

A Creative Approach to Conflict Mediation: The Power of Myth, Cultural Diplomacy, the History of Semitic Cartoons, and Representational, Ideologically Balanced Comics & Animation

“Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth--penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told.”

— Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Abstract: This paper explains how the power of myth can be used to mitigate intractable conflict. I present my thesis that multi-narrative cartoons developed with a representational, ideologically balanced production team and advisory board, can help mediate social conflicts. I describe the influence of storytelling on human psychology. I provide a history of political cartoons and the utility of cartoons and comics to subvert, influence, and entertain as well as mediate conflict. I describe how cultural meme theory supports Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and how Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory supports the possibility of creating inclusive mythologies to unite conflicting cultures. I synthesize historical and contemporary Semitic and Middle Eastern cartoons and their influence on society. Finally, I support my own application of my thesis to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: a social enterprise “Olive Branch Pictures, Inc.” and its first production, “Shira and Amal”, the story of two women, one Palestinian, one Israeli, who use music to bring peace to Jerusalem and to themselves.

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is a form of soft power that includes the exchange of ideas, information, art, language, and other forms of culture among peoples and nations. The goals of cultural diplomacy are, through acts of good-will and humanity, to influence a foreign audience to cooperate, earn support for policies, mollify conflict, and foster understanding.¹

Stories, spread by the media or through inter-cultural osmosis, can be a form of cultural diplomacy. Stories play an important role in shaping narratives which inform our system of values as well as our social, historical, political, and religious identities. All stories serve a purpose, namely to promote morality, create meaning, and suggest the nature of society.² The stories found in Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights*, the Tales of the Brothers Grimm, Japanese Zen Koansⁱ, Greek Mythology, Harry Potter, and *The Bible*, are all, in essence, mirrors through which to interpret social reality. Such stories have informed the value systems of countless societies across the globe for millennia.

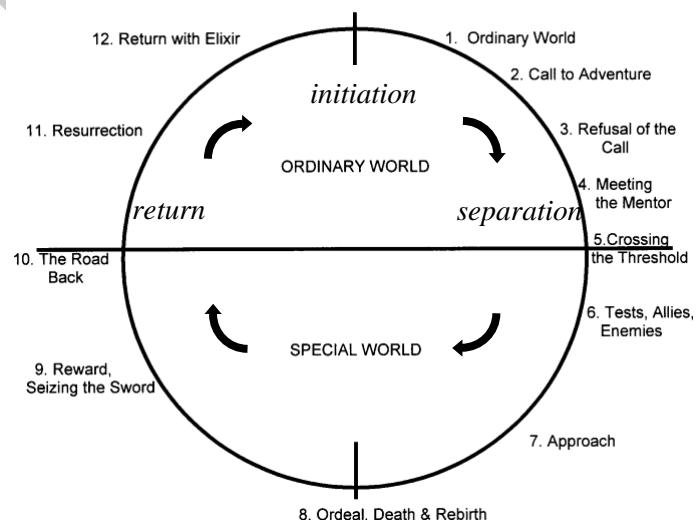
There is a middle ground between agnosticism and faith, which suggests that such stories, such myths, metaphorically reflect the nature of the human collective unconscious, developed over centuries of socialization. In his work, *The Concept of the Collective Unconscious*, psychologist Carl Jung, asserts that humans inherit a natural psychic system, that can be found in all individuals and manifests in the form of archetypal, instinctual thoughts and

¹ Waller, Michael J. "Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Integrated Strategy", The Institute of World Politics Press (2009): p. 74, 88.

² Ellis, B.F. "Why tell stories?" Storytelling Magazine (1997): p. 21-23.

behaviors.³ Where Jung finds proof of unconscious archetypes in his psychoanalysis of dreams, Joseph Campbell finds evidence across diverse civilizations from Osiris, Prometheus, and the Buddha to Moses, Mohammed, and Jesus. In his seminal work, “The Hero with A Thousand Faces”, Campbell writes, “whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse; now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.”⁴ Such myths and stories that embody the archetypal “Hero’s Journey”, or “Monomyth”, exist across time and space to teach young people how to mature, how to overcome obstacles, how to win allies and mentors, how to know right from wrong, and how to find love. Campbell writes, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious

Joseph Campbell, The Hero’s Journey Diagram



³ Jung, Carl. *The Concept of the Collective Unconscious*. London: St. Bartholomew's Hospital Journal (1937): p.1.

⁴ Campbell, Joseph. “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”. *Princeton, New Jersey*: Princeton University Press (2004): p.3.

adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”⁵ Various storytelling practitioners have built upon Campbells theories in different ways such as George Lucas with *Star Wars*. Christopher Vogler uses more egalitarian terminology to articulate monomyth structure and helped inform popular stories including Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994).⁶

These global patterns in mythology suggest that clashing civilizations could be united by a common, representational mythological story. In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari supports the capacity of myth to unite and civilize society, “large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths. Any large-scale human cooperation – whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe – is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination.”⁷ Myths have been a function for the unity of different tribes since the dawn of civilization.⁸

Like the gene, “memes” are “units of culture” that can form systems of behavior or beliefs and pass from one individual to another and multiply. The relation between stories and memes shows how stories can manifest in our memetic neural networks. The way that cultural and moral memes are transmitted across generations and between cultures supports Dr. Jung’s *Concept of the Collective Unconscious*. In a sense stories are dense collections of memes. In a perfectly free market of ideas, the more truth and value they contain, the more they grow and the longer they withstand the test of time.

⁵ Campbell, Joseph. “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”. *Princeton, New Jersey*: Princeton University Press (2004): p.28

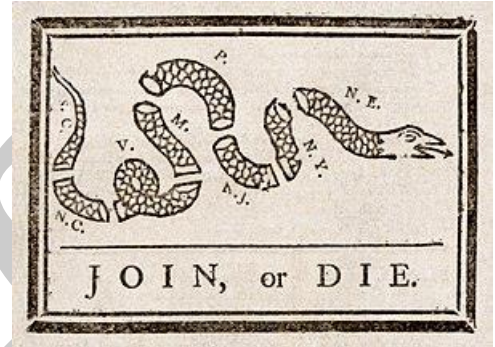
⁶ Vogler, C. (1998). *The writer's journey: Mythic structure for writers*. Studio City, CA: M. Wiese Productions.

⁷ Harari, Yuval N. “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind”. *New York, New York*: Harper (2015): p. 17.

⁸ Peterson, Jordan. “Personality and Its Transformations: Historical & Mythological Context”. *University of Toronto* (2017).

Political Cartoons

Benjamin Franklin's editorial cartoon, "Join, or Die", published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9, 1754, was among the earliest and most influential political cartoons in history, appeared along with Franklin's editorial about the importance of colonial unity. It later became a symbol of colonial freedom during the American Revolutionary War.⁹



Benjamin Franklin's editorial cartoon, "Join, or Die", *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (1754).

Political cartoons are now commonplace in any country that allows free press or whose censors aren't strong enough to suppress. Political cartoons are quite influential the Middle East. Cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed led to 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad Cartoon Crisis mass protests around the world some escalating into violent riots. Similarly, cartoons of Mohammad led to the murder of 12 artists at the satirical weekly newspaper [Charlie Hebdo](#) in Paris. Syrian cartoonist Ali Farzat, who, in 2011, was savagely beaten, his hands broken, by masked gunmen believed to be a part of a pro-government militia on account of his critical depiction of Syrian dictator, Bashar Al-Assad.¹⁰ On 26 August 2020, Emad Hajjaj was arrested in Jordan under the cybercrime law after publishing a caricature criticizing the [Israel–United Arab](#)

⁹ Margolin, Victor. "Rebellion, Reform, and Revolution: American Graphic Design for Social Change". *Design Issues* (1988): Vol. 5, No. 1.

¹⁰ Sebastian Usher. "Syria unrest: Famed cartoonist Ali Ferzat 'beaten'". *BBC* (2011). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14665113>

[Emirates peace agreement](#).¹¹ Emad's brother, Osama, claims to have been fired for his cartoons of the King of Jordan and briefly jailed for cartoons depicting the Muslim Brotherhood.¹²

Cartoons as Cultural Diplomacy

Japanese Anime, Manga, and Video Game characters are globally ubiquitous and highly successful. Japan also capitalizes on this deep cultural pool, using the popularity of these cultural exports to wield soft power influence.¹³



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as Nintendo's *Super Mario* from the 2016 Rio Olympics behind collage of popular Japanese Manga and Anime characters.

There is a long and interesting history of government involvement film and animation in both democratic and totalitarian run countries as well as government sponsorship and censorship of cartoons. Ireland for example invested the biggest grant it had ever offered a non-manufacturing company for former Disney animator, Don Bluth, to help launch the animation industry in Ireland.¹⁴ Many European countries and several countries around the world help subsidize national animation production as a means of strengthening and promoting its cultural production and heritage.¹⁵ The Cold War was a war of ideologies. Each side relied

¹¹ [The New Arab Staff](#). "[Jordan releases cartoonist Emad Hajjaj after days of arrest for 'offending' the UAE](#)". *The New Arab* (2020).

¹² Rima Maktabi. "[Brothers' political cartoons break taboos](#)". *CNN* (2011).

¹³ Douglas McGray. "Japan's Gross National Cool". *Foreign Policy* (2009).

¹⁴ Alex Dudok De Wit. "Don Bluth's Invasion of Ireland: A New Podcast Reveals the Untold Story." *Cartoon Brew* (2020).

¹⁵ Geoffrey MacNab. "How state support is transforming the European animation industry." *ScreenDaily* (2019).

heavily on the ideological unity of its people, often employing the power of the visual arts — graphic design, animation, illustration — to drive its message home.

It is also important to note the global cultural impact of the history of American cinema and Disney's animation specifically. For so many young people, Disney's animations have a mainstream exposition of cultural identities. Disney launched a series of cross-cultural smash successes including *Aladdin* (1992), rereleased as a live-action feature in 2019, and *Mulan* (1998), rereleased as a live-action feature in 2020, which, for many viewers, impactful expositions to Arab and Asian culture. Similarly, Disney's productions such as *Coco* (2017) and *Moana* (2016), have exposed countless viewers to Mexican and Polynesian cultural all of the audiences who don't have in-person access to those cultures. Such widely distributed, resource-intensive, cross-cultural products demand tremendous responsibility in how they portray the societies they represent. Though of course great storytelling is part of the job!

The Influence of Cartoons

Aristotle's *Poetics* describes the ability of stories to achieve catharsis of emotional tension for the spectator. Catharsis can be achieved through any form of self-expression. Art and storytelling offer the potential to release emotional tension of social conflicts. As an art medium, comics, or graphic novels, help uncover undercurrent trends unconsciously molding our beliefs, values, desires, political inclinations and private, intimate thoughts.²⁰

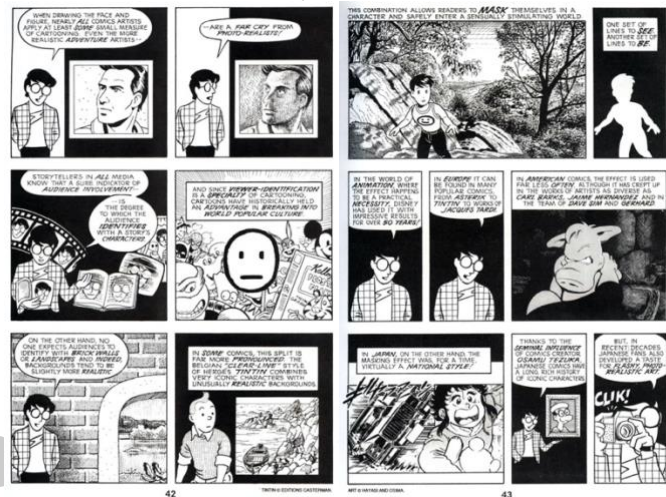
In their 2006 Harvard Negotiation Law Review publication, legal scholars Ellen and Daniel Yamshon assert the efficacy of comics for peacebuilding and reconciliation: "The use of

²⁰ Blich, Ben Baruch. "Israelis in the eyes of Comics." *Jerusalem, Israel: Academy of Arts and Design* (2013).

comics, graphics, and images can constitute powerful tools to sensitize, educate, and motivate people to participate in and prepare for dispute resolution.”²¹ Comics can be copied, printed, or distributed digitally at little to no cost, re-read, and shared, allowing the message of the comic to be absorbed deeply and broadly.²² The universal language of visual communications allow comics to communicate to people of all levels of literacy. If comics can bypass totalitarian censorship underground.

The nature of stories induces the audience to empathize and identify with the protagonist. Scott McCloud’s theory of comics, articulated in *Understanding Comics*, further suggests that the simplicity of cartoons and caricatures, especially when juxtaposed with realistic backgrounds, allows viewers to identify with the characters and subsequently place that identification within their understanding of reality.²³

These effects allow the audience to accept the reality of the characters, as part of the “suspension of disbelief” embodied in all forms of fictional storytelling, and thus absorb the story’s meaning. There is evidence that stories even induce the audience to transform into the



McCloud, Scott. "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art." Copyright © Scott McCloud.

²¹ Yamson, Ellen; Yamshon, Daniel. "Comics Media in Conflict Resolution Programs". *Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Negotiation Law Review* (2006): p. 1.

²² M. Lynx Qualey. "Arab Comic Reach a Wider Audience Through Digital Products". *An-Fanar Media* (2020).

²³ McCloud, Scott. "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art." *Northampton, Massachusetts: Tundra Publishing* (1993): ch. 2, p. 42-43.

protagonists on a neurological level.²⁴ Mirror neurons are brain cells that reacts both when a particular action is performed and when it is only observed. For example, mirror neurons trigger the sensation of eating chocolate when we observe others eating chocolate. These mirror neurons help explain why audiences adopts the same sensations felt by the character whose perspective is presented.²⁵

Cartoons can support cognitive, behavioral, and moral development as well language acquisition for.²⁶ Kids love cartoons! Cartoons are particularly appealing to children due to their generally soft, imaginative, zany, dynamic nature. However, the influence of cartoons can also be negative, whether intentional or not, e.g. exposing children to violent or sexual content or promoting immoral behavior.²⁷ The addition of sound, music, and animation amplifies the impression of stories on viewers. Animated movies and series have made substantial impacts on the lives of young people,

The history of American Comics shows the transformation of popular culture between conservative and progressive perspectives of realism and idealism. Golden Age of Comic (1930s to early-1950s) saw the rise of then modern archetypal heroes. The Silver Age of Comics (1956 to circa 1970), saw the three-dimensionality of heroes, focusing on the person behind the mask with their flaws and anxieties. In the late 1960s, arose underground comix, with artists such as [Robert Crumb](#) and Ralph Bakshi creating comics and animation that delved into graphic subject matter banned by the 1954 Code of NGO Comics Authority, which monitored moral guidelines around such subjects as violence, sex, and drugs. “Underground Comics” became

²⁴ Keyzers, Christian. "The Empathic Brain". Social Brain Press (2011).

²⁵ Holland, Norman. "Stories and the Mirror Inside You". Psychology Today (2011).

²⁶ Derzyan, Tatev, "The Influence of Cartoons on Children's Socialization", Enlight University (2019).

²⁷ Habib, K. and Soliman, T. "Cartoons' Effect in Changing Children Mental Response and Behavior". Open Journal of Social Sciences (2015): 3, 248-264.

widely popular, subverting the mainstream publishing market. The 1970s through the 2010s saw

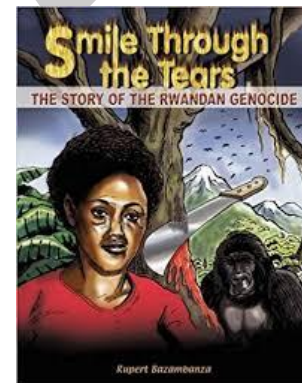
the rise of independent publishers and increase of mainstreamed adult themes and explicit content, pioneered by creators such



as Alan Moore, as well as an increase in diverse perspectives. Today in comics, and literature of all kinds, we see more diverse identity representation and overt social issues. Together, these comics, especially those brought to *the silver screen*, crafted the zeitgeist of American idealism and realism for decades, evolving into modern mythology.²⁸

The effectiveness of comics in facilitating reconciliation has been demonstrated in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide.²⁹

“Smile through the Tears”, drawn and written by Tutsi survivor Rupert Bazambanza, depicts the story of Bazambanza’s friends, the



Rupert Bazambanza, *Smile Through the Tears*.
Copyright © Rupert Bazambanza

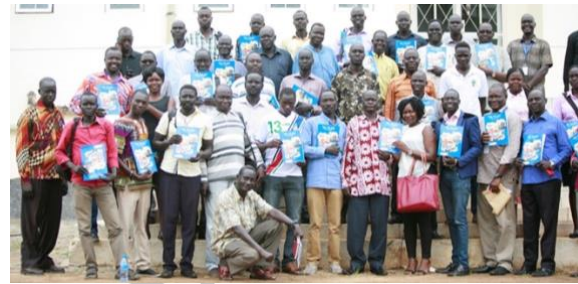
Rwanga family. The work describes the political and historical background of the genocide, while also memorializing the Rwanga family.³⁰ “Smile through the Tears” helped develop understanding of core issues of genocide and the legal framework of reconciliation.³¹

²⁶ Yamson, Ellen; Yamshon, Daniel. “Comics Media in Conflict Resolution Programs”. *Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Negotiation Law Review* (2006): p. 2,8.

³⁰ Laurike in 't Veld. “The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels”. *Palgrave Macmillan* (2019).

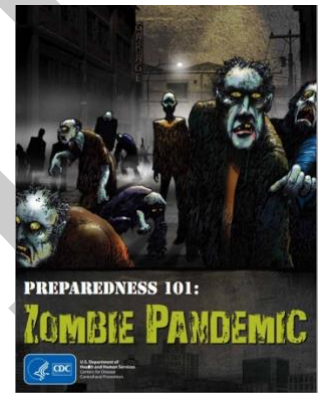
³¹ Clotilde Pégrier. “Law, Literature and Genocide: Rupert Bazambanza’s *Smile Through the Tears*”. *Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston* (2019).

NGOs “Search for Common Ground” (SFCG), “World Comics”, and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) have used comics to mediate conflict in dozens of countries including South Sudan, Lebanon, and Pakistan.^{32, 33} SFCG



SFCG Staff and partners launch “Mou and Keji get Justice at Last” (2018). Photo by Kidega Livingstone.

helped produce South Sudan’s first graphic novel, “Mou and Keji get Justice at Last” (2018), telling the story of Sergeant Poni, a female police officer in a fictional South Sudanese community. The comic book informs readers about the legal system of the South Sudanese transitional constitution, providing examples of lawful and peaceful conflict resolution. Also, in a country where women lack access to positions of power, Sergeant Poni serves as a model and an inspiration, showing that they can play a leadership role in their communities. In October 2011, the CDC published a Zombie Pandemic graphic novel, “Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic”, to entertain and educate about what to do in a pandemic disaster situation.³⁴



Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic © CDC 2011.

JustVision is a nonprofit organization led by Suhad Babaa and Julia Bacha and founded by Ronit Avni, that uses storytelling to highlight Palestinian and Israeli grassroots leaders working to help “end the occupation”. JustVision produced “Budrus”, a



“Budrus” Graphic Novel © JustVision.

³² Michel, Chantal Catherine. “Panels for Peace: Contributions of Israeli and Palestinian Comics to Peace-Building”. *Milan, Italy: Journal of Fonazione CDEC* (2013).

³³ <https://www.sfcg.org/tag/comic-books/>

³⁴ Maggie Silver, Bob Hobbs, Alissa Eckert, and Mark Connor.

documentary adapted into a graphic novel that tells the story of a nonviolent campaign that was ultimately able to unite unlikely allies across political lines and save the village's lands and olive trees in the village of Budrus through the eyes of 15-year-old Iltezam Morrar. According to the graphic novel's creator, Irene Nasser, "after seeing the impact the film had locally and internationally, we wanted to highlight some of the issues shown in the movie and bring those to Palestinian children," said Nasser, the strategic projects coordinator at [Just Vision](http://JustVision.org), the book's publisher. "A key element was the role of women who took to the front lines and changed the nature of the struggle in *Budrus*."³⁵

Between 1998 and 2000 a combined Hebrew-Arabic version of Sesame Street broadcast on local Israeli and Palestinian stations in order to generate a message of coexistence.³⁶ A study of 275 Israeli-Jewish, Palestinian-Israeli, and Palestinian preschoolers on the effects of viewing "Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim", showed that although some of the children had negative conceptions about adult Arabs and Jews, children, on the whole, did not invoke these stereotypes when evaluating peer conflict situations between Israeli and Palestinian children. Exposure to the programme was linked to an increase in children's use of both prosocial justifications to resolve conflicts and positive attributes to describe members of the other group. Palestinian children's abilities to identify symbols of their own culture increased over time.



Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim,
© Sesame Workshop (1998-2000)

³⁵ Dalia Hatuqa. "Palestinian Non-Violence Subject Of New Graphic Novel." *Al-Monitor* (2013). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/budrus-graphic-novel-palestinian-non-violence.html#ixzz6eSvJonZx>

³⁶ Daoud Kuttab. "Sesame Street, Palestine". *BearManor Media* (2018).

The results indicate the effectiveness of media-based interventions such as Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim on countering negative stereotypes by building a peer-oriented context that introduces children to the everyday lives of people from different cultures."³⁷

A Comparative Semitic and Middle Eastern History of Cartoons

Arab political cartoons began in Cairo in the 1880s and with Yaqub Sanu, whose drawings and text lambasted Egypt's then viceroy, Ismail Pasha. Sanu established one of the first theatres in Egypt in 1870 where he presented 26 plays and published a magazine called "Abu Nadharat" meaning "Father of Glasses" which became his nickname. Sanu was an Egyptian Jew born in Cairo in 1839 and died in Paris in 1912. His father worked for Prince Yaken, the grandson of Muhammad Ali Pasha, Khedive of Egypt and Sudan. When Yaqub was thirteen he wrote an Arabic poem and recited it in front of the prince who was fascinated by the young boy's talents. The prince later sent him to be educated in Livorno, Italy in 1853, where he studied Arts and Literature. When he returned to Egypt in 1855, he worked as a tutor for the prince's 12 children before he became a teacher in



Yaqub Sanu

the Arts and Crafts School in Cairo. Sanu was very successful until his activities, namely his

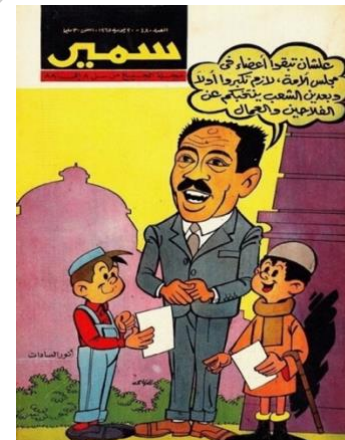
³⁷ Charlotte F. Cole, Cairo Arafat, Chava Tidhar, Wafa Zidan Tafesh, Nathan A. Fox, Melanie Killen, Alicia Ardila-Rey, Lewis A. Leavitt, Gerry Lesser, Beth A. Richman and Fiona Yung. "The Educational Impact of Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* (2003).

anti-establishment, anti-imperial positions, began to anger the royal family of Egypt, who shut down his magazine and theater. He thereafter fled in exile to Paris.^{45, 46}

Al-Awlad (The Boys), published in 1922, fully embodied comics style. “As was common for comics from 1920 to 1950, the content in “Al-Awlad” was created not as propaganda but rather simply to entertain children”.⁴⁷ In her lecture, “Propaganda in Comics in the Arab World”, Animation Artist and Associate Professor of Animation at the American University of Beirut, Lina Ghaibeh, states, “since the birth of Arab nationalism and the development of the cult of the *zaim*, or leader, the Arab countries nationalized the media, taking over the press, the radio, the television, and publishing houses, instituting the virtual monopoly on culture. This state-centered approach to culture enforced the central themes of modern propaganda [in the Arab world] (...), nationalism, the opposition to imperialism, and of course, the Palestinian cause. Taking advantage of comics as this influential medium of



“Al-Awlad”, *Dar al-Lata'if*, Egypt (1923–1932).



President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, *Samir* (1965). “In order to become members of the council of the nation you need to grow up first and then the people will elect you as representatives of the workers and the farmers.”

⁴⁵ Ashraf Abdulhamid. [“Egyptian Jews Down memory lane with famous artists,actors”](#). *Al-Arabiya* (2020).

⁴⁶ Jonathan Guyer. *On the Arab Page*. Le Monde Diplomatique (2017).

⁴⁷ Nadim Damluji, “The Violence of Localizing Western Comics for Arab Children”. Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture Symposium. *Cogut Center for the Humanities and the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, and the Mu’taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative and Libraries at the American University of Beirut* (2015).

communication and a powerful education tool, governments were quick to realize the additional potential of the medium in molding public opinion. So state-run magazines, were used or issued through the ministries of education, the ministries of culture, and, or institutions that were run by the political parties at the time.”⁴⁸ During this period, passionate and talented artists worked to strengthen the realm of Arabic children’s graphic literature such as Notaila Rashed.

Known affectionately as “Mama Loubna,” who devoted her life to the creation and promotion of children’s



Google Doodle: “Notaila Rashed’s 86th Birthday” by Sara Alfageeh. Copyright © Google/Sara Alfageeh, 20 September 2020.

literature. She helmed the influential Arabic children’s magazine “Samir” for decades and authored numerous beloved literary works for children and young adults alike. Through her books and short stories, she aspired to highlight ancient Egyptian literary traditions while showcasing the rich cultural heritage of contemporary life in her home country.”⁴⁹

Israeli cartoons didn’t become overtly political until the 1950s.⁵⁰ The comic strip “Uri Muri”, written by famous Israeli poet, playwright, Professor of Literature, and author of "A Flat for Rent" (“*Dira Lehaskir*”) and "Miracles and Wonders" (“*Nisim VeNiflaot*”), Lea Goldberg, and

⁴⁸ Ghaibeh, Lina. “Propaganda in Comics in the Arab World: From Nationalism to Religious Radicalism”. Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture Symposium. *Cogut Center for the Humanities and the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, and the Mu’taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative and Libraries at the American University of Beirut* (2015).

⁴⁹ Sara Alfageeh. “Notaila Rashed’s 86th Birthday”. *Google Doodle* (2020).

⁵⁰ Katz, Maya Balakirsky. “The De-Politicization of Israeli Political Cartoons”. *Israel Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, *JSTOR* (2013).

illustrated by Arie Navon, was published in 1936. It's publisher *Davar L'Yeledim*, rationally decided that its content for children should generally be designed to teach them to be adults in Israel and explain who the nation's greats are.⁵¹ The fact that this comic strip coined the Hebrew term "Sabra", a prickly pear as a metaphor for Jews born in Israel, suggests the medium's significant cultural influence.



"Uri Muri". Lea Goldberg, Arie Navon. *Davar L'Yeledim* (1937).

However, according to former curator at the Israeli Cartoon Museum, Gaon, Galit, "the attitude towards comics in Israel from 1936 until the late 1960s is deprecatory or disdainful."⁵² The Israeli disdain for comics was generally due to both the lack of need for comic heroes when the media was already populated with real national heroes and aniconism – the absence of material representations of both the natural and supernatural worlds in various cultures, part of both Islam and Judaism – and because religious communities didn't need new stories because they already had the stories of the Torah.⁵³ This lack of need for comic super heroes partially explains the short lived series of Uri Fink's



Sabraman (1978) © Uri Fink

"SabraMan" (1978) and Michael Netzer's "Uri-On" (1987), both patriotic defenders of Israel. It also explains the rise of the "anti-hero" comic and more subversive, satirical comics in Israeli popular culture. Examples include Daniela Deckel London's *Hamudi* in 1999, which satirizes the

⁵¹ Asaf Galay. "The Hebrew Superhero". *Hot* (2015).

⁵² Gaon, Galit. "The Hebrew Superhero". Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-7291/>.

⁵³ Nimrod Reshef, Keren Katz, Alina Gorban, and Karen Green. "Israeli Comics Today". *Society of Illustrators* (2014).

narcissism of small children, Zeev Engelmayer's promiscuous existentialist, *Soshke* (1998), Nimrod

Reshef's *Tel Aviv noire*, *Uzi: An Urban Legend*,

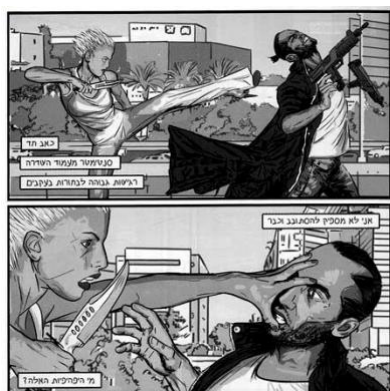


Hamudi (1999) © Daniela Deckel London



Soshke © Zeev Engelmayer (1998)

and Dorit Maya-Gur's bestselling *Falafel Man*, about a chubby, redheaded superhero who shoots sizzling falafel balls at his enemies.⁵⁴



Uzi: An Urban Legend © Nimrod Reshef (2005-2009)



Falafel Man (2006) © Dorit Maya-Gur



Srulik is a cartoon character created in 1956 by the Israeli cartoonist Kariel Gardosh, known by his pen name *Dosh*. The cartoon appeared for many years in the newspaper *Maariv* and became a symbol of what it meant to be Israeli.⁵⁵ *Srulik* is a pioneering Zionist, a lover of the land of Israel and its soil, a dedicated farmer who in time of need puts on a uniform and goes out to defend the state of Israel. Many have pointed out *Srulik*'s function as an antithesis of



Der Stürmer (1934) Cover depicting Jews taking blood from Christian children for religious rituals.

the antisemitic caricatures which appeared in *Der Stürmer* and other European and Arab

⁵⁴ Asaf Galay. "The Hebrew Superhero". *Hot* (2015).

⁵⁵ Joel Greenberg. "Kariel Gardosh, 79, Who Created Israeli Icon". *New York Times* (2000).

journals.⁵⁶ In contrast the stereotype of the weak or cunning Jew that was propagated by Joseph Goebbels, Dosh — a Holocaust survivor — drew a proud, strong and sympathetic Jewish character with a little chutzpah. Gardosh writes, “There can be no doubt, that the brutal and systematic dehumanization of the Jew in caricatures played an important role in creating the psychological conditions for his annihilation.”⁵⁸ Art historian Maya Balakirsky Katz concludes that, understanding the potential of cartoons to incite hatred and violence, early Israeli cartoonists avoided overtly racist depictions of Israel’s military enemies. Additionally, Katz states, “like all journalists working during a period of mutual cooperation between the government and the Hebrew press, Gardosh was challenged to effect change on the inside without compromising national security from the outside.”⁵⁹



Cartoons of Srulik by Kariel Gardosh

Gidi Gezer (carrot-top Gidi) was a weekly comic series first published in 1953 about a boy who serves in the *Palmach* — a pre-IDF Jewish defense force — during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence and 1956 Suez War, fighting British and Arab soldiers using “super-hero” gifts that he gains from eating carrots.

⁵⁶ Dr. Joel Kotek. “Major Anti-Semitic Motifs in Arab Cartoons”. *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* (2004).

⁵⁸ Kariel Gardosh, “Political Caricature as a Reflection of Israel’s Development,” in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998): p. 206.

⁵⁹ Maya Balakirsky Katz. “The De-Politicization of Israeli Political Cartoons”. *Israel Studies* (2013): p. 1-30.



Gidi: "Open fire at the troops from the knee!!"

Gidi: "Cusi, you cover me, you hear?"

Gidi crawls toward the road with a bundle of grenades

Cusi: "It's an armored vehicle carrying a Bren. Golly! what shall we do?"

Gidi: "First of all we eat a carrot!"

Gidi: They always give me security duty, I'm sick of nothing ever happening: The British know I'm doing security. They won't come, you'll see!

Cusi: Gidi I hear a voice!

"Gidi Gezer".
Written by Yaacov Ashman, Illustrated by Elisheva Nadal.
Haaretz Shelanu (1953).

The first comic published in Israel was "Mickey Mahu and Eliyahu", about a cat that accompanies a native Israeli boy on his adventures.⁶⁰ The name and design for "Mickey Mahu" was directly borrowed from Walt Disney's "Mickey Mouse" (1928). In the 1940s, illustrators began "Arabizing" western comic characters such as Mickey Mouse, Superman (1938), and Tintin (1929) for Arabic readers.⁶¹ In the Arab world, as in the rest of the world, these characters weren't always only used for entertainment. Mickey Mouse has been featured fighting in the Arab-Israeli war with an Egyptian army to liberate Palestine in comics and on the children's program, "Tomorrow's Pioneers" (Arabic: *Ruwād al-Ghad*), via Palestinian Hamas-affiliated television station, Al-Aqsa TV,



"Mickey Mahu and Eliyahu". Emanuel Yaffe. *Itonenu LeKtanim* (1935).



Unidentified Artist, "Return to Palestine" *Miki* (1964).

⁶⁰ Blich, Ben Baruch. "Israelis in the eyes of Comics." *Jerusalem, Israel: Academy of Arts and Design* (2013).

⁶¹ Madeleine Morley. "Mickey Mouse in the Middle East: Discovering a New Arabic Side of the Comics Canon." *AIGA Eye on Design* (2017). <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/mickey-mouse-in-the-middle-east-discovering-a-new-arabic-side-of-the-comics-canon/>

celebrating martyrdom. “Depending on the character and the publishing house, not only was the content of the speech balloons translated but also the names were Arabicized, such as in the Arabic edition paid for by DC Comics in 1938, in which Clark Kent was called Nabil Fauzi and fell in love with Randa (Lois Lane). In another later version in 1980s Iraq, Superman wore a moustache.”⁶² Superman, one of the most widely recognized popular culture figure of all time, was created by two Jews, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Superman is based on the biblical archetype of the story of Moses.⁶³ It’s not a coincidence that Superman’s Kryptonian name, “Kal-El”, means



Tomorrow’s Pioneers, Al-Aqsa TV (2007-2009)



Arabic Superman Cover (1960s)

“Voice of God” in Hebrew nor that Moses escaped in a basket in a tiny rocket ship. Let’s not forget Siegel and Shuster created the first Jewish Super Hero “Funnyman” in 1948.⁶⁴ Funnyman’s alter ego, comedian “Larry Davis”, thwarted “no-goodniks” through his clownish athleticism and pranks.⁶⁵ Jews created the first comic book, the first graphic novel, the first comic book convention, the first comic book specialty store,



Funnyman, Issue #1 (1948)

and they helped create the underground Comix movement of the late '60s and early '70s. Many of the creators of the most famous comic books, such as Spiderman, X-Men, and Batman, were

⁶² Rojo, Pedro. “Arab Comics, from Pan-Arabism State Propaganda to Current Irreverence”. *European Institute of the Mediterranean and Al Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge* (2017): pg. 126.

⁶³ Christopher B. Zeichmann. “Champion of the Oppressed: Redescribing the Jewishness of Superman as Populist Authenticity Politics”. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (2017)

⁶⁴ [Weinstein, Simcha](#) (2006). *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* (1st ed.). Leviathan Press.

⁶⁵ Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon. “Siegel and Shuster’s Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero from the Creators of Superman”. *Feral House* (2010).

Jewish.⁶⁶ American cartoonist and writer Will Eisner, one of the earliest cartoonists in the American comic book industry. Serving in World War II, he drew comics for the military to help provide instructions for various operations. His series *The Spirit* (1940–1952) was noted for its experiments in content and form. In 1978, he popularized the term "graphic novel" with the publication of his book *A Contract with God*. He was an early contributor to the study of comics as a fine art with his book *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). Every year, the Eisner Award recognize achievements in comics.⁶⁷

The first publicly screened animation to originate from the Middle East was “Mish Mish Effendi” in 1940. It was created by the Jewish Frenkel brothers in Egypt, originally from Russia, who settled in Jaffa, Palestine, and were deported to Alexandria by the Ottoman Empire out of false suspicion. Their cartoons became widely popular in Egypt, until the Frenkel brothers faced censorship and discrimination as Jews in the wake of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. They fled to France where they continued making animations.⁶⁸



The Frenkel Brothers' *Mish Mish Effendi* (1940)ki

The Frenkel brothers were significantly inspired by their Jewish-American counterparts, the Fleisher brothers,



The Fleischer Brothers and their creations

⁶⁶ Kaplan, A., Pekar, H., & Waldman, J. (2008). *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

⁶⁷ Denis Kitchen. "Will Eisner: The Father of Graphic Novels". *The Kansas City Public Library* (2018).

⁶⁸ Ushi Derman. "'Mickey Mouse' got an Egyptian brother; First Frenkel Brothers animated film". *Historical Society of Jews from Egypt* (2005).

Walt Disney's top competitors, pioneering "Koko the Clown", "Popeye", "Betty Boop", and the first animated Superman series.

The 1960s saw the rise of Palestinian Artist Naji Al-Ali until the mid-1980s. Al-Ali's cartoons were drawn from his experience as a Palestinian refugee since childhood and clearly reflected his political stance, which was often critical of the Arab regimes. His famous character "Handala", appeared in *Al-Siyasa* in Kuwait in 1969. Al-Ali explained that the ten-year-old boy represented the age when he was forced to leave Palestine and would not grow up until he could return to his homeland; his turned back and clasped hands symbolized the character's rejection of "outside solutions".⁶⁹ Al-Ali was murdered for his activism in 1987 by anonymous gunmen in London.



"Handala" by Naji Al-Ali.

Naji Al-Ali had a tremendous cultural influence on future generations of Palestinian artists. Leila Abdelrazaq drew influence from Al-Ali's work in her graphic novel *Badawi*, which tells the story of her Palestinian family. Al-Ali's "Handala" has been compared to Srulik as symbols of a generation of Israeli and Palestinian children.



Jonathan KisLev & Moodi Abdallah, *The Peace Kids*, Tel Aviv, Bethlehem (2013).

In wake of the 2020 Beirut explosion, [Maamoul Press](#), Leila's comics-focused publishing house and literary collective based in Detroit, Michigan, responded to the 2020 Beirut Explosion by publishing a collection of illustrations created by young Lebanese artists titled [Now & Then](#). All proceeds from sales of the book went to disaster relief in Lebanon.⁷⁰

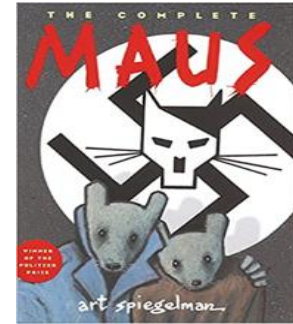


Baddawi, Just World Books (2015) © Leila Abdelrazaq

⁶⁹ Naji Al-Ali interview with Radwa Ashour, "I am from Ain Al-Helwa". *Al-Muwagaha* (1985).

⁷⁰ M. Lynx Qualey. "Arab Comic Reach a Wider Audience Through Digital Products". *Al-Fanar Media* (2020).

“Maus” is a graphic novel by American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, serialized from 1980 to 1991. It depicts Spiegelman interviewing his father about his experiences as a Jewish Holocaust survivor. It was the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize. While it was not written specifically for children, the cat and mouse depictions of Nazis and Jews make it easier for a younger audience to bear the burden of learning about the Holocaust. Similarly, Belgian Israeli Artist Michel Kichka, brought the story of his relationship with his holocaust surviving father to life in the animated movie, *Kichka: Life is a Cartoon*.



“Maus” © Art Spiegelman.



Kichka: Life is a Cartoon
© Michel Kichka

In the 90s in Israel, comics won a new respectability due to the efforts of Etgar Keret, published several critically acclaimed comics stories including *Jetlag* (1998) and *Pizzeria Kamikaze* (2005).⁷¹



Etgar Keret’s “Jetlag” and
“Pizza Kamikaze”

The comics collective Actus Tragicus, founded in 1995 by Rutu Modan and Yirmi Pinkus, bringing in Batia Kolton, Itzik Rennert, and Mira Friedmann, launched an era of experimentalist adult comics. Rutu Modan’s graphic novel, *Exit Wounds* (2007), a story about Koby Franco, a young cab driver in Tel Aviv whose life is interrupted when a female soldier approaches him, claiming his estranged

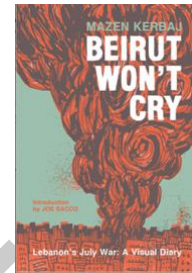


Exit Wounds © Rutu Modan

⁷¹ Harry Brod. “Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way Harry Brod. New York: Free Press (2012).

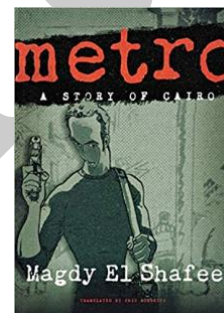
father was killed in a suicide bombing, and together they search for Franco's father. *Exit Wounds* won the Will Eisner Comic Industry Award in 2008.

Between 2007 and 2017, illustrator, author, and jazz musician, Mazen Kerbaj crafted a compilation of comics, “Beirut Won’t Cry”, chronicling his lived perspective on life in Lebanon and the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War.



“Beirut Won’t Cry”
© Mazan Kerbaj

In 2008, Magdy El Shafee published *Metro*, Egypt’s first adult graphic novel. *Metro* tells the story of a young software designer, who robs a bank after running afoul of a loan shark in a corrupt and dangerous Cairo. Shortly after publication, El Shafee’s publisher, *Malameh*, was raided by the police and copies of *Metro* were confiscated. Following this incident, *Metro* was banned for “offending public morals”. After a long trial in 2012, *Metro* was republished in Egypt.⁷²



Metro © Magdy El Shafee

The 99 – The first superhero series inspired Islamic archetypes, created by Dr. Naif al-Mutawa to provide young Muslims with Islamic role models to dissuade them from Islamic extremism and help show the world the universal values of Islam, in part to counteract the islamophobia that spread in the aftermath of 9/11.⁷³ It began as a comic book series in 2007,



The 99 © Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa.

⁷² “Metro A Story of Cairo: A story of pilgrimage”. *Arab Comix Project; Humboldt State University* (2012).

⁷³ Al-Mutawa, Naif. [“Why I based superheroes on Islam”](#). BBC. July 2, 2009.

even partnering with comic franchise DC Comics to create a Justice League crossover mini-series, and expanded to a multi-million-dollar animated series and franchise in 2009. The animated series aired in nearly 70 countries. Though “The 99” was initially banned in Kuwait as well as Saudi Arabia after it was issued a fatwa by the Grand Mufti, Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa challenged this fatwa in clerical court, proving the virtues of *The 99* and lifting the bans.⁷⁴

The fall of dictatorial regimes in some Arab countries during the Arab Spring (2010-2012) diminished the power of censorship and allowed the proliferation of different types of comics, also thanks to the rise of social media.⁷⁵ Arab Comics magazines were always associated with children until they were popularized for adults by *Samandal* in Lebanon in 2007. *Samandal* publishes local and international comics under the banner “Picture stories from here and there”. *Samandal*'s sixteen issues since 2007 have pushed artists in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia to follow suit. In Egypt there are *TokTok*, *Garage*, and *El3osba* ; *Lab619* in Tunisia; *Skefkef* in Morocco; *Waratha* in Algeria, *Habka* in Libya; and many more.⁷⁶ Arab Comics Expert and Artist George Khoury (JAD) writes, “Samandal “TokTok has gathered together young Egyptians in search of a platform for their work. In addition to responding to a crying need nationwide, TokTok is rapidly became a veritable “Arab oasis”, opening its pages artists from all over the region and especially from the Maghreb, playing on the geographical proximity of the countries but also of their social, political and economic structures.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Al-Mutawa, Naif. “The latest challenge of ‘The 99’ superheroes is tackling a fatwa”. *The National*. April 26, 2014.

⁷⁵ Emanuela De Blasio, “Comics in the Arab world: Birth and Spread of a New Literary Genre”. *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes* (2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5209/ange.67162>

⁷⁶ M. Lynx Qualey. “Arab Comic Reach a Wider Audience Through Digital Products”. *An-Fanar Media* (2020).

⁷⁷ George (JAD) Khoury. “A Resurrected Rebellion: The Will of Young People against History”. *Angoulême Festival 2018, Alifbata, France* (2018).

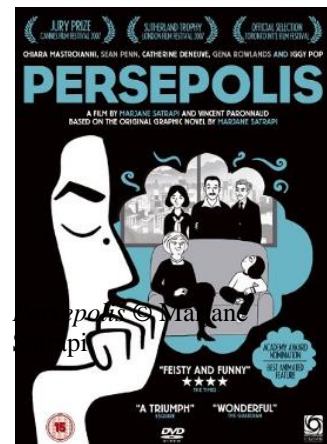
In 2013, 19 year-old Deena Mohamed published the first strip of her comic book hero *Qahera*, the “witty hijabi superheroine who fights crime and prejudice on the streets of Egypt”.⁷⁸

In creating a strong yet feminine female hero, and a balance of modesty and justice, Mohamed delivered a character critical of Arab society and the unnecessary problems it creates for women under patriarchy and traditionalist values, including sexual harassment and gender discrimination.



Qahera © Deena Mohamed

Marjane Satrapi’s “*Persepolis*” is an autobiographical series which depicts her childhood up to her early adult years in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. It was first published as an award-winning graphic novel and scaled to an animated feature film with a revenue of \$15.5 million. It helped expose an international audience to the perspectives of Iranians and women. *Persepolis* was initially banned in Lebanon after some clerics found it “offensive to Iran and Islam.” The ban was later revoked after an outcry in Lebanese intellectual and political circles.⁷⁹ Though it drew official objections from the Iranian government, the film was allowed to be screened in Tehran albeit with six scenes censored due to sexual content.⁸⁰ Additionally, in 2006 *Persepolis* became part of the cadet’s curriculum at West Point U.S. Military Academy.⁸¹



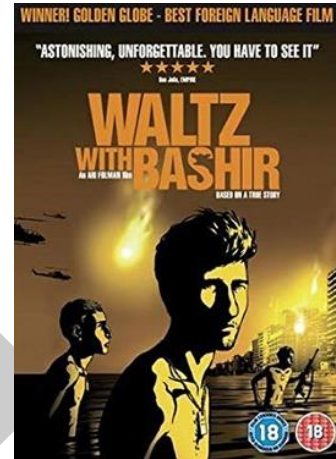
⁷⁸ Hope Grisby. (2014) “A New Feminist Movement? Middle Eastern Hijabi Women as Superheroes”. *Tel Aviv University* (2014).

⁷⁹ [Rafei, Raed. "Lebanon: Iran revolution film 'Persepolis' unbanned". Los Angeles Times \(2008\).](#)

⁸⁰ Stuart Williams and Hiedeh Farmani. [“Rare Iran screening for controversial film 'Persepolis'”. Agence France-Presse \(2008\).](#)

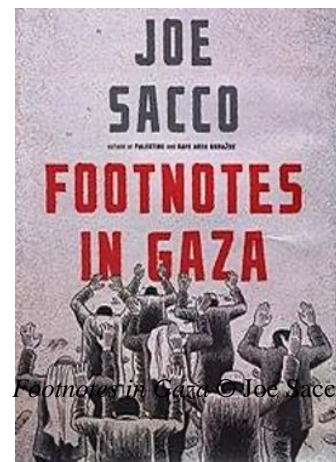
⁸¹ Rana Foroohar, [“Comic Relief”](#). *Newsweek* (2005).

“Waltz with Bashir” is a 2008 Israeli animated feature documentary written, produced, and directed by Ari Folman. It depicts Folman in his search for lost memories of his traumatic experience as a soldier in the 1982 Lebanon War. It grossed over \$11 million against a production budget of only \$2 million and won a Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The film was banned in some Arab countries with its harshest critics in Lebanon. The film was privately screened in 2009 in Beirut in front of 90 people and many other private screenings followed. Unofficial copies became available in the country as well.⁸² The animation style of the documentary allows such realities of war and trauma to be expressed for the audience to understand its messages in unique, visceral ways.



Waltz with Bashir © Ari Folman

In “Footnotes in Gaza” Joe Sacco tries to understand what happened during the 1956 Suez Crisis in the towns of Khan Younis and Rafah in the Gaza Strip in which nearly 400 Palestinians were killed. “Footnotes in Gaza”, published in 2009, along with Sacco’s earlier work “Palestine”, published between 1993 and 1995, are among the first examples of “comics journalism”. These works speak to the notion that, because it is already extremely difficult to objectively portray reality in journalism and documentary style films, using illustration to do so allows for more creative freedom. These works reveal comics to be an effective medium to address complex and controversial subjects including even the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. However,

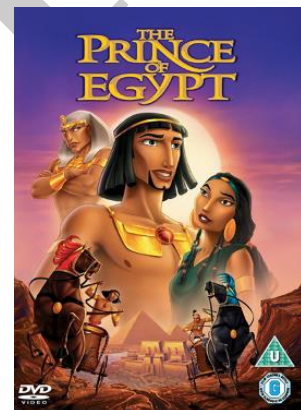


Footnotes in Gaza © Joe Sacco.

⁸² Anderman, Nirit. ["Israeli film on Lebanon War 'Waltz with Bashir' shown in Beirut"](#). Haaretz (2009).

as Dr. Chantal Catherine Michel notes, though Sacco demonstrates a critical distance from his interviewees by mentioning inconsistencies in their accounts and forefronts his approach and research methods, “Footnotes in Gaza” influences the reader into believing that Sacco’s depictions and interpretations are essential truths.⁸³

DreamWorks’ “The Prince of Egypt” – A 1998 American animated musical drama film based on the book of exodus. It received an academy award for best original song and generated a revenue of \$148.6 million. DreamWorks consulted with Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Arab authorities to make the film more accurate and faithful to the original story. Three Jewish men led the production: Jeffery Katzenberg, David Geffen, and Steven Spielberg. However, *The Prince of Egypt* was banned in the Maldives and Malaysia on the grounds that prophets cannot be depicted in media. In addition to the depiction of prophets, it was also arguably banned in Egypt due to the portrayal of the slavery of the Jews in Egypt and unflattering portrayal of Egyptian civilization.⁸⁴



“The Prince of Egypt”.
Copyright © Universal Pictures.

Arab animation has risen to the world stage. In 2004, Randa Ayaoubi founded Rubicon Group Holding in Amman, Jordan with the desire to bring about an “Arabic Renaissance” producing animated shows including “Tareq wa Shireen” (2010) and “Ben & Izzy” (2008). She stated



“Tareq wa Shireen” and “Ben & Izzy”
Copyright © Rubicon Group Holdings.

⁸³ Michel, Chantal Catherine. “The Art of Persuasion and Propaganda”. Journal of Fonazione CDEC (2013): p. 5.

⁸⁴ Eltahawy, Mona. [“Egyptians disown celluloid ‘Prince’”](#). *The Guardian* (1999).

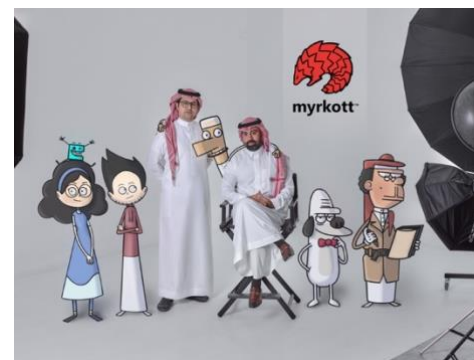
her desire to amalgamate technology and education and that "the challenge is to produce more programs so in the future children in Europe, the US or Asia might grow up watching Arabic shows dubbed in English, rather than the other way round."⁸⁵

In 2015, United Arab Emirates based animation studio "Barajoun Entertainment" produced and directed by Ayman Jamal, launched "*Bilal: A New Breed of Hero*", a full animated feature depicting the life of Bilal ibn Rabah, a follower of the Prophet Mohamad who was freed from slavery and became one of the first *Mua'dhin* circa 632 AD.^{86, 87} *Bilal* won "Best Inspiring Movie" on Animation Day at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival and made a significant influence in the region and the world for its technological and artistic success as well as in its aim to tell the stories of Islam in the modern world.



Bilal: A New Breed of Hero © Barajoun Entertainment 2015

And then there's Myrkott, a Saudi Animation Studio based in Riyadh founded by Faisal Al Amer, Malik Nejer, and Abdulaziz al-Muzaini in 2014. Myrkott offers a hilarious satire *Musameer*, a series about a Dog, and his to two mentally unhinged and delusional friends in a corrupt and absurd Arabia, which was developed into



Myrkott co-founders Malik Nejer (left) and Abdulaziz al-Muzaini (September 2020).

⁸⁵ "My world: Randa Ayoubi on arabic TV for Kds". [StoryBook News](#) (2011).

⁸⁶ Jane Horowitz. "['Bilal' review: Ancient story of a real-life Muslim hero is pretty but feels like theology class](#)". *The Washington Post* (2018).

⁸⁷ *Mua'dhin* – The one who performs the Muslim call to prayer

an exceptional feature film. Around September, 2020, Myrkott signed an exclusive 5-year partnership with Netflix to help develop animated content for the Arabic speaking Netflix users.⁸⁸

The Application of Cartoons to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is regarded as one of the most intractable conflicts in history.^{89, 90} Both parties have legitimate claims to the same land and both sides have violated human rights. There are still eight key issues: mutual recognition, security and terrorism, borders, Israeli settlements, Palestinian freedom of movement, Palestinian refugees, and control of Jerusalem, holy sites, and water.⁹¹ The root of this conflict is the clash of competing narratives over identity and land.⁹² The aftermath of the 1967 war shifted the power to Israel and the conflict towards public relations warfare. Palestinian and Israeli art, literature, theatre and film are used as “weapons of culture” to support competing narratives.^{93, 94} The Abraham Accords suggests a future of stronger Arab-Israel relations, but the state of Palestine remains a question.

⁸⁸ Zaira Lakhpatwala. “Netflix exec on the 5-year partnership with Saudi animation studio Myrkott”. *Arab News* (16 September 2020).

⁸⁹ Kelman HC. [The role of national identity in conflict resolution: Experiences from Israeli-Palestinian problem-solving workshops](#). In R.D. Ashmore, L. Jussim, & D. Wilder (Eds.), “Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction”. *Oxford and New York*: Oxford University Press (2001): p. 187-212.

⁹⁰ Josef Olmert (2018) A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World’s Most Intractable Conflict, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 12:1, 113-115, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2018.1454152](#)

⁹¹ Khalil Shikaki PhD, Abdel Monem Said Aly PhD, Shai Feldman PhD. “Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East”. *Macmillan International Higher Education* (2013).

⁹² West, Deborah L. “Myth & Narrative in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”. *Cambridge, Massachusetts*: World Peace Foundation, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2003).

⁹³ Shihabi, Muzna. “Palestinian Public Diplomacy: from Camp David II to the ICJ Ruling on the Israeli Wall”. *Birzeit University* (2006).

⁹⁴ Cannon, Ellen. “The BDS and Anti-BDS Campaigns: Propaganda War vs. Legislative Interest-Group Articulation”. [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#) (2019).

In her work, “Panels for Peace: Contributions of Israeli and Palestinian Comics to Peace-Building”, Dr. Chantal Catherine Michel describes the ideological struggle for the representation of ideas, played out in various graphic novel publications depicting aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She asserts that few, if any, publications thus far have been able to separate themselves from their own cultural, political, and religious biases as well as reach the affected audiences, but maintains that if such a publication could be achieved, it would have a noticeable impact in peacebuilding due to the effectiveness of graphic novels as communication tools. According to Michel, graphic literature that does not offer a balanced view of the conflict and tends to neglect the other side, contributes to an entrenchment of the conflict rather than to peacebuilding. She writes, “apparently, neither the great majority of the authors living inside Israel/Palestine, nor the ones living geographically (and culturally) outside of this conflict-area, seem to be willing to produce comics that could contribute to peace-building or are capable of it. As it is, [Arab-Israeli Conflict Comics] are unfortunately mostly used as a cultural weapon against the other side.”⁹⁵ Moreover, in her essay “The Art of Persuasion and Propaganda”, Michel writes, “Being culturally involved in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict means for most people the impossibility of adopting a neutral position. This could, hypothetically, only be possible for those who aren’t culturally involved”.⁹⁶ I offer an alternative – ideological balance and representation:

⁹⁵ Michel, Chantal Catherine. “Panels for Peace: Contributions of Israeli and Palestinian Comics to Peace-Building”. Milan, Italy: Journal of Fonazione CDEC (2013).

⁹⁶ Michel, Chantal Catherine. “The Art of Persuasion and Propaganda”. Milan, Italy: Journal of Fonazione CDEC (2013): p. 3.

Olive Branch Pictures, Inc.



Olive Branch
Pictures Inc. Logo.
Designed by Don
Daskalo and
Andrew Hirsh. ©
Andrew Hirsh.

I believe that the best way to mitigate intractable conflicts is through the education of the next generation, and that the best way to reach the next generation is with epic, animated, musical storytelling. Olive Branch

Pictures, Inc. is a social enterprise engaging in conflict mediation, cultural diplomacy, edutainment, and philanthropy using multi-narrative, commercially viable, animated storytelling with a representational,

ideologically balanced production team and advisory board. Our mission is to help mitigate the cycles of hatred, violence, xenophobia, and propaganda surrounding large-scale social conflicts including refugee crises and religious, international, and civil war.

Philosophy

Olive Branch Pictures ventures forward in the pursuit of truth and in the spirit of open-mindedness. Olive Branch Pictures was originally founded with the philosophy of the Taoist Yin Yang, which describes how opposing, distinct ideas and entities are also complementary and interconnected in nature.⁹⁷ Olive Branch Pictures asserts that moral and cultural relativism, as well as moral and cultural objectivism, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, that “contradiction is the essence of the human condition”, and that there is beauty in ambiguity.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Lao Tzu, Feng, G., & English, J. “Tao Te Ching”. *Vintage Books* (1972).

⁹⁸ Dr. Phillip M. Stone (My Grandfather) (1977).

⁹⁹ Olive Branch Pictures contemplates Rabbi Hillel’s famous question: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”¹⁰⁰

Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote, “if you seek authenticity for authenticity’s sake, you are no longer authentic.”¹⁰¹ Being authentic means acting, communicating, and thinking in accordance with one’s beliefs. Being authentic also means searching for truth. We must be willing to question our beliefs as well as holistically examine and tolerate the beliefs of others. Olive Branch Pictures endeavors to address conflicting group narratives with an open-mindedness derived from Socrates’s notion, “the more I know, the more I know I know nothing.” Olive Branch Pictures vows to follow responsible ethical standards when marketing to minors.

“Shira and Amal”

Our first production addresses the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict with the story “Shira and Amal” about an Israeli girl and a Palestinian girl who learn to cope with the traumatic loss of loved-ones by escaping into the world of music. Years later their paths cross in university where, under the mentorship of their professor, they develop an intercultural benefit concert and compose “A Song of Hope” to bring peace to Jerusalem and to themselves.



“Shira and Amal” Cover by Cella Siegelman and Andrew Hirsh. © Andrew Hirsh 2020.

⁹⁹ Leonard Bernstein. “The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard” *Harvard University Press* (1976).

¹⁰⁰ Hillel HaZaken, *Pirkey Avot*, 1:13.

¹⁰¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “*Notebooks for an Ethics*”. *University of Chicago Press* (1992): p.4

“Shira and Amal” is being memetically engineered to employ the freedom of fiction, language, visual imagery, music, representation, and ideological balance to navigate the social, political, and religious factors of the conflict without sacrificing entertainment value.

Methodology

Olive Branch Pictures aims to portray society and humanity using grassroots stakeholder consultation, anthropological study, understanding of the human experience, and a representational team and ideologically balanced advisory board, within a democratic market of ideas.

Olive Branch Pictures strives for subjective balance in pursuit of expressing objective truth under a council of 15 representational, ideologically balanced diplomats, producers, psychologists, religious leaders, academics, and artists, etc., selected using multi-dimensional ideological compass testing and background analysis.

By balancing the two overarching narratives with dual-protagonists in the portrayal of a fiction based on reality, history, experience and universal storytelling principles, “Shira and Amal” will access stakeholder audiences on both sides and contribute to mutual-understanding. The characters, “Shira” and “Amal”, are designed to be role-models for the next generation, teaching them how to cope with trauma, learn from mistakes, and value education, discipline, and creativity. Their journey across both secular and religious worlds makes “Shira and Amal” accessible to both religious and secular audiences. In fact, every character is designed as a cultural or ideological representative in order to achieve representation both on and off screen.

In storytelling, conflict drives the plot forward. As William Ury and Roger Fisher eloquently state: “Conflict is an inevitable and useful part of life. It often leads to change and generates insight. Few injustices are addressed without serious conflict. In the form of business competition, conflict helps create prosperity and it lies at the heart of the democratic process, where the best decisions result not from a superficial consensus but from exploring different points of view and searching for creative solutions.”¹⁰²

While the story is flexible, subject to the input of ideologically diverse, representational experts and members of the target social impact audience, as well as ongoing changes in the region, in its present form it is constructed to reach a diverse and impactful audience using a variety of creative methods. For example, this is not a love story between an Israeli and a Palestinian but rather a one of friendship. By not implicitly or explicitly promoting intermarriage, *Shira and Amal* opens more avenues to connect to more conservative and religious members of both societies as well as avoiding the age-old cliché of *Romeo and Juliet*. Another example of creative ways of navigating controversies and representing diverse perspectives is “The Conflict Song”, found in the beginning of act I as a means of intruding Shira and Amal’s diverse families. “The Conflict song is meant to be a symphonic cacophony of perspectives, using satire and music to show the diversity of perspectives, mitigate the cognitive dissonance associated with hearing opposing ideological narratives, and make it more engaging and palatable, especially for children. While it is necessary to forgive to resolve conflict that does not mean it is necessary to forget. The grandparent characters share their

¹⁰² Fisher, R., Ury, W. and Patton, B. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*, 2nd ed., Houghton Mifflin (1991).

stories with Shira and Amal as a way of providing the much-needed historical context of the conflict to the audience while also representing diverse perspectives based on true stories. In fact, most if not all of the characters are inspired by true stories, real people, real experiences while still allowing for creative liberties and production constraints that do not compromise the authenticity and potential for meaningful and balanced impact.

In this region multiple media outlets and educational platforms consistently perpetuate biased views on controversial issues. There is generally very little open-mindedness. By distributing equally between stakeholders, “Shira and Amal” will counteract propaganda and outperform biased media outlets with a meaningful, balanced, entertaining narrative.

Due to the controversy of such intractable conflict, it is unreasonable to assume that imposing such representational, ideologically balanced diversity will be easy, particularly in inclusivity of more extreme perspectives on the ideological spectrum. To help surmount this challenge, we could allow competition within the larger model of a collaborative model. In the same way that rival nations gather together to compete in the Olympic Games, our creative team, advisory board, and partners would have the freedom to compete in their representation of their narratives in convincing the audience of their truth through storytelling. The idea is that in a balanced system, extreme perspectives should cancel each other out and until one remains, following the dialectical method.¹⁰³ Partners are incentivized to join in order to ensure that their perspective is represented. A significant reason for the failure of the Oslo Accords

¹⁰³ The Dialectical Method – A method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing forces.^A In Platonic dialectics, the two arguments add zero sum. In Hegelian Dialectics, the two sides are synthesized in a combination.

^A Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

was a lack of trust. The terms of agreement were not implemented proportionately and simultaneously by both sides. The arrangement was Palestinian de-escalation of terrorism in exchange for Israeli de-escalation of settlement construction. Within a competitive game model, adding the component of trust and communication to form contracts improves the statistical odds of mutual gain. Olive Branch Pictures offers the potential to increase trust and understanding under the common goal of peace, using balanced, informative, and entertaining media which can be distributed proportionately and simultaneously and thus improve aggregate statistical odds of cooperation.

Neuroscientist Nayef Al-Rodhan disputes the total rationality of state actors, advocating that state actors are also driven by emotions and ideologies, describing human nature as emotional, amoral and egoistic.¹⁰⁷ Al-Rodham's analysis of the emotionality and rationality of state actors suggests that the combined factors of representation and ideological balance in communicating an emotionally meaningful narrative, would contribute to the de-escalation of conflict.

Dignity is another important aspect of Olive Branch Picture's approach to conflict mediation. Dignity is critical to solving conflicts.¹⁰⁸ Look at the history of World Wars One and Two. Hitler used the humiliation of the German people in WWI after the Treaty of Versailles to justify their need to dominate, leading to WWII and the scapegoating of the Jewish people. Preserving the dignity of both parties, particularly the weaker one; prevents smoldering

¹⁰⁷ Al-Rodham, Nayef. "Who are we: Neurochemical Man and Emotional Amoral Egoism." *The Montreal Review* (2015).

¹⁰⁸ Donna Hicks and Desmond Tutu. "Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict". *Yale University Press*, New Haven; London (2011): p. 1-24.

humiliation from igniting into violence. By emphasizing dignity, Olive Branch Pictures will help sow the seeds of forgiveness and pluck the weeds of resentment.

Additionally, Shira and Amal could be watched annually as a family or community to form a tradition. This annual tradition could coincide with a holiday for peace and reconciliation. It is in this same way that Jews, Muslims, Christians, and countless other faiths preserve their cultural and religious identity by annually re-reading their stories.

The medium of graphic novel enables production and distribution at a relatively low cost and can then scale to larger productions such as a theatre and film, adapting production at each phase to the needs of stakeholders and changing socio-political landscapes. By developing this production collaboratively with a representational, ideologically balanced production team, it will not only engage both sides of the conflict, but also represent, visualize, and tell their narratives with authenticity and balance. With a production team comprised of talented musicians, actors, directors, writers, and comedians who represent the people that the production addresses, Olive Branch Pictures not only serves to produce a work of incredible quality, but also amplify these creative professionals as cultural ambassadors, furthering the goals of building bridges across conflicting communities. Full representation and ideological balance would allow the production to develop mutual trust capable of trickling up through the people to influence governing powers' willingness to negotiate and help prevent apartheid, indentured servitude, ethnic cleansing, and violence and promote a more shared society and mutual-understanding.

By scaling the graphic novel to a feature-length animated musical, “Shira and Amal” will amplify its impact. By launching “Shira and Amal” in partnership with international, regional,

and local production and distribution companies, using modern marketing techniques, we will not only engage our intended stakeholders on the grassroots level, but also generate significant profit by reaching a massive commercial audience. Not only will this production generate significant profits, but it will also employ a system of giving. Both donations and investments supporting this venture will be multiplied through successful business, and then a portion of profits will be redistributed to an ideologically diverse array of credible non-profit partners engaging in peacebuilding and sustainable development in the region. Furthermore, seeking funding from ideologically diverse sources, from private donors and investors to international governments and foundations, will mitigate bias and also generate more trust and therefore be more accessible to a diverse audience. Collaborating with NGOs and Non-Profits on both sides of the aisle, local, regional, and international, this work of cultural diplomacy will help “Shira and Amal” reach its stakeholder audience from the grassroots level, up.

Using authentic modern Hebrew and Arabic, Palestinian *Amiyeh*, generational slang, and diplomatic, sensitive language, “Shira and Amal” will reach a broad stakeholder audience. Also communicating the story in Modern Standard Arabic and other popular Arabic dialects, “Shira and Amal” will increase understanding between the Jewish people and the larger Arab world. By translating “Shira and Amal” to other relevant languages, such as Turkish and Farsi, “Shira and Amal” will be able to reach the larger Middle East and support regional understanding and coexistence. The versions of “Shira and Amal” intended for stakeholder audiences can be distributed for free, for a subsidized price, or for a suggested donation while mainstream language versions generate revenue in a sustainable benefit corporation model.

Cultures use music to organize, catalyze, and unify group identity.¹⁰⁹ The music for “Shira and Amal” will be developed by musicians, ethnomusicologists, and linguists featuring a score of both classic and modern songs capturing both cultures, past and present and appeal to a multi-generational audience. Furthermore, by featuring liturgical songs from the represented faiths, the production will be able to reach religious audiences.

Miscommunication is a common cause of conflict. Perhaps the Arab-Israeli Conflict as we know it today could have been significantly mitigated had early settlers and natives been able to communicate better. If peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians is to be possible, it is important that the residents be able to understand each other.

The production could work with governments and religious authorities that control mainstream media channels, compromising content only if absolutely necessary for the greater good of reaching the people. If such compromises are too great however, the production could reach the people through alternative channels with the understanding that when media content gets banned, it generates publicity which attracts viewership in sub-stream communication channels.¹¹⁰ If necessary, slightly different versions of the production could be released for different target audiences such as word choice and visual alterations. For example, the Hebrew version could be titled “Shira and Amal” while the Arabic version could be titled “Amal and Shira” in order to gain more acceptance for the particular audience.

¹⁰⁹ Peterson, Jordan. “Personality and Its Transformations: Historical & Mythological Context”. *University of Toronto* (2017).

¹¹⁰ Jansen, S. and Martin, B. “The Streisand effect and censorship backfire”. *International Journal of Communication* (2015).

Olive Branch Pictures will use surveys, critical reviews, public opinion, and longitudinal focus-group studies to measure its social impact on the conflict and minimize any negative externalities.

Olive Branch Pictures is committed to donating at least %10 of revenue to a coalition of ideologically diverse non-profit organizations working to facilitate regional peace and development. This would further the impact of Olive Branch Pictures and also help build a grassroots movement through our non-profit partners. Additionally, customers will be able to decide which of our non-profit partners they want to receive the 10% portion of their purchase, whether it be comic book, movie ticket, etc., thus further involving the consumer in the process of making a positive social impact.

The long-term goal of Olive Branch Pictures is to apply this methodology to help mitigate other social conflicts all over the world such as India-Pakistan, Hong Kong-China, and Domestic Polarization.

Conclusion

Narratives are the stories that define our identities. Stories are sequences of events that communicate the human experience. Stories capture social realism and idealism. Human need ideals to strive for. Myths are stories that withstand the test of time. We create heroes that reflect our ideals and tell stories to shape the values of our people. Cartoons have the potential for powerful social impact for the next generation and must be produced responsibly. The history of cartoons and graphic literature, specifically in the Middle East, substantiates cartoons as effective vehicles of communication and their potential for conflict mediation and cultural

diplomacy. While it is practically impossible to separate the perspective of the storyteller from the story, it is possible to combine the perspectives of multiple storytellers. Olive Branch Pictures Inc. and “Shira and Amal” apply this model of ideologically balanced, representational storytelling in order to help de-escalate the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and other large-scale social conflicts.



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Pictures sparked in July 2017 in culmination of Andy’s volunteer experiences in the Middle East, Mexico, and India, his Jewish roots and fascination with religions, inspiration from his first love, a passion for storytelling, diplomacy, and entrepreneurship, and a compulsion to create. Andy has always loved cartoons since he was a kid. He fondly remembers reading original superhero comics with his Dad and waking up early for Saturday morning cartoons.

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ⁱ *Kōan* - A story, dialogue, question, or statement used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" and to test a student's progress in Zen. <http://www.ashidakim.com/zenkoans/zenindex.html>