

Shattering the Myth of Democracy and Equality in Israel

An Interview with Dr. Hatim Kanaaneh

by Angie Tibbs / April 6th, 2009

Hatim Kanaaneh was an eleven year old boy when his peaceful village of Arrabeh, Galilee, was invaded by Jewish terrorists and the villagers forced to surrender in 1948. What followed was living under a military regime, which had absolute powers, a life filled with terror and humiliation, coupled with a curtailment of freedom and infringements on human rights. Discrimination was evident in all aspects of everyday life, even in the education system, something Dr. Kanaaneh experienced first hand when he was denied entry to the Hadassah medical school because he was deemed to be unqualified.

He later attended Harvard and received his medical degrees, following which he returned to Galilee where he worked as a physician for thirty-five years. He founded the Galilee Society for Health Research and Services, and also the Elrazi Center for Child Rehabilitation, the first such facility specifically designed to serve rural Palestinian children. He is now retired from clinical practice but continues to be an active member of the Galilee Society and serves on the Board of Directors of Elrazi.

Dr. Kanaaneh's memoirs have been published in a book, *A Doctor in Galilee: The Life and Struggles of a Palestinian in Israel*, (Pluto Press, June 20, 2008), which gives readers an in-depth look at the struggles he, and the Palestinian minority in the Jewish state, have faced over the last 60 years, and which they continue to face. His first-hand experience of life inside Israel contrasts with ex-US President Jimmy Carter's contention that the term "Apartheid" only applies to Israeli practices in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza.

I spoke with him via e-mail.

Angie Tibbs: Dr. Kanaaneh, it's been almost 61 years since Arrabeh was forced to surrender to Jewish terrorists. What is life like today, not just for the people of Arrabeh, but for all Palestinians who are living inside what is called Israel?

Dr. Kanaaneh: A prime feature of our life is our imposed separate residential areas, separate towns and villages. Even in so-called 'mixed cities' some Arab slums are separated by concrete walls and barbed wire from the better-off Jewish neighborhoods. Our communities, with one or two exceptions, fall in the bottom three centile rungs in the socio-economic grading of Israeli communities.

AT: Tell me about that.

Dr. K: Our towns and villages have fewer internal resources, be it industry, commerce, tourism, or agriculture. And they receive much less financial assistance from common central budgets, only 3-5% of the total.

Sixty-one years after the establishment of the state, one has to be blind not to see the physical differences between an Arab town, even the best-off one, and a Jewish town: pot-holed roads without sidewalks, no public spaces, no private lawns, overcrowding, children playing in the streets for lack of playgrounds, ... and the list of signs of neglect is endless.

But these are only the physical symptoms. At a deeper level we constitute an undesirable element, a foreign element in the body of a state whose planners and decision makers define it to exclude us. Israeli Zionist Leaders have variously likened us to a cancer in the body of the state or a fifth column not to be trusted. At best we are seen as a hindrance, a stumbling block for planners to maneuver around in formulating their visions of the future of the state. At worse, we are a demographic ticking bomb to be dismantled at all costs.

The late Rabin was the most tolerant of Israeli leaders, accepting our presence up to a limit of twenty percent of the total population of Israel, a limit we have nearly reached now. That kind of pronouncement by presumed liberal leaders of Israel is ready fodder for incitement by openly racist politicians, the likes of Avigdor Lieberman, an immigrant from Moldova, who legitimized and popularized the concept of transfer to where over two thirds of Israeli Jewish adults approve of it.

How do I feel living in such openly hostile socio-political environment? I feel quite insecure: mentally anguished and physically threatened. I function with an ample reserve of paranoia, constantly on the lookout for signs of harmful intent behind every move by anyone outside my immediate circle of family and friends. When I start doubting those, I will know that I have lost the fight.

AT: Progressive writers, Kim Petersen and B.J. Sabri, wrote a 12-part series entitled "Defining Israeli Zionist Racism" which deals at length with racism inside Israel. What, if any, discrimination and/or racism have you observed and/or encountered?

Dr. K: Discrimination is a built-in part of life and the laws of the country. Remember that what we are dealing with here (and the basic issue of contention in the conflict between Zionism and all of us native Palestinians) is a conflict over land.

As a Palestinian I am disqualified by law from equal access to land ownership or use. This is given a deeper expression in the form of the Law of Return granting any Jewish person anywhere in the world automatic citizenship with all the benefits that accrue with it of access to land, housing, financial and social assistance, and to the symbols of the state while no Palestinian who is not born here can dream of ever becoming a citizen.

Recently laws were passed specifically to prevent our children from marrying other Palestinians and from the right to bring their spouses under the standing laws of family unification applicable to Jewish citizens.

The absolute majority of land we, the Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel since its establishment in 1948, once owned has been confiscated for the benefit of our Jewish co-citizens through a maze of some three dozen laws specifically designed for the purpose. Were it not for the 1976 uprising that has come since to be commemorated as Land Day, we would have lost the remainder. We, nearly one-fifth of the total population of Israel, now own about 3 % of its land. After all, we are dealing with what has been defined by Zionism as 'the land of Israel' in an ethnic sense, a definition that excludes us, Palestinians. The last stroke in the continuing saga of disenfranchisement is the requirement from us to pledge allegiance to Israel as the state of the Jews. And once we take such an oath, it would be up to the same racist crowd to define what constitutes a breach of it, a process inevitably leading to our expulsion one way or the other.

Beyond such basic discriminatory laws the whole official system and all Zionist civilian structures, many of which are legally entrusted with state-level powers and duties, are imbued with a sense of messianic zeal. Our experience with such bodies is not unlike a preview of the current practices in the Palestinian Occupied Territories where Palestinians are not allowed to drive on roads for settlers. The multitude of new settlements, named 'Mitzpim', or hilltop lookouts, are intended to guard the land in Galilee from us, its indigenous population, and they are surrounded by barbed wire and interconnected by special roads that bypass our villages. True, we were not prevented from using those roads, but they were of little use to us because they led only to the various settlements.

At the practical level this translates into set rules and regulations that exempt Palestinians like me from all sorts of benefits if they are not openly anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian. Much of this is practiced under the blanket justification of security, the holiest of all holy cows in the country.

AT: What about employment opportunities for Palestinians, in particular, young people?

Dr. K: A psychologist colleague just informed me that he had gone through two years of theoretical and practical training as a lie-detector expert/operator before he found out that one needs to have served in the Israeli armed forces to qualify for a license.

Our youth, unlike Jewish youth, are exempt from the draft. Positions from which they are disqualified on this basis when they seek employment run the gamut from civil aviation all the way down to the manufacturing of ice-cream.

The worst part of the daily discrimination that we meet with is the fact that much of the final decisions on so many little items are left to the discretion of low-level bureaucrats. These, by and large, have been brought up on a deeply self-centered world-view that sees the world as one of constant struggle between 'us'-the Jews and 'them'-the Goyim and considers one's duty as serving his own people. This, of course, leaves me out of 'the favors' many officials consider it their duty to do their clients. Intentional obstructionism is more often what we face.

Another area in which this phenomenon is evident is the differential implementation of the law. Take, for example, the practice of house demolition within Israel. Mind you, we are not speaking here of the savage collective punishment practiced by the Israeli occupying forces against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. We are speaking of the practice of demolition of homes built without permit within Israel proper.

In absolute numbers there are more illegally constructed structures in Jewish communities, but the demolition is practiced almost exclusively against Arab home owners. The basis for the construction of homes without permit is also rooted in discriminatory practices in the laws of zoning which in many cases have retroactively criminalized all residents of many villages whose existence predated the state, itself. Such "Unrecognized Villages" are frequently the site of home demolitions.

The cumulative end result of all the openly discriminatory laws, the hidden disadvantages, and the differential application of the rules and regulations are clearly seen in comparative figures from officially published data of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics.

As a Public Health practitioner I can point to the single most telling indicator of the well-being of a community, that of Infant Mortality Rate, or the number out of a thousand infants born in a certain year who die before their first birthday. This statistic regarding the most vulnerable segment of a population reflects such community attributes as the income level, the level of education, the sanitation, etc. etc.

The relative ratio of the IMR between Arabs and Jews in Israel has run at the level of almost exactly 2 since ever statistics were collected on both groups. In the last decade it has been on the rise, a reflection of increasing discrimination. One could look at many other statistics such as the level of poverty, education, housing, etc. and the gap is obvious, but IMR sums it up best.

AT: Do you see East Jerusalem being annexed completely by Israel, and, if so, what will happen to the Palestinians living where they have lived for millennia although the land has been rechristened Israel?

Dr. K: Jerusalem has already been unilaterally and completely annexed by Israel. What many people do not realize is that the city's municipal boundaries have been expanded tremendously since its annexation to include many formerly independent Arab communities as well as some pristine wilderness turned into housing projects.

Generous funding from Jewish communities around the world and from Western governments made this possible. Yet part of the overall plan is to render the expanded city the Jewish-only capital of the state and of world Jewry. The residents of the old city of about 300,000 Palestinians were granted residence status but not full citizenship in Israel. They are slowly but constantly coerced by various means, legal and otherwise, to evacuate their Jerusalem homes and neighborhoods.

AT: How do Palestinians living in Israel view the ongoing Israeli attacks on their kin in Gaza and the West Bank?

Dr. K: At the personal level I can answer that best by referring you and your audience to my blog where the attack on Gaza featured in more than one posting. To sum that up I can testify to a sense of anger, frustration and impending danger. The daily scenes of war atrocities and destruction are enough to move the conscience of anyone with a morsel of humanity. When the violence is visited on one's own brethren and next of kin the effect is doubly infuriating.

As a community we reacted by withdrawing into self-imposed isolation in our villages and slum neighborhoods in the cities. There was also an outpouring of donations of food, clothing and medicine though little if any was permitted to enter Gaza. More important, perhaps, were the daily demonstrations in our communities against the carnage, a way for our youth to vent their anger in non-violent ways.

Psychologically, a common theme I have heard expressed by many individuals around me is the fear for our own future.

AT: How so?

Dr. K: The worst case scenario we fear is of the world averting its eyes from our suffering and allowing Israel one day to drive us out of our homes under an imposed news blackout when the next war breaks out with a neighboring country, say, Syria or Lebanon. If the world could sit still and not be moved to protect our brothers and sisters in Gaza from the white phosphorous and DIME bombardments and from the endless air, sea and land assault against them, why would it lift a finger to protect us from summary expulsion from our homes? And such contingency plans for our expulsion are known to exist.

In recent weeks the plot of such conspiratorial theories has thickened even further: In recent years drugs have slowly become available on our streets with little interference from the police. More recently guns and live munitions have become easily available to our youth and the police seem to keep its eyes closed. Older and wiser members of our community theorize that this is done consciously in preparation for the final assault so that the Israeli authorities can claim that an armed uprising is brewing in our community and this would be enough of an excuse for calling in the tanks, the F-16s and the Apaches.

I cite this only as an example of the degree our paranoia has reached as a result of the attack on Gaza.

AT: You mentioned a very real fear is that the world will turn a blind eye to your suffering and allow Israel to one day drive you out of your homes. Who do you see as the strongest supporters of the Palestinian people in their struggle?

Dr. K: At the official level few countries, with the exception of Iran and of South American nations recently liberated from the clutches of USA hegemony, such as Chavez' Venezuela, openly support the Palestinian people. None of the world's heavy weights stands behind us. At the individual level, again, few in the world are informed and concerned enough to give our issues much thought. That leaves the fringe activist community in Europe and North America as our best defenders in the corridors of effective power brokerage.

Potentially, the Arab and Islamic masses are a shoo-in as our back-up crowd, but they lack the freedom and democratic means to pressure their dictator presidents, kings and emirs to respond to their wishes. Their countries' governments mostly follow the straight and narrow path dictated by their American allies with their a priori acceptance of all things Israeli.

In the end, we Palestinians, inside and outside historical Palestine, are left burdened with the task of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps; we are our own best spokespeople and supporters. Despite our spacial dispersal, internal factionalism and disunity, we have so far managed to put our issues on the world's agenda, albeit belatedly and haltingly. Our resilience and stoicism have proven to be valuable assets in a less-than-caring world.

The Jewish people have elevated their past suffering and future potential to axiomatic heights in the world's conscience. It is now our turn.

AT: What do you see happening in the future with respect to Palestinians living in Israel? Are you anticipating any improvement or do you expect things to get worse?

Dr. K: It is likely to get worse before it gets better. In the long run, I remain optimistic that general decency and common sense will triumph. The 'democratic and Jewish state' that Israel declares itself to be is an oxymoron by definition.

I see it as a three-piece puzzle that has space for only two. One part has to go. So far the Zionist system in Israel has skimped on democracy and successfully hidden the way it has disenfranchised a fifth of its population from the international community. That is no longer possible especially with the rise of civil society organizations and the advent of the Internet.

Also, I do sense a new readiness in the West, and specifically in the USA, to listen to an alternative discourse coming from quarters other than the standard pro-Israel lobby, even if it is still very reluctant to change its stand on 'minor matters' such as the issue at hand.

Rightists in Israel who make up the clear majority in Israel have expressed their views clearly in our last elections. Such leaders as the new Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, seem to share my analysis of the three-piece puzzle. The only difference is that they plan on throwing the Palestinian minority out and thus maintaining a truly Jewish and democratic Israel.

I am gambling on their failure and betting on the commitment of the majority of humanity to justice and equality. In taking such a risk I am counting heavily on the promising views of President Obama, for example.

It may not happen in my lifetime, but I foresee the eventual decline of fascism and fanaticism in the world, including in our region, and the rise of secular humanitarian views and solutions to common problems.

I know many decent people around me, both Jewish and Palestinian, and I would like to think that our shared humanity and decency are slowly contagious. If good people like you keep the world alert to the short-range dangers and help us avoid a calamitous quick end of our combined dreams through the actions of the Liebermens and Netanyahus, then the rise of true democracy in Israel can be expected.

This will ultimately be the nucleus of the one-state solution for Palestine and Israel.

AT: Thank you very much, Dr. Kanaaneh.

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