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Bodies fall but ideas endure
 Ghassan Kanafani and the

history of Palestinian cultural assassination

Culture(/taxonomy/term/30) 5 min read

Nadine Sayegh (/taxonomy/term/68103) | 08 July, 2021

On the anniversary of Ghassan Kanafani's assassination, The New Arab takes stock of the history and legacy of Palestinian cultural figures assassinated by Israel, and how their enduring significance continues to permeate within the Palestinian mind.

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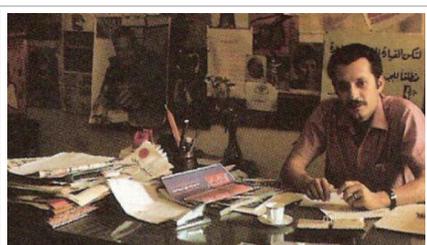
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Book Club (/taxonomy/term/32)

Today in 1972, at 36-years-old, the prolific author, journalist, and leading figure in the Palestinian resistance [Ghassan Kanafani](#) (<https://thepolisproject.com/a-man-in-the-sun/#.YOLWkhMzY6U>), was assassinated by the Mossad in Lebanon as a response to the Lod airport massacre.

Kanafani's assassination should be situated within a broader strategy of Israeli military and intelligence policy during the 1970s and 1980s to target, and [inevitably remove influential Palestinian leaders](#) (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/awakening-palestinian-citizens-israel>).



Today, Ghassan Kanafani's writings continue to resonate as an archetypical symbol of the Palestinian character

Mahmoud Darwish, arguably Palestine's national poet, wrote in his [eulogy](#) (<http://pflp-lb.org/newsg.php?go=fullnews&newsid=7704>) to [Kanafani](#) (<https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2017/11/complete-writings-revolutionary/>): "They blew up you, as they would up a front, a base, a mountain, and a capital, and they went to war with you, as they would an army.

Because you are a symbol, and a civilisation is a wound. And why

[The Stardust Thief: A magical nod to Arab oral story-telling](#) ([/features/stardust-thief-magical-nod-arab-oral-story-telling](#)).

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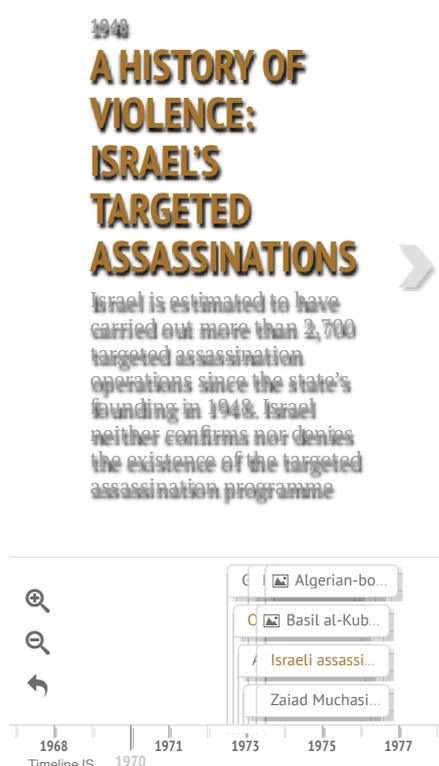
Elise Daniaud and Naama Al Alwani

Culture(/taxonomy/term/30)

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you? Why you? Because the homeland in you is real and transparent, and innovation for rivers whose waters are carved from the blood of migrants. Its streaks are always burnt, in which the late olive shade blends between memory and earth."

The impact of both his life and death highlights is a clear reminder of his effect on the Palestinian people.



He and other cultural icons of his age were targeted because of the profoundness in their work which was carried through into their audience. Yet we also find from novelist [Elias Khoury](https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/books/the-poet-is-dead-1.495890) (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/books/the-poet-is-dead-1.495890>), the sad irony of preserving the [legacy of figures of the Palestinian resistance](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opini) (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opini>)

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Kristian Peterson

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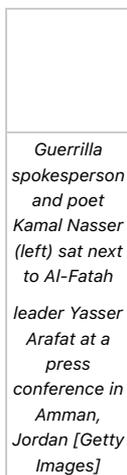
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on/50-years-palestinian-resistance), as shown by Gazan poet Kamal Nasser's sarcastic reaction to Darwish's eulogy to Kanafani. Tragically, Nasser was also killed by the Israelis: "Darwish recalled that he was taken by surprise when the Palestinian poet Kamal Nasser walked angrily into his office at the Palestinian Research Centre in 1972, holding the obituary the poet had written for Kanafani. Nasser threw the article on the desk and demanded, gently, 'What will you write about my death, now that you've written everything in this article?'"



These exchanges highlight in a personal perspective how cultural resistance lives on (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/features/heritage-and-cultural-struggle-palestine>) with the icons' legacy, even in a sardonically competitive spirit.

Kamal Nasser (<https://www.birzeit.edu/en/45-anniversary-Land-Day-Kamal-Nasser-poetry>) was killed one year later through a targeted assassination by the Mossad in Beirut, alongside Kamal Adwan, (<http://en.fatehnews.org/2021/04/kamal-adwan-1924-1973/>) a

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leading Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) politician, and 'Abu Yusef,' a militant member of the organisation.

Cultural influences were deemed as dangerous as political power through the eyes of the Israeli 'Special Forces,' and continued to repeat the strategy of suppression. Outcry and testimony are an absolute result from a population under duress and manifests, in some ways, by what is deemed art and aesthetic political resistance.

This kind of art has been a driver, and mirror of the collective psyche (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258182504_Bearing_witness_in_Palestinian_resistance_literature) of a certain time in history, viewed then and now by Israel as a permanent threat. Upon Nasser's death, in an almost linear fashion, Darwish published a short poem called the *Palestinian Wedding* (<https://www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/this-is-the-palestinian-wedding>): "This is the Palestinian wedding: Never will lover reach lover, except as a martyr or fugitive."

Another voice silenced by the Mossad was Naji al-Ali. The latter was a journalist and caricaturist who is best known for creating one of the most iconic Palestinian symbols, Handala. This sentiment holds true, not only for the fictional and non-fiction works of Nasser and Kanafani and their works – which had a significant impact on the Palestinian consciousness (<https://brill.com/view/journals/mjc>

[c/7/2/article-p190_6.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/mjc/7/2/article-p190_6.xml)) of their time – but of their counterparts in

different artistic domains.

In 1987, in London where al-Ali was residing at the time, he was shot in the head, later succumbing to his injuries. Like his counterparts, his creative work had and continues to be prescient within

Palestinian contemporary popular culture (<https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2021/05/palestina-n-art-proclaims-a-peoples-identity-in-the-conflict-with-israel/>).

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Who killed Naji al-Ali, Palestine's most beloved artist?
(<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/who-killed-naji-al-ali-palestines-most-beloved-artist>)

Analysis Suzan Quitaz

Whether their assassinations propelled their fame is an argument to be had, however, their work, symbolisms, icon-isms, have lived on, morphing to differing circumstances and struggles relating to the Palestinian experience. Today, you can readily find original artwork, from graffiti to sculpture, which will include quotations from these men, images of them, and replication of both images and images of their imaginations.



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The stories of the literary trio, (<https://artmejo.com/literature-of-the-resistance/>) and how they are interwoven with a number of cultural practitioners, is further testament to the impact of their presence and that of their publications, and of their ability to paint accurate pictures of a collective state of being. Today, their assassinations are now part of the wider culture surrounding the historic and contemporary Palestinian struggle (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/fragmented-palestinian-resistance>).

This cultural martyrdom resonates throughout the narrative of the resistance movement in tandem with political and militant martyrdom; they are held in the same regard, not only to the enemy but to society as a whole as well.

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by [Mahmoud Darwish](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/his-deathbed-letter-mahmoud-darwish)
(<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/his-deathbed-letter-mahmoud-darwish>).

In Brief Mahmoud Darwish

Both cultural and political assassinations continue till this day; recent cases are the loss of prominent thinkers, authors and activists: [Basel al-Araj](https://samidoun.net/2017/03/basil-al-araj-executed-by-israeli-occupation-forces-after-pa-imprisonment-and-months-in-hiding/) (<https://samidoun.net/2017/03/basil-al-araj-executed-by-israeli-occupation-forces-after-pa-imprisonment-and-months-in-hiding/>) and [Nizar Banat](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/activist-nizar-banats-death-unnatural-palestinian-authority) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/activist-nizar-banats-death-unnatural-palestinian-authority>).

Like Kanafani, both of these men had a significant impact on their surroundings and were viewed as pioneers of resistance. Al-Araj was killed by an Israeli 'counter-terror' unit, allegedly facilitated by the Palestinian Authority, and [Nizar Banat](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/nizar-banat-pa-sinks-even-deeper-authoritarianism), killed less than one month ago (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/nizar-banat-pa-sinks-even-deeper-authoritarianism>), at the hands of the US-trained PA forces. Both these men were referred to as martyrs who resisted through education and writing, and they both had suspicions that they would meet their end because of it.

On the commemoration of Kanafani's assassination, it is an opportunity to look back into the recent history of Palestinian resistance. To observe strategies used against their fruitful dissent,

and to prepare and protect cultural influences accordingly.

His assassination is a reminder of others who have been taken due to their heavy influence. In turn, today's ongoing digital struggle to raise awareness of the Palestinian movement provides space for individuals to identify today's cultural leaders and protect them from what befell so many others.

Nadine Sayegh is a multidisciplinary writer and researcher covering the Arab world. She has covered topics including gender in the region, countering violent extremism, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, amongst other social and political issues.

Tags:

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Naji al-Ali (/taxonomy/term/41655)

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