

Dreams of America

Eugene Palestinian Wael Wahbeh returns to Israel.

Wael Wahbeh, a 30-year-old Palestinian Muslim with Israeli citizenship, first came to the U.S. in 1991 to attend college in North Carolina. He met and married an American woman, and his daughter was born in 1994. Wahbeh and his first wife divorced in 1995, and he returned to the West Bank for several years. He came back to the U.S. in 1998 and attended LCC while staying with family friends, UO professors Shaul Cohen and Diane Baxter. Several years later he re-married, won custody of his daughter and moved to Portland. When his second marriage failed, Wahbeh, frustrated with continued delays on his Green Card approval and wanting to give his daughter more connection to her roots, decided to move back to Jerusalem. He spoke with EW in late January and left the country in March.

What's on your mind?

I'll tell it from the beginning. I'm a Palestinian born in Kuwait. After my dad died, they confiscated everything because he is not Kuwaiti. When I was 8 years old we went to Jerusalem — just me, three sisters and my mom. When I was 13, the uprising started. It took so many years of my life, all the way through high school, and I wanted to escape. Then Diane [Baxter] came to Jerusalem and stayed in our house while doing a study on Palestinian women. Her being Jewish and American opened my eyes to a lot of things, and I liked the possibility of people living together peacefully in one country. The dream of America — she really sold it to me.

Were things tough for you in Jerusalem during the uprising?

At age 17, I was arrested because they thought I threw a bottle at a Jewish bus. I had just been standing outside a shoe store, looking at shoes for basketball training. The Israeli soldiers used the magazines of their M-16s to beat me, and then they dragged me down the street. Within two hours of being arrested, at least 40 soldiers exchanged turns beating me up in a military camp. Eventually the doctor patched me up and sent me to the police station. Then they started the interrogation. I didn't confess anything, because I really knew better, and after 59 days they had to release me.

Did your treatment in Israel make you want to believe that this country was better?

Yeah. I hoped all Americans would be like Diane, but they're not. I like the people much more than I like the government, but my bond is really to the land, because I don't believe in politics. The Northwest — especially Oregon and particularly Eugene — is the only place that ever felt like home. People are willing to listen and try to under-

stand, and they're very respectful, mainly.

What's the root cause of the Middle East turmoil?

Unfairness. When you're a superpower, there's a lot of responsibility that falls on your shoulders. When America decides to be biased toward Israel, it affects the Palestinian life and economy so dramatically. It can be a small decision on this end, but the impact is big on our life. Like we're insignificant.

Have people viewed you as insignificant in America?

I had a few incidents. At one party at a fraternity in Eugene, someone asked me where I was from and I said Israel. And he said, "I support you so much. We should throw all those Arabs in the ocean." I just walked out. Another guy felt so bad he came outside in a French maid dress, chasing me down the street, but I still didn't go back. So there are people who care and those who don't.

Do you think racism is the exception, or does it reflect something deeper in our culture?

There is something way deeper in the culture. It's like a taboo. A lot of people say, "Racism isn't cool," but when it comes down to actually looking at someone as a person and not as a race or color or religion, that's the experience people lack. A lot of people feel like they have to act differently because I'm from the Middle East. They start saying stupid stuff, like they know somebody who's dark, or they work with someone who's black, or they rode in a taxi where the guy had a turban on his head.

Even when people don't put their stereotypes on the table, you can sense it?

Yeah. When people don't know how to act around someone from another nationality,

there are two choices: They can either ignore them because they don't want to say the wrong thing, or they can try to be careful and just be themselves. People hear my name and they're too skeptical about asking the next question. I hate that. Just say it, whatever it is, and then give me a chance to speak for myself.

Are there racial divisions among Palestinians in Israel?

In the Arabic society, the division is based on family name, status and where you're from. The rift between Christians and Muslims is really faded. There are old ties, and those are hard to break. More than a thousand years ago, when the Muslims came to Jerusalem, they took a vow to protect the Christians in the city. The keys to the church where Jesus was crucified have been with a Muslim family until now. Even when there are problems between Christians and Muslims in Palestine, they get solved really fast because there is a strong belief on both ends that they have to be on the same side.

Why do you think there is a perceived division between Christians and Muslims in this country?

The purpose is to have a war. I don't think religion has much to do with it. There were times when the church led wars, but I don't think this is a war led by church. This is a war led by greedy bastards. The church might be supporting them, but it's really not

Muslims against Christians, and it never was.

You told me earlier that you've lost faith in this country. Can you explain that?

I was in Israel from October to November of 2004. Everybody asked me about the election and I said, "There is no way that Bush can win." I was really shocked and disappointed that he won, and I realized that Eugene is not reality. Eugene is just la-la land, where people actually give a shit. It's not like the rest of the country, where people are just selfish.

What's a solution to racism in this country?

Most of the racism I came across is from the Christian, wealthy, conservative people, especially when it comes to their support toward Israel, which is also reflected in the American policy. Maybe churches have to talk about racism and be more accepting of other religions. They teach a lot about love, but somehow it doesn't translate into action in real life. The couple times that I went with my wife to her church, they had this projector slide show and the Israeli flag came on a couple times. I don't want to see that. Not in church, not when I'm thinking about God.

Will your daughter remain an American citizen?

Oh yeah. She'll come back for college. We're not abandoning the country for good; I just want her to grow up in Israel for

the next eight years. After that, when she comes back to America, she'll be much stronger. **EW**



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