



PODCAST

Countless Palestinian Futures with Danah Abdulla & Sarona Abuaker

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · August, 2023

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Sarona Abuaker 0:00

What does homemaking from afar look like, especially within our conditions as Palestinians who are incredibly fragmented and in what ways can we talk about Palestine and generate ideas around Palestine that aren't afraid of moving beyond what we're currently experiencing? What Dan and I are really interested in is how can we utilize our imaginations.

Danah Abdulla 0:22

I think one of the comments that really stuck with me was this is one of the only events in Palestine I've attended that didn't bore me, that didn't sadden me. And someone else just said, wow, to think these things are so mundane, but actually, I just realized how little imagination I have.

Yara Hawari 0:43

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari and this is Rethinking Palestine.

For many Palestinians, imagining a future free of Zionist settler colonial



domination is difficult to imagine. The constant process of erasure that Palestinians face means that surviving the ever-deteriorating present takes priority. The distortion of indigenous temporalities must be understood as a key part of the settler colonial domination, and indeed Frantz Fanon once wrote that French colonialism in Algeria always developed on the assumption that it would last forever, noting that the structures built, the prohibition of the Arabic language, etc.,

all gave the impression that a rupture in the colonial time was impossible. This is common to all settler colonial projects, which seek to control perceptions of reality in order to bind indigenous and colonized people in a seemingly perpetual state of being. Imagining a future beyond the state is thus a rebellious and radical act and isn't by no means an easy one.

Today I have two guests joining me to discuss a project that seeks to challenge this temporal domination and stimulate the imagination by helping people develop tangible outcomes and ideas around Palestinian futures. Sarona Abuaker, a poet, artist, and worker in Palestinian education, and Danah Abdulla, a designer, educator, and researcher, have co-developed a discussion-based game called *Countless Palestinian Futures*, which I'm excited to learn more about.

Sarona, Danah, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of *Rethinking Palestine*.

Sarona Abuaker 2:17

Thanks for having us, Yara.

Danah Abdulla 2:18

Thank you for having us.

Yara Hawari 2:20



So perhaps we can start by asking both of you, how did this game come about, and how did you end up working together on it?

Danah Abdulla 2:28

So this game came about in its current form in the summer of 2021, basically about, I'd say around a month after, or sorry, two months after everything was picking off in Palestine, Mosaic Rooms was having an exhibition called A Stateless Heritage, and they wanted to create a public program.

So they approached me to produce a workshop and kind of gave me a sort of carte blanche to do whatever it is that I wanted to do. And during that time, I know myself and probably Sarona and others, we were doing a lot of organizing, but also thinking about how things can be not so ephemeral. And being a graphic designer, there is a lot of, I mean, the discipline itself can be quite ephemeral.

So I started thinking about how you can create something that enables more action and that kind of continues this idea of iteration, which again comes also from design. Several years ago, while I was producing Keri Matt magazine, I was thinking about these ideas of questions for the Arab world.

And it's a project that never went anywhere. It's one of those things that you kind of write down and then it sits in your desk somewhere, paperwork piles up and you think, okay, maybe I'm going to come back to it eventually. And then when this workshop opportunity came about, I thought Sarona works a lot around Return. What would it be like to work with her? And if she was interested, and then we came up with countless Palestinian futures.

Sarona Abuaker 4:00

It was really funny because I remember Danah came over and we were having dinner and she was like, I'm supposed to do a workshop and I really want to make a game. But I don't know what the game should be about.



And that's how we landed on Return. So initially it was this kind of blob of an idea. And I think a lot of my personal interest in it was just from personal experiences of, as we all have, and questions around Return. I think as well, just some, of my research for my master's and just questions I'm interested in, in terms of what homemaking from afar looks like, especially within our conditions as Palestinians who are incredibly fragmented. And in what ways can we talk about Palestine and generate ideas around Palestine that aren't afraid of moving beyond what we're currently experiencing and not to treat what we're currently experiencing in a blase way?

But I think what Dana and I are interested in personally and in our work as well is how can we utilize our imaginations. And this is our humble attempt to do so.

Yara Hawari 5:08

And I think it's such an amazing, creative way to encourage Palestinians to imagine beyond this colonial reality that we live in.

Sarona, can you run us through how the game works and what a session playing this game looks like to help our listeners visualize it a bit better?

Sarona 5:24

So they're quite simple, the rules of the game. And the reason why we wanted to make them quite simplified is to enable different formats of play. So the game itself is just cards.

What we recommend is how to play it is between three to six players per group per se and a moderator should be assigned and there should be no more than two to three questions played per game quote unquote and each game session can last approximately one to two hours If you want to go more go for it, but that might run its course eventually, depending on the number of people, I suppose, but depending on the number of players, what we were concerned about was how



people were heard and, and how ideas were dealt with and how differences were held with the game.

So the game is an attempt of not doing away with differences, but confronting our differences. Because I think what the game is hopefully trying to get at and work with is the conditions that we live within like we're an incredibly scattered people, we don't have a unified language,

we don't have a unified religion. Even if people do have that they're not homogenous So, I mean there are inherent differences within people. But I think the way the game is trying to work and the rules of it try to not shy away from those differences from class differences, forms of racialization, hierarchies, depending on like the kinds of IDs we may have, or, you know, access to resources, all of that.

So two options are created for play. So there's one option where there are different themes that can be chosen. So the game has, it's being built up still, but we have 70 questions and counting, spread across six themes. The themes are governance, infrastructure, people in society, culture, and media.

And I always forget the last two, Dana, help me out.

Danah Abdulla 7:18

Economy and Geography.

Sarona Abuaker 7:19

Economy and Geography, thank you. I always forget those last two. So the game is quite expansive in terms of the themes that we cover, and that's quite intentional because I think ultimately when Dana and I first started working on this, we had all these questions just by ourselves, between her and I, about what Return could look like.



And then the more questions we started asking, the more we realized this isn't just about one particular thing about Palestine or about society building, per se. This is about world-building in this sense, where it's all-encompassing and all-expansive. So in order to try to bring organization to it, is we just chose six themes that kind of, we're hoping, make sense in terms of how then people can approach the game.

And also, the questions themselves, what they're entailing, but then hopefully gives people then an idea of other questions that can be asked that have not yet been asked in the game as well. So it's quite generative, hopefully, in that way. So option one is you can choose different themes and the moderator shuffles the cards from the different theme sets, and each player is handed two cards, and then players read their cards and choose one question, and then they put this question down on the table.

And then the moderator reads each card and then the group chooses a question to play. So that's one way. Another way is just simply choosing one theme, and then you choose a question from that particular theme. So questions can look at, for example, what should we do with the settlements? Other questions look at, for example, what would happen to the surrounding Arab regions if Palestinians left?

So, the questions span many different kinds of ideas and many kinds of different realities. And then maybe Dana and I can talk a bit more later on about facilitation and our experience with that. But the last thing I'll say about how the game is played is what we like to do in a really accessible way of doing, of keeping almost like an archive of the game while it's being played is we normally provide like massive sheets of paper

with markers. And what we do is we ask people, as one person is talking, others are writing what that person is saying, and then writing their own thoughts down. And then what we do is we say, okay, have you finished that idea? Let's move on to a different person who may want to talk. So by the end of each iteration, we



have like six, seven massive rolls of paper, where we have the questions documented, but also we've got people's ideas there.

And so it's quite a visual way. I've seen thoughts in their processes, but also the journeys that people go on. And really, Dana, please hop in, but our role, I think, as facilitators has been trying to ensure that the conversation isn't dominated by one person. And we've had plenty of conversations about our role as facilitators in this game, what do we bring to it and how do we make it generative?

But I'll stop there for now.

Yara Hawari 10:14

So did you crowdsource the questions? I mean, how did you narrow them down within those themes? Because 70 questions sounds like a lot, but actually, you know, when imagining a decolonial future, there's a lot to cover. So how did you come to that sort of final number?

Danah Abdulla 10:33

The number 70 is not final.

I think it's again, it's an iterative process because then every time you play it, you get feedback on that specific question, or other questions emerge, you refine the question and so on and so forth. And sometimes I think Sarona and I have been good at reflecting after each session, but then taking the questions and

seeing actually, is this saying the same thing as this one? Right? Just phrased differently. So constantly having a look at them and thinking about what we could remove, what we could rephrase, and who we can source more from. In the process of sourcing the questions, we decided to contact, I think maybe about, was it around 30 or so prominent Palestinians from around the world that we had identified when we narrowed down the themes.



I think narrowing down the themes, was just to kind of give a little bit more structure for people, rather than this sort of free-for-all that would make our job a bit more difficult. But then to also think about How many people work in this specific area that we could contact and then they could contribute.

Some themes have many more questions than others, I think that's something we we need to work on because the idea is maybe to have -you're never probably going to have an even number- but somewhat reach that instead of having a substantial amount under governance and then having only a few for geography, for example.

So we sourced those questions. We gave very specific guidelines to people in terms of what they needed to do. And then we sifted through them and rewrote them if they needed to be rewritten in terms of clarity. When you're playing a game like that with several people, you need to be able to look at a question and immediately understand what it's asking you rather than try and sit there and decipher it because

when we've done the game, we've assigned 25 minutes to each question and then kind of moved on from there, not spending too much time on one specific question.

Yara Hawari 12:30

Danah, you've both taken this game to various Palestinian communities around the world. Can you tell me about how that's gone and what the reception has been? And also, is this game in multiple languages or is it only in English?

Danah Abdulla 12:44

It's only in English now, but the idea is for us to begin translating it into Arabic first and then considering other languages such as Spanish. Sarona and I are heading to Santiago next month in Chile. We're hopefully going to be hosting two



iterations of Countless Palestinian Futures.

So that's, I think for both of us, very exciting. And that game will be played with simultaneous translation. I was in Beirut last month and that was a game that was played in both English with Arabic, because of the attendees, not all of them were comfortable in English. It spoke volumes about being Palestinian and how many people are comfortable with what, and, you know, being someone from the diaspora myself, in terms of my confidence, in speaking Arabic or translating these terms in Arabic.

So, that also produced a different way of playing it in a different approach. The two other times that we played it were both in London. The first time was at Mosaic Rooms and I think we had a mixture of people. That was the workshop that commissioned the project initially. And I think that that one, I think people were really engaged in the game.

They were very interested. I think one of the comments that really stuck with me was this is one of the only events on Palestine I've attended that didn't bore me, you know, that didn't sadden me, and someone else just said, like, wow, to think these things are so mundane. But actually, I just realized how little imagination I have.

The second session was a different crowd. I think you realize what happens when you have more numbers. And at that point, I think we had about 22 people, so it was a bit of a different approach that we took and we opened it to Arabs and Palestinians, but we didn't close it off to anyone who kind of wanted to play.

So some people weren't necessarily familiar or tied to Palestine in that one, but still enjoyed the idea behind it. Something similar happened in Beirut where people would see the game... I know there was an Armenian-Lebanese person in attendance who said I see this as applicable to the Armenian context.



So what I love about it is that it's not just Countless Palestinian futures. You can put countless, insert wherever futures. And I talked about it a lot when crafting it. I did play it informally with some friends because it also can double up as a dinner party game, I guess if you're so inclined.

And it was really nice because it was this, you know, we're just having tea on the balcony in Beirut. It's a beautiful night and we start shuffling the games. We put down a card and we just start having this really nice and kind of easy conversation amongst each other in terms of what ideas we have in relation to the question.

And then, you know, there was, people were just so curious, like, Sifty, I want to see the questions. This is such a beautiful question. Oh, I love this so much. What we witnessed, I think, in the three formal ones, is that the lack of imagination, the inability to imagine beyond what's in front of you is so strong.

I think people start to acknowledge that a little bit while they're playing. I think what else they, other comments that have come up is how many further questions that evolved based on that question and how many of them are interconnected. So as facilitators, sometimes we found ourselves in a way leading people just to kind of give them a tiny prompt to go in another direction. And that somewhat worked.

Yara Hawari 16:20

If you're enjoying this podcast, please visit our website, al-shabaka.org where you will find more Palestinian policy analysis, and where you can join our mailing list and donate to support our work.

Sarona Abuaker 16:33

I've been reflecting as you've been talking, and I think, the reception to the game has been, I guess, just to extend a bit on the facilitation itself, and then moving to, I think, what the richness of the game, where the richness of the game really comes



from as well, so when we facilitate it, and just to give people more of like a visual of how the space has worked so far.

So we're all sitting in a circle and some people illustrate their response to the question, others, others write their response and then they say it out loud. But I think as facilitators, I think we bear witness to the moment in which people become confronted with their own imaginations and seeing the reactions to that.

So sometimes people can become really frustrated, and what's the role of frustration, and then thinking about the world that we want to live in. And so that's been, it's quite interesting, I think it's quite emotional as well, I think that's something that was quite unexpected. I don't know if you expected that, Danah, but we've like witnessed a range of emotions, essentially, playing this game.

And I think with the reception in of itself, I think the richness of the game, I think its strength also comes from the fact that when Danah and I were making this, one of our intentions was we don't want people to feel like they need to be like Edward Said to play this game. We don't want them to feel like they need to know every single fact and date to be able to engage in this conversation.

Rather, the game invites difference because when someone looks at a question, for example, about what we do with the settlements, I'm just using that because it's a really popular one, someone can look at that like Danah and I both looked at that question and we approached it completely differently.

She looked at it from a design perspective where it was like, well, that material can be really useful for us if we want to either destroy the settlements and rebuild them, or we just rehouse people in it. And I looked at it from a much different perspective of, well of course we can't use the settlements, because aesthetically and via memory, that must be really traumatizing.

Each question, the more you flesh it out, the more that you see people from



different trades, from different professions, from different experiences, from different classes, from different languages approaching it. I suppose our job as facilitators is to guide that conversation between them, between those differences.

Danah Abdulla 19:02

No, I think it's that, I hate to say this, but it's like there's no real wrong answer. It's actually what you put down on this paper. What does that evolve? How does someone build up on what you've done? And that's why this idea of the person next to you having, you know, the person who's speaking, the person next to them has to be writing so that there's always this active thing happening within the game.

And that people are taking in the ideas, rather than just waiting for their turn to speak.

Yara Hawari 19:26

Sarona, while you were talking about the settlements and how you sort of, both you and Danah are coming at it from sort of different perspectives, it reminded me of a trip that I took to South Africa.

I visited Robben Island in Cape Town and Robben Island was this awful prison in which they incarcerated hundreds of political prisoners, including Mandela. It made me think about what we would do with the prisons here. And I started this conversation with some friends and for me, I would not want to keep these prisons, you know, the Israeli prisons, which have incarcerated so many of our comrades, our brothers and sisters, but some, you know, I guess these places of like deep trauma where massive violence have occurred. It's quite common around the world that these places are turned into memorial sites.

So it's really interesting to hear all these different perspectives. And I think the fact that this game can be used for all these different contexts really speaks to the



shared experience of so many people from our region, but also beyond, who have only ever experienced colonial and imperial domination, keeping us in a colonial temporal reality where the future is...it's unattainable. It's almost considered a luxury to imagine a different reality. And so I think this game, you know, really changes that.

You've both touched upon this a little bit, but I wanted to ask about some of the more interesting answers you've had in the game. I'm sure all of them have been really interesting and enlightening, but which, if there are any answers that particularly stood out for you or surprised you?

Danah Abdulla 21:06

I think one of the things, where the conversation deviated, because I think the question that we initially played, and I realize I haven't been very good at writing down which questions we actually played during each session, I think I've written them down on a piece of paper and then completely forgotten, but it was, what is the first step in making a return happen?

And the conversation then turned to, you know, there were several people there who were from nearby refugee camps. And they were talking about like, well, what opportunities would be available for me when I go back? Like, do I want to go back? I have a tie to Lebanon. And so this whole conversation around, despite having so little rights in Lebanon, that there was still this connection to this space, to this community. And then there was someone else saying, I don't want to, I don't want to go back to my village where I'm going to have to live with all of these people that I've lived with for all my life.

Like I'm not going to go from one space to have them be the same people I live with in my old space. I found that quite interesting because it's very different from the experience I have as, as a kind of diasporic Palestinian who grew up in Canada. So I think that was one of the more, and then kind of like it hit you in a



way to think about, okay, these are the things that they're thinking about in terms of what's the first thing to make a return happen?

No, I want to know what if I have this, you know, I have a life here. I built this life. Is that completely taken away when I go there? What am I going to do? Is this something that I'm just going to start from zero once again? Another interesting answer that took place, or it wasn't an interesting answer, I think it kind of came after, as we call it in research, the post-interview talk once you turn off the recorder. It was people just looking at each other and being like, I think there's going to be a lot of bloodshed. And I thought I hadn't been wanting to think of it that way, but yeah, those are the two, I guess because that was the most recent experience I had and those are the two that really stuck with me.

Sarona Abuaker 23:13

I think that point you just said, Danah, of like, this is the thing that people are thinking about. So yeah, you, again, like approaching a question one way and then someone else coming at it from a completely different angle, but that in of itself, then reorients you to think about those other conditions. I think I remember during our first iteration at the mosaic rooms, I remember actually it was in your group where you, and maybe it's better if you speak on it, but the person who I think mentioned policing or prisons and the group's reaction to them. Do you remember that?

Danah Abdulla 23:49

Yeah. I think it was one of the people who was in the group, who didn't really see a problem with the police, like having a police force, probably thinking about the police that you have here in the UK, whereas about maybe

three or four other people were, I wouldn't, we're just like, what do you mean? How could you think that we need police in Palestine? And there was this discussion



where it didn't turn heated. I think people were really good at beginning to understand that there are different points of view.

And this person kind of just didn't think about, you know, abolishing police or anything. But then it's like there isn't, the point is that you're not really meant to agree, kind of putting these ideas down and then how you build on that.

Sarona Abuaker 24:36

We also had in the first iteration, that it was interesting because one of the questions was whether would liberation include a Palestinian ruling class and just seeing people's reactions to that.

I think because it ultimately unfurls into many other different questions, questions of, you know, participants had very visceral reactions to this one, where someone drew a guillotine and others were talking about methods essentially of transformative justice.

Like, how do we approach people about redistributing their wealth? How do we approach people about privatized land? How do we make privatized land public again? What happens when people don't want to give up the wealth that they have? What happens to them? And so it was, again, it wasn't necessarily to agree on something, but it was rather to unpack where everyone stood.

And then there was an ensuing, I wouldn't want to say debates, but just people talking about their perspectives. There was a long discussion about how do we create accountability processes around the elite, for example, and it became about who governs the government, what a government may look like and all of this, but all of that came from one question.

And I found that to be interesting. I don't know. We've had loads of reactions and the ones that I find interesting is when people get frustrated when we ask them, we gently nudge them differently. And a lot of reactions I've heard has been like,



I've been like, okay, let's talk about that.

And they'll be like, well, I'm trying. And there's nothing wrong with that. I think it's just us confronting ourselves and in our own conditions, but I think that's part of the process. And I think Danah, you said something earlier, but it was like people needing to wait to speak. And that reminds me of, I think one of the main things of when we created the game, I think because we didn't, I mean, Palestinians, essentially like our return and other people's returns have been snatched from us.

And it's been placed within a very like hegemonic process dictated by the UN and by the IMF and all of these governing bodies. And when Palestinians have attempted to implement their return, whether through the great march of return or what we saw during the unity Intifada with people or in Jordan and in Lebanon, walking back to Palestine, we see the very material ramifications of that and so hopefully this game is a very humble small way of us not seeking that permission.

Danah Abdulla 27:28

I've just remembered one nice response or wouldn't, wouldn't say a really nice response, but it was a discussion that took place regarding the Return question. Are these kinds of statuses of Palestinians, you know, one with an ID card, one from Gaza, one from Jordan, do they remain and is it something that's going to be stamped on me if I return?

I think that was a very powerful question and thing to think about. And it's amazing how much context changes, you know, who's in the room, changes the responses. Because of that experience, I think that the crowds of people we played with in London are quite homogeneous. I'm not saying that Palestinians are, but it was, you know, you're more or less from similar spaces, whereas in Lebanon it wasn't. And so they were concerned with very different things than what we're concerned about.



Sarona Abuaker 28:22

In the second iteration at Mayday Rooms, I remember one of the responses that I found to be really interesting was, and Danah, you just pointed out, that it depends on the context that creates the response. It forces us to grapple with I think the facade of nationalism, but also I think, the very real questions we are facing, who are we beyond this crisis, in many stances?

One of the questions we asked was about what kind of education would we teach, something along those lines. And someone's first immediate response was, well, the first thing we have to do is agree on a shared history and one unified history. And I found that to be so fascinating. Because what does that history then look like? What is the necessity of an agreed shared history in order to then live together? I don't know, I don't have the answer. But, I think that's part of the fun.

Yara Hawari 29:19

I think it would be really interesting to play the game in Palestine as well. I mean, so much of what you both have been talking about has related to Palestinian communities in exile. But, you know, return isn't just a question for those in exile in the diaspora because, of course, you know, we are a collective, we are a people, and return is central to Palestinians wherever they may be.

But also because Palestinians in Palestine are also exiled within their own homeland, right? You know, there are so many internally displaced Palestinians among 48 Palestinians. There are so many refugees in the West Bank and Gaza, and it would be I think really interesting to play the game here in Palestine and see sort of really like tease out those differences.

And I guess this leads me to my final question, which is what do you envision for this project? What do you envision next? Do you have any plans to take it further beyond, your trip to Chile?



Danah Abdulla 30:20

Yeah, absolutely. Sarona and I have been thinking of different ideas. There's one thing that the participants actually asked about, which was, where can we see other people's responses, this idea of like, an ideas bank, you could say.

Which is something that requires a lot of funding, because if it's this online accessible thing. But it's an excellent idea, because it's like, actually, how did other people that I've never met before, or that are playing this game in London, or they're playing this game in Santiago, a lot of them were really interested in what people in Santiago would say.

Say, where can I see these responses? You know, what was their take on it? So this idea of a, I guess, ideas bank to our question bank. We're also playing with form, so this idea of, you know, when do we get to an iteration that we're both happy to just release publicly as something that can be purchased, downloaded, whatever it is and played, that moves beyond Sarona and me.

And then in terms of what, what do you do with these rolls of paper that contain this data, you know, or these ideas, does it turn into a sort of book that plays with different forms? Yeah, but I think in the immediate, that's one thing, and translation is another one, I think, getting it into Arabic is really important for the both of us, and seeing where else other organizations would like to invite us to play because I think the more, kind of, we do it around the world, the more we gather a better picture of what it is that we're doing and what this ends up at the end of the day. This needs to live beyond Sarona and me.

Yara Hawari 32:01

So Sarona and Danah, I really want to keep chatting with you both, but I'm afraid we're gonna have to leave it there. But thank you so much for joining me on Rethinking Palestine.



Danah Abdulla 32:13

Thank you for having us

Yara Hawari 32:17

Rethinking Palestine is brought to you by Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian policy network. Al-Shabaka is the only global independent Palestinian think tank whose mission is to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide. For more information or to donate to support our work, visit alshabaka.org. And importantly, don't forget to subscribe to Rethinking Palestine wherever you listen to podcasts.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.