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Photo Credit: Giulio Malfer

# Khaled Jarrar Stamps His Authority

Ramallah-based artist's latest project addresses national identity

By **Emily Gogolak**

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Start in east Jerusalem, board bus Number 18, cross Qalandia checkpoint, and drive 10 kilometers into the central West Bank until you reach Ramallah's bus station. Get off the bus and get ready for a firm handshake, a wide smile, and question that will surprise you. "Welcome to Palestine! Can I please stamp your passport?"

Palestine is not yet an official state, but a Palestinian state stamp might be coming soon to a passport near you. Meet Khaled Jarrar. Armed with a bold idea and a black inkpad, this up-and-coming Ramallah-based artist is turning heads with his new project, Live and Work in Palestine, and getting people in the political and arts worlds alike to ask the question, "What's in a passport?"

"The thought started from a conversation with some friends about three years ago," Jarrar explains. Visiting Ramallah from abroad, these friends were complaining about a recent

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experience at Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion airport, where they were interrogated by security personnel about plans to visit the territories. Characteristic of the patchwork institutional framework that characterizes life across the security fence/separation barrier, the territories have no immigration authority of their own: all you need to get in is an Israeli-issued visa. Jarrar started thinking, “Why should Israelis be the only ones to decide who gets to enter Palestine? I wanted to welcome people, as a Palestinian, to Palestine.”

First Jarrar started making what he called ‘Green Cards’ for visiting friends, souvenirs inviting them to live and work in Palestine. But it was not until January 2011 that Jarrar took his idea to the next level, from a few friends to the greater public, from the green card to the passport, and from under-the-radar artistic project to an overtly subversive political gesture.

Jarrar designed his own state symbol – the Palestinian sunbird (a folkloric symbol for the Palestinian people) surrounded by the words “State of Palestine” in English and Arabic. He put it on a stamp, and headed to the bus station in downtown Ramallah to welcome tourists to the territories – without quite knowing what to expect.

“When I told my friends I wanted to stamp passports, they thought I was crazy. ‘It’s illegal!’ they said. But, it isn’t... You can get touristic passport stamps all over. Checkpoint Charlie, Machu Picchu, the tower of Pisa, to name just a few.”

But Palestine is not Pisa. And Jarrar’s project is about politics, not tourism. “I wanted to provoke the whole idea of the state,” he explains. “I want people to look at a logo, and think about its way of controlling government, ministries, police, people. It’s about the authority behind a symbol.” But in an environment where the threat of upheaval is an ever-present reality, plays on symbols of authority are not taken lightly. And as cross-border tension was mounting in the weeks leading up to the Palestinian statehood bid at the United Nations in September, Jarrar could not have chosen a more contentious time to start stamping. “My project is very risky, very dangerous,” he admits. “No one has done anything like this here.”

The risk is not his alone. Israeli border security is already notoriously tough, and carrying a Palestinian stamp doesn’t make it any easier to get in and out of the country. Jarrar couldn’t predict how authorities would react, and he was even less certain about how many people would be willing to hand him their passports.

Today the total stands at 238 stamps, 10 of them in Israeli passports; and the reaction from authorities has been varied. When the first person, a South African, with a Palestinian stamp went to Ben Gurion, the only thing security said was, “This is the first time I’ve seen something like this!” before stamping his exit visa and returning his passport. The next time one of Jarrar’s stamps came through, on a Dutch passport, the police were more skeptical. “He told me that they called over five guards to look at the stamp,” Jarrar says, “but nobody said anything. They made a photocopy and then gave him the passport back and he left.”

As more and more of the stamps started passing through Israeli airports, however, not everyone was so lucky. Some faced interrogation and one Palestinian-stamped Israeli passport was even cancelled; but, for the most part, the police have done little except show some curiosity. “They don’t know if this is real or art,” says Jarrar.

Live and Work in Palestine is certainly a symbolic political statement, but is it art? For Jarrar, the two are one and the same. “There is nothing here that is not political. I am an activist for freedom, so this is how I find the role of the artist.” And it’s a role he is taking far beyond Ramallah. Though he still stamps at the same central bus station, he also has been making appearances worldwide – recent stops include Cairo, Amman, Belgrade, Brussels, Rome, and London – and the arts establishment is taking note. Jarrar was invited last October to exhibit in Paris at the FIAC (one of the most prestigious international contemporary art fairs) and he will participate in the 7th Berlin Biennale this spring. As an Israeli girl with one of Jarrar’s stamps told a security guard at Ben Gurion, “You’re going to be seeing a lot more of these.”



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