

Hisham Ahmed

By Richard C. Paddock

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, a friend brought Hisham Ahmed a small piece of the wall — a souvenir to mark the end of an era of injustice. Ahmed, now a professor of political science at Saint Mary's College, carried that rock with him wherever he went.

In 1995, he returned to his childhood home, the crowded Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem in the West Bank. By then he was an international scholar and his visit coincided with Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and the handover of power to the Palestinian Authority. For a brief time, there was no central government overseeing Dheisheh. When Israeli soldiers abandoned the entry checkpoints, residents rushed from the camp to Bethlehem to celebrate their newfound freedom. Ahmed, however, had his own celebration in mind. He hired a man with a bulldozer to knock down the hated concrete wall and barbed-wire fences that had long kept residents hemmed in. Ahmed rode shotgun and they spent all evening on the bulldozer knocking down barriers and fencing. When the residents returned, they were elated. "I decided to tear down that wall to signal that this was the beginning of freedom for people to move in and out," he said. "When I think about it today, nothing makes me happier." He kept a piece of that wall too.

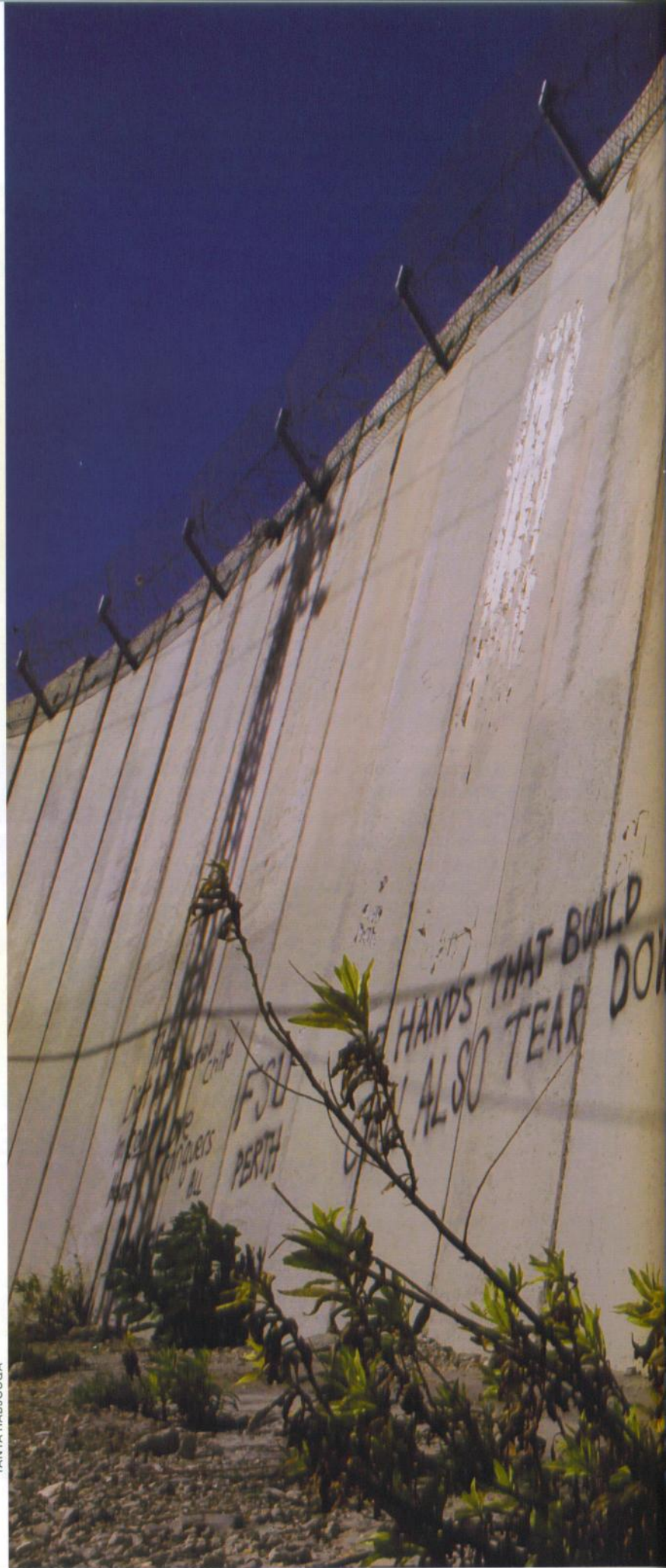
FACULTY PROFILE

Ahmed is one of the few to escape the squalid camp for life as an academic. Now 48, the soft-spoken professor received a bachelor's degree from Illinois State and a master's and doctoral degrees from UC Santa Barbara. He was a Fulbright scholar in Palestine in 1993 and 1994 and taught political science at Birzeit University in the West Bank before coming to Saint Mary's. But perhaps most extraordinary about his story is that he has been blind since birth.

Ahmed, who has authored a study on suicide bombings and a book on Hamas, is often called on to comment on events in the Middle East. He applauds the current wave of democratic rebellions across the Arab world and hopes that the turmoil in Libya ends with the ouster of dictator Muammar Kaddafi by his own people. The much-delayed democratization in the Middle East is important not only to end injustice, he said, but to prevent extremism by offering peaceful means to bring about change.

Hisham Ahmed is in the West Bank this summer serving as an observer in local Palestinian council elections. He was photographed near the wall between East Jerusalem and Abu Dis.

TANYA HABJOUJA





While some in the West have been surprised by the democratic uprisings in the Arab world, Ahmed said what surprised him the most was that it took so long for the revolutions to occur, particularly in Egypt where President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February after 30 years in power. Mubarak had long abused his power, milking the country for his personal enrichment and institutionalizing corruption.

"Mubarak's rule had completely destroyed any creativity and talent in Egypt," Ahmed said. "It planted the seed of radicalization and extremism in a country that was known to be rather pragmatic and open to the rest of the world. The imprisonment of so many people created an atmosphere of despair and frustration. Not everybody knows how to handle despair and frustration, and many resort to extremism."

Ahmed praised the discipline and peaceful methods of the Egyptian uprising at its beginning. And he said the leading role of women in the protests was a major step forward for Arab nations, where women are constant victims of discrimination and harassment. "The revolution in Egypt was long overdue and it was a most beautiful role model for other societies to follow," he said.

The Egyptian rebellion, and the revolution in Tunisia that preceded it, inspired protests throughout the Middle East that threatened to sweep neighboring dictators from power. But in Libya, the willingness of Kaddafi to slaughter civilians slowed the pace of democratization and emboldened other autocrats in places such as Syria, Iran, Morocco, Yemen and Bahrain. Ahmed applauded the United States and its NATO allies for establishing a no-fly zone in Libya and expressed hope that the Obama administration would continue to navigate the delicate middle ground between helping the rebels and heavy-handed intervention.

"Kaddafi's behavior has really disturbed the rhythm in the Arab world, and if he succeeds that could be a very dangerous precedent for other dictators in the Arab world to follow," Ahmed said. "We are at a standoff between two trends, the Egyptian model and the Libyan model. The fall of Kaddafi would certainly speed up the fall of other ruthless dictators in the Arab world. Other dictators, I believe, are looking at the Libyan experience and saying to themselves, 'Brute force might do the job. Let's do what Kaddafi is doing.'"

For Ahmed, growing up in a refugee camp under Israeli occupation instilled in him a passion for combating injustice. Remarkably, he bears no bitterness toward a society that trapped his family and a

generation of Palestinian refugees in misery. Looking back, he wonders how he managed to survive the harsh conditions of the refugee camp.

In 1948, the new Israeli state evicted Ahmed's family from their home in Zakariyya, where they had owned hundreds of acres, Ahmed said. His parents fled to the teeming Dheisheh camp, where they lived for years in a tent. His mother gave birth to five sons and a daughter who all died in early childhood. Two other daughters survived, along with Ahmed and his younger brother, who also was born blind. Many years later, Ahmed learned that their blindness was likely caused by a vitamin E deficiency when their mother was pregnant.

"Life in the camp was terrifying at times, especially as a child," he recalled. "There were soldiers everywhere. A bullet pierced the house and missed my brother by an inch." The family managed to move from the tent to a one-room structure with a zinc roof that leaked whenever it rained. The fence around the camp and the checkpoint manned by soldiers were always a hindrance. "For me as a blind person it was doubly difficult to get in and out of the camp," he said.

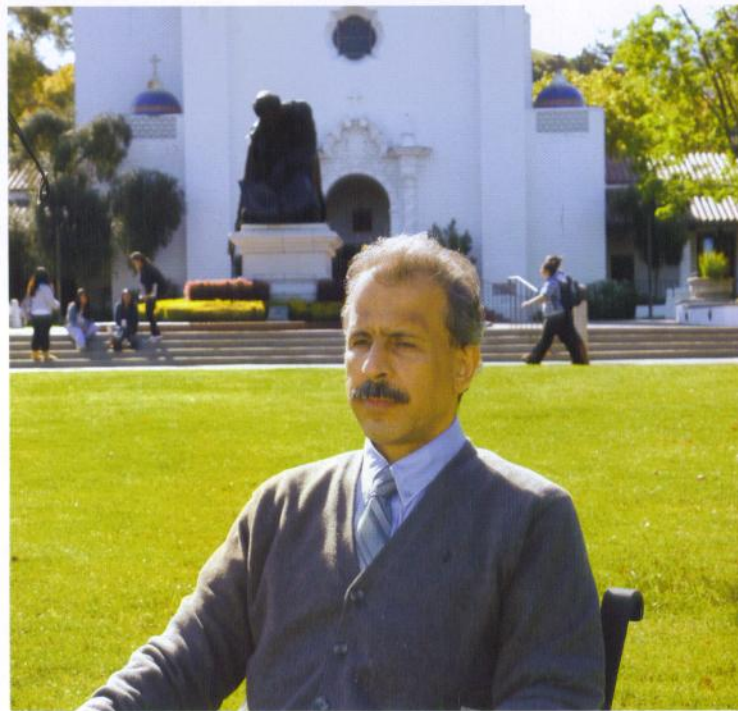
When Ahmed was four, his father took him to Egypt to see a leading eye specialist. The doctor said there was nothing he could do to give young Ahmed his sight and urged his father to focus on the boy's education. It was a message his father took to heart. He arranged for Ahmed to attend schools for the blind until the ninth grade, when he transferred to a public high school. Ahmed studied hard, knowing it was the only way he could become independent. In 12th grade, Ahmed took the national exam that would determine his future. He placed third in the entire occupied Palestinian territory, enabling him to study in the United States.

"When I view my own experience and wonder how I managed to overcome the many hardships, it is not computable," he said. "I made it against all odds and adversity. It was a constant struggle from day one." Living in Dheisheh, he learned resilience, perseverance and determination. He developed a passion for human rights and a hatred for walls that trap people. "No people should be confined in such a large prison," he said. "It deforms people's lives and character and behavior."

Richard C. Paddock is a former Los Angeles Times reporter and foreign correspondent. During a decade overseas, he reported from nearly 50 countries, including Russia, Indonesia, Burma and Iraq.

"A good teacher is one who refreshes his or her mind constantly with new information through research. Certainly field research to meet players and makers of public opinion gives the most valuable of information, and I make sure to bring that to my students."

HISHAM AHMED



SHOMARI CARTER