



Noa Grandchamp: ‘Photography can be a catalyst for dialogue’

by Alexandra Merguerian* – April 2021

Born to an Israeli mother and a Swiss father, Noa Grandchamp, a 23-year-old Genevoise activist photographer, shares with us her distinct connection to the land of Israel/Palestine. From an early age, Noa saw life through images and used this flamboyant, visual language to connect with the world. She has recently graduated from the IED Milan European Institute of Design, where she had the opportunity to further develop her photographic style. In a short tête-à-tête, Noa reveals to us how the eye of a photographer is able to capture both light and shadow, especially in a divided society marked by hardship and social antagonism.



Noa was 13 years old when she caught her first glimpses of day-to-day life in Israel/Palestine. With a tone of gratitude in her voice, she reminisces over her mother’s aspiration to convey an honest and truthful picture of this tense region to her family:

“My mom was adamant about her commitment to expose my brother and I to the Palestinian reality, in parallel to the comfortable and close-knit milieu of the kibbutz where our relatives live”. This initiation to the land and its cultural diversity became for her the starting point of a growing curiosity for her cultural heritage and the people whose lives are marked by the uncertainty of the conflict.

Over the years, Noa has been traveling to Israel periodically, whenever the opportunity arose. In the summer of 2018, she travelled to the West Bank with B8 of Hope, where she met with Palestinian activists who embrace non-violence as a life-model. With her camera faithfully hanging around her neck, Noa captured a variety of stories, and practiced the art of putting a face on the names of those individuals who dedicate their lives to peace.

Her camera zoomed in with particular intensity on the journey of Ali Abu Awwad, the mastermind behind Taghyeer (Arabic for “Change”), a Palestinian movement actively supported by B8 of Hope.

Founded in 2016, Taghyeer is an independent Palestinian organisation that upholds the values of non-violence, democracy and equality for all. Activists from Taghyeer seek to bring socio-political change within Palestinian society, especially by empowering neglected Palestinian communities that live in marginalized areas.

Jubbet adh Dhib, located south-east of Bethlehem City, constitutes a powerful illustration of an off-grid Palestinian village that has worked hand in hand with Taghyeer to grow into a sustainable eco-village. Until recently, the isolated town of Jubbet adh Dhib was characterized by dire conditions, had poor access to education and lacked the most basic utilities such as electricity.



©Noa Grandchamp



In recent years, the fate of the village began to transform when a handful of women from the village decided to take the destiny of their community into their hands by forming a women's council, the work of which has led to unprecedented achievements. Through negotiations with utility officials and international donors, women in Jubbet adh Dhib managed to bring social change to their village by implementing essential services such as a solar light system, a supermarket and a school. They have also learned how to preserve and honour their environment by developing vegetable patches, composting practices, and advanced organic gardening techniques.

Noa, who had the opportunity to document the life stories of these formidably influential Palestinian women, recounts the following: "I felt privileged to meet with these women, to have free-flowing conversations with them. They are showing the way forward and are the living proof that change can happen even in the most challenging environments". In contrast to this inspiring initiative, Noa notes that our societies are very much saturated with the inky blackness of the conflict which, to a certain extent, shrouds existing lines of hope.

Upon her return to Geneva, Noa organized a vernissage where she exposed, through her art, some of the stories that she had collected in the West Bank. Through this exhibition, Noa wanted to show that there is more to this strife than meets the eye. Her wish was to shed light on the grey zones of the conflict by raising awareness of these humble, yet powerful, peace movements. "I was driven by a desire to share my personal experience and also, to present a new facet of the Palestinian reality to the outside world".

Noa's photos and the blank spaces between them created an atmosphere conducive to reflection, where people had the opportunity to pause for a moment and become curious observers. Some of them became the proud owners of Noa's art. In doing so, they became supporters of the Taghyeer movement, to whom the proceeds from the exhibit were donated to. This money was recently used to turn an abandoned venue of Jubbet adh Dhib into a guest house for internationals who wish to sojourn in the village and lend a strong hand to its inhabitants.



As our conversation slowly ran out of steam and farewells were about to be uttered, Noa declared, as a final note, that photography, for her, can be a powerful tool to inject awareness and inspire discussion. “Over the years, a number of people, including Israelis, have written to me after seeing my work on Instagram. Most of them showed genuine solicitude and curiosity. They came to me with questions and wanted to start a conversation”. Noa is thus a walking testament that images, although inaudible, can be an interesting gateway through which opinions and attitudes can be authentically probed and relationships across difference renewed. Inspired and determined to broaden her lenses, Noa looks forward to embarking on new projects with B8 of hope.



*[Alexandra Merguerian](#) is a graduate of UCLouvain Faculty of Law and Criminology (MA in Transnational Law) and is in the final stages of her Master’s degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Uppsala University. Her research interests lie in the socio-psychological dynamics of intractable conflict and trauma-sensitive peacebuilding, with a main empirical focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She is a member of the [B8 of Hope Youth Group](#).