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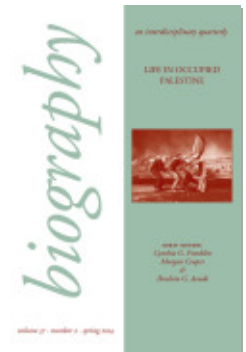
Incidental Insurgents : An Interview with Ruanne Abou Rahme

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INCIDENTAL INSURGENTS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH

RUANNE ABOU RAHME

MORGAN COOPER

Ruanne Abou Rahme and **Basel Abbas** began working on a project entitled *Incidental Insurgents* back in 2011. Structured like an audiovisual novel, the project is composed of several parts—the first of which was completed in 2013—and it focuses on the figure of the bandit.

I've been interested in Basel and Ruanne's work, both individual and collaborative, for a few years now, and I have followed their trajectory from their hip-hop group, Ramallah Underground, to Tashweesh, their audiovisual performance collective, and from their performances to their installations. This particular initiative, *Incidental Insurgents*, interested me in the way that Ruanne and Basel pursued an investigative approach to archival and oral history while insisting on the recovery and import of incidentals. Of course, their focus is the bandit and a particular character named Abu Jildeh, but there are so very many incidental insurgents in the history of revolutions and certainly in the history of Palestinian resistance against oppression.

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Morgan: *Ruanne, can you begin by telling me how you came to work on this project and about your process of research and reconstructing the narrative and contribution of this character?*

Ruanne: We started researching the project in 2011 after the Egyptian Revolution, entering it at a moment when we were in this crisis about our position, our role, as artists. The age old question—what is the role of artists in time of crisis? And not just ourselves as artists, but also thinking about

ourselves as people, thinking about the whole context and situation in Palestine and how to a large extent not much was happening politically. There are a few grassroots movements here and there, but for the most part we're in a situation of political decline of sorts.

In this context our work has emerged. By chance I picked up a novel by the writer Victor Serge (VS), *Unforgiving Years*, and started reading the introduction by Richard Greeman. The introduction is of course about the novel but also about Serge's life, and that's when I first came across the group of anarchists, bandits, in 1910 Paris that were Serge's comrades. There was something about their story that instantly gripped me: it very much resonated with issues and questions with which I was grappling. That same night I read extracts to my partner Basel and he was also completely compelled. We decided to start the research there with VS's life, and the story of the anarchist bandits.

VS was born in Belgium at the turn of the twentieth century to Russian parents who had fled Russia. They were both revolutionaries. He became an anarchist and as a young man went to Paris, where there was a long tradition of anarchism. Around the late eighteenth century the anarchist movement had reached its peak, and in the 1910s, when Serge was in Paris editing the anarchist paper, the movement had passed its peak. VS and the other young anarchist bandits soon became disillusioned. In 1912 Serge eventually was imprisoned for his connection to the anarchist bandits while in Paris. It was claimed by the Paris police that Serge was one of the masterminds. He later went to Spain and became a communist before ending up in Russia, where he joined the Bolsheviks. He very quickly joined the opposition movement and because this movement was anti Stalinist, he was imprisoned in Russia and then exiled.

A lot of his work, especially his later novels, explores what happens to people who are politically radical and have this need to fight for social justice, for a different world, not simply a reproduction of the very unjust system we live in. At the same time, Serge's characters find themselves disenchanted with the political thinking and movements of their time, which really resonated with Basel and me. Our project is very much about looking at the figures who seem almost incidental to moments of insurgency. Whether total revolution or smaller insurgent episodes are at issue, our interest is in viewing these moments through individuals who seem incidental, particularly those who somehow were not able to just comply and be part of the existing movements or parties. These figures are really interesting to the extent that they expose the incompleteness or inadequacies of existing political thoughts. These characters are at a particular threshold where they are unable to continue their

lives as they are and feel the need to surpass established options in one way or another. That's how we ended up with the figure of the bandit.

What is the threshold someone reaches to take up this position? Our project expresses people's impulse towards change and justice, and also the desperation of the moment. That combination was significant for us because it echoed what we deeply felt. There was this huge potential activated across the Arab world and potentially other places, a possibility for real change, where we wouldn't remain stuck in this colonial capitalist system, this way of being. There was a potential to think beyond that. At the same time, we had the feeling that we were just going to be stuck in an endless repetition. It is and was a moment of simultaneous hope and despair. From our own experience in Palestine we were disillusioned with the political parties and movements, and had long felt very strongly that we could no longer invest in them.

We are basically searching for a different political imaginary, a different language of sorts. And I think that these characters that we looked at, starting with the anarchist bandits, were on that same search. In this project, although we are looking at different times and moments than our own, we are also very much looking at the moment we're living. It's a very personal project while expressing something that many people are feeling: we are in the midst of a very deep crisis and yet we don't have a political "home" or forum, so we don't know how to change these conditions.

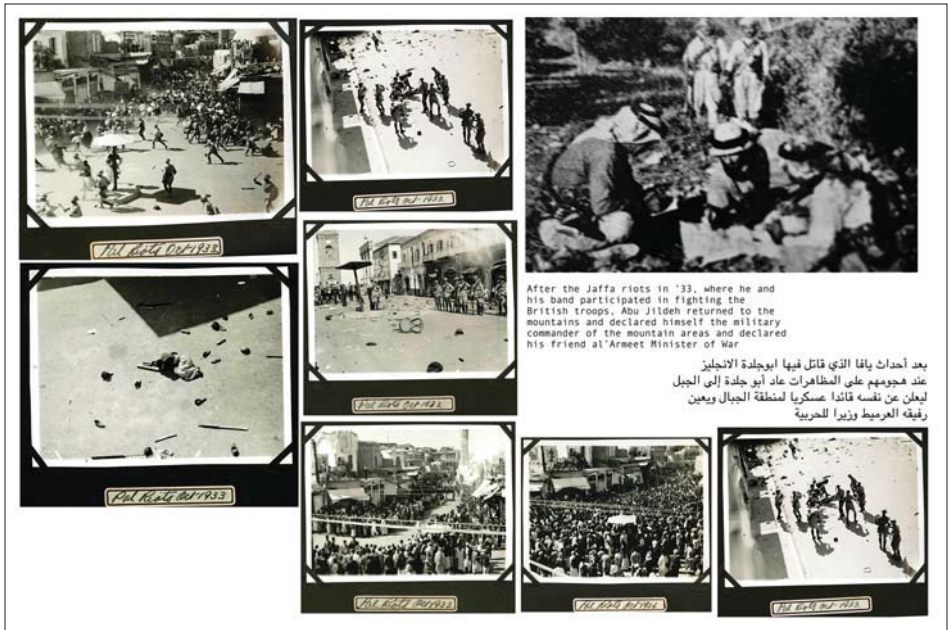
While we started with the anarchist bandits, at the same time, we drew on research we had been conducting for quite a while into the period before 1948 in Palestine. We were particularly interested in how many of the contemporary Israeli colonial methods and practices were actually developed by the British. We were also compelled by discovering how many testimonies we read from the 1930s during the Revolt against the British, which involved a gang of peasant bandits, resonated with testimonies we had read from the Second Intifada in Palestine. These resonances struck us as worth investigating further.

When we started researching the figure of the bandit, this instantly brought us to the 1936 Revolt. One day I was talking to my parents about our work, and they mentioned this character named Abu Jildeh (AJ), whom I had never heard of. They told me he was a peasant bandit in the 30s in Palestine who drove the British crazy and then was killed. Basel and I both became intrigued and wanted to know more about him. As we started to dig deeper, we found there was very little written in the historical accounts about him. The absence of historical narratives about AJ became significant for us because all the records we found that mentioned him indicated that he was actually a big part of people's imaginary. Not only was the Palestinian rural

community very taken by AJ, but there were songs written about him and stories told about him, and also the British and Zionists were totally intrigued by him. When you go back to police records or newspaper clippings from that time, there had actually been a lot written about him. It's only later on that you discover he somehow falls out of the history of revolutionary struggle in Palestine. That became a case in point for us. It really goes back to the central impulse in the project, which is looking at the kind of incidental figures, the figures that are somehow deemed not significant enough or rejected. At some point, the anarchist bandits were to a large degree rejected by the anarchist movement, and yet tragically they expressed precisely what was wrong with the anarchist movement at the time. I think that's what's interesting. The project is not an impulse to romanticize. It's an impulse to see what these figures unmask about their times and what they reveal about how revolutionary movements themselves write the narratives of revolution and resistance and what is omitted and why. It's an insistence to go back to these figures and try to focus on the kind of incompleteness of this history.

With AJ, we were able to explore these concerns regarding how revolutionary movements are narrated. What was interesting was that when we asked people about AJ, wanting to find more about him or be directed to relevant archives, we found that many people were dismissive of him, seeing him simply as a criminal. A criminal who drove the British crazy, but really just a criminal. He was de-politicized. This was significant to us because in this representation of AJ, we found something that was lacking in the modern Palestinian anti-colonial national struggle, and that is an attention to class tensions, which are often masked today. We all know very well that right now in Palestine we are amidst a very strong neoliberal technocratic project being implemented by the Palestinian Authority. We have a Palestinian elite that is basically benefiting from the colonial context, that serves as an extension of the Occupation. This is a very pressing issue for us. We are involved in a struggle, but we are not involved in it together. We can't deny the fact that there is a very clear elite that is invested in maintaining this system of settler colonialism. That's how you end up with a security regime in Palestine that is willing to silence people on the basis of their political positions.

For us, AJ is a figure who illuminates a very long history in which the fact that there is an elite benefiting from the Occupation, to varying degrees and in varying intensities, gets suppressed. There have been moments when this has been less pronounced, but at present we are facing a difficult time when these class disparities that divide Palestinians need to be addressed. AJ was a farmer and he knew many people during the 30s who had lost their lands,



From *Incidental Insurgents* (used by permission of the artists).

many of whom were treated very badly by the Palestinian landed aristocracy. At the same time, quite large portions of the Palestinian elite were collaborating with the British. This history repeats itself. When you read about what went on in the 1930s, it's not surprising, because you find you're living the same thing now. As in the 1930s when we were under British control, a Palestinian elite benefits from the occupation of Palestine and is invested in maintaining this structure. When AJ was at some point working in Haifa, he was exposed to Shehaz al Deen al Qassaam and his sermons in the Haifa Mosque, and he also met other peasants who had lost their lands. These experiences must have contributed to his radicalization. In any case, we know that the 1936 Revolt was largely a peasant's revolt. At some point in the 30s, AJ forms this band, this gang, and they start not only attacking the British and the Zionists, they also start attacking members of the Palestinian elite who are working with the British. This is key to understanding why AJ is not inscribed into the Palestinian narrative of resistance, even though all the texts at the time evidence his huge impact. Basel and I really do read him as a precursor to the 1936 Revolt, though he was caught by the British and imprisoned and killed in 1934.

FISH DAILY BULLETIN

Arab Bandits to Die



Abu Jildeh, (left), revolution Arab bandits, and Khalil Al-Nasr, (right). They are being held in a Palestinian court.

Wednesday, July 16, 1954

Jildeh, 'Dillinger of the Desert,' Erred Fatally: He Stayed Caught

Abu Jildeh, the "Dillinger of the Desert," was shot dead in a Palestinian court today. He was the last of the Arab bandits to be executed. The court sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer. The court also sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer. The court also sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer.

Masses of angry people stood in silence listening to Abu Jildeh's final words...

جموع غفيرة غاضبة وقفت إجلالا وصمتا مصغية لكلماته الأخيرة...

Thursday, July 19, 1954

Arab Brigands Turned Into Martyrs by 'Reds'

Abu Jildeh, the "Dillinger of the Desert," was shot dead in a Palestinian court today. He was the last of the Arab bandits to be executed. The court sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer. The court also sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer. The court also sentenced him to death for the murder of a British soldier and the killing of a British officer.

From *Incidental Insurgents* (used by permission of the artists).

The Palestinian Communist Party adopted AJ as a martyr. Then, in the 1970s, with the decline of the Communist Party, the narrative shifts. Ted Swedenburg writes about this in ways that we have found illuminating. He finds that at some point in the 1970s, the PLO and especially Fatah wanted to distance themselves from the image of the Palestinian peasant. When the PLO and Fatah first started, the peasant was the symbol of Palestinian resistance because it was the peasants who were largely at the forefront of the resistance. But according to Swedenburg's research, during the 1970s (and we can see this clearly in the discourse, and in the images) Fatah decides to distance themselves from the peasant image and ideals, and the rewriting begins, with the very large class dimension still present, but now masked. Eventually Swedenburg sees a shift in people's discourse not only concerning AJ but also in representing the 36 Revolt. That erasure and rewriting was very important for us and still is. We're working on a pamphlet publication we want to distribute in the summer that we hope will help to reactivate this history and this story of AJ.

Morgan: *I want to ask you to go into more depth here. You said multiple times that you "researched." Where did you find your research? In the 30s the narrative was there . . . this life story was being written, in a way. And when that*

story disappeared into the archives, how did you discover it? You said in a discussion we had earlier that you and Basel are “excavating underrepresented lives.” Can you talk about the process of the excavation itself?

Ruanne: Well, the process is really one of looking for traces, and the discovery of one trace often can lead to another. A lot of our research involved talking to people and getting their advice on where we could possibly find material. Even people’s narratives about how they see AJ now was significant and very much part of the research. We found one book written about him. But mainly through a process of unfolding, of moving from one source to new ones that the first led us to, we kept coming across new discoveries. We then also found newspaper clippings from international as well as local press that included AJ. It was in this way, finding archives and talking to people who gave us their impressions or directed us to other material, which allowed us to keep the project growing. For example, when we showed the work in London, the writer Musa Budeiri, who has done seminal work on the Palestinian Communist Party, came to us and said, “I have this archive that you might find interesting.” He shared his archive on the 1936 Revolt with us because he too believes in the importance of AJ’s story. He had in his possession a newspaper clipping from the Palestinian Communist Party, a statement declaring AJ a martyr. He was actually in possession of that pamphlet. Of course, he couldn’t find it in his archives, but he found other things! It was amazing to meet someone who had a copy of that pamphlet, one we had only read about in the *Jewish Daily Telegraph*.

The project keeps on growing. When I met Alex Winder with you, he told us of materials he had collected, and we have since shared our research findings with one another. A lot of material can be found through existing archives and online research, and conversations with people are also very important. People either find out about the work or you go and speak to them. It is such a fragmented history and there hasn’t been enough written about AJ, so you have to keep searching amongst traces. Each trace will open up a different set of possibilities that you then can follow. It’s a search. The whole project is an ongoing search. Every time we show the work, the section about AJ has grown. People see it and someone might have something of interest. It also is growing as people insert the project into their own archives, which they then share with us, and in this way the project not only spreads, but we also learn from the archives into which the project is incorporated.

We ended up going with Alex to the village where AJ is from and searching for AJ’s grave. We found his family—we found a grandson of his and his nephew. It was a really amazing experience. I did interviews with them as well, and we learned that AJ’s grave was unmarked. He was buried in an

unmarked grave. His family members told us his body had been moved at some point. When plans were made to build a road in the village, they had to move his body. I was shocked and said, "If anyone comes searching for AJ, they won't be able to find his grave." And they said we were the first to come, the first they knew of, which is sad in its own way. I told them I would come back in ten days and do interviews so that I could record their stories and get information they had heard about him. When we came back ten days later, they had made a proper grave for AJ, with his name and an inscription. In a sense, that's what the research is also about.

They also had corrections to the one book about AJ that has recently been published. Like us, the author works to bring forth the spirit of AJ. The author is taken by AJ as a character and wants to reinstate him into the history of Palestinian resistance. The grandson and nephew wrote down their corrections for me. We discovered AJ's son joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the 1960s and was killed in 1969 by the Israelis. They gave me the pamphlet the PFLP issued when he was killed, and it mentions AJ. These are some of the ways our research is continuing and we keep adding to our archive on AJ.

Morgan: *I'd like to ask you about the artistic intervention and the impact you think your project might or should have. I'd also like you to address the kind of intervention that you are making to excavate a life and reconstruct AJ's narrative and a genealogy in Palestinian resistance and experiences of oppression.*

Ruanne: I think it all goes back to trying to activate something that is already there. We are not in a sense creating a brand new history, rather we are trying to illuminate a life and a past that over time have been pushed into varying degrees of darkness for various reasons—and how do you activate that history and give this story a new life? As artists, accomplishing this is the most we can hope for. I think activation happens in the moment this character, this story, this history, enters people's imaginaries. Such a process is accumulative and that's why this project is long term, it's ongoing.

There have been various different extensions of and lives for this work. The first time we showed the exhibition was in Jerusalem. This was really significant for us. A lot of young Palestinians who'd never heard of AJ found out about him and were compelled by his story. We've also presented the work online and we had a performance result from it. Every time there is an extension of the work, it's part of the process of activating this history and bringing it into people's imaginary. Not long ago, googling AJ brought few results, but now a search brings up images from our project. We put it online in different places and this has breathed new life into it, keeping it viable and relevant.

This summer, like I mentioned, we want to make a pamphlet based on the project that we can distribute in the streets. How will this story enter people's imaginations? Of course people will do with it what they will. The point is for the story not to be completed and then cast into darkness, and it is about not allowing the history of our struggle to be written by a few people. This work is resisting the flattening and hijacking of the Palestinian narrative of resistance, and one that restores the past in its richness and complexity, while also making this history a resource for shaping our present struggles and our vision for the future.



The Incidental Insurgents: The Part about the Bandits. Pt. 2 by Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou Rahme (27 June 2013) can be found on *Ibraaz*, a platform for Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East (<<http://www.ibraaz.org/projects/52>>).