

## **Roots in Exile: The Syrian and Palestinian Fight for Identity**

*By Melissandre St Hilaire*

Diaspora means the dispersing of people from their homeland, an inevitable byproduct of war. Since 2011 over [14 million](#) Syrians have been displaced, with more than [28 thousand](#) refugees in the UK. Meanwhile in Palestine, [1.9 million](#) have been forced to flee Gaza in the past 15 months. Though Syria and Palestine are two different nations with two very different wars, their struggles have much in common; an enduring longing for peace, unwavering desire for justice, and the shared experience of being torn from home.

I am not Palestinian and cannot claim to speak for them, but I can attempt to give voice to the challenges of coming from a family that fled violence as a Syrian-British woman. December 8th marked the reclamation of a country oppressed by the Assad legacy for generations. A regime that systematically tortured activists to killing thousands in the Sarin gas massacres. Here in the UK, for most, the sympathy is fleeting before the news returns to the footie. But for us it is a reminder that we live between worlds. The dictatorship in Syria has taken the backseat in the news, amongst the historical violence dating back to 1948 in Palestine. Both of which have sought to strip the vibrant identities of our nations. Across the world, exile has become a shared fate, scattering Syrians and Palestinians alike into the margins of the diaspora. A new generation now drifts between cultures, trying to preserve an identity amidst the chaos and the distance.

*“It is like removing the roots of the tree of life from its homeland and throw[ing] it in the storm of wind and sunburn”*

*Abdulhay from Syria ([ECRE 2018](#))*

Identity has been defined as a synthesis of the relationship between man and the world. Cultural identity therefore becomes a consciousness of individuals based on heritage, tradition, values and norms ([Paleczny et al 2008](#)). To know and experience your roots is integral to the human psyche. To know oneself is a luxury. However, when conflict, oppression and displacement strike, identity is rewritten. Entire communities of people find themselves in a ‘cultural collective identity vacuum’ where one’s idea of self and their home is recharacterized by war ([Taylor & Usborne 2010](#)). This erasure of identity is one I’m sure Palestinians have felt through the years.

For me, growing up in the UK, I understood from a young age that Syria was a home to which I could not return to. My family comes from Aleppo, a city haunted by over five decades of tyranny. In honor of my late grandfather, I share his harrowing experience. Bashar Al-Assad inherited his iron grip from his father, Hafez Al-Assad, along with a tradition of unspeakable violence. Outside of his home, my grandfather was lined up outside, facing execution by Syrian forces. Half were shot; he survived by chance. His brother was killed fetching water for his family at a standpipe, another life stolen by this relentless conflict. Years later, the family home was bombed, claiming three more lives. I could list more, but I won't. These stories are part of my inheritance. I carry them, even though I have never stood on Syrian soil myself. I often find myself looking at pictures of Aleppo, before it was redefined by the regime. But these aren't my memories, they belong to my mother and grandparents. My connection to Syria isn't built on personal experience but on the fragments passed down to me, leaving me wondering what my role is in carrying my heritage forward. Palestinians I believe know this feeling intimately. In refugee camps from Lebanon to Jordan, children grow up with stories of a land they may never see. I too have no memories of Aleppo's streets, but what I do have is a responsibility to preserve the stories of those who lived on them.

In order to do this, it means grappling with contradictions. I feel proud, yet I carry the weight of knowing that my identity is tied to a country synonymous with violence. People's reactions tend to range from pity to discomfort. Most recently, the ["Human Slaughterhouse"](#) caused public outrage where over 30,000 detainees were killed since 2011, deepening this image of a wartorn country in the eyes of the world. I see the same global reaction forming around Palestine, the same destruction. Like Syria, Palestine is not just fighting for survival; it is fighting against the systematic erosion of its culture. At least [75 heritage sites](#) have been either damaged or destroyed. Among them is the Great Omari Mosque of Gaza City, believed to be the country's oldest. Built around 700 AD during the Umayyad period, it withstood dynasties only to be reduced to rubble by an [Israeli airstrike](#) in 2023. Schools, hospitals, and universities face the same end, targeted under the pretense of military operations, but in reality, an assault on Palestinian education and cultural knowledge. Nearly [70% of Gaza's casualties](#) are women and children; the very future of Palestine.

Through all the darkness, I choose to acknowledge rather the beautiful history of the ancient

Syrian city of Palmyra that tourists would flood to, standing as a testament of time witness to empires and civilisations predating the Vikings. Traces of the neanderthals inhabiting the famous Dederiyeh Cave near Aleppo or research from [John Hopkins University](#) discovering the earliest forms of the arabic alphabet. In between the news coverage, I look for Syria's cultural survival persevering not just through its physical geography but through its people. I decide to celebrate Nizar Qabbani (1923 - 1998), Syria's most famous revolutionary and romantic poet, and Fadwa Souleimane (1970 - 2017), an actress and activist in the revolution. I urge my Palestinian friends to remember the works of Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), regarded as its national poet, Ismael Shammout (1930 - 2006) the pioneer of contemporary Palestinian art or Elia Suleiman, an acclaimed Palestinian director who continues to create such beautiful films. I commend the immeasurable resilience of civilians resisting the Trump plan for Gaza, refusing displacement once more.

*"We will not leave. We will not repeat the Nakba. We will not abandon Gaza as we abandoned Hirbiya. This time, we stay, no matter the cost"*  
*Saeed Salem from Palestine ([The Guardian 2025](#))*

There is so much more to our nations than their headlines. To be either is to inherit a history of resistance, intellect and cultural endurance. But when the past runs parallel to the present, national identity struggles to take root in countries where their own people barely recognise them. Instead, can it be reshaped?

Now with the fall of the last Assad and the fragile ceasefire between Hamas and Hezbollah, our countries may never return to what they once were, but a new chapter begins - one that's both hopeful and uncertain. Mass graves are being unearthed, exposing unimaginable abuses; UN investigators are preparing to probe war crimes. For many, this moment feels like long-awaited justice. Rebuilding will take time, but it will require the voices all over the world to ensure that both nations' rich histories and cultures are preserved. For those living in the diaspora, I ask you to speak our language and celebrate the poets, the writers, the filmmakers. Reclaim the conflict-driven narrative.