INTERVIEW WITH PALESTINE'S ARMENIAN AMBASSADOR TO HUNGARY

Posted on December 23, 2018 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

Hamo Moskofian, Budapest, 13 December 2018

Prof. Manuel Hassassian's diplomatic career began in 2009 when he was appointed ambassador of Palestine to the United Kingdom where he served for thirteen years. Since September 2018 he has served in the same capacity in Hungary. Freelance journalist Hamo Moskofian forwards his recent interview with the ambassador.

Q. *Your Excellency, would you please provide an outline of your mission in Hungary?*

A. This is a new post, a new challenge and there are many obstacles to overcome. I have set a political agenda about the process to change the unfavorable public opinion of Palestinians given the context of extremely warm relations between Israel and Hungary. This is exemplified in the friendship of the Prime ministers Victor Urban and Benjamin Netanyahu. My mission here is not only to promote Palestine, but also to mitigate the negative images that are disseminated through Israeli propaganda in this country. I will do whatever it takes to the best of my abilities.

Hamo Moskofian, Budapest, 13 December 2018

Prof. Manuel Hassassian's diplomatic career began in 2009 when he was appointed ambassador of Palestine to the United Kingdom where he served for thirteen years. Since September 2018 he has served in the same capacity in Hungary. Freelance journalist Hamo Moskofian forwards his recent interview with the ambassador.

Q. *Your Excellency, would you please provide an outline of your mission in Hungary?*

A. This is a new post, a new challenge and there are many obstacles to overcome. I have set a political agenda about the process to change the unfavorable public opinion of Palestinians given the context of extremely warm relations between Israel and Hungary. This is exemplified in the friendship of the Prime ministers Victor Urban and Benjamin Netanyahu. My mission here is not only to promote Palestine, but also to mitigate the negative images that are disseminated through Israeli propaganda in this country. I will do whatever it takes to the best of my abilities.

Q. *You were born in an Armenian family in Palestine, in the Holy Land where Armenians have lived for two millennia and they were the first to adopt Christianity as state religion. How do you see your relations with the Palestinian people in this context?*

A. This question has been asked many times… How an Armenian serves the state of Palestine! My ethnicity is Armenian and I am proud of it. My birth was in East Jerusalem and I carry in me the genes of two people. I was born in the Old City and went to the Collège des Frères of Jerusalem, unfortunately not to Sts. Tarkmantchats . Then I went to the American University of Beirut, because

of my interest in politics.

Q. *When did you get involved in the Palestinian movement?*

I realized the agony of the Palestinian people early on. I started to read about the *Nakba* (Arabic: النكبة, *al-Nakbah*, literally "disaster", "catastrophe", or "cataclysm") and visited the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: Sabra and Shatila. At the age of nineteen19, while still a student, I began to teach there. I continued my studies in political science, getting my BA, MA, and PhD. My dissertation was about the Armenian National Movement, which I published in three articles. Then I switched to the Palestinian history between 1919 and 1939… I explored the archives at the colonial office and got all kinds of documents, also about the Israelis. At the same time, I managed to get the personal papers of Haj Mohammed Amin al-Husseini and Nashashibi who were the backbones of the Palestinian movement at that period. It was published in the «Al-Qabas» Kuwaiti newspaper as a series of twenty essays. It was later published as a book in Slovakia and distributed all over…

It was during the first "Intifada", in 1988, that I realized that I couldn't continue to be simply a radical Palestinian. I opened up and began communicating with others. I was the first ambassador to be invited to the Hebrew University, to be the dean of the Palestinian University. It was a breakthrough. Subsequently, many professors took the same steps.

Q. *How were you involved in the peace process and diplomacy?*

A. With the first Intifada and then Oslo Peace process, we had so many engagements between the Palestinians and Israelis based on the principle of people-to-people relations. For ten years I was with Feisal Al-Husseini who was instrumental in establishing relations between the two peoples. My last interaction with Al-Husseini was in 2001 when I received a note from the U.S. Immigration Department to get my citizenship. Every Palestinian must have a second passport for mobility, for ease of work. Al-Husseini advised me to get it. I did and on my return I was shocked to hear about his death. Al-Husseini was a visionary. On that occasion I had a long television interview with a local channel, speaking about his and his father's Abd Al-Kader El-Husseini's life, the struggle from the beginning to the present.

On the day of his funeral thousands of Palestinians walked 20 kilometers following his coffin. The Israeli authorities ordered the evacuation of Jerusalem to avoid confrontation with the Palestinians. After Salaheddin Al-Ayoubi, Faisal liberated Jerusalem at least for one day!

Following Al-Husseini's death Sharon came to power and closed down the *Orient House* which was the headquarters of Al-Husseini. During that period President Abbas appointed me ambassador to Chile where 45,000 Palestinians live. Because I could not speak Spanish, I refused the post. Then he approached me to go to Italy. Again I refused because I could not speak Italian. My education was British-based. So I became ambassador to the United Kingdom. I was a stranger in London and had no recognition from the British at first. Nobody was aware of the Palestinians. So I decided to use the social media. Finally, in 2012, the British parliament recognized the state of Palestine. The embassy

was upgraded. Also the re-evaluation of the Balfour Declaration was put back on the political agenda of the British. I am proud of that. Here, in Hungary, I intend to make some breakthrough.

Q. *The Palestinian Revolution played a notable role in the resurrection of the Armenian national liberation movement in the '70s. Without that help, some assert, our main national claims would have been shelved. Would you like to comment?*

A. When I was a university student in Beirut I became aware that Arafat and his commanders had a great role in training the Dashnak, Hunchag, and the A.S.A.L.A. militants. However, they would not join the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, because their ultimate goal was purely national. We had excellent relations with the Shiites, Sunnis and every political party in Lebanon.

Arafat left his marks on the country. Lebanon was a confrontation field at that time. Israel managed to dismantle the PLO in 1982 and the progressive front. I lost friends in AUB and in Lebanon. Arafat had close contacts with the Armenians, as does our President Mahmoud Abbas. Our struggle for independence is similar; we share the same enemy: Turkey.

Reportedly Yasser Arafat liked to be called Arafatian. Can you tell how did this come about?

Feisal Al-Husseini and I went to meet the Armenian Patriarch Torkom Manougian of Jerusalem just before the Camp David meetings. Al-Husseini asked me to know where the Armenians stood regarding the future of the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem. The Israelis claimed the Armenian Quarter would be on their side. Therefore, we needed a *firman* (proclamation) issued by the Patriarch. I said: "*Serpazan* (Patriarch), this is the situation... we expect that the Patriarch will write something about this important matter." We managed to get the *firman* which stated that the Armenian Quarter was an integral part of Occupied Jerusalem. Ehud Barak always told that the Armenians were in their "pocket" and they would be in the Jewish sector of West Jerusalem. It was a major accomplishment. Arafat was satisfied.

President Clinton, in his second term, reviewed the Camp David negotiations. He then asked Arafat about the Armenian Quarter. Regarding this matter Arafat gave two interviews to "Haaretz" mentioning my name. Also, while shaking hands with President Clinton he said: "Look, the Armenian Quarter has already passed to us because we and the Armenians are the same. I don't want to tell you how many Armenians work for the national movement. Don't forget that I am Yasser Arafatian". You can't imagine how proud the Armenian community was when it heard Arafat's words.

I also remember my very first quarrel with Shimon Peres during an international peace conference in Prague. I criticized heavily the Israeli leadership concerning Palestinians. In the corridors, while drinking coffee, Peres approached me with his bodyguards and said: "Manuel, you are *Ibn Qahbe* (S.O.B.)!" I scolded him telling that it was shameful for a prime minister to speak in that disgusting language. He continued and tried to attack me. I stood up and answered him that he and his state were "*Awlad Qahbe*" and as an Armenian who grew up on the street fights of the Old City of Jerusalem, I was prepared for a fistfight. The Czech guards immediately interfered and Peres

departed. On my way back to Jerusalem, I feared the Israelis would arrest me at the airport, but nothing happened. Retaliation came after some time, when an Israeli helicopter attacked my house in Jerusalem with a guided missile… I explained all these to CNN and other mass media, which were my main defensive weapons.