

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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SOCIETY SUFFERS FROM SPLIT PERSONALITY

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Dear Peter,

The sense of Palestinianism used to be strong in the not too distant past. In the first two years of the intifada, or uprising, which broke out in December 1987, Palestinian society witnessed an unprecedented process characterized by a coalescence of efforts, unity of means and goals and by streaming nationalistic fervor. Almost every town, village, refugee camp and city in the Occupied Territories participated in intifada activities - strikes, resistance and civil disobedience. The magnitude of the intifada spoke for itself on TV screens all over the world, the contestation of wills between Palestinians and Israelis gave the impetus to policy-makers and diplomats to broker peace agreements in Madrid, Oslo, Washington and Cairo. Peace initiatives expressly meant to contain tensions which could endanger regional and hence international stability were they to spill over into other parts of the Middle East.

Palestinian-Israeli peace talks were initiated to put an end to the state of conflict between the two warring parties, however, the mass movement of Palestinian society, which surprised even its own leadership, seems to be splitting apart. It is true that the intifada instilled new modes of thinking

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and behavior among those who participated in it, at least for a while, but it seems equally accurate that the aftermath of the intifada contains problems to be contended with for many years to come. Many Palestinians were killed, more were injured and imprisoned due to the actions of another party, the Israeli army, but many problems intrinsic to the predominant cultural outlook of the society itself started to surface. It is not the case, as some would say, that these problems are new. They have been rather subsumed during the heat of the intifada and most people act as if they never existed before.

The evening of August 2, 1994 spent at the Central Restaurant in the city of Bethlehem on the West Bank was quite revealing. Three young Palestinian men and I agreed to spend the evening together there to talk about "life" as everyone here likes to say, they were Nasser, a contractor, another Nasser, a journalist and Muhammad, a Palestinian chemist working at AT & T in the United States, who is currently visiting. All these three men have had unique life experiences - each lived in a refugee camp, and had experienced many different pains and disappointments in their attempt to bring about change in their own lives and in the lives of their beloved.

Muhammad, who obtained a Ph.D. in Chemistry at a respectable American university, constantly seems to feel the burden of being away from his family: "I feel quite happy in the States in that I can be productive and free", he says. "But if my family were to be living over there with me, I would be much happier." His brother, Nasser, the journalist, finished a bachelor degree in sociology at Bethlehem University. It took him 9 years to finish his degree since he was sentenced to 5 years in prison in the middle of his studies. The other Nasser also spent 5 years in prison while completing his studies at the Polytechnical Institute in Hebron.

The two Nassers are considered "prison graduates" a term commonly used about those who come out of prison here and which has nothing to do with formal education and attainment of a degree. In essence, "prison graduates" used to be idealized, they were viewed as heroes. They were highly respected and people would go to visit them upon their release, in recognition of their "sacrifices to the cause." People used to

look up to them for advice and guidance on national and social issues. Their credibility was high to the point that very few would dare stand in their way. "This was the case before", Nasser, the contractor commented as the discussion got under way. "The fact of the matter is that too many people have been imprisoned, particularly during the intifada. The circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of some notwithstanding, going to prison became a matter of social and psychological need." he stated. "How could this be the case," I inquired? "Some people used to feel that their image would decline in the eyes of others unless they became heroes and went through the experience," he explained.

I asked what the consequence of this attitude had been and Nasser went on to say, "At least 30% of the prison population were uninformed and uneducated about the cause, about why they were there. Of those remaining, you were lucky if you found 30% who were really concerned and informed."

At this point, Nasser, the journalist picked up the discussion:

"Let me give you a most gruesome example. When we were in prison during the intifada, they [the Israelis] brought a young man to our section. We all knew that he was on the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising. So, in effect he was important for us all. After all he used to direct intifada activities and was a part of the leadership that most people used to idealize as a specter to frighten the Israelis.

He represented one of the political factions and was sentenced to 2 years in prison. One day, this man broke down in tears. He was crying hysterically. We did not know what was going on. To us, he was the symbol of strength, he was a national leader, supposedly, and to see him crying raised some awkward questions. 'What's wrong,' we asked? 'I am worried about my 2 children and my wife,' he answered while tears were running down his cheeks.

None of us could prevent ourselves from becoming

very angry with him and we shouted in his face: "What about all those who you have been directing to throw stones and bottles at Israeli soldiers! Aren't their lives worthy of consideration? Don't they have families too? Those of them who did not get killed by bullets were destined to spend at least 10 years in prison."

Muhammad and I were listening as the narrative was unfolding. For the two Nassers, the story was a vivid reminder of painful days "which seem to be refusing to go away."

Nasser, the contractor, commented, "This is one example of how an intifada leader acted once. Many others were no better. When bored, which is quite the norm, prisoners would sit around and tell stories which had nothing to do with their nationalistic work, nothing to do with what we were supposed to be achieving, nothing to support or explain why it was worth so many being killed and imprisoned."

I asked if these problems were the product of a profound despair which engulfed the society as a result of the intifada. Nasser, the contractor, took a deep breath before he said anything. It wasn't too difficult to tell that he was working his mind hard to come to grips with such problems.

"Our society has been suffering from internal problems long before the intifada started. It is just that we did not see them, or did not want to see them because we were young. It was extremely hard for any one of us before to accept the fact that our society is not as great or healthy as we would like it to be, nor as great and healthy as we were supposed to believe it was during the intifada."

Suspecting that we were not fully convinced, Nasser went on to narrate a story about an event he had witnessed when he was a student at the Polytechnic. The story has nothing to do with the intifada or prison life as it had happened some years before in 1982, The story has to do with "psycho-social disintegration" as Nasser himself likes to call it.

"Once, some of my friends from the Gaza Strip invited me to spend an evening with them at their rented apartment in Hebron since we were all going to the same institute. The idea for me was to get away from the stresses of the camp and the family.

As the evening advanced, my friends gathered around me and said that they were going to show me something that I would enjoy. I had no idea what they had in mind but they started turning the lights on and off for a while and not knowing what was happening, I became concerned. I thought that they were signalling to other families that Israeli soldiers were in the area. Not too long afterwards, a young girl, maybe 16-years-old looked out of the window of her house, about 50 meters away (roughly 150 feet). She started playing with her hair for them and dancing. Gradually, she started taking off her clothes until she was totally naked. She made poses for the boys and they really had their kicks."

I commented that such events take place in almost all societies. Nasser, for his part displayed a cynical smile and went on to say:

"Like you I tried to convince myself that this was an ordinary problem, an everyday event. Young men who are frustrated opt for the chance to amuse themselves looking at a woman. But there is more to the story. It didn't actually end until the following day.

I went to sleep after spending some time with my friends. The following morning, I got up and was ready to go home. One of my friends slowed me down and said that he was going to show me something. I simply did not know what to expect from them anymore. We went into a shop to buy cigarettes. In the shop a young girl was working, veiled from head to toe. She kept looking down at the floor, she didn't smile, she didn't say anything and only sold us what we asked for. As we were ready to step out, my friend asked me if I knew that girl by any

chance. I told him that I did not know her, of course. To my shock, he said that she had been the one who everybody was looking at the evening before."

Signs of surprise were evident on my face, apparently. Nasser, the journalist wanted to interject, and so did Muhammad. The other Nasser, it was obvious, had more to say. Therefore, he captured the floor again:

"I know why you are surprised! You think that there is a huge contradiction here and you are also asking yourself as to the kind of life this young girl will have. The problem does not solely lie with her. You have to look at the pressure her family brings to bear upon her to compel her to wear the veil. What is even more disturbing is that the primary actors in the story come from very conservative social environments - Hebron and the Gaza Strip. The same guys who were having fun would not even let you see their mothers or sisters, let alone shake hands with them. So, there is a broader picture which makes it necessary to have an understanding of the social and psychological upbringing of these people."

I wondered to myself whether this was an isolated incident. Nowadays, you do see many Palestinian women wearing the veil which can be attributed to the rise of religious movements in the Occupied Territories. Nasser's point, however, was that societal problems existed before the intifada started. "This is only one of many examples of conflicting personality traits, particularly with women" Nasser, the journalist, said. In making his point, he recounted the story of one of his fellow student friends in the early eighties at Bethlehem University:

"Whenever you'd see her around campus, she would wear the veil. Her father was very strict. Later, I found out that she would make phone calls to men, myself included, to talk about the most crude pornographic stories. It took me some time to believe that it was her making such calls, because I couldn't associate the way she looked and acted at

the university with the way she was on the phone. I really could not believe it."

Muhammad remarked that he heard from one of his friends once that female students at Jordan University tried to undress for him, even though they knew he was married. Those women too did not appear in public except under the veil. His friend rebuked them and they eventually dropped the course.

Jumping from prison stories to those of women under the veil, I took note of the fact that this type of conversation might be problematical. I wondered if this sudden switch of interest from problems pertaining to men to problems pertaining to women could merely be another form of subjugating women in the culture, particularly given the content of the stories.

Nasser, the contractor, noticed my sense of bewilderment and said that, "Those women are the product of their environment. In most cases, it is the man who is to blame." To illustrate his point, Nasser narrated his concluding story:

"Some time ago, a 65-year-old man in our neighborhood was trying to molest a 12-year-old girl. The young girl even started to take off her pants for him out in the open, under a tree. Several of us saw this happen and worried about what others might say or do, the old man used the opportunity of his wife being away from his nearby home and ordered the girl in. They both jumped over the fence into the house and what happened there, I think, was inevitable. That girl was scarred for the rest of her life, as was shown in her behavior in later stages."

As the discussion was being wrapped up the two Nassers almost simultaneously suggested that the stories they narrated represent only the tip of the iceberg.

Undoubtedly, such stories cannot be considered isolated cases in Palestinian society. What is unique about them is that they have actually been narrated and many episodes that happen even with regularity may never be told. Numerous stories of this kind are internalized or simply suppressed because of the

immense gulf between the way people conduct themselves publicly and the way they live privately. After all, private life, or for that matter, privacy is widely considered an integral part of the public good. For people to reveal their inner thoughts or disclose their individual actions is culturally intolerable if it is not conformist. All that people say or do must be acceptable to others, to the extent that self delusion can become the modus vivendi of all social interaction.

Although self delusion is not a very good basis on which to begin planning for a strong future identity, the sweeping changes that will occur as the Palestinian people have to consider taking complete responsibility for their own destiny, will leave them no choice but to critically evaluate themselves and their society. This process will either provoke the society to come to terms with itself and mobilize all resources both public and private in order to survive, or it will split the society beyond repair.
