

1. TWO FURTHER FACULTY PORTRAITS

MOHAMMED DAJANI

In March 2014, Al-Quds University faculty member Mohammed Suleiman Dajani Daoudi (1946–) took twenty-seven of his Palestinian students from the campus to Poland to visit Auschwitz. Dajani had joined the Al-Quds faculty in east Jerusalem in 2001 and the following year established its American Studies Institute. Dajani was born in Jerusalem into a historic Arab family long embedded in the city’s history; the honorific “Daoudi” was added to the family name in 1529 when Suleiman the Magnificent appointed a Dajani ancestor keeper of the Tomb of David on Mount Zion. Two Dajanis served as Jerusalem mayor between 1863 and 1918; Hassan Sidiqi Dajani, a lawyer, was assassinated in 1938 for heading the opposition to the Grand Mufti Haj Amin el-Husseini and advocating Arab-Jewish reconciliation. The Mufti later allied himself with Adolf Hitler.

As a student at the American University of Beirut after the Six-Day War, Mohammed Dajani was active in the PLO’s Fatah but in 1975 he abandoned politics, “after witnessing a lot of corruption and misuse of funds in Fatah and losing hope in the Fatah cause” (Nurding). He studied at Eastern Michigan University, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Texas at Austin. He found his first teaching job in 1985 teaching political science in Jordan. But when the Palestinian National Authority was established a decade later he “joined the UN Development Program and was put in charge of setting up the PA

ministries and the training centers for the new Palestinian civil servants” (Nurding). Two years later, he joined the PA as a consultant and then became Director of Technical Assistance and Training. None of that history of commitment counted for anything when he transgressed by taking his students to visit Auschwitz.

As I detail below, his experiences with Israeli medicine changed his attitude toward both Jews and the Jewish state. Dajani had been involved in reconciliation efforts for nearly twenty years before the Auschwitz experience, so the trip reflected a long-term commitment. He had first seen Auschwitz himself in 2011, afterwards coauthoring a 2011 *New York Times* op-ed titled “Why Palestinians Should Learn about the Holocaust.”

The trip to the most well-known death camp was part of “Hearts of Flesh—Not Stone,” a collaborative educational program designed to teach each side about the historical suffering that shaped the narrative of the other. Dajani was working in a joint program on Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution with the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Al-Quds University was not an institutional participant. The Israeli students in the program visited the Dheisheh refugee camp just south of Bethlehem in the West Bank. Established as a temporary refuge in 1949, the camp increasingly acquired the accoutrements of permanence, though a portion of it had yet to be connected to a public sewage system. As *Haaretz* reported, “He says the choice of Dheisheh for the Israeli students was not meant to suggest there was an equivalence or even a direct link between the Holocaust and the Nakba. They were chosen as the symbolic events that have deeply affected the psyche on both sides of the conflict.” The aim was to build mutual empathy and understanding through an appreciation of events central to the other side’s narratives and self-understanding.

In a Jerusalem café in spring 2016, I spent most of a day with Dajani, during which he made it clear that he knew he had to discuss the trip with others in advance. That included the Al-Quds University president, Sari Nusseibeh. Accounts of that conversation differ. Dajani understood himself to have Nusseibeh’s approval for the trip, though the president had also instructed him to tell the students that Al-Quds had

nothing to do with it. But in the aftermath of the trip, when it became highly controversial, Nusseibeh denied having given his approval. Two members of the Al-Quds administration who discussed the events with me in August 2016 differed in their understandings as well; one supported Nusseibeh's account, the other confirmed Dajani's.

In any case, plans for the trip became public knowledge beforehand, and Dajani was pressed to cancel it. Warnings about the consequences came from multiple political and paramilitary groups both overtly and covertly active in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, including Fatah and Hamas. But Dajani was determined to honor his commitment. On his last day at Auschwitz, Dajani received an email from his secretary. As Dajani told *Moment* magazine editor Nadine Epstein, "Students marched to my office holding placards that said: 'Depart you normalizer,' and handed my secretary a letter warning me not to come back to the university." The students had trashed her office when they delivered the letter. A Palestinian journalist called him "the king of normalizers." On his return, hostility escalated. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* broke the story about the trip. The fact that the trip was part of a collaborative program did not help win approval among anti-Israel opponents of "normalization." Dajani, moreover, was already unpopular for opposing the effort to boycott Israeli universities.

None of this played well on the Palestinian street. Holocaust deniers asserted that Dajani was trying to brainwash his students by disseminating the fabrication that the Holocaust was real. He was denounced as a traitor and collaborator by students and others and warned not to enter Ramallah. The faculty union canceled his membership. Dajani had expected the university to expel the students who threatened his life. Instead, Al-Quds publicly distanced itself from the trip, claiming it was altogether a personal venture. Nonetheless, Dajani felt he should give the institution a chance to honor his academic freedom by defending his right to his pedagogical practices. He offered his resignation on May 18, 2014, anticipating it would be rejected. Instead, he immediately found himself out of a job as of June 1. Dajani summarized these events in a 2016 Washington Institute interview with Mical Polacco: "In March 2014, the Workers, Staff, and Faculty Syndicate at Al-Quds University fired me from their membership. Nine political student organizations

on campus issued a public statement against me titled ‘Normalization = Treason.’ Students demonstrated against me on campus and delivered a letter to my secretary threatening to kill me if I returned to teach at the university” (Dajani “Why Palestinians”).

According to Dajani, as he told me in our conversation, news accounts of the most dramatic subsequent event misrepresented its character. In January 2015, it was reported that his car was set on fire and destroyed while it was parked in front of his house. (For many, that recalled the occasion when Birzeit University President Hanna Nasir was attacked and injured and his car burned in November 1993 after he announced that the Islamic Bloc had won the contested student council election.)¹² Widely understood to be a threat and a warning that he must leave, Dajani now insists that it was far more serious. In the account he offered in 2016, highly experienced operatives—possibly working through a trained student group—poured a flammable glue into the spaces between the metal segments of the car. The glue was designed to burst into flame when the car was started and the engine began to warm. Luckily for Dajani, an unexpectedly warm day intervened, and the car burst into flame and burned up before he had occasion to drive it himself. Published photos of the car show that the fire was concentrated at the front around the engine. It was not a warning; it was an assassination attempt. His pedagogy had nearly proven fatal. He fled to West Jerusalem where he would be safe. Subsequently he took up residence in Washington DC, as the inaugural Weston Fellow at the Washington Institute, though he is working on plans to return to Jerusalem to start a doctoral program in reconciliation studies. He has not given up hope nor his principles, though he now understands the risks that Palestinian faculty can face when they voice unpopular political opinions.

A soft-spoken and dignified advocate at once of Palestinian rights and a negotiated peace, Dajani believes that contact and conversation between Israelis and Palestinians and the cultivation of mutual empathy are necessary preconditions for a resolution of the conflict. But achieving

12. Hanna Nasir, a physicist who was Birzeit’s first president, was expelled to Lebanon by Israeli authorities in 1974. He moved to Jordan and remained president-in-exile until he was allowed to return to Birzeit and resume his post in 1993.

empathy requires breaking taboos; hence the Auschwitz trip. Dajani came to this view from a personal history that began with antagonism. As a young engineering student at the American University of Beirut in the 1960s, he was active in Fatah. He headed the group, and saw that kind of political activism as the only route to liberation, but was deported from Lebanon in 1975. Also exiled by Israel from his native Jerusalem and banned from Jordan because of his political activities, he pursued his education in the United States, earning a BA in Economics from Eastern Michigan University. He then completed two doctorates, one in Government from the University of South Carolina and one in Political Economy from the University of Texas at Austin.

He was only allowed to return to Israel in 1993 when his father was being treated for cancer. Like many Palestinians who have contact with Israeli medicine, he was surprised when it became clear that Jewish doctors saw his father not as an enemy but as a patient and a human being. The experience was repeated when his mother became ill. But most Palestinian students, lacking family members with serious illnesses, do not have these characteristically transformative contacts with Israeli medicine. Instead, they learn distrust and resentment when they spend hours waiting in lines at checkpoints on their way to campus. As a faculty member at Al-Quds, he sought to break the pattern with an educational experiment. However, neither his views nor his pedagogy were acceptable for Palestinian faculty; they are not protected by academic freedom. This time it was his fellow Palestinians who forced him into exile. Along with three others, including his brother Munther, he has since coedited *Teaching Empathy and Reconciliation in the Midst of Conflict* (2016). The book is published by Wasatia Press, a project of Wasatia, an organization promoting Islamic traditions of nonviolence and compromise that the Dajani brothers cofounded in 2007.

As he remarks to Sam Nurdin, “I thought of establishing a political party, the Wasatia Party, but I came under attack by both Fatah and Hamas, who accused me of taking money from US intelligence services to ‘Westernize Islam,’ which of course was not true!” Dajani continues to work for peace, convinced that “Palestinians and Israelis should humanize the image of the other in his/her mind and build bridges of communication” (Nurdin); he just cannot pursue this goal from

East Jerusalem or the West Bank. Nor can he do so from a Palestinian university.

ABDUL SATTAR QASSEM

In late January 2016, Professor Abdul Sattar Qassem (or Abdul al-Sattar Qassam, 1948–), a political scientist who has taught at An-Najah National University in Nablus for three decades, was arrested by the Palestinian Authority at his home on charges of inciting violence against the group’s leaders. As Palestinian-Israeli journalist Khaled Abu Toameh reported in the *Jerusalem Post*, “Fatah accused Qassem of calling for the killing of Abbas and members of the PA security forces for their alleged collaboration with Israel. In an interview with the Hamas-affiliated Al-Quds TV station, Qassem called for the implementation of the PLO’s ‘Revolutionary law,’ which imposes a death sentence on those found guilty of ‘high treason (‘Palestinian Forces’).” Of course, these would be actionable offenses in Western countries as well, but Qassem denies the charges, which, according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, included “slandering prominent figures and inciting sectarian feuds.” A number of groups, including Islamic Jihad, described the arrest as political, a claim that the Ma’an News Agency reports the PA denied, and called for his immediate release. That release took place a few days later.

Qassem is in every respect the opposite of Dajani. Opposed to reconciliation with Israel, he faced persecution and assaults on his life for quite different political beliefs. Unlike Dajani, moreover, he is not personally opposed to violence.

Qassem was born in the Tulkarem-area village of Deir al-Ghusoun in the northern West Bank. He earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from American University of Cairo in 1972, during which time he sought to become involved with the Palestine liberation movement. As he remarked in a 2009 *Electronic Intifada* interview with Marcy Newman, “I wanted to be part of the revolution. I used to call it a revolution; I discovered later that it wasn’t. I went to Beirut three times: in 1970, 1971, and 1972 to join a Palestinian faction. Each time I was