

# Fathi Gaben

## Palestinian Artist in Jabalia



The Palestinian artist whose paintings constitute a threat to 'state security' in the occupied homeland.

In one of the houses of Jabalia camp, Gaza Strip, residence of thousands of Palestinian refugees, lives an artist who wanted to express his inner feelings through his paintings. It is natural that an artist's drawings are an interpretation of his feelings. For any Palestinian artist, this means expressing his sufferings and aspirations as part of his people's collective experience. Yet from this, the problem started for Fathi Gaben. He was imprisoned because the occupation authorities considered that his works constitute a threat to 'state security'.

In 1983, the Israeli authorities confiscated six of Gaben's paintings which were exhibited at Gaza's university. Later, Zionist soldiers raided his home, arresting him and confiscating magazines which are legal in Jerusalem, but forbidden in the Gaza Strip since it is officially under military rule. In May 1984, Gaben was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment and a fine of 30,000 shekels for 'subversive' paintings. The main evidence presented by the Zionist authorities to convict Gaben was a painting which, among other hues, used red, green, black and white - the colors of the Palestinian flag. The Zionist court refused his request to delay his imprisonment so he could find a way to pay the fine. On the contrary, he was sent to prison immediately with the threat of an added month in jail if the fine was not paid within a month.

This outrageous injustice prompted Palestinian artists to undertake a novel form of solidarity. In Jerusalem, eight artists arranged an exhibit of Gaben's paintings in Al Nuzha Theater, while they staged a paint-in. They began painting and drawing on the spot, selling their works, so that the proceeds could go to Gaben's family. The solidarity campaign spread. There were many international protests against the Israeli violation of freedom of artistic expression. For the first time,

Israeli artists expressed solidarity with a Palestinian artist. In August 1984, 30 Israeli artists visited Gaben's family, bringing toys and clothes for his children. They marched through Jabalia with placards opposing the growing fascist tendency in the Israeli state. The people of Jabalia gathered to protest the occupation, while the Israeli artists painted pictures using the forbidden colors. The artists later contacted Israeli politicians to have them intervene to get Gaben released.

Gaben was released two months early as a result of the pressure that built up. This did not indicate a real reversal of the Israeli iron fist against Palestinian art though. On August 30, 1984, Mufid Ghanem, an artist in Jenin in the occupied West Bank, was arrested and thirty of his works confiscated because he had used the colors of the Palestinian flag. However, Gaben's case had created such a stir that even the Israeli daily *Haaretz* sent journalists to Jabalia to interview him. This following is from their reportage.

### FILE ON AN ARTIST

«In the military attorney general's office, located in the military governor's headquarters in one of Gaza's main streets... there is a blue file about a person living in Jabalia camp... He is considered famous, and even a national hero, and the reason for that is the military rule. He is the artist and art teacher Fathi Gaben, 37 years old, who was arrested by the security forces on charges of painting inciting pictures... On our way to his home, a military jeep patrolling the streets of the camp obstructed our way. The soldiers looked in our faces in disbelief, and one of them shouted: 'Have you gone mad? Do you know where you are now?' But Fathi Gaben's hospitality made us feel secure, even in Jabalia camp.

«Three months ago, Fathi Gaben was released... He returned to his wife and eight children in his simple two-room house. Yet despite his early release, Fathi did not smile... You don't find happy people in Jabalia.

«On the outside, the case file number 83/2967 looks like thousands of other files piled up in the offices of the military government in Gaza. But this file contains only a few pages in which a strange story is recorded in terse military wording. The charges against Fathi Gaben were registered... The sentence against the artist, like the legal deliberations, was short and decisive. From that file, we found out how the trial went: The attorney general reviewed the case and the authorities' charges, while the defendant's lawyer spoke very few words. The judge, as if to cut the process short, gave his verdict without thought or hesitation, executing the demand of the attorney general. The artist, who was convicted of the charges and even confessed to them, was sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of 30,000 shekels. Feeling sorry, an officer at the attorney general's office said that the lawyer was the cause of the sentence. Had Fathi had a good lawyer, he would have been spared going to jail.

«The story of Fathi Gaben's arrest could not stay secret. The strange charge sheet, and the sentencing of the artist to prison, soon became public, especially after the demonstration of some Israeli artists near Gaben's house. The charge sheet against Fathi contained three charges: first, receiving leaflets; second, keeping them; and third - the real surprise - that on August 19, 1983, the defendant had tried to influence public opinion in the area by painting and exhibiting at the Islamic University's art exhibition, pictures of an eagle, the PLO's flag and a boy injured during a demonstration...

«During the discussion of the punishment to be imposed, the lawyer asked the judge to take into consideration the defendant's confession and his monthly wage of no more than 30,000 shekels. He said that Gaben paints nature pictures; he did not mean any harm to security, and did not know that what he painted was forbidden. Otherwise, he would not have signed his full name on his paintings. However, the judge adhered to his opinion, saying that the crimes committed by the artist were very dangerous ▶