



# Mohammad Sabaaneh: Political Cartoons from Palestine



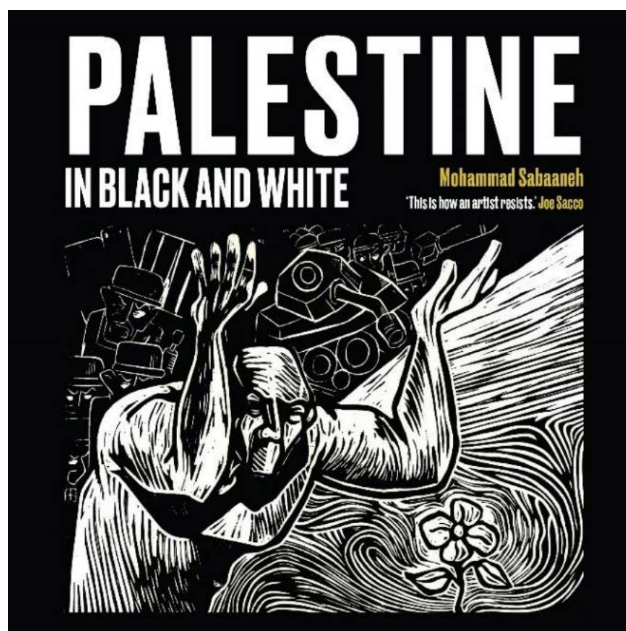
By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
April 30, 2017

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As nearly 1,000 Palestinian prisoners were well into their third week of a mass hunger strike to protest the conditions of their detention in Israeli prisons, Palestinian cartoonist Mohammad Sabaaneh, saw the publication of his book, *Black and White, Political Cartoons from Palestine*, in May 2017 and participated in the [PEN World Voices Festival](#) in New York. Now the UK edition, [Palestine in Black and White](#) is out.



Only a year shy of 40, the baby-faced Sabaaneh was held in an Israeli prison in 2013, uncharged, for five months and in solitary confinement for two weeks. At the time, as a coping method, he pretended he was a journalist, “whose mission it was to convey to the world at large what detention in an Israeli prison is like. I thought of subjects and ideas for cartoons I must draw...”

When it comes to political commentaries about occupation, human rights abuses or freedom of expression, few mediums are more effective than cartoons. Crossing cultures and language barriers, a cartoon can sum up a political situation in an instant.

Mohammad Sabaaneh has been working as a cartoonist since 2002 and has been published in many Arabic-language newspapers. Sabaaneh’s parents are Palestinian and he is now Ramallah-based, but he grew up in Kuwait, where one of the only cartoonists he was exposed to was the master political cartoonist and fellow Palestinian, [Naji al-Ali](#). Ali was working for a Kuwaiti paper when he created his alter ego, the iconic ten-year-old Hanthala, a Palestinian child with an infallible moral compass, his back always turned to the viewer. Ali championed the rights of the underprivileged, drew attention to human suffering and the politicians and policy-makers who were responsible; ultimately he was assassinated in London in 1987. It is impossible not to see Ali’s influence on Sabaaneh’s work, although he cites Kevin Kallaugher (KAL), [Ann Telnaes](#), and [Seth Tobocman](#) as sources of inspiration, and after seeing Picasso’s *Guernica*, he used elements from the painting in a few cartoons. But Sabaaneh’s work contains the same anguish and strength that Ali’s did, although Sabaaneh’s Palestinians have mostly featureless faces, they are “ugly faces” that

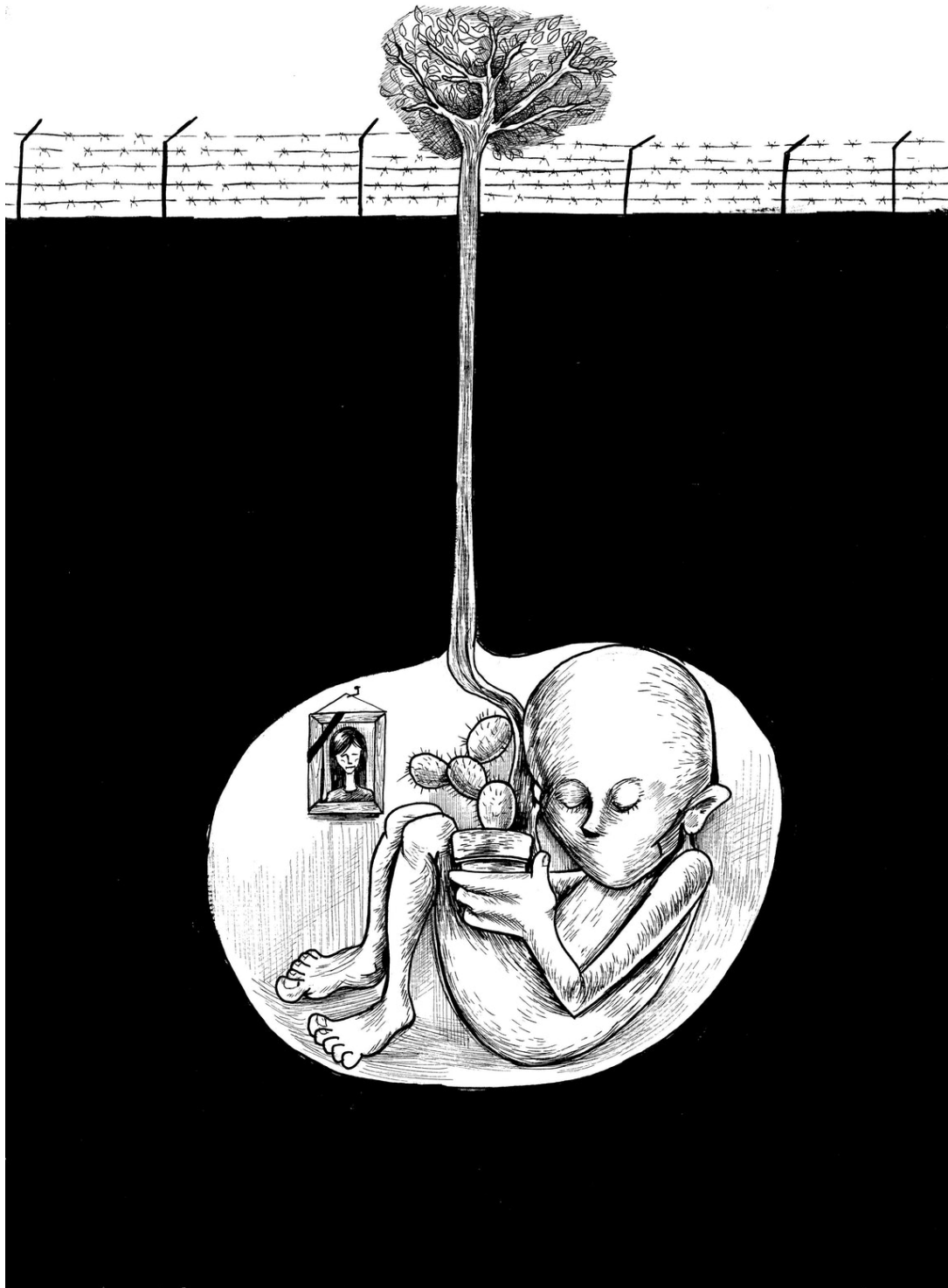
“reflect the oppressor”, he said. He uses pencil, ink and iPad, but also makes handsome linocuts.



“Each of Mohammad Sabaaneh’s powerful drawings is like a gut punch that gets straight to the essence of the stark reality of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. This is how an artist resists,” writes Joe Sacco, the preeminent cartoonist whose books include, among others *[Palestine](#)*, and *[Footnotes in Gaza](#)*.

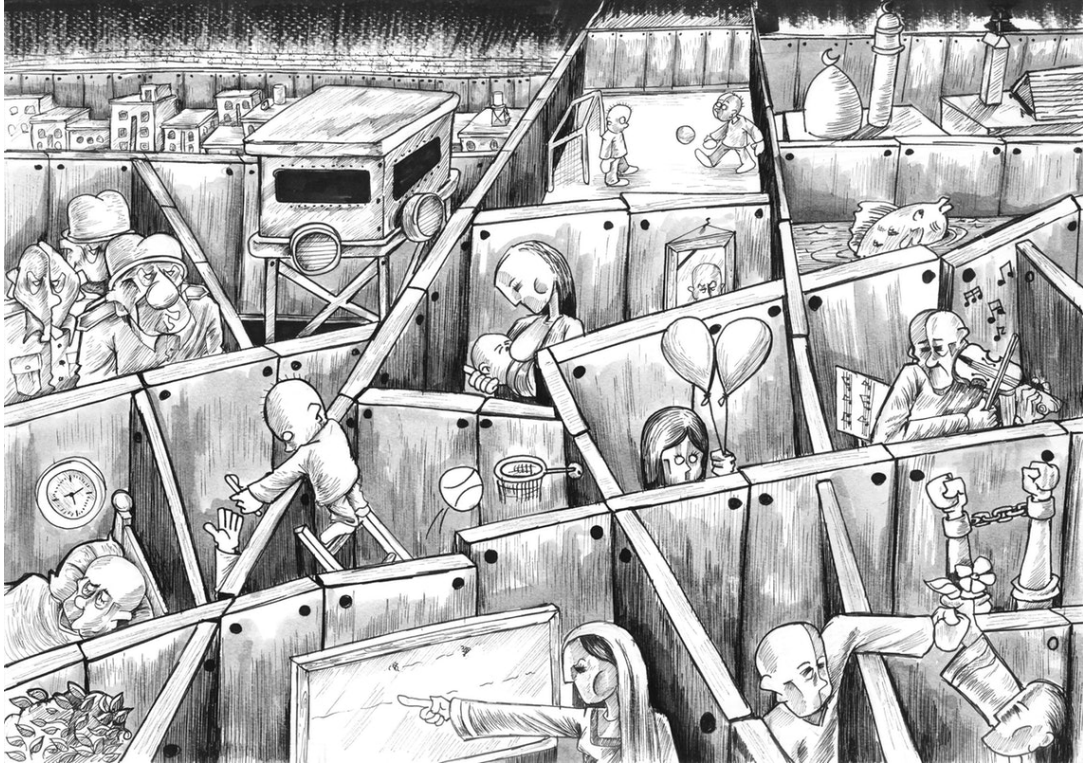
Sabaaneh’s collection of cartoons begins with an essential refresher course on history, particularly fitting, as 2016 was the 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which envisioned, amidst carving up what remained of the Ottoman Empire between France and Britain, a foreign administration of Palestine. The year 2017 was the 100th anniversary of the *[Balfour Declaration](#)*, a letter issued by the British government in favor of “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Sabaaneh takes the reader through the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Sabra and Chatila massacre, the first and second Intifada, up until the present.



The next chapter covers daily life in the Occupied Territories with an impressive image entitled “Resilience”, of a child in the womb who is also underground. His umbilical chord becomes an olive tree, and he clutches a cactus plant, the word for which in Arabic is the same as the word for patience. In another image Palestinians are walled in, living their daily lives in tiny, inter-connected cubicles, sleeping, studying, breastfeeding a baby, or imprisoned, the ever-present Israeli watchtower overlooking the cubicles. Sabaaneh also accuses foreign intervention or the lack thereof; Uncle Sam is often depicted, as are journalists who aren’t doing their job as objective observers, and of course, the omnipresent Israeli soldier.

Sabaaneh calls for a collective consciousness, and doesn't hesitate to criticize local politics as well, such as his cartoon with the heading: "Foreign occupation and national institutions of statehood coexist in confined spaces."



In "getting a workout" just-barely gallows humor has Palestinians lifting barbells weighted down by balls and chains, or balls and chains that are to be thrown through basketball hoops. Men vault over barriers at checkpoints and swim in pools pursued by rockets with shark heads.

"We are tough and patient," comments Saabaneh, and "your firepower doesn't frighten me". Yet, a little later a caption reads: "How much longer?"

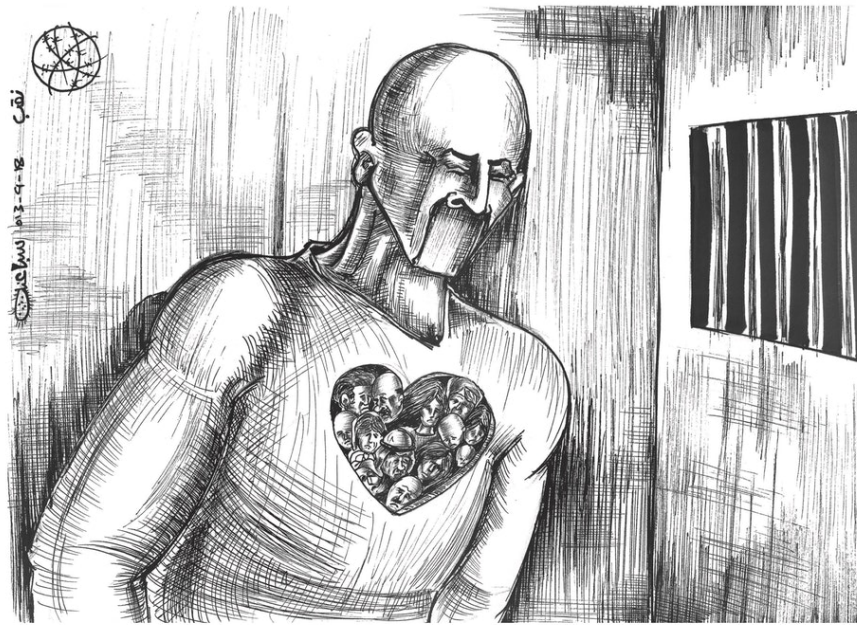
Naji al-Ali had said he drew Palestine not in mere geographical terms, but "Palestine in its humanitarian sense—the symbol of a just cause, whether it is located in Egypt, Vietnam or South Africa." In a chapter entitled "Palestine and the world" Sabaaneh writes: "Over the years, when I have found it difficult to explain the hard conditions in which we Palestinians live, I have drawn comparisons with what people know in their own communities, and I say: I am like your unarmed black neighbor who was shot dead last year; I am like indigenous people everywhere whose presence is inconvenient to those in power."

He addresses the problems of migrants, freedom of expression, and climate change and how the outside world sees the Palestinian tragedy. How will history judge what

Palestinians went through? How will people’s history be written and by whom? Sabaaneh asks.

In Palestinian families someone is always missing. They are either dead or in prison. In the heartbreaking “Someday we’ll meet” cartoon, a couple lies in bed, a checkpoint barrier separating them, the man is in prison with handcuffs on his night table.

Sabaaneh’s political prisoners appear in their own chapter where he conveys their “sharp longing for family” and fear, illness, and hunger. “Even much-anticipated family visits are difficult occasions because prisoners are separated from their loved ones, and on the infrequent visits when they are allowed to be in the same room with family members, their young children often do not recognize them and so are reluctant to be held by someone they regard as a stranger.”



My homeland lives in my heart.

His prisoners become encased in steel; in one chilling image a robot-like prisoner keeps an entire population inside him—the caption reads, “My homeland lives in my heart.”

There is also the pressure upon them, perhaps, of being a “hero prisoner” when the prisoner is so much more: “a father, brother, poet, teacher—and a human being.”

Ultimately Sabaaneh’s moving and incisive cartoons are urgent and necessary reminders of what life is like under an ongoing and agonizing occupation.

### Tags

- cartoons
- palestine
- political cartoons from palestine
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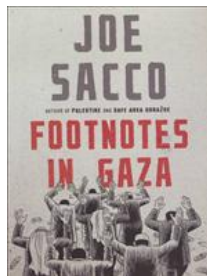


**Palestine**

Joe Sacco

Book

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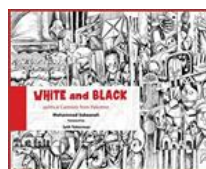


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