

HHA-1

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

1

Hisham H. Ahmed
Jerusalem
July 1994

JUST A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

The life of people in this part of the world is a narrative that is yet to be told. Certainly many writers and authors have devoted themselves to understanding Palestinian - Israeli relations and/or intra-Palestinian and Israeli affairs. Much of what has come out undoubtedly contributed to broadening the knowledge of all interested in the area and its complex cultures.

What has not acquired the interest it actually deserves, however, are the stories of the ordinary human being -- Palestinian, Israeli and foreign alike -- whose thoughts and actions play a pivotal role in creating news headlines as much as they are affected by them. Intellectuals and policy makers formulate and make policy; what they say and or do attracts publicity because of its official character. Indeed those who occupy formal institutions and status are the ones responsible for their societies' well being in times of war as well as in times of peace. It is true that they are the ones whose roles become visible and demand the most serious consideration with examples in world civilizations being too many to attempt to enumerate.

Without the participation of the ordinary individual, however, a participation that can be either passive or active, no policies or thoughts can be made.

Wherever you go in Palestinian and Israeli societies people you meet have many interesting and revealing personal stories. At the market place, at offices where people are lined up to get documents processed or just on the street Palestinians and Israelis encounter each other. As can be expected the experience of their daily interaction is easily forgotten.

Hisham H. Ahmed is an ICWA fellow compiling oral narratives of the Palestinian people.

The morning of July 20th 1994 was a typical day outside the ID cards hawiyat office (which is a part of the Israeli Ministry of Interior) in Bethlehem. Tens of Palestinians crowded behind the iron gate under the hot sun, waiting since early morning to be let in by the few Israeli soldiers standing behind the gate.

I needed to go to that office since I had to obtain the proper paperwork in order to be able to travel to Jordan. Thus my driver, Iyad and I, drove there and parked the car outside the building ready to make our way in.

The crowd was waiting impatiently and clear signs of frustration were evident.

Holding my American passport up in a very noticeable way, we signalled to one of the soldiers behind the gate that we wanted to talk to him. After repeated attempts to get his attention he moved closer towards us. I explained to him what I needed to do at the office and with some trepidation he opened the gate for us muttering under his breath to indicate his discomfort.

Iyad and I proceeded to the little room which was constructed to perform security checks on people going into the hawiyat office. I walked in first and Iyad followed behind me. As soon as we got close to the metal detector the alarm went off. Both of us stood stock still, beginning to empty our pockets of metal belongings--keys ,coins etc.

Once the alarm had sounded one of the soldiers standing there started yelling at Iyad with words I did not understand since he spoke Hebrew. A moment of confusion ensued and with my very little Hebrew I tried to grasp what was going on by asking the soldiers, the soldier in question, however, who later identified himself as John Bidouk, was too enraged to listen to anybody. His voice got louder and louder by the second. For his part, Iyad kept trying to figure out what he could have done wrong to invite such fury. All of this commotion took less than a minute until John, the soldier grabbed Iyad by the shoulders hitting him on the back with the butt of his machine gun and pushing him back outside the iron gate.

I tried to talk the soldier into stopping what he was doing, while attempting to keep up with him with the aid of my white cane, but to no avail. I explained to him and to the other soldiers who grouped around in support of their colleague, that Iyad worked for me and that I needed to understand what was happening. None of the soldiers bothered to say anything in response to my request.

By that time Iyad was already standing outside the iron gate feeling humiliated and defeated. Behind the gate I stood there anxiously, not knowing what course of action to take. I kept

trying to get the attention of any of the soldiers there to explain to me exactly what had happened and why. Their attitude was one of carelessness: they ignored my attempts to talk to them when I spoke gently and calmly. As I became more assertive John simply responded in English, "I don't speak English. You don't speak Hebrew. So, we cannot talk".

To this I replied, "You seem to be able to speak some coherent English, and a minute ago somebody else here spoke good English".

John who managed to communicate what he wanted to say to me in English also spoke some Arabic. While language barriers might have contributed to creating the problem, in no way could it be said that the language factor was the only cause of the uproar. The overriding reason was attitudinal, embedded in deeply rooted feelings of animosity and possibly hatred. John seemed to understand almost everything I said to him as did the other soldiers but John wanted to make a point, it seems he wanted to reconfirm that it was he, and none other, who was in control. Even when I told him that I planned to report him to his bosses in the "Civil Administration" and to the American Consulate, he was still belligerent: "You can go and report me to God if you so wish", he replied. "I couldn't care less".

As the discussion was unfolding fruitlessly between John and I, someone else came to me and said, in English with an Israeli accent, "Are you trying to educate the soldiers of Israel? Unfortunately it won't work". Taken aback by the gentleness of his approach, I interrupted him enquiring whether he was a soldier too. He replied "No! I'm just a citizen like you". I commented, "Look at how positive your attitude is. Your words are very different, the tone of your voice is different too and one doesn't lose anything by being polite to others". I thanked him for his kindness and stressed that if more Israelis and Palestinians were to have such an attitude this part of the world would be a much better place for all. He emphatically agreed stating that, "Without kindness and politeness between all concerned, trouble becomes inevitable".

The Israeli civilian tried to talk John into changing his unreasonable attitude, regrettably he was unsuccessful as Iyad, many other bystanders and myself had been. John seemed to be determined to have the last word and it seemed that nothing could have changed his mind.

"You can go in but he can't" John kept saying to me in his heavy Arabic. None of the other soldiers made an effort to impact John's tenacity, despite the fact that some of them were standing there with "disagreement written all over their faces", as the scene was later described to me.

I had no choice but to go into the office by myself, in the company of one of the people standing there. There were Palestinian staff working at the hawiyyat office but the atmosphere there did not seem to be much different from the way it had been outside. It was rather tense and quite uncomfortable. The staff seemed to be having a dispute amongst themselves. Gathered behind the counters with their windows closed, they were arguing and shouting at each other as if all hell wanted to break loose.

"No one understands what they are fighting about" an elderly women standing there remarked with a deep sigh of exasperation. "I have been standing here since early morning only to ask a simple question. No one here seems to care" she said. The elderly women in question and maybe others waiting there as well most likely did not have any clue as to how things could be run differently. "This is what we have been experiencing all of our lives" a man responded to the elderly women's remarks. The people seem to know that the bureaucracy is not designed to serve the public as much as to make them dependant on it. "Why would they have me come repeatedly for a whole month just to have a birth certificate issued for my newly born son" a middle aged man wondered.

I waited for about an hour before I had the chance to ask about my paperwork. Not surprisingly I was also told that I had to check with them another day.

I left the office not knowing what mood Iyad was to be in upon my departure. As I exited the iron gate, Iyad was there to meet me "How are you feeling" I asked him. "Not well at all. What is most frustrating as I pointed out to another soldier, is that if he (John) were unarmed its doubtful that he would have risked doing what he did".

What do you mean exactly" I asked. "Well, if you could have seen him, he must have been almost two feet shorter than me" Iyad said. (Iyad is close to six feet tall). "So how are you going to deal with it now" I further asked. "Unfortunately there is nothing I can do about it other than to be frustrated for the rest of the day until the pain dissipates. It is something we are used to experiencing and every time something like that happens there is no one to turn to", Iyad concluded.

Indeed for the rest of the day Iyad seemed anxious and actually in pain. Every once in a while he would start to talk about the incident only to suppress his thoughts almost immediately. Noticing this pattern in his discourse I made an effort to let him express what he felt. His point was that "talking about it doesn't help but only adds to the frustration, anger and pain that has already left its mark from many similar incidents that have happened before".