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## Symbolic Defiance: Questions of Nationalism and Tradition in Middle Eastern Textiles

Jeni Allenby

*Palestine Costume Archive*, [Jeni.Allenby@effect.net.au](mailto:Jeni.Allenby@effect.net.au)

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**Symbolic Defiance:  
Questions of Nationalism and Tradition in Middle Eastern Textiles**

Jeni Allenby  
Palestine Costume Archive  
PO Box 5098 Lyneham Canberra Act 2602 Australia  
[www.Palestinecostumearchive.org](http://www.Palestinecostumearchive.org)  
[Jeni.Allenby@effect.net.au](mailto:Jeni.Allenby@effect.net.au)

Costume and textiles have long provided women worldwide with a means for personal and political expression, a means to record contemporary experiences. While traditional costume acts as a social and cultural communication device – externally identifying a culture while also containing complex internal social codes – contemporary textiles reflect wider issues. The legacies of violence, war and exile are found forms of cultural and artistic forms of expression, with contemporary textiles such as American Indian beadwork, Hmong storycloths and South American appliqués of the Missing (amongst many others) documenting personal and community experiences, turning history into art.

This paper briefly explores examples of textiles produced in the Islamic and Arab world, where women are combining traditional textile decorative techniques with contemporary political iconography to explore and challenge similar issues. The results are sometimes whimsical, sometimes subtle, sometimes confronting – but always powerful, evocative documents of endurance, survival and hope.

The women who created these textiles came from diverse national, religious, social and cultural backgrounds - from nomadic tribes of Egypt and Afghanistan to the Arab towns and villages of Israel, to the refugee camps of the Palestinian region, and those in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. What binds them together is the innovative way each has utilized culturally traditional textile techniques to respond to contemporary events, evoking Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat's belief that its "through the study of women you get to the heart— the truth — of the culture...it's the women who usually manifest [change] — through the way they dress, the way they behave."<sup>1</sup>

The adoption of Ottoman and later European fashions in urban regions resulted in declining costume and domestic textile traditions in many Middle Eastern societies. Revitalized by 20<sup>th</sup> century political and nationalist agendas, modern textiles - along with other forms of cultural expression - now incorporate political imagery and symbols such as the national flag. The Gulf War, for example, inspired Syrian weavers in solidarity



*Child's outfit in shape and colors of Kuwaiti flag, 1991.  
Collection: Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra.*

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<sup>1</sup> Shirin Neshat, *Ms Magazine* (December 2000) quoted in Susan Tenaglia, "The Power of the Veil: Shirin Neshat's Iran." *World & I* (December 2002): 96-98.

with Kuwait to weave the Kuwaiti flag into their traditional fabrics, while in Kuwait itself during the Iraqi occupation children's garments were sold in the shape and colours of the Kuwaiti flag.

This incorporation of political symbols may have its origins in the belief systems of much older North African nomadic and rural community folkloric traditions, where symbols – such as the *khamisa* (meaning five, often represented in the form of a hand) or the triangle *hijab* – hold talismanic, protective properties. These protective devices appear in a myriad of ways - painted on walls, as padded amulets sewn onto clothing or as necklaces made of cloves or amber. It's been argued that this "evil eye concept may be seen as a popular manifestation of rationalizing misfortune within ... communities; [serving] to protect people or their possessions from a perceived fear."<sup>2</sup> When utilized to protect against concepts such as war, these traditional protection devices can acquire unique political significance – as happened with Sinai Desert *bedouin* beaded amulets and jewellery produced during the Israeli occupation of the Sinai (1967 – 1982).

*Bedouin* domestic textiles and traditional costume in the Sinai Desert are stunning decorative, concealing in their designs a wealth of cultural signifiers representing tribal origin, marital status, and personal and community wealth. While embroidery is practiced in both northern and southern regions, decorative techniques in the south also include beadwork, which became popular in the 1960s (with the import of plastic beads from China) and resulted in elaborate accessories such as chest panels, and headdresses. Skill at beadwork allows women to produce small items for the home and supplement family income selling beaded items to tourists, via various *bedouin* handicraft projects.

Beadwork is also an excellent medium for the production of the padded, tasselled and fringed triangular amulets commonly seen hanging from doorways and car mirrors. Originally (that is, from the 1960s) these featured geometric patterns. However this changed in the 1970s, at the time of the Israeli occupation of the Sinai Desert, when - caught between two armies - amulet makers decided their isolated communities required greater protection. From this time on, Arabic calligraphic, such as the name of God, began appearing in amulet designs, thus upping the power of the amulet by combining both older folkloric and modern Islamic protection devices. Weaponry also became a popular motif, with some



*Bedouin girl in her mother's wedding garments, including a beaded head dress and chest panel, Katri'in village, Southern Sinai Desert, Egypt 1997 Photo: Jeni Allenby*

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Spring and Christopher Hudson, *North African Textiles* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Books 1996), 44.

amulets featuring “God is great” *Allahu Akbar* on one side and an Israeli helicopter on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of these tiny amulets lies in the fact that – working within a framework of a culturally traditional material - they document the advent of self expression and political / national awareness amongst the women of these isolated desert communities. Long after Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, *bedouin* women continue utilizing beadwork to express their opinions of their former occupiers, now producing jewellery and domestic textiles featuring nationalist imagery supporting the Palestinian cause.

Although similar styles of amulets are found in Afghanistan they contain no nationalist statements. On the other hand another traditional media – weaving - certainly does. Produced during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), the Afghanistan civil war (1993-96), the period of Taliban rule (1996-01) and up to the present day, “war rugs” are woven primarily by the nomadic Baluch people of Northern Afghanistan, most of whom were displaced to Iran and Pakistan during these conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

Baluch rugs feature short wool pile secured by a wool and cotton foundation and average 60 to 100 knots per square inch. War rugs - which make up less than 1% of rug production<sup>5</sup> - are mostly traditional prayer rug size. Although finer examples use traditional vegetable dyes most utilize chemical dyes. They generally feature a central field with a wide border, dark backgrounds and flat, often silhouetted imagery.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 was an abrupt introduction for Afghanistan to modern warfare – the most martial image found on tribal rugs before this time were swordsmen on horseback. In war rugs, traditional geometric designs are replaced by Soviet,



*Sinai Desert bedouin beaded protective amulet with Israeli helicopter, the reverse reading “God is great” Allahu Akbar, early 1980s Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra; Gift of Lyn Lowe, Darwin 2004.*

<sup>3</sup> Interviews conducted by the author between 1982 and 1997 with elder women of several tribes confirm the weaponry depicted in these amulets was specifically Israeli.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to acknowledge the excellent ongoing research being undertaken by Kevin Sudeith of Warrugs.com (New York - [www.warrugs.com](http://www.warrugs.com)) and Nigel Lenden and Tim Bonyhady of The Rugs of War Project (Australian National University, Canberra - <http://underthesun.anu.edu.au/weblogs/rugsofwar/>) whose work I draw heavily on in this section of my paper. I highly recommend The Rugs of War Project’s travelling exhibition of the same name to any museums interested in this material.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Helman, “Carpet Bombing” at <http://www.forbes.com> 2003.

*Mujaheddin* and later Coalition weaponry, such as assault rifles, troop carriers, helicopters, hand grenades, tanks and bomber planes. Imagery almost appear to morph - unfolding blossoms become explosions, water pipes become hand grenades, bullets frame rows of paisley shaped helicopters, landmines and tanks.<sup>6</sup> Some rugs are almost entirely abstract in their symbolism. Patterns featuring women, for example, were treated in a stylised manner during the Taliban era due to religious restrictions – one marvellous design featured women in *burqas* concealed within the design of fighter planes.

A sense of cultural identity and nationalism imbues rugs integrating folklore or literary narratives, as well as those featuring complex townscapes (commemorating battles) and maps, defining nationalist borders. Themes of freedom and liberation - including recent rugs depicting the War on Terror and the World Trade Centre attacks - draw their imagery drawn from a wide range of visual sources, including the Western media. Interestingly, research undertaken by Warrug.com has confirmed that the imagery appearing in these examples has been copied from propaganda dropped over Afghanistan by Coalition Special Forces.<sup>7</sup> These leaflets explained via text and imagery the events of 9/11 and proposed US responses, and employed nation building images such as the flags of both countries with clasped hands, the dove of peace with olive branch, etc – images which clearly appear woven in War on Terror and the World Trade Centre attack style war rugs.

The introduction and sourcing of such externally influenced themes and imagery raises the question: for whom were these textiles made? As Nigel Lendon from the Rugs of War Project points out, war rugs “are primarily made for trade to the outside world, as they have always been. Thus with few exceptions, they are made to leave their immediate context of use, and take their seemingly contradictory messages outwards, with little understanding of potential audiences they reach or reactions they may engender.”<sup>8</sup>

Early examples were definitely for the home market, with Sayed Ahmad Gailani (leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan) noting in a 1988 interview (the earliest recorded Afghan assessment of these rugs) that: “a whole generation grew up knowing nothing besides the war...think of the beautiful Afghan rugs for which my country is famous... today [they are decorated] only [with] tanks, military planes, and bombers.”<sup>9</sup> Their later popularity on the international art market – where they were both dismissed (one contributor to the *Oriental Rug Review* claiming they were a 'degenerative design export product') and admired for their innovation and depiction of contemporary experiences - pushed up demand. In 2004, modern narrative styles such as the War on Terror and World Trade Centre attack rugs are extremely popular souvenirs for Americans serving in Afghanistan. However their continuing relevance to the local

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Knight, “Review of “Afghan War Rugs: Transcendence” at Dirt Gallery, Los Angeles”, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 8, 2002,

<sup>7</sup> From research undertaken by U.S. Army Sergeant Major Herbert A. Friedman (member of Psychological Operations Veterans Association and the Psychological Operations Association) and Warrug.com, using Friedman’s private collection of propaganda leaflets dropped on Afghanistan. See [www.warrug.com](http://www.warrug.com) for further details and images of these leaflets.

<sup>8</sup> Nigel Landen, *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Sayed Ahmad Gailani, interview 1988, quoted in Tim Bonyhady, “Out of Afghanistan” *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

market remains, with Tim Bonyhady of the Rugs of War Project noting that the first '2002' mat sold on the internet was “even more exceptional in its politics. It did not side with the Americans or al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance or the Taliban, and contained nothing about terrorism, liberation or freedom. Instead it expressed a universal sentiment – it was dominated by a single word, ‘scared.’”<sup>10</sup>

There is also some ambiguity as to who actually creates these rugs. While research has shown that Soviet era examples were primarily woven by women<sup>11</sup>, later examples have been woven by refugee children (to adult designs) while current international demand - and the resulting trend towards mass production - means others are being woven by men, both in refugee camps and within Afghanistan. However, textile historian Jasleen Dhamija (in her evocative 2003 essay on the authenticity and design of war rugs) prefers to believe women remain their primary producers. Spotting in one rug a motif of three women with outstretched arms protecting their homes, she wonders “are they the hidden anonymous creators of these rugs? [...] Women have always believed that by weaving the feared form they could capture it and take away the powerful evil.”<sup>12</sup>

Whoever has created them, war rugs reveal the economic inventiveness of Afghani tribal culture in the face of devastating dislocation and difficulty in the aftermath of war. As with Sinai Desert *bedouin* political beading, they remain a powerful vehicle for contemporary political and self expression that combines traditional cultural elements with modern historical and political realities.

Similar issues confront contemporary Palestinian women. Palestinians now make up the largest refugee group in the world, numbering around eight million. Less than a million remain in the State of Israel, with over five million in refugee camps in surrounding Arab countries, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The rest are scattered in the *diaspora*. For such a geographically dispersed population, preserving a sense of cultural and national identity has presented unique challenges.



*Palestinian political embroideries and “flag dresses” as discussed in this article. Palestine Costume Archive Collection, 2002. Courtesy: Peter Casamento, Melbourne.*

Textiles have played a major role in this, with embroidery long providing a means for Palestinian women to document their identity. Prior to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, each of Palestine’s 800 villages possessed its own distinctive style of traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Bonyhady, “Out of Afghanistan” *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> see Christopher Helman, “Carpet Bombing” *Forbes Magazine* 22 December 2003 and Hwaa Irfan, “Weaving between Wars and Returning to the Soul” *Islam Online* 6 November 2003.

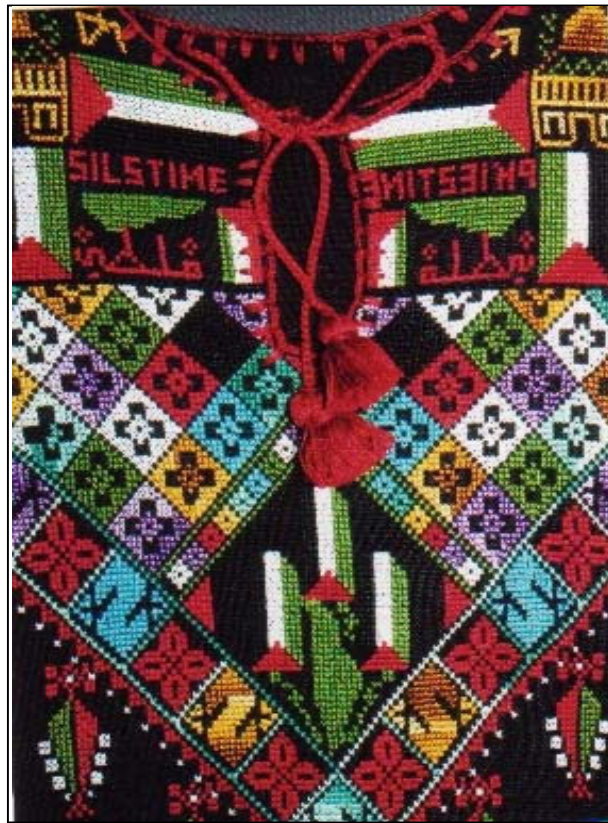
<sup>12</sup> Jasleen Dhamija “This Space is Mine” *The Rugs of War* (exhibition catalogue) Australian National University, 2003.

costume containing an intricate communication system, expressing the wearer's status, wealth and geographic origin by means of their style and decorative elements. This language of costume was lost in the decades of upheaval following the events of 1948 the moving of mass populations into refugee centres and camps broke down the long traditions of regional styles, and by the 1970s very little remained to be seen of either Palestinian traditional costume or the Palestinian weaving industry.

However, the 1980s saw two major independent developments that were to result in cultural revival. The first was the establishment of refugee camp embroidery projects, providing income for Palestinian women as well as “keeping a candle in the window”<sup>13</sup> by promoting this form of Palestinian heritage. At the same time, women in the Occupied Territories re-adopted the “traditional” embroidered dress as a form of nationalism and non violent protest against the Israeli occupation. Shortly afterwards, during the *intifada* uprising, a handful of West Bank women modified this dress to feature within its traditional form nationalist motifs and patterns, all embroidered in the colours of the banned Palestinian flag.

Developed under conditions of occupation, the coded communication systems signalled identity and political affiliation in contemporary Palestinian costume and embroidery - a visual mix of identifiable cultural icons and dense cultural metaphoric imagery - have become increasingly complex. Issues such as freedom of expression, loss of homeland and exile, and later issues of national identity – were articulated via symbolic depictions of an idealized past (such as pre 1948 village life and local landscape) and often incorporate the word “Palestine” and the Palestinian map and flag.

Embroidered dresses featuring nationalist symbols (now known as “flag dresses”) have become increasingly complex in design, utilising Palestinian poetry, folklore and mythology as sources of inspiration. In one exquisite dress the dove of peace is portrayed as the mythological phoenix bird, rising from the ashes, carrying the Palestinian flag as a series of coloured streamers. Another dress, embroidered in the colours of the Palestinian flag,



*Chest panel of an intifada “flag” dress featuring nationalist imagery, Gaza Strip. Collection: Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra.*

<sup>13</sup> Leila el Khalidi, interview with author, Amman, October 2000.

commemorates the young Palestinian boys with slingshots who themselves became symbols of the *intifada*.

Innovative political imagery also appears on products produced in Palestinian refugee camp embroidery projects. In one embroidered panel, the Biblical tale of David and Goliath takes on a subtle Palestinian twist as a young Palestinian boy fights against two large mythological beasts. In another, Palestinian poetry ("...our language is the language of fire...") is featured within a framework designed to recall the pre 1948 structure of the chest panel of a Palestinian embroidered dress.

Unlike the weavers of Afghani war rugs, Palestinian women rarely depicted weaponry in their political embroideries. While this was primarily in response to the *intifada*'s direct policy to refrain from use of weapons, one rare exception is a tiny child's dress from the Ramallah region in the West Bank, now in the collection of the Palestine Costume Archive, Canberra. Embroidered in the colours of the Palestinian flag, its motifs combine Palestinian maps and flags with the date 1987 (the start of the *intifada*) and Arabic text reading "*Falasteen*" (Palestine) and "*assifa*" (storm) bordered by black guns. The term "storm" may simply represent the *intifada*, but might also provide a lead as to the garment's origin. Storm was the name of a major military group associated with the PLO. Research undertaken to identify the specific date and origin of war rugs has revealed that the weaponry portrayed in the rug often provides a link. Thus a rug illustrating weapons used by the *Mujaheddin* may have been woven by a family member of a *Mujaheddin* fighter. Perhaps a similar link exists with this Palestinian dress.

With their dense culturally specific symbolism, Palestinian textiles have become a repository of cultural memory that continues to influence other forms of Palestinian cultural and artistic expression – such as works by Arab American textile artist (and TSA member and conference delegate) Mary Tuma. Her works *1000 Tears* and *Wishing Tree* feature similar symbolism, while *Resurfacing Palestine* (2000) displays "a stitched map that serves as an abstraction of 'place' and ... a bed of stones ... wrapped in a tangle of threads that extend down from the map, connecting the physical stones with the abstract surface of the map. The stones, found in Jerusalem, refer to the first *intifada* (uprising), but they are softened with the threads - a sort of laying down of 'arms' that can instead be used to build."<sup>14</sup>

Can we define political textiles such as these as "traditional"? Certainly the communities that created them believe them so, but with our Western cultural understandings of tradition and value<sup>15</sup> we may find that definition problematic. For us their production can be clearly divided into two fundamentally different categories – textiles produced in their traditional/ethnic environments: and those (mostly from refugee environments) openly produced for commercial purposes stimulated by western cultural and monetary influences.<sup>16</sup> The latter includes adoption of international aid materials (such as chemical dyes, DMC cotton threads, etc.) and integration of extensive external intervention (in the case of Palestinian refugee handicraft projects, this has included the production of Western items, pastel colour choices and use of foreign embroidery motifs,

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Tuma, *Artist's Notes*, Palestine Costume Archive Research Library (gift of the artist 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Lenden, *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Graham Gower, quoted in *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

all chosen by international aid personnel).

But production is of less importance in these cases than the adaptation and juxtaposition of culturally traditional textile forms with contemporary thematic narratives and complex political symbolism. Behind each of these textiles lies a story of traditional life, lands and villages, homes and families, lost or threatened. Each woman has responded to her circumstances, transposing decorative techniques traditional to her culture with visual codes derived from folklore and poetry, ancient landscapes and modern warfare, and visually realised via powerful and unique symbolic iconographies, and investing her textile creations with new meaning specific to national discourse.

This is what truly makes these textiles “traditional” - the revival of their traditional role as communication devices – whether acting as vehicles for protest, expressing national identity, observing warfare or challenging established history. As powerful teaching tools, they draw responses from the international community - in 2002 an American journalist reported American women using war rugs to explain to their children “about the people in Afghanistan and what their country has been through.”<sup>17</sup> Equally important, they reach culturally isolated members of *diaspora* communities - their dense culturally specific symbolism providing a repository of cultural memory that continues to influence other forms of cultural and artistic expression.



*An example of traditional textiles worn as contemporary expressions of Palestinian cultural identity and nationalism: Sanabel Al Fararja and Kayan Al Saify at a peace rally, San Francisco, April 2002. Courtesy: Basil Avish. San Francisco.*

Whether fine art, folk art, ethnographica, propaganda, or icons of globalization, perhaps Jasleen Dhamija defines these textiles best when she writes of ‘war rugs’ as “extraordinary ... creative expression[s] which transgress the conventional boundaries of art history and cultural critique.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sue Vering, quoted in Pamela Sherrod, “Tapestries of war: Afghan tribe's artistic expression finds favor among Americans”, *Mercury News*, 21 February 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Jasleen Dhamija “This Space is Mine” *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2003).

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