distrust in a democratic system, increased illegal activity at a local level, and more support for fringe groups who promise change but have their own sometimes extreme agenda.

One of the biggest issues that plague Lebanon and the Lebanese government is the way the country is ruled. Their sectarian rule which allocates certain governmental positions based on religious belief has long fractured Lebanon and continues to do so. This was outlined in the Ta'if Agreement established in 1992, in which “ the Chamber of Representatives has been divided among sectarian lines to ensure proportional representation and reduce potential religious conflicts” (Helou, 2019:10) with a 50/50 split of the available parliamentary seats with half being allotted to Christians and Muslims respectively. This has allowed not only for years of mismanagement and corruption, but it has also prevented any real reform seeing as the religious affiliation of politicians is considered before their actual experience and effectiveness. This pseudo-theocracy has brought about many issues: major discrepancies in socioeconomic groups, mismanaged funding and government roles, the growing support for Hezbollah, and more. By advocating for certain politicians based on their religious affiliations the idea of a separation of religion and state affairs in Lebanon is completely obliterated. The people of Lebanon have historically fought against corruption within their system in many ways including through the arts (Toukan, 2010:127). Whether It be music, graffiti, or film, Lebanese artists have stood against their fragmented system and do not relent in the face of censorship.

## ART IN LEBANON

Art, in particular street art, has a special place when discussing the uprisings and rebellions in Lebanon following the civil war. Many artists used this medium to speak up against unfair and corrupt management and band together with their activism through art (Lennon, 2021:5). Using the walls of Beirut, some riddled with bullets and others used as advertising for towering high rises to come, adds an ironic depth to their tagging. The graffiti that adorns certain areas can be vulgar, crass, even traditional, but they all serve the same end: fighting the broken system that continuously prevents progress by fully dismantling it. The modus operandi of these artists remains consistent, fighting corruption with visual truth both beautifully and shockingly (Lennon, 2021:65). This evolved even more so during the October revolution within Beirut, which caused us to see an influx of sculpture, film, and more. No matter the medium, artists in Lebanon continue to fight and stoke revolution with artistic representations, messages, and unapologetic graphics. The noise of every protest is met with the noise on the walls, the loud and boisterous messages of resistance channel the passion of the citizens staying to fight for change. The joining of Calligraphy and Graffiti has forever been immortalized by many artists including El-Seed and Yazan Halwani. This appreciation of Street art gave way to the White Wall exhibit in 2012 (ArchiLeb, 2012).

Bringing together many pieces of art born from revolution into one exhibit, White Walls allowed meaningful art to prosper in Lebanon. Furthermore, it promoted its creation by allowing numerous street art groups to come together and create more representative pieces. This ensured their safety as they were “working within the confines of Beirut’s bourgeois art world, which protected them in the absence of anonymity” (Cory, 2022). Now the use of street art in revolution is far from unique in Lebanon, we see it throughout many countries and in particular Middle Eastern and North African countries during the Arab Spring. The graffiti adorning the walls of Palestine, Syria, and many other countries mirror the same tradition. Each movement in Lebanon is met with unique pieces and more artists coming forward. Now, this relationship can be seen as beneficial for both: art is created to help further the cause of the people, and the artists receive more recognition. This begs the question: if not for the possibility of notoriety and widespread visibility, would these artists take the risk? If not

accompanied by thousands of protestors and the prospect of anonymity, would the artists still go and create these politically motivated and critical pieces out in the open? In this case does Activist Art rely on the confidence and protection behind anonymity? No matter the answer, the importance of the message and the part it plays in Lebanon's tumultuous modern history is crucial. The White Wall exhibit grouped together many pieces showing how rebellions can be spurred and documented via art, but it opened the door for more than that; Suddenly it saw different street art groups, who had previously been in conflict with each other, working together to help bring clarity, transparency, and truth to light regarding Lebanon's corruption (Cory, 2022).

It is important to note that in order for us to accurately compare the artistic movement in Lebanon to that of Palestine we must consider two factors: the importance of street art as well as the impact of art following the Arab Spring. While in Palestine the theme of any artistic representation since the first intifada has remained consistent, in Lebanon it waivers depending on the current crisis. Art has served alongside rebellion and revolution in Lebanon since the civil war of the late 70s, and as such the repertoire is massive and far too complex to navigate within these pages. Instead, we will focus on three major events and what visual impact they had on Beirut's art scene. In post-Arab Spring Lebanon, the government continued to be mismanaged and as a result, the citizens suffered. These culminated into three major protests and movements: the 2015 waste crisis, the 2019 October revolution, and the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut Blast. We will look at each crisis individually and with it the art born from it.

## 2015 WASTE CRISIS:

In 2015 we saw a wave of protests coming forward in response to the ongoing and worsening waste crisis in Lebanon, but more specifically in and around Beirut. Following the closure of a water treatment plant in Naameh, garbage piled into the streets as the center had been closed with no contingency plan in place (Haines-Young, 2015). The companies contracted to collect the waste stopped doing so, as there was no plan for them to dispose of it and no new routes scheduled. Garbage continued to overflow throughout the streets of the city in the blistering July heat, which made it completely uninhabitable. The landfill site in question was never truly meant to be a long-term solution. It was a temporary area meant to take on at most 2 million tons of waste but over the course of almost two decades took on closer to 15 million tonnes. Even while knowing that the landfill would be closed, the government took no action and made no plans to reroute the waste. Later on, in August of 2015, the waste began getting collected again but with no location or plan materialized, it was dumped around empty lots and under bridges in the city (Haines-Young, 2015). Now as if this in itself was not reason enough to protest, the #YouStink movement came forth via a culmination of different issues which are a constant theme in Lebanese protests: corruption, power cuts, water shortages, government mismanagement, and economic issues (Vice, 2015). When the government finally decided to take action or make some type of plan, it included more landfills and incineration sites to the horror of local activists and citizens worried about Lebanon's ecological footprint. Instead of investing or creating a system to promote recycling, Lebanon continued to use outdated and medieval methods of ridding itself of its litter. This waste crisis continues on to this day, with garbage being a huge issue throughout Lebanon, both its collection and its management and disposal. The protest and its growing numbers culminated in armed forces barricading the home of the prime minister (fig 11) to keep protestors at bay (A Separate State of Mind, 2015). Violence continued to grow and security forces mistreated protestors who kept calling for change and reform.

Fig 11

A Barricade separating Protestors from the Prime Minister and his Cabinet with Graffiti, (Unknown Artists, 2015)



When the barricade was set up to separate the protestors from the prime minister's house, the #YouStink movement called on Yazan Halwani to paint a mural on it (Bramley, 2015). Known for bringing together Beirutis via his street art, Halwani has a reputation for beautifying the city. His unique style combines talented and almost photorealistic portraiture superimposed on scripture-style graffiti. Affectionately referred to as "Calligraffiti" these iconic portraits overlapping scripture style Arabic writing are meant to bring together many components into one cohesive piece (Rainey, 2015). The historical relevance and importance of the language and letters juxtaposed with the damaged, dirty, and sometimes bullet hole-ridden walls of Beirut allow us to experience Lebanon in the eyes of the locals: both beautiful and harrowing. Adding to that the images of Lebanese heroes, the pathos of Halwani is clearly emulated through his style. The destruction shown together with the timeless beauty, the damage acting as a vessel for the irreplaceable, has an almost playful and hopeful feeling for the viewers. Using this "calligraffiti" and combining it with moving murals depicting Lebanese heroes, his art also serves a great purpose: taking back Beirut from the corrupt politicians so focused on picking off everything left of its carcass (Ayoub, 2015). By adorning the walls and buildings of the city he is



allowing the famed Lebanese subjects of his pieces to become a focal point (fig 12 - 14), allowing the citizens and the people they admire to represent Beirut. As such it was only natural that he be asked to paint on the barricade but, as he started doing so, locals also stepped forward to add their own touches. Instead of continuing, he allowed them to be vocal and take over, in essence creating a new piece combining all their efforts together.

Fig 12

*Fairuz*, Mural in Gemmayzeh, Beirut. Photorealistic painting over Calligraffiti, (Halwani, Unknown Year)



Fig 13

*Ali Abdallah*, mural of a homeless man who died in Hamra, Beirut in 2013. Photorealistic painting over Calligraffiti (Halwani, Unknown Year)



Fig 14

*Khalil Gibran* , mural of the poet Khalil Gibran imagined on the 100,000 Lebanese Pound Bill.

Photorealistic painting over Calligraffiti, (Halwani, Unknown Year)



Halwani is unique in that while he is a street artist, he does not believe in tagging his work. For him, the act of tagging a city with your name is the equivalent of politicians spreading their photo and name all over as if claiming ownership (Rainey, 2015). The beauty of Halwani's murals and the relevance of their subject is what matters. The relationship between the wall, the art, and Beirut is what should be remembered, not who did it. By using his art in this way for well-known subjects like the poet Khalil Gibran, and for more "faceless" individuals such as a homeless man who died in Hamra in 2013 (Rainey, 2015), he continues to provide a narrative with which the Beirut citizens can be proud of. Instead of identifying the city with Hezbollah banners or images of Tamam Salaam and other politicians, the walls of Beirut are adorned by Lebanese individuals worth the space in the eyes of the locals.

## 17 OCTOBER REVOLUTION:

Similar to the 2015 waste crisis, the October revolution in 2019 in Lebanon was caused by a growing number of issues with additional taxation being the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The 17 October revolution started as a small movement but quickly snowballed into a large collection of demonstrations all over the country condemning the sectarian rule, government corruption, and overall mismanagement. The spark was additional taxes imposed to gasoline, tobacco, and voice-over IP calling (Amnesty International, 2020). The "WhatsApp" tax was put forth as a solution to low spending on local cellular services which were government-owned. This would add a tax to anyone using the WhatsApp application and those funds would be used to close the gap in revenue for those other service providers. The protest was vilified in local media, claiming that this anger was unjustly rooted in a simple tax change, however, the implications were far worse (Cory, 2020). First, the VoIP service in question is free to use and not owned by the Lebanese government in any way, so the tax itself is immoral and illogical. Further the suggestion of this tax truly exemplifies the focus and priority of the sectarian government: collecting more money from their already suffering constituents no matter the material or psychological cost. Add to this that unemployment was at an all-time high, taxes were already quite burdensome, and basic needs of Lebanese citizens such as clean water and consistent and reliable electricity were not being met. Not only was this tax increase seen as unjust, the fact that their taxes were already being misused worsened the anger of the locals. Basic human needs, which were meant to be funded by these taxes, such as water and electricity were not provided in any type of stable or consistent manner and so the idea of paying even more for so little amplified the fervour of the movement.

The protests continued to grow all over the country and resulted in a complete disruption of the economic situation in Lebanon (Cory, 2020). Both public and private businesses shut down, highways closed off with roadblocks, and manifestations took over certain areas within the blockades full of citizens, musicians, artists, and even food stalls. At every roadblock, you were met with a group of individuals happy to help you navigate the detours or even discuss why they were protesting and how meaningful the movement was to them. The point of the protest was never to negatively impact

the everyday citizen, simply to interrupt the daily life of the politicians who until this point refused to truly acknowledge the plight and needs of their citizens. This led to the prime minister, Saad Hariri, and eventually his entire cabinet resigning (Amnesty International, 2020). Unlike western media reporting and even local government owned journalism would have you believe, these protests were non-violent as long as the armed forces would allow. As long as there was no provocation by the local army and police, protestors happily went about dancing a *dabke* to live music, eating zaatar manoushe from a small *saj*, or walking around with comical or ironic posters with text reading such things as “Crime Minister” (Fig 15). Another very important fact to note is that these protests brought together all Lebanese people, no matter their religious beliefs or affiliations. This truly united the population, strengthening ties that had previously been severed or damaged due to the friction between religious sects. This movement and all those within it had one common enemy, government corruption, and everyone stood together to tackle it head-on. These protests still continue to this day, even after a new prime minister and cabinet were elected, as the same issues culminated in the Beirut Blast of 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020) and the current gas and electricity crisis of 2021-2022.

Fig 15

Personal photo of mine taken during the October 17 Protest, Unknown individual carrying a banner



Artists flocked to the protests and collectively provided visual representation which was so desperately needed for these citizens (Anderson, 2019). Having been let down and forgotten by their own government, the local community lifted each other up and created murals and sculptures all over the country in solidarity with the revolution. From darker, more gruesome representations to beautiful colourful murals, the art of the 17 October Revolution like the mural *Rebel On Fire* (fig 16) continues to enthral viewers all over Lebanon. *The Fist of the Revolution*, painted fires, and comic strip style lighthearted representations (fig 17) of the political corruption shed light on the struggle of the local citizens, but also highlight their resilience and unwavering stance even during these difficult times.

Fig 16

*Rebel on Fire*, Mural in downtown Beirut. Man with a mask and paint on his face as seen throughout the October revolution with fire in the background (Unknown Artist, 2019)



Fig 17

Multiple murals in protest: A Protestor with a gag reading “thawra” (revolution) over a cedar, another mural comically depicts a WhatsApp chat with politicians discussing the proposed taxation, on a wall near Riad al-Solh square (Unknown Artists, 2019)



Fig 18

Artist Selim Mawad, who previously worked with human rights associations, taking a cigarette break before continuing his work.



While more established or known street artists took to the walls of business and government buildings (Fig 18), or even barriers put in place to separate protestors from government buildings as we saw in the waste crisis, newer artists using different mediums also stepped forward. Hayat Nazer, a

budding Lebanese multimedia artist used her talent to show the realities of the protest by combining shock and beauty. Nazer's art is unique and truly incomparable because of how it is conceived. She primarily used debris and remnants of the protests themselves in order to depict them (Raffa, 2021). This multi-media and upcycled approach to sculpture offers a multi-dimensional experience for the viewer: by looking at her pieces, you are looking at the actual event itself, and thus living it with her. As we see in her sculptures *The Phoenix* (fig 19) and *The Heart of the Revolution* (Fig 20), Nazer's pieces are unique in their ability to tell a story and evoke such emotions using the debris of the protest itself. Her pieces in the Martyr's Square, the heart and starting point of the protest, continue to impact viewers daily. Her audience as she puts it is the Lebanese people and diaspora themselves. Nazer's pieces have become synonymous with the revolution of 2019, so much as to have been targeted and destroyed by pro-government protests (Stewart, 2010) but she remains unwavering in her restoration of her original pieces and outspoken on the need for fundamental change throughout the country. Her artistic activism remains an integral part of the October 2019 movement and her symbolism clearly and eloquently alert the viewers to the struggles and resilience of the Lebanese people.

Fig 19

*The Phoenix*, Sculpture of a phoenix, created using protestors' tents which had been broken by security forces, Martyr's Square, Beirut. Pictured here with "The Fist of the Revolution" (Hayat Nazer, 2019)

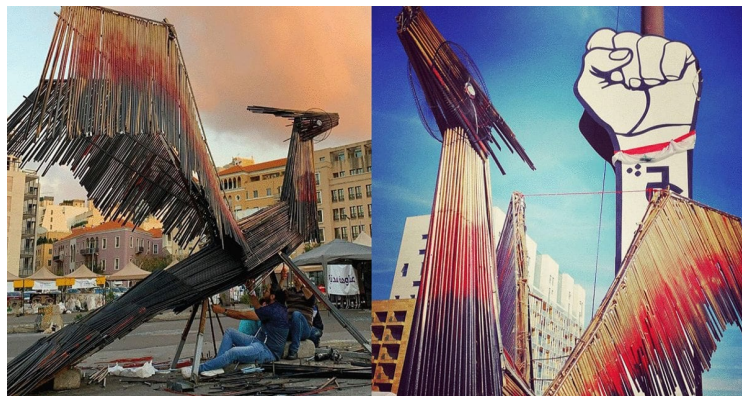


Fig 20

*The Phoenix* after being destroyed following vandalism from pro-government protestors



Fig 21

*The Heart of the Revolution*, barbed wire heart containing stones thrown from protestors on one side and tear gas containers deployed from the armed forces on the other, atop a pillar with the Lebanese flag and Arabic writing. Can be found in the Martyr's Square, Beirut. (Hayat Nazer, 2019)



Her pieces use a multitude of mediums to create images forever associated with the protest and the experiences of the Lebanese people. Her resourcefulness and imagination allowed her to be a



central artist associated with the revolution. Her contemporary eye also draws with it a younger viewership as well as more of a response within the younger generation in Lebanon, essentially calling out to a larger demographic. By attracting these viewers it opens the opportunity to impact the youth on the reality of what is happening but also allows them to feel hopeful and that they can too affect change. Nazer's art from the 17 October Revolution continues to speak on the resilience of the Lebanese people and send waves to new audiences daily through her use of collateral damage as a medium (Raffa, 2021). She once again came to the foreground after creating commemorative pieces following the tragedy of August 2020, the Beirut blast.

## 2020 BEIRUT BLAST

Amongst the continuing protests which began in late 2019, the Coronavirus pandemic, and the global lockdown, Lebanon suffered another crisis. On August 4th 2020, a collection of ammonia nitrate which had been improperly stored at the port of Beirut exploded (Balkiz, Qiblawi, and Wedeman, 2020). The catastrophe caused immense destruction over downtown Beirut. Millions of dollars worth of damage (Azhari, 2020), hundreds of thousands of people homeless, thousands injured, and hundreds dead: another result of the ineffective and careless government that had plagued them for years. This caused a greater uproar than ever before with global committees and organizations getting involved, calling for investigations, and another mass resignation within the already weakened and newly assembled government (BBC, 2020). With no faith in their system or their politicians, Lebanese citizens had nowhere to turn. The aftershock of this explosion continue to negatively impact Lebanon to this day, with protests ongoing, the energy and gas crisis continuing, and of course unemployment and poverty at an all-time high. While many countries banded together to offer aid, either financially or in the form of food and other provisions, the majority of them were mismanaged and not distributed to the public (Uddin, 2020). With the protests back and stronger than before, violence against protestors grew as well. Thinking back to Nazer's *The Heart of the Revolution*, the remnants of similar attacks were scattered across downtown Beirut.

The long-term effects of all these issues are still relevant today which is clear not only from the continuous manifestations in Lebanon but also from the dwindling value of the Lebanese pound and growing unemployment rate (The World Bank, 2022). Amid the darkest points of their modern history, Lebanese citizens once again banded together and took over the blast site through posters, signs, murals, and sculptures. Once again Hayat Nazer came to the forefront, creating a commemorative sculpture (fig 22) from the rubble and remnants of the blast itself (Raffa, 2021) known as *The Lady at the Port*.

Fig 22

*The Lady at the Port*, upcycled remnants of the Beirut blast fashioned into a sculpture. She waives between holding a torch and the Lebanese flag. Includes mirrors, glass, rubble, scrap metal, and the face of the clock tower from the port. Originally at the Blast Site and has since been moved for its protection following the burning of *The Phoenix*. (Hayat Nazer, 2020)



While her other pieces may have been destroyed by pro-government protestors (Stewart, 2010), her sculpture in the blast site stands tall: a vivid, beautiful, harrowing reminder of what is lost. Not only in terms of casualties, but also of freedoms, choices, and opportunities. Since then, Lebanon has continued to see a mass exodus of its population with an increase of over 300% in emigration (Middle East Monitor, 2022), with those who stay behind reluctant to leave due to their patriotic and familial ties, but suffering nevertheless. The beauty of these pieces gives us a hopeful glimpse into what Lebanon could be, what the younger generation can change and inspire, given the opportunity. While the questionable motives of any member of the Lebanese government and their sectarian rule which

has been a proven failure losing all confidence, the citizens still believe in the possibility of a parliament coming together and bettering Lebanon. We hope to see this in our lifetime and know that these murals and sculptures will never let Lebanon and the global audience forget how many times they have risen from the ashes.

## Conclusion

Artistic representation is an important source of information and context when looking at the struggles in the Middle East during the 21st century. From street art to refined sculpture, the stories behind these pieces of activist art impart us with insight and understanding into not only the severity of the crises but also how the effects rippled throughout the population. The viewers of these pieces are provided with important context, which as we have observed can allow them to better empathize and truly grasp the conflicts at hand. When discussing things such as the rampant governmental corruption in Lebanon or life under colonization and apartheid in Palestine, it is important to consider that the best source of information is those experiencing these situations firsthand. Hearing the unfiltered truth directly from a Lebanese citizen or a Palestinian living within Gaza or the West Bank is sure to offer you a transparent, though often gruesome, perspective on what daily life can be. By taking it a step further and analyzing the activist art born in these areas during more recent conflicts the minutia of daily life within their borders is clearly illustrated. The artists in these areas have perfected their ability to take difficult and heartbreaking realities and represent them visually in a way that is palatable, compelling, and in some cases entrancing. As the old adage says “a picture is worth a thousand words” and we can conclude by looking through the art of local Lebanese and Palestinian artists that we are told a story in a more direct and detailed fashion than words could ever describe to us. Their resistance and rebellion against their oppressors in the form of activist art continue to increase their viewership on a global scale, allowing for calls for reform and accountability to overtake the sounds of these amoral regimes trying to silence them.

Activist art in a post-Arab Spring world within Palestine and Lebanon rose up as a peaceful and accessible tool, almost a politicized weapon, allowing artists to come together and stand against a common evil whether it was colonization, censorship, or corruption. While the motivation behind these movements may differ, their ultimate goal and modus operandi are similar and provide us with equally similar pieces to analyze, both in their conception and their meaning. Art of course is more than just a tool of politics, a tool of rebellion, or a tool of war, even as a form of activism. It allows for the full and honest representation of an artist's emotions and their perception, experience, and trauma

during that moment. By looking at things such as Laila Shawa's Pop-Islamo stylistic representations of grotesque realities under occupation, Hayat Nazer's beautiful sculptures made from the remnants of destruction, or Yazan Halwani's efforts in beautifying the city he loves which has been plagued by corruption, we can see that an artists can take something terrifying, horrible, and difficult to stomach and not only make it agreeable but also make it appealing. One of the best possible outcomes of the artists' continued creation of visual depictions of the conflict or its ramifications is extending visibility, and through visibility comes accountability. Knowing that the viewership has increased to a global scale allows them the opportunity to continue to tell their story, to take back the narrative into their own hands, and hope that the message will be clear enough that they can bring about real tangible change to their situation.

These high conflict zones, whether they are plagued by external conflicts such as Israel's occupation and colonization of Palestine, or internal conflicts such as the mismanagement and corruption within Lebanon, have inspired many different artists to use their talents to spread awareness and information using a slew of mediums. While the individuals protesting today may not be here in 50 years, the information and images surrounding Nazer's sculptures and Shawa's silkscreens will stand the test of time. Art has always had an extremely important place in history for providing parallel information to any written or witness accounts. These artists contribute to those histories through their multiple pieces that shed a light on and provide valuable insight into these countries and the struggles they're currently undergoing. While a paintbrush may not be what ends the wars in Palestine or what ends the corruption in Lebanon we can see through these pieces that continued visual representation can make a difference. While looking through the visuals born from rebellion, conflict, and difficulties, we as a society can better understand and empathize with what struggles these countries and their people go through. Empathy and emotion are evoked through these pieces from viewers all over the world, giving a voice and notoriety to these pieces which increases their importance and the role they play. By better understanding the art of Lebanon and Palestine and by allowing it to spread we hope not only to spur change but also to prevent these atrocities from happening again. The more we look through the eyes of the artists, the more we can benefit from an unfiltered and raw

understanding of local sentiments. In an ideal world, this increased empathy will motivate the viewers to step up and stand alongside these artists in protest, and through solidarity end the conflicts that plague them.

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