Speaking Palestinian: An Interview with Rosemary Sayigh

This interview is part of a longer conversation that independent researcher Mayssun Soukarieh conducted with Rosemary Sayigh in Beirut during the summer of 2008. Sayigh, an anthropologist, oral historian, and researcher, was born in Birmingham in the United Kingdom and moved to Beirut in 1953, where she married the Palestinian economist Yusif Sayigh. She earned her master's degree from the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1970 and was awarded a PhD from Hull University in Yorkshire in 1994. Since coming to Beirut fifty-six years ago, Sayigh has dedicated her life to writing and advocating for the Palestinians in Lebanon and elsewhere. She is the author of two groundbreaking books: Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries; A People's History *(Zed Books, 1979) and* Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon *(Zed Books, 1993). Although these conversations focused on Sayigh's scholarly work rather than her personal history, it became clear that the two are inextricably linked.*

Soukarieh: How did you first become interested in collecting the life stories of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon?

Sayigh: First of all, Yusif* had family in Dbayeh camp, in the northern suburbs of Beirut, and we used to visit them frequently. My father-in-law was a preacher, so we used to go to his services and then visit relatives. The person who most fascinated me in the camp was Umm Joseph, a cousin of Yusif's mother. Umm Joseph would sometimes cook for family members in Beirut. When she did this for us, she would stay overnight so as to prepare the food at four or five in the morning. I was struck by her energy and the way she took full responsibility for the family. Abu Joseph [her husband] never worked in Lebanon, so she was the family breadwinner. She was a very straight-speaking, expressive, and passionate woman.

Up until 1970, I worked in journalism. I used to write for the *Economist* from Beirut. By the 1970s, I was disgusted by the *Economist*'s uncritical, pro-American position on the Vietnam War. I stopped writing for them and went back to university, enrolling at AUB to do an MA in sociology and anthropology.

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*Yusif Sayigh (1916–2004) was a renowned Palestinian economist and the author of fifteen books, of which the two-volume study, *The Economies of the Arab World and Determinants of Arab Economic Development*, is the best known. From 1968 to 1971, he set up and directed the PLO Planning Center and was also the treasurer of the PLO National Fund and member of its Executive Committee. His last appointment was as the PLO's senior economic advisor and as official representative to the World Bank.

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I decided to do my master's thesis on some topic related to the Palestinians in Lebanon—much against my thesis supervisor's advice. Because I knew people in Dbayeh camp, I started going there and staying with Umm Joseph for a few days at a time. I was learning how to be an anthropologist, how to take "field" notes and write reflections. I also wanted to practice my Arabic.

In Dbayeh, Umm Joseph related how they had lived in al-Bassa—her village of origin—in the district of Akka [Acre] before 1948 and how they had to leave. I learned far more from these visits than from Yusif's immediate family, particularly about life in rural Palestine. I think it was normal for Palestinian families not to speak about the Nakba at that time; it was not a topic of discussion either in our home or in other people's homes in Ras Beirut. I guess that was the mood of families—a way to get on with life. Palestinians were pushing their children to make careers.

But after 1967, the middle classes who read the press realized how anti-Arab most of the Western media were from the way they reported the Six-Day War. People became politicized. Many started forming groups to do something. Up until 1967, most of the people I knew—mainly Arab nationalists—believed that the Arab armies could defeat Israel. The June War really shattered this belief by revealing the corruption of the Arab regimes and military leaderships. Nasserism had failed to bring back Palestine or challenge the West.

Palestinians started to feel that they had to do something themselves; for the first time, lots of people wanted to be involved in the struggle. There were clandestine political organizations and information groups. The Fifth of June Society was one of these. It was formed by a group of nationalist Palestinians—people like Fuad Itayem, Antoine Zahlan, Shafiq Kombarji, and others—soon after 1967, with the goal of changing the West's misperceptions. We started to disseminate information about Palestine, and our work only increased after the emergence of the resistance movement, which brought an influx of journalists who wanted to write or make films about the revolutionaries. We welcomed journalists, took them on tours of the camps, and gave them educational kits on Palestine. We made a library and organized panels. The aim was also to build links with pro-Palestinian groups around the world.

Soukarieh: As a Briton, how did people perceive you at different stages of your research in the camps?

Sayigh: My family links helped, especially in Dbayeh. There, I was viewed as a relative of Umm Joseph—as Yusif Sayigh's wife. Most of the people in the camp were related somehow to Yusif's mother. It was a small camp—every family knew who I was and I didn't need to explain anything. At first, I was not asking questions or doing any recording. I was mostly hanging around, getting to know the people, and thinking about research possibilities. By then, I had done a lot of reading in Palestinian history.

In 1973, after finishing courses at AUB and having my MA thesis proposal accepted, I started doing real research in Burj al-Barajneh camp. For the thesis,

I recorded with people from the camp about experiences that led them to think of themselves as Palestinians. I had a structured set of questions and recorded with twenty women and men age seventeen to sixty. For the book, I added a historical background and new interviews with leaders such as Abu Maher al-Yamani and Shafiq al-Hout.

I worked in Burj from 1973 to 1975. My first link with the community was through Ahmad Saleh, the office boy of the Fifth of June Society. Ahmad introduced me to his widowed sister, Umm Hussein, who lived across the road from her father, Abu Saleh, where Ahmad lived with his unmarried siblings and his two married brothers and their wives and children. The family was from Kweikat village in Akka district. I stayed with Umm Hussein and was protected by this association, and by all the family and neighbors. I never felt like an outsider—except for my poor Arabic. But this helped in a way, because it made people feel that they had to teach me.

I never felt that people were hostile to me as a Briton. At a first meeting, people of the older generation were likely to say, "The loss of Palestine is the fault of you British." But I would say, "I'm against the government," and it would end there. Of course, I do not really know what people thought I was doing in my research. Maybe some people thought I was a spy, but as I always entered the camps through people who lived there, this protected me.

Umm Hussein had many visitors. She was an influential figure in the quarter, and I felt that she liked to show me off as a strange—almost exotic—visitor, a household pet. In those days—unlike today—it was still rare to have foreigners living in the camps, asking strange questions. I remember two eight-year-olds pinching me to see if I was flesh and blood like them.

Of course, I don't know what they said about me to each other! But in Burj, I always felt very comfortable. I used to visit everyone I wanted to know from Kweikat, and even beyond the neighborhood. I felt I could go to any house I wanted, and that people would welcome me. Indeed, one of Umm Hussein's daughters accused me of "not omitting anyone"—meaning that I visited "respected" and "not so respected" families alike. It was a revealing remark. As an "outsider"—not because I was British—I didn't understand social structures and visiting practices. It's through not understanding them that you learn what they are.

I am sure that because I was an "outsider" certain things would not be said in front of me, which is very normal. It would be the same with a Palestinian researcher. You can imagine that if you had a researcher living in your home, some topics would be evoked and others repressed. Of course, my national identity had an effect on my research, mainly on the way I posed issues, in implicit comparison with my own background. For example, "Why are people so competitive? Why can't they work together?" Today, I would turn these questions around and ask, "Why am I raising these issues?"

Being a woman helped in many ways. I could work across gender lines, conversing with men as well as women. It explained my being there in the

camp, as an in-marrying wife of a Palestinian man and the mother of Palestinian children. I suppose it made me seem relatively harmless.

Soukarieh: What made you choose the camps as your research site?

Sayigh: I always felt that people in the camps conveyed their history much better than more educated Palestinians outside. It's partly because they have had much harder experiences. But it's also a matter of the Arabic they speak. To me, it's more expressive and lively than the Arabic the leaders used in their speeches; it communicates directly, goes straight to the heart, and is full of humor. It's a real pleasure to listen to and record people's lives. This was one reason that I was drawn to oral history.

On the national level, I felt that the Palestinian elite and middle classes needed to know more about the people of the camps. The camps were cut off from the Palestinian community outside, except for the minority who were politicized, or who worked with charitable associations. If you attended a reception given by a wealthy Palestinian, you couldn't believe that only a few kilometers away Palestinians were living in huts and couldn't afford to heat their homes in winter.

People outside tended to see camps as areas of delinquency and crime. They did social work to get children off the streets, or to prevent women from resorting to prostitution. You didn't feel that middle-class nationalists who talked about "the cause" understood the people of the camps, their culture, or their significance and value to national history—not even the progressive intellectuals. I remember that in the early 1970s, the Lebanese leftist Samir Franjiyyeh published an article in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*,* in which he said that people in the camps were so rural and conservative that they couldn't be a base for a revolutionary struggle. This was the illusion of a "vanguard" seeking the "right" masses. Such comments said more about the people who made them than about the people of the camps.

When I first went to Burj, my idea was to focus on children's upbringing, so as to understand how relations of solidarity are built and with which "others." I had no idea what I would find there, but as I stayed, my topic changed. I became more interested in the lives lived by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In the 1970s, there was a big debate over whether anthropologists tended to romanticize resistance. This could have been one reason why I went to the camps—to understand resistance as a daily lived reality.

Even then, however, I was especially interested in recording women's lives. This wasn't easy. Kamel al-Gheim, a young UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] teacher who lived in Burj, gave me a list of potential

*Samir Franjiyyeh, "How Revolutionary Is the Palestinian Resistance? A Marxist Interpretation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1972): pp. 52–60.

interviewees that had no women on it at all. When I asked him why, he said women weren't educated and couldn't talk about Palestinian history. I tried to explain that I was more interested in people's *experiences* of history than the history people learn in books. It was hard for him to accept. He wanted me to have correct, proper information about Palestine.

Perhaps living with Umm Joseph in Dbayeh and with Umm Hussein in Burj led me to focus on women. Both fascinated me. Umm Hussein used to take me on all her visits. She had an enormously wide circle of friends and visited Lebanese as well as Palestinian homes. She told me how she got her job with UNRWA, the *wasta* and the whole issue of patronage, and how women are part of it. For my next study, I focused on women's lives, how their nationalism and gender identity interacted, and the different ways they played their part in the resistance.

As an oral history project, my thesis research was quite undeveloped. My knowledge of oral history in those days was primitive, and I was not even a historian. But my book [*From Peasants to Revolutionaries*] made an impact because until then not many books had been written about *Palestinians* as distinguished from *Palestine*. Its timing was fortuitous, and it was awarded a prize of some kind. Later, it was translated into Arabic. After 1982, with the Israelis in Lebanon after their invasion, it disappeared from the bookshops.

I finished my research around the time that the Lebanese air force bombed Shatila (1973) and the Israelis destroyed Nabatiyya camp in the south (1974). It was then that the PLO—slowly—started to build shelters in the camps. The civil war started the next year. I was really surprised at how little preparation there was. Several people told me they wouldn't even use the shelters since it was better to be killed in your own home than to be turned into *kabees* [pickles]. Compared with the defense practices in Britain during World War II, which I lived through as a teenager, the people of the camp had little or no defense even though they were receiving military training. Their homes were so flimsy, and they were given no instruction about what to do in case of air raids. A resistance leader in our quarter told me that "Palestinian children had to get used to seeing death."

After the Israeli invasion in 1982, I started working on a doctoral degree by doing field research in Shatila, which was closer to my home than Burj al-Barajneh. For the dissertation, I recorded the life histories of twenty women of different generations, socioeconomic backgrounds, marital status, employment, ideological positions vis-à-vis the resistance, et cetera. Shock over the "War of the Camps"* made me take time out to collect oral histories of Shatila

*The three-year war that erupted between the Amal movement—a Shi'a militia—and the Palestinians lasted from 1985 to 1988. During this period, Palestinians in the camps were subjected to three severe sieges.

camp itself. The book [*Too Many Enemies*] was published the same year that I defended my dissertation—1993.

Soukarieh: What were the reactions of Palestinians outside the camp to your work?

Sayigh: Not many Palestinians knew about my work. Sometimes, Palestinian women from outside the camps would say, "How can you sleep there?" Although they could imagine visiting, they could not imagine themselves living in the camp, without middle-class comforts. Even Umm Joseph criticized me. She would always say, "*Bekaffi*! Enough! Yusif and Fayez and Anis [his brothers] are all nationalists. They have done enough, why should you also get mixed up in it?" Looking back, I think she was worried that I was neglecting my husband and children.

I have to note that in Shatila, where I conducted research after the 1982 massacre, people were silent and very suspicious, not of me personally, but of everybody, even neighbors. For them, at that moment, *anybody* could be a spy, especially because there had been assassinations of Palestinian leaders, such as Hasan Salameh. He was killed by a woman who said she worked for an NGO. Also, the Israeli occupation had set up a committee of collaborators in 'Ayn al-Hilwa camp. At that time, you couldn't even ask people their name. They would say, "Why do you want to know?" Even though I used to go out visiting with Umm Mustafa, at first people didn't want to talk.

Umm Mustafa was a great protector. She was an example of the active woman, *al-mara nashita*. She was not a member of any group, but she was very nationalist in her speech and action, and in her life. She was a good reference in the camp; she used to tell people that I was there because "*tahabb al-Filastiniyeen*"—because I loved Palestinians. There was a general mood of "*imshi hayt al-hayt*" [Walk close to the wall and ask God's protection]—a phrase that expresses fearfulness and caution.

Umm Mustafa had eleven children and a terrible lot of housework. She would wake up every morning at five to do the washing, make bread, or bring water. Then she would go to the souk in Sabra to buy food and then cook lunch. On top of all that, she would take time to take me visiting after the midday meal. They did not actually live inside the camp but in a building on its edge, with several floors that got destroyed during the War of the Camps. It was a "mixed" building, where both Lebanese and Palestinians lived.

Umm Mustafa had been very close to her Lebanese neighbor across the landing; they used to constantly come and go to each other's homes. After the War of the Camps, however, the friendship was over, though the neighbor did come back to visit some months later and apologized for Amal's attack. She told Umm Mustafa that she was against the battle. I took this to indicate that Shi'i hatred was artificial, something created by the leaders. But there must have been lots of bitterness: Umm Mustafa told me about her neighbor's visit with a skeptical expression. After all, she'd lost her home. When she took me to see the shattered apartment, it was the only time I ever saw her cry.

Women's life stories in Shatila were only sad stories, a series of tragedies. I often felt reluctant to continue the project. Asking them to recall their lives must have caused them the pain of remembering on top of the pain of the event itself. I felt it was unethical to record such stories for history—and for a PhD. Yet the stories were fascinating, as were the interactions with people that they involved, and the insights into women's nationalism they offered. I was stuck in a track and had to go on. I was not radical enough to change course, or to try to find a topic that people in the camps really wanted to have researched.

Soukarieh: Why did you decide to use oral history as a methodology, and what models were you drawing upon?

Sayigh: When I began my research, I hadn't taken any oral history classes and had no model to draw on. While working for the *Economist*, I had interviewed many Lebanese politicians—Pierre Gemayel, Moussa Sadr—so I was used to listening and using a tape recorder. Many oral historians started as journalists, for example Studs Terkel. Both in Burj and Shatila, I practiced oral history without being aware of its problematic aspects. In fact, it wasn't until I began to teach it, quite recently, that I started to study oral history as a discipline with its own theoretical and methodological problems. Now, I am forced to understand the pitfalls in just going out and recording what people say and writing it up in a book.

I guess oral history came across to me as expressing human experience rather than political ideas. I find it difficult to *feel* the history I read in books, whereas if I listen to somebody telling the story of the Nakba from their own experience it becomes real to me. I thought that if I could convey these stories to others, they would have the same effect on them that they had on me.

Yusif told me about his childhood, school days, and university life, but because he was an Arab nationalist more than a Palestinian nationalist, I couldn't grasp much about Palestinian identity through him. He was also at a different level; he was in the PPS [*Parti Populaire Syrien*; the Syrian Social Nationalist Party] and later the PLO's Executive Committee. I was not very interested in all that. Anyway, he was very discreet. He never told me what went on in the meetings, or things that happened. Much later when I was recording his memoirs, he started to tell me these details.*

I learned a lot through being in the Fifth of June Society. It was then that Mahmud Darwish became known, and I started to read his poetry in translation. Ghassan Kanafani was publishing his short stories. I began to learn about the lives of Palestinians under occupation in Israel—it was about then that Sabri Jiryis's book, *The Arabs in Israel*, came out. These were sources for me to learn about the Nakba.

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*These interviews appeared in Yusif Sayigh's memoirs, which were published in Arabic by Riad El Rayess Books in 2009.

From a different angle, I felt I had a lot in common with Palestinian mothers when I started to worry about my son, Yezid, after he became involved in school with a Fatah cell. Like many other young Palestinians, he wanted to drop school and join the liberation forces in Jordan. I remember we had long days of argument until his father managed to convince him that he would be more useful to the cause if he finished his education. I felt that the kids were getting sacrificed and that there was some sort of manipulation going on. Some people went to the front, but behind them there were people who were benefiting in one way or another. You worry about young people at that age; they are so ready to sacrifice themselves, and they don't question anything.

Soukarieh: Some people worry that oral history can be used against the people who have shared their stories. Do you think there is prejudice against this discipline?

Sayigh: I think that particular worry is rather overdone. When people have been persecuted they get smarter about what to say and what not to say. They don't give a clear window to their lives; a lot stays mysterious. There are always things you don't fully understand. It doesn't give anyone a window to the "Palestinian mind." Oral history work is valuable because it involves outsiders in a more active, more human, way than reading history books.

Soukarieh: There are significant prejudices against the use of oral history, particularly when it comes to questions of accuracy. What are oral history's strengths and weaknesses?

Sayigh: I used to feel that my work was not sufficiently disciplined and critical. I relied on the self-evident truth of what people say—the literalist fallacy. Researchers should use documents as well as oral testimony. My disciplinary ambivalence—neither fully anthropologist nor oral historian—came about because I went into academia so late. I was over forty when I did my MA and almost sixty-five when I presented my PhD dissertation.

A big disadvantage was that I was not born an Arab but got my social science degree in the Arab world. For my colleagues and peers, it was the other way round. They are Arabs who went abroad to universities like Columbia or Berkeley to get their degrees. I'm handicapped by my weak Arabic. I never fully understand what people are saying; there are nuances, double meanings, and jokes that I will never get.

Soukarieh: How did you come to be conscious of the Palestinian issue?

Sayigh: I had zero awareness before coming to the Arab world; I was totally ignorant about it. I went to a school that had many Jewish girls—we formed a group together to read poetry. In university, I had a Jewish friend who struggled with his conscience about whether to go and fight with the Zionists in Palestine. I also remember seeing films of streams of European refugees

during World War II, and then there were the stories of the death camps. I come from a Labour-voting family, and Labour always supported Zionism: being pro-Zionist was part of being against anti-Semitism. The expulsion of the Palestinians was reported in the British press as a war between Jews and the Arab armies. It was portrayed as a battle for independence from British imperialism on the model of India. In school in England, we didn't study any foreign history, except a bit about recent European history. I remember wanting to go and live on a kibbutz in my last year in university. I felt it would be a utopian, socialist experience.

It was in Iraq, where I went to teach English in 1952, that I started to learn a bit about Palestine. It was a dominating issue in Iraq at that time. I began to see Palestine as part of the general Arab struggle against imperialism, but at that time I was more interested in Iraqi politics. There were demonstrations and strikes against British influence over the Iraqi government. I was still not well informed about Palestine when I got married to Yusif, whom I had met previously in Iraq.

The first person who talked to me about Palestine was a middle-class Palestinian. He talked about lost possessions—so many carpets and a lovely house in West Jerusalem. The middle-class Palestinians of Ras Beirut did not strike me as being real refugees, they seemed to be living comfortable lives. It was not until I went to Dbayeh and saw and heard the suffering of the people there that I started to sympathize and to want to know more about the politics and history of it all.

After working in Burj camp and doing my MA thesis about experiences of the refugees in Lebanon, I came to see the Palestinians as persecuted in the Arab world through a thousand forms of exclusion and subordination (although their situation in Lebanon was better then than it is now). I think that Arab nationalist circles were not very receptive to this idea because they couldn't believe that Arabs could persecute other Arabs. There was also the gap between the lives of people in the camps and those of Palestinians outside the camps, who were treated well—at least until the civil war broke out. They found good jobs and led normal lives, even if they suffered from the loss of their country. Most did not visit the camps, except for a minority, people like Shafiq al-Hout. He was an exception; he had relations with the camps from early on.

In Lebanon, there was a tremendous difference between the way the government treated urban middle-class Palestinians and the way it treated people in the camps. I think this reaction came from my class awareness. I felt there was a problem around me of not looking at class differences, that there was a class problem, not only a national one.

Soukarieh: Where did you get your class consciousness?

Sayigh: I think I always had it. When I was maybe seven years old, I was on the village green near our home and I saw this boy standing there, wearing only a

vest on a bitterly cold day. I was wrapped in warm clothes, and here was this boy in nothing but a vest, with bare legs and arms, shivering in the wind. It was unforgettable.

Also, as I told you, my parents were Labour voters. I think that they began to be Labour during the Great Depression. My father was out of work for more than a year. Like many of that generation in England, they were very critical of the conservative establishment. My mother was a member of the Fabian Society and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which ran evening classes for workers. The WEA was strong in England at the time. Sometimes I went to meetings with her.

There was also the post-World War II atmosphere when I was a teenager—a new spirit of radicalism, a new Labour government, and ideas of the Left were spreading. At school, my friends and I were rebellious and nonconformist. But it was more an inarticulate reflection of a general mood than an expression of a clear ideology.

At university, I belonged to the Labour club, and knew some labor activists such as Tony Benn. Many people who were students at the university later became members of parliament.

Soukarieh: How did you come to feminize Palestinian history? Is it the field that shaped your interest in women's lives, or did you come to the field with a particular political agenda?

Sayigh: Putting gender into history is not a matter of "feminizing" it, but of putting down what gender has always contributed to history. Gender relations are the basic model for all hierarchies of power.

When living in Dbayeh, Shatila, and Burj, I found Palestinian women very much "out in the world," not stuck in their homes. They were strong; their lives were much harder than mine and the women around me. They never had holidays or entertainment. They could not even dream of things that, to me, make a normal life. Their lives revolved around being housewives, bearers of children, and if there was no male wage earner in the family, they had to work as well. Yet, through their visits and sharp comments on events, they sustained the community. That was my first impression.

Obviously, being refugees brings special hardships for women. But at the time, I began to think that the issue was not Muslim-Arab oppression of women, or misogyny (as the West presents it), but rather, a matter of class structure and the political system at a particular historical moment, where it's important for men's status in the system to appear to control women. As I began to read more, I found that Western critiques of "female oppression" in the Arab region are not really grounded, but part of a polemic against Islam that began in medieval Europe and continued through colonialism. It's all part of image construction. Books about women in the Arab world—and this is a major Western cultural product—always have pictures on the cover of veiled women or women carrying babies.

Arab women scholars who took part in this polemic used to be defensive, talking positively about the status of women in Islam and comparing it favorably with the status of women in the West. This reaction did not really help them to change society in a way that would be less oppressive to themselves or others. It was like a pendulum swing of attack and defense, always in the same track—sterile.

I began to realize that this attack and defense attitude existed in my own mind as well. On one hand, I was seeing that Arab women can be strong and respected in their milieu, but on the other, I began to understand that societal constraints related to gender *do* oppress women—for example, the violent pressures to marry. I saw how society forces women to be accepting, to demonstrate *sumud* [steadfastness]. And while I personally value freedom, I had to ask myself where the value of freedom comes from and how it relates to Western economic and cultural systems. I was trying to find a way to study women without falling into this trap of attack and defense. Yet, focusing on women is *itself* part of the problem.

I was guided at this stage by Talal Asad, my thesis advisor, who wrote about "strong languages," or hegemonic ideas that "travel," influencing third world societies to view their own cultures as the West sees them. I applied this to feminism. I was careful not to adopt a Western feminist approach because, as Chandra Mohanty says in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,"* Western feminists have taken "third world" women as an object, as a kind of domain of study.

When writing about the oppression of Arab women, Western feminists often assume that the nuclear family gives women more freedom than Arab family structures. My problem with this position is that it views women and families as *individual* units placing them in a larger framework. There may be freedom at one level, but there are constraints at another, less visible, level. The atomization of nuclear families makes them less able than extended families to resist systemic pressures and state coercion. I am conflicted over this issue when I see that, in the Palestinian case, control of women is one element of community solidarity that has helped scattered groups of Palestinians in alien environments sustain their identity through all these years of dispersion. I find it very difficult to untangle control of women, which I oppose, from a continuity of political identity, which I support. I think it is a dilemma which is not easy to solve.

For example, to see women as victims blinds us to their own analyses of their situations, which can be very astute. I was struck by the way a young Palestinian woman I interviewed managed to persuade her parents to allow her to join a resistance group. I was also struck by the stories she told me of how she escaped marriage—she had so many strategies to send away unwanted

*In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

people who came to ask for her. But then, you also see women who are not so strong who become trapped in marriages they can't escape.

Then there is what you could almost call an obsession with Arab women as a topic of international concern and research. What about poverty, child labor, corruption, colonialism? But so much international NGO money is about women. I react to that, too, because to a large extent it's imposed from outside; it's a political choice at the level of the United Nations and the "international community."

And although I value women's life stories as part of Palestinian history, I don't feel 100 percent sure that this focus—on women or on history—is one that they would welcome, or that helps them in any way. To go ahead and do it without their welcome is like taking advantage of their subalternity—"I am a scholar and I will do what interests me."

Soukarieh: Don't you think that you could be romanticizing camp women?

Sayigh: Maybe it was an accident that I found strong women in the three camps where I lived and was fascinated by them because they were so different from the way most Western feminist scholarship represents Arab women. Originally, I had no program to study women; it was what I discovered in the "field" that forced me to write about them. The older generation of women was not aware of themselves as having a national role except as bearers of children. But with the next generation, the *jil al-nakba* and the *jil al-thawra* [the generation of the Nakba and the generation of the revolution], there was a much stronger response to the national movement and women's roles in it, to whether they should respond to it as *Palestinians* or as Palestinian *women*.

Of course, the situation when I began my work was different from what it is today. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion when the PLO was expelled from Beirut and people felt that the Palestinians were back to zero, women were the first to reorganize. They were the first to march out of the camp to commemorate the fortieth day of the Sabra and Shatila massacres after the PLO evacuation. Several were arrested during the march. Women were very active in rebuilding homes; you would see them carrying sheets of corrugated iron and bags of cement. The Women's Union celebrated International Women's Day on 8 March 1983 in their practically destroyed building. They had reconstructed it, but it still lacked windows. They did the *dabkeh* there in Palestinian dresses. It was an important event because it showed the people of Shatila that the national spirit was still alive, in spite of the invasion, the massacre, and the Lebanese army surrounding the camp. This is a symbolic role that Palestinian women have played since long before 1948. I think it says a lot about them that they maintained it in such a dark period.

Women were also very active during the War of the Camps. One of the most vivid images in my mind is the sight of a woman I knew well coming out of the camp on the last day of the longest siege of Shatila, eight months pregnant and carrying a large cooking gas canister on her head. The truce was still shaky,

but she came walking out between the Amal fighters as if they weren't there. After her came young women wearing necklaces with the map of Palestine, walking out so proudly, as if to say to the Amal fighters, "You couldn't beat us." Many women were killed in the War of the Camps. They weren't just sitting in the shelters; they were actively involved in the battles.

A friend who was active in the Women's Union was wearing Islamic dress when I last saw her—before, she used to wear T-shirts and blue jeans. She told me that all her life she had been a pious Muslim, but she had never worn Islamic dress before. It was like a mask that did not change her nationalist commitment in any way. In this period, Palestinians needed some protection. She felt that this was a resource for Palestinians; that they could move from one identity to another depending on the historical moment. I think that especially because Palestinians are deprived of their rights here, and because of being stateless and voiceless, they are—and have to be—sensitive to shifts in their political situation and adapt to them—at least on the outside. I don't know enough about the latest move toward Islamic revivalism to comment on the various ways people talk about it or adopt it as an identity.

As for Arab feminist politics, Arab women have to find a way on their own, not as part of an international campaign, and not necessarily through organizations, because quite often organizations get co-opted by the state. And it won't be done through relying on education. Highly educated women tend to get much better-paid jobs than other women, which means a better socioeconomic status for their families. Education in an unjust social system only widens the gap between rich and poor. I don't see change coming through employment either. When less educated women are forced by poverty to work for low wages, it affects the welfare and future of the next generation. I support Arab women's organizations, but I see many as insufficiently committed to social justice.

Soukarieh: How do you situate yourself within Arab women's scholarship?

Sayigh: They are all better than me! Arab women's scholarship has developed tremendously in the last decades. When I began to read in the 1960s, there were not many outstanding Arab women scholars. Now, you can't keep up with the interesting work they are publishing. And they have been active politically as well: Suad Joseph initiated a women's section in the Middle East Studies Association, and Suheir Morsy has always defended Palestinians. Deniz Kandiyoti, a Turkish scholar, was one of the first to get out of the pendulum swing of critique-defense. Fatima Mernissi was another.

Soukarieh: How would you compare camp women with upper-class women?

Sayigh: I've almost never done research with Palestinian women outside the camps, except in Palestine. I knew Rukkaya Khuri and used to visit her. I also recorded with her, along with a few other women from the pre-1948

women's movement such as Zuleikha Shihabi and Matiel Moghannam. Umm Samir [Khuri] had a history as a political activist that went back to pre-1948 Palestine. One of the things she said is that it was always a small minority of Palestinian women that was active, and that the majority only cared about clothes and visiting. It's interesting that when resistance movement women first came on the scene, they were not only proud of being part of the resistance, but they also despised women who did charity work. What is ironic is that they themselves ended up mostly doing charity, though in the name of their group. I think each generation tends to see itself as more conscious and politicized than the previous one.

But there is also a tremendous continuity in Palestinian women's activism. It is a story of advances and backslidings. But this is more a matter of history than of women or culture, because Palestinians are always being slapped back. This means that their survival becomes an achievement in itself. So how can you have accumulative organizational evolution in a situation like that?

Soukarieh: You have witnessed radical shifts in identity discourse, which you have mapped in your own scholarship. Are you reconsidering some of the assumptions and motivations that undergirded your early scholarship?

Sayigh: I do not believe in the concept of identity as it is commonly used. The fragmentation of Palestinian identity is a problem that everybody is writing and conferencing about. A problem with identity in scholarly work is that the term is used so loosely that it means everything and nothing. And I do not see identity loss as the most serious problem that Palestinians face. The real problem is the lack of a national strategy—if this existed, identity would be far less fragmented. If Palestinians are indeed losing their national identity, it is because the national leadership is not working against fragmentation. If there were a national strategy, the sense of Palestinian identity would immediately become more unified.

Soukarieh: How do you see the politics of Palestinian identity today and the complicated relationship between scholarship and activism in this context?

Sayigh: Anthropologists should not just write descriptions or analyses of "other" people but also research the forces that maintain poverty and statelessness wherever they occur. Scholars who have written about the "Middle East" over the past twenty years have changed some people's minds, but there is still so much to do. Perhaps it's unfair to blame the present strategy vacuum on the leadership. After all, the international environment is the major determinant in everything related to Palestine. But still, the leadership has responsibilities not to swerve from national aims, especially because it can gain nothing by this policy. During the days of the resistance, a Fatah fighter once told me that this was the only national liberation movement whose leaders had told their followers to shoot them if they deviated from the path of national liberation.

Of course, these were rhetorical ploys to manipulate young and mostly poor people.

There is still a potential for mobilization. Palestinians are waiting to be awakened by a call, waiting for a message—or a person who will embody the message—of resistance that they carry inside themselves. For the moment it is under a cloud. Shafiq al-Hout once told me that if ever a charismatic leader appeared there would be a line from Rashidiyya in the south all the way to Beirut to join the movement. He said that at a very grim time. I guess this always remains true. Up to now, we don't have this unifying, mobilizing voice, but it could happen.

There was a revealing incident during the first siege of Shatila in May 1985 that was related to me by Dr. Muhammad al-Khatib. The camp was being overrun from the east. Amal had almost reached the Red Crescent in the middle of the camp, and fighters were beginning to put down their guns. A young fighter, whose name Dr. Khatib didn't know, got up on a chair and told the others, "If you leave, I will shoot you all." Somehow, he mobilized everybody, and they succeeded in pushing Amal back and stopping them from overrunning the camp. That first siege was an amazing battle. They had nothing—no bandages for the wounded, no medications, no stocks of food or water, few arms or ammunition—yet they beat them off. It's inspiring that this could happen; it was like "one for all and all for one."

Soukarieh: What does it mean to be Palestinian?

Sayigh: Well, it's a complicated thing. There's first the issue of who is a Palestinian. Many people take a biological stand on this—nationality goes by paternal descent. If my father is Palestinian, I am Palestinian. I'm not with this idea—not because I want to make a claim to be Palestinian myself, but because I consider it a political choice, a political identity.

People who are not born Palestinian, but who are active for the cause, shouldn't they be considered Palestinian? For example, there is Jean Calder, an Australian woman who adopted three handicapped Palestinian children. I first got to know her during the invasion of 1982—I came across her in a shelter with these three handicapped kids, one of them clinging round her neck. At the same time, she was working with the Palestinian Red Crescent. I saw her again in Khan Yunis in 1998, still with the Red Crescent, and still with the three kids. If Jean isn't considered a Palestinian mother, something is wrong.

I consider the Palestinian identity a political issue first and foremost. It is a matter of taking a stand on the cause, not who your father is. Daniel Barenboim has been given Palestinian citizenship, and other Israelis have gotten it, too, such as Uri Davis and Ilan Halevi. I think this enlarged understanding of identity is justified by the fact that many Palestinians have opted out of the struggle. It's a sort of exchange between people with strict biological descent who leave and others from outside the circle who have moved in. The Palestinian cause is particular; it has special features, mainly the great asymmetry of power

between the two antagonists. This means that there are particular problems around national identity, such as the diaspora creating cultural differences between Palestinian groups living in different countries. I don't see this as a threat or a danger—it can be enriching—but a lot of Palestinians do. From a scholarly perspective, the question of identity—or what we call identity—has to be examined carefully. You can't assume that it can be taught to children in school; they have to live in an atmosphere of "Palestinianism."

Soukarieh: You have been criticized for "romanticizing the Palestinian refugees." What do you think is the source of this criticism, and how would you respond to it?

Sayigh: I'm not quite sure what people mean when they use the term "romanticizing" about my work. Do they mean "idealize"? I think many anthropologists who work in marginal communities feel an impulse to defend them, especially if that community has been defamed and denigrated.

When I began working, the Palestinians of the camps were not well known to other Arabs or even to urban Palestinians. Their culture was scorned. Like many other "engaged" researchers, I wanted to fill the gap left by class and ethnic silencing in order to correct an image produced by propaganda. I was pursuing an aim common to most practitioners of oral history—that of giving silenced communities a "voice" and of representing them through their own words. I didn't aim for an illusory "scientific objectivity." On the other hand, researchers need to be careful that their work doesn't provide insights into the inner life of marginal communities that can be exploited by hostile forces. This would be a transgression against the ethics of fieldwork—the moral contract that binds the researcher to his or her "informants." Would it be excusable to enter a marginal community with the intention of exposing its "dirty laundry" to a reading public avid to find evidence to support their Islamophobia?

Soukarieh: Another criticism is that you erased Lebanese solidarity with Palestinians in your scholarly works, especially in Too Many Enemies*. How would you respond to this criticism?*

Sayigh: This is a harder criticism to respond to because, in fact, a comprehensive history of the Palestinian experience in Lebanon would have to include instances of Lebanese solidarity. Indeed, the title of the book itself minimizes Lebanese support for armed struggle, Lebanese-Palestinian relations at the level of the camps, and many kinds of interactions such as friendships, business partnerships, joint resistance, et cetera.

However, Lebanese support was not so much in evidence at the time I conceived the idea of *Too Many Enemies*. Shatila camp had just gone through a series of horrific sieges and was almost totally destroyed. Many people were killed or maimed, including many children. Palestinians in the surroundings of the camp were being executed. I wanted to record an oral history of the sieges

and of Shatila camp as told to me by people from the camps, and the book reflects their mood at the time. I don't consider it the duty of a researcher to give political "balance" to a record through facts not directly related to the topic. I wasn't trying to "whiten" Chairman Arafat's attempts to regain influence in Lebanon, and certainly I deplored the way people of the camps were sacrificed in a needless struggle between Arafat and pro-Syrian Lebanese actors such as Amal. It's true that Lebanon has sacrificed and suffered more than any other Arab country for the Palestinian cause. But upholding the *cause* is not the same as supporting *Palestinians* who, through no fault of their own, were forced into exile in Lebanon. Anti-Palestinianism is unfortunately one of the few sentiments that unite all of Lebanon's sects.

Soukarieh: How do you feel about being interviewed?

Sayigh: I have never liked being interviewed—or photographed. I'm a writer; I like time to think, to go back and edit. It's also disturbing when people say they want to honor you. It's a sign that they think death is near, and they want to catch you before you go. I still have a lot of things I want to do.