

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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POLITICAL PEACE OR PERSONAL WAR?

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Dear Peter,

The manner in which people conduct themselves in public usually reveals much about their own behavioral characteristics and about their culture as well. Often personality traits and cultural phenomena become intertwined, since individuals make up the culture and since the latter unavoidably contributes to molding the personalities of members in society.

In the past a lot has been written about Palestinian culture by Palestinians as well as by outsiders. Exploration of Arab culture in general has been centered, by and large, on two dichotomous tracks: the first aims to portray the culture as great, deeply rooted in history, rich with tradition and tolerant. The second takes a diametrically opposed stand: Arab culture is inferior, backward and hostile to modernization.

The following story portrays certain elements of Palestinian life and culture for what they are and is of course narrated by individuals who are themselves Palestinian. In it much is revealed about Palestinian daily life, attitudes and perceptions.

Evenings often seem to be the most important time of the day and can produce quite intense and critical discussion. People of different ages and backgrounds usually group around in houses or outside on balconies or rooves, to reflect on their experiences while smoking heavily and drinking tea or coffee. Usually the atmosphere in a room where people gather is filled with cigarette smoke and with vibrant exchanges of opinion by people who tend to constantly interrupt each other as each is interested in making a point.

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It was not the first time that I had met Nasser, the journalist and talked about Palestinian life. After some earlier talks we had agreed to meet again the evening of August 7th 1994, in part, to pursue what we had begun talking of before and to reflect on other dimensions of Palestinian life. His brother Mohammad and Nasser the contractor, were to join us. The idea was that we would meet at a restaurant somewhere in Bethlehem since the two Nassers who have West Bank I.D. cards would not have been allowed to enter Jerusalem at night even if they had the required travel permit.

As I was making a final phone call from Jerusalem to Nasser's house to check the evenings arrangements, his brother Mohammad told me that Nasser was not feeling well and wondered if I could meet them at their house to talk. I expressed some reservations, fearing that others might come to visit unannounced, a strong possibility when the Palestinian door is never closed to any passing friend or neighbor. I was hoping for a private evening with them, without the interruptions of others. Mohammad suggested that I give it a try and see how the evening unfolded. I overcame my hesitation and agreed knowing that regardless of the setting of the meeting there would be at least one story to be told.

About an hour later, I arrived at their house, signs of fatigue were quite evident with Nasser. We all sat in the living room attempting to lay out evening plans. Not too far from us about hundred feet in fact, was the boys school crowded with people participating in an evening festival. Voices were coming loud and shrieking over the speakers. The three of us didn't feel comfortable continuing with the discussion while surrounded by such noise.

"This is how it is here", Mohammad remarked with frustration, "its impossible to have any sense of privacy. One person after the other is making a long winded speech at the school at this time of the night without any regard for the people who want to sleep. How can you read, write or even think under such circumstances."

To me the mood was almost set - one of disenchantment and frustration. Nasser wasn't feeling well; Mohammad was irritated with the lack of quietude and Nasser the contractor, who arrived about 15 minutes after I got there, seemed to be tired too, apparently after a long working day. Not too long afterwards another Mohammad (Shawqi) and Assad arrived unannounced.

At that point I did not know what the rest of the evening would bring. I started thinking about the rationale behind my earlier reservations. Taking note of my facial expressions Nasser's brother Mohammad apologized at least twice because things hadn't gone the way we originally planned them. I assured

him that this wasn't his fault and that we would try to capture the momentum and talk about something that we would all enjoy.

Coffee was served and later grapes were offered. Everyone seemed to have been getting comfortable except the second Mohammad who wanted to have some whisky which was not available at the house.

This Mohammad is also a journalist, working at the new Palestinian radio service in Jericho with twelve years of experience in Israeli prisons before his release during the Israeli and Palestinian prisoner exchange in the mid 1980s, he offers very perceptive analysis of Palestinian living conditions though he could not prevail upon Shawqi, the lawyer, to get him some whisky since he has a car.

As the discussion branched out into various interrelated subjects, Nasser the journalist, in spite of his fatigue, managed to get everybody's attention when he said that he had a story to tell about a recent day of experiences in Jericho.

I was noticing that my brother, Mohammad [a chemist, visiting from the United States] was getting fed up with the stillness of life here. So I decided to take him down to Jericho to give him some sign of hope. I thought that with the new Palestinian Authority in power there, life would have a different meaning, a different atmosphere and most certainly a different impact on him.

We drove my old car heading down to Jericho via Wadi An'ar Road¹. The car was not air conditioned and we had taken the children with us in the car and as a result Mohammad and I became really concerned about them in the stifling and airless heat. As the time passed we were all getting more and more uncomfortable yet I was determined to show my brother a new type of life in Jericho. In effect I wanted him to feel that in spite of all the difficulties, Palestinians can have as interesting a life here as can be had in the United States.

¹ Since the Israeli Authorities closed Jerusalem to Palestinians living in the West Bank in March 1993, many Palestinians who want to travel to other parts of the West Bank started taking the Wadi An'ar (Valley of Fire (Hell)) Road. This is a back road, very dangerous to travel, which does not cross Jerusalem. Not only is it a desolate route through mountains and valleys but the road is badly in need of repair, composed of many twists and turns often with sheer drops on one or sometimes both sides.

As we entered Jericho the first thing I wanted him to see was the Palestinian police with their Palestinian uniforms and their Kalishnikovs². It was about mid afternoon when we arrived and the weather was getting hotter and hotter. I kept driving around but not one police officer could be seen. I was getting disappointed and even worried about how Mohammad would feel about this. Finally I decided to drive to the new radio station knowing that we would surely find some police officers there. As we arrived, three officers were standing there, they seemed to be extremely tired and profoundly frustrated. I pretended that I was enquiring about the other Mohammad, the journalist and one of them kindly asked me to wait while he went to find out. As we waited I eavesdropped on the conversation between the two other officers. One of them was complaining to the other that his boss had not issued him a mattress and that the weather was getting worse and he didn't know for how much longer he was willing to tolerate such living arrangements.

The officer who went to search for Mohammad came back a few minutes later only to state that he wasn't there at present. I was upset that we had not found Mohammad to chat with and had found the police officers irritated and distressed. Worrisome for me also was how my brother was feeling about all of this. To refresh our spirits therefore, I decided to take my brother on a sightseeing tour in Jericho. I wanted us to escape from the heat especially seeing as our concern over the children was being heightened by the moment.

Thinking out loud I said that the only place that would be suitable for my brother to visit was Ein al-Sultan, where there was a little water spring and I thought the area would be shady enough for us to sit and relax. We started driving towards Ein al-Sultan and when we got there we were very surprised to see the people visiting the area abandoning the shady place and staying under the hot sun. Another sense of dread started to engulf me then. What could it all be about I started asking

² When the Palestinian police force started arriving in Jericho in the early summer of this year, many Palestinians were euphoric and overcame all kinds of travel difficulties just to get to Jericho to see them. It was rather a common scene to see Palestinians having their photos taken standing next to a police officer and usually holding his Kalishnikov. Many Palestinians suggest that this euphoric behavior was the result of a long period of deprivation, since the only figures of authority previously had been non-Palestinian.

myself, why would anyone in his right mind abandon the shade.

My curiosity and that of my brother became stronger and we wanted to find out what was wrong in the shady area. We started walking there and the closer we got the more intolerable the smell became. Apparently the shady spot, the only oasis from the heat in the whole area had been turned into somebody's toilet.

This was a second unsuccessful attempt on my part to revive my brothers flagging spirit, the moment he saw the little water spring he said that he had a much better and more beautiful spring in front of his house in New Jersey. His disgust increased as he saw the water coming up from the spring was blocked by piles of trash and stones.

A little bit later after our arrival something happened which added some flavor to the scene, a man wearing all of his clothes apparently coming back from work, came to the spring. In a semi-orderly fashion he removed some of the stones and the trash and placed them at the edge of the spring. As soon as he had finished making a space for himself he jumped fully clothed into the water and began rubbing himself vigorously to remove all the dirt and sweat on both himself and his clothes. When he was done, he got out of the spring somewhat refreshed but soaking wet and with a new layer of dirt on his clothes replacing the old one. He then simply returned the stones and the trash to their earlier position and walked away.

I thought to myself that my brother could not have felt any worse, this is not the society I wanted to show him nor is it the type of sightseeing I intended for him to enjoy.

In the midst of these unpleasant thoughts I decided to take him on the last leg of the day, to have something to eat and drink. We headed to one of the large open air restaurants on the main street in Jericho, my brother only wanted to have ice cream. When the waiter came to the table he asked about the types of ice cream they had. With an astonished grin the waiter responded that they had only one type of ice cream. My brother ordered a small cup, bending the metal spoon that came with it as he attempted to scoop some ice cream into his mouth. After the first awkward mouthful he launched into a barrage of comparison with ice cream in the United States.

On the table next to us were sitting a family with several children. One of the children was about three years old. All of a sudden I saw the father brutally punch this small child who started screaming hysterically from the pain. All customers sitting in the restaurant, except my brother, started looking at the scene in surprise and disagreement. I wondered why my brother wasn't looking like everybody else and repeatedly asked him to look but he utterly refused stating angrily that he would have a fierce fight with this man if he were to look at the child. Nothing in the world justifies punching this child in the face my brother said.

Disappointed in the restaurant and pained by what he had seen he decided to walk out, leaving the almost untouched cup of ice cream behind him.

We were on our way home and my brother asked me to stop at a roadside stall so that he could buy some Jericho dates. Right then I knew that another problem was brewing, my brother is not experienced in bargaining with street vendors nor is he experienced at choosing the right type of dates. I wanted to offer my help but knowing that I had messed up the whole day for him I didn't say anything. He got out of the car and bought two kilos of dates for exactly the price the vendor asked for. The dates were so bad, so unripe that none of us could eat them and they have been sitting here in the house for over a week.

Once Nasser had finished this narrative the discussion focussed on the story of the little child who was punched by his father at the restaurant in Jericho. That scene stood out in everybody's mind. In commenting, Nasser said that there were "unfortunately many other stories like it. The characters and the setting might be different but the theme is the same". At this point Nasser asked Shawqi to narrate one of his experiences at a restaurant in Hebron:

One day I had an appointment with somebody in Hebron, I arrived there earlier than scheduled and therefore, had some time on my hands.

I was driving a fancy looking car, dressed in a suit and looking something like a judge. I parked the car in front of a rather shabby restaurant and went inside. All I wanted to do was to kill time so I sat at one of the tables and the owner turned on the fan for me. The restaurant was crowded, everyone behaved respectfully to me and the waiters there, cleaned the table repeatedly.

What I had in mind was just to have coffee but I was touched and rather embarrassed by the attention being shown me so as a result I ordered some appetizers. I told the owner that I wanted coffee with very little sugar. He called a teenage boy, apparently his son, and ordered him to fix the coffee for me. A few minutes later the boy brought me the coffee. It was as sweet as syrup and usually I won't drink coffee unless it is bitter strong. I realized that there must have been some misunderstanding somewhere and called upon the owner who came to the table. With him also came the boy. They all stood there in front of me and I explained to the owner that I had asked for coffee with little sugar. Before I even finished my sentence the man slammed his fist into the boys face. "The gentleman asked you for a coffee with little sugar" he yelled.

A little bit later, another coffee was brought which I drank feeling very bad about what had happened. I went to the cashier to pay the bill, I can't remember exact prices but if I went to a restaurant, say, in Bethlehem, I would end up paying about 40 shekels [roughly \$13.50]. I asked the cashier how much I had to pay and kind of heard him mumble 7 shekels, I thought that I didn't fully understand and that I had misheard what he said. I apologized and asked him once more how much I had to pay and again he said 7. I did not want to make a mistake by giving him the wrong amount so I pulled out a hundred shekel note and gave it to him instead. Don't you have any change?, he asked. I got out the 7 shekels from my pocket and gave it to him, not believing the scene I had witnessed nor that the restaurant was so cheap.

I departed, drove my car away and swore never to go to a restaurant in Hebron again, the fact that prices are low is not reason enough to go there. The quality of the food might also be good but why make yourself subject to such an uncomfortable atmosphere.

As Shawqi concluded his narrative, the evening shifted to an analysis of why such problems occur in Palestinian society. All participants in the discussion expressed disgust with the realities of what they heard about their society. To varying degrees, they were all involved in professions and processes meant to bring about change in the social, psychological and economic conditions of their people, yet, such narratives are vivid reminders to them of how much more work needs to be done.

Explanations ranged from the simple to the sophisticated and all concluded that such phenomena have to be eradicated if the people are to improve their own lives. From what was said it can

be gathered that the culture really does need to be critically evaluated. The man who jumped into the spring may perhaps have had no other choice for cleansing himself, especially seeing as water cuts for extended periods of time are frequent in the West Bank. The restaurant owner in Hebron hit the boy in the face because, in his own mind, this was the most appropriate way of showing respect for a customer. In other words he must have thought that by hitting the boy he would convey a message to Shawqi that he cared about his desires as a patron. Furthermore, he may have even thought that he would be inviting the lawyer to show up at his restaurant in the future. The restaurant owner, could not have seen that his action would deter the lawyer, who belonged to a different generation and was influenced by obtaining his education abroad, from ever visiting the rundown restaurant again.

Given economic need, lack of facilities, and due to the fact that violence ridden practices have surrounded this society for so many years, it seems that a social environment originally based on paternalism, has been exacerbated by authoritarian rule under which violence has become legitimate as an indicator of power.

This has, of course, most affected those who are beset by financial hardship, particularly in families where the head of a paternalistic household finds himself unemployed, unable to provide for his family and perhaps with his movement restricted. In essence, he is powerless in all the traditional areas which grant him his social and psychological legitimacy.

Stripped of control over his own life, the only area in which he can be said to maintain dominance is in his family and this can become quite deformed in the way it is exerted as could well be the case in the Jericho incident. As yet there is little change to the circumstances which help to create such incidents but any policy that expands employment opportunities for Palestinians is probably the best place for the new Palestinian policy makers to begin.
