

Handala—a boy whose face we don't see

Learning outcomes

- ◇ Students will develop media literacy and the ability to read political cartoons
- ◇ Students will consider how visual imagery and symbolism are used and gain insight into how symbols come to have power and meaning
- ◇ Students will gain a greater understanding of the symbols Palestinians use to understand their experience
- ◇ Students will gain familiarity with the work of one of the most popular Arab
- ◇ Students will employ visual symbols to draw their own cartoons

Lesson in brief:

Students will look at 10 cartoons by Naji Al-Ali, a Palestinian political cartoonist and one of the most popular in the Arab world. Students will explore the power of symbols and draw their own cartoons

National curriculum: 2.1a, 2.1c, 2.1d

Materials: powerpoint of cartoons, teachers' notes, copies of handouts, copies of handouts with pictures of cartoons (optional)

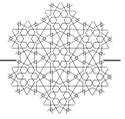
Handala, a cartoon character, a young barefoot boy whose face we never see, has become one of the most powerful and enduring symbols for the Palestinians, encapsulating both what they have been through and their hopes for the future. Today Palestinians and their supporters sport Handala T-shirts, necklaces, key-rings.

Al-Ali's work was also hated. The editor of a newspaper he worked for said he had received more than a hundred death threats over the years. Naji Al-Ali's work earned him many enemies. He drew about Israeli oppression of the Palestinians and he criticised US and international support for Israel and their inaction. But he also criticised Arab regimes and elites.



Naji Al-Ali, Handala's creator and a political cartoonist, was a Palestinian who grew up in a refugee camp in Lebanon and came to be the most popular cartoonist across the Arab world. Twenty years after his murder – he was shot in the head at point-blank range while on his way to deliver his cartoons in London – his work is as relevant, and loved, as ever.

For Naji Al-Ali, it was not simply about exposing the brutality of the Israeli army, but also the hypocrisy and complicity of the Palestinian leadership. Naji Al-Ali is still the most popular artist in the Arab world, loved for his defense of the ordinary people, and for his criticism of repression and the absence of democracy.



Who is Handala?

Handala appears in every cartoon that the cartoonist Naji Al-Ali drew. His back is turned to the world and he is watching the action of the cartoon, inviting us to do the same. At times, he takes part in the action in the cartoon. Handala means 'medicinal bitter desert fruit' in Arabic.

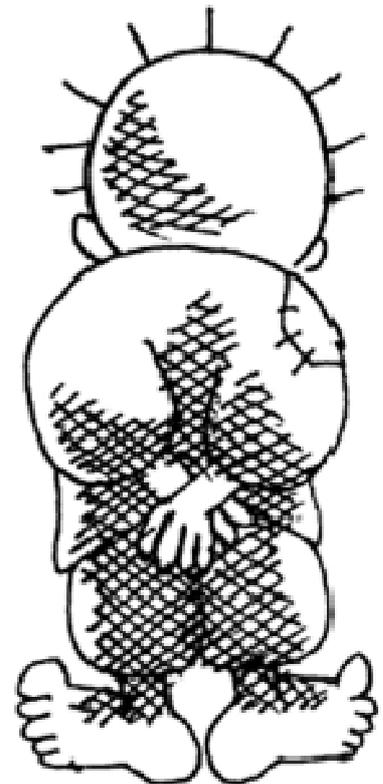
Handala was born ten years old and remains ten years old, the age Naji Al-Ali was when he was expelled from his village in 1948. Two out of every three Palestinians were expelled from their homes when Israel was established. They have not been allowed home and remain refugees.

What Naji Al-Ali said about Handala....

The character of Handala was a sort of icon that protected my soul from falling whenever I felt sluggish or I was ignoring my duty. That child was like a splash of fresh water on my forehead, bringing me to attention and keeping me from error and loss. He was the arrow of the compass, pointing steadily towards Palestine. Not just Palestine in geographical terms, but Palestine in its humanitarian sense — the symbol of a just cause, whether it is located in Egypt, Vietnam or South Africa.

His name is Handala and he has promised the people that he will remain true to himself. I drew him as a child who is not beautiful; his hair is like the hair of a hedgehog who uses his thorns as a weapon. Handala is not a fat, happy, relaxed, or pampered child. He is barefooted like the refugee camp children, and he is an icon that protects me from making mistakes. Even though he is rough, he smells of amber. His hands are clasped behind his back as a sign of rejection at a time when solutions are presented to us the American way.

I stood facing it all with my pen every day. I never felt fear, failure or despair, and I didn't surrender. I faced armies with cartoons and drawings of flowers, hope and bullets. Yes, hope is essential, always.

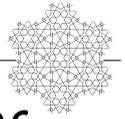


Other characters that appear in Naji Al-Ali's work:

- ◇ Poor thin man in patched rags
- ◇ Proud woman in traditional Palestinian dress
- ◇ Arab/Palestinian elite represented as deformed and legless
- ◇ Israeli soldier

Symbols that appear in Naji Al-Ali's work:

- ◇ Key
- ◇ Map of historical Palestine
- ◇ Kuffiyeh – a traditional Palestinian scarf



Teachers' notes for going through the cartoons

- ◆ There are 10 cartoons apart from the image of Handala. For younger age groups, you can use fewer cartoons if you feel this would be more appropriate for your class.

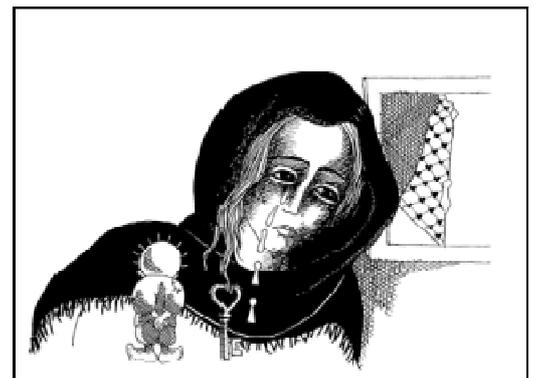
Cartoon of Handala

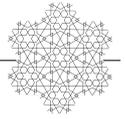
- ◆ Ask the students how this person looks to them and he might be feeling. Ask the students to jot down a few words. They will probably not have much to write down. Tell them that this is ok.
- ◆ Do the students notice that Handala has a patch in his clothes?
- ◆ Explain who Handala is. Tell the students that he appears in every cartoon you will look at today, but that they will not see his face. Explain that he is the trademark of the cartoonist you are looking at, Naji Al-Ali, and that Handala was born ten years old and remains ten years old, the age Naji Al-Ali was when he was expelled from his village in 1948. Explain that in the violence that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel, two of every three Palestinians were expelled from their homes and became refugees. Explain also that they remain refugees until today and are still hoping to be able to return to their homes – known as the Right of Return. Tell the students that Handala's name means 'medicinal bitter desert fruit.'
- ◆ Make sure that the students are aware of Handala's presence in the ten cartoons you look. In each case, before turning to the next cartoon, ask the students what they feel when they look at Handala and what they think he might be feeling.



Cartoon 1

- ◆ With the information about Palestinian refugees and perhaps some guidance students may pick up on the significance of the key. It is a pervasive symbol representing both the dream to go home, and also the right to go home, as the keys represent ownership and belonging. How do the students know what the woman is crying about?
- ◆ Ask the students how they might feel if they were unable to ever return home? What would they miss? Can they imagine what it would be like to be a refugee?
- ◆ Ask the students what might be framed in the corner – and they may guess it is a map. Explain to them it is a map of the whole of historic Palestine and that the pattern on the map is the pattern of the Palestinian keffiyeh. The keffiyeh is a traditional Palestinian scarf which has come to represent Palestinian identity and solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Ask the students what else they notice about the map and they might pick up on the hearts. In a real keffiyeh there are no hearts.
- ◆ This cartoon includes the main key symbols which are used by Palestinians and their supporters – the key, the map, the keffiyeh. Symbols of Palestinian identity are often employed, in part because Palestinian identity, history and existence has often been denied. One Israeli prime minister notoriously said 'Palestinians do not exist.' They are also symbols not just of Palestinian identity, but also Palestinian goals—chiefly to be able to return.
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?





Cartoon 2

- ◆ Ask the students to guess what is going on in this picture.
- ◆ Alert the students to the keffiye around the woman's waist if they do not notice it. Tell them also, in connection to this, that the dress the woman is wearing is a traditional Palestinian dress.
- ◆ They may know that the 6 pointed stars on the clothes being held by the man behind are the symbol of Judaism. What they may not know however is that it is also the symbol on the Israeli flag. Explain to the students that in these cartoons – as in other cartoons on these issues – the Star of David represents the state of Israel and not the Jewish religion.
- ◆ The man behind – we will see more like him in later cartoons – represents the Palestinian elite and politicians. With this information what do they make of the cartoon? The interpretation usually given to this cartoon is that a politician is sneaking up on the woman intending to convince her to forgo her embroidered Palestinian dress for an Israeli alternative. What does the face expression of the woman convey?
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?



Cartoon 3

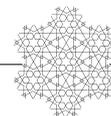
- ◆ What do the students think this woman is feeling? Why? What do they feel when they look at Handala? What do they think he might be feeling?



Cartoon 4

- ◆ What do students make of this cartoon? Ensure the students note the keffiye wrapped around the child. Students may or may not recognise the crucifixion as the symbol of Christianity and the crescent as the symbol of Islam. Based on these symbols, ask the students to guess what religion Palestinians usually are – the answer is mainly Christian and Muslim, though there are more Muslims.
- ◆ Naji Al-Ali shows that Muslims and Christians are suffering equally. Explain that this might have been an important point to make because many people see the conflict in religious terms – as between Jews and Muslims – rather than between the people who lived in Palestine and those who wanted to establish their own state there.
- ◆ What about the religious imagery? With prompting, students will see the depiction of the Palestinian mother as Mary. For the older students, encourage them to ask if it is Palestine that is being crucified, who for? Jesus was killed for others. Has Palestine been sacrificed because of other people's sins? Think of the Holocaust. Are Palestinians victims of the victims?
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?
- ◆ At this point, recap the previous cartoons. It is interesting to note that Naji Al-Ali drew many women. Encourage the students to notice that in each of the cartoons so far, the woman has had a different expression, not simply one of victimhood.





Cartoon 5

- ◆ This cartoon obviously continues with religious imagery. Before you tell the students anything, they should notice the Star of David on the helmet of the soldier, and that he represents the Israeli army and militarism.
- ◆ The writing in Arabic says 'The intifada of the West Bank and Gaza.' Explain that these areas were militarily occupied in 1967 (and are still occupied today) and that in the 1980s there was a largely peaceful uprising known as the intifada against the occupation by ordinary Palestinians. What is Naji Al-Ali saying in this cartoon about the Palestinian suffering and their resistance – how does the presence of Jesus help him say this?
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling? Should Handala do anything to help



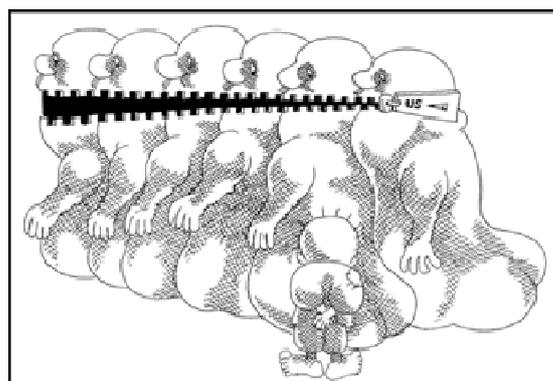
Cartoon 6

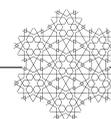
- ◆ In this cartoon, students should be able to pick up on the Israeli army ploughing an American flag into the land. They should understand that the Naji al-Ali is criticizing the US-Israeli relationship, even if they do not know what the US and Israel are close allies. This cartoon is a criticism of the relationship between the US and Israel and its effects on Palestine. The ploughing of the map on the land suggests military dominance. Israel receives vast sums of economic and military aid (set at \$3 billion for each of the next 10 years) and the US has repeatedly blocked criticisms of Israeli actions at the UN.
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?



Cartoon 7

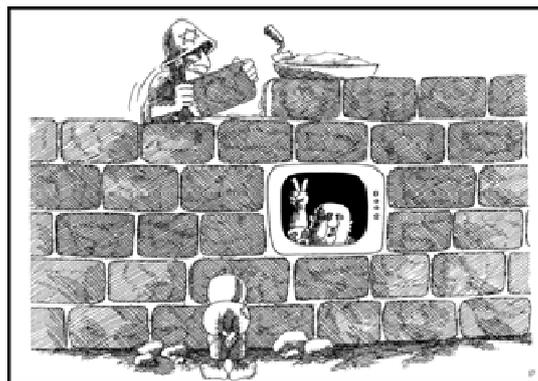
- ◆ Students will not know who these amorphous looking men are, but they may notice, with guidance, that they look like the man in the second cartoon who represented the Palestinian and Arab leadership. Here Naji Al-Ali is criticizing the relationship between the Arab regimes and the US. What is the nature of that relationship in this cartoon? What does the zip with 'US' written on it signify about this relationship? The US controls what can and can't be said.
- ◆ How has he represented the Palestinian and Arab leadership? If his criticism was reserved just for the Western world, how might this cartoon have looked different? Might he, for example, have depicted them as honourably fighting back? Naji Al-Ali drew them as physically deformed and legless to represent their corruption and moral deformity.
- ◆ Ask the students why they think there is a focus on the US. The US is a superpower and supports Israel with vast amounts of military and economic aid. Britain's position has not differed significantly from that of the US, so it is worth asking the students how they would feel about these cartoons if the US was replaced with the UK.
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?





Cartoon 8

- ◆ Students should be able to recognise the Israeli soldier, and the Palestinian leader on the TV screen. They may note the man declaring victory on the TV screen. But what is going on around the TV? This might be a good chance to talk about the importance of not believing everything you hear on television—even Handala has to be careful.
- ◆ Students may need to be told that a key ongoing feature of the occupation is the expropriation and confiscation of Palestinian land often to build settlements which are out of bounds to Palestinians. Whilst the Israeli army continues with its activities, the Palestinian leadership claims victory.
- ◆ Tell the students that there is massive wall now being built which is destroying the lives of many Palestinians. So, since this cartoon was drawn, things have got worse. They will remember about the wall when you show them the photo of the wall in the 'Handala today' section.
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?



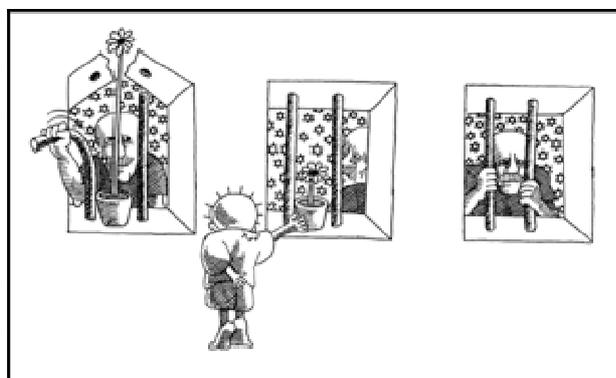
Cartoon 9

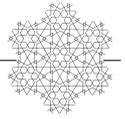
- ◆ Ask the students what they see in this picture. They will note the man whose chest is studded with medals, and the man with his medal on his backside, who has lost a leg. Do the students think that the decorated man really fought in all the battles the medals would suggest?
- ◆ What else do they know about the man in front – do they notice the patch in his clothes and that he is poor, do they think that he really fought? Who does Handala consider to be the hero? How does Naji Al-Ali portray ordinary people? How is the man represented differently from the individuals representing the Palestinian elite?
- ◆ This is the first time we see Handala touching someone else. Why is this person so special to Handala? The person is also touching Handala on the head, why do you think this is?
- ◆ Before turning to the next slide, remind the students to look at Handala. What do they feel when they look at him? What do they think he might be feeling?



Cartoon 10

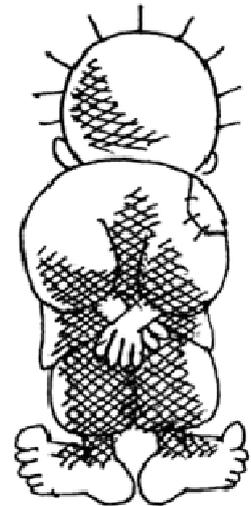
- ◆ The students will need to be told that Arabs, the main audience of these cartoons, read from right to left – so it is the part on the right where the man is depressed and dejected that occurs first.
- ◆ Is the man an ordinary person or one of the elite? In fact, one of the characters in Naji Al-Ali's work, is a thin man in rags, with a moustache. People familiar with his work would recognise the character in the previous cartoon and this one as being the same.
- ◆ Students should realise the man is in prison and note the stars on the walls that show it is an Israeli prison. Tell the students that over the years thousands of Palestinians have been imprisoned for fighting against the occupation. There are now around 10 000 Palestinians in Israeli jails.
- ◆ How is hope depicted here? Where can it come from? How is this cartoon different from the others?
- ◆ What is Handala doing? He is not a bystander as in the other cartoons, but a participant. How might Handala feel in this cartoon? How do students feel when they look at Handala here?





Cartoon of Handala

- ◆ Return to the cartoon of Handala that you started with. Ask the students to jot down separately from the words they wrote down earlier a few words about what they think of what they look at Handala now, what feelings they have, and what feelings Handala might have. Give the students a few minutes to do this.
- ◆ If they compare what they have now to the words they wrote down at the beginning of the class, they should notice that now when they look at exactly same cartoon as they did earlier, they are able to see much more.
- ◆ Use this to talk about how symbols gain their power and enduring qualities. When Palestinians look at Handala, they do not just see a sketch drawing of a boy – he evokes much more. Ask the students if they can think of any symbols that are important to them – what do these symbols evoke?



Handala today

- ◆ You can use this photo as an example of how Handala is used as a symbol today
- ◆ Here he has been painted on the Wall that Israel is currently building in the West Bank. For Palestinians it means increased impoverishment, land confiscation and human rights violations. Palestinians have found different creative ways to resist, and graffiti on the Wall is one of these ways.

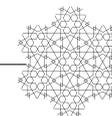


Homework/ follow-up

- ◆ On the handout on the following page there are two news stories with some background information. Ask the students to choose one of these and to draw a cartoon using some of the motifs from Naji Al-Ali's work. To help the students, give them the 'Who is Handala' page (page two) which outlines what Handala represents and contains a box to remind the students of the characters and symbols which recur in his work. You can also give the students the following pages which outline the task and contain the cartoons considered in the lesson, which students may find helpful.

OR

- ◆ The power of Naji Al-Ali's work lies in part in his self-representation as a child that was meant as a way of dealing with own personal sense of loss that is common to almost all Palestinians. Get the students to draw themselves as a kind of Handala. Ask the students to talk about what they do when they are sad, or something scary happens to them, by drawing a cartoon about it. Or you could ask them to draw about something they don't like, or wish they could change, about their world, or family, or community. This is also a way of showing how Palestinians have contributed to political expression in general.



Draw your own cartoon...

Choose one of the news stories and draw a cartoon inspired by Naji Al-Ali's work to comment on the story in a newspaper.



News story: Peace talks – Palestinian and Israeli leaders are heading to Washington for peace talks. As in previous peace negotiations, two key issues will not be on the table for discussion: the issue of refugees and whether they can ever go home and the issue of settlements.

Background:

Refugees – In 1948 when Israel was established, two thirds of Palestinians were made refugees. Until today, they have not been allowed back home. But the right of every refugee to return to his or her home is a human right, enshrined in international law. The Right of Return is a right that Israel has refused to acknowledge and the international community has not pressurised Israel to do so.

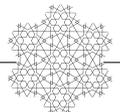
Settlements – illegal under international law – are towns for Israeli Jews only established since 1967 in the occupied territories. Palestinian homes are destroyed and land is seized for the settlements, and now almost 40% of the West Bank is out of bound to Palestinians. In order to ensure the comfort of Israeli settlers, resources including water are allocated unequally and Palestinian freedom of movement is limited – meaning their human rights to healthcare, education, work, economic well being and contact with families are often violated. There are now almost half a million settlers in the West Bank – the number of settlers doubled during the years of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s.



News story: Bil'in – At a demonstration against the Wall which turned violent in Bil'in a Palestinian boy of 9 years old was killed.

Background: The Wall is currently under construction by the Israeli authorities. It cuts through many villages so thousands of Palestinians are cut off from their water supplies and land which they rely on, as well as from places of employment, schools, universities and medical care. In 2004, the International Court of Justice ruled that the Wall was illegal but it continues to be built.

Bil'in is a small village but has become well known for the weekly demonstrations there. Over half the village's land is being cut off from the village by the Wall and thousands of the village's olive trees have already been uprooted as a result of the wall's construction. In Bil'in, for the past four years, every Friday afternoon unarmed Palestinian farmers, workers, mothers, students, together with Israeli and International activists have been marching to the barrier singing and waving flags, and confronting the Israeli soldiers. Stones are sometimes thrown. The demonstrators face teargas, stun grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets, beatings and arrest. The weekly Palestinian-Israeli demonstrations in Bil'in have become a symbol of non-violent protest and of solidarity.



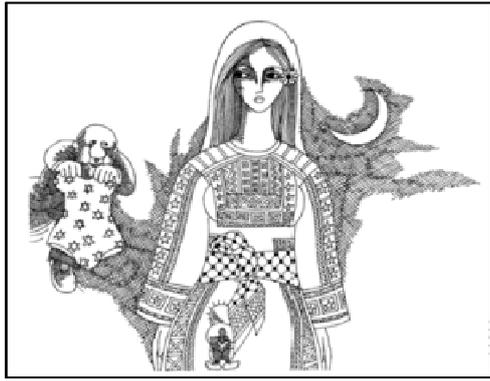
Cartoon 1



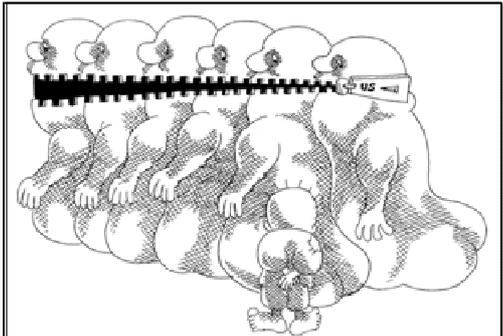
Cartoon 6



Cartoon 2



Cartoon 7



Cartoon 3



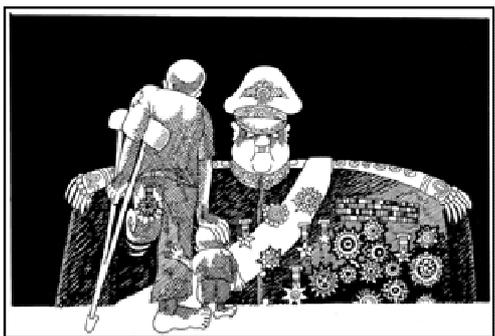
Cartoon 8



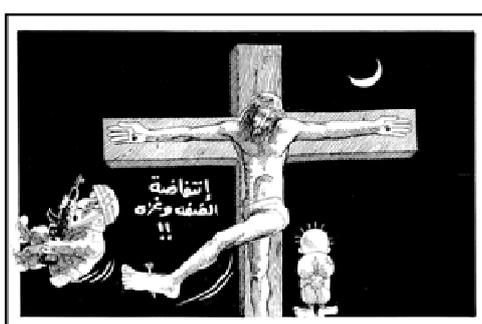
Cartoon 4



Cartoon 9



Cartoon 5



Cartoon 10

