

# ICWA LETTERS

## Visiting the Homeland

BY HISHAM H. AHMED

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Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

Palestinian intellectuals are spread all over the world. The numerous political obstacles put in their way have prevented many of them from visiting their homeland. Nowadays, however, the overall mood in the Middle East has changed; some of those who could not visit Palestine in the past now can, albeit not without headaches.

On March 16, 1995, the following interview was conducted with Surayya Antonius at the National Palace Hotel in Jerusalem. The interview took place just half an hour before she had to go to the airport after completing a one-week visit to Palestine in order to participate in an academic conference held at Bir Zeit University.

The interview is centered on her impressions of the country after a long time away. Ms. Antonius is a writer and an author in her own right. In addition, she comes from a family that earned quite a unique reputation in Arab history. While a Fellow (1930-40) of the Institute of Current World Affairs, her father, George Antonius, wrote *The Arab Awakening*, a book that is virtually required reading for almost every student of Middle East politics.

**HHA:** Who is Surayya Antonius?

**Surayya:** I was born in Jerusalem. My parents lived here in Sheikh Jarrah. My father was a writer and an academician. He held the post of assistant director of the Department of Education under the British Mandate system. At that time this was the highest position an Arab could hold. The director was always British. Although I wouldn't call my father a politician, he was also a mediator in politics. He mediated, advised and tried to show the Palestinian point of view to the British. But, alas, he failed.

My mother was from Lebanon and Egypt. She was the daughter of a very famous journalist and editor-in-chief, Faris Nimer. She married my father and came to Palestine. She became more Palestinian than many people I know. I was born here and left in 1948 just before the war broke out. I went to school abroad. I never came back to the whole of Palestine, although I did return to what is called the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem in 1965. My mother took another house after 1948 and kept on living here. Afterwards, I went back to Beirut, accompanied by my mother who was not feeling well at the time.

While I was working in Beirut, the 1967 war broke out. The remaining part of Palestine was occupied. I applied to return via the

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International Red Cross, but my application was never acknowledged or answered. So, I could not come back.

This year, 1995, is the first time I have returned. It has been exactly 30 years.

**HHA:** What about your return?

**Surayya:** It is difficult to talk about my return because it is not a return. I have come on a tourist visa. I have spent eight days. I am leaving tonight. Three of those days were taken up with the conference at Bir Zeit university. So, I did not see very much of the country. In the remaining four days, I've been to visit my two old homes and the orphanage that my mother founded. I walked around the Old City and I walked a bit on what we call the Israeli side of the city, the western side, which of course, I never saw after 1948 and which I didn't know at all.

It was extremely painful. First of all, one is a tourist, staying in a hotel in one's own city. This is very strange and psychologically upsetting. It is also extremely upsetting because the physical change done to the Jerusalem I know is appalling. It really is.

Jerusalem was a very beautiful, 16th-century, walled city. This was unique in the world: It was surrounded by very carefully planned hills, where building was strictly controlled. Hence, from several vantage points, you could see this walled city nestling in a cup, surrounded by hills. It was one of the most beautiful sights in the world. All this is gone. You cannot now, from any angle, see what you could see for over 400 years. What you see now are modern fortresses that ring the city and their intention is perfectly clear. They are there in order to assure that should it ever come to another war, it will be possible to fire down on the city, on the Arabs, from the surrounding heights.

It is extremely unpleasant to see this because the intention is very clear. One feels it all the time: You feel that you are down and they are up. This, I gather, is true of most old Arab towns all over. In Nazareth, the Israeli town is built above the Arab town. There again there is a physical expression of domination. I believe that architecture is primordial for human beings and they are much more influenced [by it] than they realize. To constantly be below physically is a terrible experience. It wears you down.

The other things, of course, that depress me is that it is basically still under occupation. At present, Jerusa-

lem is isolated from the surrounding countryside only for the Arabs, not for the Jews. An Arab who was living ten minutes outside Jerusalem is no longer allowed to come and work in Jerusalem, unless he has a special permit, which is difficult to obtain.

This afternoon, I was in a communal taxi, coming back from a refugee camp to the north. A communal taxi, as you know, is shared by seven people. We had gone just beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem. We were stopped by the Israelis. There are sheep pens into which cars drive. An Israeli soldier came up and banged on the window. He said something to me in Hebrew. Obviously he said: "Open! open!" He took all our papers in order to check that everyone had a permit to go into Jerusalem. As it happened, there was a child sitting in the car. He was a little boy who was born in Jerusalem. He was under-age. According to the occupation law, he had to have his parents with him. He had gone to school in Bethlehem and was returning home. He did not have a piece of paper from the school nor did he have a member of his family with him. So, they took this child out of the car and told him to find his way back to Bethlehem, which was not only quite a distance away, but it was also a bitterly cold day. This took us quite a long time. The driver and another man went down to plead with the Israelis and to say that the boy was not doing any harm. But there was no way to dissuade them. This sort of thing goes on all the time so that all the people living in the suburbs of Jerusalem are totally cut off. This, of course, was new to me.

Another thing that was new to me was the predominance of the Israeli army. They are everywhere. If you want to go to the Dome of the Rock, which was built by Arabs and which is the most beautiful building in Jerusalem, Israeli soldiers tell you when you can go in or when you cannot. It is the third holiest Moslem site in the world and it was always open to all people born in Jerusalem. I found that this was a terrible shock to me.

I was invited to a conference at Bir Zeit university which is located outside the official Israeli boundaries of Jerusalem. They don't check you when you are going out of Jerusalem, but they do when you return. It is extremely unpleasant. You feel all the time that you have no right to be in your own country. It is as though you are living in London or Kensington, and every time you go to Picadilly you are stopped by a foreign army and asked for papers.

The one positive factor was the university. It did not exist when I was here 30 years ago. It was simply a



small college in a village. It is now a large and very beautifully built campus, with stone buildings and a beautiful view on one of these rolling hills of Palestine. The students are admirable, for they have the most difficult time of all. The occupation authorities are not really keen on Palestinians getting a higher education. In fact, they discourage it.

This university was closed for several years; it was forbidden to teach there. It was accused of fostering nationalism. Of course it fostered nationalism. You do not need to foster Palestinian nationalism; it already exists. They managed to continue in an *ad hoc* way, by holding classes in private homes. This turned out to be extremely difficult. They are allowed to function now, partly because of pressure brought to bear on Israel from Europe. Yet they are hassled in every possible way, in silly little ways.

The university library, which is excellent, is not exempt from customs duties. They are obliged to go to the Jerusalem main post office and get all the books they ordered cleared by the censor and then pay duty on them. Every Israeli university is exempt, but not the Palestinian one. It is a very expensive business. The students have a very, very difficult time since they come from all over Palestine, from beyond the Jerusalem borders. A student who comes from Gaza has to cross the border in Israel. Then he has to cross a border into Jerusalem. Then he has to cross a border out of Jerusalem to get to the university. Every time the West Bank or Gaza are closed, which happens quite often, he can't do it. He loses his studies unless he smuggles himself across, the penalties for which are dire.

**HHA:** What about your life after you left Jerusalem in 1948?

**Surayya:** After leaving, I went to college in England. I stayed on a bit, working in an art gallery in London. Then I went to Beirut where I started as a columnist for a Lebanese paper. Later, I became editor-in-chief of a monthly magazine on sociology, economics and arts. It didn't have a political license, but we managed to get a lot of politics in indirectly. Then I was the editor-in-chief of a publishing house that published books on the Middle East.

I gave up everything when the 1967 war took place. I came to Jordan, working for a summer, setting up a new refugee camp called Zizia. The situation was terrible in '67; the refugees were pouring out by the hundreds of thousands. All the governmental social services were overwhelmed. There was a great demand for volunteers to collect materials and to actually help organize. It was an appalling situation, one of the worst in my life.

I returned to Beirut where a group of Palestinian intellectuals, many of whom had come back from abroad, set up an information office. We all spoke at least one foreign language very well. We decided that the West simply did not understand what was hap-

pening. We were all horrified by the exultation with which the West greeted the outcome of the 1967 war and the occupation of what remained of Palestine as well as parts of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. We felt that the Arabs had failed in putting the case across. So we decided in a very small way to do what we could. I worked in this office until the Lebanese civil war broke out in the mid 1970s. It was fairly successful; People of our caliber had not met journalists before. We had not taken them around and talked with them in their own mental language.

When the Lebanese war broke out, it became impossible for us to do this any longer. I stayed off and on in Beirut during the war. It was my base.

When the war ended, I was very tired. All my family was either dead or had emigrated. I had lost my house in Beirut. I decided to have a rest abroad, in Cyprus. I thought it was going to be just a year. In fact, however, I have been there now for several years. I do not know when I will go back to Beirut or whether I can return to Palestine.

I have written a lot, mainly for journals on Palestine or, occasionally, for foreign newspapers. I have published three books: One was on architecture in Lebanon that I was pleased with. This was the first time anyone had looked at traditional vernacular architecture in Lebanon. It wasn't a very good book, but it was a pioneer. Then I wrote two novels during the Lebanon war. There was a period when I couldn't do any work outside the house. I couldn't do any research.

I'd been working on a book on Palestinian women, but the Lebanon war stopped that. Actually the Israeli invasion of 1982 stopped it. There was no electricity. One couldn't read all day. My mother was very ill. The situation was bad.

Thus, I decided to write something out of myself, without research. So, I wrote a novel on the uprising in Palestine which the Palestinians conducted between 1935 and 1939 against the British. It was published in London and New York. It was well received in spite of being very anti-British.

The second book was about 1948 in Palestine and at the same time about 1982 in Beirut. I felt they were both circumferences of the same circle. One could pick up very much the same sort of reason behind both. The tragic effect on the people suffering from these two wars was also similar. That was published in London but not in New York, because it included a great deal about the Zionist role. In the first book, the Zionists were peripheral; they didn't enter into it.

I am working now, I hope, on another book. Without a doubt, it has to do with Palestine.

Yours sincerely,

Hisham

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