

Raja Shehadeh: A Moderate or a Moderate Façade?

by Robert Harris (January 2014)

“Raja Shehadeh is Palestine’s leading writer. He is also a lawyer and the founder of the pioneering Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq.” – [denies](#).

Shehadeh is quite a prolific writer, his books dealing essentially with a common theme: a highly personalised account of displacement in Palestine, often told in the form of a journey. They include themes of tragedy, misfortune, despondency, revelation, and some modest spiritual triumph against a brutish Israeli presence. Family features heavily, the drama of flawed relationships woven within an at times burdensome sense of history but one mitigated by a deep abiding love of the land and its history.

*The books use substantive imagery as a central point of narrative. For example, the image of a bird’s song ending, or the tragic motif of Shehadeh’s father, Aziz, looking toward the city lights of Jaffa, which he left behind after moving to Ramallah in 1948, as featured in *Strangers in the House* (2001).*

Raja Shehadeh [observed](#) that judgement is influenced more by emotion than by reason, and, therefore, those who suffer tend to obtain empathy and support. This fact has long been understood by the entertainment industry. For example, a victim wronged, is, from an audience’s perspective, the one who is best placed to seek justice. The individual, or group, destroyed ought to be in some way deserving, if the subject is especially cruel, malign, etc. If there could be a shadowy side to the humanitarian spirit, this characteristic would surely qualify.

Considering the highly politicised themes, a question may be asked of Shehadeh’s work: do the books constitute an authentic effort to tell personal stories which possess substantive political overtones, as is sometimes necessarily the case in certain contexts, or do they constitute a knowing propaganda, or perhaps possess elements of both? The impact of these books would seem to be quite significant politically, judging by his success. The stories relate to a serious conflict, which has been the cause of a substantive degree of suffering through the twentieth century, and will continue to

cause much for the foreseeable future.

To question the more personal details of Shehadeh's account of his life and family, which has been touched by tragedy, without good cause to do so, may constitute the needless crossing of a boundary. Yet it is nonetheless worth analysing the more general political claims of the author, due to the way in which they inevitably inform the broader narrative of his books.

This move should be especially pressing, given Shehadeh's past political activism in al Haq, and the broad Arab-Palestinian move to utilise literature for propaganda's sake, for example, the [literary festival](#), of which he is a [member](#) of the English Bar, and the Palestinian Bar Association. The Palestinian Bar Association is apparently an affiliated [Arab Lawyers Union](#) of which it [co-founded](#) in 1979, with another lawyer, one Jonathan Kuttab, who has been at the forefront of Israel's delegitimisation, particularly in [described](#) as the "Palestinian branch of International Commission of Jurists". The NGO would soon become a leader in lawfare based international campaigns, motivated by a desire to delegitimise Israel's right to exist.

Since its inception, Al-Haq has presented distorted data to promote anti-Israel propaganda, often on the basis of [limited](#) and only at times made public as a last resort. Self-censorship, with a failure to even catalogue abuses, is normative NGO behaviour for the region.

In 1990, Al Haq [notes](#) the head of Al Haq, Shawan Jabarin, is prohibited from travelling abroad by Jordan and Israel due to his substantive involvement with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Shehadeh helped establish al Haq's morally problematic template, and he remained a [propagandist](#) living in Israel today, stated of his first [attacks on Israel](#) as marking a "...hatred that does not know any bounds, and that blinds the eyes..."

Indeed, Shehadeh has long made many remarkable assertions, such as claiming Israel is [grown faster](#) than its Jewish equivalent since 1967. The city had 68,000 Arab residents in 1967, which grew more than four-fold to 275,900 in 2009. During the same period, the Jewish populace rose at a much slower rate of 2.5 times.

Likewise, census figures demonstrate that the combined Arab-Palestinian populace of the West Bank and Gaza, was just under [problematic](#) but even allowing for dramatic over-estimation, for the purposes of political gain, the populace can still be understood as

growing at a normatively satisfactory rate, one hardly compatible with ethnic cleansing.

Shehadeh has often [breach](#) of UN Resolution 997, and continued Syrian sponsorship of terrorism reaching across Israel's borders (condemned by UN Secretary General U Thant), was significant enough for Israel to mount a pre-emptive strike?

Of the Security Barrier, which marks a division between the West Bank and Israel, Shehadeh [substantive role](#) in bringing suicide attacks down to almost zero during the Second Intifada, a point which Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdallah Shalah [request](#) that Hamas carry out suicide attacks, the majority of attacks against Israel appear to have been carried out by the well-armed security forces of the [meeting](#) of international NGOs, run by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People ([produced](#) anti-Semitic material for some of these events. At the meeting, Shehadeh proposed that the international community adopt the strategy proposed by the Soviet Union, and its socialist client states:

"While advancing its new proposals on the Middle East, the Soviet Union pursues the prime aim of peace in the region and, hence, resolution of the Palestinian problem. [...] For my part, I would like to assure those present that the Soviet Union has no aggressive intentions whatsoever, either in the Middle East or all over the world. A graphic illustration of this are all the recent Soviet peace initiatives."

The assurance of the Soviet Union's good intentions would have come as news to anyone familiar with the USSR's conduct in Afghanistan, which was causing immense suffering, along with the greatest [one to two million](#) Afghani people died.

Shehadeh would approve of a Soviet peace brokerage, since the USSR towed the Arab line almost completely since 1953/4, and were a principle party [assertions](#):

"In the twenty-first century, the case of Palestine remains one of the last surviving examples of a country usurped by a colonial project exploiting religion to deprive Palestinians of their land."

Religion is of course only one element of the Zionist project, which originated in a secular fashion. Zionism relates principally to a people, rather than a mere religion. Moreover, there has never been an independent nation in this region since the end of the Jewish Bar Kokhba Revolt, in [oppressed](#) seemingly with [supports](#) a two state solution:

"I have been consistent in my view that the solution lies in the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. [...] There are two possible outcomes to this hundred-year-old struggle: one is that the land would be partitioned into two states: Israel and Palestine. The other is that the present situation would continue and the conflict would continue to fester."

The above is a fair assessment. Yet Mr. Shehadeh has long been a powerful proponent of boycotting Israel [A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle](#) (2003), Shehadeh notes his feelings of disappointment in 1996, with the Oslo Accords:

"Those first years of the transitional rule of the Palestinian Authority were strange times. It was the rude awakening at the end of a fascinating and hopeful period for me, during which I had devoted all my energies to bringing about change and a conclusion to the Israeli occupation... Prompted perhaps by disappointment over the false peace heralded by the signing of the Oslo Accords, and despite all the fanfare on the White House lawn, my thoughts had been turning to the past."

It had only been a year since Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin initiated the Oslo II process. The initial 1993 phase of the process, Oslo I, was a preparatory stage offering a degree of self-rule. However, Shehadeh also opposed this [reveals that](#):

"The outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987 gave me hope that things would finally change and I dismissed all thoughts of leaving Palestine."

The First Intifada was a time of extreme violence, despite the superficial gloss smeared over such a tragic event today. Shehadeh must surely be aware that the original Intifada, to a significant extent, constituted a campaign of terror that Arafat, and various factions, waged against the Arab-Palestinian populace, in which almost a thousand of his own people were killed by paramilitaries for supposedly being traitors, although many were in fact killed due to their political stances as [stated](#):

"It is likely that my father's murderer was an Israeli collaborator. Israel nurtured and protected the collaborators however depraved they were."

Whilst Shehadeh presents himself as a moderate who became disillusioned by the two-state peace process, he in fact appears to have been hostile to almost all solutions to the

conflict since at least 1984.

At the aforementioned CEIRPP International NGO Meeting in Geneva, Shehadeh asserted:

"[T]he debate on Western Europe's stance on the Palestinian problem and Middle East settlement has been going on for many years. I want also to point to its somewhat moderate character."

During the 1970's the European Economic Community developed a distinctive hostility toward Israel. This was made manifest in the Bahrain and Venice Declarations, both of 1980. These declarations legitimised the PLO by recognising them as the representatives the Arab-Palestinian people, at a time when they were still vocally expressing their dedication to Israel's absolute destruction. There was no criticism with regard to the violence of the PLO, and a focus on Israel returning all the Territories contested. If Shehadeh supported a two-state solution, how could the EEC stance be unduly moderate?

"...the process of forcing on the Arabs the Camp David policy which is capitulatory in its essence and which does not serve to achieve settlement of the Middle East crisis."

It is peculiar to present the Sadat-Begin Camp David accords as capitulation. To abandon its aggressive policies, Egypt obtained the Sinai and substantial aid, in return for recognising Israel's right to exist.

With such hostility toward the most important Middle-Eastern peace process in decades, Shehadeh's intense advocacy of initiatives, to dramatically increase pressure on Israel, had clearly inferred goals:

"...it is imperative for Western Europe to take sides. On whose side is it? Is it on the side of Israel which is trying to impose Camp David on the Arabs with fire and sword? [...] It is necessary... to launch a new intensive campaign to ensure that the Western European countries take sides."

Shehadeh's early statements cast doubt on the view that he lost faith in two-state solutions during Oslo.

More recently, Shehadeh [Jewish settlement](#):

"...Israel began building settlements in the occupied territories. I grew up feeling we

were in a race with time. Every year the chances of peace were being diminished and our land was being usurped before our eyes. Unless something was done the remaining part of Palestine beyond the 1967 borders of Israel would also be lost.”

Claims that Jewish settlements are swallowing up the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) can be disputed. In 2011, Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian Authority’s prime negotiator, asserted that settlements constitute 1.1% of the [features](#) constructed settlements, with applicable roads taking further space.

Nonetheless, if it were true that settlements were taking over the West Bank, would it not behove Shehadeh to have advocated the solutions proposed at Camp David, Taba etc., which offered almost all of the West Bank and Gaza? Seemingly not. In the London Review of Books, Shehadeh characterised Yasser Arafat as “[response](#) was to initiate the bloody Second Intifada, which one may assume is deemed less of a betrayal than peace.

Shehadeh’s stance on the Oslo talks, in which he was involved, is somewhat contradictory. Broadly speaking, he has expressed strong disapproval against them. For example, in 2011, he charged that they were hopelessly [final stage](#) of negotiations.

Two years later, Shehadeh would seem to have a change of heart over Oslo, but only with respect to pushing the issue of the “[based on](#) UN Resolution 194, which would intentionally bring about the demographic nullification of Israel as a principally Jewish State.

As Arafat himself [Pew poll](#) demonstrates that 89% desire having Sharia law as “the official law of the land.”

Shehadeh wants to go [communicating](#) with Nathan on the matter.

Nathan objected particularly to the set design, which strongly evoked Holocaust imagery. Shehadeh stated: “when I saw the brilliant set of the play, I found it compelling and moving, and inspiring many layers of associations.” He added:

“Many have made the analogy between Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto... I was of the contrary opinion. Gaza is not a ghetto, I argued. It is a large prison. I found the insistence on resorting to terms usually associated with the Jewish experience of suffering disturbing. It sounded to me as though only by appropriating nomenclature related to the Jewish experience could we validate Palestinian suffering. As though our suffering cannot stand on its own.”

Shehadeh stated that he disliked analogies between the Warsaw Ghetto and Gaza etc., but, notably, not so much because it is offensive to Jews but rather because the Jewish experience should not be used to “validate Palestinian suffering”. The use of stronger language to describe Gaza is perhaps unintentional but, despite his objections to the application of descriptions relating to the Holocaust, he nonetheless appears to be drawing an equivalence of scale, dimension, or significance, between the two events.

Shehadeh went on to effectively imply that criticism of Israel is never anti-Semitic, when it is done in relation to addressing Arab-Palestinian issues. He wrote:

“Describing anyone challenging Israel’s violations of Palestinian human rights, whether through literature or plays, as antisemitic is intellectually dishonest and censorious of legitimate criticism. But it is worse. It is self-defeating. It is often carried out by those who believe they are expressing loyalty to Israel.” [emphasis added]

Such stances clearly whitewash the fact that criticism of Israel is often anti-Semitic in tone. Moreover, it is absurd to suggest that those referring to “anti-Semitism” do so in an effort to be loyal to Israel, presumably to silence legitimate criticism. Anti-Semitism is a manifest reality in criticism of Israel. No nation should be above criticism, including Israel. However, a substantial amount of criticism, directed at Israel, does indeed possess distinctly anti-Semitic [discriminated against Jews](#) in an intense fashion, a fact that garnered headlines internationally during the 1980’s.

A tale of two peoples

Raja Shehadeh [unification](#) with a Greater Syria, during the British Mandate era. A desire, amongst Arab-Palestinians, for territorial independence, re-emerged after Israel’s territorial gains in the Six Day War. Israel accepted this demand in the 1970’s.

Shehadah wrote, in his book [signed](#) the Begin-Sadat Camp David Accords. The “legitimate rights of the Palestinian people” include the granting of autonomy and self-governance. This declaration occurred despite a lack of any Arab-Palestinian group or faction offering the [commented](#):

“[There] hasn’t been, since the dawn of Zionism, a leadership that is prepared to recognize our right to exist as a nationstate for the Jewish nation and to recognize an agreement as the end of the conflict and the end to demands.”

Shehadeh is clearly a man who loves to roam. A lot of his work is pre-occupied with this act. Of course, amongst the idyllic scenery is the dreaded Zionist, the ugly mark of "the occupation", of which the Jewish Settler is the most [greed, bitterness and spite](#)".

To take [culturally Jewish](#), rather than Arab or "Palestinian". Where does the Jew fit amongst Shehadeh's landscape?

Unfortunately little is said of the desire of Arab-Palestinian society to [that](#):

"...it lies in a profound unwillingness to accept the very existence of the Palestinians as a people... there was once a nation living in the territory where Israel was established."

Such statements demonstrate sufficiently that Shehadeh is only interested in one perspective on the conflict. Even if we are to accept that the Arab-Palestinian populace is a distinctive people, rather than part of a broader culturally Syrian grouping, what of the much older race, which in regional terms is more culturally distinctive, and more closely tied to the history of the region? Apparently, it is now popular amongst anti-Israel campaigners to deny that Jewish people even have any [reciting](#) Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" on the BBC, to mark the 50th anniversary of the famous speech, and his recent "Is there a language of peace?" lectures, [Britishauthor](#) and Hebrew language specialist, suggested a [stated](#):

"It is necessary... to launch a new intensive campaign to ensure that the Western European countries take sides."

For Shehadeh, the Western European community wasn't nearly pro-Palestinian enough. He advocated a leading role for the anti-Israel USSR. Thus, for Shehadeh, the international brokerage of a peace deal should be hostile to Israel. Moderation, the adoption of a balanced approach, would seem to be wrong.

With regard to Shehadeh's slanted views on the issue, perhaps his efforts at legalistic campaigning in international forums, and later forays in literature, can be understood as having a similar intent. Rather than an attempt to advance understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict, his work, despite his protestations to the contrary, can be understood as part of a broader effort for the people of the world to "take sides".

Robert Harris contributes articles to several websites on contentious political issues (not to be confused with the popular English novelist (1957-) of the same name). He also blogs at