

August 11, 1992

We
were
driven
to the
Allenby
Bridge

from Amman, where we had gone for consultations regarding the negotiations with Israel over Palestinian self rule, in diplomatic cars with a Jordanian police escort. On the way, I opened the Jordanian daily, *Al Rai*, and read the headline: "The Palestinian Autonomy Agreement, exclusive to *Al Rai*." The article contained the main sections of the self-government agreement we had been working on. It was leaked despite the care taken by Nabil Shaath to collect all the drafts from us.

On the Jordanian side, we were given preferential treatment,

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to the chagrin of the other passengers. We had completed all formalities and were waiting with others for the Israeli soldiers to give us the order to drive our bus across when a young sprightly Jordanian soldier with glinting eyes leaped nimbly onto our bus. He stood on the lower step so that we could only see his head. He had short cropped hair. His radiant face was turned towards the Israeli side of the border.

"Are these the Israeli soldiers?" he turned to us and asked.

We could see two of them. They had long dishevelled hair and walked with heavy steps. They seemed self-absorbed, tired from the oppressive heat.

"These are their soldiers?" He repeated. "These? I could squeeze a dozen of them with my bare hands."

He turned to us and winked. He had a self-satisfied smile on his close-shaven beaming impish face. His dark triumphant eyes filled his face. Then he leapt down energetically waving to us : "*Es sallam Alikum.*"

We rumbled along the loose planks of wood over the metal edifice of this old wobbly bridge, across the most troubled water in the world, on our way home.

When we got to the Israeli terminal, the Israeli woman in orange uniform could not understand why she should not search our briefcases as she did everyone else's. It fell on Mamdouh to explain in his quiet and patient way that we were members of the *Wafd*, the Delegation, and that our briefcases were not to be searched because we kept the negotiating papers in them.

"*Zeh yom shishi - It's Friday,*" the woman soldier said and puffed as Mamdouh extracted his bag from her tired hands. She didn't really care whether she was going to search one more bag or not. Nor did she give a damn as to who the owner of the bag she searched was, a member of the peace delegation or any other sort of Arab, she just wanted to go home. In fact she didn't really see the people across the counter from her. They all looked more or less the same, they were all wretched Arabs. In a tired voice she called: "Yossi. Come here."

Then she dropped her hands and waited. I turned to look at all the people lined up on our side waiting for their turn. We were taking their turn and holding up the line. What were they

thinking of us, the suit-clad men with briefcases (which the bridge security man had described as our "James Bond cases"): pompous and self-important? Did they make allowances because of the nature of our mission? From the way it looked they only seemed to hate our guts for taking their turn.

Our bags were taken for examination and we were asked to wait. Soon it became apparent that this was our punishment: the other passengers were going through, but we were kept waiting.

With the hope of getting a reprieve, I went with Mamdouh to look for the Bridge Commander. We asked a young soldier for his whereabouts. Without saying anything to us, the soldier raised his walkie-talkie to his mouth and called his superior over. We stood before the young soldier in silence. To break the silence I asked: "Why can't you respect simple arrangements such as these? Think of it, if we can't work out something as minor as this, how then can we make peace together?"

I got no response from this heedless young man. It was as though he was enclosed in a thick glass casing. I felt myself slide over the surface of the shell that made him inaccessible and impervious. I was unable to grasp, penetrate or make an impact, unable even to hurt his feelings. My attempt to communicate left neither a dent nor an impression.

The Bridge Commander finally showed up. He was a short man with a round head and big black eyes. He was accompanied by the Customs Officer. I asked the commander: "What are your orders regarding the delegation?"

"No orders," he answered quickly. "We just work things out."

"What does work things out mean? You must have received specific orders and I have the right to know them. To know where we stand."

I was assuming the stance of the legal advisor. But the Commander had said all he wanted to say and avoided me. His customs officer looked kindly at me and said with a charitable smile: "Respect, to treat you with respect."

I don't know why this got at me but I immediately snapped: "You should know that we don't get our respect from you."

I turned to the commander and continued: "I want you to know that we don't ask for privileges. We just want to know where we stand."

"It will be all right," the commander said to placate me. "We just want to look very briefly into your bags to see if there is anything for customs. That's all."

His search was superficial and it was over very quickly. We were moving to the next station with the commander when the customs man turned to me and said: "Now we can be friends." And he stretched his hand to me. I shrugged my shoulders and moved away.

"That's making peace? That's the respect you show?" he asked, then called after me to wait.

I turned back and stood before him, cold and unrepentant. It was then that I realised that he was a Middle Easterner like me. Judging from his accent he probably came from Iraq. He was truly hurt by my remoteness. I was sorry even though I was too proud to admit it. As I turned around, I thought, doesn't it always turn out the same, we Easterners get at each other. I turned silently and trotted behind his blonde superior for the body search.

We stood outside the booths in one line with the benches on both sides of the room filled with other passengers waiting for their turn to be stripped. The silent scrutiny, and the condemnation I saw in their eyes, was worse than anything that could follow.

Our chaperon soldier stayed with us to the end until we were ejected into the midst of the crowded car park in the hot dry heat of the month of *Ab El Harak*, the burning air of August. Hundreds of Palestinians were waiting with their bags, straw hats, metal pots and leather-gilded volumes of the Koran.

Until recently the air-conditioned Israeli terminal with the *Mukhabarat* (security service) room, "strip tease" booths, and the long counters where one's underwear is closely searched, was the last station along this way of the cross. Upon leaving the terminal, one could breath a deep and final sigh of relief, find a taxi, load the bags and be off. Not anymore.

Now there is a new arrangement. The Israeli authorities granted a license to only one bus company to cross from the

bridge terminal to another newly constructed terminal closer to town constructed by the Jericho municipality. This meant that two more fares were added to the expenses of the traveller, one for commuting between the Israeli and the Arab terminals and another for the bus. But this was not the only problem.

Compared to the demand, the buses available were few and far between. When one finally came, the crowds surged towards it and we with them. It was with difficulty that we got on, struggling over the baggage left in the aisle because there was not enough space in the luggage compartment. I sat on a bag and a little boy carried on his mother's shoulder rested his feet on my shoulder. And we all waited.

The bus could not possibly manage to take any more passengers or luggage and yet it was not moving. We tried to get the driver to start it, but he wouldn't. He said he was waiting for instructions. "From whom?" we asked. "From the *masul* — the person responsible," he answered. Who that was, was not clear.

But one old woman had to know. She was on her way to Amman and had loaded her luggage on one bus at the Jericho terminal but when she arrived here it was missing. She pleaded with the driver to tell her who was in charge. But all she could get from him was the retort that she should go speak to the *masul*. The old woman moved away, dragging her long beige dress with the colourful floral embroidery around the collar and along the sides. She did not go very far before collapsing on the tarmac. Then we heard Mamdouh scream from inside the bus.

"Wait, wait. I'm a doctor, let me through." The driver was not moving anyway, and the collapse of the woman had no impact on him. He kept his etched apathetic look about him. The deep diagonal lines on both sides of his face were deeply drawn. His eyes had nothing of that self-satisfied beaming impish smile of the soldier of the same age who had climbed onto our bus on the Jordanian side. The two men seemed to belong to different races. Our driver's eyes were without distance. Tightly held back with the muscles around them, they were the eyes of a man besieged by the unmitigated immediacy of his seemingly ineluctable condition. There was no sign of relief

on that face, contorted with pain and tension with lips stretched thin and bloodless, beaded with sweat.

On the pavement, next to the terminal an Israeli soldier flanked by two women soldiers wearing orange sauntered along. They seemed absorbed in what they were saying and left clouds of smoke behind them from their cigarettes. They didn't acknowledge our existence even with a glance. They had finished with us.

"Yellan baladiet Arikha — God damn the Jericho Municipality," the woman next to me cursed. She was the woman carrying the child whose feet were resting on my shoulders. She and he were wet with sweat now and I was getting my share. I looked up at her and feared that her child would suffer dehydration. He seemed limp with exhaustion.

Before Mamdouh returned, a heavy set man approached the bus and started pushing his big bag up to the door. The bag seemed too heavy for one person to lift.

"Give me a hand," he cried to the driver.

"I'm not a porter," the driver screamed. "Listen. Get out of here."

"I will not budge. I broke my back lugging this thing up and you want me to get off."

"One has to have the strength to cope," a woman next to me said.

When the bus finally began to move, I thought that I had lost sense of the boundaries of my own body and didn't even care. No sooner had we moved a short distance than we heard a loud thump. Then one passenger shouted to the driver: "Stop, stop, that was my bag that fell." But this was a military zone. The bus could pass through from the Israeli zone to our municipal terminal but was not allowed to stop on the way.

Then an Israeli army jeep drove up and waved to the bus driver to stop. We soon learned that the soldier had informed the driver that he was violating his license by carrying more people in the bus than was allowed. He must go back. I was surprised at the muted response of the passengers inside the bus. It was as though we were sapped even of the energy to protest. Only Mamdouh still retained the will to argue and

he went down to plead our case with the soldier.

"Why?" he asked the military man, "do you make people suffer in this way?"

"We make people suffer?" the soldier asked. "The terminal is entirely under your responsibility. We have nothing to do with it."

After some delay, the soldier allowed us to go on and we drove uneventfully to the next Israeli check point separating the Israeli zone from the area under the Jericho municipality. But here we had a bigger problem. The soldiers would not allow us through before checking our papers. To get into the bus was very difficult and as far as the Israeli soldiers were concerned, too risky. Now they insisted: there was no other way than for us to go back and divide up into two buses.

As we sat in the Arab bus, condemned by the Israeli guards to wait again, sweating profusely, tired, weak and confused, it began to be clear to me. Before we had our terminal in Jericho and the right to run our own bus company for commuting between the Israeli and Palestinian terminals, the arrangements were also exhausting, but at least one knew who was in charge. We knew why we suffered and had no doubt that our suffering would end with the end of occupation. The half-measures of the interim self-government will only add confusion to our pain.

Waiting in the hot sun of August in the unbearable heat of Jericho was having its toll on us. We were desperate for a drink of water and asked the soldiers for some. But they had none to spare and blamed our bus company for not carrying any. In any case we had to go back where we came from and maybe there at the Israeli terminal we would be able to get what we needed.

I looked at our driver. He remained as apathetic as he had been all along. I wondered how long it would take him to move. I only hoped we would not have to wait until he figured out who was the *masul*.

Ramallah, 1992