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The Story Behind the Palestinian Kufiya: More Than Just a Headscarf

"The kufiya today is more than just a symbol of Palestinian heritage. Wearing the kufiya has become an expression of resistance and rebellion against injustices of all kinds. It is a way of expressing solidarity with all those whose rights are stolen and whose voices are silenced. A piece of cloth that speaks a thousand words... For Palestinians in particular, kufiya can be said to mean two things: Palestine will continue to live. Palestine will be free."



The Palestinian kufiya (keffiyeh or hatta in Arabic) is a headscarf with a cultural meaning rooted in the struggle and resistance of the Palestinian people, which in the last 100 years has become a political and cultural tool.

Its use dates back centuries, although its exact origins are uncertain. Some argue that Sumerian priests used it as a symbol of honor and social rank in ancient Mesopotamia more than 5000 years ago.

Other sources suggest that the name *Kufiya* comes from an Iraqi city called Kufa, and that during a seventh-century battle between Arabs and Persians in that city, the Arabs secured their turbans with camel hair cords to identify themselves in the midst of fighting. After the victory, the Arabs continued to wear the turban in that way.



The traditional Palestinian kufiya is made of white cotton with black weft embroidery. There are also variations in the color palette and patterns.

The truth is that with the passage of time, its use spread throughout the Middle East and each region developed its own version of the fabric design. Traditionally, it can be recognized in red or black, with the red version being very popular in Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf countries. In Jordan and Syria, the garment is known as *shemagh*, while in the Gulf countries it is known as *ghutra*.

In Palestine, before 1930, the kufiya was mainly worn by peasants and Bedouins as protection from the sun and sandstorms, while in the cities other types of accessories such as the *tarbush* (a type of round, flattened hat with a tassel at the top popularized by the Ottoman Empire) were used. After the British occupation in 1930, the use of kufiya spread to the entire population, taking on a whole new political dimension.

During the Great Palestinian Revolution of 1936, the peasants were the first to rebel against the British Mandate. The kufiya served to hide their faces and avoid arrest, but it also betrayed them when they entered the cities. The arrests and the prohibition of the use

of the kufiya by the British authorities motivated the high command of the Palestinian Revolution to order the use of the kufiya to all men both in the cities and in the countryside so that the rebels could camouflage themselves. In this way, the kufiya became popular and became a symbol of resistance and national identity.

The kufiya became a kind of uniform against the Israeli occupation. A symbol of resistance and unity in the struggle for liberation.

When the Nakba, with the creation of Israel in 1948, meant the ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their lands and homes, the kufiya also represented an object of national and cultural identity to cling to.

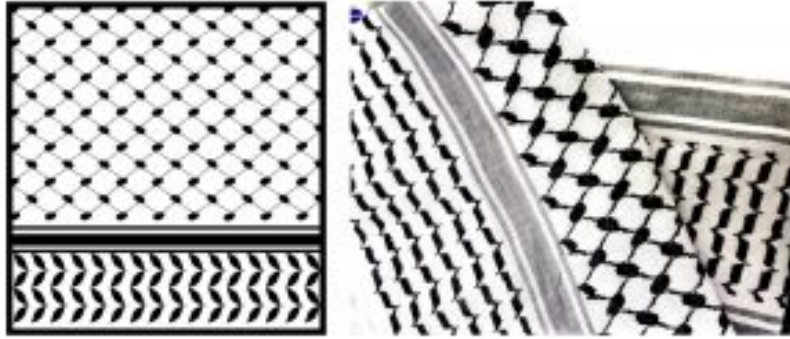


Yasser Arafat and Leila Khaled

The kufiya as a symbol of Palestinian resistance was consolidated in the 1960s, when Yasser Arafat became the most recognizable face of the Palestinian struggle, always wearing a kufiya in all his public appearances. Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), also influenced women to wear the kufiya more after her iconic photographs from the 70s, in which she is seen with a rifle in hand, with the kufiya on her head. The kufiya became a kind of uniform against the Israeli occupation. A symbol of resistance and unity in the struggle for liberation.

Design and Symbolism of Palestinian Kufiya

The traditional Palestinian kufiya is made of white cotton with black weft embroidery. There are also variations in the color palette. There is no official interpretation of the meaning of the Kufiya's design. Like any symbol, which also has centuries of history, its meaning is built collectively over the years.



Let's take it one step at a time:



The main plot: Known in Arabic as *hatta*, it encompasses the entire center and most of the kufiya. The interpretation that has circulated the most in recent years is that of this plot as a fishing net, symbolizing Palestine's connection to the Mediterranean and evoking images of abundance and freedom. Today, access to the sea is completely restricted for Palestinians due to the apartheid system imposed by Israel, which lends even more meaning to this interpretation. In addition, the network also represents the collective bonds and cooperative work of the Palestinian community.

Another interpretation of the plot is that of a "honeycomb," which symbolizes the structure of Palestinian society and its community. On the other hand, some, such as Palestinian artist [Fargo Tbakhi](#), see the plot as "barbed wire," representing the ongoing occupation.

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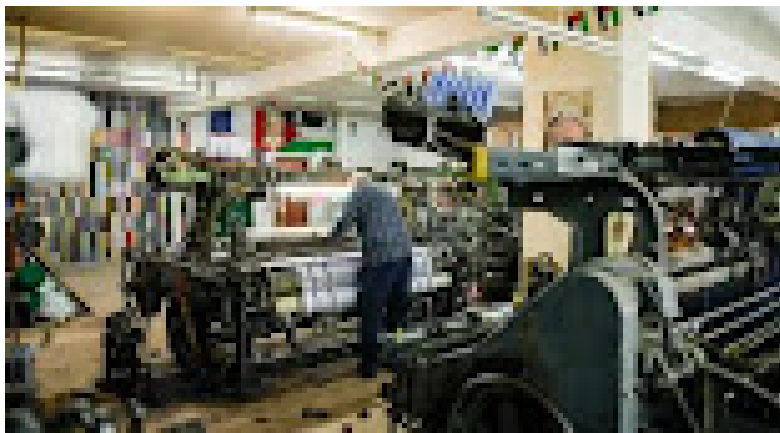


The full black borders: They are believed to symbolize the trade routes that have endowed Palestine with diversity and cultural richness through thousands of years of history.

With all the imagery that the Palestinian Kufiya evokes, we could agree that its design is a constant reminder of the Palestinian people's struggle for their land and their thirst for freedom.

Hirbawi: the last Palestinian factory standing that manufactures Kufiyas
Despite the popularity of Palestinian kufiya, its manufacture has declined in recent years. Of the more than 30 Kufiya factories in operation in Palestine, only one remains today: [Hirbawi Textiles](#).

Located in Jalil (Hebron), one of the cities most besieged by Israeli settlers, Hirbawi is a family business that has maintained the traditional craft and techniques of making Kufiyas since 1961. It has survived many economic and political pressures: on the one hand, it faces competition from cheaper replicas from China that invades the market around the world, and on the other hand, it must navigate the obstacles and economic restrictions imposed by the illegal Israeli occupation on the Palestinian economy.



The last Kufiyas factory in Palestine. Photo by [Hirbawi Textiles](#).

Hirbawi went from producing 150,000 kufiyas in 1993 to just 10,000 in 2010. It was saved from bankruptcy thanks to social media and the support and continued growth of an international online community committed to fair trade and the Palestinian cause. *Made in Palestine*, a German organization founded by Palestinians, developed the [kufiya.org site](#), the main online outlet for the Hirbawi Kufiyas.

Today, those who seek the authentic Palestinian kufiya know that only in Hirbawi do they get it. There is no replica that compares in quality because there is no machine that can mass-replicate what Hirbawi achieves with the 2-layer weaving technique. A technique that they have developed over the years and that only a handful of people master.

The kufiya as a symbol of resistance has transcended Palestinian borders, becoming a global symbol of struggle against oppression and injustice.

International solidarity

The Palestinian kufiya has been and continues to be a symbol of resistance and solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation and justice. From its use during the

Great Palestinian Revolution in the 1930s to its presence in current demonstrations in Palestine and around the world, the kufiya has been a key element in affirming Palestinian identity and denouncing the Israeli occupation.

In addition, the use of the kufiya as a symbol of resistance has transcended Palestinian borders, becoming a global symbol of struggle against oppression and injustice.



Bella Hadid, Roger Waters, Nelson Mandela, Lula, Fidel Castro, Elyanna, Aziz Bekkaoui, Rihanna, Tom Morello's band Prophets of Rage, among others, using the Palestinian kufiya.

How to use the Palestinian Kufiya

Some fashion brands have been criticized for exploiting and trivializing the meaning of kufiya. This was the case of the American brand *Urban Outfitters*, which sold kufiyas under the name of "anti-war scarf" and had to withdraw them in the face of criticism.

There are even Israeli designers who have used the Palestinian kufiya in the context of a false concept of "coexistence", completely desecrating its symbolism. True coexistence is only possible under terms of equality and justice, not in the context of an occupation and disenfranchisement of an entire population on ethnic and racial lines.

Wearing the kufiya has become an expression of resistance and rebellion against injustices of all kinds. It is a way of expressing solidarity with all those whose rights are stolen and whose voices are silenced.

However, thanks to the activism that makes these abuses visible, cases of appropriation and trivialization of kufiya are becoming less frequent. The annual celebration of International Kufiya Day every May 11 since 2016 helps to raise awareness of the cultural and political importance of [Kufiya](#). It also serves as an excuse for campaigns such as "*Wear the Kufiya*", which invites people around the world to wear their kufiya and post

photos on social media to show their support for the Palestinian cause under the hashtag [#keffiyehday](#).



Some wear the kufiya as a triangle-shaped neckerchief, others twist it around as if it were a scarf or wear it as a scarf. It can also be worn as a hijab or as a turban on the head. There are even those who use it in their home as a blanket, tablecloth or tapestry. Its large size invites creativity.

In the words of the Hirbawi family: "The kufiya today is more than just a symbol of Palestinian heritage. Wearing the kufiya has become an expression of resistance and rebellion against injustices of all kinds. It is a way of expressing solidarity with all those whose rights are stolen and whose voices are silenced. A piece of cloth that speaks a thousand words."

To which they add: "For Palestinians in particular, kufiya can be said to mean two things: Palestine will continue to live. Palestine will be free."

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Edited by [Maria Piedad Ossaba](#)

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