

In the world of photojournalism, the Middle East is never far from our eyes. Based in East Jerusalem, **Tanya Habjouqa** captures images that defy the cliché and stereotype. Keith Wilson gains an insight into her unique way of storytelling...

All images: Tanya Habjouqa



# Tanya Habjouqa





## Tanya Habjouqa Profile

- Jordanian-born photographer Tanya Habjouqa is renowned for documentary work that brings contemporary Middle East politics and creative vision into the same frame.
- Tanya is trained in journalism and anthropology and has a master's degree in global media from the University of London SOAS.
- Her work has been commended by World Press Photo, *TIME* and the Smithsonian, and is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, and Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.
- She is a mentor for the Arab Photography Documentary Program, and works for organizations such as Amnesty International on multi-country media campaigns.
- A member of the NOOR Images agency in Amsterdam, Tanya is also represented by East Wing Gallery, Doha, Qatar.

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For Tanya Habjouqa, travel has never been easy – even before COVID-19. For the past year, she's been grounded like the rest of us, but it is her family heritage, upbringing and nationality that makes her the subject of added scrutiny, especially when crossing international borders. Her predicament is likely best explained by sharing her own words to the questions I put to her when trying to check the salient facts that are integral to her sense of identity. "Tanya, help me get this right: you're Jordanian and went to university in Texas, as well as in London?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you live in East Jerusalem with your husband who is Palestinian?"

Tanya nods.

"And, like your husband, you're a citizen of Israel?"

Tanya shakes her head. "That is the closest to correct that I've ever heard! No, I'm not a citizen of Israel, I'm there on a residency. I'm a dual national, Jordanian-born. I'm from a minority group in Jordan called the

Circassians, so my father is from Jordan and my mother is Texan. They divorced when I was young, so I would go back and forth. I have both of those passports (Jordanian and American), and the majority of my schooling was in Texas, including university. So even though I have residency here (Israel) and I have the privilege of having a husband who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, my American passport, saying born in Jordan with Arab heritage, definitely makes mobility difficult."

It's complicated. However, this is what helps make Tanya Habjouqa's images so striking, and her photo stories unique and compelling...

**With all these cultural influences, as well as your heritage, how have they shaped your identity and the perspective you adopt for work?**

It's a great question and one that I'm constantly navigating. When I was

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**Previous page:** Father Arsanios, a Coptic Egyptian priest, stands next to statues of Superman and Captain Jack Sparrow at an abandoned Dead Sea resort near Ein Gedi, Israel.

**Below:** In the occupied West Bank, a group of foreign visitors take part in a two-hour 'shooting adventure' workshop. Devised by former Israeli Defence Force officers, the participants pay €100 to learn how to defend themselves from terrorist attack.



much younger I didn't understand the gift that it was, the privilege, because I found myself in my early 20s getting more opportunities as a Jordanian breaking into the business than an American. But then I'd also find myself being viewed as 'local', almost a disparaging term: 'a local photographer'; viewed as someone who's going to come with their own baggage, unlike the 'parachute journalist' who's going to come in and will show more insight because they're not emotionally connected to the story. So, I cannot help but reflect upon the audience, because I have that conflict of how information is received and viewed, and I grew up relying on and receiving news from different places.





### At what point did photography take over your life path?

And it does, doesn't it! Doesn't it seem to possess people?

### Yes, it does, very much so...

Even though it brings us abuse and pain and poor living conditions and ends marriages! I was always interested in photography even though, especially in this region, it's not really a respectable medium. If I meet someone and I say I'm a photographer, they're immediately going to think I'm an event photographer. I think photography is a deeply intellectual enterprise, and it wasn't something that was really encouraged. When I would visit Jordan in the summers as a child →

**Above:** A girl plays on a beach near the Deir al-Balah refugee camp, Gaza, in a party dress she wore to wedding celebrations the night before. This image was part of Tanya's prize-winning portfolio in the 2014 World Press Photo Awards.

## \* WHITE DRESS, WRONG THOUGHTS

**EVEN A PHOTO OF A GIRL IN A WHITE DRESS PLAYING ON THE GAZA BEACH CAN BE OPEN TO MISINTERPRETATION...**

Tanya says she can't help but reflect upon her audience when showing her work because of people's different perspectives. For example, while driving along the Gaza coast one morning, she stopped her car after spotting a "stunning little girl in this magic white dress running on the beach". She met the child's father and found out the family had been to a wedding the night before. "So they dressed up, and if you're lucky enough to be close to the groom or bride, you get to wear lovely dresses!" Unsurprisingly, the girl wanted to dress up again when the family went down to the beach. Having gained permission, Tanya took her photos. "I was careful because in my mind I was thinking there are going to be those who see this girl in a white dress, and just because she's a Palestinian they're going to assume she's a child bride."



– because my parents were divorced  
– I remember my first camera was this oblong Kodak camera. Fantastic camera! I used to do bizarre things: pre-multimedia, I would throw my Barbies down from the second storey, I would photograph them falling; I would make a recording on my audio recorder that my father had bought me, so the interest was there, but I was a writer initially.

## **Yes, but not only a writer, there have been many other interests...**

I guess I've always been a bit cynical – whatever discipline you put me in I wanted to push against it, and so I studied journalism as a writer, and it was during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and I was so disgusted and angry at the American media with the obsession with the blue stained dress. I'm from the Middle East and I wanted to talk about other things and I wanted to critique media, so I switched to anthropology. Anthropology was broad enough that I could combine my interests, but media was always there.

I miss writing, all of the disparate things I've tried to do – and I've worked for humanitarian organisations, I've tried my hand in academia, in journalism, in writing, in theatre... but here's the funny thing, what's exciting about what's been happening the past decade is that photography is getting so much more multi-disciplinary itself.

## **For example, your multimedia work, Syria via WhatsApp; it's only a 3½ minute clip, but very powerful and simply constructed. How did that come about?**

Abject failure! Depression. I was given an assignment from UNHCR to Jordan for two months, and at that point I had a newborn baby, and it was important to do this assignment because of the rush of bodies across the Mediterranean. UNHCR gave me this two-month assignment on the women refugees left behind, because the majority of the men were taking to the boats; they could only afford to send one or two at a time and so usually it was the able-bodied men – the teenagers, the fathers – who could theoretically get to Europe and open the path.

## **When was this?**

It was around the time that the Alan



Kurdi image came out (the three-year-old Syrian refugee boy whose body washed up on the beach near Bodrum, Turkey, September 2015). So, I was on this assignment when that image and those other brutal images of people dying on the sea, floating bodies were happening, and I was photographing dimly lit rooms and doing basically traditional refugee photography, because that was the mandate.

## **It sounds frustrating...**

Towards the end of the assignment I was looking at the pictures that I had and they were perfectly fine, nothing that you haven't seen, nothing that I haven't seen, but it wasn't touching the trauma of the vaster story of what was happening. Then, by chance, this woman that I was interviewing, she had seven children, and her husband had made it to Germany, and there was an infant screaming, just angry and red faced, fists furling, and she was so



**For portraiture, the bokeh is stunning, it gives me some of the most beautiful files that I could possibly get**

**Above: In the Jordan Valley of the occupied West Bank, a Palestinian boy called Omar plays with a lamb near where he lives. He told Tanya his siblings have nightmares because of harassment from Israeli settlers.**

**Above right: A Syrian refugee child sleeps on a bare mattress in Jordan, one of Tanya's photos from her UNHCR assignment and the video, Syria via WhatsApp, about the families left behind by the men attempting to cross the sea to Europe.**

**Right: Exhausted from helping the men of the village to build a new well, a boy is comforted by his mother in the Bedouin village of Al-Araqeeb, in the Negev region of Israel. The village is often demolished, with Israeli demolition teams filling wells with sand and rubble.**

exhausted that she didn't have the energy to pick the baby up. Absentmindedly, she fiddled with her phone and I saw her connect to WhatsApp and play a man's voice singing a lullaby, and that baby stopped crying and passed out!

## **It was the father's voice?**

It was the father's voice and that voice soothed the baby – I was amazed. She said he often sends messages to help teach the children, calm the children, and this happened to be just a few days before my assignment was up. Suddenly, it was this 'a-ha!' moment, so I did what I was tasked to do for UNHCR, but I also gathered as much WhatsApp as I could and took that approach. Back then, it wasn't really being done, this WhatsApp approach of utilizing these collaborative messages.

## **And so you added these voice messages to your photos to make the Syria via WhatsApp video?**

Yes, and it was a very strong piece. I gave it as an extra to UNHCR: 'okay, here are the contract pictures, but here's this video!' They go, 'okay', and then a few months later, I go, 'so that video, are you doing anything with it?' and they're like, 'oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.' Then I waited another few months and I said, 'if you're not interested in that video, then I'm just going to release it myself', →









**Above: Palestinian volunteers prepare a backdrop for a children's theatre performance in the neighbouring Bedouin community of Zanba in the occupied West Bank. The backdrop depicts East Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock, one of the most sacred sites in Islam.**

and they say, 'fine.' Then I released it and it went viral! I think it's maybe the only thing I've ever done that truly went viral, and the irony is that the UNHCR in the Gulf eventually contacted me and asked, 'did you make this video for us?'

**Your photo stories and projects of the Middle East are not what most audiences expect, where do you draw the inspiration from?**

My colleague, Peter van Agtmael, we work in what we jokingly call 'the murky middle', and especially when you're dealing with narratives on Palestine. I'm not Palestinian, but I've grown up with Palestine literally in my backyard, that sense of injustice; it tumbled into Jordan with the people, our neighbours, and I've grown up with that narrative, and it

has always been one that is restricted. My point is that Palestine is hyper-narrated to some degree, but then hyper-controlled. Almost everybody has an assumption that they know about Israel and Palestine.

**How do you rise above those assumptions photographically?**

I try to surprise you, I play with surrealism, I play with theatre, I play



**If you're doing it and feel that compulsion deep down, that obsession, then there's nothing else that will feed it**

with various elements; I like to work as much as possible collaboratively, and when you do that it's going to bring in something truly unique into the visual storytelling. It just happens to be that I live in Israel/Palestine and it's difficult to travel in and out of here, but I try to do the same thing with how refugees are perceived in Jordan; I tried to do the same thing with Islamophobia recently in France. I try to take tired tropes and assumptions and I enjoy playing and shaking you up and trying to get you to experience and perceive, or even just pause and consider.

**What do you always pack?**

This is what I'll be taking into the field tomorrow. I am obsessed with the narrative and so I'm not the most technical, but I am lucky to be



## \* BREAKING THE MOULD

### How do you capture a story in a unique way?

"When you really motivate your intentions in a story, and your interaction with it, that's the only time that it's going to really become uniquely yours, because we've all photographed the same concept again and again, so how can you make something new?"

It's going to be when you actually break the mould and get a bit honest about your personal motivations. When you have something

that is special, something that is uniquely yours, don't try to show a derivative of AFP, AP Images, the *New York Times Magazine*: if you're telling the same story that they did from a similar vantage point with less resources, then why? Always come from that rare, unique angle that only you can tell, and that's what you put your energy on and that's going to be your calling card that opens up the world to you."

odd size. What's a 58mm? At first, when I held it up I thought, 'well, that's bizarre!', but it gives you the most unique distant portraiture. It's such a peculiar focal length, but when you get used to it, you're addicted. It will give you your own unique vantage point. It's great!

### Do you use the 58mm on a D850?

I used to but now I have it on a Z 6, because I was doing a special project for Nikon, Stereography. They made a special deck for me where I had two Z 6 cameras side-by-side and one cable release which would fire both at the same time. That's how I ended up getting the Z 6. I've also got a 35mm f/1.8 on the Z 7, so I have the perfect video camera, the Z 6, which is with me at all times. I've got the Z 7, which is nice and light, and then I always have one flash and I really dig the SB5000.

### So, which would you say is your go-to lens out of that selection?

My instinct, my go-to is a 50mm and a 35mm. Then I'll go to the 58mm. The 105mm isn't my go-to. I'm using it because there's a great distance, or I've managed to set up a very stylized situation. If I'm in the field and, 'oh, there's a soldier there, I've got to do this surreptitiously', the 58mm is great for that because it gives you just that little extra. So, I'd say my go-to would be the 58mm or the 35mm.

### Is there a growing interest in photojournalism in the Middle East?

It's not like how in the UK, in Europe, we have our favourite photographers and photojournalists. That doesn't happen here, but social media has altered the way images are consumed, it's this constant flow of images; there's a lot of politically violent images, 'this settler threw this rock', and it goes viral, but rarely will you see the construction of a photo essay being shared, because there are so few platforms. There's no real photo book publishing, there's some talented photo book designers, but the closest place to print a beautiful photo book is in Turkey. Then the problem is how do you get the book into here because it's so hard to send a book between countries, so that limits the consumption of photography.

### But there are other local photojournalists gaining international recognition?

You do have a strong, growing scene of documentary photographers. With photojournalism, you'll have those that are working for AP Images, AFP, and within that you'll have a few superstars, like Khalil Hamra in Gaza, a Palestinian who's won a Pulitzer Prize, and Nariman El-Mofty, also with AP, in Egypt, who also won a Pulitzer Prize for her work, and that's because AP supports their local photographers.

### What is your best piece of advice to someone who wants to become a photojournalist?

I always hated it when famous journalists would come to the university and say, "don't do this, it's a hard field." But it is a hard field, it's going to be hard on you. It's going to be hard on your economic potential, to be a photographer, to be at the calibre of a photographer where you're 'making it', and 'making it' is always on the cusp, you're always on the edge, chasing, and that's if you're in the game! It's stressful, so it's got to be a compulsion because you don't have another choice. Yes, it's hard, so incredibly hard, but if you're doing it and feel that compulsion deep down, that obsession, then there's nothing else that will feed it. ■

**Next Month**  
Australian wildlife  
and conservation  
photographer  
Adam Oswell

sponsored by Nikon and I'm able to have three bodies at any one time. I know everyone is going mirrorless, but the D850 is just so tried and true. It's like a tank, but even though it's so large, I feel it's a bit like a medium format camera sometimes. And with that, I love this lens, the 105mm f/1.4. Luckily, I don't do too much protest photography, so I want proximity and I'm not a big fan of big zoom lenses (but this one will help me) it gives me the distance that I need if I am in a dangerous situation. For portraiture, the bokeh is stunning, it gives me some of the most beautiful files that I could possibly get.

### What else?

Another thing that I think is distinctly Nikon is the 58mm, which is such an