**From Jerusalem to a Kingdom by the Sea**

[Akbar Ahmed](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/akbar-ahmed/" \o "More Articles by Akbar Ahmed)

November 30, 2021

With his hopeful and inclusive vision of life, Adel Dajani is a natural-born ambassador between the West and the Arab world. The circumstances of his life have conspired with his temperament to create a man equally comfortable in both worlds. Too often the Arab street fixes on demagogues as its heroes. Thus, brutal and corrupt dictators like Gaddafi and Saddam are projected as iconic figures. It allows for scholars like Bernard Lewis to argue that the Arab world is intrinsically chaotic and can only be controlled through force from outside. It was an argument that Vice President Dick Cheney learned from Lewis and cited on American television in justification for his wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is a tragedy of the Arab world that men like Dajani are not in a position to guide their nations and use their influence in the West to improve their fortunes.

Arab identity has been formed by the strong currents that flow in the Middle East and include Arab nationalism, Islam, ethnic and regional pulls and the global narratives of the Cold War ideology which divided nations between those who supported the West and those who sided with the Soviet Union. In between, there was every kind of imaginable philosophy. It is from this universe that Adel has grown and maintained his sense of self and balance.

There are different and sometimes compelling reasons why we write autobiographies. The urge to preserve and record the family past is perhaps the strongest. Some believe that there’s is an interesting story to be told and are determined to record it and share it with others. Adel Dajani has recorded his fascinating story for us in From Jerusalem to a Kingdom by the Sea.

On one level Adel’s story is that of an Arab family facing exile and expulsion only to rise again.

The lesson we learn from Adel’s tribulations is the need to create an inner peace that would withstand the trauma of change.

His family was influential in Palestine and could trace its lineage back to the time when Umar the second Caliph of Islam arrived in Jerusalem and incorporated the city into the early Muslim Empire. On another level, the story is about a young man having to face dramatically changed circumstances in different cultural environments and learning to adjust. It is also a comment on the uncertainties and turbulence of our world. Perhaps the lesson we learn from Adel’s tribulations is the need to create an inner peace within ourselves that would withstand the trauma of change.

And we should be grateful. It is a story that stretches from the time of the birth of Islam itself to the contemporary life of Adel and his children. As the story travels to our world, we accompany the Dajani family from its disruption in their traditional homes in the Middle East and resettlement in North Africa. Along the way, the story arrives at Eton College in the UK when Adel becomes the first Arab student to attend that celebrated school.

Adel paid back Eton by helping launch the Ibn Rushed Annual Lecture Series. I was privileged to be asked to deliver the 2021 Ibn Rushd Annual Lecture. That is where I met him. I was struck by his affability and natural wisdom. There is plenty of evidence of these qualities in his autobiography. But it does not mean that he is blind to the challenges faced by those in his position. When I asked him to reflect on his experiences in Eton, he gave a realistic bitter-sweet assessment:

“The Eton experience represented a multitude of life experiences and attitudes: first a sense of confidence that an Arab Moslem boy from Tripoli could survive, compete, and quickly adapt with the best that Eton could provide in terms of academic, sports and human skills. Second, the humanity we have in common as school children from different backgrounds and nationalities is greater than what divides us and this strongly resonates in our Brexit times. Thirdly the emphasis on men’s Sana in Corpore Sano at Eton schooling was important and an equaliser between the boys irrespective of backgrounds. Lastly, I left with a strong sense of the importance of our cultural values of tolerance, generosity of spirit and intellectual curiosity about other civilizations which made it so natural for a Moslem to be part of the Eton School choir.”

But the general ignorance of his history and religion shocks Adel. He is “surprised by the ignorance of my school contemporaries about everything to do with my religion, the political mess of Palestine and the British colonial legacy of which we are still suffering the effects and the richness of the history of my other country Libya. I expected more of awareness from my contemporaries and the academic curriculum was totally Western-centric which was baffling to me.”

As someone committed to inter-faith understanding, I could not resist asking Adel, with his vast experience in dealing with two worlds, what lessons he had learnt to improve relations between the two: “The key to a better understanding between the West and what can be loosely called the Muslim world is the importance of exposure and travel to different countries and cultures at a young age and this is what motivated me to set up the Dajani Travel Grants to young Etonians to visit any countries in the MENA area with a specific research topic of interest. In addition, this is what also motivated the Ibn Rushd Annual Lectures which hark back to the intellectual curiosity and dynamism of Medieval Islam in the person of a polyglot such as Ibn Rushd and his descendants such as yourself who can describe the cross fertilisations between our civilizations rather than the stereotypes of divisions and misunderstandings which can be so dangerous.”

However suave and man of the world he appears, at heart Adel is a man yearning for his idyllic childhood. He captures the sentiment of nostalgia in sentences such as this from the time he was in London: “I missed my parents; longed for the security of the cashmere stole of the Queen and just one day in the sea in Tobruk. I even missed my old school in Tripoli and the lingering smell of eucalyptus trees, which evoked feelings of the blissful and carefree happiness of my Libyan childhood.”

“The most striking features of this memoir are its love of family and astonishing lack of bitterness,” wrote The Economist, in reviewing his book. But then that is what you expect from a man who ends his wanderings by quoting the Maulana: “And the legendary Sufi Master Rumi: ‘Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots.'” Eton and Rumi. Not a bad way to cope with the contingencies of our times.

*The writer is Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, School of International Service, American University and author of The Flying Man: Philosophers of the Golden Age of Islam.*