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Views: The Watermelon Question and its Role in the Hegemonic Symbolic Erasure of Palestinian Identity

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Since 2021, and more especially over the past year with the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the watermelon has emerged as a symbol of solidarity with Palestine and Palestinians. Its colours—red, green, black, and white—mirror the Palestinian flag, offering a way to signal support without explicitly displaying the flag, particularly in spaces where the Palestinian flag or the word ‘Palestine’ itself may be prone to restrictions or censure. This trend has gained unexpected momentum within global solidarity movements, showing up on flags, pins, banners, graffiti, t-shirts, and even tattoos, also and especially on social media, where the watermelon has become a popular emoji for supporters and those standing in solidarity with the Palestinian people. This trend centres the watermelon as a symbol for Palestine and the Palestinian people, not only to refer to the Palestinian flag or to Palestine to avoid censorship but it also essentially and completely replaces the flag, and the mentioning of Palestine even if the censorship threat is absent. Well-intentioned as it may be, this trend raises significant concerns about the risk of inadvertently reducing, diluting and even erasing Palestinian identity. While seemingly innocuous, the use of a fruit to represent the harsh reality and the ongoing struggle for justice and liberation of a people facing ethnic cleansing, colonialism, and genocide reflects a deeper problem with how international supporters engage with the Palestinian cause.

The growing use of the watermelon as a symbol for Palestine, often promoted by international (mostly Western) supporters, some Arabs and to a much lesser extent by Palestinians themselves, raises the question: Is this trend merely a well-meaning gesture that started as a counter-hegemonic movement, or does it contribute to a form of erasure that aligns with the hegemonic colonial forces seeking to erase Palestinian identity and neutralise Palestinian resistance? To explore this, this article employs Antonio Gramsci’s framework of hegemony and counter-hegemony, examining how such trends can be co-opted, trivialised and ultimately used to maintain the status quo. Gramsci argued that hegemonic power operates not only through direct coercion but also through cultural dominance, shaping society’s understanding of norms, values, and symbols. ¹Within the

context of settler colonialism, symbols are powerful tools, not only for those seeking liberation but also for those who seek to erase resistance to colonialism (in all its forms) and minimise the perceived threat of indigenous struggles for self-determination.

By exploring the emergence of the watermelon symbol in the context of Palestinian resistance against the Zionist colonial project, its widespread use in international solidarity movements, and the implications for Palestinian identity and visibility, this article argues that the watermelon, while perhaps useful in certain contexts, ultimately risks flattening and diluting the Palestinian cause. True solidarity, it contends, requires a more intentional, nuanced engagement with the symbols that are deeply embedded in Palestinian culture and history, as well as an unwavering commitment to speak truth to power and to naming the harsh realities Palestinians face: colonialism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Is the Watermelon a Palestinian Symbol?

The watermelon has recently been popularised as a symbol of solidarity with the Palestinian cause, particularly in international solidarity movements. A quick search on Google and social media reveals numerous reports, articles,² posts, and visuals describing the watermelon as a deeply entrenched icon of Palestinian resistance and identity, often linking it to the 1967 occupation, when the Israeli regime criminalised the display of the Palestinian flag. According to this narrative, Palestinians, forbidden from publicly displaying their flag, supposedly adopted the watermelon fruit and its red, green, white, and black colours to subtly signal their national identity as a subtle stand-in for the flag. While this story has been widely circulated and adopted by major media outlets, it still lacks historical grounding and has not been substantiated by evidence from within Palestinian culture, collective memory or historical practices. This narrative, often repeated almost verbatim by various media sources, appears more as an external construct rather than a genuine element of Palestinian history. It reflects a tendency in international solidarity efforts to simplify complex struggles, inadvertently shaping myths that risk overshadowing the authentic symbols and lived experiences of the Palestinian people.

Any Palestinian who lived through that period, particularly during the First Intifada³, can attest that watermelons were never used as a (counter-hegemonic) tool to circumvent the Israeli's regime ban on the Palestinian flag. Instead, the flag itself holds profound significance, tied to real-life acts of sacrifice and resistance. Narratives, events, and oral histories passed down through generations tell of individuals sacrificing their lives for carrying the Palestinian flag, smuggling it inside loaves of bread, or using its colours in everyday objects like laundry to defy Israeli restrictions on its display. These stories are emblematic of the deep connection between Palestinian symbols and the sacrifices made, the lives given, and the blood shed to uphold them.

Carrying and raising the Palestinian flag was – and remains – an act of defiance and resistance. Even today, a walk through Palestinian cities, refugee camps, or along the contour of the Apartheid Wall surrounding the West Bank reveals graffiti and inscriptions supporting resistance figures,

drawings of Handala, the key symbolising the right of return, political slogans, Quranic verses and even icons of Virgin Mary, but rarely- if ever- a depiction of a watermelon.

How did then the watermelon come to be adopted as a symbol of solidarity with the Palestinian cause? Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani recounts the origins of this trend: In the 1970s, three Palestinian artists—Sliman Mansour, Issam Bader, and Nabil Anani—sought to establish an artists' association. Under Israeli occupation law, they were required to submit an official application, which included a meeting with an Israeli officer for approval. During this meeting, the officer informed the artists that it was forbidden to create art deemed 'inciteful' and that certain national symbols, including the Palestinian flag and its colours—red, green, white, and black—were strictly prohibited. In response, Issam Bader asked if they would be allowed to paint a flower using those colours. The officer replied that this too was forbidden, adding, almost absurdly, that even drawing a watermelon would be prohibited.⁴

This story was later taken up by Hourani, who created a work of art using the watermelon as a satirical response to these restrictions. For Hourani, the watermelon was a tool to highlight the colonial regime's absurdity rather than a meaningful national symbol.⁵

In 2007, Hourani included this concept in the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine*, where he painted a watermelon as a metaphorical Palestinian flag. The piece, now often referred to as 'This is Not a Watermelon,' was not intended to replace the Palestinian flag but rather to expose the absurdity of the colonisers' fixation on suppressing Palestinian identity. Hourani's work was featured in various international art exhibitions, but it never replaced the Palestinian flag as a national symbol.⁶

In 2021, however, while the world was witnessing the forced displacement of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem, a group of students at the Rotterdam Art Academy attempted to display a banner featuring the Palestinian flag. University authorities removed it, claiming it was too politically charged. In response, the students hung another banner, this time featuring a watermelon painted with the colours of the Palestinian flag and the caption, 'Ceci n'est pas une Watermelon'. This action was a direct reference to Hourani's work – and to the work of the Belgian artist René Magritte - and served as a way for the students to circumvent censorship. The watermelon thus became a temporary 'flag,' standing in for the Palestinian flag that authorities had banned from public display.⁷

Reflecting on this incident, Hourani notes that the watermelon took on new significance within international solidarity movements, evolving from a piece of conceptual art into a trendy symbol of solidarity with Palestine and the Palestinians. This transformation surprised Hourani⁸, who had originally intended the artwork as a form of satirical protest.

Palestinian researcher Maliha Maslamani cautions against viewing the watermelon as a primary Palestinian symbol. The watermelon was never intended to replace the established symbols of Palestinian identity, such as the flag, which not only represents political resistance but also the sacrifices Palestinians have made towards liberation and decolonisation. While the watermelon may be useful – in very specific circumstances circumventing censorship – it should not substitute, overshadow or dilute the historically rooted symbols that Palestinians hold dear.⁹

Palestinian researcher Issam Nassar, in an interview with Maslamani, also critiqued the recent elevation of the watermelon as a symbol, affirming that it lacks historical basis and significance in the Palestinian national lexicon.¹⁰ Drawing on his research, Nassar explains that while one undocumented incident involving the watermelon might have occurred – particularly as a response to the Israeli regime’s attempts to erase Palestinian identity by imposing restrictions on Palestinian symbols – it was never a widespread or culturally ingrained emblem in Palestinian life or protest. In contrast, symbols like the Palestinian flag, the keffiyeh, and the key representing the right of return have deep-rooted significance in Palestinian iconography. These symbols are not merely visual representations; they are imbued with profound meaning as they have long served as both political and cultural representations of the national struggle, embodying resistance in ways that reflect historical realities and resonate deeply within the collective memory of the Palestinian people.

As Clifford Geertz emphasises in his discussion of religious symbols – although his focus is on the sacred, the analogy can extend to national symbols – ‘meanings can only be “stored” in symbols’.¹¹ He asserts that these symbols encapsulate, for those who resonate with them, a sense of how the world operates, the nature of emotional life it sustains, and the behaviours expected from them within that worldview.¹² He further asserts that ‘Sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import.’¹³

In light of this, I would argue that when Palestinians sacrifice their lives and livelihoods to raise the flag, it’s not merely an act of defiance, but also an act of profound meaning-making, that goes both ways. The sacrifices made to raise the flag embed it even more deeply into the collective memory as a potent symbol of pride and resistance. Simultaneously, the lives given to raise the flag are imbued with deeper significance, as those who raise it are honoured for defending the dignity of their homeland, standing against erasure, and confronting systemic injustice. In this reciprocal relationship, the flag becomes not only a symbol but a living testament to the sacrifices made, embodying resistance and the ongoing struggle for liberation .

In Geertz’s words, the flag symbol thus relates the ontological with the moral, intertwining the very existence of the Palestinian people with their ethical commitment to resist dispossession and uphold their collective dignity. The flag, as an ontological marker, represents the Palestinian identity and the struggle for self-determination; as a moral symbol, it embodies the ethical imperative to confront colonial violence, resist erasure, and honour the sacrifices made for justice and freedom. In this sense, the flag is not merely a piece of cloth or a visual emblem—it is a lived, moral expression of the Palestinian people’s unyielding fight for liberation and enduring connection to their land and their history.

In stark contrast, the watermelon symbol emerges as an external construct, predominantly chosen and popularised by Western supporters rather than by Palestinians themselves. Unlike the Palestinian flag, the keffiyeh, or the key symbolising the right of return—symbols forged through collective sacrifice and deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of Palestinian identity—the

watermelon holds no such historical or emotional resonance for Palestinians. It has not been connected to acts of defiance or lived experiences of resistance. No Palestinian has sacrificed their life to raise a watermelon, nor is it a symbol that carries the weight of ancestral memory or cultural significance. By adopting the watermelon as a symbol of solidarity, international allies may inadvertently impose an external narrative that overlooks the lived realities of Palestinians, trivialising their struggle and distancing the movement from the authentic symbols that have been integral to the Palestinian resistance against colonial erasure. In this sense, the watermelon fails to capture the depth of Palestinian experiences and risks obscuring the very essence of their ongoing fight for justice, dignity, and liberation.

The Watermelon Symbol: A Form of Cultural Hegemony?

While the use of the watermelon as a stand-in for the Palestinian flag may seem harmless or even creative to some supporters, its adoption raises critical concerns about its role in reinforcing colonial hegemony and contributing to the erasure of the indigenous Palestinian identity. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, this section explores how the watermelon symbol, while initially appearing as part of a counter-hegemonic movement, can inadvertently align with the very hegemonic forces that seek to erase Palestinian identity and undermine their resistance and struggle for liberation.

Gramsci offers a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of cultural control and resistance within the Palestinian context. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci articulated how hegemonic power is maintained when the ruling class's values, norms, and ideas are absorbed by the subordinated classes, becoming common sense. He contended that 'Social control takes two basic forms: besides influencing behaviour and choice *externally*, through rewards and punishments, it also affects them internally, by moulding personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms'. Such 'internal control' is based on hegemony, which refers to an order in which a common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour.¹⁴ He argued that hegemony involves the use of cultural means to shape societal norms, values, and symbols in ways that support the interests of the dominant group. This cultural dominance is achieved not only through force and coercion but also through the shaping of ideologies that make the status quo appear natural, inevitable, and even desirable.¹⁵ Hegemony as such, 'is the predominance obtained by *consent* rather than force of one class or group over other classes'.¹⁶

Within a settler colonial context, such as that of the Zionist colonialism of Palestine, hegemonic power is exercised not only through genocide and physical forced displacement but also through cultural erasure and the imposition of settler narratives that seek to overwrite Indigenous histories. In his work *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*, Patrick Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, signifying a continuous process aimed at eliminating the Indigenous population to make way for the settler society. In the Zionist colonial context in

Palestine, this process is not solely about territorial conquest, but it extends to the erasure of the cultural, historical, and symbolic aspects of Palestinian identity.

Within this framework, the watermelon symbol can be seen as a subtle participant in the settler colonial process. By focusing on a symbol that lacks historical roots in Palestinian culture and resistance, international solidarity movements may inadvertently align with the hegemonic forces of settler colonialism. Instead of challenging the erasure of Palestinian symbols, the adoption of the watermelon contributes to it by offering a softer, less confrontational icon that does not disrupt the settler colonial project's efforts to neutralise the sharp political edge of Palestinian resistance.

Gramsci notes that '[e]very relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the inter-national and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations'.¹⁷ He asserts that cultural symbols are powerful tools for maintaining or resisting domination. Therefore, the introduction of the watermelon as a symbol of solidarity, by international supporters, particularly those in Western contexts, contributes to 'the process by which power is produced and reproduced or transformed'.¹⁸ Instead of reinforcing the established counter-hegemonic symbols that represent the Palestinian struggle, the watermelon may serve as a tool of cultural assimilation, diluting the impact of these potent national symbols.

In the case of Palestine, the hegemonic forces of settler colonialism have systematically sought to erase and neutralise Palestinian identity. This is not only done through overt actions, such as the (ongoing) ethnic cleansing, forced displacement of Palestinians and the demolition of homes, lives and livelihoods, but also through subtler forms of cultural erasure. The criminalisation of the Palestinian flag, the suppression of language, narratives, history and the co-opting or neutralising of Palestinian symbols are all part of this hegemonic project.

The use of the watermelon as a symbol in international activism, while perhaps well-intentioned, risks playing into this hegemonic framework. By elevating a symbol with no historical connection to Palestinian resistance, international supporters and solidarity movements may unintentionally undermine the deep-rooted symbols that Palestinians themselves have fought to uphold. In Gramsci's line of thought, the watermelon symbol could be seen as a way of absorbing and deflecting the sharper, more confrontational aspects of Palestinian resistance, making it easier for international movements to express solidarity without fully engaging with the harsh realities of colonialism, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is particularly relevant in understanding how symbols can be appropriated and transformed by dominant powers to neutralise resistance. While symbols like the Palestinian flag and the key have historically functioned as counter-hegemonic symbols—expressing the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and the right of return—the watermelon, by contrast, lacks the same political potency. It is a softer, more neutral symbol that may appeal to Western audiences precisely because it avoids the direct political confrontation that more established Palestinian symbols invoke. After all, it is just a fruit!

Thus, the introduction of the watermelon as a symbol of solidarity, especially in international contexts, reveals how cultural hegemony can subtly co-opt resistance. By using the watermelon as

a more neutral or ‘cute’ symbol, global solidarity movements risk diluting the sharp political edge of the Palestinian struggle. In Gramsci's terms, what we see is a form of cultural assimilation, where the core symbols of Palestinian resistance are softened or replaced by symbols that are more palatable to international audiences, who may be uncomfortable with the explicit political messages that come with raising the Palestinian flag or invoking other powerful national symbols.

Watermelon as Depoliticisation: The Problem of ‘Cute’ Solidarity

The Western embrace of the watermelon symbol highlights a key issue in international solidarity efforts: the tendency to simplify or depoliticise complex struggles. By using a ‘cute’ or non-threatening symbol like the watermelon, solidarity movements may unintentionally reduce the Palestinian struggle to an aesthetic, rather than a deeply political and existential fight against colonialism and genocide. This depoliticisation is a critical element of how hegemonic forces operate; by making the Palestinian struggle more palatable, global movements risk stripping away the urgency and gravity of the issues at hand.

The problem with embracing the watermelon symbol lies in its inherent depoliticisation. By reducing the Palestinian struggle to a symbol that lacks historical depth and political resonance, international movements risk engaging in performative activism rather than genuine political support. The choice of the watermelon over established Palestinian symbols is not an ‘innocent’ choice; it reflects a preference for a version of solidarity that is aesthetically pleasing and easy to digest for Western audiences. This tendency aligns with hegemonic interests that seek to neutralise and co-opt resistance, turning it into a commodity that can be easily consumed without challenging the structural violence and colonial realities faced by Palestinians.

Moreover, this shift towards a less confrontational symbol obscures the real stakes of the Palestinian fight for liberation. The established symbols of Palestinian resistance carry the weight of lived experiences, sacrifices, and the collective struggle for liberation. These are not merely cultural artifacts; they are active, political symbols of defiance against erasure and dispossession. In contrast, the watermelon is a passive symbol that fails to capture the existential battle for land, sovereignty, and the right to return. By replacing these potent icons with a fruit, the narrative shifts away from decolonisation and justice toward a sanitised, commodified version of resistance that lacks radical intent.

This depoliticisation ultimately leads to a form of ‘aesthetic solidarity’ where the appearance of support is prioritised over substantial political engagement. It allows international activists to align themselves with the Palestinian cause in a way that feels comfortable and non-threatening, but it sidesteps the harsh realities of genocide, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing. The result is a form of solidarity that gestures toward support while failing to address the underlying issues of systemic violence and colonial oppression. In this way, the watermelon does not serve as a true symbol of resistance but rather as a tool of containment—a mechanism that absorbs and deflects the political sharpness of the Palestinian struggle, making it more palatable for external audiences while diminishing its radical edge.

For international solidarity movements to effectively support the Palestinian fight for liberation, they must move beyond this depoliticised, aestheticised approach. True solidarity involves embracing the symbols that carry real political risk—those that resonate with the historical and cultural realities of the Palestinian people. It requires rejecting the simplification of complex struggles for the sake of comfort and confronting the brutal truths of settler colonialism and systemic violence. By standing with the counter-hegemonic icons that Palestinians have chosen—symbols that embody a legacy of defiance, survival, and a demand for justice—activists can resist the co-optation of the movement and contribute meaningfully to the broader fight for decolonisation and self-determination.

Conclusion: Beyond the Watermelon

The adoption of the watermelon as a symbol of solidarity with Palestine, especially within international solidarity movements, raises critical concerns about the nature of international support for the Palestinian struggle. The trend highlights a broader issue in global solidarity efforts: the tendency to opt for simplified, ‘safe’ symbols that avoid the discomfort of engaging with the raw political realities of colonial violence. By choosing the watermelon—an icon with no historical or cultural resonance within Palestinian resistance—international allies risk flattening the complex and deeply political nature of the Palestinian struggle into something consumable and non-threatening.

The historical and symbolic power of icons such as the Palestinian flag, the key of return, and the keffiyeh cannot be overstated. These symbols are embedded in collective memory, representing not only the pain of dispossession but also the enduring spirit of resistance. Unlike the watermelon, which has been popularised by external actors and lacks deep-rooted significance, these authentic symbols carry the weight of lived experiences and sacrifices. They embody the Palestinian fight for justice, dignity, and liberation—an existential struggle that cannot be reduced to a mere aesthetic trend.

The watermelon can be co-opted into hegemonic narratives that depoliticise and neutralise Palestinian resistance. Rather than challenging the dominant power structures, the adoption of a ‘cute’ or easily digestible symbol like the watermelon risks conforming to a framework that minimises the radical demands of decolonisation and justice. In this way, the watermelon functions as a tool of containment, absorbing the sharper edges of the struggle and making it more palatable to Western audiences who may be uncomfortable with overtly political symbols.

True solidarity requires a fundamental shift away from this aestheticised, depoliticised approach. It involves an uncompromising commitment to amplifying the symbols that Palestinians themselves have chosen - symbols that speak to their historical narrative, their collective trauma, and their persistent fight against erasure. To honour these symbols is to acknowledge the political stakes of the Palestinian cause and to confront the realities of settler colonial violence head-on.

In moving beyond the superficial embrace of the watermelon, international solidarity movements have an opportunity to engage more deeply and meaningfully with the Palestinian

struggle. This involves recognising and respecting the political and cultural significance of established Palestinian symbols, standing with them even when it is uncomfortable or risky. Only through this radical, counter-hegemonic engagement can true solidarity be realised—solidarity that does not dilute or commodify the struggle, but instead strengthens and supports the ongoing fight for decolonisation, justice and liberation.

About the Author

Yasmine Rishmawi is a Palestinian anthropologist who works as a researcher at Odisee University of Applied Sciences, focusing on (forced) migration and changing family dynamics.

¹ Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York), p. 12.

² Mohammed Haddad, Konstantinos Antonopoulos and Marium Ali (2023) 'Symbols of Palestine', *Al Jazeera*, 20 November, accessed 14 November 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/11/20/palestine-symbols-keffiyeh-olive-branch-watermelon>; Syed, Armani (2024) 'How the Watermelon Became a Symbol of Palestinian Solidarity', *Time*, 20 October, accessed 14 November, <https://time.com/6326312/watermelon-palestinian-symbol-solidarity/>.

³ Intifada is the Arabic word for Uprising. The First Palestinian Intifada started on 8 December 1987 and ended with the signing of the Oslo Accords on the 13 September 1993.

⁴ Hourani, Khaled (2021) 'This is Not a Watermelon!' *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* (Institute for Palestine Studies), no. 127, Summer 2021, accessed 12 November <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1651433>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., para. 1.

⁸ Ibid., para. 3.

⁹ Musalmani, Maliha (2023) 'Watermelon as the Flag of Palestine: An Israeli Officer's Imagination', *Arab48*, 4 December, <https://shorturl.at/yORB4>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books), p. 127.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Femia, Joseph V. (1987) *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford online edition, Oxford Academic, 3 Oct 2011) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198275435.001.0001>, accessed 13 November 2024, p.24.

¹⁵ Crehan, Kate (2002) *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).

¹⁶ Femia, Joseph V. (1987), p. 24.

¹⁷ Gramsci, Antonio (1971), p. 350.

¹⁸ Ibid.