

Getting past the black and white

Aug. 26, 2008

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Before she actually came here, Neheda Barakat thought of the country as "scary, mystical and an unknown entity." Although the Lebanese-born journalist likes to think that she arrived with an open mind, she could not escape Israel's image abroad as "the aggressor - nothing more, nothing less."

Now, after having almost completed a six-month assignment for Search for Common Ground - a Washington-headquartered nonprofit organization that works to transform the way the world deals with conflict by moving away from adversarial approaches toward collaborative problem solving - and having engaged in numerous in-depth conversations with both Israelis and Palestinians, she understands that nothing in their relationship is black and white.

"You see both sides and you have to be a psychological contortionist to unravel it," she says.

After a successful career with the Melbourne, Sydney and Los Angeles bureaus of Australia's Channel Nine network and later the Australian Broadcasting Authority, Barakat, 46, took up a special assignments role with Al-Jazeera English in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Then in 2006, she accepted a special assignment to work for the UN in New York producing and scripting feature stories about UN projects and matters of special concern.

Her contract with Search for Common Ground was to assist an independent Palestinian News Service which had already been established to get its act together so that it could operate in a more professional manner in accordance with international journalistic standards. She worked mainly in Bethlehem and Ramallah while commuting from Jerusalem.

A passionate professional committed to the ground rules of journalism, she was dismayed with what she found in the Palestinian independent news network.

"The resources aren't there and the skills aren't there," she said over coffee in Jerusalem.

Always ready to tackle a challenge, Barakat, recalling that she had been taught by some of the great teachers in Australian journalism, decided to try to pass on what she had learned to the Palestinian journalists.

The first thing she discovered was that they knew almost nothing about investigative journalism. "They don't know anything about reporting beyond one and a half minutes of news," she says. "They were doing stuff beyond their capability."

Part of the project was capacity building, which meant taking on interns. Although they were very keen, they had no skills, she says, adding: "All they'd been taught was cut and paste."

Moreover, none of them spoke Hebrew; nor, indeed, did the journalists with whom Barakat was working. "I don't know how they could be objective if they didn't know the language of the other

side."

As a wordsmith, it also bothered her that the terms used by the Palestinian journalists were biased and non-objective. She took exception to their definition of martyrs, and told them bluntly that the people they considered to be martyrs were suicide bombers and that this was how they were perceived by the Israelis. She also balked at the Palestinians' use of the word "apartheid."

For that matter, she also finds fault with the Israelis, who too often refer to terrorists as Arabs rather than Palestinians. "You have to differentiate," she says. "When you say 'Arab,' it's indicting an entire region. On either side, it's not the language of peace."

Many of the arguments Barakat had with the Palestinian journalists were based on semantics. When they referred to the conflict as an "apartheid war," she told them that they had to delete it from the script. For their part, "the Israelis call it an anti-suicide bomber war," she told them.

"Once you explain it to them," she continues, "they understand, but it will be a long time before it's automatic. It's conditioning. You have to apply some self-examination."

A specialist in current affairs, Barakat initiated a feature on Fatah - Hamas: Truce and Beyond. The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation expressed interest, she says, but the program never went on the air, "because they didn't like what the Hamas guy said about [Palestinian Authority] President [Mahmoud] Abbas."

The PBC also refused to air another program in which a speaker from Kuwait, another from Lebanon and a local Palestinian discussed how the Arab world uses Palestinians as political pawns. Barakat was angry at the rejection because hard-hitting current affairs programs are supposed to ask hard questions.

Her advice to the PBC is: "Get a grip. Get a reality check."

A feature that got a better reception was a discussion on peace prospects in the light of changing administrations. Participants were Amira Oren of the Foreign Ministry, an Arabic-speaking representative of the US State Department and an adviser to Abbas. The program was conceived in the immediate aftermath of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's announcement that he would not run in the upcoming Kadima leadership primary and with the realization that the other major players, the PA and the US, would also have a change of leadership within the next six months.

In her attempt to teach objectivity and balance, and given the time frame in which she was in the region, Barakat chose 60 years as one of the first subjects for a feature. She didn't specify it as 60 years of Israeli statehood, nor did she mention the word *Nakba* (catastrophe) in the script.

Although she speaks Arabic, she wrote the script in English because she did not think that her command of Arabic was at a level to be writing in that language. "I never worked so hard on terminology," she says.

The script dealt with people on both sides of the conflict, and the objective was to produce a Western-style current affairs feature where nothing was off limits. "I was trying to show them the professional approach and to demonstrate how this would be a breakthrough for them as journalists. They had to learn that there's one side and the other side to the story - and there's also the unadulterated truth."

In presenting the outline, she pushed beyond the ideas with which Palestinians have grown up, and got them to think about what they have done for themselves over the last 60 years. More than that, she got them to go out to Nablus and Ramallah to do a man-in-the-street survey on precisely that question.

What was interesting was that in Nablus, the respondents could not see beyond the occupation and almost invariably said that they wanted their land back. In Ramallah, however, the respondents tended to be broader in their thinking and blamed the British more than the Israelis for their predicament. They were also more inclined to self-criticism and agreed that they'd been taking aid rather than trying to help themselves.

"They do hope there will be peace," says Barakat. "Like everyone else they're tired of the situation. It's eroding their society."

As a Lebanese, who came to Australia at 10 with her parents and six siblings, Barakat could conceivably have grown up with an anti-Israel bias. But the Middle East conflict - except for the war in Lebanon - was not discussed in their home, she says. Her perceptions of Israel were influenced not by her home environment, but by how it was portrayed in the media.

"It's been personally edifying," she says of her time here. "I've been humbled by the experience. Israel and the Israelis are seen through the prism of conflict. There's only one dimension."

What surprised her is the amount of interaction between Israelis and Palestinians and the number of Israelis who are involved in the Palestinian cause. This gives her great hope for the future. "I say to people: They do live together. When you see that, you say it's going to happen. It may take a long time, but it will happen."

She still finds "hard views" among the Palestinians vis-à-vis any accommodation with Israel, and says to them: "No one is asking you to forget, but you must forgive and go on so that you can benefit yourselves. Look what the Israelis have achieved in 60 years. What have you done? You could have achieved this too."

She did notice, however, that there was a big difference between Palestinians who interact with Israelis "and those who are isolated on the West Bank.

Now that her assignment is almost over, Barakat views it as "an exceptional experience," and is sorry that it is coming to an end. "I'm falling in love with Jerusalem," she confesses.

With hindsight and taking into account all the difficulties that she experienced in fulfilling her assignment, Barakat believes that Search for Common Ground should be tackling the problem differently. "We should be sponsoring and funding journalism schools," she says. "We've come in too late. Their views have been inculcated."

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