

# INTERVIEW WITH DR. SAMAH JABR

## Dr. Jabr, what motivated you in participating in Alexandra Dols' movie?

The invitation of A. Dols to participate in her film came about at a difficult time, I had been a prolific writer between 1998-2007, then experienced a few years of stagnation in my productivity as a writer as the risks of that habit outweighed its benefits for a certain time. Alexandra contacted me in 2011 explaining her interest in my writing and wanting to interview me, using some of the pieces I wrote earlier as the basis for her film. Her invitation, on one hand, provoked a deep feeling of mourning in me, as I imagined at that time that I would not write anymore.

On the other hand, her invitation injected me with hope and enthusiasm; I relapsed to my old addiction, the habit of quieting my noisy mind by organising my thoughts and feelings in a text. I thought that including my stories in a French movie with the potential of international distribution could be meaningful to many others around the world who live with similar oppression, political or social, imposed by unequal power relations. After a year of deliberation and careful calculation of risk, the balance tilted towards a yes. I wrote back to her saying that I would be on board for her project.

## Did you enjoy the experience?

It was difficult at the beginning. The team arrived in mid August of 2013, at a time when I was acutely distressed by the massive killings that had just taken place at al-Nahda Square and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Cairo.



Before we started work, I had invited Dols to a coffee shop to get to know her, and I explained among other things my distress about what was going on in Egypt and other concerns related to my concerns about risk in Palestine.

I think that this initial meeting was important to set the foundation for a trusting rapport; it helped both of us to reach a common understanding to what can be realized without putting anyone of us in danger or a state of confusion.

Otherwise, I was happy and reassured during the process of the making of this film. When I had been interviewed previously on camera, my worst fear had always been that my input would be cut and manipulated in a way that distorted the meaning of what I had to say.

Several other TV and documentary film teams who had interviewed me before had arrived with a truck of equipment, huge microphones, strong lights, and multiple camer-as; this time however, the team of Derriere les Fronts arrived only with a small camera and microphone- they even borrowed the tripod from some Palestinian friends.

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Her strength was her previous preparation on the subject of their research, her capacity to build trust with the interviewee, and her ability to ask provoking questions that could generate new ideas in my mind. Political discussions with her team was also inspiring.

I was also pleased with the unusual number of individuals who were willing to come for-ward and to volunteer for the creation of this film. With each difficulty the film managed to bypass, my hope in solidarity and collaboration, in the good will of people, and in their interest to listen and to learn about Palestine was being revived. I love Derriere les Fronts for the story of its creation.

The film itself is the incarnation of its subjects of re-sistant and resilience: resistance to official institutional rejection and neglect and the resilience of the individuals who kept pushing for its creation.

**There is a moment in the movie when Alexandra has to hide her camera while all of you are going through a checkpoint. What would have been the consequences, had the Israeli sol-diers noticed she was actually filming?**

The arbitrariness is the rule of the occupation. Anything can happen, from the pretense of politeness in front of «tourists» to deporting them or even shooting us. Soldiers often freelance. The rules are not known to us and we don't know what assumptions are being made within the head of a soldier. Sometimes I was more worried at checkpoints with the team present, and especially about Addy, the Arab looking member of the team. Being unfamiliar with life under occupation, a member of the film team might have engaged in a punishable act, such as filming something at the checkpoint itself.

**Among the patients you see, would your diagnosis be that those who suffer the deeper psy-chological damages are the more passive regarding the occupation or, on the contrary, those who actively resist it? And is there a causal link there?**

According to my observations and impressions of Palestinian people who participate in mature activism and planned acts of resistance to the occupation, that is, not the impulsive accidental actions of adolescents and children. I notice the following : such people are usually self confident, sincere, altruistic, and brave.

They possess the intelligence and the sensitivity to feel the pain caused by oppression. Because of their characteristics, they see the occupation as the illness, not their reaction to it.

They take a healthy stand against the occupation : they resist. Resistance often brings enormous retaliation against them and their families, so that if they survive their own imprisonment, torture and lengthy exclusion from life, they are still vulnerable to being broken by the feeling of guilt experienced through the retaliation against their families. Some are broken at that point, demonstrating a lesson of intimidation to anyone considering involvement of resistance.

The cowardly, corrupt, selfish traitors survive, and are likely to be beneficiaries of the occupation. This is not a uniquely Palestinian story; this is how colonialism systematically damages the best of the colonized, leaving behind the residue humanity. This is why human beings in post-colonial nations are usually left with a damaged sense of-self, value system, and identity.

**What are the personal forms of resistance and resilience that help you cope with your daily life under this longstanding war?**

As a psychiatrist I understand the deliberate psychological damage happening to Palestinian individuals and community due to our politically determined social reality.

And I know that the response to that is not simply to give people a diagnostic code and psychotropic medication for all « problematic » behaviour, but to defend human rights and promote justice. This is an ethical and professional stand that has no political agenda, but it is the right thing to do for the wellbeing of the people.

In the eyes of a some psychiatrists, a boy who throws a stone at invading soldiers might have a conduct or oppositional defiant disorder, a man who picks oranges from his confiscated land might be called a psychopath, a Palestinian woman crying and shouting in reaction to the demol-ishing of her home might be called hysterical, and a young man provoked by soldiers to clash with them is always suicidal, if not a terrorist.



Combattre, construire, soigner

*Fight, Build, Heal*

It is so easy to find a diagnosis to any politically unapproved behaviour. And the label is usually applied by the powerful. Such a diagnostic approach, failing to take the context into consideration, is short sighted at best. It is cowardly because it attempts to «treat» the individual and not the pathogenic context. Just as I wouldn't medicate a battered woman so that she would bet-ter tolerate the abuse, I wouldn't admit a socially or politically «controversial» man to a psychiatric hospital because of his «socially embarrassing» behavior.

Just as I have the responsibility to inform the authorities about an adult molesting a child before I would treat the child, I feel I have the responsibility to make known the ill deeds of the occupation as well as to provide a therapeutic accompaniment to those who are on a journey to recover from injustice. This therapeutic stand is absolutely consonant with my professional and ethical responsibility.

In my opinion, any mental health professional who uses the excuse of impartiality or neutrality to stay «apolitical» is actually biased and helps promote dependency and obedience to power.

Having said that, as a Palestinian woman and outside my clinical role, I use, among other things, my knowledge and experience in mental health as a tool of resistance, to better understand and to explain how the occupation attempts to destroy our collective will and identity and value systems as a society, and to theorize about how we can best survive and live creatively in spite of these attempts.

Interview realized by Samantha Lavernolle in September, 2017.

« Please see this film »  
KEN LOACH

ما وراء الجبهات  
DERRIÈRE LES FRONTS  
RÉSISTANCES & RÉSILIENCES EN PALESTINE

Un film d'Alexandra Dols

Sunbird Award  
Prix du meilleur documentaire

Avec le Dr. Samah Jabr

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Avec le soutien de Gueuloir Production et James Simon