



THE LAST WORD

No Time to Lose

To my family and friends, I'm simply called Sani or baba; otherwise, I'm either *'ammi*, *khali* (paternal and maternal uncle) or *Haj!* I'm at the age where my youngest teenage daughter keeps asking me to dye my hair and where the classmates of my eldest daughter are getting married. Whether socially or in business, I find myself more and more frequently asking my interlocutor, "Who is your father?" And I just realized that my conscious memory now spans almost five decades.

The first time I laid my eyes on an Israeli was in mid-June 1967. There were actually two Israeli soldiers standing next to their jeep that was facing our home in East Jerusalem. I was seven years old then, but I clearly remember that I was not afraid of them. I also remember that they seemed very alien to me and to my neighborhood. Forty-eight-plus years later, I still have the same sentiments when I see Israeli soldiers.

Admittedly, when I go to West Jerusalem, it is I who feel like an alien in the surroundings. However, if someone from my parents' generation would go today to Talbieh, Qatamon, Baq'a, King George Street, or other neighborhoods where Palestinians lived and flourished before 1948, I doubt that he or she would share my feeling. I never lived there and so I simply don't feel I belong. Politically, on the other hand, I wholeheartedly support Palestinian collective rights for compensation, restitution, and reparation for lost property in West Jerusalem.

I would love to live in a cosmopolitan, multi-cultured city like New York where possibly the largest number of different cultures live side by side; where all are under one rule of law and where no specific culture tries to dominate or eliminate another culture. Wouldn't that be lovely? No, I'm not suggesting that we all move to New York! What I am saying is that given the current Israeli attitude and laws, such a mix is not possible, and we have to physically separate for everybody's sake. What I am also saying is that as much as I am an alien in Rishon LeZion, an Israeli will always be an alien in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus, Hebron, Gaza, and yes, in East Jerusalem. As manicured and as meticulous as Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are, they will always remain foreign to the people (who originally owned the land on which those settlements were built in the first place) and to the landscape. Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip over 48 years ago. During this entire period, economic greed, land grab, and political shortsightedness have torn both societies apart and have caused the polarization of both peoples to the point of no return. Only a physical separation will guarantee some normalcy.

I am in my mid-fifties today. Will I ever see the day when justice is restored and Palestine is independent? My next worry is the missed opportunity of 48 years of development. We have no time to lose. Boy, we've got a lot to do!

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