

## CASE STUDY 18

### Motasem

#### Dance is resistance

“This is our place to change something in our camps and in our city.”

These are the words of 22-year-old Motasem, lead dancer at the Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society. The society is based in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. It was founded in 1998 by Abdelfattah Abusrour, who grew up there.

In Arabic, Alrowwad means ‘the pioneers’, and Abdelfattah says his aim in establishing the centre was to use art, culture and education as a means of resistance to the occupation. He wanted it “to save lives, inspire hope and give our children and young people every possibility to express themselves in the most creative, and non-armed ways.”

The centre has grown to include dance and theatre groups, photography and video workshops, carpentry, a technology lab and library, and workshops on women’s rights and self-defence.



The dance group allows young people to meet, learn new skills, find new ways to express themselves, and share their stories through the traditional Dabke dance.

The group’s most recent production, *Majnoon Laila*, is based on a well-known Arabic love story – Abdelfattah describes it as an Arabic Romeo and Juliet. The group has interpreted Majnoon

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as representing all Palestinians, and their love for the land of Palestine is represented in the figure of Laila. It is a doomed love story that ends without celebration or freedom. The performers include six children from Hebron, who have experienced detention in military prisons.

The Aida refugee camp, home to about 6,400 people, sits right next to the separation barrier in Bethlehem. Those who live there experience regular raids by Israeli security forces. Arrests, even of children, are common, and soldiers will sometimes use tear gas, sound bombs and rubber-coated steel bullets. As one dancer put it, “If I’m not in Alrowwad I’d be in a prison like most of my friends, or I’d be killed.”

The performances are an opportunity for these young people to share their stories of life under occupation. Motasem says, “They tell us ‘laugh’, ‘scream’, ‘cry’, ‘go there’, ‘stay there’. They keep controlling you and you can’t do anything, but when you finish the performance you see yourself as different, like a special person.”

Another dancer, Haytham, says, “The dance is from our culture and we can fight within it. It’s our resistance. Some throw stones; we have another way by writing, dancing, painting.

**Refugee camp** – Palestinian refugee camps like Aida have existed since the war in 1948. Today they comprise concrete buildings rather than tents.

**Dabke** – Palestinian folk dance