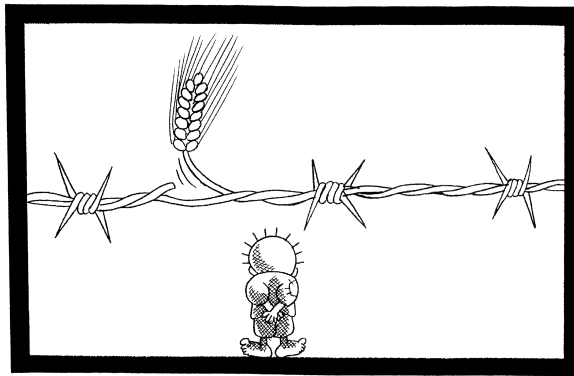


Handala and the Cartoons of Naji Al-Ali



Relevance, Characters, Symbols

By Dr. Fayeq Oweis



Who is Naji al-Ali?

Naji Salim Husain al-Ali was born in 1936 in the northern Palestinian village of *al-Shajarah*, located between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. It is believed that *al-Shajarah*, (“the tree” in Arabic) acquired its name because Jesus Christ rested under a tree there. Al-Ali was born into a family of farmers, who, like the rest of Palestinian society, owned extensive land and groves. During the *Nakba* or catastrophe of 1948, *al-Shajarah* was destroyed by Israel, along with over 480 Palestinian villages whose population fled and took refuge in the surrounding countries or in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Naji al-Ali was 12 years old when his family was forced to leave and travel north to Lebanon, where they settled in the refugee camp of *Ein al-Hilwah* near the city of Sidon in southern Lebanon. Al-Ali's childhood in the refugee camp, lacking in resources or opportunities, nurtured his awareness of the Palestinian refugee situation and engaged him in the Palestinian struggle. He longed to express his feelings and thoughts artistically, but struggled with how to do so within the walls of the refugee camp.

In the refugee camp's school, he began to draw and received encouragement from his teachers. In 1957, al-Ali traveled to Saudi Arabia to earn money towards a formal arts education. In 1959, when he returned to Lebanon, he became involved in the Arab Nationalist Movement and was arrested several times. He entered the Art Academy of Lebanon, but was unable to continue his studies there after being imprisoned for his political activities. In one interview, al-Ali recalled, *"I started to use drawing as a form of political expression while in Lebanese jails. I was detained by the Lebanese intelligence service as a result of the measures they were undertaking to contain political activities in the Palestinian refugee camps during the sixties."*

Ghassan Kanafani, a writer and prominent figure in the development of the art and literature of the Palestinian resistance movement, has been credited for “discovering” Naji al-Ali's talents. He encouraged al-Ali by publishing some of his drawings in *al-Hurriyya* magazine, the voice of the Arab Nationalist Movement, of which Kanafani was the editor. The publication of his cartoons was a turning point in Naji al-Ali's life and in his artistic career as a political cartoonist.

In 1963, he traveled to Kuwait and worked for *al-Talii'a* newspaper and in



1969 he started working for *al-Siyyasa* newspaper where he introduced his signature character, Handala. In 1974, al-Ali went back to Beirut and worked for *al-Safeer* newspaper. He published his first book of cartoons in 1976. In 1979, Naji al-Ali was elected president of the League of Arab Cartoonists. He was the recipient of the first prize in the Arab cartoonists exhibitions held in Damascus in 1977 and 1980.

Forced to leave Beirut in 1983, he went to Kuwait and worked for *al-Qabas* newspaper. In 1985 he was forced to leave Kuwait to London and in July 22, 1987, he was shot outside the offices of *al-Qabas*, and remained unconscious until his death on August 29, 1987. The assassin's identity remains unknown. *The New York Times* said of his work, "If you want to know what the Arabs think of the U.S., look at Naji al-Ali's cartoons." *Time* magazine said, "This man draws with human bones" while a Japanese newspaper said, "Naji al-Ali draws with phosphoric acid." In 1988, the International Federation of Newspaper Publishers awarded Naji al-Ali the Golden Pen Award posthumously and described him as "one of the best cartoonists since the 18th century."

The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali

The traditional sayings "*A picture is worth a thousand words*" and "*A pen is mightier than a sword*" need to be re-interpreted when looking at the cartoons of Naji al-Ali. When words are forbidden and censored, then the picture, composed of simple black and white lines, is worth much more. In terms of the pen and the sword, the saying should be "*A pen is mightier than a bullet.*" In this case, a bullet assassinated one of the most gifted and dedicated artists who fought only with his pen.

Naji al-Ali's cartoons were not intended for entertainment or as comic strips in a newspaper to make the reader laugh. They were political cartoons that were a mixture of fine arts, editorials, and political messages. Often, an artist's role in society is to deliver a concept or a message and to influence the viewer. Naji al-Ali was no exception. His cartoons conveyed messages that compelled the viewer take a stand with the forces for good and in support of the oppressed. His cartoons were very simple, clear, and to the point. They were the voice of ordinary people. He avoided complicated messages regardless of the complexity of the subject or the idea of his



cartoon. He presented the issue of Palestine with clear messages condemning the occupation, corruption, human rights abuses, and the lack of freedom of expression and democracy in the Arab world.

Naji al-Ali's cartoons were like a play taking place on a stage available only on the back page of a newspaper. This back page became the first page for millions of ordinary people who looked to his cartoons as expressions of their own voices. Al-Ali created a cast of characters who would reappear in different settings. He rarely drew or satirized actual characters as do most cartoonists, but instead used his own characters: Handala (the little spectator boy), *al-Zalama* (the good man), Fatima (the good woman), and the Evil Man. Throughout his artistic career of over 30 years, these characters remained constant in their values. The good man remained the good man regardless of his role or identity. Fatima, the good woman, also retained her role, whether she was a wife, a mother, or a freedom fighter. Handala was a special character with a pointed symbolism that had a major role in al-Ali's cartoons.

Naji al-Ali was first and foremost a political cartoonist and his central issue of concern was Palestine. Around this focal point, he introduced other issues such as resistance, democracy, human rights, fighting corruption, and Arab unity. His cartoons were full of hopes, dreams, and a vision for a better life for the Palestinians in particular and for the Arab people in general. His cartoons were made for the ordinary Arab person, whether highly educated or illiterate. They were the voices of the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed, the refugee, and the occupied, and of those people who, in his words, "*did not have a voice.*"

At a young age, Naji al-Ali found himself in a refugee camp after being forced to leave his Palestinian homeland. The loss of Palestine for him and for millions of Palestinians was the main topic and the focal point of his cartoons. He repeatedly confirmed his commitment to the liberation of Palestine, to the return to the homeland, and to resistance in order to achieve the goals of freedom and democracy. He did not perceive the issue of Palestine to be of concern to the Palestinians alone, but felt it was of importance to the whole Arab world. He saw in the unity of the Arab people, in democracy, and in the affirmation of human rights vehicles for the liberation of Palestine. When he demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, he demanded the release of political prisoners



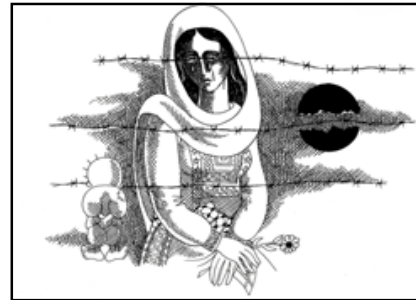
from Arab jails. He returned to the theme of the suppression of democracy constantly in his cartoons, represented in the form of an official newspaper headline, or by a reader whose tongue has been cut and bandaged or a writer composing his will because he dared to write about democracy.

Characters in Naji al-Ali's Cartoons

The major characters in Naji al-Ali's cartoons are Fatima, *al-Zalama*, the Evil Man, and Handala.

Fatima: The Good Woman

The role of women in al-Ali's cartoons is represented by his character, Fatima, drawn with simple and sharp lines and with beautiful features. Fatima plays a primary role in the majority of the cartoons, and is always the good woman, whether she is the wife, the mother or the freedom fighter. She is seen side-by-side with the good man, preparing his rifle, protecting him, or keeping him on the right track, or even taking a stand to correct his views and actions. Fatima is also the one who disciplines those who betray the revolution and the resistance. She is used as a symbol for the homeland, for the people, and for the refugee camp. Fatima is a sad woman who has lost a husband, a son, or a brother as martyrs. Fatima represents not only the Palestinian woman; she stands for Palestine as a whole— the land and the people. She is also the symbol of *Ein al-Hilwah* and other refugee camps. She is the resistance, the revolution and the *Intifada*. She is also sometimes Lebanese and Lebanon itself. In the depiction of Fatima as Beirut during the Israeli invasion of 1982, she opens her arms to greet a soldier with her breasts that become daggers killing that soldier. Fatima also represents Egypt, opposing the Camp David accords and the raising of Israeli flags in the heart of the Arab land. She is the symbol of love, peace, struggle, sacrifice, and suffering. She wears a beautiful embroidered dress and has the key of her house in Palestine still hanging around her neck. She is the *Intifada* in the form of a pregnant woman in the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Fatima is a tree with deep roots and is willing to have more





children who can throw rocks at both the occupation and the evil forces. As her husband declares in an interview with the foreign press: "*Fatima is better than a thousand men of those who just talk.*" In al-Ali's cartoons, Fatima's role is not limited to being the mother or a symbol of fertility—it goes well beyond that. She participates in the dialogue and is part of the decision-making and the determination.

Al-Zalama: The Good Man

The second major character in al-Ali's cartoons is a tall, old man drawn with sharp and defined lines. This character is thin, barefoot, and poor, with patched clothing. He is always honest and represents the same good values regardless of the different names, nationalities, and religious affiliations that he represents in the cartoons. Al-Ali referred to him as *Mohammad*, *Maroun*, *Abu Elias*, *Abu Hamad*, *Abu Jasim*, and mostly as "*al-Zalama*," which means "the man" in the Palestinian dialect. This man plays major roles in the cartoons either by himself or with Fatima, going head-to-head with the evil characters. *Al-Zalama* is a symbol of poverty and oppressed people. He is the ordinary Arab man, a Palestinian, a Lebanese, or an Arab man from the greater Arab world. He plays the role of a freedom fighter against the occupation, a refugee, an oppressed person, an educated person, and an advocate for human rights in the Arab world.

Al-Zalama is the writer who advocates democracy, but has to prepare his will after publishing an article about democracy. *Al-Zalama* is also the reader who demands that writers and journalists improve their writing and stay on the path of national unity and the liberation of Palestine. He confronts the authorities and questions them about their corruption, lack of democracy, and human rights abuses. He dares to throw a rock into an oil well despite the American sign that says "You can not touch this." He challenges the religious authorities by refusing to fast in the month of Ramadan, protesting the situation in the Arab world and standing in solidarity with poor people in the region.

He is also a man of unity, who when questioned about his religion, whether Muslim or Christian, responds that he is an Arab or simply that he is hungry. In some cartoons, his name is Mohammad and he plays the role of a Muslim





imam in a mosque preaching against the occupation. He is sometimes a Maronite, a Lebanese Christian, refusing to allow Israel to use him against his Muslim brother. He is *Abu Elias*, also a Lebanese Christian, who wears the cross pendant and is a supporter of the Lebanese National Resistance Movement. He is *Abu Hamad* and *Abu Jassim* from the Gulf States who like to get vodka from their comrades in the Soviet Union but condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He is *Boutros* or Peter, an Egyptian Coptic Christian who is accused of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and confesses because of the torture in an Egyptian jail cell.

The Evil Man (The Moron)

The counterpart to the good-hearted characters (*Fatima* and *al-Zalama*), is a character with no aesthetic features, the Evil Man or the Moron, as al-Ali sometimes referred to him. This character symbolizes the opposing values of the good-hearted characters. He represents ugliness, wealth, injustice, weakness, sell-out, aggression, oppression, laziness, and stupidity. Sometimes he is presented individually and other times in a group of duplicate characters with the same features— ugly, stupid, lazy, and dirty in their looks and actions. The duplicate characters, who look like bags of fat with no legs, represent all the evil forces and everything that is negative in the Arab world and the region. Al-Ali drew them without necks, legs or supports, to signify that these characters lacked any popular support or a future for continuation. They are temporary characters and always appear confused, stupid and sometimes with horns— a sign of aggression. They are the reactionary forces, the regressive Arab regimes, the authorities, the opportunists, the traitors, and the ones who oppose democracy and resisting the occupation.

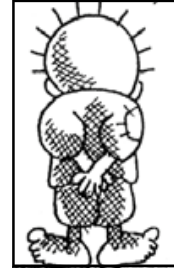
The evil character always tries to plot against *al-Zalama*, *Fatima*, and *Handala*, to silence them and or to assassinate them. The Evil Man is the one who states: “Every Palestinian is a suspect until proven guilty.” In some cartoons, the Evil Man appears in different forms and is given various names. One of these characters is called *Abu Basim* and he is fat, wears a good suit and neck tie, and smokes cigars. The word “*Basim*” in Arabic refers to the person who endorses documents using his finger prints (*basma*) without reading or questioning what he is endorsing. The other character is *Abdul Qader*, a Palestinian contractor who goes to Kuwait and makes a lot of money, thus enabling him to send his children



to study in Switzerland, London, and the United States.

Handala: A Character and a Symbol of Struggle

One of the hallmarks of Naji al-Ali's cartoons was his creation of these unique characters. Besides the good-hearted characters, a small child appears with his hands clasped behind his back, his face hidden, standing as a witness to an event, or participating in it by speaking, writing, throwing a rock, hugging, kissing, and presenting flowers. This child's name is Handala, a representation of al-Ali himself frozen in time at the age of 10. Handala became al-Ali's most famous character, appearing in the majority of his cartoons, and personifying bitterness, resilience and dignity.



From the time that al-Ali started drawing in the early 1950s and until 1969, he signed his drawings with his first name (Naji) or with a cross or both. In 1969 while al-Ali was working in Kuwait for *al-Siyyasa* newspaper, he introduced a character he called Handala (also pronounced *Hanthala*, *Hanzala*, and *Handhala*) This character, whose name is derived from a plant called *handhal* in Arabic, is a small, barefoot boy with patched clothing and sparse hair. The *handhal* is a resilient plant that has deep roots and the ability to grow back regardless of attempts to cut or weed it out. It is always associated with bitterness and thus bitterness and resilience became common features of Handala. Handala himself became the signature and the “trademark” of Naji al-Ali that was present in every drawing from 1969 until al-Ali's assassination in 1987.

Naji al-Ali introduced Handala in a cartoon published in *al-Siyyasa* newspaper on July 13, 1969. He appeared in the middle of the cartoon looking like a frog sitting down and facing the reader. In the cartoon, Handala introduced himself as “only an Arab person” and offered to be part of al-Ali's life from that time on. Handala made a promise to be faithful to the Palestinian cause and to fight corruption and criticize everyone who did not follow the path toward the liberation of Palestine. Handala also declared that he was not afraid of anyone but God. He used an Arabic saying “*Go and pave the sea*” which is the equivalent of “*I do not care about what you do*” or “*To hell with you*”. Handala's use of this proverb was a strong indication that he was willing to criticize everyone and was



determined to say the truth regardless of the consequences.

Handala introduced himself as a common and ordinary boy representing a generation that was suffering as a result of the *Nakba* (the catastrophe of 1948) and the *Naksa* (the defeat of 1967). Freedom of expression was a major principle in Handala's introduction. When al-Ali told Handala that each time he created a cartoon criticizing someone, the "*embassy protests and the official news gives warnings and threats*," Handala encouraged al-Ali to continue and not to run away from the "battlefield." From the time Handala was introduced, he appeared in al-Ali's cartoons playing many roles. Until 1973, Handala faced the reader and later on turned his face away from the reader and clasped his hands behind his back never to show his face again. Al-Ali used this to symbolize the rejection of the unjust solutions being offered to the Palestinian people.

As a child from the refugee camp representing the poor and displaced refugees, Handala always appears barefoot with patched clothing, indicating the living conditions of refugee camp children. Handala functioned as a symbol of al-Ali's childhood in the refugee camp of *Ein al-Hilwa* in south Lebanon. When Naji al-Ali was asked about Handala's age, he responded, "*Handala was born 10 years old and he will always be 10 years old. It was at that age that I left my homeland. When Handala returns, he will still be 10 years old, and then he will start growing up.*" In this, the laws of nature did not apply to Handala, because he was an exception. As al-Ali said, "*losing the homeland is not normal*" and for him, life would only normalize upon the return to the homeland. Al-Ali sometimes referred to Handala as the son that he carried in the Gulf and gave birth to in 1969. Handala's spiky hair represented the thorns of a hedgehog which al-Ali said "*uses his thorns as weapons.*" Al-Ali also described Handala as ugly from the outside, but full of musk and amber on the inside.

Handala's identity was declared from the first day he was introduced— he sided with the poor and suffering people of the refugee camps and with ordinary Arab people. Al-Ali wanted Handala to guard him from committing mistakes and to represent the common people, witnessing the events unfolding around him and exposing and criticizing them. He did not want Handala to take part in anything that would dictate unjust solutions to the Palestinian cause. Al-Ali once said, "*Handala is a witness to a generation that did not die, and he will not leave life, ever, he is eternal. He is a*



character that was born to live, and challenged to continue."

In one cartoon, Handala stands next to a grave where the tombstone reads: *"I think, therefore I exist,"* showing the fate of creative, free-thinkers. This was one of the ways al-Ali criticized the lack of democracy and freedom of expression in the Arab world. He saw in Handala a compass that directed him toward the just cause of Palestine. He said that if he wanted to rest or think about luxury living, then Handala would pinch him and remind him of his people and his cause. He also explained that the role of Handala was to observe everything that he drew and that these drawings could not be bought, *"They wanted me to be a tribal artist, to be with this regime against that; but how can I accept and Handala is there watching me? I can mislead the censorship of the official newspaper because they may not understand my cartoons, but I can not mislead Handala, because he is my son."*

From 1973 onward, Handala turned his face completely away from the reader and clasped his hands together behind his back. After the October war of 1973 and the events that led to the end of the war and the agreements brokered by Henry Kissinger, al-Ali predicted unjust solutions that would be imposed on the Arab side. He decided to turn Handala's face away and clasp his hands behind his back as *"a symbol of rejection of all the present negative tides in our region."* The turning of Handala's face was also a symbol that represented the reader, the ordinary and the oppressed Arab person. Some people viewed the role of Handala as a witness or non-participating observer negatively, but al-Ali defended that role, saying, *"When Handala exposes the plots and conspiracy of the enemies of the people, his role is positive in the cartoons."* When asked about when people would see the face of Handala, he replied, *"When the Arab dignity is restored, and when the Arab individual regains his freedom and humanity."*

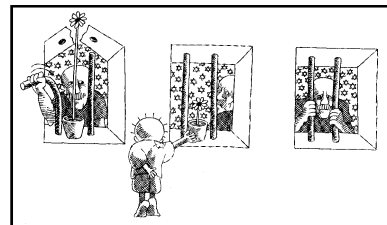
Handala became an advocate of democracy and human rights. He was provocative and incited people to take action. Handala was not only a Palestinian boy, he was an Arab, a humanitarian, and a global person. He participated in many international events. As a Palestinian, Handala was faithful to the cause of Palestine, to the refugee camps, to the Palestinian people, and to the poor and the oppressed. As an Arab, he advocated democracy, human rights, opportunity for all, freedom of expression, Arab unity, and protecting the Arabs' natural resources. His role in the cartoons was also to expose the brutality of the oppressor, whether it was



the Israeli occupation, the dictatorship of the Arab regimes, or the hypocrisy of the Palestinian leadership.

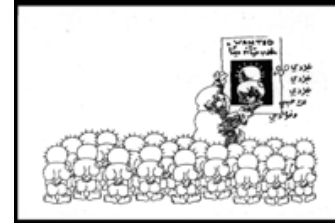
To al-Ali, Palestine was just not a geographical entity, but a just cause representing other just causes. For him, Palestine was “*not just Palestine in geographical terms, but Palestine in its humanitarian sense - the symbol of a just cause, whether it is located in Egypt, Vietnam or South Africa.*” Handala was against all the disputes between the Arab countries. His role was to erase individual identity slogans, which he did not believe in, and to support a nationalistic Arab identity. Handala was a person of unity, not only in the greater Arab world, but also in Lebanon which suffered a great deal from the civil war. He was against the civil war and against the classification of people based on religion. As an international freedom fighter and a global figure, Handala appeared in South Africa fighting apartheid, and in Vietnam, Central America, alongside the revolutions there.

In some cases, al-Ali showed more than one Handala in a single cartoon. In one cartoon, Handala holds a Palestinian flag in one hand while the other hand is throwing a rock at Menachem Begin, the late prime minister of Israel. In the same cartoon, another Handala is crucified like Jesus Christ but urinates on the crucifiers. When the Evil Man, representing the official Arab media, presents a sign to Handala and *al-Zalama* that reads “*People should be followers of their kings’ religion,*” Handala responds, “*We are unbelievers.*” Handala is also a loving, compassionate, and caring boy who presents flowers to the wounded, kisses their arms, or places flowers on the graves of the martyrs. His flower represents hope when he gives it to *al-Zalama* inside an Israeli jail, or to Beirut through an opening that was caused by a shell during the Israeli invasion in 1982. Al -Ali knew that some day he would be silenced. During his artistic career, he drew many cartoons voicing his refusal of the use of the “silencer”, be it censorship or a gun. In some of his last cartoons, al-Ali showed Handala as an immortal and eternal character that would not and could not die. In one of his interviews, al-Ali said, “*Handala, whom I created, will not end after I die. I hope that this is not an exaggeration when I say that I will continue to live in Handala, even after I die.*” Handala was and still is resilient as the *handhal* plant. He faced death with a song. In a cartoon published in *al-Qabas* newspaper on July 4, 1987, about two weeks before





al-Ali's assassination, Handala is depicted on a "wanted" poster that reads "*Wanted Dead or Alive*" but he ignores the warning and instead sings "*Oh my homeland, oh my homeland... for you is my love and my heart.*"



Handala was a symbol of struggle in the cartoons of Naji al-Ali and he has continued to play the same role, even after the assassination of his father and creator. On the walls of occupied Palestine, in protests and demonstrations all over the world, Handala has become a symbol of Palestinian struggle and resistance. He is a representative of the refugees and their right of return to their homeland. A group of Palestinians created a network called "Handala Palestine" and adopted the name of Handala as a symbol for educating others about the injustice that has been committed against the Palestinians. Handala has also become a symbol for the campaign to boycott Israeli products. He appears as the logo of various human rights organizations and media groups. He can be found as a tattoo on the bodies of thousands of people, and as a gold or silver pendant hanging around the necks of millions. Handala, crafted from the wood of olive-trees uprooted by Israel, can also be found in souvenir shops all over Palestine.

Symbols in the Cartoons of Naji al-Ali: Visual Vocabulary

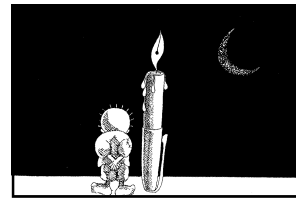
In addition to the symbolic use of his own characters (Handala, *al-Zalama*, Fatima, and the Evil Man) Naji al-Ali employed a number of other symbols in his cartoons. These, along with the characters, can be called al-Ali's "visual vocabulary" that became very familiar to his readers. The majority of his cartoons were simple and clear and he stayed away from complicated concepts. The symbols he used can be divided into three major categories: symbols of good values, symbols of the Palestinian struggle, and symbols of oppression and occupation.

Symbols of Good Values

Since the majority of al-Ali's cartoons dealt with the clashes between good and evil, he used a number of symbols to represent the values of hope, love, peace, prosperity, dignity, democracy, human rights, opportunity for



all, education, freedom of expression, and attachment to the land. Flowers, and especially daisies, appear frequently in the cartoons as signs of hope, love, and prosperity. They grow in the middle of destroyed refugee camps; they grow from the graves of the martyrs of Sabra and Shatila; they grow from inside abandoned oil barrels and they are presented as gifts by Handala to the wounded Beirut during the Israeli invasion. The love for the land, for Palestine and for Lebanon, is represented by hearts, trees, roots, and Lebanese cedars. The head of wheat symbolizes prosperity and the agricultural land of Palestine. Hearts drawn by the blood of Palestinian freedom fighters show their love for Lebanon and Palestine. The pen becomes a sword that can cut through the microphones stands of the official Arab radio stations. The pen changes to become a candle that represents hope for the future, a future of freedom, democracy and human rights.



Symbols of Palestinian Struggle

Many symbols represent the Palestinian resistance and struggle, the right of return to Palestine, and national and cultural identity of Palestinians. Jesus Christ and the cross appear frequently, signifying struggle, passion, and suffering. Jesus appears as a refugee, a wanted person, as a Palestinian and an Arab person. In some cartoons, al-Ali showed Palestinian freedom fighters being crucified. In another, a fighter leaves the ship that took him from Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of 1982, and returns using the cross as a raft and saying “We missed you Beirut.” Al-Ali was fascinated with the cross and one of his self-portraits contained the cross as part of his name and signature. The house key that Fatima wears around her neck and her tears that become key holes represent the right of return to Palestine. The house key is a symbol of attachment to the land of Palestine and to the houses that were left behind. The key also represents life in the refugee camps. Al-Ali used cultural elements such as Palestinian embroidery, folkloric songs and proverbs throughout his cartoons. Palestinian national symbols such as the flag, the *kufiya*, the map of historic Palestine and the camouflage clothes of the Palestinian freedom fighter, acknowledge the right to resist and the right to fight against aggression and occupation. The *kufiya* represents a national resistance and cultural identity when it is





worn by the freedom fighter wrapped around his head. It is a symbol of love when wrapped around the shoulders of a woman representing Egypt defying its leaders signing the Camp David accords. It is also a sign of love when it worn by the lady Beirut. But when the *kufiya* is worn by the Evil Man in the form of a neck-tie or a tourist hat, it represents the imposter and his role in trying to take advantage of the resistance. When the *kufiya* is worn by the contractor *Abdul Kader*, it represents the bourgeois segment of Palestinian society. Rocks are symbols of resistance to the Israeli occupation thrown by Palestinian children at soldiers carrying their loaded machine guns or driving tanks. Refugee tents are signs of the living situation in the refugee camps.

The tents are also used as a canvas to write messages taken from Arabic classical poetry. The passports that appear in the cartoons are meant to show that Palestinians do not have their own, and in some cases to represent the temporary



document given to the Palestinian refugees by Arab states. Cactus plants and the word *sabr* (the name of the cactus plant and also the Arabic word for patience) appear frequently in the cartoons. The word represents the waiting of the Palestinians for a just solution and the plant itself represents the land. A number of Palestinians who were allowed to go and visit their original hometowns destroyed in 1948, identified the location of their homes from the surrounding cactus plants that had grown back after being uprooted.

Symbols of Oppression and Occupation

In addition to the Evil Man representing all the evil forces, al-Ali also used a number of symbols to represent oppression, occupation, and corruption. Israeli and American soldiers are shown with signs on their helmets. Barbed wires and prison bars represent settlements, borders, prisons, and fences that prevent the Palestinians from leaving their refugee camps and fences that prevent them from going back to Palestine. These also represent the detention centers that were created by the Israeli army in southern Lebanon. Censorship and the lack of freedom of expression in the Arab world were major subjects for al-Ali and he incorporated newspaper headlines purporting to promote democracy and freedom of expression in his cartoons. The scissors that cut through the newspapers, the masking tape tying up the tongue of the good man to silence him, and



the silencer itself are all symbols protesting the lack of democracy. Oil, a natural resource belonging to the common and ordinary Arab people, was also a frequent subject. Al-Ali saw oil as a curse on the Arab people rather than a benefit. In one cartoon, oil barrels are used as "Drums of War" by Israeli and American soldiers. In another, an oil barrel is Satan or "iblis" and Handala and *al-Zalama* throw the stones at it while performing the Hajj rituals. When Fatima asks *al-Zalama* about the role of oil in the struggle, *al-Zalama* answers "The Americans are drinking it all..." Oil barrels fall from the sky, attacking Handala alongside the Israeli bombs and the Arab regimes' daggers.



Naji Al-Ali created a powerful visual vocabulary with strong symbols that have retained a contemporary resonance well beyond his death. The consistency of his vision and his artistic voice made him one of the most popular artists of the modern Middle East. His unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause and his sharp critique of the powers that be in the region won him many friends and many enemies. He left an indelible legacy.



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<http://www.najialali.com/>



About the Author

Fayeq S. Oweis is an Arab-American artist and professor of Arabic Language and Culture at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California. He has a Ph.D. in interdisciplinary studies with a focus on Arabic and Islamic arts and has published extensively and given numerous presentations on Arabic Language and Culture, Islamic Arts and Arabic Calligraphy, and Arab-American artists.



As an artist, he designed the exterior entranceway murals and the calligraphy of the interior dome of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. He also co-designed and directed the execution of one of the first Arab/Islamic cultural murals in the United States located on the main street of downtown San Francisco as well as a Palestinian cultural mural honoring Edward Said proposed to be painted at San Francisco State University. He has exhibited his calligraphic compositions throughout the United States, and was an artist-in-residence at the Art Institute of Chicago in February 2007.

He is a community activist and a founding director of ZAWAYA, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization dedicated to promoting Arabic culture through music and visual and performing arts.

For more information, visit www.oweis.com.



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2425 Virginia Ave, NW

Washington, DC 20037

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