

# Anatomy of a Mission - London 1990-2005<sup>1</sup>

I feel privileged to have been invited to address such a distinguished audience at such a prestigious forum. Speaking today, almost a week before the end of my official duties in London, I cannot but recall that I started my assignment in London with a Chatham House lecture in September 1990 when I had to step in at the last moment to replace Hani Al-Hassan in a session chaired by the late Sir John Moberly.

Let me first give a short history of the Palestinian diplomatic representation in London.

## **The Palestinian Diplomatic Representation in London**

### Location:

From the early 1970s until 1986, the Palestinian diplomatic representation was part of the Arab League Office at 52 Green Street. In 1986, it moved to independent premises in South Kensington at 4 Clareville Grove. For austerity measures, in 1996 we moved again to a smaller but more modern office in a lesser neighborhood – Hammersmith – at 5 Galena Road.

### Appellation:

From the early 1970s until 1988, the mission was called the PLO Information Office. Then in 1988, because of our peace initiative based on our acceptance of the two-state solution, and in agreement with Her Majesty's Government, it was upgraded to PLO General Delegation. In 1993, just after the Oslo breakthrough, the Delegation, representing the PLO and the PNA at the same time, was renamed the Palestinian General Delegation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Transcript of a lecture delivered by Afif Safieh, the Palestinian General Delegate to the UK at Chatham House/The Royal Institute for International Affairs on Wednesday, 13 July 2005.

tion. We were then authorized to fly the Palestinian flag, which we did at a very moving ceremony attended by William Ehrman, the head of NENAD - the Near East/North Africa Department - on behalf of the Foreign Office and the members of the Council of Arab Ambassadors.

Representation:

The first PLO representative was the late Said Hamami, who held the post from the early 70s until he was assassinated in 1978. I never met Said but he was undeniably a very effective representative and I still feel the impact of his passage in London. Said was succeeded by Nabil Ramlawi - from 1978 to 1983 - who was then transferred to the UN in Geneva and who is now in our Foreign Ministry in charge of the unit for diplomatic training. Faisal Oweida followed in 1983 and held the post until 1990, when he was transferred to Austria. Unfortunately, he died two years ago from cancer.

I am the fourth Palestinian representative in London. I do not know if there were any assassination attempts. Anyway, if there were, they passed totally unnoticed by me. Concerning my health, yes, I suffer from diabetes, cholesterol, and high blood pressure, and I am overweight and a chain smoker. My doctor, every time she sees me, tells me, "Bravo Afif for still being with us."

Size:

In 1990, I inherited an office with 12 employees including the secretary, the receptionist, and the driver. Then, because of budgetary constraints, the number was brought down to five, to rise again gradually up to eight.

In the past 15 years, I have dealt with three Prime Ministers: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair; four Secretaries of State: Douglas Hurd, Malcolm Rifkind, Robin Cook, and now Jack Straw; and ten Ministers of State: William Waldgrave, Douglas Hogg, and Sir Jeremy Hanley, during the Conservative period, then with the late Derek Fatchett, Peter Hain, Brian Wilson, Geoffrey Hoon, Ben Bradshaw, Mike O'Brian, Baroness Symons, and now with Dr. Kim Howells.

During those 15 years, I organized ten Arafat visits to London, three of which were mainly connected to meetings with Madeleine Albright. In addition, last year we arranged a visit for our Prime Minister Abu Ala'a, and this year, for President Mahmoud Abbas for the London conference on 1<sup>st</sup> March.

The upgrading was gradual. When I landed in town in September 1990, it was prohibited for me to have any ministerial level contacts. Since then I have become familiar to 10 Downing Street, to the Foreign Office, and to Westminster-Whitehall in general. Christ'l and I started being invited to the Garden Tea Party by Her Majesty the Queen; at first, we were just with the crowd, but then we were upgraded to the Diplomatic Tent, which is for junior diplomats, and then to the Royal Tent itself. We have also been invited to a Royal Banquet at Buckingham Palace for a visiting Head of State and every year to the Trooping of the Colors, the Lord Mayor's Banquet, and to Ascot, though I have to say that I am not particularly enamored with horseracing. Then, of course, there is the annual invitation to the prestigious Diplomatic Dinner by De La Rue who hope to be contracted to print one day, hopefully soon, our national currency.

*Job Description:*

What does a Palestinian representative do? Our mission has all the responsibilities, burdens, and expectations of an embassy, yet we have neither all the privileges nor the immunities or financial capabilities of a normal embassy as we are still a national liberation movement, still struggling for independence and statehood.

How do I define my job description? Wherever I am posted, I consider that there are ten layers of work that I have to handle:

1. The government
2. Parliament
3. Political parties
4. The Diplomatic Corps
5. The media
6. The NGOs
7. The Palestinian community
8. The Arab community

9. The Muslim community
10. The Jewish community

This is all in addition to the regular reports to the leadership and some consular duties. We issue neither passports nor visas, but we do authenticate documents, etc., and in moments of optimism, find ourselves performing some commercial duties related to the various companies that consult us about the potential for economic transactions.

Let me now go through the different 'layers' of work.

1. *The Government*: At the very beginning, our interaction was mainly with the Foreign Office at a sub ministerial level. Now it is with the Foreign Office at all levels, but beyond it, we have to deal with many other departments, including the Prime Minister's Office and various ministries.
2. *Parliament*: I really attached great importance to my dealings and interactions with both Houses of Parliament. I was invited three times for hearings by the Select Committee for Foreign Affairs, the first time in April 1991.

In the House of Commons, we have five institutional interlocutors and channels of communication. The first is CAABU, the Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding, which has a triple chairmanship now from the three major parties: John Austin, Crispin Blunt, and Colin Breed. The second is the Britain/Palestine All Party Parliamentary Group, which was presided over first by Ernie Ross then by Dr. Phyllis Starkey and now by Richard Burden. Then we have the Labor Middle East Council, the Conservative Middle East Council - which was created by Lord Gilmour and Sir Dennis Walters, and was then presided over by Nicholas Soames - and the Liberal Middle East Council, which was presided over by Lord David Steel and is currently presided over by Sir Menzies Campbell.

3. *Political Parties*: Our relations with political parties take place throughout the year and each time I have a visiting dignitary or delegation, I ensure that they meet the leader-

ship of the opposition as well. The busiest period is during the season of the annual party conferences in late September and early October. I usually have one or more fringe meetings, which are extremely important because they help shape perceptions, policies, projections, and predictions.

4. *The Diplomatic Corps:* In a lesser capital, relations within the Diplomatic Corps are more horizontal: a bridge club, a tennis players' network, frequent gastronomic trips from The Hague to Brussels, etc. Such leisurely pursuits are unthinkable in London, and because of the intensity of bilateral relations, the volume of visiting delegations, the size of the community, etc., relations are of a vertical nature. I should add here that the Council of Arab Ambassadors remains an extremely important forum and the resulting joint activities are of great value, which is why I have always drawn the attention of our British interlocutors to the exceptional importance of this council composed of former ministers and those who never wanted to be ministers.
5. *The Media:* Beside the importance of the British media and its pool of sophisticated and knowledgeable journalists, not to mention the heavy presence of international media outfits, London is also the media capital of the Arab World. It hosts all the Pan Arab dailies distributed from Morocco to Muscat, as well as many weeklies and monthlies, and then of course there are the proliferating TV satellite stations, many of which were born in London or have their second most important offices located here.
6. *The NGOs:* This is the largest 'layer' and the one to which I have devoted a huge amount of time. It includes Churches, trade unions, university campuses, think tanks, human rights institutions, solidarity groups, etc. On the lecturing circuit, this is the most demanding category. To take the Churches as an example, I have had the privilege of addressing the Annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and of the United Reform Church and of lecturing twice at Wesley Chapel of the Methodist Church, and I have been in regular contact with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Head of the Roman Catholic Church.

7. *The Palestinian Community*: It might not be as big as the one that exists in the USA, Chili, Canada, Australia, or even Germany but it is an extremely important community, concentrated mainly in the London area, and is in more intense contact with the homeland and the region than other Diaspora communities are.

For example, because London is such an important Arab media center, we probably have here more than one hundred Palestinian journalists, a number second numerically only to that associated with Palestine itself. Throughout the years, many institutions were established in London. The Association of the Palestinian Community, of which I am the patron, has a constitution, a general assembly every two years, and democratic elections, and has already had seven successive presidents. In addition, there are charities such as Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and Interpal, as well as organizations that focus on lobbying and raising awareness such as The Return Center or Arab Media Watch.

We, the Palestinians, have become the Jews of the Israelis and today, because of our geographic dispersal, we are 'a global tribe.' With the right approach, we could turn that into a source of empowerment.

8. *The Arab Community*: There are no accurate figures because in the national census, there is not a category for 'Arabs,' only 'Muslims' and 'Others,' but a conservative estimate would be that there are over 400,000 British Arabs. Politically speaking, it is still an invisible community, the last ethnic minority to be totally unrepresented in both Houses of Parliament. This is due to a combination of factors, including the absence of any governmental encouragement and insufficient assertiveness by the community itself. The Arab Club and national associations are regular interlocutors of the Palestinian delegation.
9. *The Muslim Community*: Now close to two million strong, with five members in the House of Lords and four elected members of the House of Commons, this particular community's electoral weight is increasingly being felt. Since I ar-

rived in London, I have been in regular contact with the Union of Muslim Organizations (UMO) and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and I have lectured at the invitation of the 'City Circle,' a network of second and third generation Muslims who work in the City.

10. *The Jewish Community*: Wherever I happen to live or work, I devote a lot of time to interacting with the Jewish community and many of its institutions. I have frequently lectured at the Liberal Synagogue in St John's Wood, always kept close relations with the Jewish Socialist Group, Jews for Justice, Friends of Mapam, Friends of Peace Now, Ne-turei Karta, etc., and consider June Jacobs, Rabbi David Goldberg and many others personal friends, as does Christ'l.

Some years ago, the *Jewish Chronicle* published, unaltered, a long letter of mine in which I said, "I never compare the Palestinian Nakba/Catastrophe to the Holocaust. Each tragedy stands on its own. I never indulge in comparative martyrology. If I were a Jew or a Gypsy, Nazi barbarity would be the most horrible event in history. If I were a Native American, it would be the arrival of European settlers that resulted in almost total extermination. If I were a Black African, it would be slavery in previous centuries and Apartheid during the last century. If I were an Armenian, it would be the Ottoman/Turkish massacres. If I were a Palestinian – and I happen to be one – it would be the Nakba. Humanity should condemn all the above. I do not know of a way to measure suffering or how to quantify pain but what I do know is that we are not children of a lesser God."

### **The Broader Picture: Evolution of European Perceptions**

1948: European public perceptions of the Palestinian problem have passed through a variety of phases. European anti-Semitism was decisive in the birth then the success of Zionism in Palestine. Without the "Dreyfus Affair" there would not have been Theodore Herzl's manifesto *The Jewish State*. Without Hitler's accession to power in the early 1930s and the Nazi atrocities, Zionism would have remained a minority tendency within Jewish communities. Both Abba Eban and Nahum Gold-

man wrote in a variety of books that the “exceptional conditions” of the birth of Israel would not have been possible without “the indulgence of the international community” as a result of World War II. “Exceptional conditions” meant the atrocious conditions that allowed the majority in Palestine to become the minority and the minority a majority.

Alas, the Palestinian dispossession and dispersion, the Nakba, took place with Europe applauding. We were the victim of the victims of European history and were thus deprived of our legitimate share of sympathy, solidarity, and support.

1956: I do not think that the tri-partite aggression against Egypt in 1956 caused much of a fracture in the political establishment here in the UK. Yes, it shortened Anthony Eden's premiership, yes, the late Lord Christopher Mayhew committed political suicide when it was predicted that he had prime ministerial potential, yes, the late writer Peter Mansfield resigned from the Foreign Office, but there was no major crack in society. In France, its impact was by far more serious. Coupled with the impact of the Algerian independence movement, it helped terminate the Fourth Republic and the political careers of Gaston Deferre and Guy Mollet, brought back de Gaulle to power in 1958, and thus contributed to the reorientation of French foreign policy.

1967: If one reads the book of Livia Rokach, the daughter of the first Mayor of Tel Aviv, or the *Diaries* of Moshe Sharett, one learns that Ben Gurion adhered to two strategic doctrines. One was the periphery theory: since our environment is hostile, we have to make an alliance with the environment of our environment meaning Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. The other doctrine could be summarized thus: we should know how to provoke the Arabs into provoking us so that we can expand beyond the narrow boundaries we had to accept in 1948-49. That model applies perfectly to the escalating crisis that led to the War of 1967. I am reminded here of the words of General Matti Peled who once said, “Believing that Israel was in danger in 1967 is an insult to the Israeli army.”

1967 was an important turning point in terms of the way that Israel was perceived, as it was then that some began to per-

ceive it as an occupier. The facilitation of mass Palestinian departures, the attempts to change the demographic statistics in Israel's favor, the illegal annexation of East Jerusalem, the beginning of settlement building – all helped in tarnishing the Israeli image.

1973: The year 1973 was an important strategic moment and undeniably a demarcation line. Europe (Pompidou/Jobert - Edward Heath) displayed understanding *vis-à-vis* the Arab military initiative to reawaken a dormant diplomatic front. The oil crisis that followed revealed the depth of economic and security level interdependence between Europe and the Arab World and the risk of regional over-spills. The Euro-Arab dialogue was thus initiated and the need for an equitable solution for the Palestinian problem emphasized.

1977: The first electoral defeat by Labor in Israel liberated more segments of Western public opinion anesthetized by the soothing discourse of the Labor leadership and their *savoir-faire* in matters of public relations. The raw discourse of Likud, their vociferous and vehement statements reflected the reality of oppression. Meanwhile, the Kibbutz Movement, this 'paradise on earth,' used to seduce public opinion, was discovered to be a fading phenomenon that never represented more than three percent of society and of the Israeli economy and that was built mainly on confiscated Palestinian land.

1982: The invasion of Lebanon was an eye-opener. It was clearly an unprovoked war, which is why various analysts said back then that it was "a war out of choice, not out of necessity" and many Jewish and Israeli writers announced "the end of the purity of arms."

1987: The year 1987 witnessed the eruption of the first Palestinian *Intifada*, which was mainly non violent, and 1988, the PLO peace initiative of a two-state solution and the start of a new era in which the media begins to balance its coverage and to give more time and space to Palestinian spokespersons conveying our version of history.

## **My Term of Duty in London**

Let me first say that London, for an Arab or a Palestinian diplomat, is an emotionally difficult posting, also that I have to commend all my interlocutors for their profound decency and extreme professionalism.

1990: My landing in town in September 1990 was not a soft one as it coincided with the first Gulf crisis and Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait.

We were accused then of having bet on the wrong horse. My major concern was not to become politically marginalized. I detested Saddam, the occupation of Kuwait, the rapid deployment of foreign troops, and the preparations for war. I kept my adherence to the diplomatic option that I favored. On a David Frost Sunday program I stated, "You have seen Yasser Arafat kiss the cheeks of Saddam but you did not bother to ask what he was whispering in his ear."

1991: With the end of the Gulf war, James Baker started his shuttle diplomacy. From London, we played an important role in projecting the image of the indivisible nature of the Palestinian people and of the Palestinian national movement. In London, several publicized meetings took place between PLO officials, Palestinian personalities from the Occupied Territories, and Diaspora intellectuals such as Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu Lughod. The British Government made it possible for Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi to 'slip' through London to Tunis for consultations. My position was as follows: the PLO is, at the same time, an institution, and an idea. If ten thousand work in the institution, the nine million Palestinians are the powerful vehicle of the idea. The PLO has represented the Palestinian people for over 25 years. Now it will be the Palestinians representing the PLO. I frequently repeated then that the PLO had become "unreasonably reasonable," having accepted that at the Madrid Conference, the Palestinians were "half a delegation, representing half the people seeking half a solution."

1992: While negotiations stagnated in Washington, the Oslo process began – in London, where, on 2 December, the Steer-

ing Committee of the Multilateral Talks held its meetings. Abu Ala'a was the coordinator of the Palestinian negotiating teams but could not – the PLO was still excluded – attend himself, and while the formal official event was taking place at Lancaster House, Abu Ala'a and myself met at the Ritz Hotel with Yair Hirschfield, an assistant of Yossi Beilin, with Terry Larsen, the Norwegian, hovering on the sides.

1993: History is in the making, I kept repeating to myself, in relation to the Oslo breakthrough and the signing on the White House lawn. The specificity of the Palestinian situation: "a leadership in exile, demography dispersed, a geography occupied" could move towards normality or the semblance of normality of "an authority over a demography over a geography".

1994: My application for "family reunification" in East Jerusalem submitted by a distant relative – my mother – was rejected by the occupation authorities. I had planned to abandon politics and diplomacy and start an English weekly in Jerusalem, *The Palestinian*.

Amidst the growing disenchantment with the peace process, my message remained as follows: Israel seeks a diplomatic outcome that will reflect

1. Israeli power and intransigence,
2. The American constant alignment on the Israeli preference,
3. Russian decline
4. European abdication,
5. Arab impotence,
6. What Israel hopes will be Palestinian resignation.

My advice, meanwhile, was to refrain from confusing realism with resignation.

1995: All Palestinian factions abided by an unproclaimed cease-fire, Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist, and the Is-

raeli Government provoked the Islamic tendencies by assassinating Shiqaqi in Malta and the 'Engineer' in Gaza.<sup>2</sup>

1996: The year was marked by successful Palestinian Presidential and legislative elections, the retaliation of the Islamic tendencies in response to the Israeli assassination policy, the war waged by Peres in Lebanon, ending with the Kana massacre, the 'retaliation' of the Palestinian Israeli voters through abstention, and the election of Netanyahu whom I described as "a pyromaniac on a power keg." My lectures are often titled: "From Breakthrough to Breakdown?"

1997: This was the year of diplomatic stagnation, and instead of permanent peace, we lived through the farce of a durable... peace process.

1998: Three meetings between President Arafat and Madeleine Albright took place in London, while America became increasingly irritated with Netanyahu's rigidity, which is no doubt one of the factors that resulted in 1999 in his electoral defeat opposite Barak.

1999: Barak proved to be a monumental disappointment. A complex individual, he rapidly alienated his colleagues within Labor and antagonized his coalition partners and whilst flirting with the Syrian track, effectively froze the Palestinian one.

2000: Barak sought to jump the interim phases and move directly to final status talks. Arafat, on the other hand, let it be known that he believed this to be premature since insufficient homework had been done, while the American side restricted itself to conveying to us Israeli proposals. David Aaron Miller, in a recent candid op-ed in *The Washington Post* titled "Israel's Lawyer" wrote that had the American side presented the "Clinton Parameters" at Camp David in July rather than in December, we would have had an agreement then.

---

<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shiqaqi, who was killed by most probably Mossad agents in October 1995 and the Hamas activist from Gaza, Yahya Ayyash, who was assassinated by a booby-trapped telephone in January 1996 – the Ed..

The failure of Camp David heightened tensions, as did the provocative Sharon visit to the Dome of the Rock. The Mitchell Report, some time later, admitted that the second *Intifada* started by being non-violent and that the ferocious repression by the Israeli side, causing more than a hundred fatalities in the first two weeks, pushed a few on our side to resort, unwisely, to using arms.

2001-2002: In the internal debate, I lobbied for a unilateral Palestinian ceasefire. Clinically, I believed that the Israelis should know that they could not terminate the *Intifada* and that we should know that, by the *Intifada* alone, we could not terminate the occupation and that there was a need for a diplomatic initiative.

2002: The diplomatic initiative occurred when the Beirut Arab Summit adopted the Saudi peace initiative. Alas, it was followed by a Hamas suicide bombing in Netanya. Sharon, offered a choice between reciprocating to a diplomatic overture or retaliating to a military provocation, chose the latter, and the world, suffering from self-inflicted impotence, watched the reinvasion of the already occupied territories. The Nakba is definitely not a frozen moment in history that has recurred sometime in 1948!

2003: The previous September, Tony Blair, at the Labor annual conference, was very warmly applauded when he announced that he would convene an international conference to help resolve the conflict. The conference convened – on ‘Palestinian reforms’ - turned out to be more modest than expected, yet still managed to displease Sharon who tried to sabotage the London gathering by preventing Palestinian ministers from traveling, though fortunately, modern technology and video-conferencing were able to salvage the day. Here in London I did my best to convey the message that reforms, meritocracy, transparency, and accountability were not conditions to be imposed on us by the outside world, but a Palestinian expectation, aspiration, right, and even a duty, but whilst warning that the issue of Palestinian reforms should not become the tree that hid the forest, with the forest, in this case, being an ugly spectacle of occupation and oppression.

2004: Again, during the Labor party conference at the end of September, Tony Blair received the loudest applause for his passage "Come November.... I will make it my personal priority..." Since then, I have often invoked this Blair speech to prove that Yasser Arafat was not the obstacle to peace. At the end of September, Arafat was not dead; he was not even ill. No, by "Come November," Tony Blair meant, "when we have the American presidential elections behind us."

2005: With the disappearance of the founder of the contemporary Palestinian national movement, I frequently refer to Max Weber who spoke of the phases of leadership and legitimacy thus: 1- the traditional phase, 2- the charismatic phase, 3- the institutional phase. The successful presidential elections, with the international monitoring, represent a good omen for the future. The charismatic era having ended, a managerial revolution should now be on the agenda. We all know Sharon's intentions. How the world and the Quartet will carry the peace process beyond the unilateral Israeli disengagement from Gaza remains to be seen.

## **In Conclusion**

We have an excellent working relationship with Her Majesty's Government and with the entire political establishment. In Parliament, it is the pro-Israeli lobby that is on the defensive and that is definitely more comfortable in supporting an Israel run by Labor rather than by the internationally embarrassing Likud. All opinion polls, not only in Britain but also across Europe, show that the trend is overwhelmingly in favor of ending the Israeli occupation that started in 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian state. It is no more a leftwing phenomenon and we also enjoy comfortable majorities among Liberal and Conservative voters. Unlike in 1973, when European governmental positions were more advanced than their public opinions, today, public opinions are now more supportive of Palestinian aspirations than governmental positions are. The future looks promising. It is no longer politically suicidal to be pro-Palestinian. It is no longer electorally rewarding to be anti-Palestinian – quite the opposite.