

“ID Card” by Mahmoud Darwish — A Translation and Commentary

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The poem is presented,

FULL TEXT

Special Report

Write down:

I am an Arab.

My ID card number is 50,000.

My children: eight

And the ninth is coming after the summer.

Are you angry?

XXX

Write down:

I am an Arab.

I work with my toiling comrades in a quarry.

My children are eight,

And out of the rocks

I draw their bread,

Clothing and writing paper.

I do not beg for charity at your door

Nor do I grovel

At your doorstep tiles.

Does that anger you?

XXX

Write down:

I am an Arab,

A name without a title,

Patient in a country where everything

Lives on flared-up anger.

My roots...

Took firm hold before the birth of time,

Before the beginning of the ages,

Before the cypress and olives,

Before the growth of pastures.

My father...of the people of the plow,

Not of noble masters.

My grandfather, a peasant

Of no prominent lineage,
Taught me pride of self before reading of books.
My house is a watchman's hut
Of sticks and reed.
Does my status satisfy you?
I am a name without a title
XXX

Write down:
I am an Arab.
Hair coal-black,
Eyes brown,
My distinguishing feature:
On my head a koufiyah topped by the ighal,
And my palms, rough as stone,
Scratch anyone who touches them.

My address:
An unarmed village-forgotten-
Whose streets are nameless,
And all its men are in the field and quarry.
Are you angry?
XXX

Write down:
I am an Arab
Robbed of my ancestors' vineyards
And of the land cultivated
By me and all my children.
Nothing is left for us and my grandchildren
Except these rocks...
Will your government take them too, as reported?
Therefore,

Write at the top of page one:
I do not hate people,
I do not assault anyone,
But...if I get hungry,
I eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware...beware...of my hunger,
And of my anger.

"IDâ€™† CARD" IS one of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's most popular signature poems that made him a constant target of vicious criticism by Israel's religious, ultranationalist and conservative groups.

In this free-verse poem, Darwish assumes the symbolic persona of an ordinary Palestinian victim of Zionist oppression being interrogated by an Israeli official. The verses empower the peaceful dispossessed Palestinian with an assertive identity and a confident voice that defy continuous humiliations at the hand of the occupier. Although the poet was fluent in Hebrew, he ignores the official's language by omitting his questions from the poem and replies only in Arabic to underscore his own and Palestine's cultural and national identity. The poem's power lies partially in its stark language, uplifting tone and simple, direct images, which endow the speaker with a kind of primal nobility. Darwish was one of the most innovative, influential and beloved Palestinian poets of the 20th century. He was considered a powerful and successful articulator of his people's cause and sufferings-the most sophisticated of

Palestine's trio of "resistance poets," along with Samih Al-Qasim and Tawfiq Ziad.

Born in the Arab village of Berwa in Galilee, he and his neighbors were uprooted in the 1948 war. Children's lives were shattered and the villagers scattered as the Zionist army destroyed the village and subsequently built a kibbutz and a moshav on its ruins.

Darwish started writing and establishing his poetic career at an early age. "ID Card" appeared in his collection *Olive Leaves* in 1964, when he was only 23.

The poem quickly became a favorite of his fans and a target of the Israeli authorities' critical assaults for its unrelenting focus on his people's Arab-Palestinian identity. Darwish's poetry was fiercely attacked by Israelis for graphically portraying the Palestinians' Nakba-the 1948 catastrophic expulsion of most of them-and their stubborn love of their homeland.

Palestinians' attachment to their land was a core aspect of the young poet's artistic vision. This was considered by most Israelis a serious threat to the Zionist narrative.

Right-wing Israeli politician and military commander Ariel Sharon-a merciless hater and tormentor of Palestinians-was forced by the country's first Likud prime minister, the terrorist Menachem Begin, to resign his job as defense minister after an investigation condemned Sharon for instigating the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian refugees-men, women and children-in the Sabra and Shatila camps outside Beirut during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon (see p. 24). Sharon (whose Hebrew name Ari-el means "the Lion of God"!) was once quoted as saying that he envied Palestinians for their unswerving devotion to the soil. Darwish publicly responded by advising Sharon to cure himself of this envy by simply withdrawing from Palestinian land.

The intense critical attacks on "ID Card" and other poems were mild compared to the hysterical official reaction to a public reading in 2016. On Tuesday, July 19, of that year the Israeli Army Radio Network ended a segment of its regular "University of the Air" program with a Hebrew recitation of "ID Card." The wild, almost irrational reaction came promptly from the highest levels of the Israeli government, now completely dominated by racist, fanatic ultra-right parties.

Last year's assault on "ID Card" and Darwish was launched by two members of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's cabinet and the daily newspaper *Israel Today*, which is close to the Israeli prime minister (and funded by the American Zionist casino magnate Sheldon Adelson). The initial reaction came from Miri Regev, minister of culture and sports, who said she was terrified by the recitation and attacked the Army Radio for including the poem in its program.

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman then joined in by comparing the poet to Adolph Hitler. *Israel Today* wrote that airing the poem was like broadcasting a program to Israeli soldiers about Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, "because both have one aim: to destroy the Jews." Regev, Lieberman, *Israel Today* and other critics found it convenient to ignore the poem's two penultimate lines ("I do not hate people, I do not assault anyone") just before its concluding warning to "the usurper."

Contrary to this heightened angst in Israel about a decades-old Palestinian poem, the perspective and attitude of the poet and his multitudes of admirers toward "ID Card" reflected a sad irony.

When Darwish finally decided he no longer could tolerate the oppressive atmosphere in Israel and left-occupied Palestine for good in the early 1970s, he took up residence in Beirut, where he earned a living through, among other endeavors, regular poetry readings at huge popular gatherings. "ID Card" was a favorite of Darwish's admirers. However, they were always disappointed because they never heard it in public again: the poet insistently refused to read it.

To his admirers the poem was a sort of primal scream that reminded all Palestinians of the catastrophic events of 1948 and their tragic aftermath. To the poet, asserting his Arab identity had been an existential necessity under occupation-but one he found unnecessary and irrelevant in an Arab country. He also confided to his friends that he had no intention of continuing to be solely a Palestinian voice. Instead he wanted to constantly explore the universality of the human condition and to expand the horizons of his poetry in form, style and content. And that is precisely what he accomplished over his remaining years-successfully and brilliantly.

Salman Hilmy, an Iraqi American, worked for the Voice of America for 34 years and was chief of its Near East and South Asia Division from 1987 to 1993.

DETAILS

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