



PROFILE

Hanan Ashrawi

Poet, academic, feminist, diplomat and, above all, nationalist—Hanan Ashrawi is all of these. But it was as the articulate and impassioned spokesperson for the Palestinians at the Madrid peace conference in November last year (and more recently in Moscow and Washington) that Ashrawi has come to the attention of the world at large. She is now widely admired in both East and West, in the Occupied Territories as much as in the Palestinian diaspora, in the West Bank villages and in the corridors of international diplomacy.

Together with the other members of the Palestinian team, Ashrawi performed so well at Madrid that the Israelis had considerable regrets at having excluded the familiar and more easily-targeted figure of Yasser Arafat. When Yitzhak Shamir was interviewed in Israel soon afterwards he reacted to an unwelcome question by snapping at the journalist: "You must have learned from Hanan Ashrawi."

Born into a middle-class Christian family in Jerusalem, Ashrawi now lives in the West Bank town of Ramallah. After graduating from the American University of Beirut, she received her doctorate in the US, but returned to take up a teaching position at Bir Zeit University on the West Bank where she is now Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Deploring the brain drain from occupied Palestine, Ash-

rawi has always believed that Palestinian writers and intellectuals have a special responsibility.

Ashrawi's sophisticated use of the English language, the sharpness of her intellect and her skill at handling the media are clearly assets for the Palestinian movement. It was she, for example, who wrote the well-received speech given—in English—by the leader of the Palestinian delegation at Madrid.

It was her achievements as writer, critic and teacher on her own home ground, however, which made her reputation throughout Palestine. This is not to say that she has a history of high profile activism. On the campus of the American University of Beirut—a hotbed of revolutionary politics in the 1970s—she was not particularly well known. Nor can it be said that she has suffered a great deal in personal terms during the Intifada. In the increasingly repressed Occupied Territories a spell in an Israeli prison is fast becoming almost a prerequisite among those (especially the youths) seeking to be taken seriously as nationalists, and Ashrawi has so far been spared this 'honour'.

One of the consequences of Israel shutting down Palestinian institutions of learning in the Occupied Territories has been that Palestinian academics such as Ashrawi, Sari Nusseibeh and others have been free (if that is the right word) to enter the political process more committedly. The leadership in the territories has thus taken on a new, more intellectual and more Westernised look.

Yet it would be a mistake to deduce from this—as the Israelis sometimes suggest—that the West Bank leadership operates somehow autonomously from the PLO. Ashrawi and the others have taken considerable personal risks in declaring their allegiance to and maintaining contact with the PLO. Before the Madrid conference, Yasser Arafat

met Ashrawi and others secretly in Tunis, and even during the conference itself they flew to Morocco for further consultations. It would also be a mistake to think that the decision to choose Ashrawi as spokesperson was made anywhere but at the PLO headquarters in Tunis although, of course, she had to be acceptable to the Arab states, the USA and Israel.

Since Ashrawi happens to be a woman, the question of her stand on feminist issues is inevitably raised. In Algeria, women fought side by side with men in the struggle against the French for independence; the rise of the Islamic movement now threatens their hard-won gains. In consequence, the position of Middle Eastern women as a whole is once again under the spotlight. For Palestinian women, who have always regarded their Algerian sisters as revolutionary role models, the dilemma is even more acute.

Ashrawi notes that: "Of course there is a danger that if women's work is primarily a reaction to an immediate external challenge, and not part of a long-term social and economic infrastructure, that all the advances will recede once the threat is removed." While regarding herself first and foremost as a nationalist, she argues for a feminist agenda hand-in-hand with the Palestinian nationalist agenda.

Elements of the Islamic movement in the Occupied Territories (HAMAS) are generally opposed both to the peace process itself, and to the very idea of a woman assuming the kind of high-profile public role Ashrawi carved out for herself. The fact that she has never been personally condemned by such elements is but one more proof of the general respect and admiration she has won by her achievements both inside and outside Palestinian ranks.

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