



Live Action Role Playing: A Gateway to Palestine

By Zeid Khalil



“I’ve always hated acting” was my response to a Facebook message sent to me by a friend who was inviting me to join what he referred to as a “game” where people take on characters and act out roles based on their own imagination. He explained that it had nothing to do with theatrical acting; there were no details on how your character should be or what your character would say, and no script or audience. He summed it up by saying that basically one could do it anywhere, anytime, and most importantly, there was no right or wrong way. Even though I was not sure whether I had understood the concept or even whether I was interested, I thought, “Why not? After all, I have nothing to lose.”

My first game was simple: The setting was in a Zamn-like café where people from all walks of life come to drink coffee. My character was described in a 22-word paragraph that read: “You are a flirty, successful, married businessman. You are surrounded with fake people most of the time, and you don’t mind it.” At that point I did not know who the other characters were, but soon enough I found myself in character, automatically flirting with the girl at another table. I was then approached by the waiter, a fresh graduate who was looking for a job. There were two guys at the table behind me who hated my guts because I had stolen a seven-figure business deal from them. Although only eight players were playing that game, there were a lot of funny moments and interesting scenes. After the game we talked about what happened and what everyone was trying to do, and finally how we would love to repeat such activities in the near future. Live Action Role Play (LARP) was an amazing experience.

After several games, I started to think about how LARP could be used to break stereotypes about Palestine, and as a means of social



and cultural exchange. My thoughts also led me to question how expats who come to Palestine wanting to learn and experience as much as they can possibly handle within a limited time could have a rich and deep experience after only a few days of visiting different cities, taking part in a weekly demonstration here or there, passing by Yasser Arafat’s or Mahmoud Darwish’s tomb, or even having a drink at a local bar or coffee shop. Do they grasp the real essence of Palestine? How much do they understand of what makes people love this land? Personally, I think that their experience gives them data to question the way the media depicts the lives of Palestinians. We are typically portrayed in a fighting mode all day, every day, struggling with checkpoints, land theft, settlements, water, and a bad economy. This reality does not negate the fact that Palestinians also enjoy birthday parties, New Year’s Eve, Christmas, *Eid*, weddings, and an ordinary boring day. This realization, being shared with others within the emerging LARP community, was translated into an LARP game, “Till Death Do Us Part,” a joint cooperation between a Norwegian LARP organization, *Fantasierforbundet*, which has supported the LARP community in Palestine ever since its birth, and The Peace and Freedom Forum (PFF), the organization that hosts LARP in Palestine. The game

Have you ever watched a movie where young kids were dressed up as ancient warriors with shields and swords, fighting each other to defend their kingdoms, and wished that you could have done that back in your day? Why not make that wish come true? The Palestinian Live Action Role Playing (LARP) community offers a space where you can travel back in time to be that warrior, or rush through the future and live with robots and maybe become an alien. All of this can be experienced simply through a non-scripted, improvised role-playing setting, coupled with a group of friendly, fun players who share the same love for Palestine and passion for creativity.



focused on a Palestinian girl who studied abroad and fell in love with a Norwegian guy. The girl insisted that the wedding had to be fully Palestinian, and the groom, being deeply in love, agreed. For three consecutive days, 17 international LARPers from various European countries mingled with 18 Palestinians from different places in the West Bank. LARPers from both sides who were deeply involved in their given characters witnessed together how serious and detailed the *tulbeh*

ceremony could be, especially given the involvement of the respected elders. The groom had to experience the Turkish bath while the bride was attending her henna party. After that, the official grooming and *sahra* took place one day before the wedding. On the big day, the groom came on horseback, his Palestinian in-laws and their friends felt obliged to dance *dabka* for him since his family and friends had no idea how to. Subjects of alcohol, homosexuality, religion, dating, politics, money, and corruption were all in question, as was the contrast between Palestinian curiosity about every single detail of a person's life and European appreciation for privacy.

As part of the PFF activities, LARP has been used to interact with Palestinians in refugee camps not only in Palestine but also in other Arab countries, such as Al Rashidiya Refugee Camp in Lebanon. It has also been used to create a space for fun and recreation for underprivileged children in distant villages such as Awarta in Nablus and Al Samou' in Hebron. In addition, it has been used in Finland as a tool to explain the political situation of Palestine through playing "A State of Siege," a game where the Palestinian situation was relived in a Western setting, and where players from all Scandinavian countries played characters who represented the Israeli occupation forces, on one hand, and

Palestinians from various political groups, government officials, activists, NGO representatives, and human rights officials, on the other.

These are some of many examples where LARP has been the tool used to bridge the gap between Palestinians in different places inside and outside Palestine, and to create a deeper understanding of Palestine within the international community in a way that is not restricted to facts, figures, and numbers in a PowerPoint presentation, but rather an interactive way where each player involved can witness firsthand how it feels to be Palestinian. Nevertheless, LARP has always been used as a way to have fun, enjoy one's time, and defuse the tensions of daily life.

Playing LARP can be simple or complex, depending on the world the game-master wants to create. Some games can last for two hours and others can be a week long. In addition, some games have pre-set character definition while others offer the possibility to build your character based on your imagination. Most games have a story line or a general theme. Moreover, some games take you back and forth in time, while others are played in the present. In some games players dress up in costumes to give depth to their characters.

New LARPers only need to attend a game on time, read the general description or setting, and take an active part in the pre-game workshop. The workshops help people get into the role-playing mood in preparation for the game. After that, the players pause for a minute to visualize their characters and then play the game and experience where their characters will take them. Finally, LARPers will sit down to reflect in the after-game debriefing session, which is usually followed by a casual gathering so that the players can get to know each other for who they really are.

General guidelines for LARP include, but are not limited to, the following recommendations:

1. Play to lose: LARP is not a competitive game; it is fun unless your character has a deep (unnecessary) purpose to achieve.
2. Characters in the game are not real characters; almost always the sweetest people play the meanest characters.
3. Do not block-play: when one player is approached by another he/she should not walk away but rather engage in a fun conversation or activity.
4. If you are sitting at a table before or after a LARP, always provide an extra empty chair for people who want to join the conversation.
5. Respect other players' space and feelings both on and off game time.
6. You are encouraged to stop the game when you feel uncomfortable at any point.
7. Enjoy your time.

Ever since 2011 the Palestinian LARP community has grown dramatically from no more than 10 players to around 200 Palestinians who have played a LARP at least once. The community is also a regular participant in the Nordic annual LARP conference, *Knutepunkt*, which gathers LARPers from 25 countries around the world. In addition, the PFF is involved in year-long multiple projects



with German, Danish, and Palestinian organizations. The community is also working on its internal capacities where knowledge and experience gained by experienced LARPers are being shared with interested newcomers in the form of game-writing workshops and game-organization workshops, in addition to the participation in international LARP events throughout the year. All achievement and events that have taken place since 2011 have been documented in a book that will be published during 2015 and distributed free of charge for those interested.

Are you ready for your first LARP?

Check for updates on our Facebook group page: Palestine LARP.

Zeid Khalil is a young business professional. After graduating from Birzeit University, he worked for seven years in several private-sector companies such as Wataniya Mobile, Zoom Advertising, and Baransi Communication and Information (BCI) solutions. In 2013 he moved to the small city of Lincoln, UK, to pursue his master's degree in international marketing, which he successfully completed with merit. Currently Zeid is Product Development Supervisor at the National Bank in Ramallah, Palestine. In addition to being a board member of several organizations, including the Arab Palestinian Sexuality Forum and Peace and Freedom Forum, Zeid is an active member in the Live Action Role Playing (LARP) community in Palestine.

Article photos: LARP trips to Jericho. Photos by Riad Mustafa.

