Between the Lilies: Laila Shawa and the Political Representation of Palestine

Rana Anani

When artist Laila Shawa (1940–2022) painted the series *The Gaza Beach Lilies* (1988–1989) and *The Gaza Beach Daffodils* (2016), she wasn't simply depicting nature; rather, she was painting a flower deeply associated with her beloved home city, which would later witness a campaign of continuous human, environmental and urban annihilation. For her, the flower also represented hope, patience and endurance in Palestine, and a refusal to be confined within a predetermined status of submission to patriarchal society as a woman – subjects that influenced her artistic career over the course of her life.

Shawa was captivated by the sea lily, the endangered plant that grows on the sandy Mediterranean shores, and she was one of the few Palestinian artists to depict it. The flower was in the centre of Gazan rituals when picnicking in the Sheikh Ajleen area on the southern shores of Gaza City. People would admire the flowers that grow abundantly in the sand, and sometimes pick them to place in vases at home.[1] Her work *The Lily Seller* (1989) captures these rituals by depicting a woman whose white headcover blends into a bouquet of these flowers. But these flowers are also associated with funerals and death, something a Gazan woman knows and experiences all too well with the loss of sons and loved ones. Shawa's drawings of lilies also relate to the work of Diego Rivera, the revolutionary Mexican artist who drew a series of lily paintings, tying them to the poor conditions of the working class, exploited as they were by the upper class, and so relevant to loss and suffering. Even during her final illness, Shawa was painting lilies, including

Laila Shawa, *The Lily Seller*, 1989, oil and acrylic on canvas, 91 x 71 cm, courtesy of The Laila Shawa Estate

[1] Aser Saqa, 'On Laila Shawa', unpublished text, 17 September 2025

The Kingfisher that lived in my garden (2020), which she gifted to a London hospital where she spent some time receiving treatment.

Shawa held a firm conviction in the artist's critical role: 'I do not believe in painting flowers and butterflies and trees. I don't mind doing that if I have nothing else to say. But I feel if one is to leave a mark in this world then the central concept of what you are working on must make sense and has to be valid also.'[2]

At the beginning of her career, Shawa, who witnessed the Nakba at the age of eight, distanced her art from blatant political themes, focusing instead on a subject close to her heart: the critique of women's submission to a patriarchal society. However, following the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987, she began to engage directly with politics, starting with *The Walls of Gaza* series. At a later stage she became openly political, while maintaining her critique of patriarchy and adding to her work a touch of sharp satire. This makes a powerful appearance in two bodies of work, *Trapped: A Female Suicide Bomber* (2011) and *The Other Side of Paradise* (2012), in which she confronts the distorted Western media portrayal of Palestine.

Contradiction and Difference

Shawa was born in 1940 and grew up in an affluent, educated Palestinian family in Gaza, one that championed gender equality and provided a significant personal support for her education and freedom. She articulated this in an interview in 1993: 'I never realized there were differences between boys and girls until I grew up and went into the world… I was astounded to see that women were so submissive and accepted to play a certain negative role… nobody ever told me you are a woman, and you have to do this. My parents left me on my own devices; they said marry whoever you want if you want… I had a mother who was very aware, and influenced by Simone de le Beauvoir's thought. I had a father who was extremely progressive.'[3]

As she travelled for work and education, Shawa developed her sociopolitical and artistic awareness. At an early age, after initially enrolling to study philosophy and sociology at the American University in Cairo, she withdrew and joined the Leonardo da Vinci Institute of Art in the same city. Later, she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where she studied with Renato Guttuso, the renowned Italian anti-fascist artist and founder of *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (New Art Front), a movement defined by socially engaged, politically committed realism. Joining the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, founded by the expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka, on several occasions between 1960–1963, also contributed to shaping her

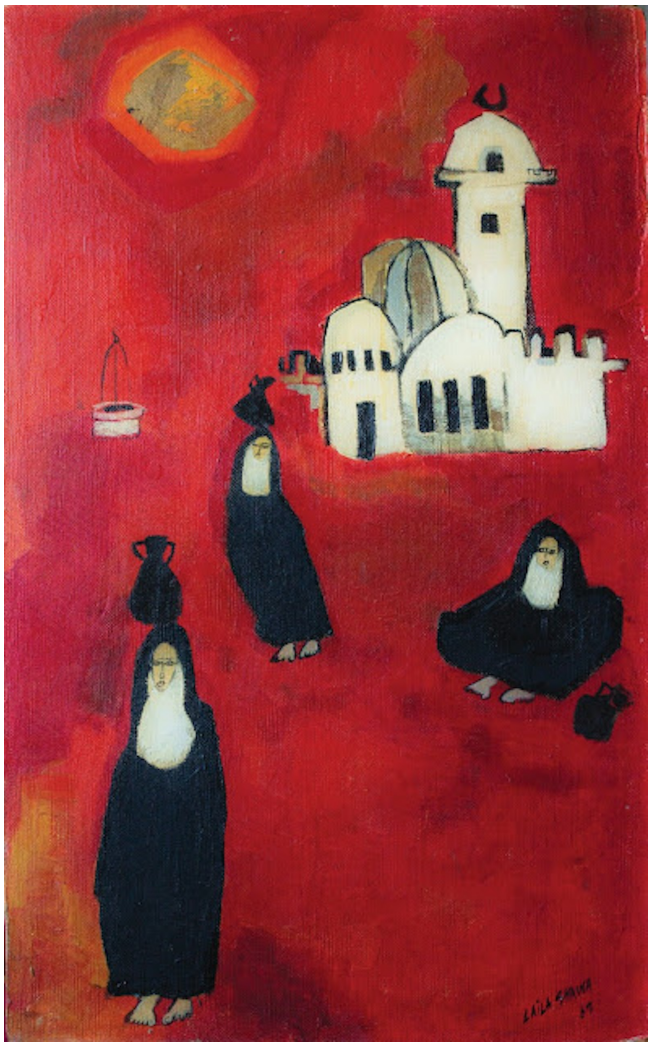
[2] Laila Shawa, interviewed by Salwa Mikdadi at home in London, ca August 1993; Box AV-1, ID: 022.0077, Salwa Mikdadi papers, MC-022, New York University Abu Dhabi Library, Abu Dhabi, UAE

[3] Ibid

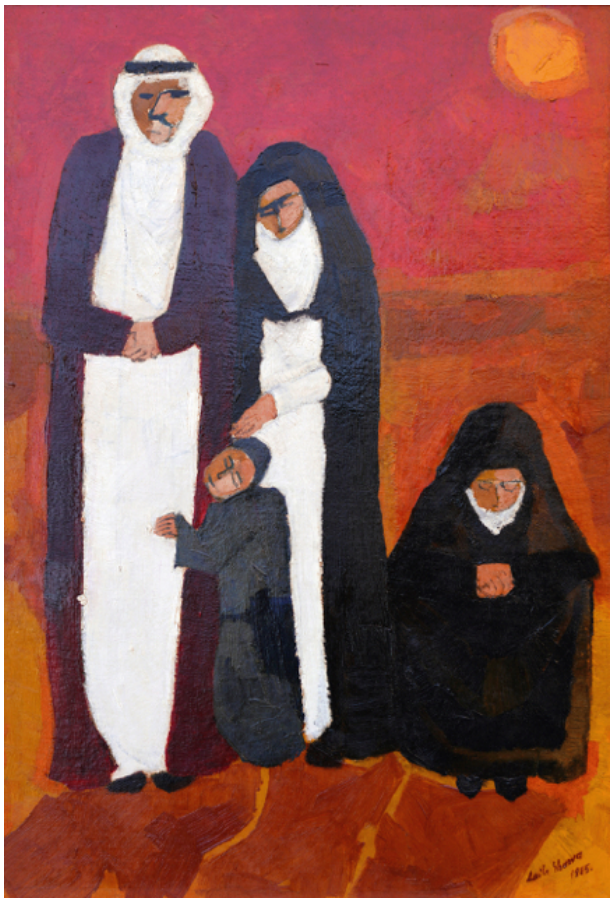
work and views, combining her passion for art with a strong commitment to social and political issues.

Upon returning to her home region, Shawa was confronted with a reality marked by the rise of political Islam. What shocked her most, however, was what she considered women's acceptance of a victimised role and submission to male control. This subject challenged her foundational belief in women's equality and prompted her to address the issue repeatedly in her work, directing her most powerful criticism at women who she saw as 'accepting' this dominance. In doing so, she became one of the few women artists in the Arab world to tackle this theme with such directness.

Amongst the first works to address this theme was an early painting titled *The Well* (1967), in which she depicted a group of barefoot, veiled women dressed in black, carrying jars under the scorching sun. Against a red background, she painted a small town appearing in the distance, with a mosque with a tall minaret, and a water well. While the painting is close to her later series of city paintings, it is more connected to an earlier painting titled *Family* (1965), in which she portrayed a traditional man with stern looks who stands over his family, with two



Laila Shawa, *The Well*, 1967, oil on board, 80 x 50 cm, private collection, image courtesy of The Laila Shawa Estate



Laila Shawa, *Family*, 1965, acrylic and graphite on board, 70 x 50 cm, courtesy of The Laila Shawa Estate

women bowing their heads in submission, and a child. The painting was displayed in her first solo exhibition, titled 'Contrast and Difference', organized in 1965 at the Marna House Hotel, which was owned by her family in the Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza. At the time, Shawa was supervising the arts and crafts departments in UNRWA schools in Gaza, and was a lecturer at the UNESCO Institute of Education.

These paintings mark the beginning of Shawa's long career preoccupation with the issue of women and patriarchy. While she did set this subject aside for a period of time, she returned to it extensively in the late 1980s, exploring it from different aspects. Shawa argued that since women possess agency, they are therefore complicit in their own subjugation and not merely passive victims. She also considered the spread of the *hijab* in the 'Middle East' a sociopolitical phenomenon that has nothing to do with traditions, aimed at controlling and subjugating women and 'a consequence of men losing control over their lives due to Western hegemony and corrupt dictatorships'.[4] In this vein, Shawa produced a significant series of artworks where the *niqab* and *hijab* become symbols of the subjugation of women and acceptance of an inferior status. She painted women's *hijabs* in vibrant colours, as if adding a touch of enhancement to

[4] Dareen Homani, 'Al-tareekh la yaktubuhu al-muntasirun faqat.. fi wadaa' Layla al-Shawa', *Difa Thalitha*, 9 November 2022 (in Arabic), https://diffah.alaraby.co.uk/diffah/print/herenow/2022/11/9/ التاريخ لا يكتبه المنتصرون فقط في وداع ليلى الشوا , accessed 23 November 2025

their subjugation, while the eyes peering from behind the *niqab* were often small, dark and hollow. In contrast, her free-spirited women appear unveiled, with large, beautiful eyes, many closely resemble the blossoming white lilies that she often painted.

Among the themes she explored in this context was a series presenting traditional marriage, which she considered a form of 'prostitution'. In the painting *The Prisoner* (1988), she depicts a beautiful woman with a dreamy gaze, surrounded by lilies. Upon closer inspection, a group of veiled women can be seen hidden among the lily petals that surround her like societal guards imposing authority. Similarly, in *Desert Bride* (1989), a procession of veiled women carry a bride shrouded entirely in white fabric, turning the bride into a resemblance of a corpse or a sacrificial offering. Beneath her shroud, the bride holds a bouquet of white lilies, a symbol of freedom and hope, but also sadness.

Laila Shawa, *The Prisoner*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 76 cm,
collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman

Although accurate to a certain extent, Shawa's critical perspective on Arab women's freedom stems from the position of a woman who enjoyed a privileged social status and upbringing, a condition that is lacking in the lives of many of the women she critiqued. Shawa considered women in the Arab region one entity, not as a wider diverse group with various statuses and circumstances. Feminist scholars have argued that class played a significant role in the debate about the 'question of women' in the Arab world in the early and mid-twentieth century. They also queried whether the 'modernity' championed by middle class

women at that time 'exacerbated class inequalities among women and seriously disadvantaged rural and working-class women'.[5]

Women's freedom became a powerful preoccupation in Shawa's artistic career, explained in part by the fact that she was a contemporary of an era marked by the rise of Arab nationalist discourse within the middle classes who advocated for women's rights and resisted the patriarchal system partly as a form of modernism.[6] Yet her work was provocative not only to men but also to women. She recalls an incident in which she was confronted by a female critic on the subject: 'I was attacked by one critic [during] the exhibition on veiled women. She said I am attacking the victim. But I do not believe women are victims. I believe they are who they choose to be. If they choose to put themselves in the place of a victim that is exactly what they are doing, possibly because it is convenient… I paint about this, I get attacked and I get criticized for it, and I think that is what makes it worthwhile: this ongoing battle between me and my audience.'[7]

The depth of Shawa's commitment to the theme of the subjugation of women is encapsulated in the series *An Endangered Species* (1988), in which she criticised the *hijab* and depicted women who wear it as empty and as look-alikes. A well-known work from this series is *The Impossible Dream* (1988), featuring veiled women who are holding ice creams but they are unable to eat them because of the *niqab* covering their mouths. Their eyes are closed as if enjoying the untouched pleasure. For Shawa, the work is also charged with political critique: these women are not only dreaming of a Westernised delight they cannot access but are also trapped in a hypocritical and regressive culture, alluding to the rise of political Islam.[8]

Laila Shawa, *The Impossible Dream*, 1988, acrylic on board, 102 x 76 cm, collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman

5 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, and Chichester, 1998, p 9

6 See Nicola Pratt, 'How the West Undermined Women's Rights in the Arab World', *Jadaliyya*, 25 January 2016, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32910, accessed 20 June 2026

7 Laila Shawa, interviewed by Salwa Mikdadi, op cit

8 See ibid

The Impossible Dream

Shawa exhibited *The Impossible Dream* at the National Museum in Amman in 1990, as part of the series *Women and Veils*, from where it was picked up and subsequently gained recognition in the West, and marking the beginning of her career in the UK, after moving to London in 1987. Consequently, she was invited to organise an exhibition in The Gallery in London in 1992, her first solo exhibition outside the Arab world, titled 'Women and Magic'. This was followed by participation in a group exhibition titled 'Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World' at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC in 1994.[9] The exhibition 'Women and Magic' featured a series of works exploring the practice of magic in Muslim societies, employing elements of Islamic heritage and design. Another well-known painting from the series is *The Hands of Fatima*, painted in 1989 and later acquired by the British Museum. It features a group of veiled women wearing vibrantly coloured gowns of red with intricate motifs. Between their covered faces is the repeated symbol known throughout the Arab world as the 'Hand of Fatima' (*khamsa*). Shaped like a palm with an eye at its centre, it is traditionally believed to offer protection against the evil eye. While all the women in the painting are depicted with closed eyes, their hands raised to their faces in a gesture of shock, Shawa paints, playfully and sarcastically, one of the women standing in the middle with her eyes only half-closed, looking upwards in a look of dismissal. This figure breaks the uniformity of reaction, implying a layer of criticism of societal expectations.

Laila Shawa, *The Hands of Fatima*, oil and acylic on canvas, 89 x 70 cm, collection of the British Museum, London, courtesy of the British Museum

Venetia Porter, one of the curators for the Oriental Department of the British Museum, and who acquired Shawa's works for the museum, has

[9] See 'Laila Shawa – Voices from Gaza' on Contemporary Art Platform, www.capkuwait.com/exhibition/voices-from-gaza, accessed 20 June 2026

described her as 'one of only a few Arab artists to successfully break through barriers in the West.'[10] Porter's statement, although likely intended to praise Shawa, ultimately places an emphasis on the barriers the West creates for art coming from the East, forcing it to fit within a predetermined vision in order to pass through. While many Arab artists rose to prominence in the Arab world in the mid-20th century, the West remained largely closed to them. Western art institutions were primarily collecting Arab art that framed the East through preconceived perceptions, reducing the artworks sometimes
to ethnocentric, orientalist objects meant to evoke 'astonishment' in Western audiences.[11]

For a long time, the representation of the Orient by the West served to reinforce Western superiority and justify its dominance over the East, as Edward Said articulated so profoundly in his book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. This was also the case in exhibition spaces in Western museums, which did not shy away from portraying men from the Orient as 'aggressive' and women as sexualised and enslaved.[12] Therefore, Shawa's art criticising women, perceived as critical in an Arab context, was stripped of its meaning when exhibited in a Western context and risked becoming 'oriental' objects meant to 'astonish'.

In assuming a universal female experience, Shawa not only ignored the various challenges faced by Arab women but also reinforced a colonial notion that all progress in relation to women originates from the West. This perspective, deemed as 'white feminism', ignores how colonialism itself advances gender inequality. Rafia Zakaria argues in *Against White Feminism* that such an approach often becomes performative, centring whiteness while objectifying local women and coercing them into a Western model. This fails to dismantle any patriarchal system; instead it supports a narrative that enables the very structures it claims to challenge.[13]

Moreover, as the West began to champion women's rights through its numerous humanitarian and human rights organisations across the 'Middle East', it also continued to support the wars that were ravaging the region, including the backing of the colonial project in Palestine, a key factor in suppressing women's liberation movements, specifically those connected to the Palestine Liberation Organisation.[14] More recently, the devastation faced by Palestinian women in Gaza, following the start of genocide in October 2023, was also met with silence from Western feminist and cultural institutions, including the British Museum, which acquired those critical works from Shawa.

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[10] See 'Laila Shawa: Still Shaking People Up: Lawrence Joffe Talks to the Palestine-Born Artist Whose Work Forms Part of the British Museums Collection, Laila Shawa', *The Free Library*, 2002, www.thefreelibrary.com/Laila+Shawa%3A+still+shaking+people+up%3A+Lawrence+Joffe+talks+to+the...-a083078369, accessed 20 June 2026

[11] See Todd B Porterfield, 'Western Views of Oriental Women in Modern Painting and Photography', in Salwa Mikdadi, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, International Council for Women in the Arts, Lafayette, 1994, pp 58–71

[12] See Holly O'Farrell, *British Representations of the Middle East in the Exhibition Space, 1850–1932*, Routledge, 2024

[13] See Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 2021

[14] See Nicola Pratt, 'How the West Undermined Women's Rights in the Arab World', op cit

Hope, Endurance and Eternity

When she moved to Beirut following the 1967 occupation of all of Palestine, Shawa forged a timid connection with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO)'s Arts Department. In her works, she avoided the overtly political themes full of symbols that many artists associated with the PLO embraced at the time. Despite her reservations about what she deemed as propaganda art encouraged by the PLO,[15] she participated in several group exhibitions organised by the Department, both in Arab countries and internationally.

When the PLO established the publishing house Dar al-Fata al-Arabi in Beirut in 1974, Shawa accepted an invitation to illustrate children's stories that would carry nationalistic and resistance-oriented messages. In 1975, she illustrated the story *Nadam Hisan* (A Horse's Regret) by the Syrian writer Zakaria Tamer, a story exploring the contrast between a wild, free horse and a submissive, tamed one. Reflecting on this collaboration, artist Mohieddin Ellabbad, a founder and the artistic director of the publishing house, recalled: 'I came across an exhibition of paintings of horses in Yemen by Laila Shawa. So, I asked her if she would like to illustrate this book. When she hesitated, I [suggested we collaborate]. I said, "You do the paintings in whichever form you like, and just leave me some space for the text." We laid out the book together, and it was beautiful… Laila had just graduated from university and had a wonderfully free and naive style.'[16]

Shawa went on to have several solo exhibitions, including four in Beirut and one in Kuwait.[17] In 1975, following the start of the Lebanese Civil War, she relocated to Gaza, but continued to maintain a connection with the PLO art department. Her paintings were used on the covers of *Shu'un Filastiniya*, published by the PLO, at least twice in the 1980s.

Beyond the Walls of Gaza

The *Walls of Gaza* series marked Shawa's first direct engagement with the subject of occupation, a shift inspired by the graffiti that appeared across Gaza's walls during the First Intifada. Shawa, who was living between Gaza and London at the time, could not ignore the walls of the city, covered as they were in layers of slogans. The walls became an underground form of communication between the resistance and the people, urging them toresist and reject occupation. Israel issued a law forcing Palestinians to continuously repaint

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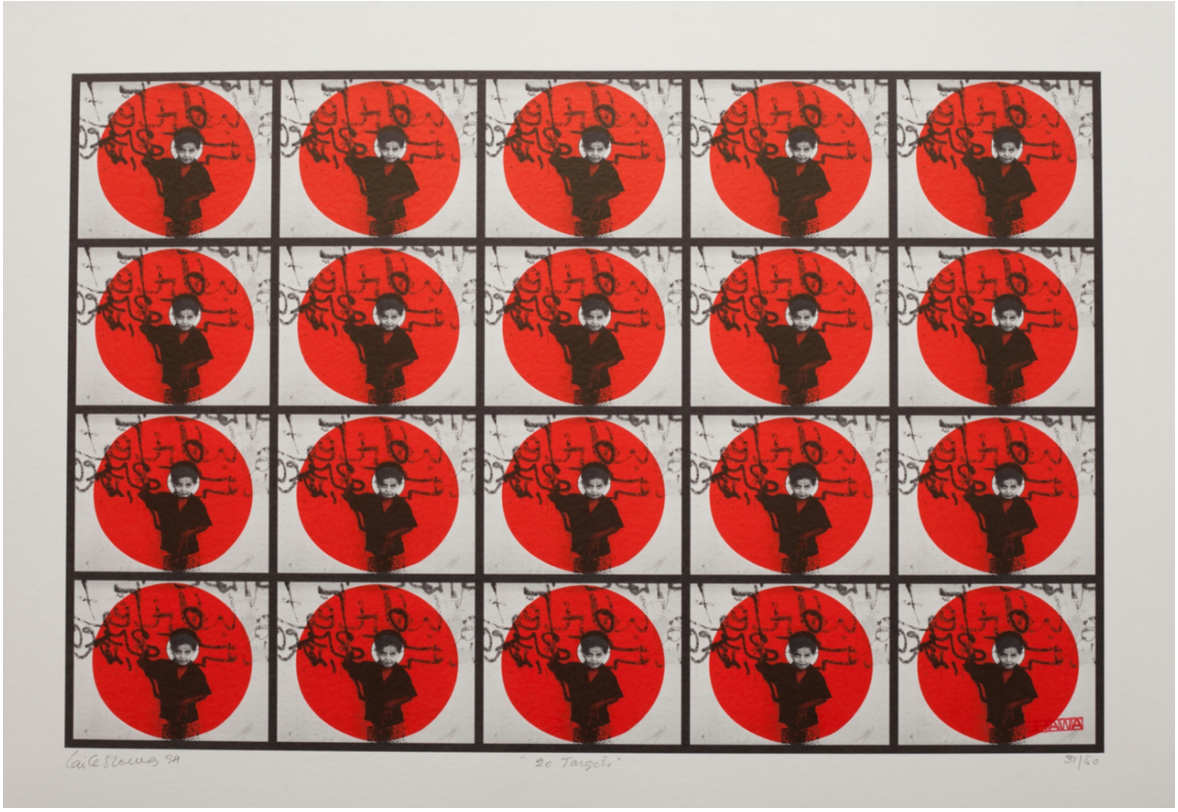
15 See Amy Assad, 'Confronting Paradise', *Al Majalla*, 19 April 2012, en.majalla.com/2012/04/article55231091/confronting-paradise, accessed 11 January 2026

16 Hassan Khan, Mohieddin Ellabbad and Nawal Traboulsi, 'Revolution for Kids: Dar El Fata El Arabi, Recollected', originally published in *Bidoun*, Winter 2010, www.bidoun.org/articles/revolution-for-kids, accessed 11 January 2026

17 Exhibition of drawings, The Book Centre Gallery, Beirut, 1968; Hotel Vendome, Beirut, 1970; 'Cities of Gold', The Tunisian Cultural Centre, Beirut, 1971; Sultan Gallery, Kuwait, 1972; 'Of Horses and Cities', L'Antiquaire Gallery, Beirut, 1975

their walls, deeming the graffiti incitement. Shawa looked at the walls as a layered political canvas that embodied feelings, aspirations pain and suffering. Her early flights from London meant she arrived very early in the morning to Gaza's empty roads 'full of dirt, rubbish and not a soul… all what you see are these walls full of slogans, and they speak to you. I felt I could not ignore this for too long.'[18]



Laila Shawa, *20 Targets*, 1994, from the *Walls of Gaza* series, coloured lithography print on photography, courtesy of The Laila Shawa Estate

It was not the first time Shawa had carried a camera, as she had previously worked with the Armenian photographer Hrant Nekachyan (Abu Saro), who documented the lives of refugees in Gaza camps between 1948 and 1952.[19] Yet it was the first time she took to the streets, at a time Palestinians in Gaza were suspicious of photographers' intentions, especially those who looked foreign, as this posed a significant risk of revealing the identity of those who wrote the slogans.

Shawa photographed the walls and reconstructed them using drawing, collage, installation and graphite, and then transformed them into a silkscreen series, *Walls of Gaza* (1994), marking a turning point in her work in terms of style and subject. The body of work conveys powerful messages, some showing defiance amidst vulnerability (*20 Targets*), others critiquing the

[18] Laila Shawa, interviewed by Salwa Mikdadi, op cit

[19] See Maher Charif, 'The Armenian Community and Its Contribution to Palestinian Life', Institute for Palestine Studies, 11 October 2022, www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1653306, accessed 11 January 2026

international community complicity in the ongoing colonialism in Palestine (*Amended Resolutions II* and *Passages to Freedom*). Shawa also criticised how the Oslo Accords corrupted the Palestinian struggle, as in *The Deal*, depicting a Palestinian flag covered in dollar signs, while garbage scattered on the ground was integrated into the composition. She also critiqued consumer capitalism and how Palestinian symbols of struggle, such as the *keffiyeh*, were transformed into fashion items, emptied of their political and liberation meaning.

A few years later, Shawa presented another body of work in an exhibition titled 'In the Name of God: Crucifixion' in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK in 2000, in which, in a subtle way, she depicted similarities between the persecution of Christ and Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

Shawa continued with political themes, this time provoked by the Western media coverage of the Second Intifada. In 2000–2005, a wave of suicide bombings protesting Israeli oppression captured disproportionate international media attention. While peaceful demonstrations by Palestinians faced with systemic Israeli violence were often overlooked, the media heavily focused on suicide bombings, reframing the Palestinian struggle as 'terrorism' and linking it to radical Islam, while sidelining the violence of the Israeli occupation. Edward Said argued in his essay 'The Essential Terrorist' that the 'war on terror' conflated ethnic and religious identities with terrorism, creating a political and media distortion.[20] Consequently, the coverage narrowed its focus on the small minority of suicide attacks carried out by Palestinian women. The media reports fixated on their physical appearance, their nail polish, their beautiful eyes, and portraying them as victims of a backward, patriarchal culture – a narrative that stripped them of everything they stood for.

The distorted media narrative resonated with Shawa, compelling her to directly challenge the Western media gaze. In her exhibition 'The Other Side Of Paradise' at the October Gallery in London (2011–2012), she confronted this stereotyping of the Middle Eastern woman, layering it with satire and presenting it provocatively. At this stage, Shawa's perspective shifted, and she reacted against a West that had once been looked to as a source of women's 'modernisation'. The media's unjust framing of Palestinian women led her to stand with the very women she had critiqued in her earlier work. Consequently, she sought to explore the motivations behind the *shahida*, a question Western media refused to engage with. As she explained in an artist statement: 'The core of the *shahida* model revolves around a troubling confusion of eroticization and weaponization. In this installation, I sought to assign to each aspirant an identity and wholeness that would otherwise be denied her in the routinely horrific media reports of female suicide bombers in Gaza.'[21]

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[20] Edward W Said, 'The Essential Terrorist', *The Nation*, 15 August 2006, www.thenation.com/article/archive/essential-terrorist, accessed 20 June 2026

[21] See 'Laila Shawa', in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11 October 2012, www.signsjournal.org/laila-shawa, accessed 20 June 2026

Shawa continued this exploration in her *Disposable Bodies* series (2011–2013). Through this project, she further interrogated the portrayal of Palestinian women by the Western media and Israeli propaganda. She used a series of headless and limbless mannequins, dressing them with explosive belts, bullets, beads, graffiti, bombs, peacock feathers and butterflies. In this series, Shawa juxtaposed weapons with objects women use for beauty, as a satire of Israeli and Western media narratives. Her exhibition 'Trapped: A Female Suicide Bomber' at the Galerie Imane Farès in Paris in 2011 engaged with this trend, inspired by a 2007 Channel 4 television programme about a female suicide bomber whose failed attempt was captured on Israeli surveillance cameras, where she was forced to undress to reveal the explosives.

Laila Shawa, *Disposable Bodies (Shahrazad #4)*, 2012, mixed media, 86.5 x 34 x 24 cm, courtesy of The Laila Shawa Estate

Laila Shawa, the bold and freedom-loving artist, insisted on confronting a patriarchal society in her art. From the very beginning of her career in the mid-1960s, she understood her role as a critic, which was powerfully reflected in her work from the late 1980s on. The idea of homeland emerged in Shawa's work in unconventional ways, and she didn't hesitate to crticise politicians as well as political processes that maintained the miserable condititons of people on the ground. Despite the West's attempts to co-opt her early on, she rebelled, criticising its preconceived stereotypes about Eastern women and Palestine. Even as she sometimes judged women harshly, blaming them for their societal position from the privileged vantage of her middle-upper class background, she remained one of the few artists of her generation to centre the question of women and their liberation, making it transformative and a lifelong focus. Shawa passed away in 2022, before the 2023 genocide in Gaza. Had she witnessed the destruction of the Rashad al-Shawa Cultural Centre, which was named after her father, the mayor of Gaza City from 1972 to 1975, and the wider devastation of the city she loved, it would have undoubtedly left profound scars upon her.

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