

# PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS

Compiled and translated by F. EL-MANSSOURY \*

[COMPILER'S NOTE: Ever since 1948, the year in which the State of Israel was proclaimed, a Palestinian Arab minority has continued to live within its borders. Analyses have been made of its members' economic and social condition, but less is known about their personal reactions to being Arabs living in Israel. In this article I have asked three young Palestinians who grew up in Israel and lived there until a few years back to relate their reminiscences about any personal contacts or relations they had with Israeli Jews. Mostly they spoke of a large gulf between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. The following are their interviews.]

*Mahmoud Darweesh is a well-known Palestinian poet in his early thirties who left Israel five years ago. His poetry has been translated into six languages.*

I felt embarrassed during a trip to Europe some years ago, when European writers and intellectuals asked me about the extent of influence the two literatures, Arabic and Hebrew, exerted on each other. They had heard about the harassment to which Arab writers in Israel were subjected, and wanted to know whether there was some common ground on which writers from the two communities stood. I had to tell them there were none; that as far as the Israelis were concerned, Arabic literature written in Israel was not worth knowing about. It is true that, occasionally, a section of the Israeli press would purport to show interest in the subject, and a few articles would be published claiming to deal with the literature being produced by Arabs in Israel, yet on closer examination, a knowledgeable observer would find the Arab names cited in these articles to be of obscure figures in no way representative of the Arab literature movement in the country. When one enquires why none of the really well-known writers has been dealt with, the Israeli establishment produces its stock explanation: because they are anti-Jewish! "Anti-Jewish" was the standard appellation for any Arab protesting against Zionist policies depriving him of his rights.

\* F. El-Manssoury is a free lance writer living in Beirut.

Thus a cloak of silence has been drawn over a literary movement that has won a good deal of recognition outside Israel. But in Israel itself, officials in charge of the information media have kept the Hebrew reader and listener unaware of anything save our being the "enemies" of his people. The Israeli establishment adopted this attitude in full realization of the fact that our literature, being by its very nature a literature of protest against an intolerable situation born of a gross injustice, might contribute to tearing down the barriers between the Jews and the Arabs in Israel. James Baldwin, the Black American author, has written a book called "Nobody Knows My Name." How appropriate this title seems in describing our condition in the Zionist state! Nobody knows our names or our problems. The paradox here lies in the fact that quite a few Arab writers living on the West Bank or in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq are known to the Israeli public through Hebrew translations and commentaries written on their work by Israeli scholars; whereas Palestinian poets and novelists who have been living under Israeli rule for a quarter of a century, remain unknown to the Hebrew reader.

Sometime after the June War, Moshe Dayan visited the Palestinian poetess, Fadwa Touqan, who lives in Nablus on the West Bank. When the Israeli press criticized him for this visit, and for his suggestion that Fadwa should be invited to Tel Aviv to read her poetry to the Israeli public, Dayan's reply was as follows: I wasn't the person who made Fadwa a poetess or inspired her to write her nationalistic verses. She is a Palestinian and she has her Palestinian audience; therefore I propose that the Israeli public should listen to the popular poets of the Arab world in order that we understand the Arabs.

Why, we ask, should high-ranking officers like Dayan and Harkabi devote so much of their time and energy to studying the literature of the Arab world, while ignoring the literary output of Palestinians living inside Israel itself? The answer is simple: so much of what is written in the Arab world today is a literature of anger and condemnation; anger at corrupt regimes; condemnation of threadbare traditions and wobbly ways of thought. The Israelis — the Dayans and the Harkabis — in translating or commenting on this literature, present it to their public as a literature of despair, utterly devoid of hope. Also, by giving a certain slant to the voices of these angry Arabs, they try to persuade the Israeli public into believing that such Arab intellectuals are angry because of the conflict between the two peoples, when in point of fact, the very powerlessness of the Arab regimes in defending Palestinian rights is the cause for so much anger and bitterness on the part of Arab intellectuals.

Thus we see that the generals' interest in Arabic literature is inextricably

woven into their political strategy vis-à-vis the Arabs. It is certainly not altruistic. By the same token, any Israeli interest in local Palestinian literature would mean having to reveal a skeleton in the Israeli closet; those who had steadfastly maintained that the "Israeli" Arabs were better off than their brethren beyond the borders, would be hard put to explain the black picture painted by Palestinian writers of conditions in the Zionist state. They would also be at a loss to explain the phenomenon that is so clearly manifest in Palestinian literature written in Israel, whereby the ties that still bind Palestinians in Israel to their Arab brothers elsewhere remain strong, despite the fact that these Palestinians have been cut off from their fellow Arabs for over twenty-five years.

One day an Israeli writer came to me and suggested we collaborate on a play about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Let us make the point of issue in this play a house whose ownership is disputed, he said. I agreed and asked him whether this house should be a point of meeting for the two peoples, or one of separation. It would be a point of conflict, he explained, then went on to say:

"The right to own this house should not be based on the law of inheritance, on need and merit. The man who built it fifty years ago no longer has a right to it, for, no matter what the circumstances that compelled him to depart from it were, the effort he has expended in acquiring this house should give him the right to keep it, especially as it is the only house he has."

"And where would the element of justice be in this play?" I asked him. He thought for a moment, then said: "Let the pangs of conscience suffered by the Jew be a kind of indemnity for the Arab to compensate him for the loss of his house. Let us make remorse the pervasive atmosphere in the house until the passage of time has played its role." This was the end of the collaboration.

My encounters with the less intellectual Israelis were no more fruitful in terms of understanding. Take the following incident as an example: I took a taxi one day and asked the driver to take me to an address at al-Mutanabbi Street. The man seemed pleasant enough, so I offered him a cigarette and we struck up a conversation. Suddenly he said to me: "Tell me, how much longer is this going to last? We are really fed up." I assumed he meant the war and the rise in prices and taxes, so I agreed with him that the situation had really become unbearable, but he went on to say:

"How much longer is our state going to keep these dirty Arab names as street names? We really should wipe them off the face of the earth."

I asked him whom he meant and he replied with disgust: "The Arabs of course."

“Why?”

“Because they are filthy.”

I could see from his accent that he was a Moroccan immigrant; so I asked him if he thought me dirty, and if he considered himself to be cleaner than I. He looked surprised and refused to believe I was an Arab, so I showed him my identity card. At this, he said he did not mean the Christian Arabs, but the Muslims. I told him I was a Muslim, so he said he meant the villagers. But when I told that I came from a village which his government had demolished and wiped off the face of the earth, he was unimpressed; the state remained beyond any criticism that came from an Arab. Finally, when we had arrived at al-Mutannabi Street and I got out, I discovered that while the placard still carried the name of the famous Arab poet in the Arabic script, the Hebrew script had a totally different name: Montnefi. Not even an Arab poet who had died many centuries ago was granted Israeli respect.

What does a Palestinian living in Israel usually overhear while walking down a street, sitting in a cafe or travelling in a streetcar? After the 1967 War, I heard young Israeli couples bantering along these lines:

“Darling, I would love a Soviet-made tank for a birthday present.”

“All right, we’ll try a new position in it.”

Or, “Darling, I would like to spend the night with you sleeping in the open air along the Suez Canal.”

Hearing all this, the Arab would naturally be confirmed in his suspicion that even in love-making he is less sophisticated than his Jewish compatriot, for it would certainly take him a long time to adjust to a love relationship that was translated into terms of tanks, guns and other instruments of war.

In the euphoria of victory after the June War, even the traditional illustrations on postcards disappeared; instead of flowers and landscapes, postcards now carried pictures of tanks, planes or guns, when they did not carry pictures of the Suez Canal, the Wailing Wall, and the occupied towns. Once I saw a postcard which illustrated the famous principle of having one’s cake and eating it too: a *Mirage* carrying a drawing of an olive branch on its fuselage.

There is a great gulf between the Palestinians and the Jews in Israel, with encounters taking on the appearance of confrontations. I once asked a group of Israeli writers: “Why all this arrogance? I inherited my religion and my nationality; I was never given a single moment of choice in this matter. And now I want to ask you: who among you chose to be a Jew?”

“This is the difference between us: I am not only a Jew — I chose to be one,” came the reply from one of them.

“How?” I asked.

“This is not a matter that can easily be explained to a non-Jew. Jewishness is something that can only be understood by a Jew and this is the source of my pride, which you call arrogance.”

“I would understand you if you told me you chose to be a Zionist or an Israeli. Is that what you mean?”

“Not exactly; I mean I chose to be a Jew and I committed myself to my Jewishness which is embodied in the National Home, Israel. I do not differentiate, as some do, between Jewishness and Zionism; they are one and the same thing which finds its expression in the State of Israel. And if you asked me to define Eretz Israel, and to point out where its borders lie, I would only quote to you what Chaim Weizmann always used to say: I know that the Lord promised Eretz Israel to the children of Israel, but where the borders of this promised land lie, only He knows.” With this, the discussion would come to an end, for in Israel, the Lord always has the last word.

*Salah al-Abdullah is a young businessman from Nazareth.*

My dealings with the Jews were mostly on a business level, and through my business as a dealer in leatherware I came to know Jews from several communities in Israel — among them North Africans, Yemenis, Iraqis and Rumanians. The North African Jews belong to the most backward community in the country. They are looked down upon by the European Jews who consider them a lawless breed and responsible for most of the crimes committed in the country. Yet when an older Moroccan Jew meets an Arab acquaintance, he greets him graciously in the traditional Maghrebi fashion: he touches the hand of his acquaintance, then kisses the back of his own hand. The Iraqi Jews, who are among the best-educated Oriental Jews, are not so courteous towards the Arabs. They would dearly like to pass themselves off as Ashkenazim and this snobbishness does not endear them to the hearts of the other Sephardic Jews.

It can be said that in general, Jews who come originally from Arab countries like to entertain in a lavish Arab style. As a guest in their homes, I would be plied with food and drink. They would talk to me in Arabic, exchanging courtesies and pleasantries with me. As long as we remained clear of politics, they were polite and friendly, but the minute the conversation veered in that direction, the atmosphere would become tense and chilly. When, however, there was no mention of politics and the atmosphere was relaxed, they were not above slandering the Ashkenazi Jews as an overbearing lot whose hospitality was perfunctory and minimal in heartiness. The Oriental Jews would in

these moments try to find some common ground with the Arabs by bemoaning the shamelessness of Ashkenazi girls. They would tell me: we are all Orientals, you Arabs and we Sephardic Jews; we do not tolerate our women-folk turning into sluts. These Ashkenazi women have no notion of chastity and virtue.

Yet beneath this veneer of friendliness, there lurked a good deal of animosity which was often sparked off by minor incidents. One of these incidents took place in Ramleh back in the mid-sixties, when a truck driven by an Arab accidentally hit and killed an Iraqi Jew riding on a motorcycle. The Arab driver would have been lynched on the spot had not the police rescued him at the last moment. Then the town erupted like a volcano and thousands of Jewish demonstrators marched along the streets crying: *Lorotsim Arabim, Lorotsim Arabim* (We don't want the Arabs. We don't want the Arabs.)

They went on a rampage inside the Arab quarter, but the government, fearing a possible massacre, rushed in large security forces to guard Arab lives and property. Some tense hours passed while the mob went on besieging the Arab quarter and chanting hysterically. Finally, the situation eased and everyone went home.

It is interesting to note that the Israeli government and the press in general condemned this mass hysteria and a rally was staged in Ramleh to express indignation at the clash between the two communities. Speakers at this rally pointed to pertinent passages in the Old Testament which enjoined the Jews to protect their guests and since we Arabs were looked upon as guests in Eretz Israel, Israelis were told we should be tolerated rather than lynched!

Peace has returned to Ramleh, but the animosity remains, though it is hidden. As most of the Jews in Ramleh are of Iraqi origin and the Jews had lived and prospered in Iraq since ancient times, one wonders why they hate the Arabs with such intensity. My conjecture is that they have been indoctrinated by the European Jews and taught to hate us. The mid-sixties were bad times in Israel; unemployment was rife, and political and social discontent widespread. The Oriental Jew, badly off and treated as a second-class citizen, was in a similar position to that of the poor white in the American South or South Africa.

I once worked for a Rumanian Jew. Having received my wages from him one day, I discovered that he had paid me a larger sum than was due to me. I went up to him and pointed out his error. He stared at me in disbelief. An honest Arab! He had never expected to come across such a phenomenon, he told me.

I had a similar experience with another Rumanian Jew. This man brought me a length of leather and asked me to fashion it into the specific goods he required. When the work was completed a few days later, he came to collect it; but after a first glance at it, he announced that I had substituted an inferior make of leather for the original piece he had brought, and refused to pay me for my work, saying that all Arabs were swindlers anyway. I asked him to take a closer look at the leather. He did, and discovered the markings he had surreptitiously made on the leather prior to his giving me the piece to cut. He had been afraid I would change it and his innate prejudice against the Arabs was so strong, he had expected the worst even before checking the leather to see whether his markings were there or not. When he discovered his mistake, however, he apologized profusely, but it was clear from his tone that whereas he now believed in my honesty, I was to him merely an exception, not the rule. The paradox is that Rumanian Jews have the reputation in Israel of being among the least honest of the European Jews in their business dealings.

We Palestinians never cease to marvel at the double standards of the Zionists. Perhaps the following incident will illustrate this: I once attended a youth congress in Vienna as a member of a leftist Israeli delegation. One day I was taking a stroll in a park when a woman approached and addressed me in Hebrew. I was wearing the badge of the Israeli delegation in my lapel and so the woman, an Austrian Jewess as it turned out, took me for a Jew. She poured out her heart to me; she was unhappy in Austria because anti-Semitism was widespread; people were prejudiced against the Jews, treating them badly, and she longed to go to Israel, which was the last haven for the Jews, she told me. I listened to her tale of woe and when she was through, I said: Supposing I told you that the same treatment you have described to me is meted out to the Arabs in Israel; that they too are subject to prejudice and persecution, and treated like third-class citizens in their own country; would you believe me?

She stared at me in silence, the fact that I was an Arab dawning on her, but she shook her head vigorously; she would not believe that Jews could ever be persecutors. As far as she was concerned, that was a contradiction in terms. She kept on shaking her head, refusing to believe what I was telling her. I turned to an Israeli who was with me and asked him to corroborate what I was saying. He did, after assuring her that he was a Jew himself; but nothing we said left an impression on her. She simply rejected all our evidence; the Arabs were not persecuted in Israel; they couldn't be.

Was there a change of mentality after the June War? Yes, but the change was not for the better. Before the war, the average Israeli was terrified of Arab

might. During times of crisis, acquaintances would come to me and say imploringly: In the event we are attacked by the Arab states and something happens to us, will you protect our children? Will you consider them as if they were your own flesh and blood? And I would say: But of course; there is bread and salt between us, as the saying goes, and no political issue is going to destroy our friendship. We Arabs know how to differentiate between politics and personal relations.

When the 1967 war exposed Arab might as a myth, however, relations with my Jewish acquaintances became decidedly cooler. Now, if they wanted to make a friendly gesture, they did it in a condescending way. They would tell me, for instance: Well, Salah, if you need a pass, just drop us a line and we will get it for you. Rather than share my anger at the fact that, as an Arab, I was still living under official restrictions, they would express their readiness to furnish me with a pass from the authorities of my district, if I felt like leaving my town for a day or two. Thus the emphasis was always on their being the victors who could afford to be charitable. It was obvious they did not look upon me as their equal.

*Yussef Hamdan, a writer, was born in Jaljoulia<sup>1</sup> in 1942.*

I had my primary education in the local village school. There were no Israelis resident in Jaljoulia, but their settlements ringed our village on all sides. Prior to the 1948 war, we frequently visited our relations in the nearby towns and villages and they visited us. One of my married sisters lived in Qalqilya and her son was my playmate. But with the establishment of the State of Israel, the borders were sealed and I just could not grasp the fact that it was no longer possible for me to meet my nephew. We lived under military rule and there was always a long queue of villagers in front of the military governor's office, seeking passes to go to nearby villages or towns for work or medical attention, as the case may be. In these pressing matters, the military governor was the most powerful man in the district and his word was law. I remember seeing him make the round of houses in our neighbourhood to make sure that everything was in order, and the villagers would make him gifts of eggs and poultry so that he would be kindly disposed to giving them the passes they so badly needed.

My childhood and boyhood memories are full of the sight of dead men; very often, one or two corpses would be displayed in the village square for

<sup>1</sup> A village in the "Triangle" formed by Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus. In 1948, Jaljoulia became part of Israel. It was about two miles distant from Qalqilya, on the Jordanian side of the border.



identification. These would be the bodies of men who had been separated from their orchards and fields by the arbitrary demarcation line of 1948, and since their orchards were usually their sole means of livelihood, they would try to cross the border surreptitiously in order to gather some of their produce, and the Israeli guards would shoot them as "infiltrators."

Not only people across the new border suffered from loss of ownership; men from our own village had their land confiscated by the Israeli authorities on the pretext that the land in question was required for military purposes. I remember the rumpus I heard one day on the street outside our home. When I went out to investigate, I saw the following scene: Israeli soldiers were dragging an old man who was one of our neighbours through the village street. He was a venerable old man who always looked so dignified in his traditional Arab robes and now they were cursing him and calling him thief. It transpired that the old man's orange orchard had been confiscated by the military authorities and he was caught while trying to pick a couple of oranges from a tree he had once planted with his own hands.

After going through secondary school, I became a school teacher and the Ministry of Education appointed me to a teaching post in an Arab school near Haifa. I started to write and my articles and poems were published in the Communist press. This brought on me the wrath of the authorities and I was dismissed from my post, though the official reason given for my dismissal did not mention politics as being the cause. The military governor of the district then promised to reinstate me and even to promote me to headmaster if I desisted from political activity. I rejected this offer. (It should be noted in passing that this offer came from the military governor and not from the Education Ministry which, ostensibly, was directly responsible for employing me; the reason being that for a Palestinian living in Israel, the military governor wielded far more power and authority than did the civil authorities directly in charge.) After my dismissal, I did odd jobs here and there. More often than not, however, I would lose my job on account of being Palestinian. This would happen in the following manner: I would apply for a job and the employer, assuming me to be a Jew, would let me have the job without first asking to see my papers. After the initial period, he would express satisfaction at my work and ask to see my papers in order to go through the formalities of employment; discovering my "nationality," however, he would make all kinds of excuses to get rid of me.

Around this time, I became acquainted with Dr. Mordechai Stein, an anti-Zionist lawyer of Russian origin who led a small political movement called

The Third Force. He was deeply committed to the Palestinian cause and bitterly opposed to Zionism, which he had fought ever since he came to Palestine as a young man in the twenties. He defended the *Ard*<sup>2</sup> movement in the courts, and before that, in the fifties, he had submitted a memorandum to the United Nations on the plight of the Palestinian refugees. He had even travelled to the United States to publicize the cause of the refugees, but the American newsmen whom he met gave him to understand that publishing his anti-Israeli charges would put them in a very tight spot with the American Zionists.

Dr. Stein published a paper in Arabic, English and Hebrew, which came out irregularly and which met with intense hostility on the part of the authorities. I contributed articles to this paper. Dr. Stein was an early advocate of a binational state and a believer in the concept of a de-Zionized Palestine serving as a haven for persecuted Jews while remaining the recognized homeland of the Palestinian people. He died in 1969.

In 1966 I enrolled at the Department of Middle East Studies at the University of Tel Aviv. Outwardly, the admission of a Palestinian student to an Israeli university or institute is a smooth process taking place in an atmosphere of freedom and democracy. But the reality is different, for the path of the Palestinian student is hedged by many difficulties. An Israeli Jewish student is entitled to a state grant or scholarship, whereas a "politically-minded" Palestinian is not. He cannot even avail himself of the services of the office which secures temporary employment for needy students. Then, too, the Palestinian student's movements were curtailed by the authority of the military governor of his area. If he was given a pass to attend lectures and to sit for exams, he was not always given an additional pass to enable him to visit the college library after lecture hours. Thus the student was deprived of the chance of consulting reference works that may be necessary for his studies. Since state security is a very holy cow in Israel, few Israelis question the legitimacy of the restrictions placed on the Palestinian students. Military rule was lifted in the middle sixties, but in actual fact, these restrictions simply moved from military into police hands. At any rate, the university authorities can always point out that *they* place no academic restrictions on the students and that what the police or the military does is no business of theirs.

During the week preceding the 1967 war, the streets of Tel Aviv were denuded of young men, for all men fit for military service had been called up. Sometimes people would stop me on the street to enquire why I was still

<sup>2</sup> *Al-Ard*: an Arab nationalist movement suppressed and banned by the Israeli authorities in the early 1960's.

wearing my civilian clothes and why I wasn't with my unit on the front. The obvious explanation — that, I, as an Arab, was exempt from military service — simply did not occur to them. Why? Because in their minds, an Arab had to be a swarthy, spider-like creature and anybody who did not fit this description was apparently not one of them.

On one occasion, a friend of mine was travelling on a bus where he happened to be the only Palestinian amid a crowd of Israeli passengers, when an old woman got on the bus. When nobody offered her his seat, my friend got up and offered her his. As the old woman sat down, she said: "I know why none of the others offered me their seats; they are all Arabs."

My friend was deeply hurt by this remark and he went and told the bus driver, a Jew, what the old woman had said. This time the driver shared his indignation, and, turning to the woman in question he rebuked her, telling her that all the passengers, with the exception of the young man who offered her his seat, were in fact Jews.

I once became acquainted with an Israeli girl of Russian origin and as she was free of the usual racial prejudice, we became good friends and she insisted on inviting me to her home to introduce me to her parents. I was not keen on accepting the invitation, fearing that her family might not welcome a Palestinian in their midst. But as it turned out, her mother made me feel welcome, saying to me: "I am really glad that my daughter has found an Arab for a friend. I don't like these people," she said, referring to the Israelis with distaste, "they are all merchants. I didn't like them even when we were living in Russia, but it was my husband who made us come here. I wish we had stayed where we were."

Later, the girl was called up to do her military duty and joined up, albeit with little enthusiasm. When we met again, she told me about the pressure that was being exerted on her by her superiors to make her give me up. Her superior officer had called her to his office and there questioned her about a girl whom we both knew. Then the officer gradually led the conversation to her own relationship with me. She cut him short by saying: "Look, you people called me up to do my military duty and you are entitled to expect full obedience from me as far as the military regulations are concerned. But my private life is my own and I brook no interference in it." However, the officer was undeterred by this reply, for he went on saying: "Listen: we know everything about your friend. He is an enemy of the State of Israel who wants to see its downfall. He has, with his political activity and his writings, made no secret of his attitude. He is an enemy of Israel and as such, he is also your own enemy,

for you are a Jew and he is an Arab. We advise you to stay away from him.” She did not accept his advice and remained my friend. It remains to be said, however, that while heavy pressure was laid on her to make her give me up, no effort was ever made to make *me* stay away from her. But finally I came to the conclusion that my relationship with this girl was causing her to be put under a strain and so we parted company.

It was after the October War, 1973, when I had already left Israel, that I heard on Cairo Radio messages sent by Israel’s prisoners of war to their relatives. One of these messages was from an Israeli soldier to his mother. He told her that she had been right when she had wanted to stay in Russia and not come to Israel; they would have been happier there. I recognized the name of the soldier: he was the younger brother of my girlfriend, Ginia.

Can there be friendship between an Israeli and a Palestinian? Yes, but the Israeli in question has to be as free of Zionist obsessions and prejudices as was Ginia, for example. Or he or she must be a member of a leftist organization such as Matzpen or Rakah. Members of such organizations are often considered by the authorities to be even worse enemies of the State of Israel than are the Arabs. And yet the authorities are never as harsh with them as they are with the Arabs. This is not out of love and charity, but out of the very real fear that any suppression of leftist Jews would drive them fully into the Palestinian camp; a prospect that really frightens the Zionists.

As for the other Israelis, there is little hope of having really friendly relations with them. I remember that when I worked on jobs with Israelis who did not know my identity, I would hear some of them casually mention in the course of conversation that they lived in Arab houses (meaning houses built and owned by Palestinians who were now refugees). After the June War, these same Israelis would say to each other with astonishment: “Imagine! The other day an old Arab from Gaza came over to our place saying he would like to take a look at his house. Fancy someone coming to tell you that your house belonged to *him*! The nerve these people have!”

Many Israelis seem blissfully unaware of the existence of Palestinians “in their country” and the following story illustrates this fact: After eating a very good meal, an Israeli woman of East European origin called the restaurant manager to commend him on the excellence of his cuisine, saying: “But tell me: who makes such delicious food? What cuisine is it?” The manager told her it was Arab food. “Arab food?” the woman seemed amazed. “Arab food! Why, are there any Arabs in Israel?”

“There are, Madam,” he assured her; “I am an Arab.”