



Reflecting on Palestine's grief, humour and steadfastness

Keynote Address
Karen Koning AbuZayd

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Cover: *A Palestinian woman collects wheat stalks during the annual harvest in a field in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, on April 28, 2015 (Apalmages)*

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Reflecting on Palestine's grief, humour and steadfastness

Keynote address delivered at the Palestine Book Awards 2015,
in London on 19 November 2015

Karen Koning AbuZayd



Karen AbuZayd was the Commissioner-General for UNRWA from June 2005 to January 2010.

Before joining UNRWA, AbuZayd worked for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 19 years. She began her humanitarian career in the Sudan in 1981, then Namibia in 1989, then to Sierra Leone during the Liberian civil war. She was the UNHCR's chief of mission in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war.

Keynote Address: Reflecting on Palestine's grief, humour and steadfastness

I am very honoured - indeed thrilled - to have been asked to speak at Middle East Monitor's Palestine Book Awards this year. What a pleasure to be able to dwell on my long, fiercely held belief in the Palestinians, and in their struggle for a dignified independent statehood, as well as on my treasured memories from 10 years of living in Palestine. Please bear with me if many of my comments are Gaza-infused and occupied-territory influenced.

It was with immense pleasure that I read the superb - some humorous, some sad, some both, but, more important, thought-provoking, insightful, historical and beautifully expressed - books on the awards shortlist this evening. How glad I am to be offering remarks and not having to choose among these very special books, each profound and unique in its own way of describing the lives of, and life among, the Palestinians.

The entire Palestine mosaic is represented impressively by the authors. Each and every aspect that I grew to know and embrace, while heading UNRWA's programmes for Palestine refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, is touched upon in these works. The awe, the laughter, the tears, the admiration, the fury and the incredulousness; all of the many emotions that take hold of anyone who lives among Palestinians, and shares their pain and anger on one hand, and their pride and joyfulness on the other.

The reader (indeed, any observer) cannot but appreciate and applaud the Palestinian example of those oft-quoted characteristics of refugees everywhere - resilience and

steadfastness - along with their strength and achievements in the face of all odds.

I arrived in Gaza in the year 2000 as a long-time United Nations humanitarian officer, having worked in many refugee operations, across continents, with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and having been a long time contributor (at least since graduate school in the late sixties) to Palestinian causes. Surprises awaited me as I encountered first-hand what had been initially a supporter's, and later a refugee worker's, more distant view of the reality in Palestine and for Palestinians.

Expecting that I might find overseeing the administration of basic services - education, primary health and social services - routine after years of refugee emergencies, war zones and repatriations, I realised quickly how serious and complicated the political and financial demands on UNRWA actually were, particularly while trying to manage these activities under occupation. The work and the environment were anything but routine.

The occupation became the underlying and overriding menace, or threat, as I saw and felt it, to all that Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank - and, by extension, the Palestine refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon - and in the diaspora tried to do to live their lives in dignity, with some semblance of independence. Those in the occupied territory are controlled by an external, hostile power, and those displaced in camps in neighbouring countries, are accepted and tolerated, but are still known as refugees, or "the other"; even, I have to say, in Gaza. Both within and without Palestine, the Palestinian future, individually and collectively, is uncertain, and a longing for independence, a state of their own, prevails.

Occupation's debilitating and humiliating consequences can be appreciated only partially without living "under" it. The ever-present and often overwhelming challenges of being occupied present themselves only to the fully and truly occupied. Non-Palestinians who live in the occupied territory, particularly Gaza, are subjected to a more "diluted" restriction regime. We are able to "escape" periodically,

more or less as we choose. We experience only a second-hand version of the suffocating atmosphere, the frustrations, the wish to react furiously and protest angrily.

But these quite predictable “inclinations”, reasonable under the circumstances, produce unhappy consequences if allowed to erupt publicly. Proof of this is what is occurring now in the West Bank and Jerusalem, where children’s knife attacks are met with deadly force by soldiers’ guns. Child stone throwers are jailed, their homes destroyed and their families punished by losing jobs and travel permits. Demonstrators, *inside* Gaza, behind a fence, are (inexplicably) shot and killed by occupying soldiers *outside* the fence. Such actions would be unacceptable anywhere else in the world. They would provoke an outcry, a call for an investigation, a charge of violations of international law. However, Palestinians appear to be a people for whom rights may be violated with impunity.

I return frequently to the small copy of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that I carry with me everywhere, to be reminded that 67 years ago a grand list of 30 Articles (each one detailing a human right or group of rights), was agreed upon by that nebulous body, the “international community”. This list, admittedly aspirational, unfortunately bears little relation to the reality in much of the world today, and, I venture to say, is almost nowhere observed in its entirety. This may be an indictment on all of us, but for refugees and the occupied the consequences of non-observance are genuinely debilitating and depressing on a daily basis, as well as on the larger world stage.

Focusing only on the “freedom of movement” Article 13, in the Palestine context, one wishes to suggest that it should cover not only persons, but also goods and services. Imagine having to seek permission for every move, with regard to where you can go, when and for how long; where you can live; what goods are available to you, and what quantity (even to the daily caloric intake level) you are allowed to access. Contemplate being ill, and not being “permitted” to seek medical treatment; or receiving a scholarship to study abroad or an external job offer, and being

unable to accept either, without the arbitrarily granted approval to cross an artificially-created border.

Rhetorical points, perhaps, but ones that reflect actual situations, and are finally being asked more frequently and genuinely, I believe (and hope) by an increasing number of observers, analysts, academics and, perhaps more importantly, even by some governments. One may have to devote a large dose of serious research time, though, or be on the right list to find informed answers or honest analyses or, what one hopes for most, proposals for action.

We are fortunate in the context of the Palestine Book Awards to be able to immerse ourselves in seven outstanding books that address our thirst for answers and information on the issues I mention. From a variety of perspectives, we are presented, in the most lively and compelling way, with the knowledge (and emotion - an essential adjunct to the facts) that we need to begin to understand and to empathise with the Palestinian experience, provoking, therefore, an impetus to action.

It is fascinating how the very different viewpoints and styles of the authors, being honoured so deservedly at this event, blend together to offer a true and complete picture of Palestine and Palestinians, through the ancient and current history and politics of Gaza and Jerusalem; through the eyes and acts of a doctor, a child, a son; from a war diary; and from pictures and graphics and a splendid collection of photographs over the centuries.

To read the books by these authors is to become one with the everyday lives, tribulations and triumphs of Palestinians today, sometimes one Palestinian. A reader discovers - and feels - what it has meant to be a Palestinian over past decades, even in past centuries. The striving and acceptance, the feistiness and resignation, the successes and failures, desires and disappointments are all portrayed in one or another of the volumes, from their individual vantage points.

What spirit, what determination, is on display among Palestinians



who do not give up, who are diligent and tireless in their intentions to make the best of their constrained world, to succeed to the limits - and beyond - of what is available to and for them.

In “Baddawi”, told so poignantly through pictures and dialogue which make refugee life “come to life” and easy to understand and believe in (and with a helpful glossary!); in “Vanished”, so sad, but so clearly evocative of life in Gaza; in “The Drone Eats with Me”, how frighteningly real, but told with a hint of humour, and again, so true to life and what it means to try to survive beneath the droning of the drones, and to try to reply to your children’s unanswerable questions about “when is this going to end?”; in “Chief Complaint: A Country Doctor’s Tales of Life in Galilee”, a glimpse, or rather many glimpses, into life over the years as a Palestinian inside Israel, based on the ailments of the doctor’s patients.

The two rich historical volumes on Jerusalem, “Jerusalem Interrupted: Modernity and Colonial Transformation, 1917-present” and “Gaza: A History”, both full of in-depth analysis plus facts and figures, valuable even for this reader who has so far only skimmed parts of each one. Finally, “The Palestinians: Photographs of a Land and Its People from 1839 to the Present” is an exquisite treasure to show what has been and could be.

In each of these volumes, one comes to understand better what Palestinians have faced, and continue to face, on a daily basis, and to agonise, as well as to celebrate, along with the residents of Palestine today. One might ask how much longer they must wait

to regain, or retain, their land, slowly being eroded by so-called legally condoned confiscation; when will they be able to exercise sovereignty over their own territory?

In the struggle for national and individual dignity, decisions must be made about drawing the line between striving for what may be unrealistic at this moment, and making the most of existing facts on the ground. The real “culprits” have to be identified; those who have physically taken over the land as well as the (powerful) external actors who allow, even encourage, the usurpers to engage in more and more unjust and destructive behaviour. Both deserve to be confronted, but the where and how has to be carefully thought out.

Today’s stones and knives are not weapons of choice, but used because no others are available to them, certainly none as lethal as those held by the oppressors. They, in fact, may be more effective, or at least more visible and striking, however negatively viewed by some, than speeches and resolutions at the United Nations or the Arab League.

Palestinians need to know who their friends and supporters are; who understands and values their view of history; and who acknowledges the need to affirm their rights. The Palestinian right to exist is ignored by some, rejected by others, particularly in “the West”, and, more particularly, in my own country, whose decision-makers are in thrall to the occupiers. However, this state of “neglect” (or denial, or ignorance) is beginning to change, albeit slowly. Palestine is now an Observer State at the United Nations. Its flag is flying outside UN Headquarters in New York, alongside those of other nation states.

I don’t pretend to have an answer about how best to address the injustices that Palestinians suffer, even less so after having watched the deterioration of conditions for Palestinians over the years during and since I lived in Palestine, where even the attempts to provide decent, basic services to the refugees meets resistance from many quarters.

The primary cause which preoccupies and is so harmful to Palestinians, continues to be denied by, or is invisible to, outsiders; those who could and should be challenging the legitimacy and behaviour of the occupying power.

Still, hints of solutions can be found in the books before us this evening; or at least explanations of how Palestinians survive, and thrive, despite the inhuman oppression of occupation and the decades-long history of loss. The authors remind us of a history of a proud and capable people. They demonstrate the grief and the humour, but most of all, the steadfastness with which Palestinians view their lives and their future.

Having worked with other refugees for nearly 20 years before joining UNRWA, and now as a Human Rights Commissioner on Syria, I am aware of the reactions from and toward those who have been forced to flee their homes to escape war and persecution. There is no refugee population whose exile, as an entire nation, has persisted as long as the Palestinians, suspended as they are in a stateless bubble, prevented from exercising full political rights, and blocked in their attempts to achieve economic and political independence.



We all know many, *many* Palestinians who have overcome their existential circumstances and are making their way successfully in the world, both from and beyond their original homes or places of exile, not least the authors with us here this evening. Such achievements are also evident inside Palestine, as was noted during a visit last month to Palestine by a new board I am part of: Americans for a Vibrant Palestinian Economy. Those who were first time visitors to the West Bank were astonished at the energy and ideas and positive, “go-getting attitudes” of the Palestinians they met. These Palestinians deserve our praise and congratulations for their efforts and fortitude, but their achievements are not easily availed by many (dare I say most?) of the five million refugees who remain in the occupied territory, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and even many in the further diaspora, who still long for their land, their culture, their history and their fulfilment in an independent state of Palestine.

The authors here tonight do not dwell on despair or hopelessness - or when these attitudes are described, it is to demonstrate how they develop - or carry the promise of changing into defiance and resistance, into survival, accomplishment and progress. This is certainly true today in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and is becoming more evident to others, even in my own country, where politicians and the media are overwhelmingly eager to show that they are “standing firm” with, and willing to arm and finance, the occupying power to an extraordinary and unwarranted extent. For too long, in many arenas there has been only one side to the Palestinian story, one without nuances. It is a struggle to get an audience to listen to an explanation about the motivations for stone throwing by young boys or for challenges to the use of lethal force in these confrontations. And I have been struck by the absence of anyone asking for a justification for shooting to kill demonstrators on the other side of a fence, which might as well be a wall.

Above all, it is difficult to get decision-makers to understand that granting Palestinian rights may make a difference in the Middle East, the region described, above all others, as being in chaos and

a threat to its neighbours and beyond. If they do understand, there seems to be no motivation to take action (other than to bring out the planes and bombs) or even to speak out.

Surely justice for Palestinians could relieve many of the stresses causing conflicts that produce millions of refugees today, and which result in the need for multiple humanitarian appeals for billions of dollars from those countries who would do everyone a service by addressing the root causes of refugee flight instead.

A free Palestine, where Palestinians are masters of their own land, their own state, should be the wish of every person who believes in justice and abhors war and conflict; and beyond suggesting a mere wish, to appeal instead for a pledge to work with Palestinians who are best placed to know how to define their own struggle and to know what is needed most to enhance their efforts to address their future. The authors here tonight are to be admired and congratulated for their contributions to these efforts.

So, thank you, authors, and thank you, audience, for joining us for this important, and, as we strive to keep hope alive, propitious moment and event.

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