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Reclaiming Walls and Imaginaries. Palestine Solidarity and Anti-Colonial Aesthetic Practices in Tunisia

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Israel's devastating retaliation to the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023 has sparked the re-emergence of a global wave of solidarity with Palestine. In Tunisia, besides conventional demonstrations, support for Palestine and anti-colonial discourses are articulated through different aesthetic practices of resistance. Drawing from local, regional, and international symbolic repertoires, they reaffirm the necessity of self-representation and question Western cultural hegemony.

- The support of the United States and most European governments for the current Israeli war on Gaza has renewed widespread outrage and disillusionment regarding Western countries' purported liberal-democratic values. Moreover, it has powerfully repositioned the liberation of Palestine as a central cause in the movement for global justice and emancipation.
- In Tunisia, in the midst of a severe economic crisis and the exacerbation of authoritarian rule and political repression, activists and artists have been mobilising in support of Palestine. They demand the end of the ongoing genocide and denounce Western complicity in it.
- Current pro-Palestine activism confirms the relevance of culture in the articulation of political discourses, in the recomposition of political and (trans)national identities, as well as in raising awareness and mobilising people.
- Anti-colonial aesthetics and discourses consistently inform Tunisian left-wing (especially youth) cultural activism for Palestine, as exemplified by the targeting of Western cultural institutions with graffiti, boycott campaigns against their events, or the revival of militant Third World cinema.

CONTEXT

Recent pro-Palestine mobilisations in Tunisia restate the relevance of symbolic repertoires in the articulation of political discourses and in the reactivation of social movements. Culture and representation are once again sites of contention. Through aesthetic action in the public space, activists and artists are denouncing cultural colonialism and subalternity.



THE GLOBAL, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL DIMENSIONS OF SOLIDARITY

For months, people across the globe have been mobilising to demand an end to what major international human rights organisations and legal scholars have come to define as a genocide against the Palestinian people. Popular protests have either remained unheard, been censored, or even violently repressed. In the Global South as in the Global North, Palestine has become once again a powerful catalyst of intersectional demands for social justice, minority and native people's rights, and, more generally, for emancipation from the Western-dominated neoliberal order (Bishara et al. 2023).

Cultural activism and aesthetic performances have been crucial in supporting and making visible more conventional forms of political practice. Artistic expressions are vital in the articulation of such demands and discourses, as they help "create new collective understandings of histories, rights and identities" (Tripp 2013: 260). In the context of pro-Palestine mobilisation, symbols, chants, slogans, graffiti, and creative media content have been shared and replicated within and beyond national and continental borders. They have contributed to the recomposition and reactivation of local political and social groups, but also facilitated the construction of a transnational solidarity movement. In Western liberal democracies, the unprecedented extent of censorship and silencing with which symbolic and aesthetic forms of protest have been met (among other things, the banning of flags, chants, keffiyehs, and even of pro-Palestine artists and intellectuals) is yet another indicator of the cruciality of culture to the political and ideological battlefield.

In the Arab world, Palestine has galvanised and mobilised people in ways and numbers serving in some respects to recall the Arab uprisings that started more than a decade ago now. From Morocco to Yemen, from Cairo to Tunis, massive popular demonstrations have taken place simultaneously and for a common cause, often being met with repression by local regimes. Indeed, notwithstanding the significant divergence among the region's ruling elites on the issue, Palestine has always been at the heart of discourses on Arab solidarity and unity, and a trigger of popular mobilisation. Identity issues are, however, only one aspect of such pro-Palestine support, being rooted as well in the defence of human and political rights, the respecting of international law, and the right to self-determination in the face of Western-supported colonialism.

This paper is the output of fieldwork conducted in Tunis from October 2023 to February 2024. In this period I have been able to observe and participate in pro-Palestine demonstrations and cultural events, and to interview artists and activists. This cultural and political mobilisation has involved people from different social classes, professional branches, and political allegiances, taking place both in the capital Tunis as well as in small towns: Islamists, Arab nationalists, women's associations, LGBTQ activists, students, leftist and liberals, workers, artists, and intellectuals alike have mobilised for this cause. Support for Palestine is also a major concern for the Tunisian government, which consistently deploys anti-imperialist and Arab nationalist rhetoric – all the while cooperating with European countries on their border-control policies and favouring a climate of racist violence and persecution, especially towards sub-Saharan African migrants.

Pro-Palestine mobilisation is taking place against the backdrop of severe economic crisis and increasing political and social repression, having touched not only regime opponents but also journalists, human rights and anti-racist advocates, as well as artists. Many of them are also involved in pro-Palestine activities. While tolerated, at least in an early phase, and maybe useful to give vent to social unrest, it is important to stress that pro-Palestine demonstrations do not necessarily signal popular alignment with the agenda of President Kais Saied, who, since the July 2021 coup, has been dismantling the country's fragile democratic institutions.

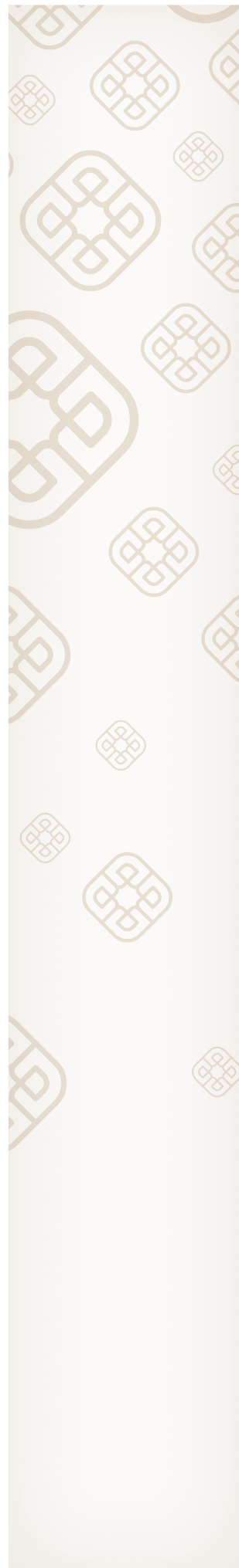


Image 1. Mural realised in the context of the festival “On the wall” by artists from Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya



Source: Author's own picture, taken February 2024.

Tunisian artists and activists have been deploying globally shared and innovative political and aesthetic practices, drawing from local, regional, and international long-standing traditions of resistance culture (known in Arabic as *thaqāfa al-muqāwama*). Debates, readings, concerts, and screenings have taken place in cafés, theatres, art galleries, cultural centres, as well as in public squares and streets; cartoons, graffiti, and audio-visual content have been created and shared, their visibility and reach enhanced by social media platforms. Moreover, political-aesthetic practices have included acts of boycott and the targeting of cultural institutions, festivals, and funds that are deemed supportive of and complicit in Israel's ongoing war on Gaza. For example, demonstrators interrupted the opening ceremony of the Journées du Cinema Européen, where various European ambassadors were present, with antagonistic slogans and speeches. They did the same at the Italian pavilion of the Tunis International Book Fair, to which the European country's ambassador and minister of culture had both been invited. The suspension of ties between local and international partners is another example: Cinema Le Rio has paused collaboration with Germany's Goethe Institute, for instance.

Among the Arab people, the staunch support of the United States and many European governments for Israel has dramatically revived and exacerbated mistrust and resentment for the “double standards” perpetuated by liberal democracies, standing as champions of freedom and human rights, while militarily and politically supporting apartheid and a genocidal war against Palestinians. In Tunisia, the sharpening of these tensions and contradictions have challenged (to an extent we are still not able to measure) the unbalanced relationship that undergirds international cooperation and funding, despite it representing a major source of financial support for local civil society – including in the domains of art and culture. Cultural activism, especially that of leftist youth, has pointed a finger at this unequal power dynamic, acknowledging the centrality of culture for both the “power” and the “people” as well as the urgency of self-representation in the face of cultural colonialism.

THE WALL OF DISCORD

One of the earliest episodes signalling the preoccupation of activists with the role of foreign cultural institutions concerned the French Institute in Tunis (IFT), attached to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a major tool for the promotion of *francophonie*. After a small Palestinian flag drawn on the outer wall of the IFT, situated in the central Avenue de Paris, was erased on 16 October 2023, activists covered the same wall with pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist, and anti-imperialist slogans. The words written thereon were the same as those chanted during demonstrations, such as internationally famous

slogans like *min an-nahr ilā l-baḥr* (“from the river to the sea”), banned and criminalised by different Western governments when used in relation to Palestine. Some of them target Western powers and especially France for perpetuating colonial policies, such as *Macron assassin* and *Colon un jour colon toujours* (“Once a settler, always a settler”). Others refer to the internal political debate such as *muqāwama muqāwama, lā ṣilḥ wa lā musāwama* (“resistance, resistance, no to reconciliation, no to compromise”) and *al-taṭbī‘ jarīma* (“normalisation is a crime”), referring to a controversial draft law demanding the tightening of anti-normalisation policies towards Israel, which was discussed in parliament but later stopped by Saied.

After the material and symbolic act of “whitewashing” had sparked the outrage of politicised youth, this time the IFT did not erase the graffiti. Instead it launched a call for a “collective mural project,” inviting artists to submit proposals on how best to decorate the wall henceforth. The initiative was ridiculed by thousands of Tunisian social media users, who replied to the IFT’s posts on its Instagram and Facebook profiles (seeing more than 3,000 comments on the latter alone) with sarcastic and hostile replies, along with jokes, memes, and other creative content. Dozens replied to these posts with the message *Voilà une proposition* (“here’s a proposition”) followed by red, white, black, and green heart emojis arranged in such a way as to form the Palestinian flag. This showed again the overlapping of traditional and innovative techniques of resistance via aesthetic practice, as deployed by activists and ordinary citizens to express their solidarity both in the public space and in the online one, too. Eventually, some Tunisian artists did respond to the IFT call, with their paintings going up on the wall in question in May 2024. However, they were soon destroyed as a sign of protest against such collaboration.

Image 2. Graffiti on the wall of the French Institute in Tunis



Source: Author’s own picture, taken November 2023.

The contention witnessed over the IFT’s outer wall is emblematic of the wider battle over symbols, representations, and imaginaries implicit in any political and ideological confrontation. It tells us something about the relevance of culture for those who exert control over it as well as for those who contest this assumed authority, and also about the ways in which it is manifested or challenged in the public sphere. Through concrete and virtual aesthetic acts, Tunisian activists claimed the wall as their own. Khalil Lahbib, a 29-year-old leftist and owner of the cultural café Biblio’Thé, synthesised the whole issue thus: “It is a Tunisian wall, after all.”¹ Biblio’Thé is a space for alternative culture and art; since October 2023 the café’s activities have focused on Palestine, with film screenings, debates with activists and civil society members, music, and the festival On the Wall – as

¹ Author’s interview with Khalil Lahbib, Tunis, 28 November 2023.

dedicated to so-called resistance murals. “Culture is what we live” said Lahbib, who is also founder of a graffiti collective and company.

After all, it reflects the people’s problems, it reflects society and its causes. Palestine is our cause. You can’t erase the Palestinian flag on a cultural centre while Gaza is being bombarded and the whole Tunisian people cries for that. It’s crazy.

His words convey a sense of how many Tunisians would perceive the apparently banal gesture of cleaning up the IFT’s exterior as condensing into a single act a whole history of cultural domination, erasure, contempt, delegitimation, and non-recognition of certain people’s plights and claims, as well as the continuing “occupation” of public space by a foreign country. The affair hit a raw nerve, shedding light on the increasing detachment and resentment of Tunisian youth vis-à-vis France, its cultural hegemony, and its claim to moral superiority. In the eyes of many around the world, the war on Gaza has irremediably compromised the West’s claimed authority on matters of human rights, freedom, and democracy; for Tunisians, meanwhile, the former colonial power is the primary representative of such double standards.

SCREENINGS AGAINST OCCUPATION

The IFT wall affair compelled people to mobilise and reclaim the public arena, and triggered initiatives that aimed at the decolonisation of space, knowledge, and culture, as well as at the dismantling of Western hegemonic representations of the region. In particular, leftist activists in Tunis organised the “Cinema Days of Resistance” (*Ayyām sīnimā al-muqāwama*) in direct response to the whitewashing of the IFT’s outer wall. The festival’s manifesto, posted on the eponymous Facebook page that had been created on 23 October 2023, states:

This movement began against/on the wall of the so called “French Institute”, an institution symbolizing hegemony... An institution that whitewashed the Palestinian flag adorning its walls just as it whitewashes the occupation everyday.

The initiative was launched in Tunis and led by leftists, albeit without employing specific political labels. The format was subsequently adopted and the initiative replicated in other towns and neighbourhoods across Tunisia. “Who are we? It is not important,” reads the manifesto, “What is important is what we will create: wide spaces to disseminate resistance cinema and art.”

Activists screened films by Palestinian directors and/or dealing with Palestinian resistance and occupation on the IFT’s outer wall (the primary target of these endeavours), in other symbolic places (such as the walls of the Goethe Institute and in front of parliament), in cafés such as the above-mentioned Biblio’Thé, and at the Nawaat Festival organised by the independent media platform of the same name. Special emphasis was placed on the female/feminist perspective, with films made by women directors and focusing on the role of Palestinian women activists and fighters throughout the history of the liberation movement selected for screening. Examples include Jocelyne Saab’s *Les femmes palestiniennes* (1974), Nabiha Lotfi’s *Because the Roots Will Not Die* (1977), and Arab Loutfi’s *Jamila’s Mirror* (1993). This choice of offering highlights Tunisian radical feminists’ and leftists’ willingness and indeed urgency to dismantle the Western patronising gaze, pertaining also to much liberal, white feminism, at Arab and Muslim women. In fact, screenings examining Palestinian women’s resistance were also organised by feminist groups such as the Association Lina Ben Mhenni and the non-governmental organisation Aswat Nissa.

Image 3. Poster advertising the Cinema Days of Resistance



Source: Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61552714077486>).

Other films screened under the auspices of the Cinema Days of Resistance would be the much-contested and censored *Jenin, Jenin* by Mohammad Bakri (2002) and the short documentaries *Scenes of the Occupation from Gaza* (1973) and *Palestine in the Eye* (1976), both by Mustafa Abu Ali, one of the founders, in 1968, of the Palestine Film Unit, a group of filmmakers which joined Fatah and the armed national liberation movement.²

ECHOES OF “THIRD WORLDISM”

The Palestine Film Unit’s aesthetic repertoire is also the source of the logo and slogan of the Cinema Days of Resistance, in adopting for its social media profiles the same stylised gun with film reels on top and the motto (in both Arabic and English) *min ajl sinimā ta’ā ilā taḥrīr al-arḍ wa al-insān* (“For a cinema that contributes to the liberation of both people and the land”). More broadly, Tunisia’s committed cinephiles retrieve the aesthetics and discourse of Third World filmography to contest Western cultural hegemony, to propose an alternative and autonomous representation of the region, but also to claim an anti-capitalist cinema. In their 1969 manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema,” Argentinians Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (2014) advocated the idea of revolutionary cinema and film-making as “guerrilla activity.” The essay “Black screen, white lies” – a nod to Frantz Fanon – is also one among the many works proposed by the Tunis Ciné-Club for its screenings and readings.

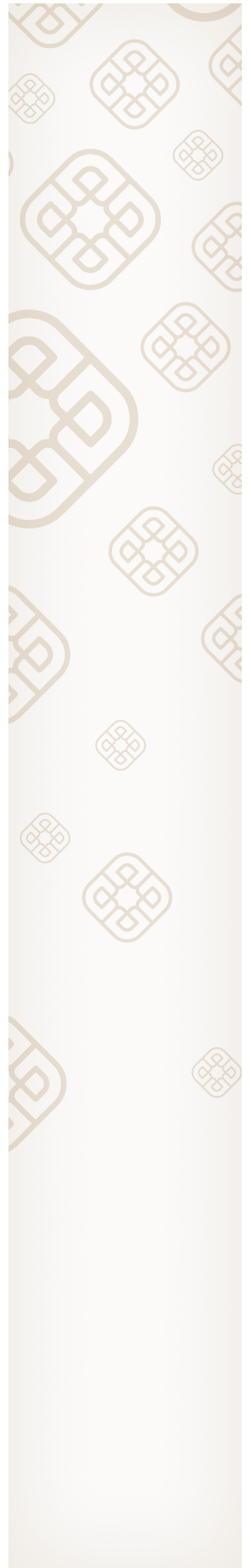
These echoes of “Third Worldism” (see Elling and Haugbolle 2024), which would persist in transnational solidarity movements long after the decline of the waves of revolutionary fervour running through the 1950s–1970s, resurface powerfully today in the face of the ongoing massacre in Gaza and the West Bank – and now Lebanon, too. Borrowing from Raymond Williams, we might see Third Worldism as a “residue” formed in the past but still “active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (Williams 1977: 122). As such, it offers (Tunisian) leftist activists today a cultural repertoire from which they can draw in seeking to radically contest the present, and in which to embed current developments surrounding the still unresolved Palestinian question.

As the renewed mobilisation of Tunisia’s leftist youth for Palestine has affirmed once more, art and culture are crucial to the articulation of contentious ideological discourses and to the construction of political projects and imaginaries more broadly. These activists draw from the transnational repertoire of Third Worldism, and at the same time elaborate new anti-colonial aesthetic practices. These practices manifest both online and in the public space, in tune with the global solidarity movement.

² In the mid-1970s, it would become known henceforth as the Palestinian Cinema Institute.

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