

College lecturer sees hope for Mideast peace

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■ **MORAGA:** Palestinian born blind man tries to bring sense of balance to class

By Matt Krupnick
TIMES STAFF WRITER

It only took crossing a busy street 13 years ago to convince Hisham Ahmed that the rift between Palestinians and Israelis might someday be bridged.

Ahmed, a blind Palestinian hired over the summer to teach politics and international relations at St. Mary's College, was waiting for a break in traffic as he returned to a West Bank refugee camp after a trip to Jerusalem.

Israeli drivers — afraid of being pelted with stones by residents of the nearby camp — usually sped by the site as quickly as possible, Ahmed said, making an otherwise simple crossing a life-threatening endeavor.

Then, unexpectedly, a car stopped to let him cross. A nearby Palestinian told Ahmed, who was in the region on a Fulbright fellowship, that the driver was an Orthodox Jewish rabbi.

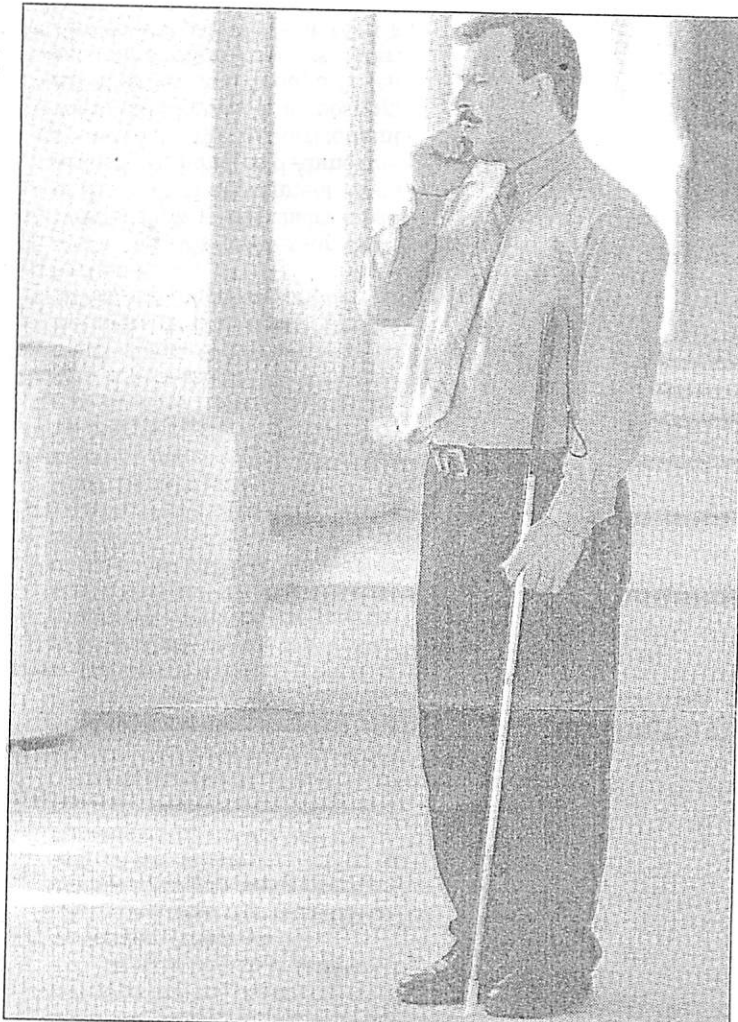
"That one incident made me think, 'My goodness, how human interaction can flourish,'" Ahmed said during an interview in his new campus office. "I refuse to draw barriers between people that are created artificially."

Ahmed, 43, has had plenty of barriers thrown in his way over the years. He was born blind in a West Bank refugee camp near Bethlehem, the younger sibling of several children who had died because of the harsh conditions.

His father had a fourth-grade education, his mother not even that. The family split time between flimsy tents and a house with a roof that tended to disappear when the wind picked up.

Not ideal conditions for success, Ahmed said, especially given the local views on disabilities.

"In an Arab family, you would expect an overreaction if the sighted children died while the blind children lived," said Ahmed, who has a blind brother. "What happened in my family was just the opposite."



KRISTOPHER SKINNER/TIMES

ST. MARY'S COLLEGE professor Hisham Ahmed takes a phone call while walking the hallways on campus in Moraga. Born blind, the admired professor believes new ideas can lead to Mideast peace.

Meanwhile Ahmed, who arrived in the Bay Area in July, has been getting his bearings on campus. Last Wednesday, he made his way from his Garaventa Hall office, past a construction site, so he could meet deliverymen dropping off furniture.

He and his wife, a human-rights attorney he met in Jerusalem, live in a campus apartment surrounded by students. The sometimes noisy atmosphere doesn't bother him much, he said.

"I would never view my role as a traditional teacher," Ahmed said as he walked through an aus-

tere dormitory hallway to his apartment. "I like to interact in many ways."

But the traditional classroom might be the best place to create a new generation of leaders who could bring peace to the Middle East, he said. New ideas are the region's best hope, he said.

"It's very hard to be optimistic," he said, "but I have never been a pessimist."

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his parents nurtured him, sending him to a school for the blind. He first proved his academic prowess by scoring well on a national test.

After two years at a Palestinian college, Ahmed transferred to Illinois State University to complete his bachelor's degree. From there, he went on to gain two graduate degrees from UC-Santa Barbara and write the first English-language book about Palestine's Hamas political party.

The UC Santa Barbara professor who advised Ahmed on his doctoral dissertation — "American Foreign Policy and Palestinian Self-Determination: 1917-1948" — remembers him fondly.

"He's a live wire and there's not another student I appreciated more," said retired professor Stanley Anderson.

While some might worry that a Palestinian-born professor might present a skewed view of the Middle East, Ahmed is as objective as anyone, Anderson said.

"His nationalism is tempered by wisdom," he said.

Ahmed, who was raised Muslim but considers himself secular, said he has taken great pains to remain neutral throughout his career. He has both criticism and praise for Israeli and Palestinian leaders and says the two sides need to make "sincerely genuine efforts" to come to an agreement.

"Once you get into a cycle of violence, these are the times when rationality might be the first casualty," he said. "People lose sight of the cause and effect of a given situation."

Ahmed was teaching at the West Bank's Birzeit University when he noticed a job ad for the St. Mary's position. He had once met Brother Ronald Gallagher, who is now the St. Mary's president, when Gallagher was at Bethlehem University in the 1990s, and the job description intrigued him.

St. Mary's professor Suzi Weissman, who was chairwoman of the politics department when Ahmed was hired, said Ahmed responded to the advertisement within 30 minutes of its posting. An interview and about a dozen recommendation letters later, Ahmed was part of the St. Mary's faculty.

"He's a treasure for our students," Weissman said. "He's a secular Muslim who grew up in the West Bank, yet he's incredibly even-handed."

The hiring has required adaptation on both sides. The school had to provide special equipment for Ahmed, including voice software for his office computer.

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