



Palestine's Unknowable Lives

Reviewed by Haifa Hammami

A People Called Palestine

Photographed by J.C. Tordai

Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001.

It would seem that Palestinians these days have few, if any, friends in the international media. Sorely lacking are those individuals that not only understand but also can narrate this particularly difficult chapter in our history. As such, I was happy to find the work of J.C. Tordai in *A People Called Palestine*. His work is perhaps the only example of visual documentation of Palestinians that renders the realities of everyday life and avoids the manipulative, shocking techniques and clichés embodied in much of visual culture today. This is no small feat, as Tordai has to work both against the limits of his own medium - photography - while also capturing a difficult political narrative in a shutter's moment. His success at achieving this is surprisingly rare in his field.

The Limits of Photography

Unlike the written word, photography, due to its perceived objectivity as the product of a machine, deludes viewers into thinking that



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Gaza City, 1994. Photo: J.C. Tordai



we are all seeing essentially the same thing when we look at a picture: the truth, an authoritative account of an event. And furthermore, that we must all feel the same way about what we see, as photography uses one language only: the image. Like the adage says: a picture "speaks for itself." Well it doesn't, in fact, photographs are notorious liars; they simplify, they exaggerate, they edit, omit and ignore, while all the time hiding behind this perceived objectivity in order to build a consensus about what is being seen. For Palestinians this is potentially disastrous since our national history has been, and continues to be, fertile terrain for mythmaking and distortion by our detractors.

Historically, photography has not been an honest arbiter in times of war. This has been no different for Palestinians. It is commonly known that the original *intifada* was the first time the world stood up and lent a sympathetic eye to the Palestinians, as people were fed nightly images of children facing down tanks and armed soldiers. It is staggering to think that it would take such a disproportionate or skewed scene to begin to muster support. But it actually wasn't support at all that was being created by these images; it was emotion. And this is where photography, and specifically photojournalism, gets into trouble as it is used to induce feelings about an occurrence with which the viewer has had no previous experience. Images in the context of a conflict must be sufficiently upsetting in order to elicit the appropriate types of emotion (outrage, horror or pity). In order to achieve this, a photographer must search out and reveal increasingly astonishing or catastrophic scenes, those stripped of any ambiguity, in order to induce the audience to feel the suffering of a conflict to which they have absolutely no attachment. As this is nearly impossible, it places the photojournalist in the dubious role of arbitrating the morality of the conflict, as it is the photographer who renders not only what is known about the conflict but - more importantly - how the

viewer is to feel about it.

This is exactly the point where Tordai parts ways with many in his field, as he seems to be aware that the camera cannot adequately capture human suffering, and that in its attempts to do so, it can exploit both the subject and the viewer.

A People Called Palestine

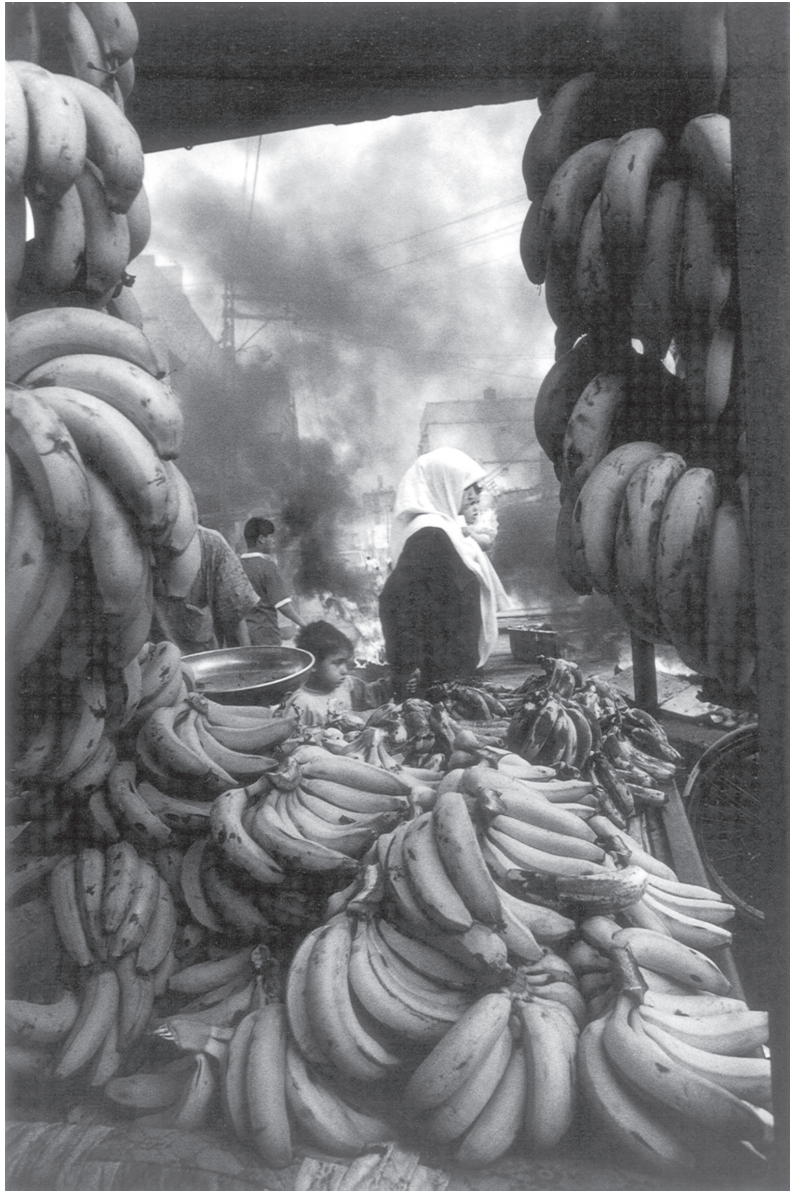
Of the fifty or so photographs in *A People Called Palestine*, only four feature a gun. (In fact, in these photographs food looms larger than any military theme.) What is rendered in this book in the most varying and complex ways is the Palestinian people. The people and their land.

Although the photographs are clearly reportage, interestingly, the place that is presented is not easily deciphered as Palestine. While the photographs steer clear of the overly romanticized Palestine of olive trees and the Dome of the Rock, many of the photographs could actually be "anytown" anywhere in the Arab world. The photographs depict a range of scenes - in camps, at the seaside, and in the fields - and then makes these backdrops for the theatre of human activity. In this way the photographs normalize Palestine inasmuch as they present the everyday, in its most mundane sense, those activities known throughout the world to all of humankind; the average life of working and playing. As if there could be no greater dream for Palestinians, Tordai's work allows us to conjure up the image of Palestinians being themselves in Palestine.

In some of the photographs there are a few prompts that give the book an identity intrinsically Palestinian. It is in these images that Tordai gently weaves the act that is so specific to Palestinian life: the struggle, the act of popular political struggle as an everyday activity. Interestingly, it is this very act that the popular media has often ignored



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Gaza City, 1993. Photo: J.C. Tordai



or more ominously, has recently deemed illegitimate.

Working With and Against the Camera

One of the ways that Tordai overcomes the reductive rendering created by the camera can be seen in his shots of the refugee camps. The notion of "place" in these photographs is made abstract rather than depicted in a representational manner by cutting off or blurring out the background in a sort of grainy visual chaos. Individuals and their activities are emphasized with such care that the texture and patterns of their clothes, the subtle shades and shadows on their faces become distinct. The cliché that has come to be known as the "squalor of the camps" is obliterated in a blur of visual ambiguity. One can make out a watch, the smoke of a cigarette, the logo on a shirt. The character of the person is pushed forward, yet it is entirely unclear where the photograph is taken. In fact, in these images, Tordai's subjects are so vivid that it is as if the camera has exposed to us the thoughts on their minds (Winter, Jerusalem, 1992).

These images stand in contrast to the photographs depicting the Palestine that is largely ignored by the popular media: those of the land. Whether in a field, or in a courtyard, at a shop or in a United Nations depot, in these shots, "place" is drawn out in careful detail. Tordai does this by capturing an enormous amount of information, rendered in a broad range of tones. In these shots, hundreds of shades that fall between black and white construct the intricacies of a scene. This draws the viewer's eye into and around the photograph in order to capture all the details. These images could almost be critiqued as paintings, as Tordai is adept at building up some five layers of information in order to express these scenes (Demolished House, Zawata, 1993). They are at times so evocative that the viewer can feel the chill of the air (Migrant workers, Erez, 1995), or smell the smoke from the street

(Gaza, 1993). What is conveyed in these images is a highly nuanced vision of Palestine, replete with an endless amount of clues about the land and its people.

One could accuse many photojournalists of aestheticizing the misery that they are documenting. The famous photographer Sebastiao Salgado is a prime suspect in this effort. His photographs stage people artistically on a background emphasizing their powerlessness as they are reduced to objects placed compositionally on a backdrop of squalor. Tordai can't be accused of even nearing this imperilled position as he doesn't try to construct a scene artistically or stage it for the viewer's consumption; people aren't posed in his work nor are they or the landscape overly dramatized. The images are certainly beautiful, but not to a degree that renders them inauthentic as journalism. Misery and suffering are not the underpinnings of his photographs. This is not exploitive work, as nothing is owed to the subjects in the photographs, neither our pity nor our sorrow.

I think that Tordai's work will live on much the way that Robert Capa's "Falling Soldier" still gives us a glimpse into the Spanish Civil War. We look at that image and can almost hear the shot that sent the soldier tumbling backwards on the hill. We look at it and wonder whether he died at that moment. We see it all in slow motion. It is a vivid image, yet it captures only a brief point in the course of a much longer, more bloody war, one that is not depicted in the photograph at all. Rather it suggests that we the viewer can never really know about that day on the hill, we can only search the beauty of the image and wonder about what we see and what we don't know. Tordai's work will invite future generations to try to see, to imagine and wonder, to envision the everyday lives and the inner worlds of Palestinians in these difficult times.

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