

## CULTURE

# Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour will not leave Israel despite not feeling free

He's known as an "artist of the intifada," but Mansour doesn't see himself as a political artist. He told DW how his motifs come from daily life as a Palestinian living in Jerusalem 70 years after Israel's independence.



*DW: On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was declared. Palestinians commemorate the next day, May 15, as the day of Nakba, the "catastrophe." How do you feel about that now, 70 years later?*

Suleiman Mansour: All the time, not just at this time, I am very sad. Sad, sometimes angry, sometimes confused, because when you hear the Europeans, the Americans talking about human rights and looking at the situation here and then not doing anything, or even worse, supporting Israel, it's confusing.

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*How would you describe your situation as a Palestinian today? For example, in Jerusalem where you live?*



In Jerusalem, I feel there is [a kind of war against the Palestinians](#). It's a hidden war, not an obvious one with airplanes. You always have some kind of lawsuit against you, and you don't know where it is coming from. It creates a kind of atmosphere where you always feel you are in danger. You don't feel free.

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And moreover, I don't like Jerusalem. It's a place for tourists. If you go to the old city, everything is just souvenirs or restaurants. It's not a living city as it used to be.

Mansour is also known as 'Suleiman' due to the English transliteration of his name from Arabic

If I could choose, I would rather live in Ramallah or Birzeit [both in the West Bank]. But I have to live in Jerusalem to keep my ID. So, as a Palestinian, you have to live in a place where you don't feel safe, you don't feel free and that you don't like,

just to keep your ID.

*The so called "Jerusalem ID" grants permanent residency to Jerusalemites who were born there or already lived in the city before 1967 [when Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in the Six-Day War]. It doesn't give you Israeli citizenship, but you can travel to Israel and abroad with it.*

With the Jerusalem ID, I have some benefits. I can go to the Israeli cities of Jaffa and Haifa, to wherever I want. If I lost it, I would be a nobody. I couldn't go to Europe, not even to Jordan, nowhere. Even living in Ramallah would be against the law. Everything is complicated here. They want to complicate our lives and their end aim for you to be fed up and leave. That's why I don't want to leave, no matter what happens.

Read more: [The 1967 Six-Day War and its difficult legacy](#)



*You were born in 1947 in Birzeit, not far from Ramallah. What did your parents tell you about 1948?*

My father and my grandfather died when I was three years old. My father from cancer, my grandfather out of grief from his son's death. We six children were left with my mother. She spent all her time working, sewing clothes to make a living for us. She didn't have the time to talk to us.

*So, how did you learn about the history of Palestine?*

I didn't know much. We were under Jordanian rule, and they taught us as children that we are Jordanian: The Jordanian flag is our flag, Jordanian King Hussein is our king. It was brainwashing. When I became a teenager, I started to read the newspaper, and I loved Gamal Abdel Nasser [the pan-Arab nationalist and

president of Egypt from 1956-1979]. Other students in school told me some things. And then after the occupation happened.

*In 1967, you mean, after the Six-Day War, in which Israel conquered the east of Jerusalem and the territory that is now known as the Westbank.*

Yes, after '67. I met Palestinians from Israel, and everyone had a sad story. It affected me a lot. When I was studying art at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, they wanted to teach me abstract expression, the trend at the time. I didn't want to, I wanted to paint more realistic things from life.



Mansour's painting 'And the Convoy Keeps Going' includes symbols with political resonance such as the dove, the gun with a green branch and the paint brushes

*Today you are one of the most renowned Palestinian artists, and you're often referred to as the "artist of the intifada." Would you consider yourself a political artist?*

I think people exaggerate with all these titles. They need heroes. So they picked me. I don't like it. As an artist, you don't want to be put in a box. Even when I do things that don't have to do anything with politics, they say it's political. As a human being it might be good for your ego, but as an artist, it's not so easy.

*But you were involved in political movements.*

I am not involved. I reflect in my art my way of life, and my bad luck is that I am under occupation. I didn't choose that. It would be surrealistic to live under occupation and to paint nice flowers and beautiful women and everything is so nice. You can't do that. You have to reflect your life. I use symbolism quite often, and people tend to understand my symbolism.

*During the first Palestinian uprising against Israel, known as an intifada, you said that you would only use material from Palestine.*

*What was that about?*

That was the philosophy of the intifada. When you read their literature and leaflets, it's about boycotting Israeli goods and trying to rely on ourselves. Most people were trying to do that, by planting their land or starting a small farm to live from. As an artist I thought, why don't we do the same? Why don't we search for natural materials to do our work from?

The mud came from my childhood memories. As a child I used to work with my grandmother when she was building beehives and even ovens with mud. And I was always around her, trying to help. So when I thought about material that I could use, mud was the first thing that came to my mind. After a while, once I started making figures, I realized that the mud also reflects the human fate with the cracks, people waiting to disappear, fall down and go away.

*Read more: [Intifadas: What you need to know](#)*



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Mansour used clay to make this piece of art in his studio in Ramallah

*The second intifada wasn't about boycotting anymore. It was about fighting. Did you take part in that as well?*

I didn't have a role in the second intifada, and I didn't like the second intifada. I felt that it was imposed, not real, made up. The violence also played a role. Israel is so strong militarily. So why are we going to fight Israel where they excel? That is bad thinking.

*On May 14 the [US Embassy will be moved to Jerusalem](#) [the interview was conducted before the embassy opened — Eds.] Some people have [announced the coming of a third intifada](#). What do you think?*

Nothing will happen, some demonstrations, that's it. No one can predict an intifada. You can predict an intifada like the second intifada because you make it. But the first intifada is something that just appeared. Nobody can predict it.

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*In Gaza people have been demonstrating over the past couple of weeks in the so-called "Great March of Return" and demanding the right for Palestinian refugees to return to what is now Israel. People come back every Friday to [the Gaza-Israeli border](#), although the Israeli army is shooting everyone who is trying to cross the fence. Will this become a movement?*

Gaza is a different story. This is like a big prison. I don't know how they can even live. They don't have anything to lose. The anger there has been built up over many years. Their anger is directed against Israel. And this will continue.

*Where do you think could be a road to the future? What about two-state solution, with an independent Palestine and Israel side-by-side?*

Not without Jerusalem. In 1994-95 there was a solution on the table that would have been acceptable to people. It said Jerusalem would be one city. West Jerusalem would be run by Israelis, even the Wailing Wall would be part of that, and the rest of East Jerusalem would be run by Palestinians. But it would be one city. That solution is not so great, but it would be acceptable for me. Most people would accept that.

*In this case you would accept the State of Israel next to a State Palestine with special status for Jerusalem?*

Yes. But I prefer a one-state solution. Maybe like a confederation or something. Many places have different religions and different languages. They live together and have equal rights. We could even accept the Lebanese model [where high political offices are based on religious affiliation]. Even if there were fewer Jews than Palestinians [in a one-state solution], the prime minister could be one of them. We could reach a conclusion like that. But you have to be willing to try, and as long as you are so strong and you have so much support, you will not even think about these things.

*Sliman Mansour, also known as Suleiman Mansour, is one of the leading contemporary Palestinian artists. His works, which have been exhibited around the world often reflect the Palestinian struggle and include images of woman in traditional dress and Levantine tree-filled landscapes. In 1987 he was part of the "New Visions" collective that boycotted Israeli supplies and instead used local natural*



This peace dove was painted by Mansour for Oasis of Peace, a joint peace initiative by Jewish and Palestinian-Arab Israeli citizens

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**Date** 15.05.2018

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