

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

A Palestinian Point of View

Personal Opinions

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FOUAD Y. RAFEEDIE

Interviewed

by

Patricia Homick

on

May 30, 1981

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: FOUAD Y. RAFEEDIE

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Homick

SUBJECT: Palestinian issues, Arabic Community Center of  
Youngstown

DATE: May 30, 1981

H: This is an interview with Fouad Rafeedie for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, A Palestinian Point of View, by Patricia Homick, on May 30, 1981.

Fouad, are you officially a United States resident?

R: Yes.

H: How long have you lived here?

R: I came to the United States in January of 1975, so about six and a half years.

H: Can you describe the city where you lived back home?

R: The city I was born in and lived in all of my life was about six miles from Jerusalem. Its inhabitants are a half million. It is one of the biggest cities in the West Bank. In the West Bank the majority of people are Muslims. There are thirty-five percent Christians. I went to Catholic school there. It depends on agriculture and some light industry.

H: Is it a city that could compare with an American city?

R: Maybe you could compare it with one of the southern states.

H: What did your mother and father do?

R: Both graduated from high school. My dad was self-employed and is retired now. My mom is a housewife.

H: What type of job was your father involved in?

R: He had a mill.

H: When did you come to the United States?

R: I had two options after I graduated from high school there. Since I went to Catholic school I had a scholarship to a university in Italy. The other option that was open to me was the United States because I had four brothers who came to the United States in 1967. They came to Youngstown. They wrote me about Youngstown State University so I came over here because they were willing to help me through college.

H: What American customs, places, people, laws, or anything at all do you find most interesting and unusual?

R: When I used to think about the United States I heard that it was a melting pot where a lot of different ethnic groups operate and work. I found this interesting. In the United States there are no cultural differences, culture mix. That is what I like to see in people--coexistence between people learning about other cultures. That has helped me a lot.

H: I understand that you are a strong supporter of the PLO? How did you first become interested in it?

R: The situation I was born in made me be a supporter of the PLO. When you live in a situation with a lot of oppression and you find people suffering, I think any human being when he thinks about the situation has to do something to change the situation. As a Palestinian I lived under occupation; I saw the misery of occupation, so I decided to do something. Reading about the history of Palestine, I found it is essential, especially to Palestinians, to work hard in order to get the oppression out of the people. If we educated people don't work for our land, who's going to work? There has to be some sacrifice from everybody in order to create an atmosphere where everybody can live together peacefully. Through my family I learned more about the problem. The more I got into school, the more I got into life. Around the tenth grade I became too attached to this problem.

H: I understand you have a brother who was in an Israeli jail?

R: I have two of them. One of them stayed two years and the other about three months.

H: Could you describe their situations?

R: The youngest--he is twenty years old now--there was a demonstration because there was an issue about education in Israel. The authorities wanted to change all the education programs in the West Bank schools and make Hebrew the official language of those schools. Students stood against this and they had a big demonstration. They took him and accused him of being one of

PLO. They put him in jail for two years.

My other brother who was in the United States went overseas in 1973 to visit my family and get married over there. When he got there, at the airport, they took him and they said he was a supporter of the PLO and that they had information from the FBI in the United States that he was active in politics in favor of the PLO. They took him to jail. With pressure from the United States government since he was a citizen of the United States, they released him after a few months under one condition: That he never go back there.

H: Did he ever describe to you the conditions in the jail?

R: Not particularly because when you have a citizenship they treat you better than a regular visitor from the West Bank. As I know from a lot of people, jail is a jail, whether in the United States or in Israel. In Israel it is one step further; torture is the main thing. There is an international organization called Amnesty International, which is right above the human rights. If you read their reports which were submitted to the United Nations and to the Library of Congress in Washington, you will see that Israel has one of the worst records in the world concerning human rights. Israel, Argentina, and Chile, and the Philippines have the most oppression. So the situations in the jails are pretty bad.

H: Other than your involvement with the Arabic Club, in what other ways have you supported the PLO here in the United States?

R: In the United States our main aim is to get the American people aware of what is going on in the Middle East. We feel the American public doesn't hear both sides of the story. The news media over here is all Israel publication. This will give the American people one side of the picture. We had a PLO information center in Washington. We have a lot of organizations concerning Palestine like the Palestinian Women's Organization, the Student Union for Palestine. Our main objective is to get the American people to know more about Palestine and to let them make their own decision of the situation over there, who they favor.

H: Are you a member of any of the branches of the PLO?

R: No, I'm not a member of the PLO. The PLO, as any other government, has branches to organize different sectors of the Palestinian people. They have the labor movement organizations, the student organization. I'm a member of the general union for Palestinian students, which is not affiliated with the PLO in a sense, but at the same time its work is coordinated by the PLO supporters in the United States. I'm also a member of the North American Congress for the Palestinian people here in the United States. We established this Congress one year ago.

H: What has this Congress done?

R: The main purpose is the main thing, to get the American people aware of it. The good thing about it is there are a lot of Americans who are associated members of this Congress. We have a lot of progressive forces in the United States who support the Palestinian cause; this support comes through the Palestinian Congress of North America.

H: Does this Congress meet regularly?

R: It meets three times regularly. The executive committee meets three times regularly each year. The branches, which are the local chapters, like in Youngstown, meet once a month. There is a convention for all the delegates from all the chapters that meet once a year. The highest authorities in the Congress decide about the plans for the next year, programs we should carry, money matters.

H: Is this local group the group that meets at the Arabic Club?

R: Yes.

H: What do you personally believe is the greatest problem in solving the Middle East situation?

R: As a Palestinian, I think if you ask anybody they will tell you that the core problem is the Palestinian issue in the Middle East. There won't be any peace in the Middle East as long as the Palestinian issue is not solved. To me, this problem could be solved by letting all the immigrants who left Palestine go back and live in peace with the Israeli citizens. I'm not saying we should throw out the Israeli citizens. I'm not saying we should throw out the Israeli inhabitants or Jews on the sea. We know we could live in peace together because we used to live that way before 1948; before the establishment of Israel we used to live in peace together. I think these people should be allowed to go back and establish a secular democratic state. By secular I mean religion separated from politics, like in the United States. I believe separation of government and religion is essential. I don't care if a Jew is the president of Palestine, but after the secular democratic state is established I don't care who the official is or the name of the country, as long as that official is elected by the people.

H: I've read about this proposed solution and critics have come up with the point that there aren't any examples in the Middle East of a secular democratic state. Do you think it's still possible to establish?

R: If you discuss the principle as a principle, the principle is right. I think people in the Middle East haven't practiced it so far. That doesn't mean the principle is wrong. What we are

saying is give us a chance. I think if you ask an Israeli about this principle he will tell you yes. Whether it's practical or not we don't know yet. Let's put it to work and see if it is worse than what exists now. If it fails the situation won't be as bad as it is now, so let's give this solution a chance. On the other hand, we give this proposal and the Israelis don't give any other alternatives. The alternative of the Israelis is that the West Bank and Israel is one land and they will never allow the Palestinians to come back. That's not an alternative to what we proposed.

- H: What is the attitude of Palestinian students here at Youngstown State University toward the United States role in the Arab-Israeli situation?
- R: I think if we want to discuss in reality the situation concerning the Americans we should separate between two things; as a Palestinian I'll see a different point of view. There are American people on one hand and the United States government on the other hand. When we say we are against the United States' policies, we say we are against the policies of the government of the United States. We don't have anything against the American people. I think the American people are fine; they are one of the best people all over the world. Because of my experiences with American students at YSU, they are ready to hear your point of view. The problem is that are these representative of the White House or not. I think the Zionist lobby, the Jewish forces in Washington, are so strong that they put pressure on the administration to take policies which are not . . . All we are asking for is an evenhanded policy in the Middle East; treat the people the same way. If you look at the interests of the United States in the Middle East, I think they have more interest to be with the Arabs than to be with the Israelis. I'm not saying the United States should believe Israel. I'm saying they should look at the situation. My experience is that the more you tell Americans about Palestinians, the more they lean toward you. When I talk about this issue I differentiate between the American people and the United States government. All we're asking of the United States government is to treat the Palestinian people as people, not as a bunch of refugees, not like a gang of terrorists. We are a country of four million people now according to the United States' latest issue concerning education. Palestinians are one of the most educated people in the Middle East. I think as a human being we deserve the right to live; we deserve the right for determination. I know the American people have that much pressure to put on the state department compared to the pressure of the Zionists and Israelis. I think the Zionist forces in the United States have much more power than the American people.

An example of this is that General Brown, one of the best generals in the United States Army in 1976, he said let's have an evenhanded policy in the Middle East and the next day they

kicked him out of office. The same thing happened with Andrew Young at the United Nations. He sat down and talked to a representative of the PLO and it was a big issue in the United States and it cost him his seat as an ambassador to the United Nations. That shows you how much pressure the Zionist lobby has on the state department and the government of Washington.

H: Do you know anything about the Palestinian organization here on campus? Are you involved in that organization at all?

R: I'm a member of the executive committee of the general union for Palestinian students. Since I graduated in March, I can no longer be an executive member. We started this idea for a general union of Palestinian students last year on campus. We had two lectures, some movies. We had a table at homecoming. The problem until now was that the American people are not willing to come and attend our lectures. We don't know if American students are worried about politics all over the world that much. I think as long as American people are satisfied economically in the United States, they don't worry that much about the problems of the world. To me, what's happening in the Middle East is affecting the American citizen whether he likes it or not. There is the oil issue in the Middle East. There is the danger of confrontation between the Soviet Union and the American forces there in the Middle East. It's a hot issue and a very dangerous spot in the world. The American public should be aware of what is going on in the Middle East and overseas because it's going to affect them, directly or indirectly.

H: What was your reaction to an impression of Yasir Arafat's news making appearance at the U. N. a few years ago?

R: The problem with the world community is that they never treat the PLO as a representative body of the Palestinian people. The world looks at the Palestinians as a bunch of refugees who are scattered all over the world; they are not organized; they are a bunch of terrorists; that is why they are not entitled to self-determination. By coming to the United States, Yasir Arafat proved a point that we are a part of the world community. We are not a bunch of refugees; we are a people. When you look at the United Nations resolution after Yasir Arafat visited the United States, it stated that the Palestinian people are people. It is not a refugee problem. There are four million people and we should solve their problem. This is one of the biggest achievements the PLO achieved. Let the world community recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. 105 countries voted that the Palestinians are people and they are entitled to self-determination. At the same time a resolution was adopted quoting Zionism as a form of racism. Zionism is a political idea which uses religion in order to achieve its goals; it is different from Judaism. I am not against Judaism.

- H: Various political scientists are suggesting that the PLO's influence is declining due to three reasons: One is the divisions within the PLO. Two is the emphasis on force. Three is the all-or-nothing attitude intent upon destroying the Zionist state. How would you react to these charges?
- R: Concerning the division of the PLO, we don't look at different views in the PLO as division in the PLO. There are a lot of groups with different ideas concerning the struggle to liberate Palestine, but at the same time they all agree on one aim, which is the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of a secular, democratic state. There are a lot of points of view on what should be done in order to achieve that aim. That is not a division.

An example of this is Vietnam. In Vietnam there were thirty-six groups fighting for unifying and the liberation of Vietnam. They agreed on one principle in the end and succeeded. Different points of view are healthy in any revolution or in any movement or organization. When you see different points of view you see discussion and the best will surface in the end.

Concerning the second thing, why we resort to force, we don't. Since 1948 we've been trying to solve this problem through peaceful channels. We came to the United Nations after 1948 and they took a lot of resolution, but the Israelis didn't give up. The United Nations doesn't have the power to make its resolution work. An example of this is when did the United Nations force any oppressors to leave a country? They can't; they don't have the power to do this. Over twenty years there have been peaceful channels and it didn't work, so the only option we were left with was the arms struggle. We didn't declare the arms struggle because we like to kill people. I hate to see innocent people die, but give me another alternative. There are two ways: Either solve it through peaceful channels or solve it through arms. Unfortunately, the world community didn't give us a chance to solve it in peaceful ways, so we have to resort to arms.

- H: Within the PLO itself, aren't certain groups more peaceful than others?
- R: Yes.
- H: Couldn't that hurt the PLO in the long run? If most of the groups of the PLO were able to come up with a peaceful solution, what if they did solve the Middle Eastern situation? How about one of those more radical groups, isn't that a possibility that it could hurt the PLO?
- R: You're right on this point. In one sense I disagree with you. I think in any organization there are radicals and nonradicals. In the United States you have liberal democrats, conservative



republicans, and the KKK, the Communist party, the Nazis. Even in the United States there is a lot of extreme. In the PLO there are radical groups, communists, and moderates. This is the time to deal with the moderates of the PLO because the leadership of the PLO right now is moderate. Yasir Arafat is moderate and we should deal with him now. I'm afraid that after Yasir Arafat goes the PLO will turn more radical and it will be hard to deal with the PLO. This is the time people should start thinking. We're not talking about the destruction of Israel as people; we're talking about the destruction of Israel as an establishment, as an entirety. If you look at Israel now, if you're not a Jew you can't be a citizen of the state of Israel. This is bad. I'm a Palestinian who was born there and came here to the United States. I can't go back and visit my family unless I get a permit from the government of Israel. That is impossible to get because they know I'm active politically in the United States. An Israeli who is an American citizen that was born in Russia or France could go there anytime and get a citizenship. We are talking about the destruction of Israel not as people, but the destruction of the establishment of Israel and establishing a secular democratic state.

H: I would like to discuss the Arabic Club of Youngstown. I understand that you're involved extensively in that. What exactly is your position? Are you on the board of directors?

R: I was on the board of directors last year. Now our main thing is to start an Arabic school to teach our children who were born in the United States, the heritage and the culture, and the language of the people. Last year we started Arabic classes. We have thirty-six students now, most of them who were born over here. We also have two American girls who are interested in the language and come and learn the language. My position in the club now is that I'm responsible for this program.

We are also trying to establish a separate budget from the community center because there are a lot of students who come from refugee camps that don't have a lot of money. There are a lot of people who have grocery stores that are self-employed and have a lot of money. We are trying to push through the community center an effort to get each store to put \$20 each month in a separate budget to go to help needy Palestinian students at YSU. I think we are starting the first step of this next week. We put it forward to the club and the club agreed with the community center and we are going to start working on this thing.

H: Can you tell me a little bit more about the classes? How often do they meet? Who teaches them?

R: We meet once every week, Saturday, at the community center. The session is three hours. The first two hours is basically

education. We got books from overseas. They are the same books they go through in first and second grade. The third hour we have some kind of game for them because if you put a child through three hours of intensive education they will get bored. We gave them games or songs. There are four teachers taking care of this. They are not special education majors or education majors. I think they have the ability to interact with the children though. I noticed that if you get the children to like you on a personal level, they get more from what you say. What we try to do is let them like us on a personal level; this way we will achieve more with them.

H: Is there any possibility of opening up classes to adults?

R: There is a possibility, but it is hard to do in Youngstown because we don't have a specialized body. If you don't have an experienced teacher, adults may find it harder. Some adults have never experienced the Arabic language either. The children hear their parents talk Arabic. We have a lot of letters in Arabic and pronunciation is very hard for Americans. It is not impossible, but it takes time and it takes a lot of learning to do it. I think that is a good suggestion though.

H: Can you tell me how long the Arabic Club has existed?

R: It has existed since 1969. We used to rent a building from a church on Shehy Street. In 1975 we decided to buy our own building and put it in a central area around the city. We chose Belmont Avenue.

H: Who provided the funds?

R: The members of the club. We never had any support from outside. We have about fifty-six Arab stores in the area who are willing to help. When you ask them for a contribution they will give it. Every year we have one party especially for the club. We have a picnic outside and have Arab food and dancing. We do this to collect money. I think we're doing a good job with this. The building is almost paid for.

H: Do you charge membership fees also?

R: Yes. Beside the contribution there is a fee that members pay which form a big chunk of the financial aspects of the club.

H: Do you charge by the year or by month?

R: Yearly. If you want to pay it monthly though, you could. We charge \$10 for businessmen and \$3 for students; we know the students don't have that much money to pay. When you apply to be a member in the club you have to pay a fee, like \$50, but the student has to pay \$10 to be a member. That is

when you get in the first time. We try to make it easy on everybody to join because we think this is a good thing to have in a community.

H: Are there a lot of Americans who attend the Arabic Club?

R: Unfortunately, no.

H: About how many people attend a weeknight and how many on the weekend?

R: Total there are about fifty to sixty on weekdays. On weekends there are probably sixty to 100. When we have special activities there are more than that. The hall that we have, it is not a big hall; it holds 150 and we could fill it.

H: What types of special events do you have?

R: There are three important things we celebrate. One of them is the Partition of Palestine, which is May 15. That day they established the state of Israel. We celebrate the Land Day, which is March 31. That was the day the people overseas arose against the Israeli occupation and said it was their land and wouldn't leave. The third event is the Woman Day. We feel the Western Hemisphere had a bad idea about the Palestinians and Arabs in general concerning women. They say they don't treat women good; women are inferior to men. What we try to establish, especially in our people, is the idea of equality between men and women. May 8 of every year we celebrate the woman day. These are the three main things we celebrate. Besides this there is some centralized demonstration in Washington, New York, and Chicago. We get busses and get people to go there. We associate with Americans through the festival they have every year in Stambaugh Auditorium. The community center sponsors a booth over there with Arabic food and dancing upstairs.

H: You keep calling it the community center and other Arabs tell me it is the Arabic Club. What is the official name?

R: The official name is the Arabic Community Center of Youngstown.

H: The other Arabs tell me about political meetings you have at the Arabic Club and they talk about collecting large sums of money for the PLO. Is that correct?

R: Yes. We feel that as long as we are Palestinians living in the United States there are two ways to support the PLO, to support our cause. One is to publicize our cause to the American people. Secondly, it is to contribute to the cause by sending it some money overseas, not only for military purposes, because there are hospitals run by the PLO for people who got hurt in the war. There are children who lost their mothers and fathers and somebody has to take care of them. There are

a lot of expenses and a lot of aspects of the PLO. The problem here is that they think of the PLO as a military thing. We have seven institutions of the PLO. We have the cultural institution, the social institution, the education institution, health and care facilities, a literature institution, and folklore and dance institution. All these things should be supported by the Palestinian people.

H: How often do you hold these gatherings for the purpose of raising money?

R: Three times a year.

H: Can you give me a rough idea of about how much you collect?

R: It depends on the economic situation. When the steel mills were working and business was booming we would collect a lot of money. These days the unemployment is so high and inflation is so high that there is not that much money coming to the people through grocery stores they have. We don't collect big amounts. The idea of it is not to collect a big amount of money. The idea is to let people participate, to put effort into this cause. The main thing is to get people to support the cause.

H: Are there other Arabic organizations in nearby cities such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh that have similar centers and conduct similar meetings?

R: In Akron we don't have a center for the community. We have an organization of Arabic students and a general union for Palestinian students. In Cleveland, since they have a bigger community, they have their own club and carry the same activities similar to the ones we carry in Youngstown. New York has three centers: One in New Hampton and two in Brooklyn. It is the same thing in San Francisco. In most cities in the United States there are centers. If there are not centers there are student organizations.

END OF INTERVIEW