Basel al-Araj: The Engaged Intellectual (1986–2017)



> “If you want to be an intellectual, be an engaged intellectual. If you don’t want to be engaged, then neither you nor your culture are of any use.”

(Basel al-Araj, in a video widely shared after his death) [1]

Basel al-Araj (1986–2017), “the engaged intellectual,” was a Palestinian

pharmacist and researcher from the village of al-Walaja near Bethlehem who documented the milestones of the Palestinian revolution and was a leading activist in popular protest against settlement. The occupation hunted him, until an Israeli special unit stormed the house where he was holed up in al-Bireh before dawn on 6 March 2017. He fought for nearly two hours until his ammunition ran out and he was killed; the occupation held his body for 11 days. [2] [3] [4]

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Who was Basel al-Araj?

Basel al-Araj embodied the intellectual who would not stop at words: a pharmacist, a researcher in Palestinian oral history, a writer and lecturer, and an activist in popular protest and boycott campaigns, before he took up arms [2] [4]. After his killing, activists described him as a “thinker” assassinated by Israel [2].

Basel al-Araj at a glance

Item	Details
Name	Basel al-Araj
Origin	Al-Walaja, Bethlehem [2] [3]
Age	31 at his death (34 according to Al Jazeera Arabic) [3] [5] [2]
Profession	Pharmacist and researcher in Palestinian oral history [2] [4]
Activism	Popular protest against settlement, boycott campaigns and documenting the revolution [2] [4]
Killed	6 March 2017, firefight with an Israeli special unit in al-Bireh [2] [3]
Buried	Al-Walaja, 17 March 2017, after his body was held for 11 days [3]

Timeline

Date	Event
1986	Born to a family from al-Walaja, Bethlehem district [2] [3]
Before 2017	Popular protest against settlement in al-Walaja; boycott campaigns [2] [4]
2015–2017	Works as a researcher in Palestinian oral history [2]
2016–2017	Hunted by the occupation; goes into hiding [3] [4]
6 March 2017	Killed in a firefight in al-Bireh; body seized [2] [3]
17 March 2017	Funeral and burial in al-Walaja [3]

Son of al-Walaja

Basel al-Araj came from the village of al-Walaja near Bethlehem, encircled by settlements and the separation wall, and was among the first to oppose settlement there [2]. He studied pharmacy, before devoting his last years to research in Palestinian oral history [2].

Pharmacist and researcher: documenting the revolution

Basel documented the milestones of the Palestinian revolution, from the 1930s revolt against the British Mandate to resistance against the Israeli occupation, and led field tours to the villages and sites of fedayeen operations and battles to explain their history to young people on the spot [4]. Among these sites were the 2002 “Alley of Death” operation in Hebron, the battle of al-Walaja and the experience of resistance in rural Jenin.

He organised educational seminars across the West Bank on resistance thought and wrote articles for several Palestinian websites, including one titled “Live like a porcupine… and fight like a flea.” In 2012 he wrote: “The war ends when the mind is defeated” [4].

“The engaged intellectual”

After his death, videos circulated of Basel speaking about the role of the intellectual and the “engaged intellectual” who does not separate thought from action, and the phrase became his title [1]. Writer Ali Hassan Ibrahim sees in a photo of Basel wounded at a demonstration proof that his engagement was a conscious choice, not a passing impulse [1].

Israeli intelligence had described him as a leader of the Palestinian youth movement; the occupation hunted him and he went into hiding [2] [4].

His death: al-Bireh, 6 March 2017

Before dawn on Monday 6 March 2017, an Israeli special unit stormed, with gunfire and shells, a house where Basel al-Araj was holed up near the Gamal Abdel Nasser mosque in al-Bireh [2]. He fought for nearly two hours until his ammunition ran out; the soldiers then stormed the house and killed him [4]. A Palestinian Health Ministry autopsy found at least ten bullet wounds, one to the heart and several to

the head [3].

Occupation forces seized his body; his name was announced only in the morning, and Ramallah and al-Bireh saw violent clashes in which two young men were hit by live fire [2]. Islamic Jihad leader Khader Adnan called Basel an exceptional resistance fighter who never abandoned resistance [2].

The will: “I have found my answers”

Basel left a handwritten will he had meant to write months earlier: “Is there anything more eloquent than the martyr’s deed?” and “I now walk to my fate content and convinced; I have found my answers” [1]. Writer Ali Hassan Ibrahim reads the answer Basel sought as martyrdom itself [1].

His writings, research and articles, published and unpublished, together with his biography and a selection of what was written about him, were collected in a book titled *I Have Found My Answers*, after his will.

The withheld body and the funeral

The occupation held Basel’s body for 11 days, under its policy of withholding martyrs’ bodies as a “bargaining chip” and denying families burial [3]. On 17 March 2017 the body was returned and the funeral set out from the family home in al-Walaja with hundreds taking part, while occupation soldiers watched from a hill in the nearby settlement of Har Gilo [3].

Legacy

Basel al-Araj became widely known among Palestinian and Arab youth because he joined research to action and refused to separate culture from resistance [1] [2]. His name became a symbol for a new generation, as Ghassan Kanafani was the symbol of the resisting intellectual decades before.

Read also: Ghassan Kanafani, Farhan al-Saadi, Abdel Qader al-Husseini.

Video

Frequently asked questions about Basel al-Araj

Who was Basel al-Araj?

A Palestinian pharmacist and researcher from al-Walaja, known as “the engaged intellectual,” killed in a firefight with occupation forces in al-Bireh in 2017.

When was Basel al-Araj killed?

Before dawn on 6 March 2017.

Where was Basel al-Araj killed?

In a house where he was holed up near the Gamal Abdel Nasser mosque in al-Bireh.

What does “the engaged intellectual” mean?

An intellectual who does not separate thought from resistance – an idea Basel repeated in his lectures.

What is the book *I Have Found My Answers*?

A collection of Basel al-Araj’s writings, research and biography, titled after a line in his will.

Where is Basel al-Araj buried?

In his village of al-Walaja, on 17 March 2017, after his body was held for 11 days.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. Ali Hassan Ibrahim, “The Eloquence of an Intellectual Martyr,” Al Jazeera Blogs, 25 May 2017.
2. “Israel Assassinates a Palestinian Activist in a Raid on Ramallah,” Al Jazeera Net, 6 March 2017.
3. “Basil al-Araj, Palestine Activist, Buried in West Bank,” Al Jazeera English, 18 March 2017.
4. Mundher Fouad, “Why Did the Zionists Assassinate Basel al-Araj?” Arabi Post, 20 March 2017.
5. Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, Institute for Palestine Studies.