



Continuing the Palestinian struggle: an interview with Fouzi El-Asmar

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Fouzi El-Asmar

For over 50 years, Fouzi El-Asmar has been one of the most important public intellectuals of the Palestinian liberation struggle. He is most well-known as the author of the landmark autobiographical work, *To Be an Arab in Israel* (1975), published in seven languages including Arabic and Hebrew, and as a prolific journalist specializing in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with particular focus on matters of concern to Palestinian citizens of Israel. Less well-known, especially in the West, is the fact that Dr. El-Asmar earned a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Exeter, with a dissertation on Hebrew children's literature, published subsequently as *Through the Hebrew Looking-Glass: Arab Stereotypes in Children's Literature* (1986), and that he went on to publish several additional books, including collections of poetry and collective works theorizing a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. We sat and talked together in Bethesda, Maryland, where he has lived for 34 years, about his writing, his activism, and his present views about the Israeli situation and the Palestinian struggle.

TG: Can you start by giving us some history of your dissertation project and its reception in Israel? In 1985, for instance, Adir Cohen, a professor at the University of Haifa, published a

book with an ostensibly similar focus, entitled *Temurot be-Sifrut Yeladim* (published in English as *An Ugly Face in the Mirror: National Stereotypes in Hebrew Children's Literature*), that neglected not only to mention your dissertation but to consult you as a scholarly authority on the subject. Was not Cohen's move all-too typical, in that Jewish-Israeli voices are generally lent such disproportionate preference over Palestinian voices, positioning themselves as "legitimate" bearers of "expertise" on matters relating to the Palestinians and thus contributing to the marginalization and reduction of Palestinian voices and perspectives?

FA: Well, I tried to contact Adir Cohen when he was writing his book. I called him when I was in Haifa, because I knew that he was preparing to write about the same subject. He refused to meet with me—he actually said he didn't want to meet with me.

The whole subject of Arab stereotypes in Israel was very important to me, especially at that time. I was curious as to why the Israeli Jews had such negative stereotypes about Arabs, and I wanted to know where such images came from. In Tel Aviv, I'd often meet Israeli Jews who'd say they'd never met an Arab or been to an Arab village. Yet he or she held stereotypical views of Arabs. I knew this had to be coming from somewhere. And it wasn't enough to blame Zionist or Israeli propaganda. We knew of course that the Israeli government wanted to separate Palestinian and Jewish culture, but for other reasons. The Israelis have slogans—for example, they refer to bad work as "Arab work." But what is meant by "Arab work"? How can someone know what "Arab work" is if he's never even been to an Arab village or town? From there I started to think, and I discovered an article about Hebrew children's books, so I decided to read those books myself. When I started reading them, I was amazed to find how pervasive and insidious the stereotypes were. I focused on commercial books at the suggestion of my dissertation adviser, because somebody had already written a dissertation about the official schoolbooks. I sensed that the commercial books were actually more significant than the official ones, because they were written by people who wanted to influence the younger generation of Israeli Jews and who held certain ideas about Arabs, and because such books are readily available in bookstores: anyone can buy them. In fact, I myself bought copies of all of the children's books dealing with Arabs and still have them here with me in the States. So I started reading them, and I was astounded at the way in which they went about explaining certain things.

For example, there's a famous Zionist slogan about Israel: "A land without people for a people without a land." How does one explain that to a child? Well, one of the story books is about a Jewish family who comes to Palestine—a father and two sons and his wife—and they decide they are going to stay. They begin walking through the mountains and hills, and not a single person is to be found. Then they come upon a small creek, and the father says, "This is where we should build our home." Once they build a house, they start cultivating the land, and while they are doing that, the son hits something with his plow—a menorah! At that point, the father lectures his family: "You see, this is virgin land. For 2000 years, nobody has touched it. This menorah is a gift from our forefathers." Another story book presents the following image: "Don't approach the Bedouins, they are dirty Arabs. If you see one, be careful and go inside the house. The Arab is a thief who wants to steal from you."

I had hoped that, by writing a book on this subject, I could make Israelis aware of these stereotypes—even more so than Arabs. In fact, whenever I write something, I always think about

the other side. I don't think about spreading my work throughout the world. It's more important to me that the Israelis read it. On the other hand, when I write for the Arab audience, I want Arabs to read that work. So that's the story. Of course, the Israelis didn't like what I wrote, and I think Adir Cohen in his *Ugly Face in the Mirror* was successful in denying what I found in these books.

TG: Cohen's book, as far as I can see, is not readily available, if at all, while yours has prevailed. So I'm not sure how ultimately successful his book was, or that it has been perceived as credible or objective among the broader community of scholars. Do you think there is a connection between the way in which somebody like Cohen co-opts and reduces the Palestinian perspective in his work, and the response of the Israeli left to your book, *To Be an Arab in Israel*? Talk about the Israeli left as you have experienced it. How, for example, did Uri Avnery, who remains ever-popular in Western anti-occupation circles, react to *To Be an Arab in Israel* and to your unwarranted arrest and unlawful, 15-month administrative detention in an Israeli prison back in 1969–70 (and subsequent one-year house arrest that lasted until 1971)? What are some differences in your position on key political issues that prompted reactions such as his?

FA: When we talk about the Israeli left, we cannot just say "Israeli left." There is a Zionist left and an anti-Zionist left. These two perspectives must be distinguished. Now, the Israelis were usually very aware of everything I was writing and often looked for ways to diffuse its message. So when I wrote my book on Hebrew children's literature, they got Adir Cohen to write a book on the same subject, probably thinking that while he would agree with me on some things, he would focus on different aspects and draw conclusions more amenable to the Zionist position. For example, I found no mention of the peasants—*fellahin*—in the children's books. Why? Because peasants have a relationship with the land. I discuss this fact in my book, while the majority of the children's literature focuses on the Bedouins. For the Israelis, intellectuals or otherwise, the most important Arabs are the Bedouins. Why? In order to prove the Zionist point that Palestine was devoid of people before the arrival of the Zionists. You know, one day the Bedouins are here, another day they are there; they are seen as wanderers without roots. When Sabri Jiryis wrote his book, *The Arabs in Israel* [1976], which discusses the historical and legal situation of Palestinians in the Jewish state, the Israelis got at least two or three Jewish scholars to write about Arab history in the region, but in a way that would supply a point of view more in line with Zionism—a perspective more "moderate" than the so-called "extreme" Palestinian view. So when we talk about the Israeli left, we have to distinguish between the Zionist left, as represented by Uri Avnery, for example, and a group like Matzpen. Matzpen was aware of what was going on, and they were encouraging, and they were trying to explain the situation to the Israeli public. But they were limited.

TG: Explain a little about Matzpen.

FA: Matzpen was a leftist anti-Zionist group. It was very small and lasted for a while. It had a solid point of view and some very good people. I used to meet with them all the time. They published a very important book written by Moshe Machover and Akiva Orr, entitled *Peace, Peace and No Peace* [1961], which is comprised of quotations about peace from Israeli leaders, showing basically that they were really doing nothing to bring about peace. Matzpen was very active against the occupation. It organized demonstrations, wrote articles and books, collected

signatures on petitions, and so on. When I was in jail under administrative detention, the group organized demonstrations against my incarceration. But today, Matzpen's former members must be seen as individuals who do not really comprise a group. Still, they are people who really care a lot about the future of the peoples of the region. They were calling for the rights of the Palestinians and so on.

TG: Which is something that no other groups were really doing at that time.

FA: Well, the Communist Party was also active, but it had its own agenda—which also carried a contradiction. If you are anti-Zionist, how can you uphold the Jewish “law of return,” which Matzpen was against, for example, but which the Communist Party upheld?

TG: On the other hand, the Israeli left as represented by somebody like Uri Avnery, who for example had a very bad reaction to *To Be an Arab in Israel* and was very public about it, had yet another agenda.

FA: I was editor-in-chief of the Arab version of Avnery's newspaper, *Haolam Hazeh*. I know Avnery very well, and I worked with him. As I wrote in *To Be an Arab in Israel*, he is an opportunist. I will never forget the time we signed a petition against the 1967 war which was published in *Ha'aretz*. There was a woman in the group of signatories—that is another story discussed in my book—who hosted a weekly meeting between Palestinians and Jews in her house. Her husband was a very famous writer who wrote novels about the Holocaust, and she was born in Palestine. We all signed that petition. Once it became clear that Israel was going to win the war, I found to my puzzlement that Avnery had started publishing another daily newspaper. In its second issue, which came out right after Egypt's acceptance of the cease-fire, Avnery wrote that Israel's target was now Damascus. In effect, he was calling for Israel to attack Damascus: *Hamatirah Dimsik!* That made me really angry, as did other things that also started happening at *Haolam Hazeh*. For example, the Israelis were planning to destroy three Palestinian villages. They wanted to expand Israeli territory, so the army proceeded to destroy the villages of 'Imwas, Yalu, and Beit Nuba. Amos Kenan, an Israeli writer, witnessed these events while serving in the army in that area. When he returned, I sensed that everybody in the editorial department was trying to hide something from me. They didn't want me to know about the destroyed villages. Then I found out that Amos Kenan—who is a leftist, but also a Zionist—had been opposed to the villages' destruction but didn't want news of it to reach the outside world. So instead of writing an article about it, he and the others at the paper wrote a personal letter to then-Secretary of Defense Moshe Dayan. So what did I do? When no one was around, I found the letter, made a copy, and went to a friend of mine—an old Jewish man, a lawyer named Mordechai Stein who is also an anti-Zionist—and together we published the letter, both in Hebrew and English translation, and distributed it to journalists far and wide. When Amos Kenan found out, he telephoned Stein at two o'clock in the morning, cursed him out and demanded to know why he'd published the letter. And then he proceeded to attack me. Yet as time passed, he began changing his tune and actually tried to take credit for the letter: “Do you see what I did?!” He hadn't wanted to reveal the destruction, but later he was happy to take credit for my actions.

By the same token, when Avnery read *To Be an Arab in Israel*, he couldn't say that I was lying. Instead he wrote an unfavorable editorial, entitled “The Twisted Mirror of Fouzi,” in which all

he could say was that I see things differently. Of course I see things differently: He is a Zionist! But he wanted—as we say in Arabic—to hold two watermelons in one hand. You cannot do that! In other words, Fouzi wasn't lying, he just didn't see things the right way—Avnery's way.

That “way” was also the official Israeli position when the first edition of *To Be an Arab in Israel* was published in London with an introduction by I. F. Stone. The Israeli embassy issued a statement asking for people to boycott the book, after which they accused Stone of not understanding the Middle East, notwithstanding the fact that he had already written at least one major book on the subject. Despite these obstacles, my book was very widely read. In this respect, I have to thank Israel Shahak. He encouraged me to write the book and is responsible for getting it published in Israel. I had located a publisher there initially but was concerned about giving him all the rights, as requested, because I'd been advised that the Israelis would quash the book if they wanted to. They might publish it in Hebrew but would put up obstacles to its translation in order to prevent its contents from being disseminated more widely. So Shahak said he would publish the book in Hebrew, and he did. Recently some Israelis have contacted me who are thinking about reprinting the book with a new introduction that I would write.

TG: Can you explain a little bit more about this political distinction that is embodied by the figure of Uri Avnery?

FA: This is something I have been writing a lot about lately. The problem that we are now witnessing in Israel is the result of a combination of two factors. Israel was established by secular people, but as a religious state. Herzl, Ben-Gurion, Golda Meier—who, when she visited the US, announced on television, “I am a secular Jew.” Ever since these two elements were fused, the “secular” Zionist left has been unable to separate them. It cannot. So Israelis have a problem: they cannot say that Israel is not a Jewish state, for then they will have no connection with Jews outside the country; they will have no money coming in, and no *aliyah* (Jewish immigration). That's where the core of the problem lies now. Because of this Zionist position, the Israeli left lost everything. They lost the parliamentary elections to the Likud in 1977. And now everything that's going on is a result of that. An article was just written about the annual global policy conference held in Herzliya a few days ago, in which it was remarked that the word “Israeliness” was never mentioned once during the proceedings, only “Zionism” and “Judaism.” That says something. The Israelis can no longer find themselves. Are they one people? What is their nationality? And to this very day, they have been trying to determine what constitutes a “Jew.” The Israelis are asking these questions. As Zionists, they cannot separate the secular from the religious, because that is how they built their state. But unless they separate the two elements, they will never reach a genuine peace with Palestinians or the Arab world. They continue to put religious considerations first, above anything else, whereupon they propagate the false notion that nationality and religion are identical.

Now, the majority of religious Jews in Israel think that the “chosen people” shouldn't even have a nationality. Therefore Israel has an even bigger problem. If Jews don't comprise a nationality, how can they create a national state? They can't! The only thing left for them is the empty slogan—you might recognize it from the theme song to the Hollywood movie *Exodus*—“God gave this land to me.” They are using “God” as a means to justify the unjustifiable acts which they are committing. In this context, we see the religious Jews coming to dominate the decision-making

apparatus. In the army, they have reached the highest levels, and now they are trying to control Israeli everyday life, not just in the colonies (which they call settlements), but also in Israel proper. They want women to sit at the back of the bus, they don't want them to serve in the army, to sing, to this, to that, and so on. Israel is in very big trouble if it cannot solve its problem of being a state without a national identity.

TG: Well it's a big contradiction. If you carry an Israeli passport, "Israel" will not appear as your nationality, only your perceived religion or ethnicity.

FA: On my identity card, nationality is written as "Arab," and a Jewish person's nationality is written as "Jewish." This has also become a big problem, which played out recently when the son of a very important Israeli writer, Yoram Kaniuk, married a non-Jew who himself had a son. Because the boy's mother wasn't Jewish, the Ministry of the Interior wrote "no religion" on his registration papers. Yoram Kaniuk became enraged over this. He went to the Ministry and demanded that the word "Jewish" be deleted from his registration papers. When his request was refused, he took the state to court—and won. That created quite a commotion in Israel. After all, what is Kaniuk now? He says he's no longer Jewish, so what is he? That's what the Israelis are facing. And that's also why Israeli leftists cannot do anything—unless they declare, straightforwardly, that they are anti-Zionist, that their nationality is Israeli, and that their religion is Jewish. What do you call a Jew who is an atheist? What do you call him?! That's what is going on in Israel now. If you study what's going on, it is precisely that.

TG: What are your thoughts about the potentials and realities of the ongoing Arab uprisings with respect to this crisis? Are the Occupy Wall Street-like protests against neoliberalism in Israel rehearsing the old "left" problematics, or do they hold out potential for a more radical linkage with the Palestinian struggle?

FA: These are two different issues. People in Israel are concerned about their future. They know they can win 15 wars, but if they lose one war, they're finished. And they know they cannot conquer the entire Arab world. And they also know that the Palestinians are not going to give up, that they are going to continue fighting for their rights. Let's not forget that the Palestinians gave up much more than anybody expected. They accepted a mere 22% of the land of Palestine in order to establish their "state." The Israelis may be the majority in Israel—they are strong, they have a well-equipped army, a strong economy, and so on—but they behave like a minority. Even if you give them solid proof that they're in the majority, they won't accept it, and you therefore can't guarantee them anything, no matter how hard you try. Yet they are not giving the Palestinians any guarantees. That's another contradiction. So you have Israelis, demonstrating in the streets, who have reached the point that they will agree to a smaller Jewish state and an even small piece of land for a Palestinian state, as if that will solve the problem. That's the mind-set of these demonstrations. Of course, they include liberals, leftists, even the Zionist left.

Read Avnery and see what he's saying, for example. He supports a Palestinian state, but when it comes to the question of the refugees' right of return, he takes a different position. Mind you, he is much better now than he was years ago—he is in his late '80s—but he is speaking out of self-interest. Likewise the Israelis in the streets are also demonstrating for themselves. They are afraid that if things continue as they are, there will be no more Jews, no more Israel, no more

nothing. That's their concern. Their problem is not unemployment—Israel's economic situation is good. It's that the government has decided to spend the majority of its money expanding into the Occupied Territories rather than building inside Israel. Young people are offered cheap housing in the Occupied Territories with lowered mortgage rates, fewer taxes, high security, and so on. Although many people take advantage of the offer, others are worried about what would happen if peace were reached. Would they have to leave the colonies? Many of these people would prefer to stay in Israel rather than move to the Territories and face that situation. They are angry with their government for not building housing for them in Israel instead. That's the problem, that's why they are demonstrating.

TG: If Palestinians are at most a token cause in the current Israeli demonstrations, what do you think are the potentials and realities of the ongoing Arab uprisings with respect to the Palestinian struggle and the dissemination of information about it? Where, in effect, is the Palestinian struggle now? Is the Palestinian leadership's bid for United Nations membership a manifestation of that potential and perhaps of its structural limitations?

FA: First of all, one thing has to be understood about the Arab uprisings. The Palestinian problem lies at the core of all movement now taking place in the Arab world, and in the thinking of the Arab people. Of course, you will not find this discussed in the American media, which tries to ignore it and defers instead to the actions and position of the Arab League. I'm talking about the people! I have been in a lot of Arab countries, and as soon as someone there learns that I'm Palestinian, his behavior changes. In Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, everywhere. The uprisings have something to do with this. Take Egypt. Yes, the Egyptians have problems, financial and so on. But the first issue raised within their movement was *dignity*. They could not believe that Mubarak was planning to conduct a siege on Gaza. Palestinian children needed medical supplies, but he wouldn't allow them in through the checkpoints. He even wanted to build a wall along the Gaza border, much like the Israeli separation wall. Egyptian dignity was dishonored. This is not to ignore Egypt's other big problems, but the Palestinian issue—the human dignity of Arabs—was the reason the demonstrators went to the Israeli embassy in Cairo and put up certain demands. The uprising revolves around the quality of life and future respect for the Arab people, and the Palestinian issue is at its core.

That's what scares Israel—and the West. The West doesn't give a damn about the people; its allies are the governments that serve Western interests. So it needs to keep those governments in power. The US may talk about bringing down dictatorships. But let's look around the Gulf States. Don't they have dictators? Regarding Bahrain, for example, the US has said next to nothing. Regarding Syria, it is speaking loudly, but what about Bahrain? Or Yemen? Whenever Yemen has problems, the US wants them solved immediately, because Yemen's geographical location is considered of strategic importance to the West. The mistake here is that the West and its allies are ignoring the people. Even if they succeed right now in maintaining a foothold in the region, through the Muslim Brotherhood and so on, that will not last.

TG: Why won't that last?

FA: First of all, the Muslim Brotherhood has an agenda which does not match the spirit of the 21st century. If we believe the pronouncements of one of its leaders, for example, all books by

Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, will have to be forbidden. I don't think that will be acceptable to anybody. Besides, the Brotherhood has its own agenda, and unfortunately the United States, which at all times previously considered the Muslim Brotherhood terrorists and enemies, is now opening a line and doing business with them because of the interests they represent. It may take a few years for other parties to take over, but I don't see that the religious parties can continue. They simply go against the tide of modern history, the modern mind, the modern way of life. But the Arab Spring, as it is called, does have the momentum to continue, and it will continue, and it will be stronger by that time, especially when the real face of the Muslim Brotherhood is revealed—the fact that it is exploiting Islam to achieve something other than the real thing the people want.

TG: In Palestine itself, how is the Palestinian liberation movement affected by the Arab uprisings? Will there be a Third Intifada, for example?

FA: First of all, the Arab Spring, as I said before, was affected by the Palestinian struggle. It's exactly the opposite of what you're suggesting. When people in the Arab countries see all those Palestinian children standing in front of Israeli tanks throwing stones, while they themselves can do nothing but sit there as their leaders steal their livelihoods and refuse to help them while helping the Israelis, they become angry and inspired. The Palestinians, however, will suffer some problems as a result. Hamas, for example, has become, or wants to become, part of the other scene. First of all, it is giving up the armed struggle, and second, it is cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood. Some leaders have even begun to call Hamas the Muslim Brotherhood of Palestine. And now Hamas has united with Mahmoud Abbas, which is another story. He is the president, he is the prime minister, he is the head of Fateh, he is the head of the PLO—one person. That's going to become a real problem for the Palestinians. But the Palestinian people inside Israel, and in the Occupied Territories, know what they really want, and that's the core of the matter, that's the most important thing. Will there be a Third Intifada? There could be. There is still an intifada going on today, not at the same level as the Second or First Intifada, not in the same manner, but it is an intifada. As I see it, if a teacher can get to school to teach, that is a form of resistance. If a doctor can make it to the hospital, or if a shopkeeper can open his store, that's something under occupation—the fact that they are not giving up.

TG: *Sumud*.

FA: *Sumud*. That's right. When I go to Jerusalem and see peasants coming to market with their products, their vegetables and so on, I ask, "Who's going to buy that?" And they say, "Be optimistic, come back in the afternoon and see." So I do, and I see people coming from inside Israel to buy these products from Palestinians. There is cooperation; they come and buy, just to support the Palestinian people. That's an aspect of *sumud*, that's how you help.

TG: It is likely that many Anglophone readers have not followed the more recent of your published articles from which you are drawing here, because they are written and circulated primarily in Arabic. Would you explain your decision of some years ago to write primarily for the Arabic press? Is it that Western audiences and readers are less receptive, or that your skills and knowledge are put to better use this way?

FA: When I first came to this country, I was invited to give a tour of lectures about the Arabs in Israel. I was really keen on it; I have given maybe 1500 lectures since I arrived in 1972. Time after time, I found that I was repeating myself, that I was trying repeatedly to explain something quite ordinary to the people here—which was fine. But then I came to question how it was possible to affect or influence public opinion in the United States. I couldn't get an answer from anyone, although I talked with a lot of people. Many insisted that if just one person comes to agree with me, I will have made a difference. Yes, but we are not talking about one person, we are talking about public opinion! Then, the First Intifada happened, and suddenly, this intifada did ten times more to publicize the Palestinian perspective than had all the Arab movements together since 1948. Everybody everywhere was saying, "Look at the Palestinians, look at what the Israelis are doing, look at that!" So I thought, this is the way it should be. The influence should be coming from the outside, not from the inside. Palestinians had been working in the US since 1948, giving speeches, lectures, interviews—and nothing had changed. The Intifada did it (much like the oil crisis in 1973). So I reached the conclusion that this is what we needed to do, we needed to influence public opinion from the outside.

But then I discovered another problem. On the outside, they really don't understand the mechanism or thinking of the American people. How can we reach them? How do we deal with their misperceptions of Palestinians and the Arab world? I therefore decided that the best thing for me to do would be to write in Arabic and try to explain to Arabs what's happening in the US, in the Congress, and so on. Why does Congress, for example, invite Benjamin Netanyahu to give a speech, and not Mahmoud Abbas? Why did it give Netanyahu 20 standing ovations? I really don't think the Arabs understand how things work here. So from that point of view, I started writing in Arabic. Before that, I had published articles in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Star*, the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and the like. I was actively writing in English.

Something also happened to me that influenced my decision. I was speaking at a church to which I'd been invited to give a lecture. I of course referred frequently to the Palestinians and to Palestine, but at the end of my lecture, during the Q&A, a woman stood up and asked: "Where is Palestine?" Being in a church, I wanted to respond, "Don't you know where Jesus was born?" But before I could open my mouth, a woman from the other side of the room shouted, "What?! You don't know where Palestine is? Palestine is in Jerusalem!" Now I'm standing there talking, and I've killed myself to explain the situation as I see it—and I'm left empty-handed. Empty-handed! Why should I waste time doing this, when people here can be led to understand what Palestinians are doing, and what the Palestinian problem is, from the outside more than by what I can explain to them. Of course I have friends who disagree with me, but I think I'm right. To this day, I appear publicly every once in a while, but I don't accept a lot of invitations, especially when Arab students invite me. I mean, I've given hundreds of lectures to Arab students, but in those instances I'm preaching to the converted. That's not what I want to do. Last year I was invited to a synagogue, so I went with pleasure. In fact, the congregation was led by a woman rabbi, and I was worried because it was a Conservative synagogue—but we had a very good discussion. I think I affected some of the audience; several came up to me afterwards and told me they didn't expect me to be so straightforward, that I was right, and that they would have to think about what I'd said.

TG: As someone with an extensive history of political organizing and activism, would you share your thoughts on the state and effectiveness of contemporary Palestine solidarity activism, for example the Gaza flotilla movement, the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions movement, the International Solidarity Movement, etcetera? Have these movements been successful? How might they improve their effectiveness on behalf of Palestinian liberation?

FA: I'm not really sure how effective they are. At least these people's voices are heard, you see them, you see their signatures, they make a certain impact. But the problem is that the media doesn't cover their activities. Back in the '80s, I was in the home of I. F. Stone, and we were talking, and he said, "Fouzi, you know what? It's about time for you people—the Arabs—to have a newspaper in English so you can have an open forum, like the Jews have with *The Jewish Week*. You now have Edward Said, a very well-known Palestinian figure, and you can do this and this and this." We still have no such outlet. We just don't. And that's not just bad for Arabs, it's also bad for the allies of the Palestinians. Sure, thanks to the Internet, we can now publish and access a lot of material, and that's very good and has its effect, the material can be quoted and so on, but from my point of view that's not enough. For example, people often read my column and say, "Fouzi, this should be translated into English." And I reply that I have in fact written many of my articles in English and submitted them to newspapers—to no avail. The typical response is, "No thank you, there's no space." American newspapers will usually not publish my articles unless I am criticizing the Palestinians. But if I want to write about the Israelis, they won't publish me. They block everything. Once in a while they allow a big name, an ambassador or the like, to publish something critical. I'm just wasting my time with them.

I'll give you an example. My first contract for *To Be an Arab in Israel* was signed with a small publisher in New York City by the name of Richard Barron. After he'd already paid for the translation, Barron showed the book to a woman editor on Middle East affairs at the *New York Times*, who told him not to go ahead with publication unless something was done to change the book's tone. So he came back to me and suggested I add something to the narrative. "What kind of something?" I asked. "I can't 'add' anything, I'm talking about things that actually happened to me." And he said, "You mention that you were once on a kibbutz and slept with a woman there. Can you expand upon that?" Of course I refused. Keep in mind that my book was eventually reviewed in most if not all of the major newspapers worldwide—except in the United States, where it was mentioned once in the *New York Times*. And when was that? When Yitzhak Rabin published his memoirs. Yitzhak Rabin was responsible for occupying my home town of Lydda, and for all of the killing that happened there, but the Israeli censors forbade him to publish that episode in his memoirs. In Israeli's defense, the *New York Times* wrote in a review that there would have been nothing new in such a recounting, since the matter had already been covered by Fouzi El-Asmar in *To Be an Arab in Israel*!

So when you approach the American media with ideas concerning Palestine, even if they are fresh and original, you will not be able to publish them. When Edward Said was active with Arafat, he got published all the time. When he turned against the Oslo peace agreement, all of that stopped. Once in a while, the media will ask Rashid Khalidi to write an article, or they will ask some other Palestinian to write an article, just to show that they are "objective." But when they publish an article by Khalidi, they'll always publish two or three articles from the Israeli side as a "counterpoint."

TG: So a major problem, then, for the Palestine solidarity movement is the inability to get the message out to each other and, more importantly, to the broader public.

FA: The message is out there. There's a difference between giving you the message and requiring you to look for it. The message can be found on the Internet if you look for it; if you find it, you get it. But Internet messaging is not necessarily conducive to people who aren't already interested. We want to reach the people who aren't interested, who are not already seeking this message. These people have to be given the message.

TG: What avenues do you think are open to making a difference with respect to this problem of media censorship? For example, is the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US perhaps more broadly based than the demonstrations in Israel discussed earlier? The American media has to a certain extent covered OWS, and even though its coverage has waned, the movement is ongoing. Is there a way for that people's movement possibly to provide an interventionist platform for disseminating the Palestine solidarity message?

FA: That's difficult to say. I think that the Israeli demonstrations have received more coverage in Israel than the Occupy Wall Street movement has received here, because the media there writes about that subject. *Ha'aretz* writes about it all the time, even *Ma'ariv* and *Yediot Ahronot* write about it—not a lot, but at least it's mentioned. You will rarely find any of these demonstrations mentioned in the US newspapers. The activities of the Palestine Solidarity Committee and of other groups advocating for Palestinian rights are also blocked here. One important exception is *Democracy Now!*—Amy Goodman—because she's interested in the world and believes in open journalism and free speech. I really don't know how we can solve this problem or, in turn, how best we can reach the mass majority of the American people. That's not an easy thing—and that's not the only problem.

I'll give you an example. We had to change the alarm system at our house, so we had two technicians come out, young people. One had an Italian name, so I asked him if he was Italian, and he told me he wasn't. Then he asked me, "Where are you from?" I replied, "I'm from Palestine. Do you know where Palestine is?" He said he didn't, so I asked him, "Do you go to church?" He said he did. Then I asked him, "Do you know where Jesus was born?" "Oh yeah, he was born in Nazareth." I responded, "First of all he wasn't born in Nazareth, but anyway, I was born in that country." He cried, "You were there?! You walked where Jesus was born?" All he was interested in was Jesus. He wasn't interested in the Palestinian problem. He didn't ask what "Palestinian" meant—but he was excited about Jesus. And he was bothered when I asserted that Jesus was a Palestinian. "No, he was a Jew!" I replied, "What do you mean? What are you?" "I'm a Christian." "What else are you?" "Oh," he said, "I'm an American." "So you are an American Christian—and there are American Jews, and Palestinian Muslims, and Palestinian Christians—and Palestinian Jews!" The point is that Jesus was born in Palestine, and therefore he was Palestinian! These are basic facts. How do you reach people like this—ordinary people—in order to explain to them that Palestine is not just about Jesus?

TG: You wrote your thesis on Hebrew children's literature regarding the commercial market for such books, but you did that as a scholar writing a dissertation. Do you see an opening in the educational system for discussing these issues, or is that arena also blocked?

FA: There is definitely a blockage. For example, the Palestinians in Israel have been attempting to hold commemorations of the 1948 catastrophe, or *Nakba*, for several years now, and they would like this event to be recognized officially by the state. But when Palestinians commemorate their catastrophe, it is Independence Day for the Israelis. Israel is very angry about this, especially insofar as the Palestinians who are insisting upon these commemorations are already the second- or third-generation of Palestinians born in Israel. So the Israelis have tried to block them officially with a law against memorializing the *Nakba*.

I'll tell you something. Six or seven years after my book on Hebrew children's literature was published, I returned to Israel to conduct some additional research, because the ugliest stereotypes in those books were of the Egyptian army and Egyptians in general, and I wanted to see if anything had changed in that respect in the years since the rapprochement between Egypt and Israel. Nothing had changed. No additional stereotypes were evident, but the image of the Egyptian in these story books had not improved. And it's still that way. The Arab history being taught to Palestinians in Israeli textbooks still omits a great deal. Richard the Lionhearted will be discussed for two or three pages, while only one page is devoted to Saladin. After all, the people who implement Israeli educational programs for Arab schools in Israel are largely Jews who emigrated from Arab countries. No, very little change has taken place in this respect. Some things may be discussed more openly now, but only because the Israelis have no choice. What with the Internet and television, it's much harder for them to hide what they are doing. But they keep trying. For example, some members of the Knesset are trying to pass a law forbidding anyone from running for the Knesset unless he or she serves in the army. Such a law would not only block out potential Palestinian candidates, it would also block out the religious people, some of whom are baffled because they often choose not to serve in the army anyway. Going back to the topic we discussed earlier, Israelis don't know how to separate religion from nationality. They can't.

TG: And they're exacerbating the conflict if they try to prevent the Orthodox, who only started joining the army in more recent years, from doing so. That suggests even more of an internal rift. Are these rifts within Israeli civil society and the political sphere advantageous for Palestinians?

FA: The Palestinians cannot take advantage of the situation properly. First of all, when it comes to the Palestinian problem, both the secular and the religious Jews are united. The secular Jews who support the settlements (colonies) are anti-Palestinian; otherwise they would be unable to justify their further colonization of Palestinian land. And the religious Jews have to be anti-Palestinian, because according to their belief, Palestinians occupy the land God gave to the Jews. There is a Hebrew expression, "To redeem the land": "We must redeem the land from the strangers and occupiers." Can Palestinians take advantage of that? It definitely works better for them when the Israelis are embroiled in internal struggles. But that's not enough.

TG: What about my earlier question regarding international solidarity, for example the boycott? What do you think about the potential of that effort?

FA: What is happening now is good. The international boycott, by which many European countries have refused to import merchandise produced by Israeli companies in the West Bank and so on—that's all good. The point, however, is to stop what Israel is doing. That's the problem

we are facing. You can certainly boycott Israeli products, but the Israelis will always find an avenue to market. I support all of these movements, and all of these voices. But we have to unify around a goal whose rallying cry is simply that Israel must stop what it is doing. That's it: Stop! You might put it like this: "We are going to *stop* all of our aid to Israel. We want to achieve peace in the region because of its global importance, its economic significance"—however you want to put it—"and if Israel doesn't *stop* what it's doing to the Palestinians, we're going to *stop* all of our aid to Israel." That's what we need.

TG: Do you think the United Nations is a body that could effectively help in this respect?

FA: No, no. Since 1948 and before, the United Nations has passed resolution after resolution, and nothing has changed. These resolutions cannot be implemented. That can only be done if pressure is placed on the United States, Europe, China, Russia—all of them.

TG: What about the recent Palestinian bid to the U.N. for statehood and national membership? Does that make any sense to you? Is that strategically effective?

FA: As I said, strategically this sort of thing is fine. I think the U.N. bid brought the problem to the forefront and pushed the Obama administration to reveal its true face—its ugly face. And it showed the world that Israel is not interested in peace. Nothing will stop Israel unless what it is doing is known to the world. Look what happened with UNESCO. What would it have meant for UNESCO not to have accepted the PLO as a member? UNESCO is not just a tourist group, is it? I don't think the United Nations wants to—or can—do anything about the Palestinian issue, unless, as I said, it is pushed. You can't pass any anti-Israeli resolutions in the Security Council. You just can't, there's no way.

TG: You have published several books on the subject of various solutions to the conflict—two-state, one-state, debates over that issue—for example, the general position outlined in *Towards a Socialist Republic of Palestine* (1978), co-authored with Uri Davis and Naïm Khader. Recognizing that there is indeed so much media censorship of genuine public debate over this matter, one must also acknowledge that there is far more public discussion about solutions to the conflict today than ever before.

FA: Public opinion worldwide has reached the conclusion that the Palestinian problem must be resolved or else there's going to be a disaster. Iran now wants nuclear weapons because Israel has nuclear weapons. Israel refuses to demolish its nuclear arsenal so that the Middle East might become a nuclear-free zone. More Arab countries will probably try to obtain these sorts of weapons in the future. The United States is interested in developing its own arms industry, so it needs Arab money and so on. I have always thought, and still think, that the only solution to this problem is for one democratic secular state to be established in the region. My book with Uri Davis and Naïm Khader is all about a one-state solution, as is the follow-up book we published a few years later entitled *Debate on Palestine* [1981]. For a very short time, I thought that perhaps two states were a practical first step toward solving the problem. But then I realized two states were simply not feasible. Israelis are not going to accept two states, because their minority mentality prevents them from trusting a Palestinian state, however small as it might be.

TG: Is that like a victim mentality?

FA: It's not just a victim mentality. Israel has still not created a nationality. The Zionists thought that by bringing Jews to Palestine, they would create a nationality that had not existed previously. But when the Jews came to Palestine, they remained Ashkenazi, Sephardi, etcetera. These Jews prayed differently, they didn't even speak the same language, they learned Hebrew when they came to Israel—but it didn't matter. The Zionists could not create a people, they could not connect the people to the land—except through God. And that doesn't work for human beings. I'm here because I'm here? You have to have an organic connection. That's what I'm talking about. They don't. So is it any wonder that increasing numbers of Israelis are starting also to consider a one-state solution?

I believe that the one-state solution is more conceivable, more practical, than two states. With two states, the animosity between Israelis and Palestinians will continue. The Palestinian who was born in Haifa, or whose parents were born in Haifa, if you ask him after all these years, will still say he's from Haifa. If you don't allow him at least the right to go there—not that he or she will necessarily go—he will continue fighting. There are millions of such Palestinians outside Palestine and in Europe. And Palestinians in the United States also want the right to return. But Israel is worried that these people won't leave if they are granted that right—as is true for many of them. After all, if you've stolen something from me, shouldn't I be the one to decide whether or not I want it back?

That's the problem with the two-state solution. As I've said in lectures, if you have a Palestinian state, it doesn't mean you've solved the Palestinian problem. The Palestinian problem has more dimension than just statehood. It's very simple. I was there in 1948 when the state of Israel was declared. Within 24 hours, I went from being in the majority to being in the minority. 24 hours! A week or two later, I went downtown (I wrote about this in *To Be an Arab in Israel*), and I saw empty stores, empty houses, all the goods were gone. And what about the money that was in the banks? What about the gold that was there? What about all that property? This wasn't a land without people. It was a country with people living in it! You cannot just say, as the Israelis do, "You ran away, you decided to leave, we won because we won." That will not solve the problem. One state, however, could solve, or would be a good step toward solving, the problem. We have examples in the world—Belgium, for example, and Switzerland—which comprise more than one nationality. In that case, of course, Israelis will have to decide upon their nationality, too.

TG: If the Palestinian question has more dimension than just statehood, why did the prospect of having a state become so important for so many Palestinians?

FA: The Palestinian question has more dimension than statehood in light of the rights which the Palestinians lost. That's important. Let's put it this way, and with respect to another dimension. Israel will not recognize the refugee problem. It simply doesn't want to acknowledge that the Zionists committed a crime in 1948. They committed a crime! In my home town, I saw them with my own eyes kicking and yelling, "Yalla, yalla alla Abdallah!" (Go! Go to King Abdallah!) They don't want to acknowledge that. They do not want to admit that they committed an injustice against humanity. They say, "We Jews don't do that." They cannot deal with this fact.

And that makes Palestinians very angry. “Wait a minute,” they say, “What do you mean? This happened to me, to my father, to my grandfather. I still have the key to our house!” This dimension has to be addressed, but the question is how. If you create one state and give the Palestinians a chance—“You want to live in Jaffa? Okay, go live in Jaffa! Buy a house! We will compensate you for your loss.” That’s what Germany did for the German Jews after World War II, even if some of them chose to immigrate to Israel or elsewhere. If the house was still standing, the state gave it back to the dispossessed persons. And if it wasn’t still standing, compensation monies enabled them to buy a new house. That solved the problem.

TG: Why then would so many Palestinians want to sacrifice that dimension in order to have a state?

FA: I’m a Palestinian, I talk with them, I read their writing. Some of them think that if this is all we can get, we should grab it. That’s okay, but if you ask them if that will put an end to the struggle, they say it won’t. That was Arafat’s philosophy: Get what you can, and let the new generation continue. Continue what?! If you sign an agreement, how can you continue any differently?

TG: In the face of the contradictions and the frustrations and the blockages by the media of public discourse on the question of Palestine, what about the proliferation of Palestinian culture internationally, which has been occurring very slowly for perhaps the past thirty years? We have seen it grow and grow: novels, films, poetry. You have written several collections of poetry, for instance *The Wind-Driven Reed and Other Poems* (1979), begun during your administrative detention in Israel. What is your view on the role of culture in the Palestinian struggle?

FA: That’s very important, and the Israelis have understood that from the beginning, which is why they started stealing our culture. So now you see “Israeli falafel” in the stores. How could someone who came from Poland or Russia know anything about hummus or falafel or foul? Of course they didn’t! And then there’s embroidery. Perhaps you are aware of a new book just published by Hanan Munayyer, a 554-page history of Palestinian embroidery containing hundreds of illustrations. It shows how each Palestinian village, each town, has a different design pattern, which the Israelis have tried to present as part of their own culture. The Israelis know how important culture is.

Palestinian culture is more well-known than any other aspect of Palestinian society, especially to people who live in the Middle East. We have produced a great deal of poetry, for example poems, including mine, which have been translated into many languages, as well as novels—Ghassan Kanafani’s and so on—to the extent that an Israeli theater just presented Kanafani’s play, *Return to Haifa*, and even brought the production to Washington, DC. Palestinian culture is more active and influential than ever—but only for a certain class that is interested in such things. The United Nations, with the assistance of Amnesty International, published a collection of poetry from around the world, entitled *Sing Freedom* (ed. Judith Nicholls); two of my poems are included. Another poetry collection, *Breaking Free* (ed. Robert Hall), focuses on human rights poetry and includes several Palestinian poems. Also noteworthy is the recent *Palestinian History in Postage Stamps*, published by the Institute for Palestine Studies and compiled by Nader Abuljebein in both Arabic and English, which contains hundreds of images of Palestinian stamps

as well as stamped letters and postcards sent to and from Palestine prior to 1948. We Palestinians can lay claim to all of that, and although the Israelis keep trying to block us, they are not succeeding as much as they have succeeded in blocking other areas of Palestinian life. We have painters that...

TG: There's a relatively new book out by Kamal Boullata regarding Palestinian painters.

FA: Kamal Boullata also published a book about Rashid Hussein, the Palestinian poet. But as I said, these works are meant only for a certain class and not for the general public. The general public is consuming more and more of what the Israelis are providing—"Israeli falafel," "Israeli hummus," and the embroidery patterns re-made by Israelis. By the same token, I think it's important to point out that some Israeli writers born in Palestine, for example Amos Oz, cannot help themselves when they write. They *have* to refer to Palestinian culture and convey their sense of it. And their writings are distributed around the world. That's probably why I'm more comfortable with this aspect of Israeli expropriation than with the other aspects; there's a reason the Israelis have taken up Palestinian culture. More recently they have taken up additional aspects: "Israeli couscous," "Israeli tabouli." But when it comes to the real core of Palestinian culture, the Israelis are a failure. In the Arab world, Palestinian writers and poets are at the top of the list—Arab writers, too. And now, thanks to their UNESCO membership, the Palestinians are going to request that Israel return some of the old paintings it stole from Palestinian museums.

TG: Another aspect of the Israeli co-optation of Palestinian culture is *hasbara*, the propaganda movement to paint Israel internationally as "the only democracy in the Middle East," through films and of course through all of the culinary, artistic, and literary culture you've mentioned. I always think about your work on Hebrew children's literature when I watch contemporary Israeli films that claim to represent Palestinians faithfully, because one finds in them pervasive stereotypes. As more and more people internationally view these films, they get a false sense of what Palestinians are like, and what Palestinian life is all about—it's largely propaganda.

FA: The Israelis try to compete by coming up with their "own" traditions and fashions, but none of these have been very successful. They even tried to compete with Palestinian pottery and couldn't. Moreover, there is now a Palestinian theater in Israel which recently took first prize in a major national contest. There are also many Palestinian-Israeli film actors—for example Mohammed Bakri, who the government is now trying to prevent from being cast in a particular role. (A critical op-ed about this in *Ha'aretz* stated that the Minister of Education has no education!) In sports, every Israeli team has at least two or three Palestinian members. Palestinian Israelis have also begun to publish their own newspapers and magazines. There's *Nazareth Journal*, the first Palestinian-Israeli women's magazine, and another magazine which focuses on economics. So the Palestinians in Israel are developing—we should remember that they are developing inside Israel under a lot of pressure not to, but they are doing it.

TG: Do you have any advice for creative young people today who wish to advance the cause of Palestinian liberation by bringing culture into the Palestine solidarity movement?

FA: I think that when somebody wants to influence another person, he or she should talk to their mind. Nothing can talk to the mind of a human being better than culture. You might present a

poem written by a Palestinian when he was in jail, for example, or about his house or his field, or about his beloved—something that shows Palestinians as normal people, as human beings. I think these and other aspects of Palestinian culture should be represented everywhere, wherever you go. It's always nice if you begin a political lecture with two or three lines from a Palestinian poem, or a saying by a Palestinian writer, or if you show a video about Palestinians—things like that will help.

Dr. Terri Ginsberg received her doctorate in Cinema Studies from New York University. She taught most recently at Rutgers University and is presently a Board member at [The International Council for Middle East Studies](#), a new think tank based in Washington, DC.