PODCAST

Three Threads of the Movement for Palestinian Liberation

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Tamara Ben-Halim · May, 2022

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

Yara Hawari 0:00

I think we should take inspiration from the Palestinian street. We can also do that within Palestinian civil society and Palestinian organizational spaces. It's about fostering an environment of like-minded organizations that work together, that have clear politics and obvious red lines, but also where there is a space and room for people to grow, learn, and develop. And that also adopts this notion of care.

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

This year, Al-Shabaka has once again joined forces with Makan and Visualizing Palestine to build on the growing momentum for Palestinian rights across the globe. The three organizations have been looking to raise $60,000 to contribute to their ongoing work and strengthening the movement for Palestinian liberation.

This collective spirit takes inspiration from the Unity Intifada of last year, which saw Palestinians defy their enforced fragmentation and unite across walls, blockades, and artificial borders in defiance against Israel's apartheid regime — and despite decades of settler colonialism — reminding the world that the Palestinian people's struggle is a unified one.

Al-Shabaka, Makan, and Visualizing Palestine are also working together, unified in our efforts to reclaim the narrative on Palestine to one that upholds freedom and justice. We all work in different ways, but with a shared goal of strengthening critical connections and producing and communicating Palestinian analysis in order to use them as tools in advocacy and beyond, to challenge Israeli colonization and apartheid.

In today's episode of Rethinking Palestine, we will be exploring these connections, looking at how our work intersects, and how we can build stronger communities in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

Joining me to discuss all of this and more is Aline Batarseh, Executive Director of Visualizing Palestine and Al-Shabaka board member, and Tamara Ben-Halim, the co-director and co-founder of Makan. Thank you both for joining me today on Rethinking Palestine.

Perhaps we can start off with an introduction of each organization and some examples of the work that you do. Let's start with Aline.

Aline Batarseh 2:46

Thank you, Yara. It's really exciting to be in conversation with you and Tamara today. So, Visualizing Palestine's focus is on developing data-led visuals that are aimed at advancing the rights-based narrative of Palestine and Palestinians.

We actually produced our first visual 10 years ago, at a time when the use of infographics as an alternative form for social justice communication was not

common at all, especially in the Palestinian context. Our visuals focus on data and storytelling. At the same time, we know that a lot of research goes into the development of different types of research products, policy papers. A lot of research also goes into our visuals, and we always make sure to cite the sources that we use and to make those accessible through our website.

But the important part is that our visuals also tell a story, and they take a lot of creativity. What we want to do with our visuals is provoke thoughts and emotions that compel people to take action.

So we work on visual storytelling because we know from research that learning that engages more of our senses, including with visual aids, helps us retain information for a longer period of time. And with a lot of research on Palestine, we've also noticed that not everyone wants to read a 200-page report, right? Unless you're a policy analyst or researcher. But a lot of people will take a look at visuals, also in a very fast-paced world that we live in.

VP's visuals have Creative Commons licensing, which means that anyone can use our visuals, print and download them for free, and can use them for awareness raising as well as advocacy tools around Palestine. VP importantly works both independently and in partnership with Palestinian and international human rights organizations to produce visual tools to serve a wide community of advocates, human rights defenders, academics, educators, and students, to help them communicate about issues impacting Palestine and Palestinians.

I think one thing I'd like to emphasize is that we see a lot of people that are often told that Palestine is complicated or too complex for an average person to understand, and that they shouldn't even try to bother to form an informed opinion. And one of the things that Israel tries to do intentionally is to complicate reality with propaganda and strategic fragmentation. And we believe that anyone can and must understand the root cause of oppression, particularly in countries

that are complicit in Palestinian oppression. They have a specific responsibility in learning more and in being able to advocate.

So what our visuals do is they attempt to take complex data and information and distill them into visually compelling resources. VP has a large collection of infographics — almost 200 infographics on the impact of settler colonialism on Palestinians. VP has developed some videos and educational platforms, including Visualizing Palestine 101, Palestine Journeys, Palestine Open Maps, and the Growth of the Movement Timeline that documents wins of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement since it started in 2005.

And maybe I'll just end with some examples of what we've been working on over the past year. About a year ago, we collaborated with Human Rights Watch on their crime of apartheid report. And we developed several visuals on what the crime of apartheid means. We have four vignettes on what it means to be born as a Palestinian in Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Naqab, and abroad, and then comparing what those discriminatory policies — Israel's discriminatory policies and practices — mean for Palestinians versus Jews. And how basically Israel ensures racial domination of Jews over Palestinians by implementing these practices and policies.

We've actually been producing visuals on apartheid for a very long time. And most recently, we also developed an additional visual with Al-Haq, Al-Mezan, and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies on Israel's use of strategic fragmentation as a tool to divide and dominate the Palestinian people. So I just wanted to share these couple of examples and I'll stop there.

Yara Hawari 7:08

Thank you, Aline, for sharing the important work that Visualizing Palestine does. Over to you, Tamara.

Tamara Ben-Halim 7:13

Thank you to Yara and Al-Shabaka for having us today, and it's always wonderful to be in your company and in the company of Visualizing Palestine as well. So I'm co-founder and co-director of Makan.

Makan is a UK-based, Palestinian-led educational organization. We started conceptualizing the idea behind Makan around 2015 and started our pilot workshops in 2016. The reason why Makan was started really goes back to the aftermath of the 2014 attacks on Gaza, when there was a sense that several of us had that although more Palestinian voices were starting to be heard in the mainstream media and in other fora, there was still, generally speaking, a very problematic narrative across most arenas that really failed to take into account basic structural power imbalances — a lack of understanding of Israel as an apartheid state and Palestine as an anti-colonial struggle. And we really wanted to use our position as Palestinians in the diaspora to be able to contribute to pushing the narrative in the right direction.

So during this time, we did a lot of research and did a lot of mapping out of what other brilliant organizations and initiatives were doing, and we found there was a real niche for specifically educational training, capacity and skill building that invests in and supports young advocates who are speaking out on Palestine and also on other social justice and human rights issues more broadly.

So the ultimate goal of Makan has really always been to equip people — specifically young people, but also more established advocates and campaigners, and I'll speak a little bit about our audiences in a moment — with the tools, the knowledge, and especially the confidence that they need to be able to help shift the broad conversation on Palestine across grassroots advocacy, university campuses, and policy spheres to one that upholds freedom, justice, and equality for Palestinians.

So, a brief example of some of the core of the work that we do. I've mentioned that we do educational training. What that really looks like is the curation of specific educational programs — what we call workshops or tailored training — that really focus on getting people up to speed. Not that they have to be experts in any way, but getting them up to speed on having a basic knowledge of what the contemporary Palestinian rights struggle looks like, what the history of the struggle is that has led us to where we are today, what apartheid as a crime under international law means, why it's appropriate for us to understand Israel's regime as an apartheid regime, and then really taking the practical aspects of that knowledge and putting that into practice by learning how to really talk about the Palestinian issue in effective ways that counter so much of the propaganda that exists and that we've particularly seen most recently.

Those are our general workshops on Palestine, on Palestinian rights, that are targeted at young advocates, at university students, but also at trade unions and trade union leaders, as well as grassroots and social justice leaders. We're also branching out to work more specifically with journalists and policymakers as of this year.

While our work is focused mostly in Britain, because of the shift towards virtual and remote work, all our work is currently online, and that has enabled us to be able to reach across North America — on the East Coast and Canada in particular — and elsewhere in Europe and in the Middle East.

So that's generally the workshops that we run. We also run trainings that we call tailored training, that is more specific to the needs of specific groups of people. So we may have a group or an organization or institution that wants support on a specific aspect of the advocacy work or communications work that they're doing around Palestine. And they would come to us to help curate a training that is really tailored to their needs as well.

And this is in addition to broader work that we do around developing educational resources, posts on social media. And we also have an upcoming online course on the contemporary Palestinian struggle that's being launched in partnership with the Institute for Palestine Studies in the next couple of months. I think I will leave it there and we can speak more about the collaboration that we do with one another in the next question.

Yara Hawari 12:32

Tamara, thank you so much for telling us about Makan's important work. I'm going to share just a little bit about Al-Shabaka, because I'm sure most of our listeners are already aware of who we are and what we do.

Al-Shabaka is an independent, transnational think tank. We have a network of over 200 Palestinian experts and specialists in all different fields based all over the world, including public health experts, engineers, architects, academics, lawyers, environmental workers, and so many more.

The aim of Al-Shabaka is to draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people — whether under occupation, in exile, or in the '48 territories — so as to engage a broad spectrum of perspectives and debate on policy and strategy. We also work to get Palestinian expert voices in policy spaces and spaces where they can influence decision-makers.

And to this end, we publish policy analysis in the form of briefs, memos, and commentaries in both English and Arabic. We cover topics such as apartheid, climate change, leadership, governance, representation, and so much more. We also engage in other forms of multimedia, such as webinars, and we have, of course, a monthly podcast called Rethinking Palestine, in order to promote our members' policy analysis in a variety of different formats.

Our audience is also quite wide and includes activists, journalists, civil society

organizations, lobbyists, diplomats, politicians, and students. And we have now become really a very wide network. Indeed, our members are present in most spaces where Palestine is discussed. This is obviously because of their own expertise and credentials, but at Al-Shabaka we also work with our members to access these spaces and to make sure that Palestinian voices are in these spaces, because it's been the case for so long that Palestine is written about, analyzed, and discussed without Palestinians in the room.

And our hope at Al-Shabaka is that we're showing that Palestinians can analyze, and they have been analyzing, and they refuse to be marginalized. And of course, we are not the first or the only organization to do this.

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

Now onto our second question: where do you see yourself and your organization in the ecosystem of organizations working towards Palestinian liberation? Let's start with Tamara this time.

Tamara Ben-Halim 15:10

So I think there's obviously such a rich ecosystem around us of organizations working on Palestine, new and old, that each contributes something really, really important at different levels.

And I think it's really important to understand movements as — although coordination is always good — you need all of the different efforts and all of the different initiatives, because no one organization, no one effort, no one approach is going to on its own bring us the freedom and the justice that we're working towards.

So with that in mind, in terms of where Makan comes in, I think to be able to do

campaigning work, to be able to do advocacy work and the most effective organizing and mobilizing that you can do, you need some level of knowledge and confidence. You absolutely don't need to be any kind of expert. You don't have to have a PhD. You don't even have to have a master's.

But to be able to think about how to talk about the issue in effective ways — in the ways that Palestinians are talking about the issues — to be able to uphold the demands of Palestinians, to think about the different pressure points, to think about what the most effective strategies are in your campaigning work — all of this requires some level of basic knowledge and skills and capacities in communication as well. And this is really where Makan comes in.

So we haven't seen really any other organizations that are focused exclusively on intensive education with academic rigor on Palestine that is really working to invest in advocates' knowledge and learning on the issue. This kind of political education — we know there is a huge need for it, particularly now, given the shrinking of space that is happening in Britain, in Europe, in the United States, and elsewhere.

And when we talk about shrinking space, that's really jargon for just saying that spaces for speaking openly about Palestine and advocating for Palestinian liberation are in many ways closing because of attacks that we're witnessing from pro-Israel organizations, from Israel and its allies, that are making it extremely difficult — whether it's someone posting on social media, on Instagram, whether it's a university student trying to organize at their local student union, whether it's an academic putting together a course on Palestine in the States — all of these things, we're witnessing greater and greater attacks.

And that I think reinforces the need for the type of political education and confidence-building work that Makan does. Although there's increasing solidarity with Palestine across the board from social justice movements and activists, which

is a wonderful thing to see, at the same time we're also seeing a huge chilling effect. And that is something that Makan, along with other organizations, is trying to address very carefully, particularly in Britain.

Because of course, the last thing we want is for people to be too scared and underconfident to be able to speak up, even though they want to. So our work is really about helping them to be able to gain the confidence and the tools to do that.

So just to answer the question directly in terms of where we are in the ecosystem, I think we're somewhere between — although it's not so linear — somewhere between the academic sphere and campaigning and advocacy. So to be able to do that campaigning and advocacy work, to be able to do the speaking on media platforms, we hope the work that we do and the interventions that we make help people to take that next step more effectively.

Yara Hawari 19:27

Tamara, what you said at the beginning of your answer about the movement needing to be pluralistic and have a multilayered approach is so important. Aline, what do you think about this?

Aline Batarseh 19:38

Thank you, Yara. And thank you, Tamara. Everything that you said resonates quite a bit, and I completely agree with you also that there is no one organization alone that can bring the freedom that we're all working towards, especially with the increased attacks that we see from Israel on nonprofits, the criminalization of six organizations — but that we also know that this is not new. They're just amplifying the efforts that they use to suppress freedom of speech of Palestinians.

And I think also, the stronger we get and the more united we get, they try to divide us even more with all the tactics that they're using. And so the strategic

fragmentation is on all levels, really. And yet we remain strong. So it's really beautiful that we're all in partnership together.

And I think what I'll say is, in terms of where Visualizing Palestine fits into the ecosystem, we really see ourselves playing a very specific role in the ecosystem of organizations working towards Palestinian liberation. We see our visuals as tools and educational resources that can be used by others in the movement, including academics, students, activists, and anyone really that wants to raise awareness and that wants to advocate around Palestine.

I think the biggest group we've seen use our visuals are students in universities. From our records, we've seen more than a hundred universities use our visuals. The academic arena is really a huge place where we see our visuals used, but they're of course used beyond that as well. And we don't see our visuals as an end in and of themselves, and this is why we collaborate with other organizations and activists to continuously identify priorities and make sure that our visuals are useful for campaigns that are being carried out by other groups and organizations in the movement.

And we also talked about this — that there's such a huge volume of information being produced on Palestine. And sometimes it's overwhelming. It's, in some ways, an overresearched context, while at the same time, research is being silenced, buried, and countered by Israeli propaganda. So we at VP want to make a contribution to knowledge production by disseminating information in a creative medium.

So we're just one of these organizations, basically, that are producing visuals as an important alternative source of information, because traditional forms of media have historically excluded Palestinian voices. So it's the Israeli government in tandem with the Western media and with countries that are complicit with Israeli policies.

And I will just share this one piece of research that I came across recently — a study by Maha Nassar in 2020 that revealed that non-Palestinians wrote 99% of opinion pieces about Palestinians published by the *Washington Post* over a period of basically between 1970 and 2019. So this is not a perception. There are statistics around Palestinians being literally excluded from media. And then that was over the *Washington Post*. The *New York Times* didn't do much better — there were less than 2% of opinion pieces that were published that were written by Palestinians.

So our voices are being excluded. We're being referred to in the passive voice in opinion pieces. There is a violent language that's being used to describe Palestinians. So all of this is really impacting the opinion that people in different countries form around Palestine and the Palestinian struggle.

And we saw this most recently with how mainstream media was reporting on the murder of Shireen Abu Akleh. There was a language that was being used to refer to her in the passive voice, saying that she "has died," not saying who killed her. And this was important because a lot of people don't even read past those headlines.

So we see ourselves as one Palestinian-led platform that centers Palestinian experiences. And that really works in tandem with Al-Shabaka, with Makan, with a lot of other amazing Palestinian organizations that are really working to change the narrative on Palestine.

Yara Hawari 24:00

Aline, those stats that you mentioned about op-eds are really stark — and not surprising at all. But I think when you hear the numbers, it really sticks with you.

Al-Shabaka works in tandem with other organizations in contributing to changing the narrative on Palestine and making sure that Palestinian voices are heard in mainstream spaces. Indeed, we are one of the few Palestinian think tanks. And as

such, I think we are contributing to much-needed policy analysis written by Palestinians that can challenge what is usually written about us and for us.

And I think we are producing knowledge, and there are so many great organizations that also do that, like Jadaliyya and the Institute for Palestine Studies. Our particular focus is on policy. And I think that's particularly beneficial to those working in advocacy and lobbying. And at Al-Shabaka, we really hope that the pieces that we're publishing provide material tools and resources for many of our partner organizations.

Something else you mentioned, Aline, was identifying collective priorities, and that's so important at Al-Shabaka. For example, partners sometimes come to us and ask us for specific policy analysis. They might be working on a specific policy angle, lobbying politicians, or running a campaign. And they are in need of Palestinian-written analysis. And this is something that we can provide. Or if our partners are working on a specific topic and they want it highlighted, we are always happy to uplift that work or produce more materials on that specific topic.

But I think there are always ways to improve our work together. And that brings me onto my next question. Last year, during the Unity Intifada, we saw examples of Palestinians working together in inspiring shows of unity. For example, collectives organizing legal support and representation for those arrested by Israeli regime forces, neighborhood defense committees, groups fielding media and sharing talking points.

What do you think we can learn from that moment moving forward? And how can we work better together? I'll start with Tamara again.

Tamara Ben-Halim 26:04

I'll answer this one briefly, because I think there was a lot to be inspired by, obviously — there always is — but particularly in this moment of unity and

defiance that came from Palestinians. From the general strike, from the Dignity and Hope Manifesto, from seeing Palestinians from Haifa to Gaza show actions of brotherhood, sisterhood, solidarity with their siblings in Jerusalem. And I'm sure we all — as Palestinians and as non-Palestinians — were hugely moved by this.

I think what we can learn from this — obviously different parts of the Palestinian movement, and maybe particularly abroad, have been fragmented over time. I think we can't ignore that reality. I think the good thing is that at least here in Britain, and I feel in the States as well — Aline can respond to that better than me — in recent years, that is changing. There is increasing collaboration and genuine and strategic partnership. There is a lot of meaningful, close work happening between organizations within the movement and, of course, beyond — with more broadly other social justice groups, be they Indigenous collectives, be they anti-racist organizers, and others.

In terms of what I think is practical for how we can work more effectively as organizations, the struggle I think that we normally have as Makan is making the time and the mental space for it. There's always a feeling of urgency. There's always a feeling of go, go, go, and it's difficult to ever pause. And you need to pause. And we all need to pause in this work, both to avoid burnout and to take care of ourselves and one another, but also to allow creative thought to happen.

And I think you really need that when you're thinking about collaboration, because collaboration — it can happen naturally, but I think if you don't make space for it, it doesn't happen. So you really need to look beyond the immediacy and the internal operations of your organization and the day-to-day details that you get bogged down in, and to be able to think with more perspective. So I think for us, and for me in particular, making time and space for collaboration is really the thing that enables it to happen. So really having that intention, I think, is absolutely necessary.

I think more broadly speaking, in terms of the movement, ideally you have the same principles and values. But also it's okay not to agree on absolutely everything to be able to unite for a broader goal of collective liberation. So as long as you have the basic shared principles and values, I think it's important to also be strategic to an extent in order to come together, to help strengthen the movement and its efforts.

Yara Hawari 29:11

Over to you, Aline.

Aline Batarseh 29:13

Thank you, Tamara. You mentioned a lot of really important points about how we're also seeing the world changing, right? Because I think we're exposed to social media and we're all in this virtual world together, and our stories are being heard by people and by communities who are also oppressed, including Black Americans and Indigenous groups. So there's just so much to build on. It's really inspiring, I think, and it has been going for a while. But I feel like our issues and this whole thing around — we really cannot be liberated, we have to work around joint liberation together — I'm very inspired.

I feel like on a daily basis I have to remind myself of this quote from Angela Davis that says you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world, and you have to do it all the time. And it's not easy, but I feel like for me it's a source of inspiration, and I have to remind myself of it all the time — because we have to imagine that a different world is possible, and we have to work towards it.

And I think just to answer the question, Yara, around what do we learn moving forward from the Unity Intifada — and for me, the biggest, most important lesson is that unity is possible. Despite Israel's fragmentation, despite everything that Israel is doing to make sure that we do not unite, it is possible. And of course,

despite the Palestinian Authority's complicity as well in making sure that the status quo remains the same. So you've talked about this a lot, Yara, in your analysis as well.

Last year, during the Unity Intifada, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship basically worked around organizing the general strike, and because they are such a huge part of the Israeli workforce, it really impacted the economy. I feel like there's just so much that we can do to build on it. It just needs persistence and patience, and this is why our work together, I think, is very important — because we have to have sort of patience for it to make it happen. And I feel like it's not an overstatement to say that, because it does take time and it does take the ability to take our imagination to a different place and to think of a better future. That is a future of freedom for everyone.

And I think we also saw this so clearly during the funeral for our beloved Shireen on May 13th. Despite all of the Israeli restrictions — the military checkpoints they set up to prevent mourners from joining the funeral, from attacking Palestinian mourners carrying Shireen's coffin, to arresting mourners that were carrying the Palestinian flag — Palestinians are still united in love and in pain. And I don't think I've ever seen Jerusalem this Palestinian. It was such a beautiful moment, even though of course it was full of sorrow.

But we see what we can do when we really unite and get together — and that we can defy Israel's fragmentation. And it's in no way easy. But I do think that this persistence is very important. This faith in ourselves is really important.

Yara Hawari 32:32

Aline, you mentioned Shireen Abu Akleh's funeral in Jerusalem, and how despite the horror of her killing, it showed once again a united front of Palestinians. Indeed, in death, Shireen united Palestinians in a way that few political movements have been able to do. Scenes that I never thought I would see in my

lifetime — Jaffa Gate flooded with Palestinian flags and Palestinians chanting for a free Palestine — were so incredibly moving and inspiring as well as deeply poignant. And I think many of us felt like, with those scenes, we were getting a glimpse of what a liberated Palestine could look like.

But back to this question of working together. Palestinian civil society organizations, both in Palestine and around the world, are working in very close quarters. We often cover the same topics, organize similar events, etc. And as such, we often go after the same funding, the same supporters, the same employees even. And I think this kind of environment can foster competitiveness and even sometimes resentment. And I don't necessarily think that's always by coincidence.

I think there are forces at work that are trying to distract us from the work that we have to do. And what we saw during the Unity Intifada was Palestinians coming together from the bottom up to resist Israeli settler colonialism. It wasn't unity or organizing that came from NGOs or political parties. It was the Palestinian street organizing in a way that directly responded to events on the ground, that was built on decades of organizing and political work. And this was what was so inspiring. It showed that we still have the capacity to resist and organize.

And I think we should take inspiration from the Palestinian street. We can also do that within Palestinian civil society and Palestinian organizational spaces. It's about fostering an environment of like-minded organizations that work together, that have clear politics and obvious red lines, but also where there is a space and room for people to grow, learn, and develop. And that also adopts this notion of care.

Now, before we end, I want to let our listeners know that Al-Shabaka, Makan, and Visualizing Palestine are currently raising funds to support our collective work, expand our reach further, and strengthen the global movement for Palestinian

liberation. You can support us by visiting al-shabaka.org/donate now, or any time before June 16th.

Thank you, Aline and Tamara, once again for joining me on Rethinking Palestine.

Aline Batarseh 35:17

Thank you so much. It was a real pleasure being in conversation with both of you, and I always really love working with you and collaborating on many different levels. Thank you so much, Yara, for hosting us.

Tamara Ben-Halim 35:31

Likewise. Thank you so much, Yara and Al-Shabaka, and Aline and VP.

Yara Hawari 35:41

Thank you for listening to Rethinking Palestine. Don't forget to subscribe and leave us a review. For more policy analysis and to donate to support our work, please visit our website, al-shabaka.org. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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