

An Irrelevant Race

Oct. 15, 2008

Jihan Abdalla Ramallah , THE JERUSALEM POST

(Extract from an article appearing in print in Issue 14, October 27, 2008 of The Jerusalem Report.

Palestinians believe that neither Republican John McCain nor Democrat Barack Obama will do anything to improve their economic, national or geopolitical status

"I have no interest in the U.S. elections," says Rami Al-Sayyad, 33, owner of a photography studio in Ramallah. "I don't care who gets elected," he says with a wave of his hand, shooing away an annoying fly and the wearisome question.

Midday in downtown Ramallah; people crowd the streets. Seemingly unaffected by the unseasonably searing late September heat, they hurry about, bargaining for vegetables and groceries to prepare for the iftar, the evening meal (which also means breaking of the fast, and is eaten at sundown to mark the end of the daylong fast observed on each of the 30-days of the Ramadan holiday.)

This is one of the hottest Ramadan holidays in recent memory. Maybe that's one reason people are much more concerned about getting home or ducking into the shade than about the U.S. presidential race. But it is not the only one.

Inside one of Ramallah's many tiny shopping malls, 48-year-old Naimah Safye, 48, owner of a women's dress shop, seems grateful for the break in bargaining, but reiterates al-Sayyad's position. Sitting upright behind the cash register she says, "It doesn't matter who gets elected, our lives are not going to improve. It's not that I'm indifferent to the peace process or that I don't watch the news. But the world, especially the United States, insists on ignoring us."

The Palestinian press is not ignoring the race, and faithfully reports each incident and poll as do the major Arab television networks, such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia and Dubai TV, which are avidly watched here. But Palestinians, who overwhelmingly believe that the Bush administration has been disastrous for them, also believe that neither Republican John McCain nor Democrat Barack Obama will do anything to improve their economic, national or geopolitical status.

Political analyst and former spokesperson for the Palestinian Liberation Office, Diana Butto says, "Palestine and Palestinians are not a U.S. election issue, whereas Israel is an important political and economic one," she explains. People here are convinced that both of the two hopefuls will be bound by what they view as the United States' unwavering pro-Israel policy, she says, leaving little room for hope of progress toward an end of the Israeli occupation.

And so, while Israelis discuss the elections heatedly, almost as if each of them has a personal stake in the success of this candidate or that because of his purported stand on Israel, Palestinians remain distant and apathetic. If the candidates do not care about us, they seem to be saying, we will not care about them, either.

Butto says that to outside observers, and at first glance, it would seem that Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who has lived in a Muslim country and was raised by a Muslim stepfather, would be the preferred choice of the Palestinians, at least the Muslims among them, who constitute over 75 percent of the population of the West Bank and 98 percent of the population of the Gaza strip. In America, she says, Obama's interracial background may provide him with a "racelessness" that is fresh and politically appealing. And Al-Jazeera's English language station has frequently suggested that Obama's ethnicity and background gives him a kinder understanding of Arab and Muslim countries.

But this is not the way Obama is perceived by the majority of the Palestinian public, who sense Obama's "phobic reaction to anything and everything Islamic," wrote Dura-based journalist Khaled Amayreh in a recent article for the Palestinian Information Center.

Jamal Dajani is producer and senior director of Middle Eastern Programming at Link TV, an American satellite television network that has produced award-winning programs on the Middle East. In a recent program about the United States elections, Dajani stated that during the early months of the presidential primaries, there was an "immense amount of enthusiasm for Obama's candidacy in the Arab world and press." But this early enthusiasm "has been replaced by skepticism," ever since the senator's speech to the American-Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) annual conference last June. Obama said that he was a "true friend" of Israel, that the U.S. bond with the Jewish state was "unbreakable," and, "as president, I will never compromise when it comes to Israel's security."

Obama's visit to the region in July only exacerbated the Palestinians' sense of alienation and disaffection. As Palestinians see it, Dajani tells The Report, Obama spent the greater part of his 30-hour trip "reaffirming his commitment to Israel and performing rituals expected by all dignitaries when visiting Israel." Although he paid a 45-minute visit to Ramallah to meet with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and voiced strong support for the creation of an independent Palestinian state, this was something "Palestinians have heard endlessly before," according to Dajani. Furthermore, Palestinians noted that Obama did not visit Gaza or any of the refugee camps - symbolic visits that would have indicated that he is, indeed, committed to the Palestinian cause.

Dajani notes that Obama did tell the Palestinian public that, if elected, he "would work from the first day in the White House to find a solution to the Palestinian issue," one promise that Palestinians have not incessantly heard from American hopefuls before. But they nevertheless believe that, along with all the other assertions of commitment to the peace process, it will prove to be empty.

For his part, McCain did not visit any Palestinian cities or meet with any of their officials but only spoke by phone to Abbas during a two-day visit to Israel in March. This, according to Butto, "angered Palestinians." Nevertheless, in a poll taken in early September, 33.5 percent of the 1,020 Palestinians from East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip who were surveyed preferred McCain and 27.7 percent backed Obama. But fully 30.4 percent said they "favor neither of them" and 8.3 percent declined to answer. The poll was prepared by Dr. Nabil Kukali for the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, located in Beit Sahur in the West Bank.

Kukali suggests to The Report that the majority was not actually expressing support for McCain but rather disappointment in Obama. "People had high expectations for Obama," he explains. "But his statements to AIPAC indicated that he does not understand Palestinian suffering."

Revealing the extent to which disappointment in Obama may be a leading factor in Palestinian disaffection, another poll posed a single question: "Democratic Candidate Barack Obama may win the next presidential election. Do you think his winning will positively or negatively affect the Palestinian cause?" Of the 1,270 respondents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, only 9.9 percent answered that Obama will have a positive effect, 44.9 percent said he will have a negative effect and 35 percent that he "will have no effect;" 10.2 percent of respondents refused to answer the question. The poll was conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, which is headed by Dr. Khalil Shikaki in Ramallah.

"These results demonstrate how frustrated Palestinians have become with the United States Middle East policy regarding the Palestinians," observed Maher Fawzi, 27, a computer technician, when informed of the poll. Fidgeting with the mouse of his computer, he explains to The Report, "Americans refuse to legitimize our suffering. It's like we don't matter."

Web Link:

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1222017536307&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>