

'We are not second class citizens, we are fifth class citizens': Interview with Educational Bookshop owner Mahmoud Muna

BY PAMELA RILLON - MAY 6, 2014

There it was, in the middle of the frenzy of Salah Eddin Street, the oasis called "The Educational Bookshop". Highly recommended to me in my home country of Chile, the recommendations fell short. I was dazzled. I loved its spectacular modern architecture, bookshelves, coffees, muffins and an atmosphere that only the magnificent city of Jerusalem can offer. Every time I went, Mahmoud Muna was attending the cash register. As a manager of the family business he always greeted me with a quiet and Zen moderation. A patience that contrasted with my hyperventilating Latina blood that fueled me to buy books as if the world were ending. With infinite patience, Mahmoud helped me buy piles of books (book tax in Chile is 19%), and assisted me in locating difficult to find publications that Chilean-Palestinians friends had requested I bring back for them.



MAHMOUD MUNA (PHOTO: PAMELA RILLON)

During the long hours that I spend at the bookstore, I wondered about how is it to be an Arab resident in East Jerusalem. One day my journalist soul couldn't hold it anymore. I asked for an interview. I thought I would have to argue why. He did not resist. Jerusalemites know they are world news.



THE EDUCATIONAL BOOKSHOP IN EAST JERUSALEM. (PHOTO: PAMELA RILLON)

Raised in the city's schools and having done three years of studies in local universities, he did not finish due to the political situation. After the last Intifada, Mahmoud leaves to study in the UK. From Europe he returned more open minded, and with a degree in Computer Science, a MA in Digital Media from the University of Sussex and a MA in Communications and Public Relations from Kings College in London. Mahmoud was very happy in England. The multiculturalism really captivated him, as did the dream of staying ten years there to establish a career. However, he also knew that wish was impossible to reach. Any citizen of the world with a job offer can stay in any country, as long as he wants, but not him. He doesn't have that right; instead, he has a duty.

Living Inequality

In a corner of the bookshop we talked and sometimes laughed. Well, I laughed, and he with his usual parsimony, smiled. Two words into the conversation and I knew I was in front of a highly educated person, but at the same time very grounded and practical.

Is there a dilemma of being a Jewish and democratic state?

It's a big discussion now. You can't have a Jewish and democratic state. I don't consider Judaism as an ethnicity; I consider it as a religion. For me anyone can be Jewish, and any person can stop being Jewish. This seems different than the views of the state of Israel, which believes that you are born Jewish. This is a very important junction, because it makes a huge difference in how we perceived the state and how they perceived us.

How does the state perceive you?

For them, there is not a problem of saying a Jewish state for the Jewish people, because for them Jewish people is like talking about a nationality. It's like saying France is for the French, Germany is for the Germans, Israel is for the Jewish people. For me, Israel's statement is unadaptable to democracy, because Judaism is a religion and in the 21st century we don't have religious states. We have the Vatican, Iran, we have Saudi Arabia, but I don't think the world is very happy with them. In the 21st century we are looking for democratic states that represent everyone regardless of their religion, color, ethnicity...

Many countries in Latin America call themselves Catholic, but they are democratic.

Exactly, because the laws of the countries are civic. The people who decided on what is possible, what is allowed or not are not the people of the church, are the people in the parliament. In Israel we have a parliament, but it is

hugely influenced by the religious institutions. How can we be non-Jewish in a Jewish state? We will definitely be discriminated against from the start. Because we belong to a state, that doesn't belong to us technically. Because if you say a Jewish state and I'm not Jewish, then it is not my state.

If Israel separates religion from the state more, would you accept it as a Jewish state?

Then you wouldn't say a Jewish state. Because you don't say in Chile, a Christian state. You say the state of Chile with a majority of people being Christians. You can say the Israeli state, but not the Jewish state. Just like Jordan or Syria or Egypt are democratic states –to some extent, of course- but they are not Muslims states. The problem here is that Israel is not defining itself as an Israeli state, is defining itself as Jewish state.

If they would give you equal rights...

Personally, and this probably is not the case for many people, I wouldn't mind belonging to the state of Israel if it decided tomorrow not to be a state for the Jewish people, but a state where anyone can live equally.

You wouldn't mind the symbols, the flag, the star...?

I don't mind the star... because I'm not religious anyway. It doesn't matter as long as I'm equal to anyone else in this state.

You wouldn't mind to become an Israeli?

I mind being an Israeli now, under the framework that exists now. But generally if we speaking about a state that is fully democratic, that just happens to be called Israel, that just happens to have a flag with a Jewish star, I don't care. Because all of these are just symbols.

Is your way of thinking, consider too liberal in your community?

Maybe, but I got over the emotions that it has to be called Palestine, it has to be the flag of Palestine (he sighs). I don't think it matters. Once we are equal, we have to get busy with our daily lives, we can get busy of having a decent economy, making good for our country, taking care of the environment, taking care of each other, like any other state. In the end, it's all about having a decent life.



The Status of Palestinians

In Israel/Palestine if you are an Arab, you are going to be classified in general in four different categories. You can be either a citizen of Israel (the ones that remained within the Israel borders when Israel was founded in 1948); you can be a resident of Jerusalem (Palestinians that became part of Israel, when Israel occupied the city after the Six Days War of 1967). You can be a Palestinian of the West Bank and in the last place of the pyramid a Palestinian

from Gaza. According to Mahmoud, Palestinians of Jerusalem, live in a real limbo. “We are residents, but not citizens. This a very weird situation, because if I go to Chile and spent five years, I will become a resident and if a stayed another five years I would became a citizen, in here we are residents, we never qualify for the next step”.

It is a permanent status?

No, actually we have to renew it every two years. So that's why if we leave the country for four or five years our residency becomes a question. You live in a country, you pay taxes, but you always remain a resident and all because you are not Jewish.

What does this residency allowed you?

It allows us to travel inside historic Palestine, inside Israel and inside the West Bank, it allows us to own land, buy and sell houses as if we were citizens, but it doesn't allow us to vote in the Israeli Parliament and doesn't allowed us to live anywhere else outside Jerusalem, because the minute we leave anywhere outside Jerusalem we lose our residency. So all people in Jerusalem fight day and night to stay in Jerusalem and the state always asks us about our documentation to prove that we live in here. So we always have to collect our tax payments, our bills, electricity, gas to prove that we live within what Israel define as the borders of Jerusalem.

Do you feel that your options are limited?

It limits your options of where to live, where to work, where the kids go to school, it limits your life. And this it is not something for a few years, this is your whole life, where you have to make the decision or either continue to live in Jerusalem or somewhere else.

Is that the reason why you returned from the UK?

After my studies in the UK I would have liked to stayed for ten years to establish my career a little bit more and then come back to my country. That's what I envisioned for myself. But I couldn't do this. Because if I stayed for ten years in the UK, I wouldn't be allowed to come back. So I would have to stay forever in the UK.

What did your friends say about your decision of coming back?

Most of my friends not even understand why would I leave the UK to go back to the misery of living in Jerusalem.

Why you did it?

I have a duty. I'm an educated guy, if I leave Jerusalem, then the city will not have very educated people. I can't lecture the world on the problem of Palestine. I myself can't forfeit this fight that is strong and difficult. And this means that I have to confine my life in Jerusalem. If I compare it to the UK, then this is a downgrade for my career, for my life. But at one point I was thinking, eventually I am going to have a family, have kids. I can't take away their right to live in Jerusalem. And on the national level it is letting go the battle.

At the Hilton for 120 Years

The problem of land in Jerusalem is dramatic. Mahmoud says that land prices have increased hugely. “About 1,000 square meters in Jerusalem costs not less than two million dollars, it is an amazing amount of money. In the West Bank you can buy the same for ten thousand dollars”.

What do people do?

People start building on top of their houses, building expansion. But to do so, you required Israeli permissions. And this is a long, long and expensive procedure. So what do you have to do? You build without permission. And then the State has the excuse to come and destroy your house. For Europeans it could sound perfectly normal for a democratic state to do that, but the problem is that Israel omits that they don't give permits.

What happen if you follow the procedure?

If you comply with the long Israeli system, it could take — like with my family — eight years to get the permit. Just the paper work cost us half a million dollars. I calculated that for that amount of money, my whole family could have stayed at the Hilton Hotel for 120 years. That is to give you an idea of how expensive it is to build houses.

Why do you think Israel is doing this?

Israel wants to push the Palestinians outside Jerusalem. They want to make our lives so difficult, so expensive, so impossible, that you have to live outside the city. Once you live outside Jerusalem you lose your residency. And you are not associated in anyway to the state of Israel. So the state becomes more Jewish and less Arab.

Where is Israel pushing you?

To the West Bank, like Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, or any place in the world.

Can you move to another place in Israel?

No, if you leave Jerusalem, you can't live in Israel. You can't become a citizen; your residency is in Jerusalem. So moving to Tel Aviv is like moving to another country. You lose your residency.

To Vote or Not to Vote

Regarding political representation, the Palestinian of Jerusalem don't vote in Israel and their vote in the last Palestinian elections was just symbolic — "to establish that Jerusalem is Palestinian." They are not represented by the Palestinians or the Israelis. "We are lost," claims Mahmoud.

Can you vote for municipal elections?

Even though we pay taxes, we decide not to vote because we don't want to give authority to the municipality over us. If we vote, we would have to recognize the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem. If you engage in the system, it is one step towards the recognition. We are 30% of the voting power of Jerusalem. But we don't have a single way to influence the Israeli municipality.

Have you thought about maybe changing the strategy?

(He sighs) This probably needs a revision. Might need to rethink it. Maybe we should engage, so we can change it. Meanwhile we suffer.

Loving Local

Mahmoud laughed when I suggested that this system must have affected the marriage market. "You want to go personal" he said. "Of course", I answered mischievously. He told me that this point is really important, because if you marry outside Jerusalem, "she can't come here and if you go outside to live with her, in a few years you lose your right to live in Jerusalem". He maintained that historically the university was the place for love, but this has stopped. "Because now people can't move between the cities anymore. Now the place where the person lives is one of the criteria when you meet someone".

So you ask friends not to set you up with someone that is not from outside Jerusalem?

Basically the parents do the match making. It's a bit weird. But your mother is in charge of finding someone from the city. But I think these types of limitations are not healthy in any society. There is an increase level of diseases. Because this entire people are from the same pool of genes.

So this system has affected you in every way possible.

The birth rate is dropping and this is not because of modernity, it is because of the political system. The occupation has gone into every small element of our life. Even in how we get married, choose our love, or what we choose to study.

What is the effect on education?

When you choose what to study, you need to know that you are going have to find a job in Jerusalem, so you need



to study something that can secure you a good life here. It's not about your dream, your passions, what you love, it is about in which direction is the economy of Jerusalem going and I think this is catastrophic. On the other hand, universities are not international, not even national. Everyone knows each other, they are either family or neighbors, the teacher is from the same city. The university education is dropping as well because of the situation. The occupation is a political structure sitting on your neck that one day will be over, but the effects of it are going to stay with us for generations.

Fifth Place

Mahmoud has to run. He has received a lot of phone calls. He is a busy man. I keep him for the last questions.

Do you think Palestinian in the West Bank are in a better situation than the residents of Jerusalem?

In some ways it's better and in some ways worse. It's better because people in Ramallah can move to Bethlehem, to Jenin, and then go back because you have this continuity within a state. They have more freedom, but limited. Because the minute you want to do something that the occupation doesn't allow you to do, you remember that you are not free.

In what way are you in a worse situation?

I have to interact with the Israeli occupation every day. I have to pay taxes, if there is a crime I have to go to the Israeli police... I get reminded every day that these people are occupying me against my will. And they don't treat us very well. If I go to the bank, for example, I can bring them a lot of money, but they'd rather not have my money at all, they are forced to open an account for me.

What do you think about the situation of Palestinian citizens of Israel?

They are an example that we might want to adapt. They accept Israel as their state, and they try to change it from within. A lot of things had happened to their identity, they don't speak Arabic that much, they speak Hebrew. They became part of the system, even though the system still refuses them, but it does it in a less harsh way than they refuse us. In Jerusalem we have this choice in front of us. Basically it is being more Palestinian or being more Israeli. For now we are in the limbo. A lot of people think we have to join the Israeli example, the problem with this is that those guys have been in this fight for 60 years and they haven't achieved anything.

Do you think they are second class citizens?

No, not second. Because first you have the Ashkenazi, then the Arab Jews, then the black Jews.

So they are fourth class citizens?

Yes, actually they are. It's quite funny.

So you are the fifth class citizens?

Yes, we are the fifth, and then come the Palestinians of the West Bank and then the ones in Gaza. (We laugh).

