

Inexhaustible Memories of Palestine

A Book Review. Return: A Palestinian Memoir, by Ghada Karmi.

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It had been five years since I last ventured into the Occupied Territories, the shrinking Palestinian homelands. I had stood speechless at the misnomered separation wall, essentially a cement corral and a menacing blight on the landscape of the Holy Land.

I had seen the oasis of Jericho become barely more than an imposing hotel where peace conferees and aid agents hide in style from the peace they are unarguably not advancing.

I had witnessed how a simple crossroad, Qalandia, outside Jerusalem had become a fenced-in channel through which Palestinians waiting to be inspected by young Israeli guards are humiliated and delayed, only to sometimes be turned back.

I had noted increasing numbers of women covering themselves in colorless, suffocating garb. (What their message was and to whom it was addressed, I couldn't understand.)

I had found it embarrassing to revisit families living under occupation who'd earlier spent hours with me remembering martyrs and imprisoned sons, detailing routine violence by an encroaching Jewish population, the armed colonists, and explaining the unpredictability of Israeli military procedures.

[I had stood with neighbors gazing helplessly as a family's dwelling was demolished](#) by a three-story high Israeli bulldozer. I'd sat in a van with anxious Palestinians waiting to enter their homeland at the Jordan-Israeli border, watching in pained silence while happy travelers from a busload of American students casually tossed a football back and forth while their passports were processed.

Following the 1993 Oslo Accord—we can't call it a peace treaty — one might have glimpsed the tricolor Palestinian banner posted somewhere on the dry hills between the Allenby Bridge and Abu Dis at the entry to Jerusalem. By 2010, there was no sign of that flag, except perhaps one painted on that foreboding cement wall— on the Palestinian side.

Even with bleak news continually seeping from inside the occupation, even with the risks of reporting on Israel's suffocation and murders of Palestinians, I had promised a dear friend that I'd revisit her this winter. Laila remains there year after year. A psychologist, her skills are in increasing demand by the traumatized population.

Travelers not Palestinian can reach Ramallah and return to Amman in Jordan in one day. Within two days I'd be able to witness the latest changes, encroachments and destructions, and also pass an evening with Laila, this extraordinarily cheerful and resolute soul.

I never reached Ramallah, not physically. Resting after my arrival from Abu Dhabi at a friend's home in Amman, I picked up a newly published volume her book club had recently discussed, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*, by [Ghada Karmi](#). I knew the author's earlier work but I'd not expected this, her second memoir, to be so gripping.

There are numerous memoirs by Palestinians, most notably [Out of Place](#) by Edward Said, another by [his own sister](#), one by poet [Suheir Hammad](#), by [Randa Jarrar](#) and many others, now extending into three generations. (Most are in English, the majority by women.)

One wonders how many more impassioned, compelling chronicles we need to inform us of the ongoing drama and injustices in their homeland. Yet, opening the pages of this 'return' I found myself following Karmi's chronicle as if it were a crime story. (At one level it is a crime story.) Unlike many narrators of Israeli crimes, this book begins as an account of 'soft' crimes, those by Palestinian officials and the United Nations in complicity with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in their charade of possessing power and winning justice.

I myself had witnessed the gradual transformation of returned Palestinian leaders into a corrupt and impotent club of (mainly) men hanging out in Ramallah pretending to lead, but actually serving as front for independence, their putative authority extending no further than the boundary of this city of NGOs, foreign schools and upscale restaurants. I also witnessed diaspora Palestinians returning to Gaza City after 1993, investing in their forthcoming state, "a Mediterranean Hong Kong", only to depart within a decade, embittered and often more deeply religious, returning to homes in Austin, Texas and Brooklyn, New York.

Here was a well informed doctor and an experienced leader in the Palestinian diaspora coming to Ramallah not as a visiting correspondent, but with a prestigious insider's ID. Karmi left a medical career in London to take a job as a UN appointee in the PA's Ministry of Media and Communications. She was eager to join her compatriots, reasoning, "I would be at the heart of things, and would learn the inner workings of the institution that organized life in the Occupied Territories, although they were under Israeli control" happy she "would not join the host of marginal researchers, foreign experts and hangers-on who cluttered the numerous non-governmental organizations in the West Bank." That was 11 years ago, in 2005, when both Gaza and the West Bank were under the new PA. Surely as a Palestinian born in Jerusalem to a well regarded family, a longtime activist for justice and statehood, Karmi had reason to be optimistic.

"What the hell was I thinking of?" is the opening line of the first chapter of *Return* uttered as her plane was touching down. This trip would be the culmination of many visits to Karmi's mythical homeland. Her misgivings and evidence of a doomed mission on her first day at work aside, Karmi persisted, perhaps deciding early on that this could at least be the basis of another book, although this memoir appeared in 2015, a full decade after the assignment she describes—surely an indication of the time the author needed to come to terms with what she experienced and to recount them with such candor. (Anyone committed to the Palestinian cause would have difficulty abandoning it, even when facing censure and personal loss.)

With commendable skill, Karmi forges ahead detailing the routine of Palestinian Authority life, recalling word-for-word dialogues among sophisticated dining businessmen, diplomats, drivers and office colleagues that reveal the competition, the conflicts, the jealousies, the

pretenses and disillusionment, the jockeying for favors, and just keeping one's job. And keeping aid flowing.

The malice of Israeli policy is well known, so too the incompetence and duplicity of Palestinian officials. Karmi is not the first to admit the PA is dysfunctional and an utter failure in the quest for statehood. But she exposes the problems with such candor and literary skill that the reader is committed to follow her to the end.

I found myself feeling emotionally involved, without rancor or impatience, in the personalities Karmi introduces me to. Perhaps this is the result of the author's respect for these people and her genuine curiosity in the issues they discuss, whether with an office worker, or with a co-founder of the Hamas movement who himself comes across to us as more sincere than Mahmoud Abbas or other PA officials. (Even while questioning this Gaza leader's strategies, Karmi offers a stunningly convincing rationale for the resistance to which he and his compatriots are committed.)

Our author employs the same technique when chronicling her exchanges with her father in Amman. A learned man in religion, history and culture, Hassan Karmi held Britain and the USA largely responsible for the success of the Zionist plan; he argues with his daughter in defense of the heightened role of religion in Arab lives. In her recounted dialogues, the author expresses genuine doubts about the Hamas leader's or her father's positions on the subject at hand, while allowing their argument to prevail, at least for the purpose of edifying us, her readers. This literary strategy Karmi applies throughout her memoir, and with striking affect.

Karmi also invokes those visits with her ailing father to record her personal history and to expose problems she finds with Arab family values, exploring the expectations and challenges of women like herself. In this respect, this memoir is not only the story of a professional woman, but also the chronicle of a daughter, a wife and a mother.

As I proceed through this Palestinian memoir, I happen to be reviewing two very different productions related to Palestinian life— one a film, the other a theoretical analysis. The documentary film, [Speed Sisters](#), opening February 2017, is by the Arab-Canadian director Amber Fares. Speed Sisters features five young and feisty Palestinian women who while living under occupation, become car racing enthusiasts—the first all-women race car driving team in the Middle East—independent, bold, and free. The women's indulgence in cars is understandable, given the bleakness of Israeli occupation, but hard to imagine alongside what's in Karmi's story. The other production is the ninth book by Steven Salaita whose brilliance and insight were evident even before he was [denied a university appointment](#) by a Zionist-influenced discriminatory university dean. Salaita's [Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine](#) is an exploration of shared experiences of Palestinians and Native Americans where the author lays out conceptual ground between American Indian and Indigenous studies and Palestinian studies through concepts of settler colonialism, 'indigeneity', and state violence. It's a groundbreaking study into what should have been obvious decades ago

These three stories may seem at odds with one another. Yet we can see them as continually evolving meanings of what it means to be Palestinian.

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