

LUNCH AT THE MUQATA'A

PART ONE

ON THE THIRD AND FINAL DAY of the Fall 2003 International Solidarity Movement (ISM) non-violence training in the West Bank town of Beit Sahour, news suddenly came over the radio that someone had blown themselves up in a restaurant in Haifa, inside the Green Line. It was October 4, two days before Yom Kippur.

The broadcasts were in Hebrew and Arabic and had to be translated by the ISM facilitators into English for the majority of us—the Internationals attending the training. But even before the facilitators explained anything we could tell by their intense concentration as they sat huddled around the radio switching back and forth between stations, and making hushed phone calls, that the news was not good. I don't recall anyone turning on a tv.

Beit Sahour in October, 2003, was like a ghost town. Full of empty hotels and restaurants usually catering to tourists going to nearby Bethlehem, but no one was going to Bethlehem. The year before, in 2002, the siege of the

Church of the Nativity had made international headlines as the Israeli military laid siege not only to the Church, and those seeking refuge in it, but to Nablus, Jenin and other cities on the West Bank. This created the ground work for the newly spawned multiple checkpoints and the ever expanding “Security Fence,” or “Separation Barrier,” or “Apartheid Wall,” depending on whom one was talking to. So while Beit Sahour was almost empty, except for the people who actually lived there, the very air seemed charged with the news—the hotel staff visibly distracted; the training organizers speaking worriedly among themselves.

The Haifa restaurant in question, Maxim, was owned by a Christian Palestinian with Israeli citizenship. The bomber was a woman, Hanadi Darajat, a twenty-nine-year-old lawyer. Twenty-one people were killed and fifty-one wounded, including several children. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility.

Yasser Arafat denounced the bombing. It was later rumored that the shrapnel in the device Ms. Darajat was wearing, shrapnel that killed both Jewish and Arab patrons and staff members of Maxim, had been taken from the bodies of her brother Fardi and her cousin Salah—after they had been killed in front of her eyes by Israeli soldiers, according to one report, and while she was in Jordan buying wedding presents for her brother, according to another. It was the eve of Fardi’s wedding. Other accounts noted that when she was twenty-one, her own fiancé had been killed by the Israeli military. She was purported to be

haunted by seeing her brother and cousin's bodies in the morgue after their deaths.

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In response to this bombing, Huwaida Arraf, co-founder of ISM and the lead facilitator of this training, asked participants of our group if rather than go to our assigned villages to assist with the olive harvest, would some of us instead be willing to go to the Muqata'a in Ramallah, the headquarters of the Palestinian National Authority (PA) and home of Yasser Arafat—or what was left of his home and headquarters after the 2002 siege.

The concern was that this latest bombing would be used as a pretext by the Israeli military and government to again invade Ramallah and finish what they had not the year before—the near total destruction of the Palestinian Authority headquarters and Yasser Arafat's personal residence within. In addition to attacks on the civilian population of Ramallah, sieges had also been laid to the largely Christian town of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity; and the cities of Jenin and Hebron.

Statistics vary widely as to the casualty levels according to the source, but a United Nations investigation noted 30 Israeli soldiers killed and 127 wounded. With 497 Palestinians killed and 1,447 wounded in these cities.

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Huwaida Arraf was twenty-seven in 2003, from a Christian Palestinian family and raised in Detroit, with dual U.S. and Israeli citizenship. She'd spent a year at Hebrew University in Israel and also time on a kibbutz. In addition to English she was fluent in Hebrew and Arabic, and while possessing enormous confidence, was without the preening ego and prima donna arrogance that so often accompany it. Her organizational skills were of the first order, despite the notorious disorganization of ISM—disorganization that was both the source of its weakness and its strength. Because as one Northern California stalwart of the group, Paul Larudee, was fond of saying, "If you don't know what you're doing, your opponents won't be able to figure it out either."

Tall and slender, with a mass of wavy dark hair, Huwaida held the attention of all, and along with the much older Ghassan Andoni (one of three co-founders of ISM) was the charismatic center of gravity at the training. Whether demonstrating how to duck and cover in the event of incoming ordnance or matter of factly recounting the harrowing events of the previous year, she was poised and effortlessly glamorous, even in jeans and a T-shirt.

The year before, during the sieges and height of the violence she had led groups of Internationals to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and to the hospital in Ramallah to meet an Italian delegation whose members had been blockading the hospital doors to keep the Israeli military from entering the hospital and arresting wounded

patients. And with yet another group of Internationals that she had helped organize, she had gone to meet her American Jewish husband and ISM co-founder Adam Shapiro, who was already inside the Muqata'a while it was under attack. She managed to breach Israeli security around the compound, remaining focused and calm as the chaos roiled around her.

The following is an excerpt from the Easter weekend dispatch of March 30, 2002:

APPEAL FOR HELP FROM THE SIEGE OF RAMALLAH

We are members of the international and Palestinian community trapped in the Siege of Ramallah.

On early Friday morning, 29 March 2002, Israeli forces re-invaded the city of Ramallah. The Israeli forces have occupied Ramallah completely and have established tank positions throughout the city, in all civilian areas. We can hear explosions, tank shelling and heavy caliber gunfire throughout the night and day. Israeli snipers are shooting regularly in civilian neighborhoods at times when they are not under any form of fire. As we write this, there are US-made Apache attack helicopters overhead firing on the city.