

A TALK WITH DR. JOHN DAVIS

Dr. John Davis is a founder and past president of ANERA. He was born in Missouri in 1904 and received his Ph.D from the University of Minnesota. Before being recruited to head UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), he was Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and Business Education at Harvard. He went on to work with the American University of Beirut and took a leadership role at ANERA and the Musa Alami Foundation of Jericho, USA. His work in the Middle East gave him a deep affection for the Palestinian people, causing him to be fondly remembered by many of the Palestinians who knew him. Janice Murphy, Vice-President of ANERA, spoke with him recently about his years of experience in the Middle East.

JM: Tell me, Dr. Davis, how this long association with the Palestinian people first developed. How was it you were invited to be a Commissioner General of UNRWA?



John Davis, at UN press conference, 1959

OUR APOLOGIES to our readers for the delay in receiving the fall issue of our Newsletter. We have installed a new computer system, and had numerous problems to resolve. If you have received more than one copy of our Newsletter, please know that we are busy eliminating the duplications. Computers can be strange animals sometimes, but we appreciate your patience and support while we try to tame ours.

JD: My field had been agricultural economics. I had developed the concept of business agriculture. Changing to this part of the world became a redirection of my interests. I had almost no qualifications for the work in terms of the problem itself or the people or area. But I had been active in UN affairs in regard to agriculture and had made a study of Public Law 480 [the Congressionally mandated program for the shipping of surplus foodstuff overseas] the summer before. I was asked to go to the UN office in New York and meet, among others, Dag Hammarskjold to discuss the position. I was certain in my mind that I would not leave my post at Harvard. And while I was persuaded to say "Yes," it was never enthusiastically. I simply had no compelling reason to say, "No."

I stipulated that I should go to Beirut by ship where I could take the time to read the existing literature about the Palestinians, these people in exile. So I took what time I could to acquaint myself with the problems I would face in my new work.

JM: You were Commissioner General from 1959 to 1963, and your headquarters were in Beirut at that time?

JD: Yes, at that time, our temporary agency was temporarily headquartered in Beirut. I headed the

largest UN agency at that time, working with Palestinians living under four governments. Imagine an agency with the responsibility of feeding, sheltering, providing health care and educational services for a million and a half people. The job of Commissioner General was the most challenging and most fulfilling job that I had.

JR: I frequently hear your name in association with vocational training.

JR: I had taught vocational education back in Iowa, after I completed college. I had a particular interest in this area and raised more than 8 million dollars for vocational training before I was through. I must say it worked out like magic. Besides elementary school education through the ninth grade, UNRWA provided vocational training in ten schools in fields where employment could be found—mechanics, carpentry, welding and the like. Such training is essential for children growing up in refugee camps. Why? Because these children had not only been made homeless, they had been separated from their culture and their traditional livelihood. They could no longer learn from their fathers the skills and work habits which would make them productive.

JM: Much the way farmers here learn from parents.

JD: Yes, much the same anywhere. But the Palestinians, suddenly becoming refugees, had a kind of abrupt change, leaving a vacuum there that we wanted to help fill. The program was successful. Initially, the instructors were European, but they trained Palestinians to replace them over time. A



curriculum was developed in Arabic which had the side benefit of being adapted all over the Arab world where none had existed before. It was not planned that way of course, but it was a pleasing side benefit.

JM: What struck you most about the people?

JD: Well, they are a wonderful people. The poor media image of the Palestinians has always troubled me. I was always impressed, in fact, that they are so fundamentally and basically a peace-loving people.

That's why I made my study of Western policy in the Middle East that resulted in my book, *The Evasive Peace*. I tried to speak as an American to the American people, explaining in factual terms the injustices the Palestinians have experienced. That has been a long term effort of mine—to foster a better understanding of the political events that have transpired in the area. Here you have a population that has been forced to flee warfare, for some twice in their lives, and still living without a homeland. Yet as a people, they are also plagued with the distorted perceptions of them held by Westerners.

JR: How did your work lead you to become involved with the founding of ANERA?

JD: In 1967 I was in New York City, where I served as the Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the





A Palestinian graduate of UNRWA's telecommunications program

American University of Beirut. You know, ANERA's information was greatly assisted by a grant from NEED—Near East Emergency Donations, Inc. in 1968. NEED itself was an effort mounted by companies that worked in the Middle East—oil companies, banks, suppliers of technical equipment—all organized to aid the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the 1967 War. As I was recently back in New York, I was asked by NEED to come to their meetings to debrief them on the situation on the ground.

JM: Your contacts and information were an excellent source of assistance for them as to disbursement of the funds they raised.

JD: Yes that's right,—I was able to tell them very specifically what was happening. In time, NEED ran out, but the need did not. Therefore, ANERA, which had been formed to work on the crisis, continued to raise funds for the important work and I was asked to work with ANERA, first as President, and then as Chairman of the Board.

ANERA should not exist, because the problem should not exist. Having said that, I will say I'm rather proud of my continuing association with ANERA, as it does a fine job.

JM: It must be very depressing for you to have spent so many years in the area and see it no closer to peace.

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JD: I'd like to see more progress made toward peace. I would say categorically that I see no sign of peace until the policy of the United States changes to one more responsive to the needs of the Palestinians.

JM: How did your work in the Middle East change you?

JD: When I left UNRWA as Commissioner General I could never bring myself to the point of trying to reorient myself to my past work in agribusiness. The result is that I have worked in this area for thirty years. One is powerless to create the conditions for a just peace. To have lived in the area and with the people, one could not help but be affected by the suffering, and could not help feeling compelled to try.



John Davis with ANERA staff, 1974

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