

# How the watermelon became a symbol of Palestinian resistance

While the origins of the story cannot be verified, the fruit has taken on new meaning on social media



Khaled Hourani's work 'The Colours of the Palestinian Flag', on view at the Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow in 2014.

Courtesy the artist



**Alexandra Chaves**

May 29, 2021

Updated: May 30, 2021

Red, black, white and green – the colours of the Palestinian flag... and of watermelons. After the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, Israel prohibited the display of the Palestinian flag and its colours in Gaza and the West Bank, and it is said the Israeli army arrested or harassed anyone who tried to do so. As a form of protest, the story goes, activists would carry around slices of watermelon instead.

The story has become a bit of a contemporary myth, proliferated recently on social media, with its true origins buried in various retellings and reposts.

As far as the facts go, a **military order** from Israeli forces did prohibit the right of assembly and publication related to political matters or what could be interpreted as political, including the bearing of national symbols.

A report in *The New York Times* from October 1993, weeks after the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation – which gave birth to the Palestinian Authority and also lifted the ban on the flag – briefly references arrests linked to carrying the fruit.

“In the Gaza Strip, where young men were once arrested for carrying sliced watermelons – thus displaying the red, black and green Palestinian colours – soldiers stand by, blase, as processions march by waving the once-banned flag,” the report states. The paper later retracted the detail, stating that they could not confirm the watermelon incident.

Another story involves artists Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani and Issam Badr, whose exhibition at 79 Gallery in 1980 was shut down by the Israeli army as the artworks were deemed political and bore the Palestinian flag and its colours. Confronting the officer, Badr asked, “What if I just want to paint a watermelon?”, to which he replied, “It would be confiscated”.

Mansour, now in his seventies and living in Birzeit, remembers the incident, but clarified a few details for *The National*. He recalls that the exhibition in 79 Gallery was open for only three hours before soldiers cleared out the space and locked it up. Two weeks later, Israeli officers summoned the three artists, warning them to stop producing political paintings, and perhaps paint flowers instead.

“They told us that painting the Palestinian flag was forbidden, but also the colours were forbidden. So Issam said, ‘What if I were to make a flower of red, green, black and white?’, to which the officer replied angrily, ‘It will be confiscated. Even if you paint a watermelon, it will be confiscated.’ So the watermelon was mentioned, but by the Israeli officer,” Mansour explains.

He does not recall artists during this period using the watermelon as a political motif in their work.



Beesan Arafat (@beesanarafat on Instagram), Palestinian-Jordanian artist in England, depicts a slice of watermelon on a Hebron plate. Courtesy the artist

In some ways, the veracity of these narratives are now secondary, as artists have adopted the fruit as a symbol of the Palestinian struggle.

The first example can be traced back to Khaled Hourani, who had heard a version of Mansour's story and painted a slice of watermelon for the Subjective Atlas of Palestine project in 2007. His work later travelled around the world, including Scotland, France, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Hourani has also held art workshops centred around the work at schools in Ramallah.

In recent weeks, following the destruction and death in Gaza, online support for Palestine has amplified the conversation around Palestinian rights and the decades-long Israeli occupation. Along with the rise of online campaigns, Hourani's work has received newfound attention that he says is overwhelming, with hundreds of messages pouring in.



Artist Khaled Hourani first used the watermelon in his work for the Atlas of Palestine Project in 2007. Khaled Hourani

“For me, it was kind of sudden. This is just one of my projects, which was not as successful or widespread as it is right now,” he says. “It’s a unique kind of solidarity... It’s very powerful. I honestly don’t know how to deal with it. Some people are getting it as a

tattoo, some are making patterns for clothes, putting it on flags, different mediums. I'm happy that it brings attention to the Palestinian cause.”

Sarah Hatahet, a Jordanian illustrator who lives in Abu Dhabi, has created her own watermelon artwork after coming across Hourani's on social media. Others, such as Sami Boukhari, who lives in Jaffa, Aya Mobaydeen in Amman, Beesan Arafat in England, have also drawn upon the tale of the watermelon and shared their artwork on social media.

Hourani describes the support for Palestine online, particularly from younger generations, as harbouring a kind of “magic”.

“People around the world are standing up and saying that the occupation has to come to an end. This is a historical moment. As an artist, as a human being, I feel honoured that my work is being used as a tool or is a part of this driving force,” he says.



'Watermelon Resistance' by Jordanian artist Sarah Hatahet.

Resistance through art has a long-standing history in Palestine, but so do attacks on Palestinian culture – not only in the form of censorship, such as the ban on national symbols, but also of graver instances of closures, confiscations, arrests and destruction of property.

Even in the 79 Gallery incident recounted by Mansour, he recalls that two paintings had gone missing by the time the Israeli officers allowed the artists to return to the space and the exhibition never reopened.

A most recent example is the [raid on Dar Yusuf Nasri Jacir for Art and Research](#), or Dar Jacir, in Bethlehem.

“In the 1970s several art centres in Ramallah were also destroyed by Israeli forces,” says art historian Salwa Mikdadi. “What they did to Dar Jacir is not new. This has been repeated over and over again.”

Mikdadi, who has curated several exhibitions, including Palestine’s first exhibition for the Venice Biennale in 2009, teaches at New York University Abu Dhabi and has written extensively about Arab and Palestinian art.

Some people even deny our existence, deny Palestinian culture and identity, so art fights this. It gives a home for the homeless

**Sliman Mansour, artist**

She says that the targeting of artists and cultural spaces is a tactic used by occupying forces to erase identity.

“Clearly they wanted to dehumanise the Palestinians, make them a people without a culture, without a past. It is a rich culture that goes back centuries. So for them, culture is a very dangerous tool in the hands of Palestinians. It’s a medium that has proved to be more much more successful than politicians in how they effect change from the audiences around the world.”

Mansour thinks similarly. “Some people even deny our existence, deny Palestinian culture and identity, so art fights this. It gives a home for the homeless,” he says.

The artist’s work, such as the 1973 painting *Camel of Hardship*, is among the most recognisable in Arab art, along with his depictions of peasants and women in traditional dress.

During the First Intifada, Mansour and other artists led the New Vision movement, which upheld the idea of self-reliance.

“The main philosophy of the First Intifada was to boycott Israeli products and rely on ourselves,” he says. “People were planting vegetables in their gardens so as not to buy anything from Israel. We thought, ‘Why don’t we do the same as artists? Why should we buy paint from Israeli shops and then use it to paint against them?’”.

He turned to materials such as mud and straw, joined by artists such as Nabil Anani and Tayseer Barakat, who used henna, vegetable dyes and other natural materials.



‘Woman Picking Olives’, by Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour. Courtesy Zawyeh Gallery

Today, despite the dispossession and destruction, a small sliver of progress, perhaps, is a renewed global conversation around the occupation, and growing support for Palestine expressed by cultural institutions worldwide.

These include a call for solidarity with Palestine by The Mosaic Rooms in London, signed by artists and organisations, as well as the ongoing Visual Arts for Palestine campaign.

On Tuesday, the International Biennial Association, for which the board of directors includes key leaders from the Sharjah Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, Berlin Biennale, Kochi Biennale Foundation and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation, have also put out a statement of support.

“Social media has made a very strong impact, much more so than when communications were controlled by the occupier. Now they don’t have control over that,” Mikdadi explains.

“Before, the Palestinians’ voices were hardly ever heard. They were interpreted by correspondents and journalists. Now this is a direct communication, and the speed with which these messages are distributed around the world is phenomenal. It’s extraordinary for us who lived through earlier times...

“The world is so interconnected now, people can see for themselves what’s happening.”

Updated: May 30, 2021 06:28 PM