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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

1

Hisham H. Ahmed
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From Dispersion to Delusion.

Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

My name is Imad Nayef Musa. I am 25 years old. I live in Al-Bireh, which is just north of Jerusalem in the twin city of Ramallah. I was born in Arlington, Virginia. Therefore, I was raised in the United States. At the age of 12 I lived for 4 years in Ramallah where I went to high school. In 1986 I went back to the States for my senior year in high school and then went on to obtain a BA degree in mass-communication from George Masson University. During my college years, I visited the occupied territories only once in the summer of 1988.

I returned back to the occupied territories immediately after college, in the summer of 1991. For 2 months, I didn't do anything. I decided to take it easy as I didn't want to see any books or academics. Following this 2 months relaxation period, I landed myself a job as a reporter for the Al-Fajr English weekly newspaper in Jerusalem. I did this for a year, and then I was promoted to managing editor of the newspaper. I served in this capacity for 10 months until the paper was closed in September 1993.

About 2 weeks after Al-Fajr went out of business, I got a phone call from the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC) offering me a job which I accepted. Now at the JMCC, I am responsible mostly for the daily press summary, which is a translation into English of the day's news from the local Palestinian newspapers. The press summary is sent to all the foreign news agencies, such as CNN, BBC, ABC, Reuters, AP, UPI, French TV and other wire services, radio and TV stations. I also translate special documents, leaflets and opinion pieces by important people which are included in our weekly publication called the Palestine Report. I am also involved in editing articles when necessary.

Q: Since as an Arab-American you were born and raised in the States, why did you come to do your high-school in the occupied territories?

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

A: It is not just me. It is a phenomenon among many Birawi [Al Bireh] families. When their kids become adolescents, particularly the oldest child in the family as I am, they immediately send them here to save their souls! Sometimes, the parents don't come with their children, they simply leave them with the grandparents to raise. This is a catastrophe for many families because the kids come here when they are adolescents and when they are just beginning to see what life is like as teenagers. Their parents then send them here to live with their 90-year-old grandparent in a village that might have electricity for 6 hours a day, but most likely not, that might or might not have running water, that might or might not have color television and that certainly has no MTV or cable channels or even a telephone.

In my case, things were much better. My dad sold everything he had in America, his Mexican restaurant and other belongings, and we all came here together in 1982. Another reason which compelled my family to return in 1982 was the fact that my grandmother on my father's side had died. There is also an unwritten rule in the family that the family home in Al-Bireh should not be closed for any reason. Therefore, we packed up and we came to live in our grandparents home in Al-Bireh.

It was hard for me to live here at the beginning because I didn't know Arabic very well. At home I didn't speak Arabic and although I understood it from my parents most of the time, we didn't really speak it. When I got here, kids my age always used to make fun of me saying things like:- look at the American boy, look at the American boy who can't speak Arabic. That gave me the motivation to learn how to speak Arabic as well as the people who had never left the country. I set myself a specific goal to learn the words, the local dialect, the accents and the special idioms and euphemisms. I worked hard, even when I was young and I did it very well. In fact, by the time I left when I was 16, some people couldn't tell that I had lived in America. I pride myself on that because I didn't actually like the attitude of many who came here from America and would swagger and show-off and act more American than Palestinian.

When I became 16, I put up a vehement struggle against my father's advice to go back to the States. I didn't want to leave the country which was actually very rare as anybody in my class who the chance to go to the States didn't stay a day longer than they had to. They said that living here was boring and they really couldn't stand it. I suppose I had gone further in becoming like the boys of my home, which is what I had really wanted since I was young. I had learnt to live here like the rest of the people lived and I didn't seem to have the expectations or desires that my classmates had. They wanted the entertainment and the "super-class" life that they could find

in America. I guess that I got rid of that when I was able to adapt to the way people live in this country, without means of entertainment - no MTV, no cinemas, no restaurants, no places to go at night after dark.

In retrospect, my father's advice that I go and finish my last year of high-school in America was sound. He told me that it would be easier to apply to college from America directly instead of going through a middleman and waiting for the mail which could take a whole month each time for each application, letter or recommendation. He said that my teachers were there in the States and that my transcripts were there and that all my papers could be sent much easier there. I am so glad that I eventually listened to him.

I left to go back to the States on my own. My father arranged for me to live with my uncle who was in Virginia at that time. This was a good arrangement, the high-school was near and so was George Mason University. I stayed with these relatives for the whole 5 years and it worked out very well which helped me a lot.

All the time when I was in America, I kept thinking that I wanted to go back. I started my college education as a computer science major and not as a journalism major. I stayed like that for one year. But then I thought to myself that I wanted to go back home and wondered what I would do with a computer science degree. I started to convince myself that it wouldn't be very useful and therefore, decided to switch. I said to myself that journalism was something that could help the people and help the cause. This would be my chance to give something back to the country, or at least, to defend it in the world arena. I started to count how many engineers and doctors the Palestinians have and it seemed to me that they exceeded the actual population! I really felt that they had made no impact on how the Palestinians are viewed by the world and concluded that real progress in the world is not made by scientists but by the social scientists. It seemed to me that they were the ones who provided a structure for the thought process and an explanation for human motivation and achievement. Consequently, I felt that we needed people in the social sciences and so this is what I concentrated on.

I started to take mass communication courses and luckily got a lot of credits waived because I didn't have to take either a foreign language course or a foreign culture course because they counted my high school years in Palestine as satisfactory substitutes. What also helped is that I got credits from high school because I had done well in English. So I had many credits that I could take in other fields and I took psychology, sociology, statistics and all sorts of social science skills.

Finally I finished and it wasn't much of a dilemma, particularly because of the outbreak of the Gulf War which made me realize that I didn't feel as comfortable in America as I did in Palestine. Some people may find this surprising but you can be born and raised in America and have lived there almost indistinguishably as an American for many years, but I noticed a lot of racism coming out during the Gulf War, especially against Arabs. I didn't like the country's foreign policy and there was no one that I could talk to. If I told people that I thought certain things needed to be changed, they would simply say that "this is America". The slogan at that time seemed to be "love it or leave it" so I decided to leave it. I remember asking myself why I was wasting my time in America. Wherever, somebody wants to live, they will have to put up with some sort of hardship but I decided then that I'd rather put up with the hardships of my fellow countrymen than the hardships of my adopted countrymen whom I discovered during the Gulf war had not really adopted me. I figured that I would at least be serving a purpose by coming here rather than staying in America, getting a job, having fun on the weekends and just living a sort of meaningless life of subsistence from one week to the next. Thus, the weekend after graduation I packed up my things and left. There were only two days between graduation and leaving America and I haven't been back since. That was in July 1991, more than 3 years ago.

When I came to visit the occupied territories in 1988, it was just 7 months into the intifada and it was raging. I am glad that I experienced even that one month as it opened my eyes to the reality of the intifada and when I was in America, I could say that I had actually witnessed it and was not only repeating what I had read in the newspapers. When I came back in 1991, I noticed some changes but not many. The intifada still seemed to be basically as it was when I came in 1988 although there were less mass spontaneous demonstrations and more of an attitude of routine. For example, every Saturday morning, laborers who work in Israel would all go down to the manara [town square] and demonstrate, because their Jewish employers don't work on Saturdays so they can't either. This was a regular weekly occurrence and hardly the mass expression of anger that I had seen in 1988.

People also didn't want to strike anymore. Whereas in 1988, if there was a martyr in Jenin for example, they would strike, not only in Jenin and the villages around it, but the entire Gaza Strip and West Bank would strike because of that martyr. He was a Palestinian and it didn't matter where he came from the whole of the occupied territories would strike, including Jerusalem.

Another thing about strikes in 1988 was that people would strike for 3 days in a row as a mourning period for the martyrs. After that there might be a political strike for 5 or

6 days consecutively. They wanted to do anything to prove to the Israelis that the Palestinians controlled the street. Nobody was complaining about it.

When I came in 1991, however, this had changed, people were complaining and strikes were limited to the area of wherever someone was killed. If a martyr fell in Nablus, for example, only Nablus would strike; Ramallah, only Ramallah would strike; Gaza, only Gaza would strike and so on.

In addition, I saw that the people had come out of the Gulf War totally demoralized. Whereas in 1988, they would say "What? Me? Buy a shirt from Israel? I won't buy a shirt from Israel. A Palestinian shirt is much better made and much better quality. Me? Buy a coca-cola from Israel? Me? Buy milk from Israel? Me? Buy yogurt from Israel? No! That Israeli stuff stinks".

But when I came in 1991, people were saying "Don't drink that cola from Ramallah. There is no taste to it. Go try to find some pepsi or some coca-cola from Jerusalem". East Jerusalem, of course, was never a strong boycotter of Israeli goods. They would say "don't buy that Arab chocolate. Don't buy that Arab shirt. Don't buy those Arab pants. Don't buy those Arab shoes."

This process of demoralization continued and I was surprised that nobody else seemed to notice what was going on. I guess it was more obvious to me as an outsider. The people were disjointed and I think they felt that the Arabs could never win. They now thought Israel was the best and Israeli products were beginning to flood the market after the four-year boycott. I saw nothing Israeli in the markets in 1988 but in 1991, I started to see that there was coca cola, Israeli chocolate, Israeli milk, things were slowly but surely coming back. I even saw cartons of vegetables that had come from Israel with Hebrew writing all over them.

In 1988, the stores opened at 8.00am and they closed at noon. When I first came in 1991, the stores opened whenever they wanted but had to close by 1.00pm or 2.00pm. Soon it became 3.00pm, then 5.00pm and now, of course, there is no control over when stores open or close. The intifada leadership doesn't get involved in such things.

Also when I came in 1988, there were at least 3 or 4 strike days a month. These were programmed strike days, like the 6th, the 9th, the 17th, the 25th, the 30th days that everybody would know. In addition, people would also know things that come up like that the 2nd of November is the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration so that day would be a strike. Israel's Independence day would be a strike day. Any Jewish holiday would be a strike. Palestinian national days were also strike days.

Now, of course, there is only one strike day which is limited to the West Bank excluding Jericho and for the most part Jerusalem. This day is the 9th of the month. Of course, stores can open as long as they want on other days.

I am not saying that this is bad, actually it was probably a bad choice to start killing the economy with strikes in the first place. What I am really concerned about is the people's morale which has been destroyed totally. If you tell somebody to buy Arab products, they will look at you like you are crazy in the head. The thing to do today is to go to Jaffa road in Israeli West Jerusalem and buy all your clothes from there. Even people from Ramallah and Bethlehem and Jerusalem pride themselves on the fact that they spent 200 Shekels [\$70] on a pair of trousers or something from an American style mall in West Jerusalem, or in Tel Aviv.

When I first arrived, I actually had many fights over not bringing Israeli products into the house and my family said that they couldn't understand why I wanted to continue the boycott of Israel. They told me that people didn't care about this anymore and they wanted quality products. They then explained that "The Arab factories almost killed us over the last four years with the stuff they were putting out. When these factories realized that there was no competition in the market, they would decrease the sugar in the coke, decrease the caramel, decrease everything and use dirty recycled water with recycled aluminum and put out stuff that could have killed us. Yogurt was the same, milk was the same. Dangerous things were happening. Why are you telling us to continue the boycott of Israeli goods? We stopped this months ago".

I was really shocked when I heard this. I was also shocked and got into a lot of fights, some of which were almost physical, over people's attitude about the Gulf War. During the Gulf Crisis, people came out worshipping Saddam Hussein regardless of the fact that he was the cause of all their present demoralization. He talked about how he would burn three-quarters of Israel with his chemical weapons and how he was coming to liberate the Palestinians, but instead he went in the opposite direction and actually occupied Kuwait instead of maybe Jordan which would have brought him to the border with Israel at least. Everything he did was the opposite of what he was telling people, but the people believed him. I had many arguments trying to convince people that they shouldn't be demoralized at the loss. I said that he was the leader of another Arab regime, just like the rest of them and that the people shouldn't have expected so much. Of course, they shouldn't expect that the intifada will liberate them from Israel but it is tragic that they have such a low view of themselves.

Another shock was that I thought also I was coming to serve the people but I found the people not waiting for anyone to serve them nor considering that anyone would and telling me that I was crazy to be here and I should be in America making money or opening a grocery in a black neighborhood or something in America and making millions of dollars. I found a very materialistic people but still I found enough in them, enough spirit and sometimes I even found cases where people were not as materialistic as I had thought despite the fact that they had been destroyed economically over the preceding five or six years. This was enough to keep me optimistic or to keep my spirits high enough to stay - even after being offered a job for peanuts where I used to make less than I made as a volunteer for my college newspaper! I volunteered as copy editor for my college newspaper and was making more than I made in my first job here and it was very hard to explain to my parents and everyone else why I was doing this. It's still hard to explain but I find enough things to keep me satisfied when I look around.

q) How do you evaluate your work experiences thus far?

a) Work here is difficult. It's the exact opposite of America. Nothing is clear, there are no working conditions that you can rely on. There is no fixed structure for institutions you would think are respected. At the beginning of the month or after getting paid when I was at Al-Fajr for two years, I never ever expected to get paid for another month. It was always a challenge. Simple tiny little things like transportation expenses for an interview from Jerusalem to Ramallah would be a big fight that might extend for months and months and this for something worth two or three dollars. It was a shock that I had to work so hard just to be able to work!! So nothing was automatic with work, you never knew if you were going to get paid, you never knew if you were going to get paid the right amount and you never knew if you were going to get reimbursed for expenses. In America of course you just sign your expenses, sign your pay sheet and you get paid at the regular time. Here if you don't fight and follow up and pursue and pressure ...it's lost and they'll try to get as much out of you as they can.

Of course, there were no expense accounts like normal journalists on which you can buy batteries for your tape recorder, have transportation money and expenses if you have to take a source of valuable information out to lunch.

This lasted for a while and suddenly I was promoted to managing editor. I wasn't the first choice as they wanted someone who agreed with them politically and Al-Fajr generally, was owned by Fatah. I had crossed the line too many times by being independent or speaking my mind and they were afraid I was a

bit of a maverick or something. I was young and they knew I wasn't afraid of being fired or disciplined like the stalwarts at Al-Fajr Arabic, who were almost doing it in their pants whenever the editor in chief would walk into the office. They sat at their desks like rabbits, although as soon as he left then they would be making coffee again, chatting and listening to the radio. But with us at the English paper, nothing would change, whether he came in or out we'd be doing the same kind of work and if we were not working then he could watch us not work. So Al-Fajr English had a different environment - it was less politicized and there wasn't the deference. Anyway, they couldn't find anyone else so I was promoted through lack of choice, to managing editor! I didn't like it, I wanted to be free to be a reporter and as I thought I should carve myself and my career into journalism, I didn't want to go into editing, just yet. An editor is someone who has been a journalist for tens of years and knows everybody, knows all there is to know about reporting and can direct the reporters on what to do. Instead here was I at the age of 23, maybe the youngest editor of a Palestinian newspaper in history, giving orders about stories and stuff like that, but I had no choice! I stopped writing because there wasn't enough time. Money was tight and when they fired staff or someone left they wouldn't rehire and I gradually took over everyone's responsibilities. I eventually ended up with seven different responsibilities which included the marketing, subscription, distribution, advertising, designing the advertising on the computer, doing translation and writing the editorials. I ordered photographs, figured out what would go in the next issue, deciding who we should interview and what kind of opinion piece we should have. There were too many decisions to be made by one person so in the end it was too hectic, I was spending twenty hours a day in the office. I kept complaining but they weren't listening because as long as an issue came out every week that was fine with them, they didn't care how the problems were being reflected in the content. I didn't like what was going on, I didn't like having my name attached to something this miserable and I could see where it was going. By the end there were only three people left and three people, with one of them part time, to put out a sixteen page weekly newspaper is impossible! So I made my last stand and didn't put out one issue and that brought everything to the forefront. At that time they owed me more than 1,000 shekels in supplies that I had paid from my own pocket such as transportation, photographs, paper for the printer, even glue to do the layout. They weren't buying anything any more so I was putting out the paper for them and I was getting nothing in return. I told them that they should hire people and said we needed seven. They said that they would hire only one person. I said that would not make the changes that were necessary and I quit.

When I quit the paper closed, and I came here [JMCC] and there's a much better atmosphere, a much better working environment. The director believes in the Arabic saying "give the bread to the baker" meaning that if something is your profession then he will let you go with it. If you make a suggestion then he will give you the budget that allows you to implement your suggestion. So I found a better working environment and can now do what I want. So I'm more satisfied than before although I see my focus shifting and I don't know if I like it or not. I am now working more in the world of publishing, publications, books, research, the way things look, layout and translation than in journalism and reporting itself and I would prefer to be in the thick of things. I do like the press office role of JMCC and it's a better source of news than Al-Fajr ever was. Al-Fajr was isolated from everybody else in that it was too factional and only presented news about people in one faction, secondly it wasn't a "news breaking" office as it was a weekly newspaper. Here we tell the foreign news networks what's going on in town so I like being at the center of the news but my actual work has more to do with translation and the publications. But hopefully something will come up and I'll go back to focussing on what I want to be my career which is journalism itself.

Q: Since you came back in 91 there have been many developments in the Middle East in general and with the Palestinians particularly. The aftermath of the Gulf war, the Madrid talks and the Oslo accord. You went to Gaza for work and it was your expression of feelings about that trip that I would like to hear more about. Can you say something about it and what you learned as a person and as a professional journalist.

A: Well, let me say that the Gaza-Jericho Accord is much more about Gaza than Jericho. The way it seems now is that the Gaza Strip will be given total independence with some guarantees to Israel about security and I'm talking about the final arrangement not the transitional period. The West Bank, including Jericho, will never be as free as Gaza. In the West Bank you have the intertwining of the Palestinian population and the settlement population and the Israeli army everywhere, on the pretext of being protection for the Israeli settlers. So I think this basically means that there will be occupation forever in the West Bank whereas in the Gaza Strip the Israelis were glad to leave and it shows. They have kept some installations there - 14 military installations at least and three settlement blocs. Incidentally, the settlements used to be disconnected but now, according to the Cairo agreement, they have been given giant parcels of land to connect the settlements together. So the Palestinians have in effect given more land to the Israelis so that they can tie their settlements together and have them in large blocks that can be more easily protected in the name of security.

Jericho is very different, you don't feel it is under autonomy, you see Palestinian police but you also see Israeli patrols who are part of the "joint force" in the middle of the city. Settlers come in and out too but in Gaza there are no Jews inside the Arab population centers which are gigantic when compared to Jericho. In Jericho you drive for exactly three and a half minutes from [entry] checkpoint to [exit] checkpoint but in Gaza it's more like an hour.

As you first enter Gaza it looks like one big prison. You arrive at something called the Erez checkpoint which is a horrifying experience. This is made of barbed wire, with soldiers in bullet proof vests, tall watch towers, electric fences and machine guns everywhere. The soldiers, depending on their mood, will let you in with or without checking. If it's a yellow plated Israeli car they don't have to let you enter and they can actually say that there is nothing in the agreement that allows Israelis to enter, however, any entry refusal in a yellow plated car is because you are an Arab. If it is a settler they let you straight through to your settlement. On your left you see where the Palestinian laborers who work in Israel will line up for hours every day, starting at about 4.00. in the morning. From there they have to walk through a Palestinian checkpoint where the Palestinian police check that they have the right papers to enter Israel. They are basically doing the job of the Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian police often return Palestinians trying to enter Israel saying they don't have the right papers which makes the job of the Israeli police easier. At the Palestinian checkpoint there is a narrow corridor with barbed wire on both sides and an asbestos roof. It's like a livestock ramp and they have to walk single file along this for about a kilometer before they actually get to the Erez checkpoint. Finally they get to Erez and have to go through the same process again on the Israeli side. If they are allowed through they get into Israel at about 6.00 am. This process takes 2 or 3 hours. You pass the checkpoints, the main one at Erez, the joint one and then two Palestinian checkpoints before finally getting to Gaza City. Before that you have to slush your way through giant pools of running sewage on the street which is not a nice way to be welcomed into Gaza! I think the Palestinian authority, instead of thinking about cleaning up Gaza city, although this is an excellent thing, should think about cleaning up the entrance to Gaza and the way it stinks first. This is the only entrance point to the whole of the Gaza Strip and it has been completely ignored so far. As you go into Gaza the poverty is obvious, you have to leave your yellow plated car at the checkpoint and take a Gaza plated taxi the taxi driver who takes you to the middle of the city will tell you how he loves his car and how its the best car in Gaza City. You ask him what it is and he says its a 1969 Peugeot! It looks like something from old movies but in Gaza its a source of pride and is actually worth more than a

1980s car on the West Bank. I was told that it was worth about 15,000 shekels which is about \$5,000 which is more than my 1983 Opel. There is an Israeli gas station where you have to leave your car and you pay them to keep your car there for the day. This is the same gas station that was burned during the laborer riots in July and its already been rebuilt. It was working again in less than week. It a very affluent place because they do a lot of business.

Again, on the subject of poverty, an interesting thing happened when I went to get a cold drink and only had a 200 shekel note on me. I had left my change in the hotel room. I told the young guy I was sorry but I didn't have any change and he said, please buy anything you want and give me whatever you want, I'll take care of it. I bought a one shekel bottle of juice and he took 15 minutes to get change for my 200 shekel bill. In the West Bank and especially Jerusalem they wouldn't have accepted it, they would have told me to go and get change and come back bit in Gaza they are desperate to sell. For just one shekel you can take a taxi anywhere, in the West bank there are certain areas you cross and the price goes up, but for one shekel I saw the whole of Gaza City and it's generally four in the West Bank and seven in Jerusalem.

There is dirt and sand all over the place, the ocean breeze sends the sand flying everywhere so I really don't know what these five million dollar clean up projects funded by Holland and Japan can do in a climate like this. If they were to build a barrier along the coastline like in Tel Aviv for example, that would actually keep the sand off the streets but the way it is now all the sand is back on the street the day after its cleaned.

Gaza City has been divided into seven segments by this foreign clean-up project. Each section of Gaza was given to a local contractor who tried to hire unemployed laborers. The Palestinian Authority promised it would provide thousands of jobs but it actually only provided 250. Each section cleans the street and paints the walls white - the walls are covered with the political graffiti and slogans of the last eight years but now they are trying to paint over this whole painful period of history. The problem with this of course is that once they have finished it has all been re-written after a couple of days. So this is a waste of time, effort and money. It is completely unorganized and operates in a vacuum as it has not been accompanied by a public awareness program to teach people how to keep their city clean, not to throw glass and cans in the street nor how to deal with public property.

The people are very open and wherever you go in the street they will tell you that this is a bad situation, "we have a government made up of hooligans" is something I heard time and

time again. If you come to an intersection with a stop sign, everyone will stop but then a police car without its sirens on and without being on any urgent mission, will come zooming up across the intersection almost hitting five people on the way. I asked the people if this was normal and they said yes. Instead of the police or the government teaching the people how to act responsibly the people have to teach the police and the government. The police is designed along the lines of a military body, where anyone who was an active member of Fatah is automatically guaranteed some kind of job in the government, usually the police. The police are an unemployed army. By name they have a job but they have no duties. You see them on the street waiting for taxis, you see them trying to hitchhike, and you see them walking around doing nothing. At busy intersections there is usually one poor policeman standing sweltering in the heat trying to direct the traffic in a chaotic situation while at a slow intersection where maybe one car passes an hour, you will find eight policemen sitting there pretending to direct traffic.

What we have here is a case of being employed and unemployed at the same time, they are supposed to be getting a subsistence wage but I don't know if and how much they get as they have orders not to talk about their salaries. In Jericho, where people are more trusting and also have relatives in the West Bank, its easier to get information. Anyway they are getting bad wages and they are not really employed but there is a lot of prestige. Every family wants someone in the government or connected to the government be it police or whatever although they are critical at the same time of the way in which things are being handled and say that people get employed due to their factional connections. They get a job whether they have any ability or not, any education or not or any talent or not.

Another thing in Gaza is that it has become a mahabarat state. One man told me that his son is in the 12th grade and 10 out of 40 students in this class work with the preventive security apparatus, which is the internal mahabarat or the agency for spying by Palestinians on Palestinians. I found this to be crazy but many times if I was making jokes about Arafat or the future, some Gazans would tell me to shut up as they were afraid that there may be a preventive security person around us. They told me to shut up many times as I was behaving as I would in the West Bank where there is a more relaxed atmosphere. In Gaza, people in general are pretty horrified. I didn't realize it would become like an Arab regime, where people don't make jokes against the leadership, so fast.

Q: Don't they feel freer than they did before, now that the Israeli soldiers have gone?

A: Of course. From this point of view they are no longer afraid of being shot in the street, not afraid of being stopped by an Israeli soldier in the street and humiliated or arrested for 24 hours for not having their papers in order or something like that. That kind of fear is gone but has been replaced by a psychological fear that they are being watched even in their own homes. There are very few places to meet and the few people who will tell you what's going on will always do so in hushed tones. I was sorry to see this kind of attitude already in place.

Q: So the initial euphoria in Gaza has gone completely?

A: Yes, the National Authority has been there for four months and the cost of living has gone up, unemployment has increased and income has decreased. After the agreement was signed there was an influx of thousands of people, mostly policemen, land prices went up and rent went up. I heard that you pay \$400 a month for a 100 meter square apartment. Nobody makes \$400 a month in Gaza, most people make between 700 and 1,000 shekels [\$230-\$330] and this is considered very good for Gaza. Another interesting point is that Israel devalued the shekel in 1988 but in Gaza they still call it by its old name and value, so if I want to buy something that is one shekel, the Gazans will ask me for a thousand lira. The West Bank changed its system when Israel did and was always one step behind it in other ways too, but Gaza is light years behind and Israel doesn't care because it knew in the end that it would give Gaza back to Arafat. Arafat always spent less money on infrastructure and everything else in Gaza because he knew he could get it back, but in the West Bank, Arafat always had competition from either King Hussein or Israel. So most of the money was spent in the West Bank and consequently it is there that you see most of the political leadership of Fatah, the peace delegates and the negotiators.

Gaza is forgotten - by Palestinians, by Arabs and by Israelis. Gazans are bitter about this. They say that they were never given any credit in the history of the Palestinian revolution even though they were the backbone of the intifada.

Q: What about the factional tensions? There have been some reports of the PNA arresting some religious elements. Have you talked to any people about this?

A: I was very happy to see how well the factions got along in Gaza, I had never seen national unity as I saw it in Gaza. In the West Bank they are very divided, obsessed with remarking on who's a communist, who's Fatah, who's Hamas but in the Gaza Strip everyone is in the same boat. There were no institutions who refused to hire someone on grounds of their factional affiliation. Even in Communist institutions there are religious

elements but then religion has permeated the whole of the Gaza Strip and it is too late to change. The whole strip has been forced to become more conservative. Women who are members of the PPP [Palestine People's Party] and who talk about freedom of expression and equality for women in conferences, will put their head covering back on before leaving the conference hall and walking out onto the street. They are forced to live in this situation. This is changing a little bit, I did see some hair in the street but religion has permeated the society in general. It's not like the West Bank where there are segments of the population unaffected by religion.

What is happening now is that the PNA is actually destroying the good interfactional relations. The interfactional relations had to be much better in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank as they are forced to deal with each other. It's a very small area 30 km by 4-5 km wide and containing almost 1 million people. If you don't like your neighbor because he is DFLP or PFLP you cannot live because your houses are almost open to each other.

The PNA is destroying this because it is dominated by a mentality that has never lived in Gaza and it is making divisions between the factions. It has not only arrested religious elements but also had a recent campaign against the DFLP. While I was there the police sent letters to the four main public lecture halls saying that they were not to allow any political organization to hold any political meetings in their halls without written permission from the Palestinian police. Later that day the police surrounded the YMCA and prevented the DFLP from holding their annual conference and this is something that never happened before, even during occupation. They held it in secret somewhere else but it should have been public and it should have been open.

The PNA is creating divisions along factional lines. Hiring people from Fatah only hurts the other factions as does the crackdown on Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the DFLP. The PFLP is also expecting some kind of a crackdown soon too. They are creating an Arab totalitarian regime, a mahabarat regime where the opposition can exist but only for legitimization of the regime in power. Abu Ammar [Arafat's nom de guerre] can use the existence of the opposition as testament to the democratic nature of his regime but this opposition will never be free to operate. Neither as a minority political party with the right to become a majority nor with the liberty to truly and safely rally public support. It will not be protected by government legislation as human rights and civil liberties are not among the priorities of this national authority - at least not from what I seen and heard.

Q: Where do you think things are going in Gaza?

A: Well, like I said when I started, I think the West Bank will never be granted independence but Gaza will. Neither Israel nor Egypt want Gaza so it was given to Arafat to do whatever he wanted with and it will be his kingdom. He is free to go to Jericho any time he wants and it seems politically important that he should go because it is a part of the West Bank, but he has only been once and that was only to greet the people when he first came back. So he already knows his kingdom is Gaza forever. When the final status is decided he knows he will not be in the West Bank. He may have some input into the final status but it will be less than king Hussein and less than Israel, in fact Israel will probably have the final word on everything. So he is concentrating on Gaza and what's happening there is total chaos.

I asked people how many ministries there were and they said there was only one - the Abu Ammar ministry! So he basically controls everything. He might appoint a minister for education, for example, but this minister will have no responsibility except to delegate back to Abu Ammar and ask him what to do next and it is the same with all the other ministers. Arafat is doing exactly what he did in Beirut and Tunis and this extends to the way he treats everybody who has an appointment with him. Business people, perhaps even those who are willing to invest a lot of capital in the Gaza Strip are kept waiting for hours after their scheduled appointment time. Foreign journalists I have spoken to say that a meeting for an interview at 7.00 in the evening can end up being at midnight. He is basically giving them the Tunis runaround but he is famous for this and it doesn't seem that he is going to change one bit. He ran things as a one man show wherever he was in the world before and now he's in Gaza and he running a one man show again. There is no delegation of responsibility, there is no checks and balance system there is no division of labor among the branches of government. He's the chief judiciary, the chief executive and the chief legislator.

Q: Do you think that the people are going to tolerate this? After all, the intifada rose from the Gaza Strip as a result of the duress caused by oppressive Israeli practices.

A: That's true but the Palestinians have had the life sucked out of them for the last seven years and now they are just tired and thankful that the stores can stay open until midnight and that they can walk outside after dark. They have only been able to do this for the last four months! Up until May the curfew was 7.00pm and breaking it could mean being shot to death, which happened many times. So now, being able to go with your family to the beach at 9.00pm and to sit there watching the waves and eating and drinking is an incredible situation

for the Gazans to be in. This was unimaginable for so long. Talking about political freedom is very different and this does not yet have any impact on the personal freedom which Gazans suddenly find themselves enjoying. This is something massive for Gaza. They will not rebel against the Palestinian authority as most people don't think in terms of political rights but in terms of their daily lives. Of course, the majority don't have any money to spend but they can sit safely outside after dark without spending any money. I once saw a huge group of people sitting upstairs in a restaurant overlooking the beach in Gaza, eating fish and steak or whatever, and drinking whatever they wanted. Under the restaurant were another group who didn't have the money to sit in the restaurant but the restaurant had opened a place outside where people could come without actually being in the restaurant. Often they just sit there - they don't even have food with them.

I was actually surprised to find that they don't sell goat and sheep meat in Gaza, which are the most widely available meats in the West Bank, because it costs the same as the West Bank which is 36 shekels a kilo [\$12]. They don't even eat seafood as fish is now more expensive than meat in Gaza. The only kinds of meat they have are chicken which is about 6 shekels a kilo [\$2] and beef which is about 24 shekels a kilo. Even this is not really feasible as a regular part of their diet because these are West Bank prices too and the average Gazan's income is considerably lower than that of a West Banker.

Fish is 40-50 shekels a kilo which is really a tragedy because Gaza had a booming fish industry before 1977. The people were a fishing community who ate mostly fish and were famous for their fish dishes. Fish formed the culinary heritage of Gaza for centuries. After the Camp David agreement was signed fishermen were restricted from entering the waters of the Sinai peninsula by Egypt, whereas before they could go as deep as they wanted into the Mediterranean. Despite the zoning restrictions, however, they still managed to make a living throughout the eighties. Now, with the Cairo agreement, things have got worse as the Palestinians have been given a stretch of water about 4km deep and 4km wide and this is the only thing that they can control, although they have no say over the actual security of this stretch of water. Another problem is that neither fishermen or police are sure of the limit and the Israeli police aren't there to tell them the limit, so any Palestinian who goes out of the range will have his boat confiscated and taken to Haifa. In Haifa the fisherman must then pay a fine and pay for the transport of his boat back to Gaza which is usually more money than he would make in two months of work. You ask the Palestinian police what the rules according to the Cairo agreement are, and they say that they have never seen the Cairo agreement. Israeli soldiers of course have been briefed on the agreement and actually turn up with

copies of the document which they proceed to read out to the Palestinian police who just stand there looking wide-eyed and eventually going along with whatever the Israeli soldiers tell them. Many boats have been confiscated and if you go down to the sea at night you can see the remaining 30 or 40 boats in an arc which marks the basic extent of their territorial water. Each boat is no more than 100-200 meters from the next boat so what can any boat catch which will be different from the boat next to it? They are all competing for the same catch and nobody is able to do his full capacity of fishing in such a tiny area. This makes for killer prices and the only one who can afford them is Israel. Most of the fish is therefore frozen and sent to Israel so you can sit down and have a plate of Gaza Shrimp in Tel Aviv. The remaining fish goes to restaurants overlooking the Gaza beach which are frequented by foreigners or high class Gazans.

Q: So, there is a destruction of heritage, an increasingly more politically dominating national authority, factional and other tensions - what do you think are the possibilities for conflict?

A: Well, the Gazan people were never treated humanely by Israel but they took this very quietly for about 20 years so the society is not actually as volatile as one would think. It takes a lot to get them started although once they do get started all hell breaks loose. At this stage however, it will take a very long time to get them started. They are still enjoying the personal freedoms which have come about and there is less military subjugation which is a big achievement after seven years of being chased by Israeli soldiers and hiding from them and being shot by them. There is a period of mass psychological relief in Gaza now, the people just want to relax and they will not react against a Palestinian regime for the time being, however harsh it may be. They don't have the energy to react anyway and they just want to put themselves back together a little bit.

In the West Bank there were always outbursts and disturbances throughout the 70s and 80s - in Jerusalem, Nablus, Ramallah, Birzeit. These were never on a very large scale however, and would usually die down after two or three days. This did not happen in Gaza. There were no real periodic outbursts until finally in 1987 the whole thing exploded and then didn't let up for seven years. I think that in Gaza it may be the same again. They seem to go into hibernation for a couple of decades and then suddenly wake up as they did in 1987. So I would predict a similar pattern although things happen much faster now than they did in the 60s so maybe it will take only a decade for people to catch their breath, rebuild and re-evaluate their society and their lives.

Q: There have been increased attacks on Israelis either on settlements within the Gaza Strip or in the adjacent and surrounding areas, particularly by Palestinian religious elements. There have also been more frequent arrests by the PNA and my question is how will Palestinians in the Gaza Strip feel about having their sons and their daughters arrested by their own leadership rather than by the Israelis?

A: This is certainly something ironic but first I would like to clear up one misconception. The reports of a rise in attacks on Israelis are actually an Israeli falsification as attacks have decreased sharply since autonomy. The Israeli chief of staff, Ehud Barak recently released statistics which showed clearly that more Israelis were killed from the beginning of the year until autonomy began in May, than from then until now [September] so there are less attacks and I think that even the armed opposition wings are taking a break after years of being hunted. I was recently told that the head of Izzadin al-Quassam¹ was seen walking in broad daylight through the street in Gaza. This would have been unthinkable before as he would have been shot on sight by undercover agents. He said that he was armed, just in case, but that he basically wanted to take a stroll and relax.

Q: So, overall with the things you've seen and heard in Gaza are there any other things that you think are necessary to mention and can you give me an idea of where you think things are heading?

A: Regarding the whole question of frustration, there is one point I would like to make. It seems that always in times of frustration that things are taken out on the weakest group and in this case I think it is the women. In Gaza all this pent up frustration is going to come out and I think that what's going to happen is a big wave of wife bashing. This was also the case in Israel at the beginning of the intifada because the men felt impotent politically and militarily, they couldn't stop these people who they used to call cockroaches and sub-human and they were being embarrassed internationally. Consequently, the women in Israel suffered and this was a very widespread thing in 1988-89. In Palestinian society the nation has been in tumult for decades and they also take it out on the women, the women are the first to suffer. The frustration of things is not going to be expressed or even inventive politically. So I think that there are going to be more social problems but not political problems that everyone is worried about like civil war or factional infighting. Nobody is willing to sacrifice that much

¹ Izzadin al-Quassam is the military wing of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), the most active of the armed resistance wings.

for a principle whether they are pro-peace or anti-peace. Everyone is apathetic, they are going along with what's happening and they believe that what's been planned in Washington or Tel Aviv will be implemented so they are just going to sit back and let it happen. The spirit of resistance has been drained particularly over the last seven years and by the Arabs as well as the Israelis as I mentioned earlier. Even the PLO itself had its share in making the people feel that there is no longer any choice and they must save whatever they can, particularly with the attitude of surrender brought into Gaza by those from outside. The attitude of the people in Gaza is basically that they fought for years to make the PLO the sole representative of the Palestinian people and can't believe what they got! They say that they were doing better when local leaders were negotiating for them because they weren't willing to make so many concessions, whereas the leadership from outside was willing to compromise a lot and mostly for its own gain.

Q: If you were an advisor to the Palestinian leadership now, what would you say?

A: The advice I would give them now is that I know its too late to cancel the Oslo and Cairo accords, no matter what damage it does to the Palestinians as a people and as a sovereign nation but the least it can do is stop all negotiations and reorganize. It must reassess its position and set a structure for the future negotiations.

Q: So you are not saying that in principle negotiations should be stopped, but that there should be some kind of internal organization among Palestinians before the negotiations are pursued?

A: Well, I don't really agree with the negotiations because they are being carried out with the victor in control of the vanquished. They were set up unevenly in Madrid and this has continued through Oslo and to the present. I also feel that this leadership is not responsible enough to carry out these negotiations. Abu Amr is still in control, he is the symbol, the father, the holy ghost and everything else there is to be! He is surrounded by people like Nabil Sha'ath and others who are like businessmen making deals and not people negotiating on the future of a nation.

However, putting all principles aside and being pragmatic about it and taking into account the present situation and the fact that the leadership will not change, I think the minimum it can do is freeze for enough time to look inward. To look seriously at all the things that have been ignored like the social issues, economic issues and political issues within the society which can be resolved without waiting for donor funding or

anything else. Things that we can organize and work out among ourselves so that in the future when we negotiate we have a clear direction and people know what's happening. The way the system is working now, nobody knows what's going on. For example, according to ~~the head~~ of the liaison committee for security in Gaza there were no negotiations taking place on border control but then suddenly Nabil Sha'ath said that he had held negotiations on border control that very day. It's complete chaos, nobody knows anything, even within the pro-peace camp.

So, if they wish to continue toying with the fate of the Palestinian nation then they really must start to give it some respect. The people have been suffering for this for decades and they really should be given a break, no matter who gets upset. The leadership can reaffirm their commitment to the agreements signed but really should take a break just to put them in touch with their own people before there is too wide a gap to breached.

Anyway, to conclude, I lived in America so I have the advantage of having met with Arabs from all the Arab countries, in fact the whole of the Middle East, Turks, Pakistanis, Iranians. I have found that we share almost the same problems and our political problems are created by our social problems. Things like a lack of attention to detail, lack of promptness. This may sound small but it leads us to political, national, social and economic catastrophes and I wonder if we can ever change. Are we doomed to remain third world countries dominated by western norms and an inferiority complex where the westerner is close to God and we are close to hell? Many Arabs have really come to believe this.

I think that our pride can be regained but not by the Palestinians alone, we are just a part of affairs in the Arab Islamic world. With the peace process, regardless of whether what's happening is good or bad, there will be some more openness, borders will come down and there is a chance for comprehensive change within the whole of the Arab world which will touch upon us. Maybe there will be some decentralization and the Palestinian cause won't be just for Palestinians. Then again maybe there will come a time when it will be hard to distinguish between Israeli occupation and a Palestinian occupation of its own people and there will be another mass rebellion but this time for justice against injustice that is really not as specific to the Palestinian nation as to the whole of humanity. This is what I look forward to.

Hisham H. Ahmed.

