

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Jerusalem
October 1994

DEHUMANISED AT THE BORDER

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Dear Peter,

The 21st century rapidly approaches and the meaning of Palestinianism remains difficult to interpret as it has been for the past few decades. Any discussion of Palestinian rights inevitably invokes thoughts of dispersal, statelessness, loss of national identity and lack of independence and freedom. The widely understood meaning of Palestinianism is denoted by the existence of a problem whose political dimensions seem to be in the process of resolution by agreements and arrangements. Its human component, however, remains to be considered.

For military, strategic, political, historical and security related considerations, Palestinians cannot exercise the right of statehood and independence. However, they have settled, perhaps unwillingly, for the autonomy arrangement granted to them thus far in the Gaza Strip and Jericho. This solution might address certain aspects of their political problem, it does not necessarily, however, put an end to their human dilemma as they try to go about constructing a new life. Foremost of their difficulties is the inability to move around freely from one place to the other whether within or without the Occupied Territories.

A Palestinian living in the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip, for example, has to obtain a permit from the Israeli authorities to travel to Jerusalem. Often such permits are not granted and even when they are, seekers have to stand in long crowded lines often in extreme weather conditions outside Israeli Civil Administration offices. Some of those who wait for hours and sometimes even days, run the risk of dehydration and fatigue and just recently, one Palestinian standing outside a civil administration office in the West Bank to obtain a travel permit to Jerusalem, was reported to have collapsed from heat exhaustion. An ambulance had to come and take him for treatment.

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Restrictions on travel and movement of Palestinians can go far beyond the regulations, of Israel, however, and Palestinians who need to travel to Arab countries can be subjected to restrictions and pressures as damaging, if not more than those referred to above.

The following story of two young professional Palestinian women who work at the most reputable Palestinian University of Birzeit and who planned to travel to Egypt for business via the Sinai border, is quite illustrative. Hala Salem and Salam Kanaan are both researchers at Birzeit University's Community Health Department. The two hold Masters degrees in social work, one from Britain and the other from the American University of Beirut. They have travelled extensively around the world acquiring a lot of experience in the process. On July 24th 1994, they needed to travel to Egypt to participate in some professional work arranged by the Ford Foundation.

After they obtained all the required paperwork from the Israeli offices they thought that they were on their way but their experience proved to be quite different. The following interview was conducted at their office in Birzeit:

Q) What were you feeling before you embarked on your trip?

Hala:

On the one hand I wanted to go because I needed some reference books in Arabic for the department here at Birzeit. I also wanted to see some Egyptian colleagues in Cairo and also felt the need to go out of the country in order to have a short break. On the other hand I was reluctant to leave because I had so much work to finish with previously arranged deadlines. I also thought that I wouldn't want to go through the typical problems which one expects to encounter when travelling across the Sinai border. I realized that travelling would take a long time and despite the fact that I enjoy it I wasn't sure that I had the energy to go through it.

Q) Did you expect to go to Egypt and enjoy it as well as taking care of your business there? All people have ideas about the trip before they leave, what were yours?

Hala:

I was in Egypt last year, I have a lot of friends there, its not the first time I've been and I enjoyed it very much before. My hope was to see the friends I have in Egypt, renew my professional and social contacts and also see a lot of things there too.

Q) How did you [Salam] feel before you went on the trip?

Salam:

I was very much looking forward to it in fact, firstly, it was important as far as my work was concerned. The goal was to investigate what Egyptian Universities offered in terms of community health programs. Secondly, Egypt is a very important place for me as I am fascinated by the antiquity and the history of the place. I was looking forward to going back. What pains me the most is that I was in Egypt 18 times before. I started counting how many times my passport was stamped in and out of Egypt. Each time I went there, however, was via the airport [in Amman] apart from once when I went by sea. I didn't have problems at any other time. Anyway, in addition to work I was hoping to see all those wonderful old places in Egypt.

We were planning to visit the Ford Foundation and the World Health Organization in Cairo and in Alexandria. I also wanted to have a change of atmosphere from the overall situation here which is always quite tense. There was a lot of stress at work before we planned to leave and we thought that Egypt would distract us from the problems here and it would be a very much needed break. The hope was that psychologically the trip would do us a lot of good although physically it would be tiring. However, the physical strain and the psychological exhaustion we went through at the border was absolutely incredible. I haven't recovered yet.

Q) I presume that you took care of all the necessary paperwork before you left, so what exactly happened on the trip?

Salam:

As well as taking care of the paperwork we took a Mazada tour bus [Israeli company specializing in Egypt trips]. We boarded the bus in Jerusalem and then took it first to Tel Aviv and from there to Rafah [border crossing point into Egypt]. Before we left we also contacted the Egyptian Embassy in Tel Aviv and explained to them all the procedures we had been through and they simply responded that there should be no problems whatsoever. They said that if we had papers proving that we were going for business, then everything should be OK. We decided to leave on this basis despite the fact that we had an intuitive feeling that something was going to go wrong.

The trip was rather pleasant at the beginning, we got up at 5.00am, took a taxi from Ramallah [a West Bank Town] to Jerusalem at 6.15, boarded the bus at 7.00 and took it to Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv we paid the required border taxes while waiting for an hour at the company premises. After the wait

we boarded the same bus in the company of other passengers primarily international tourists. While on the bus we found out that there were ten other Palestinians, four of them from Jerusalem carrying Laissez Passer [Israeli travel documents usually issued to Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip or Jerusalem] and six others carrying Jordanian passports, as we do.

We stopped at a rest place and had some coffee after we left Tel Aviv. Coincidentally, the driver talked to us about a man called Akram al-Jamal who seemed to be the [Egyptian] director of the terminal in Rafah. He told us what an unpleasant person he was and said that he would simply refuse entry to a person if he didn't like the way they looked. We started laughing when he told us, not imagining that anything like this could happen to us.

We arrived at the Israeli exit point in Rafah around 11.20. Things were rather easy there and we went through without trouble. We finished processing our paperwork shortly before noon. We went in and had to queue in a separate line from the tourists - Palestinians in one line and foreigners in another. In spite of that, it was trouble free. It was like any other exit point for Palestinians. For me, however, it seemed more organized than the Israeli exit point at the border with Jordan. There was no intimidation and no people shouting at us.

When we were done, we boarded the bus again to the Egyptian inspection point. My understanding was that a representative from an Egyptian tour company would be there to receive us. As expected the representative was waiting for us because according to Egyptian-Israeli agreements the Israeli bus could not cross the Egyptian border. The representative seemed to be a nice man. He took the names of the Palestinian passengers only, 12 of us. I thought that this meant the process would be speeded up. He actually told us to present our papers right away because the process would take at least 2 hours.

We entered the Egyptian border point shortly after noon. The first thing we did was to change Israeli money into Egyptian currency. We first filled out one form which was required of everybody. Then we were asked to fill out a second form which was only demanded from Palestinians entering Egypt. When we wrote on the form that our citizenship was Jordanian, we were told to change that to Palestinian. To us this meant that the fact that we were carrying Jordanian passports was not recognized. However, we made the required change without much questioning.

We waited, and waited and waited. The place was very noisy, filthy and depressing. At one point while waiting, the representative of the Egyptian company who was trying to follow up on our papers, called me up. He said that two other women from Jerusalem and I were wanted for interrogation. We first thought that this was a routine measure. We went to a room which had a sign saying that it was a 'criminal laboratory'. The first woman went in and came out rather quickly. The same happened with the second one too. Then I entered and stayed a little bit longer. I was asked questions about my name, my birth place and about my profession. I was also interrogated quite sternly as to why I was going to Egypt and the reasons for my several previous trips to the country. I responded that I went to Egypt so often in the past, partly for tourism purposes, partly because my sister was studying there and partly for business which was why I was going now. I mentioned that I worked at Birzeit University and that I was invited by the Ford Foundation to go there as the invitation paper I showed them proved. I stressed that I had a formal invitation and that I was travelling for professional reasons.

In general, the questions directed at me were stupid. For example, they asked me whether I was married. When I responded in the negative they wanted to know why I wasn't married. They further asked me what type of jobs my father, my mother and my brothers have. In raising such questions, the interrogator thought that he was trying to display some humor: "You will have your honeymoon in Egypt, when you get married," he said laughing. When I told him that I was engaged he started asking me questions about my fiancée - his job and his place of residence.

After the questioning, he asked me to leave which I did. A little bit later, the Egyptian company representative called me again, this time with Hala. Hala went into another room to be interrogated by another person before I was asked in.

Hala:

While waiting for Salam, I expected them to call me in. My intuition told me that some trouble was unfolding. Therefore, I was not surprised when they called Salam again or when they called me with her. I was anticipating that they would ask for me, as I expected Salam to tell them that she was with a colleague.

I was rather calm when I went in. In the room were two men. The room used for interrogating me was a part of the criminal laboratory mentioned by Salam. Funnily enough, what got my attention in particular was a badly working black and white TV put on the side. The screen was not clear at all. While questioning me, the two men were also watching an Egyptian

movie for two thirds of the time. This made me feel that they neither comprehended or were remotely interested in most of what I was telling them.

When I first entered the room, one of the men said, "Have a seat Madam. What are you going to Egypt for?" I told him that I was going on a business trip. "What kind of work is it that you are going to do there?" he asked. I explained to him what it was. "Do you have proof?" he asked with a look of disbelief. I gave him the faxed invitation to look at. Most likely, he did not understand what it said because it was in English. The interrogator asked who the invitation was from and I told him it was from the Ford Foundation. "What is the Ford Foundation?" he asked. I explained to him what the Ford Foundation was and he asked me why I was going there which I also explained.

The interrogator seemed really confused. At one point, while gesturing with his hand, he asked whether the Ford Foundation was anything to do with making the Ford cars. While examining my passport, he asked whether I had been to Egypt before. My passport clearly shows that last year I had an honorary visa for an invitation to Egypt from the ministry of foreign affairs. When I explained to him that my visit to Egypt last year had to do with the study of Arab childhood and development, he simply said that I must be a very important person.

He then asked me if I was planning to have fun in Egypt and I said that it depended on whether I would have time as I was basically going for work but if time allowed then I would try to enjoy myself. He asked me again about my profession and whether I had somebody travelling with me. I told him that I was with my colleague Salam. When I told him that I work at Birzeit University he asked whether the university had an Israeli president. I explained to him that the president of the university was Palestinian because the university is Palestinian and he asked if any Egyptians worked at the university. I told him that we hadn't had the honor of Egyptians working on our campus although I hoped it would happen in the future. At the end of this session the interrogator asked me to leave the room saying that he hoped I would have fun in Egypt. After I left they called Salam in.

Salam:

I went in to be interrogated by the same two people who were questioning Hala. The setting in this room was a little bit different from the one I had been questioned in previously. Here both men were watching television on and off while questioning me whereas in the first room one man had served as the interrogator and the other seemed to be preoccupied reading a newspaper. In this room, which was Round 2 for me,

one of the men asked me a few questions very quickly. They were mainly centered on the purpose of my trip to Egypt which I explained to him, only to be asked whether I was carrying letters to people with me. I emphasized that I had no letters to be delivered to anybody. He asked me whether I was sure and I responded positively. I gave him a copy of the invitation but he didn't seem to understand anything in it. The letter was in English. I thought that he didn't understand anything so I explained to him that this was an invitation from the Ford Foundation related to community health work. I basically translated the letter to him almost verbatim, I just wanted to get it over with. His attitude seemed OK, he did not seem to be hostile or anything like that. The other man sat cross-legged watching television for the whole time and every once in a while he would look at us and smile. The interrogator asked me to leave the room stating that he would give us the passports shortly. I left and the waiting started all over again. The representative of the Egyptian company went back and forth apparently enquiring about our papers while all the passengers who were with us had already left. We saw them getting their luggage and boarding the bus while we were kept waiting more than two hours after our arrival at the Egyptian border point.

Hala:

While we were waiting I managed to keep calmer than Salam. At one point I decided to go and talk to the security officers at the main entrance of the building. I asked them if they knew how much longer we would have to wait and explained that we had been waiting for more than two hours in the hot smelly hall. They simply looked at me and apparently liked what they saw. They asked me what I did and I said that I worked at a university. They asked what I did at the university so to avoid being bogged down with a whole barrage of questions, I simply told them that I worked in the health field. They then asked if I dealt with mental health and when I said yes, one of them said that he had a psychological problem and that was that he only wanted to get married to a woman from El Sham¹. They asked if I was Jordanian since I carried a Jordanian passport. I told them that I wasn't and they asked me if I knew that King Hussein was planning to come and pray at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. I said that I did know and remarked that Sadat did it before him. They continued by saying that King Hussein and Rabin went to pray at the White House and I replied that Arafat and Sadat did that too and many others would most probably do it as well. I was getting quite angry by then and following the exchange of words

¹ The reference here is to Bilaard El-Sham or Greater Syria. In Ottoman times the whole area which includes today's Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria was known as Greater Syria.

between me and the guards, something quite disturbing happened. Some of the security people came out of their rooms and started yelling at the crowd in the hall. Tired due to the long wait some people had moved closer to the door where their paperwork was supposed to be processed. The security people did not like the fact that they were being pressured or challenged by the bystanders and simply started shouting at them: "get out, get the hell away from here, you animals." People started moving away from the door where the shouting was coming from and went back and sat on the floor as there were no seats available.

Salam:

It was Al-Jamal who threatened the crowd, telling them that he would do nothing today unless they moved away. He told them that they may have to sleep there tonight and tried to sound upset and make the people feel that it was their fault and that they should feel guilty.

Hala:

As the officials were shouting and yelling, two young men waiting in the crowd shouted back at them: "We don't want to go to Egypt anymore. Give us back our passports. We simply want to return home. We are not going to tolerate this treatment." The young men then had an argument with the guards outside. The guards went and brought Al-Jamal who seemed to be the head of this process and to have the last word on who went to Egypt and who didn't. Al-Jamal came out of his room screaming: "Who are the ones complaining? Bring them here".

We thought that he would beat them up. Al-Jamal roughly demanded to know what kind of passports they held. When they told him that they had Israeli passports [they were Israeli Arabs] we could feel the change of atmosphere immediately. Al-Jamal himself shifted his whole attitude and began welcoming them profusely after screaming at them and treating them like animals. He insisted that they go to Egypt and enjoy it there. He brought them their passports, according to them the most hospitable treatment, simply because they were Israeli nationals. He even apologized to them about what happened, repeating several times that they were not the intended target. He finally processed their paperwork before anybody else's and made sure that they were okay.

Salam:

The hall where people waited was very large and when you first enter, you walk into a small corridor. The waiting area is divided into sub-areas marked by windows. The first line is marked for foreigners, the second for Egyptians and the third for Palestinians. When people enter the hall, they can go to any of the windows and submit their papers, except

Palestinians. Despite the fact that there was only one window operating, a Palestinian would be told to go to the Palestinian line where the window was closed. Next to the Palestinians' window there was a bench where I wanted to sit to fill out the form especially handed to us. One of the security people came running in my direction and yelled at me to move away. "You are not allowed to sit here", he shouted right in my face. I moved away, feeling truly humiliated. He would simply not let anyone sit on that bench despite the fact that it was put there, one would think, to accommodate those who have to wait at the window. He finally came and sat on the bench himself, stretching his feet all the way so that no one would disturb him. More people were standing than sitting and the processing of the paperwork was slow and inefficient. There were a lot of people waiting there. It took those in charge quite a long time to process a passport. From what we saw, the security guards that Hala went to talk to earlier would carry a bunch of passports for hours. Every 10 or 15 minutes, they would call somebody's name. They might give the person the passport or might have him or her go for interrogation. What makes things even worse is that often you don't hear your name being called because the guard is inclined to speak softly in the middle of a crowd of, say, 200 people. It is your problem, of course, if you don't hear your name being called. By the time you get to the guard to inquire about your name, you are insulted and screamed at for not hearing your name or for not getting to him faster. When they asked us to wait, we moved away to the end of the hall. We were getting tired and frustrated. At one point in the wait, they called somebody else's name, Hala's, and my name. This time it was Round 3 for me and Round 2 for Hala and we were to be interrogated by none other than Akram Al-Jamal himself.

Hala:

When I first went in, he gave me a quick dirty look and then did not lift his eyes off the passport and the other papers in front of him. He did not even bother to ask me to have a seat. He asked me the same nonsensical questions, particularly regarding the purpose of my trip to Egypt. He was writing down some information on a piece of paper in front of him, covered by another piece. Another man was standing in one of the corners of the room, looking at me all the time. When I was interrogated the first time I saw the man write down "VIP". I did not know what that exactly meant. I left the room this time after the questioning without Akram al-Jamal having looked at me at all. I was faceless. I didn't exist for him.

Salam:

When I walked into the room, he looked me over only once to check me out. Before I started answering his question as to

the purpose of my trip to Egypt, he interrupted asking me why I had travelled frequently before. While he kept looking at my passport page by page I responded that I travelled frequently, partly for business and partly for pleasure. Without even listening to what I was saying, he abruptly ordered me out of the room. We waited for at least three-quarters of an hour after I left the room.

Suddenly the representative of the Egyptian tour company walked in my direction and told me that my entry into Egypt had not been approved. He said that I had to go back home. I asked him why and he said that no reasons had been given. I asked him if I could talk to whoever was in charge. He said that I could give it a try "but the people here are very difficult to talk to". According to the guide, the boss turned out to be the man who had earlier kicked me away from the bench as I was trying to fill out one of the forms. I went to him and said that I only wanted to understand why I should go home. He simply said that he was not responsible and that: "This is simply the dictates of state security. Now it's totally out of my hands, don't talk, don't argue, don't ask any more questions. All you can do is just go back". I told him that I would go back but that I needed to understand why. He stared straight ahead but I persisted and asked him to tell me who was in charge of this entire process. He told me to go and ask outside, probably so that he could get rid of me but I went outside and on my way I found a soldier and although he was not an official, I asked him too. He started yelling at me: "If they tell you to go back then you just do as they say. These are the dictates of state security". I asked him if he could just tell me who the boss was and he replied that there was no boss.

Nobody wanted to show us the boss or tell us who he was so we couldn't even find out who was responsible for the decision. I went back to talk to Hala. I wanted to advise her to go on with her trip without me. I was boiling with anger by then. Just a few minutes later, the representative of the Egyptian tour company came to inform Hala that she too had to return. He asked Hala to go and get her passport from the window while mine was kept by the man who earlier kicked me away from the bench .

Hala:

My feeling during all of this was that if Salam were to return I would do the same anyway. I was quite prepared psychologically and did not get surprised at all. I even told her, when she came to encourage me to go on alone, to wait for five minutes as I would no doubt be coming too. The man at the window called me up and mockingly said that having realized we were such very good friends who loved each other dearly, they had decided to send us back together. Outraged

but not surprised I responded "This is the best thing you did today, thank you very, very much. I don't want to go on this trip now anyway. Let Egypt be for you, I will go quietly if you just hand me my passport". I started laughing at the sheer absurdity of the whole situation but Salam was utterly frustrated. We went straight back to the money changer and changed our money all over again. The money changer was Egyptian and very apologetic about the way we had been treated. As we were changing the money an Egyptian soldier standing outside the hall looked at me and yelled for me to go over to him. I asked him what was wrong and why he was yelling, I was going back after all, and he surely had no other reason to shout.

Salam:

When the representative of the Egyptian company came to inform us of the decision, he was quite apologetic and sounded rather affected when he said that he hoped things would work out better another time. He continued by saying that different countries had different rules and regulations and although they might not necessarily be sound, one must be patient. He actually seemed like a decent human being who knew how to talk to us and how to treat us. His facial expressions conveyed a sense of embarrassment and concern and the money changer sounded sympathetic too when we went to change our money back. However, I also asked him if he knew who the one responsible was but of course he didn't know either. The "boss" seemed to be some type of taboo subject that no one should dare to speak of or disclose any information about. I think Akram al-Jamal must have been the man responsible but it was impossible for us to go back and talk to him again, it was abundantly clear that the decision was irreversible. We felt completely humiliated and we had not even had our passports returned to us but they had been given to the soldiers outside.

Hala:

The soldiers outside were the ones who kicked us out of the hall. Three other guys were waiting outside, two from the Gaza Strip and one from Nablus. The five passports were in the soldiers hands.

Salam:

We were shocked that they were still holding on to our passports. Apparently they decided that they would keep them until the Israeli tour bus arrived for us to board. Even more shocking was the fact that there was an Egyptian tour bus going back and forth to the Israeli border point where we had to go and which we could have taken but the soldiers prevented us from boarding the Egyptian bus and insisted that we continue to sit and wait outside in the heat. They justified their action by saying that this was a part of the

Egyptian/Israeli Camp David accord whereby Palestinians returned from the Egyptian border could only board an Israeli bus! It was extremely hot in the open yard and we were ordered to sit and wait on some stones next to a garbage dumpster. Three quarters of the trash was dumped on the ground beside the dumpster and stray dogs were roaming all over the big yard. The heat was unbearable, there was no water to drink and Egyptian soldiers stood at the entrance to the building with our passports in their hands. They repeatedly told us to wait and I was getting to breaking point. I felt worse then I have ever felt in my life. We tried to eat some of the food we had brought with us but we couldn't. Even the bottle of water we had we could not use because one of the soldiers standing there suddenly grabbed it and drank from it. The guys waiting there got frustrated as well and we all had a heated discussion trying to understand why they had sent us back. I couldn't bear it, we waited and waited in the heat and I felt as if I was becoming hysterical. I went to talk to the soldier who had our passports. I asked him to give them to us so that we could get on the bus that was going back and forth in front of us. He said that we would have to pay ten Egyptian pounds for the bus [about \$3]. We'll pay 100 pounds, I said, just give us the passports. He asked me to wait for a moment and went inside apparently to enquire. He came back and said we couldn't have our passports and told me again to sit and wait. I went back feeling humiliated again. A little while later I felt as if my blood was boiling. I thought that I was having a stroke and I was ready to explode. I went to the same soldier again and he screamed at me because I think my voice was loud when I started speaking with him. "Don't yell at me" he said, "it's not under my control and I can't do anything about it". I told him to get somebody else who we could talk to and he went inside and finally brought back two guys who strolled out nonchalantly with their arms linked. We asked for our passports and they said "no, no, you must keep waiting because according to the Camp David agreement you can only leave on an Israeli bus". We asked when it would come and they replied with a smile "oh sooner or later ...eventually.. don't you worry". One of them started asking us why we were turned back. We said we had no idea and he then started finding a justification for each case. He told Hala that she was turned back because she carries a Jordanian passport that is valid only for two years. When I said that mine was valid for five years he used that as a reason too. With one of the others he said that he had been turned back because he was too young [31]. It was abundantly clear that he was making fun of us as he used whatever crossed his mind as a justification however illogical or absurd.

We returned to the place we had been sitting before to start the wait all over again I told Hala that I was really dying,

next to the dumpster, under the heat with the dogs surrounding us and overseen by the soldiers who were now singing and dancing and playing around like little boys. It made no difference to them at all. While waiting one of the guys from Gaza was talking to one of the soldiers and we could hear the soldier telling him "Like you, I'm nothing more than a mosquito. I am just like an ant. If they want to get rid of me here they can do it very easily, they can do whatever they want to me. They can kill me and there is nothing I can do about it".

We started feeling concerned about crossing the Israeli border point assuming that we would be harassed by the Israelis as well, especially if they knew that we had been turned back. We waited for two more hours and the Israeli bus finally arrived. It was around 4.00 in the afternoon. I felt relieved when the bus arrived yet still worried that the Egyptian soldiers would prevent us from getting on board. We boarded the bus and I made up my mind that even if they didn't give us the passports I wouldn't get off. They brought us the passports after we got on board, they handed them to the driver.

I then had a strange and unpleasant exchange with the driver. When I got on the bus the seats were arranged so that some of them were facing towards the back of the bus rather than the front. Consequently I sat with my back to the driver and thought nothing of it until the driver suddenly started yelling at me to sit appropriately. I didn't understand what the driver was talking about. I had no clue what he meant when he said "sit appropriately without your back to me" especially seeing as the bus was designed in that way.

I had had enough humiliation. I had had enough of being shouted at like this. I moved quickly from my seat and sat meekly next to Hala. We were dead silent afterwards, digesting all that had happened. Not too long afterwards, an Israeli soldier came on the bus and looked at the five of us. He and the driver conversed in Hebrew. Apparently, the latter informed the soldier that the Egyptians had turned us back. The soldier came in my direction and talked to me in Hebrew. I explained to him in English that I didn't speak Hebrew. The driver served as a translator, explaining to the soldier that I came from Nablus.

When we got to the Israeli border point, I was in total misery. We tried to explain to the Israelis that we were turned back for no reason but to no avail. They ordered us to sit and wait all over again, which we had no option but to do.

Before we boarded the bus back to the Israeli side, Hala was complaining of fatigue and illness. She kept saying that she felt like she was dying. Her face got red noticeably. It was not ordinary redness but rather a sick, unhealthy redness.

Hala:

We saw many people waiting at the Israeli crossing point and we tried to make our way through the crowd to find a place to sit. But I started feeling dizzy. Salam and I went and sat under some trees. One of the others who had been turned back joined us. An hour and a half after we started the wait, I felt my stomach turning over. I started vomiting and my body temperature shot up and I started sweating and shaking. Sudden diarrhoea followed. I went and tried to talk to one of the Israeli commanders telling him that I needed some help. He simply ordered me to go back and wait. Four hours later, we were processed. I could hardly move by then and had nothing left in my stomach whatsoever.

They let us go around 9:15pm. We were the last to leave and we almost lost our luggage.

Salam:

We boarded a bus out of Rafah. We were in the middle of nowhere at night. The bus dropped us off. We were dead tired. Hala was sick. We had no other option but to take a cab to Jerusalem, other than to stay in nearby Gaza. We then had to take another cab to Ramallah and we got home around 11-30pm.

We had spent 17 and a half hours mostly being humiliated and psychologically tortured.

Hala:

On the way back, though I was feeling awful, I started thinking about the meaning of peace. What has peace brought to us. If this is the way Arabs treat us, I started thinking, what should I expect of foreign countries! If one is humiliated and oppressed at home, what kind of treatment should one expect outside! It was extremely difficult for me. I never expected to be so badly treated. I was feeling both humiliated and sick at the same time. Nothing could have been worse.

I was extremely sick the following day too. The day after, as I started waking up from the shock, I started questioning the meaning of life itself. I felt like I was badly beaten. If only they had given even one reason for turning us back it might have made it easier.

Salam:

I believe that the reason for sending us back has to do with the fact that we are Palestinians. In addition, I think it

was Akram Al-Jamal's ego which made him decide against allowing us to travel as we did not succumb to begging the great man to allow us into his illustrious country! We preferred to maintain our dignity, rather than tell him that we would do anything if he would just let us go. We were confident of ourselves when we went to talk to him and I don't think he was used to having people talk to him without deference, especially people in the position we were in. It was his way of saying that I am going to put you in your proper place. This is the feeling I constantly had. This feeling was even amplified by the soldiers we talked to outside the building on the Egyptian border.

The fact that we were women travelling on our own did not please them at all I could tell. Out of anger, and in order to see how they would react, I once said to the soldiers that I wished this torture upon their beloved women. One of them responded by saying that their women did not travel on their own to go and have fun. "Our women are not like you," one soldier said hatefully. He went on to say that "they don't even have food to eat, let alone can they travel for fun".

I felt truly helpless in this atmosphere. I did not know what to do given the fact that we were at the mercy of people who have all the sources of power at their disposal. They were in a position to humiliate us with cruelty and there was nothing that we could do to change the situation.

I can sum up the reasons for them turning us back into three: 1) The fact we are Palestinian; 2) Al-Jamal's ego as he wanted to have the last word; and 3) the fact that we were women travelling independently.

Hala:

They let all the foreigners travel freely. There was not a single individual that they turned back or caused trouble to. This is why I told the guy at the window to have all of Egypt for himself when he called to let me know that my travel was denied.

Salam:

I really wonder what their reaction to us would have been if we had carried foreign passports. What pained me the most was the feeling that I had been stripped completely of my self-respect. The experience demonstrated to me what one human being can do to oppress another. I never thought that human beings could be so cruel and certainly never thought that some would enjoy inflicting this cruelty. This dimension came out loud and clear.

I don't want to say that I will never attempt the trip again. I want to go back to Egypt. I like Egypt. But I will never do

it the same way, via Rafah.

Hala:

As for me, the experience forced me to stay in bed for days. I further believe that ~~the~~ experience scarred me psychologically. Every time I remember what happened, every time I talk about it to my friends, I can't help but recall the scene where we were sitting on the dirty stones, next to the trash, surrounded by dogs. I can't but recall sitting under the steaming sun with the soldiers making fun of us. This is the scene which constantly crosses my mind.

It is impossible for me not to travel. I have been invited to attend the U.N. conference on population which is taking place in Cairo in September. This time, however, they will have to finalize all the necessary arrangements over there. I am simply not willing to go through the same humiliation that I went through on this trip. I've already made it very clear to the people in charge of arrangements for this conference that I am only willing to fly and want my entrance into Egypt assured when I touch down in Cairo.² I have also been made much more acutely aware of the methods used to subjugate humanity which were demonstrated by this experience.

Salam:

Our trip was on the twenty-fourth of July. On July 25, Israel and Jordan signed the Washington Declaration. As the experience was progressing, I kept wondering how all this could be happening while warring parties were making peace. If this is the peace that Arab states are going to have with Israel or among themselves, it will take us a long time before we can talk about real peace. First, we should talk about humanity. We should talk about how people need to treat each other. Peace is not an abstraction, it can't come automatically after the act of signing a piece of paper at a big ceremony.

Every experience that one goes through must be enriching, one way or another. This one was too negative to be considered enriching in any way. I haven't recovered yet. Every time we try to talk about something else, the trip experience continues to haunt us. Some type of conditioning happened. Something inside of me has been permanently destroyed.

² Hala participated in the UN conference on population held in Cairo in September. She flew directly from Tel Aviv to Cairo, was met by conference organizers at Cairo airport and had no problem entering Egypt whatsoever.