

• NATAN ODENHEIMER

**‘W**hy do you think Israelis want to hear you speak?” I ask American-born Palestinian businessman Sam Bahour in a Ramallah cafe. “I’m a public figure, so when people come to hear me, they know what’s on the menu,” he replies. “There are all kinds of audiences. Some want to hear me firsthand, others to challenge me, which many do, or to reinforce how they argue against me outside, so they could say ‘I tried. I heard the other side but I cannot change my opinion.’”

MANY SEE Bahour as a controversial figure. Perhaps this is because alongside his business commitments he spends much time and energy in “narrating,” as he puts it, to Israelis and American Jews the Palestinian angle of the history and present of the conflict.

Bahour was born to a “very nationalistic family” in Youngstown, Ohio.

His parents, both originally from El-Bireh, raised him to know the names and histories of their neighbors in Palestine better than that of those living next door. During his college years, he became involved with the Palestinian student movement, which was the PLO’s student organ, and became a leader in the movement. After the Oslo Accords were signed, he followed his wife back to Ramallah to work in business development, hoping that the agreement would open the door for new opportunities.

In the past 24 years Bahour co-founded Paltel, a telecommunication company and the largest private-sector employer in the West Bank, served on the board and as the treasure of Bir Zeit university, was a director of The Arab Islamic Bank, and published opinion pieces in the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian* and +972. Currently, he runs his own company, Applied Information Management (AIM), specializing in business development and focusing on information technology and start-ups.

In 2013, J Street U chapter at Brandeis University invited him to speak, which some students found offensive since Bahour is a supporter of the BDS movement and criticizes Israeli policy harshly.

Following the Brandeis event, a Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) contributor, Ariella Charny, published a blogpost titled “The Failures of Sam Bahour,” discrediting him as an anti-peace activist.

But despite the many online descriptions of Bahour as a peace opposer and Israel smearer, he didn’t blink before agreeing to an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, something that isn’t trivial in the current political atmosphere. He believes that these sort of conversations – the kind that is difficult to engage in – are key for moving forward.

“We as Palestinians,” he said, “failed in history in addressing Israelis directly. We always thought that as long as we have an open door to the US, an open door to Russia or the European Union, we can resolve the conflict through a third party. I think it’s important but it’s impossible to [resolve the conflict] without addressing the Israelis directly. I encourage my people to do that in Hebrew as often as possible. Ultimately, this dispute is no longer about Israel-Palestine. It’s about Israel itself.”

TWO EVENTS shaped Bahour’s political consciousness and fixated him on what he sees as the Palestinian cause. The first was learning about the Sabra and Shatilla massacre committed by Lebanese Christian militias following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. When the photos started coming out, Bahour, who was a college student at the time, organized a demonstration against Israel on campus.

“I’m aware of the fact that more than one party was responsible. However, without Israel’s invasion of Lebanon it probably would not have happened. I blame Israel and all else who were involved.

“I asked myself then,” he says, “how could that take place? That was before Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria – these were supposed to be tragic events that stop the world from spinning, but they didn’t.”

The second event was the eruption of the First Intifada. “I was about to exit university in the year 1987-8 and already politically engaged. I couldn’t just sit still at home. I visited Palestine many times before, but my main activity on those visits mainly involved sitting on my aunt’s balcony stuffing myself with food. That year was the first time I came on a political tour. Understanding where the United States sits in this reality, a superpower supporting Israel, made this conflict doubly personal as an American and a Palestinian.”

Bahour returned to Youngstown to work in software development, but made room in his schedule for leading group visits to Palestine. Slowly, the intifada was fading, and around this time Bahour married Abeer Barghouty from Deir Ghassana, who followed him to Ohio. “In

1993,” Bahour recalls, “the Oslo Accords were signed – no one expected it. I read the agreement, and I became furious. I was against it.

“What kindled my anger was that the Palestinian side started the process by recognizing Israel, and in return Israel recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This lopsidedness didn’t make sense. It’s like the US would recognize the People’s Republic of China and in response the PRC would recognize the Republican Party. It was a bad agreement, but at least it was dated. That was the good thing about it. We thought, ‘We have already been under occupation for 30-35 years, what’s five more years?’

“I advocated – spoke and wrote – against the agreement. Then, one time, I came back home and my wife told me, ‘What’s wrong with you? The whole world is applauding this agreement through history. You are the only person disliking it.’ She convinced me to reread the agreement with a business eye, not a political one. She had a hidden agenda, of course. She wanted to go back home. We just had our first child and this Ohio thing didn’t work for her.”

Bahour gave the agreement another chance.

“There was an annex about every part of life, land, Areas A, B and C, water, patrols, police – you name it, it was there. I came across Annex No. 36, the Telecommunication annex, and the first paragraph was great. I couldn’t have written it better myself. It said that Palestinians have the right to build, operate and maintain separate and independent networks. Long story short – this brought me back to Palestine. My wife came back home, I relocated and got hired by a group of investors that were negotiating with the Palestinian Authority to create the first telecommunication company, Paltel.”

### Life back home

However, when Bahour started working on Paltel, he read the rest of the annex, and discovered clauses that limited the operation of the telecommunication company taking its baby steps. “The annex said that if we want frequencies and wavelengths allocated to us, we should come back to the Israeli side and they alone will decide if it’s allowed. Or, for instance, when we wanted to connect two Area As together, we need to cross Area C, which is 62% of the West Bank, and every time we wanted to do that we needed to get Israeli approval.

“You want to import equipment? You must jump through three Israeli hoops, a hoop of customs, a hoop of standards and a hoop of security. This slowed down our development process a great deal. So ultimately the conclusion I reached over that year or so is that the political lopsidedness of the agreement was translated into all of the sectors setting them up for failure. It’s similar to me telling you you are welcome to leave this cafe any time you want but I don’t tell you I sealed all the doors and windows, and that there is no actual way,” he explains.

“Having said that, we did the best we could do within these limitations. We built the largest private-sector company in Palestine, providing a fixed-line network, a mobile network, and a telecommunication network. It’s not separate and independent in the full sense of the word, but it’s the best we could do. It also became very successful financially. Even too successful financially, and that’s why I left. I felt like they [the directors of Paltel] were making too much profit from an occupied people. Then again, when I think back, I’m not sure the private sector, anywhere, should be expected to [do] more than what it’s expected to do, which is to hire people, create value and profit. I came with an illusion that the private sector is part and parcel of the National Liberation Movement. It was a mistake on my part.”

BAHOUR LEFT and opened his own consulting firm. The next year, he was hired to put up the first shopping center in the Palestinian territories (in Ramallah) called the Plaza Shopping Center.

During the Second Intifada, a lot of the clashes were very close to the construction site and building the shopping center didn’t take 18 months as planned, but turned into a five-year challenge. Despite the hardships, today the shopping center chain already has nine branches.

Bahour argues that the pace of the Palestinian economy’s growth is limited by Israel and that if Israel eased restrictions on the economy, even without solving the political crisis, the economy could grow much more. “When my Israeli friends, especially those who are in the supermarket business, visit, they are surprised by what we did here. I tell them yes, it’s a ‘wow,’ but if it wasn’t for the boot of occupation on our neck, we would have had branch number 50 by now.”

### What do you mean?

“For instance, we aren’t able to have the frequencies we want, to be able to put 3G on your smartphones. So every Palestinian smartphone

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PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY President Mahmoud Abbas gestures beneath a poster of Yasser Arafat, at a rally in Ramallah in 2014 marking the 10th anniversary of Arafat's death. (Finbarr O'Reilly/Reuters)

is a dumb phone. It's 2017 and Israel still refuses to release the 3G frequencies. I'm almost embarrassed to talk about it. I was in Denmark the other month and they have signs there for 5G 'coming soon,' and we are still begging for 3G.

"Israel, in my opinion, has full responsibility, not over everything, but over the strategic economic resources: water, frequencies, air spaces and borders. For example, the Oslo Accords said we can make bilateral agreements with any country as long as the country has trade relations with Israel. Yet, we also need to bring it to the Israeli side, not for approval, but for acknowledging it, because they control the border. We made nine agreements, and not one of these agreements was recognized by Israel. Another example is that Israel allows private companies to dig marble on Palestinian land, which could have been a resource used for stimulating Palestinian economy."

**You say that you spend almost 20% of your time in speaking and engaging with American Jews and Israelis. What's the most important thing for you to tell American Jews?**

"Many of those I speak with are rabbinical students that are here for studies or work in mainstream organizations, and I show them what I know and allow them to make the calculations of what that means. Our people have a tendency to exaggerate the reality to make their point. So if there are six soldiers outside my house I put on that there are 600 to make an impression, but at that point I lose my confidence with my audience, so for me it's important to lay out the reality as we experience it," he explains frankly.

"I do that comfortably because I know enough about Judaism to understand that social justice is a pillar of the religion and I think that this pillar can be invoked if people would be better educated. What I have seen in the last 15 years is that people open their eyes and minds as I'm speaking to them. It doesn't happen overnight, it doesn't happen at once, but I can see a process taking place, and given the number of people who come after the talks or the engagements asking how to get involved, I know it's ringing somewhere."

These discussions mostly take place in the West Bank; among them are independent groups visiting, some are organized thorough J Street, Encounter Programs, Extend and other organizations.

Asked about the reactions he's been getting in his discussion, he replies: "At first, many American Jews think that what I tell them accounts only for my experiences or my opinion and that it doesn't reflect a broader community. So they try to limit my added

value as a personal opinion, not of a community at large. The second reaction is becoming pissed off at their own establishment. These are grown people, leaders in their community, and they are shocked. They ask themselves, 'How come I do not know the entire story taking place on the other side of the wall?' Then comes the hard process of observing what they learned without becoming ostracized in their community. I think it's a tiptoe act and I don't envy them for having to do it, because I know how hard it is when you know something and want to act, but you also don't want to lose your roots and ability to work within your community, and I think this gives people a lot of pain."

**When did you find yourself in such a situation?**

"There is a romanticism about Palestine that the Palestinians over time created which has little to do with the reality here. Let's take, for example, the PLO and PLO leadership. It was revered and upheld over the years. But when you sit face to face with PLO operatives and PA representatives and ministers and so forth you start to see them for what they are. Some good, some bad, like every government. Some competent, some not. But definitely not an institutional body ready to engage in the big struggle facing us. That was a wake-up call for me. I encourage people not to romanticize it, but also not to lose hope, to understand the reality, each in its own way."

**What is your take on your Israeli audience?**

"They are always the hardest ones. They come with a very predefined notion of right and wrong. They come with a possibly inherent racism or superiority over Palestinians. They come rattling off very expired thoughts, talking points that are 15 and 20 years old."

**Like what?**

"They ask, 'Who are you as a Palestinian?' I thought we were past that. That people understood we exist. They go back to 'God gave me this land' so they put me in a corner. What am I supposed to do? Defend God?... The terrorism blocks them from seeing anything. To evaluate anything. Two Israelis die, and suddenly the entire 50 years of struggle becomes unthinkable."

**What is it that Palestinians want and Israelis don't understand?**

"We desire the exact same things that every single Israeli citizen desires when he wakes up: work, safety, marriage, love, having a house, a car, a mobile phone, tech, education for his children – Palestinians are no better and no less than other people."

"What I don't get is how the Israeli Knesset can both tell its people that Gaza has nothing to do with Israel, that it is not occupied, and at the same time maintain the population registry; they register every newborn child and issue them ID numbers."

**You think that Israelis are stuck in Oslo?**

"I think the Israelis are stuck in Zionism. Zionism was meant to create a state. That state was created, and it turned out to be a very strong state. What they should have done is put this ideology in the museum and cherish it. Instead they took Zionism and rolled it into all the institutions of the state."

"Fast forward to 2017, when Israel looks in the mirror it doesn't see Israel. They see a reflection of Zionism and it's very difficult for them to decide now – Are they a state for their citizens? Are they a state among the member states of the world (which means that there are rules of how to act; having an occupation is not one of those)? Or do they want to remain true to their ideology which is exclusive by definition, and they have to face that fall-out if they do."

"The current government doesn't recognize this as occupation. So I ask every Israeli I come across, if it's not occupation, then what is it? If it's occupation, it must end. Fifty years is far too long for temporary occupation. If it's not occupation, then I'm a subject, in Ramallah, of the Israeli jurisdiction between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River... I think that they need to be wary: the next generation of Palestinians may not beat their head against the wall of statehood. My daughter may say, 'You know what, Israel? Congratulations. You win. You get it all. You get the West Bank, west Jerusalem, east Jerusalem, you get the water, we will throw in Gaza for free, and you know what else you get? Us. And you know what more? We heard there is free health care in Israel. Where do we pick up our medical cards?' If the next generation drops the bid for statehood, what they will convert it into is a bid for civil rights."

**This approach is becoming popular?**

"There is a whole generation that speaks in this language. I would encourage them not to do that. Not because I don't want civil rights, but because this will force us into a one-state reality, but it's not going to be like Ohio and Pennsylvania, but like white and black South Africa. We have 138 countries that said yes to Palestine, nine that said no, of them, the only two important ones are Israel and the US. We are close to statehood. If we fail, we will not disappear or vanish. We will convert our struggle into a civil rights movement. If we do that, the game is over." ■