



Share



## about the journal

*comparative studies of south asia, africa and the middle east (cssaame)* seeks to bring region and area studies into conversation with a rethinking of theory and the disciplines. the journal is committed to working across temporal divides and asking how concepts and practices might be rethought and redeployed through new narratives of connection and comparison

## about borderlines

*borderlines* offers open-access scholarship that experiments with and seeks to forge new connections between area and theory. published by the editors of *cssaame*, it complements the journal by featuring original work in formats that differ from the scholarly articles and forums that are usually featured in the journal. it includes multimedia work, short essays, and interviews. it also offers additional content that enriches individual articles published in the journal, such as visual material, archival documents, and online commentary and discussion

[Home](#) / [Borderlines](#) / "The wall is fixed, but each year there is a new story": An interview with Mohammad Al-Azza

# "The wall is fixed, but each year there is a new story": An interview with Mohammad Al-Azza

By Amahl Bishara  
May 15, 2015

*The following is part of a series of short posts on photographic practice in Palestine. In the fall of 2014, Al-Azza's work was exhibited at Tufts University, an event facilitated by Amahl Bishara and her students, a few of whom are featured here in the series. Though focused on the work of Mohammad Al-Azza, the posts speak to the broader situation of artistic practice in Palestine and its effective censorship under the ongoing occupation, but also to questions of intimacy and the public role of photography in the context of conflict.*

---

**Amahl Bishara:** First can you tell me a bit about how the separation wall came to be built around two sides of Aida Refugee Camp? What have its effects been since it was completed in 2005?

Mohammad Al-Azza: The plan for the wall began in 2002. At first, they put barbed wire just beyond the middle of the open space next to the camp, but just beyond the middle. The plan was to build the wall there. When they actually started construction around 2004, the plan changed, and they decided to take all of the land, not to leave us this open space. So the wall was moved closer to the camp.



A fire burns next to the separation wall around Aida Refugee Camp. Starting in the winter of 2012-2013, protesters used fire and drills to slowly open holes in the wall. Though Israeli soldiers have closed the holes immediately after they are opened, the brief moments when Palestinians can see—or even cross—to the other side have been inspiring to Palestinians in Aida Camp and around the West Bank. Photo credit: Mohammad Al-Azza (Click image for higher resolution).

This land meant a great deal to the people of the camp, because people spent a lot of time there. They used to pick olives from the trees, and distribute them among the families. I remember there used to be three football fields on that land, where we as youth and even little kids used to play. The seasons of the almonds, of the olives, especially of the red *hanoun* flowers that used to grow there: each time of the year brought something special. It meant something to us. We had our memories there, all of those generations that witnessed the time of that land.

So when they started putting up that barbed wire, naturally, there were confrontations every day with the army. Aside from that, there were the processions organized under the banner of peaceful protest. But in the end nothing changed, and they built the wall. We lost a lot of youth and children. Many were injured, and many were arrested during the period when the wall was being built.

The wall changed people's lives a great deal, in terms of freedom of movement. Perhaps we thought that once they built the wall, the army would stop coming to the camp. But to the contrary, the presence of the army intensified. It became a very sensitive area, with hostilities every day with the army. The watchtower was there, so every day the army would be present in the camp.

And for the people who used to work inside Israel—now we have more than 40% unemployment in the camp. Most of them would use that land before they built the wall to enter Israel, to go to work. Now you have to apply for a permit, and only a few people get permits. So it has become more difficult for the people in the camp.

**AB:** *Do you think the wall prevented people from going to Jerusalem?*

MA: No. They claim their goal [in building the wall] was the security of Israel. To the contrary, anyone can still enter Jerusalem. But it has become more dangerous, because only a few areas are open. It either works to get through, or it does not. They might catch you, they might shoot you. There are people desperate enough to take the risk. The wall wasn't this amazing thing that provided Israelis with security. It was a continuation of Israel's colonialism and racism, to make us feel even more that we are under occupation, to make us feel that we are living in a big prison, that we cannot move.

**AB:** *How did the wall affect your work? Or, how did the wall constitute your work?*

MA: Well, before the building of the wall I wasn't really a photographer. It was after the building of the wall in 2005 that I learned photography. I have dedicated a lot of attention to the wall. The building of the wall was probably the biggest event of the second Intifada in the camp.



Photo credit: Mohammad Al-Azza.

The wall is fixed and permanent, but each year there is a new story about it to tell. At first, we would talk about how the land behind the wall was important to us. Then we talked about the restrictions on movement, like in the photograph of the horse, because before the wall was built, the horse would be on the land, but now the horse is on the street. Then there was the stage of the burning of the watchtower. I documented that. And then, the drilling of the watchtower. And then, there are also the murals painted on the wall.

So there is more than one story that can be told about the wall.

**AB:** *And now, if there are no demonstrations, do you find it difficult to tell stories about the wall?*

MA: When the wall is here, you have to do something about it. There will always be a new idea.

**AB:** *To back up a bit, starting in November 2012, protesters have used fire and drills to break holes in the wall in Aida Refugee Camp, and they were successful on a few occasions. What has been the role of photography in the movement against the wall?*

MA: It has been very effective. It played a big role on the local level, not to speak of internationally. It had a great influence on other areas in the West Bank where the wall was present, especially when the wall and the watchtower were burned for the first time. These images spread very widely on Facebook and the Internet in general, and so every area that had the wall started to do the same thing. They burned the wall.

This video from January 2013 shows the kinds of intense clashes that occurred between youth of Aida Camp and the Israeli army. Starting at 4:34, you can see the hole made in the wall. Video credit: Mohammad Al-Azza.

Israel had not expected that fire would harm stone. Then Israel started taking this into account. It was like the Israeli soldiers developed a psychological complex. For a while whenever they would see a little fire lit next to the wall, they'd come into the camp like crazy people.

So because of the photographs, the idea of burning the wall spread. The photographs raised awareness. They taught others who lived with the wall, and got them to move and do something against the wall. The videos had the same effect.

**AB:** *How is photography tied to the larger movement for liberating Palestine?*

MA: Personally, I take pictures, but I never believed that photography would liberate Palestine. Photography might complement the resistance of occupation. It can raise awareness, especially for people outside Palestine, to draw their attention to what is happening to us, to expose the crimes the occupation is committing.

This video from August 2014 shows Palestinian protests in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. The first part of the

video shows protests on the main street in Bethlehem just meters from Aida Camp. At 3:12, the video moves down to Aida Camp itself. Both parts show the army's excessive use of tear gas and its deployment of "skunk water," chemically altered water that smells intensely of sewage, and leaves this smell for weeks. Video credit: Mohammad Al-Azza

AB: *So you have done photography about the wall, but at the same time the wall limits and restricts your photography. What are the restrictions you face in your work because of the wall?*

MA: It's really high!

Look, maybe taking a picture of the wall just by itself is straightforward. But when there are demonstrations, when it is being burned and drilled, this is very difficult. Taking pictures becomes dangerous for me. If I publish these pictures, the army will come to me first and arrest me, because I might know the people who were drilling, because I was there. Until today there are pictures I haven't published, for example of drilling the wall. So it was a big concern for me, expressing myself through these pictures. True I wasn't involved with drilling the wall, but taking pictures of this was very dangerous to me.

Maybe if the wall were open, I could talk about our memories from when we were young, the memories that are lost behind the wall. Maybe if they left a little door open, I could sneak through and photograph the football fields and the places where we used to hang out.

AB: *You were arrested in July 2013, and even though you were released after several days, Israel has refused to close the court case against you. Why do you think they arrested you?*

MA: They want to stop me from practicing this profession of photography. Also, it is because I raised a court case against the soldier who shot me. They want to create any reason they can to condemn me in court.

AB: *I was so glad that you were able to come to the United States last year to share your work. How was your experience participating in American university life for a few months?*

MA: It was a very good experience. I met new people, many of whom didn't know that much about Palestine and now, perhaps, are more aware.

AB: *How did you find Tufts University?*

MA: The university was beautiful. Aida is a bit more beautiful, though. What can I say? Write that a bathroom at Tufts is the size of the Aida Camp Girls' school.

AB: *Perhaps this is a strange question, but can I ask, was there anything that was harder for you to say in the United States than in Palestine?*

MA: Sometimes it can be a burden for me, with all that has happened, for me to travel and tell a story about the events that happen here. Why? Because when I do this, I remember these difficult incidents, and this does trouble me. When I'm here in Palestine, I don't always talk with internationals. Or when I do, I might say something general, rather than getting into details like I do when I'm travelling. But there, it was every day, or every few days, I had to tell the story from the beginning. And that was something difficult in itself.

But the other thing that was not easy for me to talk about in the United States was that here, I immediately enter into discussions about resistance. I can say that I support resistance. I discuss armed resistance, and so forth, but there that was quite difficult. Because maybe the audience doesn't know about Palestine at all. So I would talk about what was inside me more and talk about my personal experience with much more ease. I'd think about what people would want to hear in a first conversation.

AB: *What is the role of Americans in supporting Palestinians' liberation struggle?*

MA: They can work on the boycott, divestment, and sanctions project, in all its dimensions: not just boycotting Israeli goods, but also – since there are a lot of Israeli officials who come there to speak – they can boycott them, demonstrate against them, make them feel like people have stopped welcoming them, have stopped standing by them.

Another way to be active is regarding the taxes that they pay. They can demand that the taxes they pay benefit them as

Americans, in whatever way they choose. Now not all of this money helps them as Americans. A lot goes to Israel, and it is used to kill civilians. This is very important. Why should their taxes go to these military projects, to kill other people?



CSSAAME *Borderlines* are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#)

The journal is protected under [copyright by Duke University Press](#)

For more information, visit [our Duke Journals website](#)

Published in Partnership with



Center For Digital Research & Scholarship  
Columbia University Libraries/Information Services

ISSN: 1089-201X

e-ISSN: 1548-226X

CSSAAME *Borderlines*

ISSN : 2373-101X

[RSS](#)

Submissions and Inquiries

[✉ Journal](#)

[✉ Web](#)

