

The director of the Palestinian Museum reflects on her years in charge



Palestinian visitors are seen during the opening ceremony of the Palestine Heritage Museum at Deir Al Balah Industrial Secondary School for girls, in Gaza City, Gaza on March 21, 2017 [Mustafa Hassona/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images]



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Duty and care are the words that would best describe the approach of Dr Adila Laidi-Hanieh towards the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit. She is stepping down as director of the museum at the end of this month, and we took the opportunity for her to reflect on her years in charge, changing the institution from the inside out.

The museum is in a beautifully designed building which nestles in green terraces and overlooks the Mediterranean. It aims to represent the history and aspirations of the Palestinian people; explore their past and present; and reflect on their future.

The flagship project of private foundation Taawon Welfare Association, the museum opened in 2016 and held its first on-site exhibition in 2017.

However, Laidi-Hanieh noted that when she took over in late 2018, "there was a lack of direction." For example, there was only one department which handled everything programmatic. "I was aware of the need to develop first-rate programming while reinventing the museum's image as a vibrant place for families and people from all income and education levels, by offering diverse opportunities for reflection, learning experiences, community ingathering and fun."

A renowned scholar and curator who has worked tirelessly to promote Palestinian culture and heritage — and a recent recipient of the National Order of Merit from France — Laidi-Hanieh's contribution was crucial to clarify and sharpen the museum's mission. She started by developing its future exhibition programme on her first week

on the job in September 2018; then its first five-year programme strategy in Spring 2019, with an accompanying departmental restructuring; then hiring young graduates to staff newly-created departments to handle exhibitions and collections, research and knowledge, including new units to manage and expand the museum's crucial education tasks and publications. Looking back, she could see how the museum accomplished most of the goals, despite the stranglehold of the Israeli occupation and the interruption of the pandemic.

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"I did come from a cultural management background, and also had an art historian's scholarly perspective," she told me. "Then little by little I learned to become a museum professional. When you work for an institution, you have a duty of care to its institutional identity and integrity."

She explained that a museum is different from an art centre pursuing novelty, or a think tank or a university addressing scholars and academics. "A museum is first and foremost articulated around a collection, which it researches and documents, preserves and exhibits, for the benefit of the general public, in hopefully thoughtful and attractive exhibitions, and accompanying public programmes, on site and online."

In the past, she said, some stakeholders expected the museum to be all things to all people, a community centre, cultural centre, a dynamo for research. "All these goals are urgent and important, especially in the Palestinian context, but a museum has the responsibility of caring first for tangible and intangible heritage, which in

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the Palestinian case is endangered, dispersed around the world, and not even well framed by a local Palestinian museology. Our museum is the only institution that can do a certain kind of large-scale exhibitions."

Five years of exhibitions

When Laidi-Hanieh stepped in, she was involved initially with three major exhibitions. The first was in progress when she took up her duties. *Intimate Terrains* was the largest exhibition of contemporary and modern art ever held in Palestine. Its focus was Palestinian landscape, which had an obvious political underpinning, with themes such as the narrowing land, exile and diaspora, artistic return to the land, the separation wall, and dispossession.

"We had an excellent curator, Tina Sherwell, who chose the artists and set up the show, so my role was just supporting the team on the messaging. Here I thought of setting up a different space in the museum alongside the main gallery that would explore the underlying themes of resistance and human rights addressed elliptically in the exhibition space. This way we would separate the discursive-political from the reception of the art works, while giving visitors the opportunity to interact with both, especially when in our context, the general audiences' interaction with modern and contemporary art is limited. At the same time, there is a still a general expectation for art to be directly representational and engaged."

The way that she made the show compelling to visitors was by displaying infographics, photos and poetry in the second space. This way they had visitors looking at the art and having a



chance to explore further in a discursive space, without having this overt political framework placed around the art. This was an important approach since the museum's vocation is to welcome visitors from all education and income levels, including students on school group visits and from nearby Birzeit University.

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Another important show addressed Jerusalem as a centre for Palestinian modernity articulated around a selection from two of Jerusalem's historic printing presses, tools and reprints of journalistic, commercial and educational ephemera. This allowed her to explore themes of censorship, press, the intifada and gender. "We opened it during Covid and managed to keep it open, even resorting to putting videos online for people to see it in 2020." This came right after an exhibition opened right before the pandemic, a selection of Palestinian political posters from the museum's collection, titled "*Glimmer of a Grove Beyond*" by the young curator Adele Jarrar.

People by the Sea

The exhibition of which Laidi-Hanieh is proudest is the ongoing landmark exhibition *A People by the Sea: Narratives of the Palestinian Coast*. This maps the rise and ruin of Palestine's coastal cities and their rich surrounding countryside and maritime relations and trade. Curated by artist Inass Yassin, with the help of guidance from two historians, it highlights political, social and cultural dimensions of the history of Palestinians in regard to the sea, from the eighteenth century and the rise of local autonomous rule, through the British Mandate and gradual dispossession of

Palestinians before and after 1948, and the ongoing Nakba.

The director developed the concept to focus on the coastal areas since they were ethnically cleansed in 1948. "This was for me based on a very moving experience of a walking guided tour I took in 2015 of the old city of Jaffa, with historian and politician Sami Abu Shehadeh," she recalled. "He made the once thriving urban centre of Jaffa come alive to us, before it was erased and literally thrown into the sea and what remained of it was gentrified." Laidi-Hanieh said that from the observation of the historical part of the city, she decided to develop an exhibition about the entire coast, with restitution of life, civilisation, culture, trade, unions, sports, entertainment, religious festivals and social life in Palestine.

Shows like this highlight particular aspects of the history of Palestine and its cultural heritage, and the achievements of Palestinian individuals and society, despite being ruled by indifferent and, more often than not, hostile foreign powers.

Laidi-Hanieh remarked that the unique advantage of a museum with a state-of-the-art space and highly professional team is the chance to leverage elements of political, economic and social history dispersed in books, photo archives and private art collections, and gather them together in one place.

With an exhibition, a museum creates an object of inquiry and invites the public to experience it by moving through space physically. "This is the 'emancipatory learning experience' that I defined back in 2019 as the new core mission of our museum," she pointed out. "Our exhibitions are made up of ethnographic objects, commissioned

artworks, paper, and audio-visual archives, interactive stations and so on. This concentration of information and visuals produces cognitive and emotional effects greater than the sum of its parts. We believe that you can definitely acquire knowledge and change your perceptions by an aesthetic experience, by an emotional experience."

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Labour of love: embroidering Palestinian history

Another significant exhibition was the third iteration that the museum developed, *Labour of Love*, held at a Qatar Museums Gallery in 2022. The exhibition showcased the rich history of Palestinian embroidery (*Tatreez*) and its significance. It attracted 8,000 visitors, including FIFA World Cup football fans and supermodel and advocate Bella Hadid, who posted about it on social media. The non-traditional exhibition originally developed by curator Rachel Dedman for the museum in 2016 as a political history of Palestinian embroidery was also a celebration of Palestinian rural women's labour while destabilising received notions of gender roles and class.

"After unexpectedly receiving a generous donation of an important collection of Palestinian heritage dresses in 2021, we were able to rely on our own collection to develop long term projects that build knowledge on this important component of material heritage, such as collections, surveys and inventories, and building new professional preservation facilities. I am gratified that this donation came from a group of

Arab American women based in Washington DC, who I got to know when I was studying in the area in the 1990s."

In a first for Palestinian heritage textiles, the museum was able to open new cold storage and restoration facilities and train colleagues and people from the embroidery community to care for their own heritage dresses. "We were able to do so thanks to advice from Madrid's Museo del Traje, and in a major technical partnership with London's Victoria and Albert Museum." That, she added, was where the role of a museum comes in. "UNESCO placed the art of Palestinian embroidery on its list of humanity's intangible heritage in 2021, and in 2022 and 2023 it gave to those in the field the tools to guarantee its material integrity and develop local Palestinian knowledge about it."

The director explained that while dresses might look very mundane, they were the only portable and wearable heritage that Palestinian refugees had after 1948. "This is why Palestinian embroidery is so important, and has a political value, representing Palestine's lost way of life and a lost homeland. Much remains to be done in salvaging other parts of Palestinian cultural heritage, but Tatreez chose us first."

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New initiatives

Over the past two years the museum has launched a number of other initiatives to engage audiences. These include the redesign of the bilingual interactive encyclopaedia of the Palestine question, Palquest.org, in cooperation

with the Institute for Palestine Studies, and the launch of the first Arab museum website for children, based on original museum content, programmes and collections: sanasel.org: "Play Together, Learn Together" is a resource for children, families and educators.

Finally, the museum announced a full master's scholarship for curatorial and museum studies in the United Kingdom. This scholarship is a great opportunity for students who are interested in pursuing a career in the field of museum studies and is an overdue step to professionalise the operations of the Palestinian Museum.

"In these five years, we have been able to produce very high-level content, with a lot of attention to attracting audiences. This is quite incredible considering that we are living under occupation, which results in structural weaknesses in certain qualifications for museum staff, in available resources and in visitor access," said Adila Laidi-Hanieh. "At the same time, I think living under occupation generates a certain dynamism in a society and a people struggling to live free. It creates a hunger to express and to re-invent new ways of living."

Future exhibitions for the Palestinian Museum will include a permanent exhibition based on the history of Palestine, a new set of digital first programmes, a new original exhibition on music, and a new exhibition on Gaza. "Future stakes and challenges remain enormous," concluded the museum's outgoing director. "In these five years, though, we managed to become not only a centre of attraction for school groups and tourists, but also a living space that offers new perspectives

and cognitive experiences on our heritage and society."

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Monitor.

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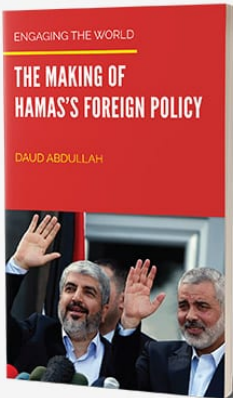
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