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ZAKARIA ZUBEIDI

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Much has been written about Zakaria Zubeidi as the former leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, one of the main resistance groups in Jenin refugee camp during the second Intifada, and simultaneously one of Israel's most wanted. In this chapter, Zakaria, co-founder of The Freedom Theatre and a former participant in the Care and Learning project and its Stone Theatre, reflects on The Freedom Theatre and cultural resistance. What follows is Zakaria's story, which gives a unique insight into how an organization like The Freedom Theatre was able to take root in a Palestinian refugee camp.

Zakaria's mother Samira Zubeidi was a leading figure in the Care and Learning project alongside Arna Mer Khamis and the Stone Theatre was built on the top floor of the Zubeidi house. Zakaria and his older brother Daoud formed the core of the acting troupe.

Zakaria was one of the few of the former child actors in the Stone Theatre who survived the second Intifada. He had been shot and imprisoned several times for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers even before the Intifada broke out in 2000. In addition to his friends from the Stone Theatre, Zakaria lost his brother Taha and his mother Samira, who was assassinated by an Israeli sniper in 2002.

When The Freedom Theatre was established, Zakaria was in his late twenties and spent his days and nights in hiding to escape numerous assassination attempts by the Israeli occupation.

From Zakaria's perspective, The Freedom Theatre was built upon the ideas of the Stone Theatre.

We realized how much we needed a cultural centre after our experiences at the Stone Theatre and when the Israel-Palestine conflict was most intensive. The conflict was not only an exchange of fire, but it also had to do with culture and education of young and small children and how to lead them out of their oppressed mindsets.

In the al-Aqsa [second] Intifada, the Israeli aggression destroyed large parts of the camp. Houses and families were destroyed and when that happens documents disappear along with memories. So this increased the need for a place for thoughts and ideas for young people.

Previously, the cultural relations in the camp were always between families. My relations were with Arna and Juliano, mainly with Juliano.¹

In the chapter about the beginning of The Freedom Theatre, Zubeidi describes how the initiative to start a theatre anew came about through a chance meeting between him and Swedish nurse and activist Jonatan Stanczak (see 'The Beginning'). Even though he did not have an official role in the theatre, Zakaria provided legitimacy to what was initially seen by many in Jenin as a foreign concept.

¹ Zakaria Zubeidi, interviewed by Ola Johansson, Jenin, February 9, 2017.

I brought the people who needed a place of culture in from the streets in the early days – people who did not, for instance, have a chance to study at the university. They didn't have other opportunities. So these were the people who got into acting, photography and so forth. And people from the camp got the opportunity to see theatre in their own neighbourhood. However, there is a difference between the need for theatre in other parts of the world and the need for theatre here. In Europe, communities need theatre and believe in the ideas of theatre but here, the theatre needs its people in order to develop and carry its ideas. We needed to work hard for the community to become convinced of our ideas. Here theatre is not 'only' theatre, it is resistance.²

Zakaria later entered an amnesty agreement with Israel that took him off the wanted list and, after the initial months of restrictions and spending his nights in the Palestinian Authority headquarters, allowed him to move freely, albeit only within Jenin.

Even before he laid down his weapons, Zakaria had claimed that the armed resistance had failed. To him, the armed resistance was a means of sending a message to the world that the Palestinians were fighting the occupation. But the developments leading up to the second Intifada and beyond had left him disillusioned, not least with the Palestinian leadership. As he told Stanczak during a conversation in the early days of The Freedom Theatre: 'When two brothers turn their weapons against each other, the first thing one must do is to put down the weapon and think about how we ended up in this situation.' For Zakaria, The Freedom Theatre became a symbol of that process.

Zakaria maintains that the concept of cultural resistance does not stand in opposition to armed resistance, or any other kind of resistance.

To people here [in Jenin] it's a matter of how you pose the question. People think that Zakaria went from armed resistance to cultural resistance. I did not. I burst open the lock to the theatre with the butt of my machine gun. You can't separate armed resistance from cultural resistance. Somebody needs to tell the story of the fighter: Who is he? Why is he doing what he is doing? You cannot just take a picture and write that he is a terrorist. Armed resistance is not one soldier killing another soldier. It is a civil uprising with fighters trying to defend themselves with whatever is available. There are tens of thousands of people in the camp and yet we didn't have more than 120 guns to fight with. With these arms, we were fighting a national army.³

On the role of the cultural resistance fighter, Zakaria believes that it is,

To translate the armed, religious and political modes of resistance and to be the criticizing force against all of them. Everything revolves around cultural resistance; it is impossible to understand the fight without cultural insights. But cultural resistance is not always prioritized. People don't appreciate it the same way as they do other roles in the resistance. Many people

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

think it's impossible to afford the luxury of taking a pause from the struggle to appreciate culture. If they happen to pass by on the street down here [outside The Freedom Theatre] they may come in and see something. But if there is a demonstration further down the road they will go to the demonstration.⁴

In late December 2011, Zakaria was informed that Israel had cancelled his pardon. Zakaria maintained that he had honoured the conditions of the amnesty deal granted him in 2007. In 2012, he was arrested by Palestinian Authority forces, accused of involvement in the shooting at the then Jenin Governor's home. After a five-month spell in prison, that involved a lengthy hunger-strike to object to inhumane treatment and violation of the rule of law, and over 3,000 people around the world signing petitions calling for his release, he was released on bail.⁵

In early 2013, Zakaria was advised by Palestinian Authority security officials to turn himself into Palestinian custody after the Israeli occupation had made threats to his life. Zakaria did, and subsequently spent the coming four years in an open-door prison cell while attempting to resolve his situation. His amnesty was reinstated in early 2017. While in the PA's protective custody, Zakaria was also formally acquitted of all charges in relation to the five months he was incarcerated by the Palestinian Authority in 2012.⁶

As this chapter is written, Zakaria has recently returned to Jenin.

I now have full amnesty and can move freely over the whole West Bank and I also hope to be able to travel abroad in the near future. I would like to meet friends around the world who have supported me and The Freedom Theatre to talk about the situation in Palestine and the importance of cultural resistance.⁷

Zakaria says he benefitted a lot from his connection to The Freedom Theatre during his time in prison.

The visits from friends in the theatre meant a lot, and with encouragement from people like Micaela Miranda and Nabil Al-Raei I started studying political science and sociology in prison and continued on a masters course from Birzeit University.⁸

Zakaria has been appointed director of the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs and was deeply involved in the April-May 2017 freedom and dignity hunger strike by prisoners in Israeli prisons.

Zakaria's perspective on The Freedom Theatre, as it enters its second decade, is that its message has been sent to the community.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'Zakaria Zubeidi released on bail,' *The Freedom Theatre*, October 1, 2012 (thefreedomtheatre.org/news/zakaria-zubeidi-released-on-bail).

⁶ 'Zakaria Zubeidi freed from charges,' *The Freedom Theatre*, March 5, 2014 (thefreedomtheatre.org/news/zakaria-zubeidi-freed-from-charges).

⁷ Meeting with Zakaria Zubeidi and Friends of The Freedom Theatre, Jenin, April 6, 2017.

⁸ 'The Freedom Theatre co-founder back on full amnesty,' *The Freedom Theatre*, April 17, 2017 (thefreedomtheatre.org/news/the-freedom-theatre-co-founder-zakaria-zubeidi-back-on-full-amnesty).

In my opinion, TFT is the only one in Palestine who can represent us Palestinians. We lost the ability to give anything to the world; we became consumers. But now, here in TFT we also produce.

Culture for me is my internal capacity. If we go back to the beginning of history, the first humans were made from earth. Every child, every person who comes to The Freedom Theatre comes with their story and their experiences. It is important how the people from TFT bring their passion and commitment out to others. For example, yesterday [April 5, 2017] when TFT hosted a political meeting with representatives from the camp as part of the theatre's anniversary, an actor came inside the theatre hall and in ten minutes he managed to present everything the rest of us had discussed in an hour. In one sketch he transmitted everything we wanted to say – and even better than we could. This ability is important. Who here in Jenin would have thought that a student from TFT could stand up and do that? Who would have thought that Suzan [Wasfi] would one day sit here and translate for me? Before, somebody who met me or heard my name would be afraid. Now Suzan is sitting next to me translating. This is what I respect about TFT. I believe that TFT has made great accomplishments and there is a lot of potential within it.