

Sandy Tolan, *Children of the Stone: The Power of Music in a Hard Land* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Two stories, two dreams: one realized, the other dashed.

A boy born to a fragmented, impoverished refugee family living under harsh military rule is mesmerized by the sound of a violin and vows not only to master the instrument but also to start a school to share its liberating beauty with others. And he does it.

An occupied people beaten down by conquest and subjugation finds its voice and asserts itself in a largely non-violent popular revolt that touches the imaginations of people around the world and generates hope that a just peace may be within reach—only to find itself utterly stymied and, in many respects, worse off than before it rose up.

*Children of the Stone* tells these interlocking tales in a page-turning narrative that brings both alive in all their wrenching and often confounding and heartbreaking complexity. You know much of this story and how it ends, but you read it as if for the first time. That is its power.

Neither story is simple. Ramzi Hussein Aburedwan is a hero who is often not heroic—at times driven to the point of obsession and exasperatingly insensitive to those who join him in his impossible dream—but his (and their) achievement is nonetheless impressive. Which makes the grinding setbacks and defeats of the Palestine national movement in these years all the more poignant, as we witness the relentless strangling of another dream—two states for two free and independent peoples—despite the heroic efforts of thousands in the Occupied Territories, within Israel and around the world.

But neither seemingly disparate story ends any more simply than it began. This book is not a novel, after all, even if it reads like one. Nor are they at all separate arcs, as is clear from the start. In Tolan's hands they are a single tale whose counterpoints provide harmonic texture. The unifying theme is resilience in the face of loss.

## Ramzi's Dream

We first meet 6-year old Ramzi in the summer of 1985 at his paternal grandfather's home in the al-Am'ari camp, outside Ramallah. He has been dumped there, along with his brother and two sisters, after his mother fled to escape her drunken, abusive husband, a remote presence in Ramzi's life whose late-night exploits end in a car accident that leaves him permanently brain-damaged; in 1990 he is executed by vigilantes who claim he collaborates with the Israelis. But Ramzi's grandfather, Sido Mohammad, who was uprooted with his family and driven into exile in the 1948 war, soldiers on with a dignity and determination that provide both an alternative role model and a lifeline, which the boy, bright-eyed and willful despite the turbulence around him, seizes upon.

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At dawn one morning he sneaks out of the house and follows Sido to work hauling garbage, cleaning sidewalks and scavenging for recyclables. Before long Ramzi is a regular on the route; a hard worker from the start, he is rewarded by Sido's discovery of an abandoned teddy bear that plays Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" when he pulls a plastic string. The music provides solace as Ramzi listens to it over and over again before falling asleep.

As he grows up, music is a frequent companion. Evenings are often spent listening to recordings of Umm Kulthum's haunting contralto on the family radio. But it is his first-grade teacher's impromptu performance on the violin in 1986—the first live performance he has ever seen—that he later says changed his life and placed music forever at its center. His dream is not only to make music himself but also to build a school to teach it to others so they, too, can experience its transporting power.

## The Palestinian Dream

Meanwhile, by the late 1980s, the prospects for Palestinians under Israeli occupation have never been so bleak. Their economy is in deep decline, and they have no control over it or much else in their lives. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is in disarray, the Arab regimes are preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq war, and the broader international community is either indifferent to the Palestinian plight or paralyzed. With no other options, the people take matters in their own hands.

On December 8, 1987, after an Israeli truck smashes into two cars full of Palestinian migrant workers at the entrance to Gaza, killing four, angry Gazans gather to protest what they take to be a deliberate act of murder. The next day rioting breaks out. Israeli soldiers fire live ammunition at fleeing children in the Jabalya refugee camp, killing one. This shooting lights the powder keg. Protests quickly spread to the West Bank. Over the next several days they grow. It remains only for a political leadership to emerge to channel the spontaneous protests into what becomes a sustained revolt.

In January the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising, a coordinating body that included all the major factions, issues its first directive, a milestone in itself. For the next two years, it provides a dynamic local leadership to the resistance, which functions as a coherent national movement for perhaps the first and only time in Palestinian history. They issue leaflets twice a month that provide both a political overview and instructions for action. They call strikes, promote boycotts, organize tax resistance and urge other forms of civil disobedience. They also mediate conflicts within the society—urging landlords and merchants to hold down rents and prices, for example, or exempting certain factories from the strikes to keep people employed in shaky industries.

Popular committees spring up to organize community responses to the uprising and address local needs. The first ones are spontaneous, set up to organize the storage and distribution

of food in communities under curfew. Soon they take on other tasks, such as organizing guard duty, health care and small-scale self-help projects, cleaning the streets and arranging visits to hospitalized or incarcerated residents. Many collect funds to support projects and care for the families whose members were wounded or arrested. Community-based mediation and judicial committees settle disputes and enforce punishment of local lawbreakers. Together, these institutions become alternative administrations, even taking on the organization of clandestine education when the Israelis close all the schools. In doing so, many say they are laying the groundwork for a democratic Palestinian state.

But the Israelis are not the only ones appalled at this prospect. The absent PLO leadership is, if anything, more anxious. The Israeli response is brutal, as if the *intifada's* largely non-violent character is itself an affront. This revolt, after all, began with kids taking to the streets to confront the Israeli army with nothing but stones and the singular audacity of youth. Ramzi is one of them, and he becomes a local hero when he is photographed in early 1988 hurling a hunk of curbstone. Before he knows it—and without intending it—he becomes “a potent symbol of his people’s national uprising.”

Over the coming months, hundreds are arrested. Most endure vicious beatings and torture, often in the vehicles used to cart them away, and their scars become badges of honor. When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin calls for “force,

might, beatings,” the international community is treated to the sight of heavily armed Israeli combat troops wielding wooden 2x4s to break the arms and legs of youths whose “crime” is often little more than taunting their adversaries, as resistance continues to build.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian national movement remains deeply divided, not only among competing factions but increasingly between officials sitting outside the Territories and the people resisting inside. Almost from the beginning, the external leaderships of Fatah and the Popular and Democratic Fronts struggle to head off the formation of new, popular power centers that threaten to sideline them. Then Jordan’s move to sever its administrative responsibility for the West Bank gives them an unexpected opportunity.

PLO leaders quickly declare Palestinian independence and proclaim Yasser Arafat president of the new state. They also vote to accept all UN resolutions on the conflict, renounce all forms of terrorism (required by the United States for a dialogue with the PLO) and, for the first time, go on record in support of a “two-state solution.” In doing so, they establish Arafat as the only interlocutor for Israeli negotiators. Next, they move to harness the uprising to their diplomatic agenda in what amounts to a coup from above. As one close observer puts it, “The PLO in Tunis successfully captured power in the West Bank and Gaza not because it led the revolution but because it promised to end it.”



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And they did. The 1993 Oslo accords are the result—an agreement that raises hopes across the political spectrum but so lacks substance, in terms of final outcomes, that it is easily stalled and then derailed by its opponents over the decade that follows. That trajectory is at the heart of this book.

## The Dreams Diverge

Two years after the accords are signed, Ramzi gets the break that will change his life unalterably: He is chosen for viola lessons with violinist Mohammed Fadel, an exile who returned to help build a new National Conservatory of Music, part of what the founders hope will be a “cultural renaissance of an independent Palestinian state.” Ramzi’s awakening to both the beauty and complexity of classical music is a story within a story that takes the reader—this reader, anyway—into a world only dimly apprehended before.

Tolan’s evident excitement at this journey is contagious. We witness the blossoming of an artist out of the most unlikely circumstances and are drawn into the experience alongside him. By 1997 he is attending a summer music school in New Hampshire with young musicians from around the world, including Israel. A year later he is enrolled at the Conservatoire d’Angers in France where he relearns the basics from a master who starts by showing him how to stand, how to breathe, how to hold his bow, how to move his fingers and how to stay still while he plays. Over the next two years, his improvement is steady. If only that was the case back home in Palestine.

At this point the two arcs diverge, as hope triumphs for one strong-willed and single-minded boy while it fades to black for a people no less determined but frustrated at every turn by both their occupiers and their political representatives. In 2000, seven years after Oslo, all semblance of a “peace process”

breaks down and the second *intifada* erupts with a fury drawn as much from dashed expectations as from the suffocating experience of continued occupation, which has gotten more and more constricting with each year. By June 2002, when Ramzi comes back to Ramallah, the *intifada* has descended into low-level war.

For the rest of the book—more than half—we travel with Ramzi on his quixotic but remarkably successful effort to create music schools where he can share his gift with his community, spreading it as far as refugee camps in Lebanon. We also watch the accelerating erosion of not just the dream but also the viability of a “two-state solution,” as the West Bank is colonized by new settlers whose expanding communities are linked by a web of bypass roads that carve up what is left of the 22 percent of historic Palestine the Israelis captured in 1967—Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem—and reduces it to a disconnected patchwork of enclaves that resemble the bantustans of apartheid-era South Africa.

I confess that I started this book still clinging to the hope that two interdependent but distinct states could emerge from this conflict, perhaps due to just how far-fetched the prospect of a unified state for Jews and Palestinians living as equals seemed. But I finished fairly sure that the door to two states has been closed and that one state of equals is the only option left—assuming wholesale expulsion or permanent apartheid are off the table.

Tolan’s particular gift to his readers is his juxtaposition of the realization of Ramzi’s impossible dream with the setbacks and defeats of the Palestinian people. You just never get to a place where you throw up your hands and say, “All is lost,” because he keeps surprising us with Ramzi’s ability to rebound from catastrophe. In this respect, Ramzi’s story is both parable and possibility. ■