



PALESTINE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

A Chronicle of
Passion and Politics

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Preface

One can ask without sounding petty: Does the world need another book written about the Middle East? My personal library is a testimony that might argue against this book's printing. But few books cover analytical as well as emotional components of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, preferring to stress one over the other. This collection of essays follows no such restrictions.

I started writing about the Middle East when I was twelve years old. Little did I know then that this would provide the subtext for most of my intellectual endeavors for the rest of my life. Growing up as a Palestinian-American, one is apt to view things with different filters than those without a hyphen in their ethnic designation. I only hope this group of articles and essays offers a viewpoint that will expand readers' notions of Middle Eastern politics.

This book deals mainly with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Several articles deal with the Iraq war, but the main thrust is how the idea of Palestine has captivated millions of people over generations. The Palestinian narrative is only now becoming familiar to American audiences.

But there is not just one narrative that can define or represent Palestinians. This book therefore represents a personal journey. Although it might have begun when I was twelve, the writings took their inspiration from the outset of the second Uprising (Intifada) against Israeli Occupation. In addition to the personal accounts, several essays deal with the hard edge of realpolitik.

Just as the flowers bloom and the birds sing because they must, so too was I compelled to write. This collection is meant to bring understanding on many levels. Each essay stands or falls on its own. Hopefully you will feel the urge to continue your readings on the subject to learn about this crucial part of the world.

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May, 2003

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Introduction

This collection of articles and essays was written over the last three years. At times it will seem like two different people were writing the articles. Don't let the different styles surprise you because both represent something pivotal in the Palestinian experience.

Both "styles" carry components that accompany the reality of living as a Palestinian in America. One style captures the emotive experience of living in Diaspora. The other captures the hard edge of realpolitik that living in a western country can illuminate.

I began writing just after the second "Uprising" or Intifada began. Many of the articles first appeared in the online publication called Viewpoint (www.gophercentral.com) and they have the feel of events as they were happening. Other articles have a historical overview that is timeless.

Reading about the Palestinian-Israel conflict through the narrative of a Palestinian-American should demonstrate that Palestinians are not a monolithic block. There is a greater diversity within Palestinian society than the rest of the Arab world, largely due to the fact that over 5 million of us live all over the world.

The purpose for writing each and every word was to help explain the issues that have shaped the Middle East for decades. How can one understand what the issues are without understanding the passions of the region? How can one understand the conflict without understanding the historical roots?

Each essay was written to stand on its own. They have been arranged in chronological order as much as possible and they represent a journey for me as the writer. Hopefully they will help you, the reader, on a journey of discovery.

The Making of a Palestinian

(12/28/00)

Amidst the polemics that rage on and off line, sometimes it is helpful to take a step back to understand the human dimension of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. If you please, indulge the following reminiscences, for I believe they reveal why Israel must necessarily abandon Occupation.

My father was born in the small West Bank village of Beitunia in 1930. His family owned an orange grove in Lydda and after 1948 neither he nor his siblings ever saw the grove again.

He came to the US for good in 1949. He was a “man’s man” with shoulders that appeared Atlas-like to me while growing up.

When he was alive, I only saw my father cry three times in my life. The first time transformed me forever. I was eleven years old and the year was 1968. My father received a package in the mail. Apparently he had donated some money and he received a book. I do not remember what kind of book, but inside when he opened it, I will never forget what I saw. It was a small Palestinian flag.

My father took it out and with his head bowed... he wept. I distinctly remember a sense of bewilderment. I had never seen this hulk of a man cry before. I quizzically asked, “Yaba, what’s wrong?” But he never told me. His was a generation that found these emotional outbursts confusing and embarrassing. But somehow I instinctively knew what had happened. And something happened to me. That day I became a Palestinian.

It was the next year in school that the teacher assigned each of us to give a speech. Most of the boys gave speeches on football and baseball and the girls on dolls and make-up. My speech was on the disastrous consequences of the Balfour declaration.

Fast forwarding to the year 2000, history has somehow come full circle. This time, I am the father. One evening my wife, three boys and I decided to break the Ramadan fast at a restaurant. The waitress came over to ask what beverage we wanted. I answered for the table, "Bring three Cokes for the boys and two glasses of water."

My ten-year-old looked at me with surprise and said, "Yaba, should we be drinking Coca Cola? We should order something else because Coke is helping the Israelis."

With this statement, my ten-year-old became a Palestinian. Now, if you think that our home is a den of indoctrination, you would be dead wrong. He overheard me speaking about a Middle Eastern boycott of American goods, which included Coke. I believe my son "instinctively" knew that we should not lend ourselves to helping Israel brutalize our brothers and sisters, even indirectly.

These two incidents, separated by more than thirty years, reveal something fundamental, almost metaphysical. What connects *all* Palestinians in the world is a shared psychic experience. And this experience solidifies a Palestinian identity, no matter where one lives. Diaspora has not eradicated this identity. Time has not eradicated it. Neither prosperity nor privation has eradicated it. Being a Palestinian transcends geography and time. It is an eternal thought that lies dormant, waiting for a chance to express itself.

In the refugee camps of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon every Palestinian dreams of freedom and living in dignity without despair. In the villages of the West Bank and Gaza every Palestinian dreams of a life without identity cards, without Israeli snipers shooting the eyes out of children in dubious self-defense. Every Palestinian living in countries from Australia to the US is connected to every other Palestinian. We will not go away.

Israel has falsely assumed that time was on its side. Their belief was that successive generations of Palestinians would assimilate into neighboring Arab countries. Israel believed that creating conditions of deprivation would cause a mass exodus without a longing to return. They have forgotten their own history. Israeli brutality has solidified Palestinian identity and demands its expression.

My father died almost twenty years ago and before he became ill and died, he looked me in the eye and said, “Son, I may not live to see Palestine, but *Insha’Allah* you will.” Although it is true that Palestinians clutch the past to preserve our identity, we are ready to embrace the future. My father’s hope still rings in my ears.

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Do They Really Hate Us?

(10/18/01)

Hope is a waking dream.

—Aristotle

Monday night, I heard an analyst say that we had not tapped into the Arab-American community enough to spread the word “back home” about the nobility of the US war against terrorism. A friend of mine told me the foreign services office is busy trying to recruit hundreds of Arab-Americans as well.

When you have a hyphen in your self-definition, you often have a unique perspective. My father became a hyphenated American and I maintain the hyphen to this day. As I mentioned previously, he came to the US in 1949 after the “Nakba” (catastrophe) when the family’s orange grove in Lydda was lost to the newly formed Israel. He spoke little English when he arrived and taught himself the language by going to the movies. He was 17 years old.

Thirty years later, at the tender age of 47, the American dream let him retire and he moved to sunny Arizona. This brief introduction should give you an idea that I am a product of the American dream, where a penniless immigrant, through hard work and dedication, can retire in thirty years.

But if I am a product of the American dream, I have also been infused with the wonder and promise of the possibilities of that dream. America embodies the freedom to express oneself, freedom to live without fear of a military dictatorship throwing you in jail for holding unpopular ideas. And what you do with your life is up to you. In short, dreams animate my life.

I'll let you in on a little secret. The same dreams in American hearts are also yearned for in the Middle East. They are universal human impulses, yet remain buried in the sleep of despair. That is why so many people flock to the US from all over the world. They cannot realize those aspirations in their home countries. Why?

Let's take a look at the landscape of Middle East regimes. Saddam Hussein, once a US ally, strangles and gasses his own people, using largely US weaponry. Iran, through CIA and MOSSAD intervention, maintained a monarchy that brutalized its own people until 1979. In Jordan, the monarchy has moved to quell all forms of expression that run counter to the throne. All media is controlled.

A colonel in the Jordanian army once told me that in the US, the army is trained to fight outside enemies. But in the Middle East, armies are trained to fight their own people. Where did he get his training? Of course, here in America.

In Saudi Arabia there are 30 multi-billionaires in the royal family and the rank and file citizen is practically destitute. The royal family appears pious for domestic consumption, then goes whoring and drinking all over the world. Saudi citizens have few jobs in their countries. My aunt brought my children souvenirs from Mecca. They were made in Taiwan. The Saudi monarchy cannot rely on its own military to maintain itself, so the US is there to help it fight its citizens, should the need arise. The monarchy would topple within one month should the US withdraw its support.

The Palestinian Authority, created by the CIA from PLO remnants, has cut a deal with the US. In exchange for "cracking down on its own people" and supporting US military goals, America will supply riot gear and slap its *bette noir*, Israel. A Palestinian state is planned, but without the democratic ideals that animate the human soul.

In Egypt, the second largest recipient of US aid in the world, cries for freedom land you in jail. In fact, the US asks its client state (with little opposition) to suppress the demonstrations for freedom. US aid is contingent upon it.

Syrian despotism is well known. Syria can occupy neighboring Lebanon with US approval as long as it goes along with its military objectives. Oh, by the way, we admitted them to the Security Council, wiping away its crimes against its own people. The US now welcomes Syria into its political sphere where the dream is only real for those who flee.

Of course, the granddaddy of them all is Israel. Israel's present leader, Ariel Sharon is a master butcher. The massacres at Sabra and Chatila are just examples of his desire to kill the dream. The crimes Israel has accumulated over the last 50 years are almost too numerous to mention... except that they were done with either US complicity or the US turning a blind eye. The US has given Israel over \$100 billion since its inception.

The result? More brutalization and Occupation, paid for by the US.

People in the Middle East do not hate Americans. They certainly do not hate the American Dream. Everywhere, people yearn for freedom. And in this oil-rich region, everywhere are regimes, either created or propped up by the US. No regime in the region has legitimacy. Everyone violates human rights. Every regime attempts to kill the American Dream.

So what am I supposed to say to the other side of my hyphen? Forget the dream? Stop trying to lift yourself from the servitude of your masters?

The people in the Middle East do not hate Americans. They rightly hate those trying to squeeze the American Dream from their hearts.

Arafat and the Rhetoric of Blame

(12/06/01)

*A man who lives, not by what he loves but what
he hates, is a sick man.*

—Archibald MacLeish

The horrendous events of this past week need to be put into context. If I had a nickel for every time I heard the words “Arafat is responsible for the violence in the region,” I would instantly retire. One would think that all parties live by the above quoted reference rather than reason. But the truth of the matter is more serious than adding up debating points between Palestinian and Israeli spokesmen.

Israelis and the media know that to simplify a conflict, it is often desirable to personalize it. Personify evil in the name and face of a leader. Quadaffi served this purpose in the '80s, and of course Saddam Hussein was the '90s version of evil incarnate. Bin Laden is the poster boy for everything evil in the 21st Century.

So Israelis have a well-worn media plan with which they can make political hay. But we can ask with sobering reflection whether Arafat is actually responsible for everything that ails the region. If the answer is in the affirmative, then the solution is rather simple. If this is *actually* the case, let me be the first Palestinian to say it... execute him now.

Israelis know where he is. To eliminate the responsible party is simple. One attack helicopter will do. Eliminate the responsible party, and the trouble goes away.

Who believes this? Rhetoric aside, everyone knows that even if Arafat were killed, the problem would still exist.

And what is the problem? Occupation. Collective punishment and enslavement of over 3.5 million Palestinians living under oppressive conditions is the breeding grounds for violence.

Kill Arafat and the problem remains. Israel has bombed everywhere *except* where Arafat is actually lurking. Why? They do not *want* to kill him. They want to keep him alive and lay the blame on a person instead of a situation. If Arafat were eliminated and the next suicide bomb went off, who would the Israelis blame? What would they say?

Make no mistake about it... Arafat's days are numbered. He made a deal with the devil when he decided to become the *de facto* police force for an occupying power. He is caught between the hammer and the anvil. He is not a very good policeman and he certainly is not a very good leader for the Palestinian people.

The simplistic personification of the conflict is really a diversion. Don't fall for it. If Arafat were dead tomorrow, millions of people would still be brutalized by Israeli Occupation... and as long as this is the case, there is no power on earth that can bring an end to the violence.

There can be no security for Israelis while they continue to occupy Palestinian lands. There can be no peace while there is a continued Occupation.

Run for Cover

(10/25/01)

My cousin phoned me yesterday to tell me he saw our 80-year-old aunt, half blind being interviewed on Al Jazeera, the Arab equivalent of CNN. She was actually wailing to the cameraman, “*Al Yahoud... Keteloona,*” which translates to “The Jews are killing us.”

Putting aside the notion that most of World Jewry actually does not support Israel’s brutal Occupation, the conflict became more real after that call. Everyone has a personal story to tell, a tragedy that has touched their life. Israelis have them too. My aunt was left wailing to the entire Arab world... but who would hear?

Israeli soldiers have lionized for years. In 1967 they swept through most of the Middle East in six days. I suspect they feel those were the good old days. But today, the face of the Israeli soldier represents something different to the world. When they invade neighborhoods with tanks and infantry, their soldiers know where to go to “stay safe.”

Where is that? Tony Karon, of *Time* magazine wrote of Israeli soldiers using children as a shield. Karon reported, “A PR disaster followed reports of [Palestinian] children huddling frightened in a Lutheran orphanage while Israeli soldiers took up firing positions in their building. The State Department specifically appealed for the safety of the children.”

Other tactics have Israeli soldiers placing 10-year-old Palestinian children on their tanks advancing into Arab neighborhoods. The goal is to suppress fire. They found this really

does work. Children as human shields... a practice Israelis long condemned as proof positive of decadent morality.

There comes a point in every colonial adventure when the Occupiers realize they simply cannot win. Israel is close to this. One measures colonial resolve by the desperation of its soldiers. When Israelis use children as human shields, their desperation is clear. Their colonial adventure is about to come to an end.

The Cult of Zionism

(05/21/01)

Language is truly an amazing phenomenon. It is as if words have a transcendent quality that mean more to us even than we think we know. Take for example the word ‘thug’. In the past I have used this word in the phrase, “Zionist thugs.” This is not a new term to anyone who has ever felt the humiliation of a checkpoint, the terror of an F-16 or Apache helicopter dispensing its payload.

But the word ‘thug’ has an interesting etymology. The word comes from the old Hindu cult called Thugee. The cult was devoted to Kali, the goddess of death and destruction. For hundreds of years the Thugee cult practiced an organized campaign of assassinations. Strangulation was the preferred method. Thugees claimed tens of thousands of victims.

The British Raj hanged nearly 4,000 Thugees in the 19th century and the cult has only survived as a word to be applied with discretion. I began to think of the term, “Zionist thugs” in a different light. What makes a former human rights activist with dignity like Nathan Sharansky begin to advocate oppressive racial policies? What makes seemingly intelligent, articulate Israelis turn so completely away from reason and accept myth instead of historical truth? What makes Israel, as a nation, elect known war criminals—not once, not twice, but consistently elect leaders with so much blood on their hands?

The answer might lie in the notion that the spiritual heirs of the Thugees are Zionists. This is not just a rhetorical phrase. Is Zionism a cult? And if it is, what can you do with them?

Dr. Michael Langone, editor of *Cultic Studies Journal* has developed a brief checklist to determine if a movement is a cult:

- The group is focused on a living leader or idea to whom members seem to display excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment.
- The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members.
- The group is preoccupied with making money.
- Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
- The leadership dictates sometimes in great detail how members should think, act, and feel.
- The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s), and members.
- The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality, which causes conflict with the wider society.
- The group's leader is not accountable to any authorities.
- The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify means that members would have considered unethical before joining the group.
- The leadership induces guilt feelings in members in order to control them.
- Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group.

I am not sure if Zionism has ever been considered as a cult before. So the question for concerned Jews who are not part of this cult, and Palestinians is: "How should this cult be dealt with?" Since reason alone is ineffective in transforming cult members, and mass de-programming is not viable, we have a real problem on our hands. We are beyond 19th century mass executions (the method the British used in India), so how can we break through and "cure" such a large cult? We need to understand that after "converts" commit themselves to Zionism, the cult's way of thinking, feeling, and acting becomes second nature, while important aspects of their pre-cult personalities are suppressed or, in a sense, decay through disuse.

A normal level of psychological development and personality integration is very difficult for a cult member to achieve. Nathan Sharansky is a prime example of exhibiting a decayed sense of human rights... probably through disuse. He needs to be cured or rehabilitated... not killed. I am not being facetious. Zionism is an anachronistic cult based upon an ultra-nationalistic ethic. We need the best minds in the world to work on this if there will ever be a solution to the problem between Israelis and Palestinians.

Yaba, Why Do They Do That?

(05/30/02)

After a recent suicide bombing that was reported on television, my twelve-year-old asked me, “Yaba, why do they do that?”

I must admit, I did not know how to answer him. He has never experienced what living under Occupation means. Living in suburban Illinois and alternately fishing and playing with the latest X-box video game, what frame of reference or context could he possibly relate to in grasping whatever answer I could give?

I put him off saying that it was complicated and he walked away less than satisfied. This is an attempt to explain to my son why someone would become a human bomb and kill himself along with innocent people in a crowded market. In trying to find my words, the answer began to assume a rather simple truth. The American physicist and teacher Richard Feynman once said, “The truth always turns out to be simpler than you thought.”

This is what I wish I could have told him then.

When a people have been stripped of everything they have, are denied the expression of who they are, humiliated by those occupying their land, their homes destroyed, schools closed, children not being allowed to play, put in jail without trials, executed without being tried... life becomes intolerable.

In fact, the notion of simple earthly pleasures becomes out of reach. The Israelis control every facet of Palestinian life. Suicide bombings are a reaction to this oppressive control of life. These people are telling Israelis, “You can starve us, beat us, humiliate us, but you will never control our spirit. We will

choose the day of our death, and in the process make you feel a bit of the pain you, our Occupiers, inflict on our entire society.”

Palestinians exist in an environment so dire that the prospects of death overshadow their prospects for life. Imagine your mother spat upon by a nineteen-year-old Israeli soldier simply because she was your mother... imagine our neighborhood being bombed by powerful planes and helicopters and we had no way to protect ourselves. Suicide bombings are acts of desperation and mean that a people have been pushed to the brink. There is not one incident that leads to one of these actions. Rather it is a systematic matrix of actions by Israeli Occupation that terrorizes an entire population. Palestinians have been pushed so hard, they no longer fear death nor the enemy.

The “rightness” or “wrongness” of these suicide bombings can be debated by everyone, but failure to understand why these happen will make certain that they will continue. Without understanding the causes that lead to the bombings, one will never eliminate them. This simple truth seems to evade most commentators, pundits and politicians; and of course seems to be missed by most Israelis and those who support them.

I wish I could have said this to my son when he asked. I had not yet truly understood that the answer was simple. In another time, at another place... but for the grace of God, I too might have become desperate enough to become part of such horrific events.