Palestinian Embroidery at UNESCO: The 2021 Global Recognition



In December 2021, UNESCO inscribed **the art of embroidery in Palestine** on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was the first explicit international recognition that the stitches Palestinian women have passed down for generations are a heritage that bears Palestine's name.

The decision came after years of attempts to present the Palestinian thobe on global fashion stages as "Israeli." In this article we tell the story of **Palestinian embroidery at UNESCO**: what this art is, how its nomination file reached UNESCO, and what the inscription means in practice in the battle over memory.

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Embroidery and the passing down of skills at a women’s centre in Gaza City. Archival photograph; credit as given by the source: AC/AA.

What is Palestinian embroidery (tatreez)?

Palestinian embroidery, known in Arabic as *tatreez*, is the art of decorating fabric with needle and coloured thread. It began in rural Palestine and spread to the cities, the refugee camps and the diaspora. UNESCO describes it as a social practice passed between generations: women embroider with their daughters and neighbours when they gather in each other's homes.

The village thobe and its parts

A village woman's traditional dress consists of a long dress (thobe), trousers, a jacket, a headdress and a veil. Embroidery is concentrated on the **qabbeh** (chest panel), the sleeves and cuffs, and on the **banayeq**, the vertical side panels running from the waist to the hem. Women embroider with silk thread on wool, linen or cotton.

A language of stitches: what the thobe says about its wearer

The thobe was never just decoration; it was an identity card. Its colours and motifs revealed a woman's village and region, her marital status and her economic standing. Among the best-known motifs:

- **The cypress tree**: a symbol of steadfastness and eternity, common on the side panels.
- **The palm tree**: one of the signature motifs of the Ramallah thobe.
- **Wheat ears, roses and feathers**: inspired by the Palestinian landscape and its seasons.
- **Birds**: such as doves and roosters, symbols of love and good fortune.

Every region has its own pattern

Women call a repeating decorative unit an **"irq"**, and every region has its own patterns and colours:

Region	Distinctive features of its embroidery
Ramallah	Red cross-stitch on white or black linen, with the palm-tree motif
Bethlehem	Couching stitch (*tahriri* or *qasab*) in silk, silver and gold thread, and the "malak" (queen's) dress
Hebron	Dense embroidery covering most of the dress in dark colours
Gaza and the coast	Bright colours on striped fabrics such as the Majdalawi weave

Region	Distinctive features of its embroidery
Beersheba and the Naqab	On Bedouin dresses, red for married women and blue for unmarried women or widows



Details of Palestinian embroidery motifs. © Richard Laschon / Shutterstock, via UNESCO.

Embroidery as a witness to the Nakba and the Intifada

After the Nakba in 1948, refugee women carried their dresses into the camps, and embroidery became both a livelihood and a way of preserving memory. During the First Intifada (1987) "Intifada dresses" appeared, embroidered with the map of Palestine, the flag and the Dome of the Rock, in defiance of the ban on raising the

flag at the time.

The road to UNESCO

Work on the Palestinian embroidery nomination began in 2016, five years before the decision, according to the UNESCO Committee decision. The **Palestinian Ministry of Culture** led the effort, together with other ministries, NGOs and community representatives.

From the national list to the international list

UNESCO does not accept a nomination for an element that the state has not first recorded on its own national inventory. The file therefore went through several stages:

1. **2016**: The Ministry of Culture created the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List with 18 elements, updated every two years.
2. **2018**: Embroidery was added to the national list, proposed by craftswomen and charitable associations.
3. **2021**: The Intergovernmental Committee inscribed it on the Representative List of Humanity.

Women at the heart of the file

The nomination relied on wide participation by the embroiderers themselves, including **women from refugee camps**. The UNESCO Committee explicitly commended this, noting that Palestine had involved communities as widely as possible. The communities concerned also gave their free, prior and informed consent to the nomination, a core requirement for any file.

The decision names bodies that helped document and study the embroidery, including the **Anata Cultural Centre** and a museum the decision refers to as "Teraze," as well as families who preserved old dresses.

Then-Minister of Culture **Atef Abu Saif** said his ministry had worked intensively on

the file for more than two years before submitting it, according to Al Jazeera.

The decision: December 2021

The decision was adopted on Wednesday, 15 December 2021, during the 16th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held online. It bears the number **16.COM 8.B.30**, and the element is inscribed as **"The art of embroidery in Palestine, practices, skills, knowledge and rituals."**

Five criteria, all met

Being old or beautiful is not enough for an element to be inscribed. The Committee assesses every file against five criteria, and found that the Palestinian file met all of them:

Criterion	What the Committee said about Palestinian embroidery
Definition of the element (R.1)	Clearly defined: embroidery on women's dresses, sheets and bedspreads, practised by women of all ages and passed from grandmothers and mothers to daughters
Impact of inscription (R.2)	Raises awareness of women's heritage, encourages safeguarding within Palestinian communities and fosters intercultural dialogue
Safeguarding measures (R.3)	Existing exhibitions, bazaars and research; embroidery taught in schools; plans for documentation, publication and income generation
Community participation (R.4)	Broad participation since 2016, with free, prior and informed consent from communities
Inclusion in a national inventory (R.5)	On the Palestinian national list since 2018

The Committee's only recommendation was a reminder that Palestine should establish a clear process for involving communities in updating its inventories in future.

Palestinian reactions

Then-Prime Minister **Mohammad Shtayyeh** welcomed the decision as protection for Palestinian identity and narrative against attempts to appropriate them, according to Al Jazeera. Culture Minister **Atef Abu Saif** described heritage as a reservoir of the people's memory and called on international organisations to prevent its theft.

The decision coincided with widespread public anger: on the same day, women in Ramallah protested in embroidered dresses against what had happened at the Miss Universe pageant, as described below.



Women in embroidered Palestinian thobes. Documentary photograph published by UNESCO; this is not a photograph of the 2021 Ramallah protest. Source: UNESCO.

What does the inscription mean in practice?

The inscription of Palestinian embroidery at UNESCO means the international community officially recognises this art as a living element of Palestinian heritage, with Palestine as the state responsible for safeguarding it. It does not, however,

grant intellectual property or copyright in any legal sense.

What the decision provides

- **Palestine's name in the international record**: the element bears the name "Palestine" alone, making it a reference for any journalist, researcher or museum asking whose embroidery this is.
- **An argument in the battle over the narrative**: when the thobe is presented at a fashion show or pageant as "Israeli," the UNESCO decision is the first documented response.
- **Support for safeguarding programmes**: Palestine can apply for assistance from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund to finance documentation and training.

What it does not provide

- It does not legally prevent any designer or company from using Palestinian motifs commercially.
- It does not mean embroidery exists only in Palestine; the Committee itself noted that embroidery is practised in many parts of the world. The recognition concerns **Palestinian embroidery, with its motifs, meanings and rituals**.

Palestine's obligations after inscription

The state that owns the element must implement the safeguarding plan it submitted and report periodically to UNESCO on the element's status. For embroidery, the plan covers documentation, research and publication, training new generations, and supporting women who rely on embroidery for income.

The inscription against the appropriation of the Palestinian thobe

The decision did not come out of nowhere. In the years before it, Palestinian

embroidery was repeatedly presented on international stages without credit to its owners. These are the two best-documented cases:

The New York Fashion Week dress (2017)

In September 2017, Israeli designer **Aviad Arik Herman** showed a dress embroidered in the Palestinian style at an event during New York Fashion Week, after which it was auctioned. It was embroidered by Bedouin women from the **Association for the Improvement of Women's Status in Lakia** in the Naqab (Negev), according to Al Jazeera.

The association's head, **Asma al-Saneh**, said the women were not told that the sponsor was the **OR Movement**, which builds Jewish towns in the Naqab and Galilee, sometimes in place of existing Bedouin villages. The association asked for its name to be removed from promotional materials. The designer and the movement, for their part, said the process had been transparent.



The gown that sparked controversy at a New York event in 2017. Image courtesy of Richard Magazine, as credited by Al Jazeera.

Miss Universe contestants in Rahat (2021)

Ahead of the Miss Universe pageant in Eilat (13 December 2021), contestants visited the Bedouin town of **Rahat** in the Naqab. Some wore embroidered Palestinian dresses while rolling grape leaves and baking, according to Al-Monitor.

Miss Philippines posted her photos captioned "Day in the life of a Bedouin" with a hashtag promoting tourism to Israel, and no mention of Palestine. Social media erupted, and Palestinians and rights groups called it cultural theft. The day after the UNESCO decision (16 December), university students in Gaza held an event titled "Don't Steal Our Heritage," dressed in embroidered thobes.



Students at the “Don’t Steal Our Heritage” event in Gaza City, 16 December 2021, as part of the protests over the Miss Universe incident. Photograph: Mohammed Abed / AFP via Getty Images; via Al-Monitor.

Answering the "shared heritage" argument

Defenders of such displays argue that the Bedouin are citizens of Israel, so their heritage is part of "Israeli diversity." This argument ignores two facts:

1. The Bedouin of the Naqab are part of the Palestinian people, and their

embroidery was part of the map of Palestinian embroidery before Israel was established in 1948.

2. The problem is not wearing the thobe, but **presenting it without its name** and attributing it to a state that pursues its owners and demolishes their unrecognised villages in the Naqab.

This is where the value of the UNESCO decision lies: it puts Palestine's name on the thobe in an international record, so the question is no longer one opinion against another.

Palestinian embroidery after 2023: stitches that bear witness

Since October 2023, the question is no longer only who gets credit for Palestinian embroidery, but whether the heritage itself survives. As of 27 May 2025, UNESCO had verified damage to 110 cultural sites in the Gaza Strip, including 77 buildings of historical or artistic interest, one museum and three repositories of movable cultural property, according to a report on UN findings. In February 2025 the World Bank estimated that about 53% of the Strip's cultural property had been damaged or completely destroyed.

A child's thobe that survived the Rafah Museum

Most of the Rafah Museum's collection was destroyed in 2023. But a child's embroidered dress survived the bombing after the blast threw it onto a neighbouring roof, where it stayed for eight months before being recovered. It became the final piece in the exhibition *Thread Memory: Embroidery from Palestine* at V&A Dundee in Scotland, which opened in June 2025, according to Twyg.

Evacuation maps in cross-stitch

Gaza artist **Maha Dayeh**, who had worked in embroidery for about twenty years, was displaced to a tent in al-Mawasi after leaving her home on 16 October 2023.

There she began her project "The Road of Pain": embroidering, in cross-stitch, the evacuation maps the Israeli army dropped on residents, using grey for destruction, black for mourning and red for blood, according to Erem News. In April 2025 she presented her embroidered map of Gaza to the French president at the Arab World Institute in Paris.

In the camps: the needle as livelihood and therapy

In Beirut's Shatila refugee camp, women at a workshop run by the NGO **Beit Atfal Assumoud** keep embroidering the patterns of villages they have never seen, watching footage of the bombing of Gaza on their phones as they work, according to NPR. For them, embroidery is a source of income, a form of therapy and an act of steadfastness all at once.

Embroidery is thus returning to its original role: a living archive carried by women when museums and archives are destroyed. That makes UNESCO's 2021 decision more than symbolic recognition today; it is prior international testimony that this heritage exists and has owners.



An embroidery by Maha Al-Daya documenting a map of the Gaza Strip.

Photograph: Aline Deschamps for M Le magazine du Monde.

Other Palestinian elements on UNESCO's lists

Embroidery was neither the first Palestinian element recognised by UNESCO nor the last. By 2025, Palestine had nine elements on the Representative List, four of them in its name alone, according to the list of Palestinian elements:

Year	Element	Palestine alone?
2025	Arabic kohl	No, joint Arab file
2024	Nabulsi soap making	Yes
2024	Henna: rituals and practices	No, joint Arab file
2023	Palestinian dabkeh	Yes
2023	Engraving on metals	No, joint Arab file
2022	Date palm: knowledge and traditions	No, joint Arab file
2021	The art of embroidery in Palestine	Yes
2021	Arabic calligraphy	No, joint Arab file
2008	Palestinian hikaye (folk tales)	Yes

Notably, the elements inscribed in Palestine's name alone, such as embroidery, dabkeh and Nabulsi soap, are the same ones repeatedly presented worldwide without credit to their owners. That is why many see their inscription as a defensive step as much as a celebration.



Dabke in Palestinian costume, 30 July 2010. Photograph: Brendan Lally. License: CC BY 4.0. Image unchanged.

Frequently asked questions about Palestinian embroidery at UNESCO

When was Palestinian embroidery inscribed by UNESCO?

On 15 December 2021, during the 16th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, by decision 16.COM 8.B.30.

Which list was it inscribed on?

The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which is different from the World Heritage List of archaeological sites and buildings.

Who submitted the Palestinian embroidery nomination?

The State of Palestine, through its Ministry of Culture, with the participation of NGOs and craftswomen, including women from refugee camps.

How long did the nomination take?

The nomination process began in 2016, embroidery was added to the national list in 2018, and the international decision followed in 2021.

Does the decision stop Israel or others from using Palestinian embroidery?

Not legally, because UNESCO does not grant intellectual property rights. But it provides documented international recognition that this art is Palestinian, which can be cited in the media, in museums and in international forums.

What other Palestinian elements are inscribed by UNESCO?

Most notably Palestinian hikaye (2008), Palestinian dabkeh (2023) and Nabulsi soap making (2024), alongside joint Arab files such as Arabic calligraphy, the date palm and henna.

How has the war on Gaza affected Palestinian embroidery?

By May 2025 UNESCO had verified damage to 110 cultural sites in Gaza, and most of the Rafah Museum's collection was destroyed. At the same time, embroidery has become a way of documenting the war, as in the work of artist Maha Dayeh, who embroidered evacuation maps.

Read more on Our Palestine

- All Palestinian heritage articles on Our Palestine

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