

Nov 04, 2016 by **Paul Rockower**

## **Exhibiting Palestine** <sup>[1]</sup>

As a member of a small tribe of Orientalist Zionists, I count among those who find it no contradiction in supporting both Israel and Palestine (for what it's worth, we are cousins). While it can often be a lonely tribe, it can also lead to some interesting academic discussions and exchanges. One of those discussions took place when I interviewed Yousef Munayyer, the Executive Director of The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Development last year.

The Jerusalem Fund is a non-profit organization located in Washington, D.C. that conducts Palestinian educational, cultural and public diplomacy. "We really think of public diplomacy in terms of education and in educating all different types of people," said Munayyer. Founded in 1977, the Jerusalem Fund conducts its various forms of Palestinian public diplomacy through its three respective programs: The Palestine Center, The Gallery, and The Humanitarian Link.

The Palestine Center serves as a think tank and resource of information and analysis on Palestine, and offers a Palestinian/Arab perspective on U.S. foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and overall U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The Palestine Center also conducts Palestinian public and cultural diplomacy.

In part, the need to conduct Palestinian public and cultural diplomacy, he said, is to help combat stereotypes towards Palestinians and the Middle East. "I find that particularly in the United States, you're dealing with combating stereotypes— stereotypes that have been created in the minds of people largely by media representations that are completely inaccurate. Mostly based on images of either money-loving oil sheiks, or rabid, insane terrorists," Munayyer said. Therefore, public and cultural diplomacy that is conducted by The Palestine Center works to help create more understanding of the Palestinian people. "The different types of cultural work that we do helps break those stereotypes and break down the kind of ignorance that's involved in creating these images that are really very far from being true," he stated.

One area that The Palestine Center conducts cultural diplomacy is through The Gallery. The Gallery showcases bi-monthly art and cultural exhibits of artists from the Middle East, most often but not exclusively Palestinian and Palestinian/Arab-American artists. Munayyer noted that using art and cultural diplomacy helps show a different side of Palestinian life and makes issues more accessible beyond merely a political focus of public diplomacy. Such exhibits include projects like 'Palestinians, meanwhile'—a photography exhibition to highlight normal, everyday life in Palestine.

The photographer of the 'Palestinians, meanwhile' exhibit, Elena Farsakh, sought to take pictures of what everyday Palestinian life is like. In this regard, Munayyer noted that the exhibit highlighted:

"That Palestinians are like everybody else, they're kids and they're moms and

they're dads and they're grandpas, they're storeowners, and they're businessmen, and they're whatever they are. And this goes a long way to making people go, 'huh, its not necessarily what I thought.' This goes a long way because, like they say, an image is worth a thousand words, so imagine a wall plastered with different images. Images last with people; they remember them the next time they see an image that's not the same. It creates a context for people to work with when they're talking about categories like Palestinian, Muslim, Arab. It helps inform their understanding."

He commented that for opening of the 'Palestinians, meanwhile' exhibition, there was a completely different crowd than that which normally attends political lectures. "Not because these people aren't interested in politics but because they are more interested in something like this," he said. "Through this sort of the images and the discussion around the art, and the art itself, people learn something about Palestine that they might not have been able to learn from a lecture and that itself is also valuable for our outreach efforts."

In addition, The Gallery hosts a summer film series, evening musical performances, art workshops and an annual souk and olive harvest festival. Munayyer also mentioned upcoming plans for a cultural event to discuss the *keffiyah*- the Arabic headscarf often associated with the Palestinian cause. He noted that the keffiyah had become such a part of global pop culture that its origins are sometimes lost on the trendy fashionistas sporting the scarf. To help reeducate the public on the keffiyah's origin, the Palestine Center planned to host a lecture for a cultural anthropologist who is an expert on the keffiyah to discuss its history and its emergence as a political symbol and icon of the anti-establishment.

Public and cultural diplomacy is successful as a form of iconoclasm that demolishes previously held images and forces audiences to re-imagine prior notions. In this regard, the Jerusalem Fund carries out meaningful Palestinian public diplomacy by using cultural diplomacy to break down American stereotypes towards Palestinians and the Middle East. I only wish such dialogue was conducted with Israelis, and vice-versa, but that remains for a different discussion.

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