

## “Shocked by the evil”: A Talk with Musa Abu Hashhash

Musa Abu Hashhash is the man Norman Finkelstein was on his way to see in Hebron when Israel, deciding otherwise, deported Finkelstein and denied him entry for a decade. It was a dramatic action that brought Israel some bad press from unexpected quarters. *Haaretz*, Israel’s newspaper of record, said “it is not for the government to decide which views should be heard here and which ones should not. The decision to ban Finkelstein hurts us more than it hurts him”.<sup>1</sup>

Abu Hashhash and Finkelstein have been close friends for nearly 20 years, when Finkelstein arrived in the Occupied Territories around the time of the first Intifada to witness for himself what was occurring. Abu Hashhash and his family offered accommodation. “Here was a Jewish person who was not going to hide behind the fact [of his Jewishness]”, Abu Hashhash says. “I knew from the very first minute he was a good person”. Finkelstein, in turn, has called his friend “the most decent human being that I’ve ever met in my life”<sup>2</sup>, and *Beyond Chutzpah*, his most recent book, is dedicated to Abu Hashhash. He had been to visit Abu Hashhash and his family 15 times before, and while he may choose to legally challenge Israel’s decision, for Finkelstein it is more importantly “an opportunity to raise the Palestinian side of the issue: why shouldn’t *Palestinians* be allowed to meet whomever they want?”

Abu Hashhash can talk intimately about what Palestinians are allowed and not allowed. As a Hebron field worker for the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem for nearly 9 years, his job involves bearing daily witness to the realities of occupied life and the impact of Israeli- imposed restrictions. Life in the Occupied Territories, he says, has worsened dramatically since the first Intifada: “there is more poverty, more frustration, more hopelessness”.

For those of us accustomed to a culture of speed and convenience, where the easy life seems almost a birthright--and we are outraged by the bus that is five minutes late, the pizza delivery man who takes more than 30 minutes—it’s difficult to understand what it means to have restriction imposed upon you relentlessly, without justification or even a pretense of legality. There are the endless checkpoints, for example, that eat away the day’s hours and keep Palestinians from work, family, and even medical aid. Abu Hashhash himself has experienced this directly: for four years he was denied access to his Jerusalem office, for reasons Israeli intelligence refused to divulge. A rationale did not need to be offered.

In his recent book *1967: Israel, the War and the Year that Transformed the Middle East*, Tom Segev says that one byproduct of the Six Day War was the creation in the Territories of “an endless labyrinth of headquarters, commands, branches, departments, units, wings, bureaus, authorities, administrations, and outposts—a giant warren of countless officers, soldiers, and civil servants. Their work consisted almost entirely of inventing more and more reasons to interfere in the residents’ daily lives”.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes the interference has fatal consequence. For instance, B’Tselem recently reported the case of Nufuz al-Husni, a 44 year old Gazan with a uterine tumor who requires treatment in Ichilov, Tel Aviv, but who has been denied entry by Israel five times for no apparent reason: “each time, we got the same answer”, she says. “Refused, refused”.<sup>4</sup> Her condition remains critical. Even a cursory glance at B’Tselem’s website reveals that al-Husni’s story is one of many. Abu Hashhash says, “the Israelis know exactly what is needed to help the Palestinians. They deny them anyway”.

It often seems that these are arbitrary decisions, based solely on whim and malice--but these individual acts of restriction add up to a policy of collective punishment. The minor gesture of resistance can have repercussions for an entire community. “A boy throws a stone”, says Abu Hashhash, “they arrest everyone around him”. Or they may shut down a school, as in the recent case of the Islamic Charitable Society, an orphanage and school in Hebron that was effectively ransacked

by the IDF, again without rationale; or fuel and water supplies will be attacked; tools for essential infrastructure will be withheld; Gazan Fulbright scholars will face a bureaucratic nightmare trying to access their own education abroad.

All of it is brazen contravention of international law. A recent report by Al-Haq noted that “measures such as widespread and systematic property destruction, land appropriation and de facto annexation, physical and psychological harassment and restrictions of movement regularly take away any genuine choice of concerned individuals”,<sup>5</sup> and thus violate international law, and certainly make a mockery of Israel’s ratification of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which “recognizes the right to liberty of movement to everyone lawfully within the territory of the state”,<sup>6</sup> as well as the right to education.

Asked to identify the most difficult aspect of the Occupation for him and his family, Abu Hashhash mentions how it makes what should be a simple act like meeting family or friends nearly impossible: his own family is divided by the apartheid wall, and he has family members who cannot find work; unemployment is at crisis levels. He talks of the frustration of doing a difficult job largely in isolation. He knows the work he does with B’Tselem is crucial, and yet “changes are very small”: someone is let through a checkpoint; a soldier is brought up on abuse charges. Much of his time, he says, is spent trying to calm “oversensitive soldiers” whose zealotry often leads them to read threat into any gesture.

Even though the international community is slowly waking to the full extent of suffering in the Territories, Abu Hashhash points out there are few politicians who are willing to learn firsthand what’s going on. “Some delegations, perhaps”, he says, straining to recall any recent Canadian political presence, for instance, in Hebron. When people do manage to make the journey, “they are shocked by the evil” of what they see. In lieu of on the ground experience, Abu Hashhash says the international activist community must at the very least be aware of the ongoing human rights violations, in Hebron and throughout the Territories, and be relentless in pressuring Israel to uphold its international law commitments.

Meanwhile, restrictions continue to work their damage to varying degrees. It may be some time before he sees his friend Dr. Finkelstein again, “though we are strongly encouraging him to find another way to get here”.

And Nufuz al-Husni, waiting on Israeli benevolence to allow her medical aid, languishes. “I am tired, very tired”, she says. “It’s destroying me”.

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<sup>1</sup> Haaretz Editorial, 05.27.08, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/987465.html>

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sherri Muzher, 11.05.07, [www.palestinechronicle.com](http://www.palestinechronicle.com)

<sup>3</sup> Tom Segev, as quoted in “Unmasking the Six Day War” by Hudas Thier in *International Socialist Review*, May/June 2008, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Btselem, Testimony of Nufuz al-Husni, 07.05. 2008, [http://www.btselem.org/english/testimonies/20080507\\_gaza\\_cancer\\_patient\\_nufuz\\_al\\_hasni.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/testimonies/20080507_gaza_cancer_patient_nufuz_al_hasni.asp)

<sup>5</sup> Al-Haq, Sixty years of Nakba: Israel’s Continued Policy of Forcible Displacement, 2008.05. 03 [www.alhaq.org/pdfs/Position-Paperr-Nakba.pdf](http://www.alhaq.org/pdfs/Position-Paperr-Nakba.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Btselem, Israel refuses to issue ID cards to unregistered Palestinians, 29.05.08. [http://www.btselem.org/english/Family\\_Separation/20080529\\_Unregistered\\_persons.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Family_Separation/20080529_Unregistered_persons.asp)