

Kenizé Mourad



OUR SACRED LAND

Voices of the Palestine-
Israeli Conflict



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O N E W O R L D
O X F O R D

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INTRODUCTION

Although I have been a journalist specialising in the Middle East, particularly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, for over 15 years, I decided long ago not to write a book on the subject. It is almost impossible to deal with an issue on which passions run so high without accusations of anti-Semitism from some quarters and anti-Arab racism from others.

Recent events in the region demand that this silence be broken. Great human tragedies concern everyone and this is also a struggle for justice and for rights: the right of the Israelis to live in peace and the right of the Palestinian people not only to exist but also to live in their country, at a time when Israeli leaders talk of forced exile.¹

Shutting our eyes and remaining tightly enclosed in our own selfish viewpoint entails the risk of terrible consequences. The Palestinian situation is a time bomb, yet we allow it to grow ever more inflammatory. Not only the Middle East but the whole western world – accused of bias and hypocrisy – is in danger of exploding.

We are on the brink of a wave of unprecedented terrorism that no one and nothing will be able to stop, unless we act now. Whatever we are told, terrorism will never be contained by police or military action: the only solution is to address its causes. Distancing ourselves from acts of terrorism by calling them acts of madness or fanaticism is not an option. Many Israelis understand that the more Palestinians are killed by Sharon's soldiers, the more suicide bombers are created.

I wanted to avoid political analysis and interviews with the powers that be. I went into the region to give voices to 'ordinary people': men, women, children, Palestinians, Israelis. In setting down their stories and those of their parents, some of whom had survived the concentration camps and others who had been forcibly ejected from their villages in Palestine and taken in by refugee camps, I wanted to understand their needs, their concerns and their sense of the present situation.

I wanted to understand the narrowing of Israeli popular opinion. Israelis supported the Rabin–Arafat agreement, with its goal of peaceful coexistence, but have now embraced the Sharon-led extremists who reject the idea of an independent Palestinian state. The Israeli people have been persuaded that Palestinians want an end to the Israeli state. They live in the irrational terror of reliving the nightmare of the Holocaust – when in reality they possess one of the most powerful armies in the world and face an onslaught of nothing more than stones, a few rifles and the tragic human bombs.

I wanted to understand the bitterness and fear of the Palestinians, who are convinced that the Israeli government lied to them, never had any intention of giving them their own country and is simply waiting for an opportunity to destroy them so that it can finally realise its dream of a ‘Greater Israel’. I wanted to understand their revolt in the face of the proliferation of new colonies and the misery of a population forced into poverty by a system of expropriation, curfews and checkpoints. I wanted to understand the despair that leads to extremism.

During my time there, I was filled with the sense that every encounter was weighed down by a terrible misunderstanding. Manipulated by extremists at either end, most of the people whom I interviewed were convinced that the other side wanted to annihilate them.

To understand what is going on, one has to have waited for hours behind a checkpoint, in the scorching heat, amid lorries of rotting vegetables and stalled ambulances, listening to mothers pleading with implacable, sometimes mocking, soldiers to let their sick child through; one has to have seen the father turning away to weep for his eight year old son, killed while running after an escaped chicken; or the little boy paralysed in a hospital bed, explaining that he was on his way back from school when three soldiers ‘shot him for fun’. One has to have seen Orit, a young Israeli woman whose sister was killed in a suicide bombing, bravely holding back her tears and repeating implacably: ‘You don’t understand. They don’t want peace; they want to destroy us’. Palestinians such as Samira, Etedel and Leila all said exactly the same.

I met also a minority on both sides who do not want peace, or who want it at the price of the other side’s total defeat: the Israeli groups for whom the West Bank should be part of Israel, because it was given to them by Yahveh and the Palestinian groups who want all the refugees to return home – to areas that for the most part are what now constitutes Israel – which would upset the demographic balance of the country and its rationale as the ‘Zionist’ state, created for Jews.

Equally, I met people on both sides who are actively militating for peace. Most Palestinians realise that, given the balance of power, compromise is the only realistic choice. Above all, they refuse to equate extremist Israeli governments with a people with whom they feel they could live peaceably.

On the Israeli side, I particularly wanted to give a voice to a minority from which one rarely hears, yet which represents hope for the Middle East: those few men and women who, in the face of everything, continue to fight for the rights of the Palestinians. They do so to enable not only a victimised people, but also their own country, to survive since they know that the policies of Sharon and his ilk are, ultimately, suicidal. They are also fighting, with a rare moral courage, for universal human rights. Indeed, in their own words, they are fighting to be different from those who have persecuted them over the centuries.

In this conflict, victory will be won only if each side agrees to certain compromises. Violence and war are futile. Those who achieve their objectives through such means do not maintain the upper hand for long. This land is too deeply anchored in people's hearts for a military solution to be anything more than ephemeral. Each new generation will take up the struggle, and ever more ruthlessly. As the killings and the suffering accumulate, the hatred grows deeper. Solutions have been proposed but we need the willingness to implement them and, above all, the generosity and the courage to make them work.

Note: I have changed the names of most Palestinian people and places, to protect those who agreed to tell their story. I sometimes did so even when people told me that it was not necessary because their life was so unbearable that they no longer cared if they lived or died.

A HOUSE DESTROYED THREE TIMES

I arrived in Jerusalem one evening in May 2002. From the balcony of my room I had a view of the old city, bathed in golden twilight. Behind the high crenellated walls, dating from the Ottoman period, I could glimpse the roofs of churches and large mosques, next to which fluttered the blue and white Israeli flag, stamped with the Star of David.

In the flaming sky, great flocks of skylarks darted and weaved in the dying light while the muezzin's call to prayer reverberated in the distance. Then, everything fell silent and, as the heady scent of jasmine began drifting across from the surrounding greenery, I felt cradled in the atmosphere of serenity and began idly to dream of the eternal Jerusalem, the city of peace, forgetting for a moment the fratricidal war that has raged here for centuries.

The following morning I have a meeting with Salim Shawamreh in east Jerusalem, on the lush, bougainvillaea-bedecked terrace of the American Colony. This ancient Palestinian complex, with its magnificent verandas and high windows with pointed arches, was taken over by an American community at the end of the 19th century and turned into a hotel over 50 years ago.

I know nothing about Salim other than that he is a member of an organisation that militates against the destruction of Palestinian houses, his own house having been destroyed three times. He arrives – a small, stocky man, his black, tightly curled hair framing a smiling face – apologising profusely for his lateness.

“I live in Kufr Aqab,” he explains, “a suburb of Jerusalem separated from the city by a military checkpoint. You often have to wait two or three hours to get through and sometimes, like today, it is completely closed. I had to drive across the hills, on small roads.”

“Why was it closed?”

“They’re frightened that something will happen; a child was killed this morning in Ramallah¹ during the curfew. Children have been killed every day for two years. The worst thing is that it has almost become normal ...”

Salim’s parents were farmers from Oum Shawaf, a village that they had to flee in 1948 when it was bombed by the army of the *Haganah*, a Jewish paramilitary organisation, created in Palestine in 1920, that became the Israeli army in 1948.

“My family managed to take a little money and some jewellery with them and came to live in old Jerusalem, where I was born. I remember a quiet town, where everyone in the area knew each other: we played in the street and every Friday we went to the al-Aqsa mosque. My father owned a café; we lived well. But in 1967, when the Israeli army occupied East Jerusalem, our café was confiscated and we became refugees again. We were five brothers and five sisters; I was 11 years old.

“Like thousands of others, we had to escape – soldiers were threatening to destroy the houses on top of us. We went to the camp at Shufat, where there were hundreds of other families who had had to leave. We were given two small rooms, in which we lived for years. My mother cried a lot ... You know, the dream of Palestinians who have lost everything and who live in the miserable conditions of these camps is one day to have a house and a decent life. We work, we put aside the tiniest sums so that we can save the necessary money and when we finally manage to build our house ... the Israelis destroy it!”

“But why?”

“Supposedly because we don’t have a permit. But they never give permits! I’ll tell you my story – although it’s only one of thousands ...

“Despite all the hardships, I spent my youth studying because I knew it was the only way out. In 1977, I got my qualification in construction engineering. After marrying a Palestinian cousin, also a refugee, I went to work in Saudi Arabia. Ten years later I came back with my wife and three children. I had money and I wanted a house for my family. I bought a piece of land in the village of Anata, three kilometres from the old city of Jerusalem.

1. Ramallah, 15 kilometres from Jerusalem, became one of the two Palestinian administrative centres (the other is in Gaza) after the return of the Palestinian Authority nine years ago. Situated at an altitude of 900m, it is a large town with a pleasant climate, attractive villas, blocks of flats and modern buildings that house the various ministries, including the Mouqata’a, where Arafat has his office.