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Bearing Witness Through Ink: A Review of *Palestine in Black and White* by Mohammad Sabaaneh

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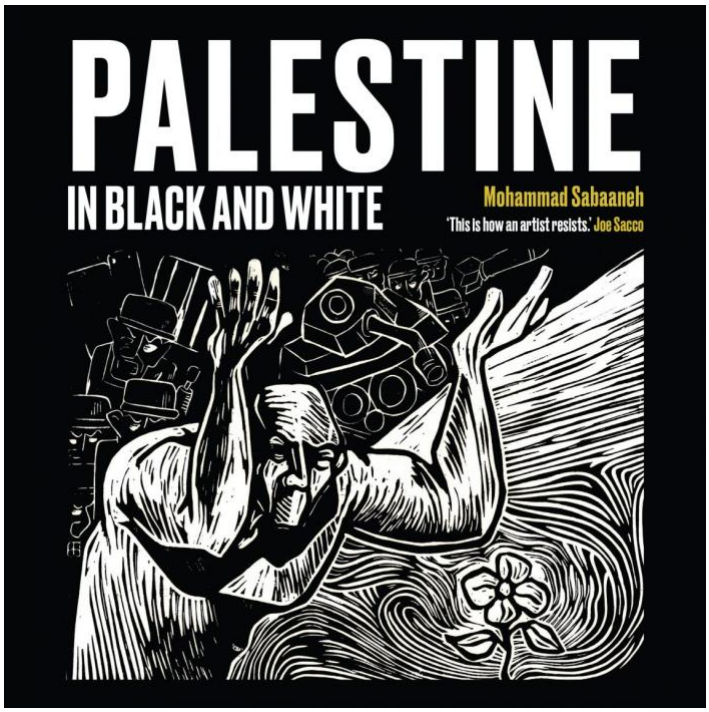
I am an undergraduate student at New Mexico State University, majoring in Film & Digital Media with a minor in Borderlands and Ethnic Studies (BEST). For my final project for the BEST course: Introduction to Palestine Studies, I had the honor to review Mohammad Sabaaneh's *Palestine in Black and White* (Saqi Books, 2018). Sabaaneh tells the story of life under Israeli occupation through a collection of stark black-and-white illustrations. The book is a collection of over 100 political cartoons, each crafted in a style that emphasizes contrast, tension, and emotion. Without relying on captions or color, Sabaaneh conveys the weight of everyday violence, the depth of Palestinian resistance, and the emotional impact of exile, imprisonment, and loss.



Sabaaneh is one of the most recognized cartoonists in the Arab world. Born in Kuwait in 1978 and raised in Palestine, he developed an early passion for drawing, inspired by his older brother. Over time, he sharpened his artistic voice into a distinct, bold style that uses visual minimalism to convey powerful political messages. He currently works as a cartoonist for the newspaper *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, and his work has been featured internationally. In 2013, he was imprisoned by settlers and wrongfully charged with collaborating with Hamas. He spent five months behind bars, including stretches in solitary confinement.

It was during this time, isolated and unsure how long he would be held, that the idea for this book began to form. Sabaaneh wrote: "I spent the long hours thinking about creating a book that would depict all aspects of Palestinian life, through snapshots of both the heroic and the ordinary, which

like a mosaic becomes whole when one sees all the pieces together" (p.9-10). I think that sentence captures the spirit of the entire project. Sabaaneh's imprisonment exposed him to many fellow detainees, whom he calls "heroes." They were people who missed the most ordinary things: "lighting a cigarette, conversing with a loved one, basking under the heat of the sun, or sipping a cup of coffee" (p.10). These are the themes he brings into his work, moments that communicate both dehumanization and deep humanity.

The book's power lies in its ability to speak volumes without a single word. The drawings are direct and clear, but rich with metaphor and symbolism. In one, a group of men and women are shown dancing dabble while shackled together. A checkpoint cuts through the line of dancers, and Israel's wall stops them short (p. 57). In another image, Sabaaneh depicts a scene at a court. An IOF soldier pulls on a rope anchored on an Israeli judge to choke a shackled prisoner below, emphasizing how the military supersedes "fair trial" (p. 113). Barbed wire often appears, tangled around olive trees, pressed against bodies, and wrapped around entire homes. Each image is carefully composed to say something precise about displacement, oppression, and resilience.

One of the most moving aspects of his work is how much life it contains. His figures are not anonymous victims. They are parents, children, students, and workers. They laugh, cry, resist, and dream. Through these portraits, Sabaaneh makes clear that Palestinian identity is not defined by tragedy, but by survival and community. He neither flattens nor simplifies his subjects. Rather, he presents them as people navigating an impossible situation with courage and love. This human-centered approach sets his work apart from the more abstract or parodical political cartoons common in Western media.

The linocut style, which involves carving an image into a sheet of linoleum, gives the illustrations their sharp contrast and tactile quality. Black ink pressed onto white space creates a visual tension that's both bold and intimate. The absence of color is perhaps a direct result of his imprisonment while this book was in the works. In a symbolic way, I think his work challenges neutrality by sticking to black and white. It removes any room for nuances. These drawings are not here to balance both sides. They are rooted in the experience of the occupied, the displaced, and the imprisoned. The images are accessible to people of all languages and backgrounds. Viewers need not be experts on Palestine to understand the emotional stakes. The themes of surveillance, family separation, displacement, military violence, and justice are global. The book invites readers to draw connections between Palestine and other struggles for freedom. In doing so, it functions as both an act of testimony and a call for international solidarity.

The book also positions itself within a larger history of Palestinian visual resistance. Artists like Naji al-Ali helped set the stage for Sabaaneh, using characters like Handala to speak out against occupation and corruption. But Sabaaneh's work is different in tone and technique. His art is quieter, more meditative. There is no speech, no text. Just images. This silence creates space for the viewer to pause, interpret, and feel. The simplicity of the linework invites repeated viewing, and with each return, a new detail might emerge. This quiet intensity makes a lasting impact in a media landscape often overloaded with noise.

Sabaaneh's own experiences give the work additional depth. When he draws a prisoner sitting in isolation, it is not from imagination, but from memory. He writes briefly in the introduction about the mental strain of solitary confinement and how drawing became a way to stay present. In this

context, the art becomes not only political but personal. It is a form of survival. A way to hold onto one's identity in a system designed to erase it.

What also makes the book compelling is its refusal to rely on shock value. There is no gore. No graphic depictions of violence. Instead, Sabaaneh focuses on emotional and psychological weight. A mother presses her hand to a photograph. A child stares at a wall twice his height. These are quiet moments, but they carry enormous force. They ask the viewer to slow down, to reflect, and to feel.

Palestine in Black and White is more than a book of political cartoons. It is a visual testimony, a record of a people who refuse to disappear. Sabaaneh's work reminds us that art is not just a form of expression but also a powerful form of resistance—a tool to remember, to protest, and to build connections.