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A German Palestinian Identity

Anis Hamadeh, speech script, May 30, 2005

Translated from German

There are many people who live with **two cultures** or more. It is even possible to argue that most everybody descended from the culture of the mother and the one of the father. It often happens that people confront themselves with their respective cultures, grinding and harmonizing them, in order to be able to live with both of them at the same time.

When you are **German and Palestinian** this is basically the same as everywhere where two things get together. Only that the history of Germany and the history of Palestine in the 20th and 21st centuries in major parts belong together. The genocid of the Jews had immediate effects on the country of Palestine and the prevailing Zionist policy there.

Flagrant are the differences of associations between the German word „**Juden**“ and the Arabic word „**Yahuud**“, although both words should mean the same thing: Jews. On the one side there is the perpetrator's trauma of the concentration camps, on the other side the victim's trauma of loss of land and freedom. Both is linked to this word which in two languages evokes so different images.

A person who carries these two things inside will either discard the **perpetrator/victim stereotypes** or will become schizophrenic and live with a split personality, because one person alone cannot solve this fundamental contradiction. This German Palestinian contradiction shows, for example, in the so-called **two narratives**, i.e. ways to see the history of the country with the capital Jerusalem. People who have both a German and an Arab identity are forced to unite the two narratives for themselves into one story, in order to find a meaning between the two versions of the Jewish land and the Arab land, respectively. They are forced to confront themselves with issues which are hardly tackled in the society, or with reluctance. They cannot be content with the conclusion that there are two points-of-view, for what else does that mean than that there is war?

At these active questions I arrived relatively late, intensively only about three years ago, when there was an **incident in Jenin** in the Westbank. Since then, I have increasingly analyzed this conflict and integrated it into my artistic work. And since this time also the context of my own identity and the problem of the two narratives is entering my awareness. So I reconsidered my own personal experiences in respect to the two narratives and in the following want to give a short account about this.

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My first conscious memory of the German Jewish narrative is connected with a **documentary film about the concentration camps** which was shown in my high-school in Oelde in Westfalia. We were brought into the auditorium and, more or less unprepared, were shown the pictures of horror. I did not understand the situation. The film was important for me, indeed, but I felt left alone with these pictures. I did not realize yet that people in Germany and everywhere had and have so much difficulties with dealing with guilt and feelings in general. Afterwards the lessons went on. The lessons went on, this is not a reproach, they had to go on, only that from that day on something like a secret was in the air, something that stood between me and others. It was in the school-days, I started to get

interested in Ghandi, ML King and Hermann Hesse and always came back to questions of German history.

The father of my mother was a German soldier in the war, he came from Koenigsberg and fled during the war with his family to Hamburg where he began a career as a civil servant and involved himself in protestant church work. He used to write reader's letters to the conservative newspaper "Die Welt" (and possibly still does). **World War II** was hardly ever a subject for discussion in our family. Much later I realized that this was a typical German constellation. There has always been an accompanying silence, similar to the mentioned film in school.

And the **Palestinian elements** in my life? I know Falafil, Hoummus and fuul since my earliest childhood, other dishes, too, which I rediscovered in Palestine later and which are served on every party where Palestinians gather. The famous olive oil from home. I had also learned some bits of Arabic. Then there was the somewhat kitschy wall carpet showing beduins on a camel (it is somewhere in the cellar today) and the huge photograph of Jerusalem in my parents' living-room. A couple of souvenirs. There were – as I would say in retrospective - also other things, only that I did not have names for them at that time.

There certainly are **individual ways of dealing with cultural identity** in children from two distant cultures. My sisters, for example, showed little interest in the Arabic language, others from my university colleagues may have stronger Arab identities than me, when they listen to oriental music, have more Arab acquaintances and visit the orient often. In my case, the reflection on history, both the own and the one of the world, led to the awareness of my Arab and Palestinian identity. However, I would not call Palestine my home, because I have spent only little time there and my lifestyle is not exactly typical for the society there. The family, of course, is a piece of home, even though I have visited them only for few – but intensive - occasions and not in the recent past. I exchange emails with a cousin of mine and recently heard about a small cultural initiative, which I would like to support in the future, in the village of my family near Jenin in the occupied West Bank.

The first time I talked to an **Israeli soldier** was when I was about 19. I was standing at a wadi with a small group of tourists when somebody tried to start a conversation with me. The intention was friendly, the man just wanted to exchange some words. I said to him: "Please, I do not want to talk to Israeli soldiers." At that he shrugged and went away. I don't like armed people too much, anyway. But in this case it was about the army which held the village under occupation where my father comes from. In this time I was not even ready for a dialogue. "al-Yahuud" said the people from the village and meant the occupying power. Why didn't they say „al-Isra'iliyin“, the Israelis? Because it has too many syllables? This might well be a reason. Another reason is that there are also Arab Israelis, but these are not meant. It is about the Jewish state which is so defined in the Israeli self-understanding, too.

With **armed Palestinian groups** I never had contacts, but once in the eighties translated some recordings of video interviews with the "Black Panthers", an autonomous Palestinian mini militia. It was a "Spiegel TV" documentary. The Panthers were a mixture of Rambo-like appearances and hooded citizens. It was impossible for me to identify with them, even if it is also impossible for me to denounce the combat of Israeli occupation soldiers. It is a different case with civilians, international law makes clear distinctions here. A difficult case are the illegal Jewish settlers on Arab territory, because they have a similar political-strategic and also militant approach in many things and at the same time they have children who also live in the settlements.

Some time after my encounter with the Israeli soldier I met the Palestinian farmer **Ibrahim** who lives in the 48 area, i.e. the state territory of Israel (noting that "state territory" is not quite the proper word as Israel has no really defined borders.) Ibrahim also spoke Hebrew and had

Jewish acquaintances some of whom I had the chance to see. It was difficult for me then to understand how such contacts could work out at all.

Much later, in 2003, I made the acquaintance of two Jewish musicians, the **Duo Rubin**, Ithay Khen and Gabriella Gonda-Khen, who had initiated a concert tour Shalom Salam for which they were looking for a Palestinian counterpart and found me. This project is still running and, among other things, made me explore my national identities further. The Duo Rubin had been in Leipzig for several times and many of you in the audience here will still have musical memories of the couple from the Chomsky opening speech. The encounters with the Duo Rubin have inspired me to write some **texts**, among them the 100 pages online report: "Kings We are, with Wings of Dust. Memories of the Shalom-Salam tour" from August 2004.¹ Recently, two literary stories were completed, they also are online in German and English.² It is important to mention in this context that the Duo Rubin and me have not solved the conflict among us yet, but we are **searching** for genuine and lasting peace ourselves.

It is rather not a romantic image of Palestine that I have. Even without the occupation there would not be everything alright there. Patriarchal structures are alien to me and I have a concept of freedom which also makes me question many patterns of behavior which I know from Palestine and from exile Palestinians. This concerns certain religious ideas as well as issues of education. In order to understand what Palestine means I am working on the website **www.virtual-palestine.org**. Via a map one can click into districts and villages and follow local links. A main aspect of the website is features about cultural activities and works by artists.

Conflict research has for years been a strong motivation for me to newly think about Palestine, Germany and Israel and this task has always led me to look inside myself. Not (or hopefully not) out of narcissism, but because the course of research systematically pointed in this direction. This is my experience, others might have made different experience. My conclusions accord for example with the ones of pacifist **Avigail Abarbanel**, psychotherapist and former soldier in the Israeli army who since 1991 lives in Canberra, Australia. On her homepage <http://avigail.customer.netspace.net.au/> there is a sentence which I regard to be centrally important in this context: „I believe that people who know that they have been hurt have a duty to heal themselves so that they do not hurt others.“ Avigail Abarbanel here speaks on the background of her personal experiences. As she arrived at this conclusion in her own life she consequently became political.

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As a Palestinian German I am, of course, also confronted with the **commitment of Germany to Israel**. Our foreign minister recently wrote about it in a prominent place: "This commitment is unlimitedly and conditionlessly valid, it is not negotiable and builds the basis for the special relationship of our two countries."³ A problem, which people do not really seem to be aware of, is that such an absolute commitment violates both the human rights and international law if it is taken to justify occupation, killings, illegal settlements, theft of land and the like. Moreover, unlimited and conditionless lump commitments to states point to an atavism which basically seemed to have been mastered with the introduction of democracy in Germany. But people in the Weimar period may have thought the same thing, I don't know. Especially because of the German history such concepts worry me, likewise the comparable chancellor's word of the "unconditioned solidarity" which he uttered in the evening of September 11, 2001. This is an example for the fact that I, as a Palestinian German, cannot

¹ The report: „Kings we are, with Wings of Dust. Memories of the Shalom Salam Tour“ is online in two languages at www.anis-online.de/1/orient-online/koenige/eintro.htm.

² "Some Cannot Forget, Others Cannot Remember", April 2005: www.anis-online.de/1/ton/15e.htm and „Victims Who Turned to Perpetrators“, Mai 2005, www.anis-online.de/2/literatur/samir/02e.htm

³ Joseph Fischer, "Eine große Chance für unser Land. 40 erfolgreiche Jahre deutsch-israelische Beziehungen." Das Parlament Nr. 15 / 11.04.2005: www.das-parlament.de/2005/15/Thema/004.html

really develop trust in my country, i.e. Germany. A second important point in this context is the question **which Israel** is referred to, at all. Is it the Israel of the United Nations or the romantic, glorified Israel? What exactly is protected when the talk is about "Israel"? At any rate, occupation and the juridical distinction between Jews and non-Jews do not belong to the right of existence of the State of Israel or any other state.

In his topical position paper Herr Fischer mentions a "war of terror against Israel" which allegedly has emerged from the Palestinians before Abbas's rule. With my name and with my background I certainly notice that Palestinians, also Arabs and Muslims are quite often regarded with a certain suspicion. And how could it be different when there are such unlimited commitments? Because of my descent on the one hand and the German all-inclusive commitment to the State of Israel, on the other, I might be something like a "you can never know" person or at least have to defend myself against this latent accusation which is being posed to Arabs and Muslims in general. Herr Fischer says in the same source: „The important thing is to observe with great vigilance how our Jewish citizens and their communities in Germany factually feel. Their concern about a new increase of anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes, utterances and acts of violence, and their concern about **unjustified or one-sided criticism of Israel** must not leave us untouched."

It sounds considerate what is expressed here, but the **other side of the medal** is that, for example, students' grants can be canceled when these students participate in Palestine conferences or when they are critical of the human rights violations in Israel. Two such cases from 2004 are personally known to me and in both cases I did not have the impression that they would be suspicious persons. In politics, too, suspicions, which lead to the exclusion of participants of the discourse, are known. Also the fact that the present speaker writes so much and publishes it online does have to do with his wish or need, respectively, to protect himself because of his descent and weltanschauung. There are, for example, groups in Germany which systematically look for deviant people in the name of Israel and who make reports for press, ministries and security institutions where apparently they are listened to closely, a circumstance which cannot surprise much, when we consider the mentioned commitment to Israel.

A common way to launch such a campaign is the **reproach of anti-Semitism**. In January 2004 I analyzed this reproach in the online study: "The Reproach of anti-Semitism in Critical Reflection"⁴ under consideration of about 400 press sources. One of the conclusions was that this reproach is brought forward in the context of Israel criticism almost every time. In other words: it always concerns the rights of Palestinians, too, without that the Palestinians have to be named. Insofar, and from my position I feel the responsibility to point to the fact that this kind of special relationship between Germany and Israel would not be possible to maintain without an adversarial Palestinian and Arab-Muslim role, at all.

Here is a topical example for such a conflict shift with the background that a family from **Nablus** in the West Bank attempts to use its contacts to **Nuremberg** for a city partnership, supported by Arab partners. Under the title "A Horrible Suggestion" the journalist Eldad Beck wrote in the Israeli daily newspaper *Jediot Acharonot* on May 11, 2005: "During the past days a horrible initiative has been launched: the PA and the Arab League promote a partnership between the 'capital' of terror in Samaria and Nuremberg in Germany, the city that formed one of the most important centers of the Nazi party."⁵

Ladies and gentlemen, can you understand me when I say that the German and Israeli publics sometimes make me feel oppressed? Nablus is an occupied city, human beings live there. I have been there several times, visited, among other things, a historical *hamam* (bath)

⁴ "Der Antisemitismus-Vorwurf in kritischer Betrachtung. Darstellung und Auswertung von Pressequellen. Studie zum Attac-Workshop „Semitismus/Nahost“ am 14./15.02.2004 in Hannover" (108 pp) at www.anis-online.de/1/essays/14.pdf, see English summary at www.anis-online.de/1/essays/14/14e.htm

⁵ Source: Nahostfocus.de, May 15, translated by the German Embassy in Tel Aviv

from the Ottoman era, used today as a pastry bakery. Why are such bad comparisons invented and Palestinians brought into a context with Nazis? For this is not an isolated case, it can be shown in the dozen. **But I don't want to be an enemy.** Not even in parts. And I also do not want Arabs and Muslims to have to carry the unresolved World War II on their shoulders, being brought into a context with Nazis as it unfortunately is happening in our societies.

At the same time, discriminations against Jews are taken more seriously than discriminations against non-Jews, as the Fischer quote above made clear. This leads, among other things, to the condition that extremist groups on the Jewish side can go much further than others without the possibility of making them responsible. A nonviolent group called the „Christian Peacemaker Teams“, for example, recently created an online photo study about **graffiti of Jewish settlers in Hebron**, graffiti which has not been removed by the authorities.⁶ There you can read mottos in English like “Kill all Arabs”, which belongs to the more harmless messages, for there is also the mentioning of gas chambers. Undisputedly, there is polemicism and aggression among Palestinian extremists. The danger, however, to be publically suspected because of such polemicism, exists on one side only.

In order to illustrate this imbalance I would like to mention my **encounters with Sami and with Latuff** on the internet about three years ago. Sami told me that he had left the Israeli army behind and showed me an anti-war poem that he wrote and that I found very telling and beautiful. Sami had gone to Switzerland and co-founded the organisation “Children of the Holocaust” there. To his work belong discussions with right-wing radicals who wish to get out of their groups, the writing of texts and the participation in the public discourse. In this context, I received a mail one day which was about the discharge of a Brazilian image maker called Latuff. He had created an image series „I am Palestinian“ in which people are shown in situations of oppression, and all say: „I am Palestinian“⁷. A native American says it to a US American, a Tibetan to a Chinese, and five other constellations. Among them a Jewish boy in the Warsaw ghetto. It was because of this image that “Children of the Holocaust” had complained and lost. In his newsletter mail Sami complained about it. In this situation I solidarized with Latuff⁸, not because he was standing on the Palestinian side, but because of his freedom of opinion. As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of Latuff's pictures which I do not like very much, when they are martial or drawing comparisons which I hold to be rather destructive in this form. Often, war is the subject of the pictures of the man from Rio, but it is always social justice he aims at. To cut or limit such a creative potential would be against all the principles which the democratic world has developed over the last centuries. The same Latuff drew the collection „Forgiveness“ a few months ago where Israelis and Palestinians are shown in situations of forgiveness. It is one of the most impressive manifestations of a will to peace that I have ever seen. You can see the pictures for example in Latuff's Room on Anis Online⁹.

⁶ see www.cpt.org/gallery/view_album.php?set_albumName=album03

⁷ see all pictures at www.sinkers.org/latuff/

⁸ see <http://palestinechronicle.com/story.php?sid=2002092700153681>

⁹ www.anis-online.de/1/rooms/latuff/index.htm



Now one could ask: why is Latuff allowed to let a boy from the Warsaw ghetto say: „I am Palestinian“, while Eldad Beck may not bring Nablus and Nuremberg into a context? My answer to this is that Mister Beck may bring into a context whatever he wants, only that he does it in an important Israeli newspaper brings the issue onto another level. Besides, he is purely associatively suggesting a context between Nazis and Palestinians while Latuff created a dramaturgic context between oppressed Jews and oppressed Palestinians. But however we individually may judge in such cases, clear is that in a pluralism everybody will also be confronted with things that do not please and require tolerance. Especially when old wounds of the societies have not healed yet or when the thorn is still there in the wound. Therefore, the dialogue is important, the sincere and goal-oriented dialogue, or rather **trialogue**, which is still missing among Germany, Israel and Palestine. The exclusion of participants of the discourse and other repressive measures may work, but are not the method to achieve social peace.

Comparable cases are common and can be observed all over the world. On May 20, 2005, Yahoo News reported about a poem on a Palestinian victim. This poem was in the choice of a Norwegian school exam as a text for analysis in a 20 pages collection.¹⁰ It was written by the Norwegian author Lillian Schmidt and the title is: „Nida al-Azzais – a Palestinian Pupil“. It describes a 14-year-old girl who was shot in 2002 in a refugee camp by Israeli soldiers. It ends with the words: „Nida, shot by Israeli soldiers, made me stop at last and see the violence. It made me take a stand. But how does this help her?“ The Israeli embassy commented on this case and insisted that it was important to offer different perspectives of the conflict and to be balanced. I think it is quite understandable that the Israeli embassy is enervated, but what does it do to settle the conflict? Is there an interest, at all, to settle the conflict? This aspect is under-represented in the discourse and missing.

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The danger of an unlimited solidarity with a state lies in the **ideologization of the discourse**. Not the properness of arguments stand in the center of the discussion, neither juridicial agreements, but solidarity stands above everything else. An example for this is the

¹⁰ http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20050520/wl_mideast_afp/norwayisrael_050520142924&printer=1

rubric “anti-Semitism articles” in the German press. It is a rubric with recurring patterns, topoi and warnings, easily recognized as a genre and firmly belonging to the media routine. This rubric always also concerns Palestinians, but they do not have a voice there, due to the consideration of the feelings of a heterogeneous victim group. The reason for my own lack of using the term “anti-Semitism” to denote the phenomenon of discrimination against Jews is that the concept is loaded with historical associations and thus biased. It is always referring to the Nazi time and it brings everybody, who is confronted with this reproach, close to the perpetrators of the genocide. The fact that a genuine mastering of the Nazi time has not yet happened can be viewed from this perspective, too. Then one might start to think about whether we are dealing with shifts and substitute conflicts which are performed in a ritual way to avoid the real conflicts and to delay their mastering. Like somebody who perpetually scratches a wound open in order to stay aware of the shock of its infliction. Concerning the anti-Semitism articles, they might be correct contentwise, but the genre indicates the involvement of an ideology, i.e. a methodical defense of unquestionable (dogmatic) truths which concern the fundament of social coexistence. The discursive reluctance in respect to the issue of ideologies might well be due to a general feeling of insecurity about how much acceptance ideologies may and should have in a democracy. Zionism beyond doubt is an ideology and Germany is in solidarity with it. Thus we have the question in our own house.

Now, when Palestinians say: “We don’t want to be your enemy and we also don’t want to live in oppression”, then this seems to be an **acceptable attitude**. Such people indeed exist and they are not just a few. It is astonishing that one hears so little about them in the public. Do they not fit into the scene in a country in which both the press and politics continuously emphasize the commitment to Israel instead of emphasizing human rights and international law which both were newly formulated and newly implemented after World War II as a consequence of the horrors? Or is the expectation that every single Palestinian has to become a pacifist and a moderate person before anybody from Palestine is listened to, at all?

This issue is important also because we are living in a time of **political sulking** endangering democracy. When politicians have but little credibility in the eyes of the society then this surely also has to do with the inconsistencies concerning international law and human rights. Some citizens have the impression that the state and the public do not systematically act according to criteria of justice and thus they find it hard to identify with them.

In order to solve the whole conflict it is necessary to **newly discuss the origins of the conflict**. Newly simply because all previous attempts have not led to peace. The main task is to bring the two narratives to a **sybiosis**, for a **common understanding of history** is the key for ending the conflict. This is by all means a concrete starting-point and it can serve as an orientation on every level. On the official level, for example, a textbook project could be called into being after the example of Germany and France in recent times. Concerning the history of the two countries they have used one single text which entered the respective textbooks in German and French.¹¹ In this way, the issues of conflict can be dealt with in a systematic way, because these issues will appear inevitably in such a project. Yet at the moment I do not see the necessary **readiness** in the societies I observe, the readiness to contribute to the systematic conflict appeasement and to take equal-righted peace as important as it is.

As an artist and scientist I have thus drawn the consequence to search for constructive **alternatives** and, at the same time, to confront society with things which in my view obstruct the dialogue. My hope lies in the belief that society does know that the situation is not

¹¹ see the article: „The Schoolbook Project“ from 2003 at www.anis-online.de/fdp/neueblaetter13.htm#newpages13.

satisfying. It knows that one cannot win a war against terror just like one cannot win a war against anti-Semitism or against evil as such.

Socrates said: „Nobody knowingly commits an injustice“ and he meant that the subconscious likes to fool us and to provide us with **justification strategies** so that we can assume to be innocent. But when over so many decades conflicts remain unresolved and society even gets to feel from different directions that there had been misplannings and misconceptions, then it is not constructive to cling to the past. Only the open and tolerant society can develop the necessary synergies to set things right again. Thus social trust has to be established and this seems to be one of the main difficulties. But to remain in the present social constellations would mean to narrow the own perception, to seal oneself off against certain subjects, issues and statements and thus to introduce a kind of final stroke. Yet in view of our history **there cannot be a final stroke**. It is often argued that we need visions in order to resolve the major conflicts. This thought misses the fact that such visions already exist and that it solely is a matter of faith and the will to realize feasible visions.