

INTRODUCING BAHA HILO

**Compiled by Dr. Riffat Hassan for *The Salaam Network's* Interfaith
Group for the Study of Important Books**



Baha Hilo is a native Palestinian born and raised in Bethlehem. He is a graduate of Birzeit University with a degree in Sociology.

Baha Hilo is an educator and an activist. He has worked with different humanitarian, human rights and advocacy groups including the U.N., the Joint Advocacy Initiative of the YMCA & YWCA and his experience has also included working with the National Council of the YMCAs in Sri Lanka, and Silver Bay Association in N. Y amongst others.

Baha Hilo's reputation as an extraordinary educator has reached many different corners of the globe. He has been invited by international organizations, cultural

institutions and universities such as Bard College in New York. He has lectured in various parts of the world, including Brazil, the U.S., Malaysia, the Netherlands and Norway. Through these platforms, he has received global and local audiences, sharing his knowledge and experience of the realities of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Baha Hilo's educational initiatives aim to raise international awareness and build global solidarity.

In 1998, Baha Hilo co-founded the ***BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights*** is an independent, human rights non-profit organization committed to defend and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons. It is registered with the Palestinian Ministry of Interior; legally owned by a General Assembly and administered by 9 elected Board members. ***BADIL*** holds special consultative status with U. N. since 2006.

BADIL believes that the only feasible and durable solution is one that is based on rights and justice; derived from international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, the principles of justice, and the best practices of states. Its vision, mission, programs and relationships are defined by Palestinian identity and the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. It seeks to advance the individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people on this basis.

BADIL is unique in its comprehensive approach and legal analysis which is not restricted to a particular period of time or to a specific geographic location. ***BADIL***'s work falls within four specialized units: Legal & International Advocacy, Research & Documentation, and Community Mobilization.

Since 2013 Baha Hilo has been focused on education on Palestine through an initiative called ***TO BE THERE*** which was launched by a collective of activists and educators who believe in the importance of helping people around the world to better understand the reality imposed on Palestinians by the State of Israel. The mission of this initiative has always revolved around the development and delivery of programs that educate, inform, and raise awareness, contributing to the realization of peace, justice, equality, freedom, and democracy in Palestine.

TO BE THERE aims to educate non-Palestinians by organizing visits and educational solidarity programs such as the FFIPP Summer Internships Program. (FFIPP is an international non-profit organization, comprised of international students and faculties, working in solidarity for a complete end of occupation and just peace in Palestine). He also coordinated different educational visits such as the annual Olive Harvest, Olive Planting, Palestinian Land Day, summer study programs, and Christmas in Palestine.

TO BE THERE works toward a society where law prevails in the interest of all its citizens living and previously living in historic Palestine, including refugees expelled from their homes in 1948. Since 2013, it has reached out to people from different corners of the world, many of whom came as guests and went home as friends for life. The kind of experience and knowledge people received has helped them enrich the ever-expanding network of people in solidarity with Palestine who have a clear understanding of the complex forms of Israeli apartheid and the ongoing oppression that State of Israel continues to reproduce.

In 2019, ***TO BE THERE*** started working on an exciting project: ***THE CITADEL - 1865***. The Citadel was a building which had been built between 1860 and 1865 as

a school and a multipurpose hall. It is one of the 3 oldest buildings in the town of **BEIT SAHOUR**, a Palestinian town east of Bethlehem, in the Bethlehem Governorate of the state of Palestine. The city is under the administration of the Palestine National Authority. Its population in 2017 was 13,281, consisting of approximately 80% Christians (most of them Greek Orthodox) and 20% Muslims.

The idea of renovating the Citadel was quite simple: revive the original objectives and bring it back to an educational space and a multipurpose room. As an inspiring space, The Citadel was also supposed to be the center of all indoors activities as well as the different educational and cultural events organized by ***TO BE THERE***.

This project almost collapsed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Israeli restrictions on access to Palestinian society already existed, but the travel restrictions because of health issues made this access nearly impossible. This new reality called for different forms of adaptation, like providing updates and knowledge through webinars, podcast episodes, online activism, and virtual tours.

During this ongoing crisis, Baha Hilo and his group realized that the Citadel could be very useful for the local community in several ways. One way was to create a space to exchange knowledge and inspirations for local intellectuals, musicians, artists, film makers, activists, and other cultural producers. It could be the place where such talents could be highlighted and celebrated during such stressful and depressing times. It could also be the space where Palestinians could be supportive toward each other and join in refusing to give up in the face of different forms of political, ethical, economic, and social corruption during this ongoing global health crisis. Baha Hilo has served as the Activities Coordinator of ***THE CITADEL - 1865*** project.

Olive trees have been a major part of Baha Hilo's practice as an educator and community organizer. In May 2022, he initiated a new project entitled *PRESERVE* which is curated by Emily Jacir is supported by the Center for Human Rights and the Arts. This project which commenced at **DAR JACIR**, an arts and education center in Bethlehem, is focusing on preserving and repairing the olive terraces and the historic olive trees on Palestinian land. Additional olive trees will be planted in the winter, as well as other trees that are natural protectors of the olive trees from insects (fig trees).

PRESERVE comprises a series of lectures, workshops, and gatherings based in the terrace, including participating in the olive harvest (November 2022). The project is also experimenting with companion plants that have been historically used to enrich the soil around the trees. For example, eggplant was interplanted amongst the olive trees to try to bring much needed nitrogen.

Baha Hilo presented an artist talk and discussion at Dar Jacir on Friday 14, October, 2022. The talk was held in English and Arabic and focused on the significance, history and place of olive trees in Palestine, as well as the different methods used by the state of Israel to destroy this ancestral staple and tradition. He discussed his current project at Dar Jacir's olive terrace and the significance of olive trees, historically and today, covering four broad themes – culture, economics, religion, and politics. He also discussed the importance of the olive tree as a symbol of Palestinian *sumud* (“*resistance and steadfastness*”).

Baha Hilo's talk served as an introduction to the olive harvest at Dar Jacir, and the following day (15 October), everyone was invited to join the olive harvest. Following the harvest, Baha Hilo led the group in preserving and pickling the olives and making olive oil.

Baha Hilo has appeared in documentaries including *Walled Citizen* and *Israelism*.

WALLED CITIZEN: |a Travel Film about Walls from Palestine! Despite living between walls and carrying one of the world's weakest ranking passports, a Palestinian filmmaker attempts to travel the world in search for freedom. Release date: October 16, 2020. Director: Sameer Qumsiyeh

ISRAILISM is a 2023 American documentary about the portrayal of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in American Jewish institutions. It uniquely explores how Jewish attitudes towards Israel are changing dramatically, with massive consequences for the region and for Judaism itself. When two young American Jews raised to support Israel unconditionally witness the way Israel treats Palestinians, they become conflicted and their lives are changed. They join a movement of young American Jews campaigning to redefine Judaism’s relationship with Israel and reveal a deepening generational divide over modern Jewish identity. ***Israelism*** sparked huge debate on American campuses even before the events of October 7, 2023. Release Date: February 23, 2023. Directed by Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen, it has screened at various film festivals in the United States and won a Brooklyn Film Festival Spirit Award

Baha Hilo has a YouTube channel, The link is BALA HILO’s YouTube Channel. BAHA HILO/<https://tobe-there.com>. (335 videos)

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