

CARICATURES OF CONFLICT

A Child in Palestine: The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali, by Naji al-Ali with an introduction by Joe Sacco. London and New York: Verso, 2009. ix + 117 pages. \$15.84 paper.

Reviewed by Nadia Yaqub

Tourists browsing the souvenir shops across the street from the Roman amphitheater in downtown Amman may be puzzled by the array of souvenirs that feature a pen and ink drawing of a small boy with a large round head and spiked hair. He appears on key chains, jewelry, mugs, hats, and clothing, always pictured from the back with his hands clasped behind him. The figure is Handhala, the child witness created by political cartoonist Naji al-Ali as a representation of an ethical gaze. Handhala appears in most of al-Ali's cartoons, mutely watching the economic and military violence, corruption, and moral bankruptcy that is the subject of most of his work. Because of his stature in the Arab world as an unflinching critic of corruption, exploitation, and political expediency al-Ali, whose work appeared daily in Arabic-language newspapers from the late 1960s until his assassination in 1987, is revered today not only as a creative artist but also as a principled voice for the downtrodden. Moreover, he drew at a time when many of what became iconic images in post-1948 Palestinian popular culture were coming into being, and his work was instrumental in investing these images with meaning and popularity.

While Handhala has become ubiquitous as a symbol of Palestinian solidarity, the popularity of al-Ali's broader body of work has not kept pace among English readers. Several books about al-Ali, as well as collections of his cartoons have been published in Arabic. Additionally, multiple websites and at least two films feature his work.

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However, only recently has a slim collection of al-Ali's cartoons with an English-language introduction and explanatory text been published. The book, *A Child in Palestine: The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali* provides the novice with a useful and accessible introduction to al-Ali's work.

A Child in Palestine offers readers approximately one hundred full-page black and white cartoons that originally appeared in various Arabic language newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s. The images are organized thematically rather than chronologically, with the collection divided into five chapters of almost equal length: "Palestine," "Human Rights," "U.S. Dominance," "Oil and Arab Collusion," "Peace Process," and "Resistance." The chapters include a very brief introduction (never more than two pages) by Dr. Abdul Hadi Ayyad. Each individual cartoon is also accompanied by an explanatory caption prepared by Dr. Mahmoud al-Hindi. Captions also include the month and year of each cartoon's original publication except in the rare instances when such information is not available. The source of the original publication for each image is provided on the copyright page of the book. An introduction by the well-known graphic journalist Joe Sacco lends the project a legitimacy that might otherwise be lost on English readers who are not yet familiar with al-Ali's work.

The cartoons themselves are a representative sampling of al-Ali's work, demonstrating the range of political and social issues that he addressed in the thousands of images he produced over the course of nearly twenty years of daily publishing from Beirut, Kuwait, and London. For obvious reasons, Naji al-Ali is probably best known today for

his cartoons about Palestine, and the collection includes several of his most frequently reproduced images. However, the broad range of his subject matter is also illustrated in cartoons that have not received wide currency in the current political climate, such as two cartoons about the growing popularity of veiling in the Arab world (pp. 32–33), or one about superpower politics that depicts Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in bed together (p. 59). The collection also includes examples of the biting critique of all powerbrokers—Israeli, American, Arab, and Palestinian—that may have cost him his life. Even Yasir Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, is mocked (p. 93).

While *A Child in Palestine* provides an English audience with an accurate and attractive introduction to al-Ali's work, the volume does little to address the pressing need for a definitive edition of his cartoons. As is the case with Arabic language collections of his work that have appeared thus far, the selection process for the cartoons in *A Child of Palestine* is not explained. Kasim Abid's 1999 film "Naji al-Ali: an Artist with a Vision" eloquently describes the evolution of al-Ali's art in reaction to political developments in the 1980s. This evolution is not depicted in *A Child of Palestine*. Scholars and serious fans of al-Ali's work need an edition that includes most, if not all, of his images with exact and complete information about their original publication. No serious studies of his art can be carried out without such an edition. Given al-Ali's stature as a groundbreaking political cartoonist, a seminal Palestinian artist, and an iconic cultural figure of the Palestinian resistance, it is surprising that such a project has not yet been carried out.