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Recollections of

ANERA's Early Years

ANERA

Improving Lives in the Middle East

Since 1968

Mr. John Richardson was ANERA's first Executive Director and second President, serving from ANERA's founding in 1968 until 1977.

ANERA has grown steadily for more than 40 years. It has taken on additional responsibilities to better serve Palestinian refugees and other victims of war and disaster across the Middle East. That's the good news. The bad news is the Palestinian problems have not disappeared and a solution remains as elusive as ever.

In this essay, I want to look back at the first nine years of ANERA and share some stories from those early days that were filled with optimism and hope. This is a personal recollection, not an official history in any sense of the word, but I have checked the record for correct names and dates.

ANERA's creation was the result of the June 1967 war that generated a second wave of refugees from Palestine – some of them already having fled from their homes in 1948 (recounted in my “Pre-History” of ANERA, available on the organization's website). I was working in Beirut at the time as the local representative of American Friends of the Middle East (AFME). Attorney James (“Jim”) Sams of the Arab Emergency Relief Committee (for Arab-Americans) and AFME President Orin Parker were key players in establishing ANERA. It was late spring of 1968. Jim came to Beirut

seeking what would become ANERA's core staff. He asked me to become its first Executive Director. I was familiar with the Arab world and the Palestine issue and realized this position would keep me closely involved with a subject of deep concern. And, it would give me a chance to better inform Americans about Palestine by relating the story of its displaced families.

Orin Parker had endorsed the assignment but it hinged on the approval of Dr. John H. Davis, ANERA's newly-appointed president. Dr. Davis was a former commissioner-general of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) and author of a new book on the Arab-Israeli problem, "The Evasive Peace." He was an excellent choice for the job, having also served as an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower Administration and having taught at the Harvard Business School.

I said goodbye to Beirut and returned to the United States, where I met Dr Davis and formalized our agreement. Jim Sams found an office for ANERA and on August 12, 1968 we set up shop in suite 900 at 733 15th St., NW.

ANERA's first office employee Joyce Bouvier had a longtime interest in the Middle East. She became our office

manager/secretary. She was quickly joined by Joyce Stewart, our bookkeeper and eventually ANERA Treasurer. With our small but eager staff, we put our minds and hearts into our work.

A critical element in ANERA's creation was the belief that a new and separate organization would be able to reach out to a wider range of potential donors than other Arab-American groups of the post-war refugee relief effort. With the tacit support of NEED (Near East Emergency Donations), ANERA was able to obtain early commitments from major U.S. oil companies that were active in the Middle East. They became our principal source of early income.

But we wanted to reach a wider audience of concerned Americans. So we began to explore the world of direct-mail fund-raising. We worked closely with the D.C. firm of Guy Yolton, a leader in the field and an imaginative person who did not shy away from the Palestine issue. Direct-mail took time to build an appropriate list of donors.

In the early stages it cost more than we took in. The rule for list rentals from other groups was you could use their names and addresses for a single solicitation. Anyone on that list who contributed to you became part of your

own list. So, we slowly and steadily expanded our donor list, exchanging names with selected non-profit groups for our mutual benefit.

I do remember one painful period during the rise of Yasser Arafat's PLO, when spectacular airplane hijackings and guerrilla attacks were constantly in the news. The question was whether ANERA should keep its direct-mailing schedule or wait until things calmed down. But, it didn't take long to realize that if we waited until the Middle East was quiet, we'd never get anything done. We decided to stick to our schedule and just hope that people would be persuaded by our message and want to support the needs of the refugees. Thankfully, that decision proved correct.

In 1971, ANERA took an important step in expanding its operations with the decision to merge with a New-York-based organization, American Middle East Rehabilitation (AMER). AMER had a distinguished humanitarian record, having been created in response to the first Palestine refugee crisis in 1948. AMER's main function was soliciting and shipping in-kind medical gifts, mainly medicines, to the Palestinian refugees. Despite the additional financial burden, we believed it was important to keep the

AMER function going and it became a division of ANERA with a small New York office run by Mary Anne Kolidas. ANERA later consolidated AMER in the ANERA Washington office and hired a former UNRWA Jordan director, Bob Fisher, as its director. The Medical Committee was chaired by two distinguished physicians, Dr. Rosa Lee Nemir and Dr. Vicken Kalbian. The gifts in-kind program has remained a vital part of ANERA's effort to address priority needs in the Middle East.

The 1973 Middle East war proved to be another crisis point for ANERA. While it did not result in further Israeli occupation of Arab lands, it increased suffering for refugees in the Gaza Strip and Sinai, where most of the fighting took place. Once again, ANERA was able to demonstrate its ability to respond quickly and help coordinate refugee relief assistance from the United States.

Perhaps ANERA's most important program development in 1975 was the decision to seek grant aid from USAID, the State Department's foreign aid division. The opportunity came about in a rather indirect fashion. In the wake of the October 1973 war, the US State Department was intent on solidifying the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. While Egypt and Israel were the principal

recipients of the “golden shower” of foreign aid, we spotted language in the House Foreign Affairs Committee report on the proposed foreign aid package about the desire to support charitable/educational activities in the occupied West Bank as well. This language may have been intended to help Jordan’s King Hussein stay in good favor with his West Bank subjects but there were no apparent restrictions on recipients.

We jumped on the opportunity and ANERA was one of the first two American organizations (along with Catholic Relief Services) to apply for USAID grants. Somewhat to our surprise, ANERA received a positive response and quickly became a major U.S. private sector participant with the State Department in the occupied territories.

Because of Palestine’s political history and Jordan’s retention of East Jerusalem and the West Bank after the 1948 war, the Palestinian population there was served by a U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem. The U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv was responsible only for Israel. After the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, there was no U.S. embassy to oversee U.S. government-supported programs in the occupied territories. The Consulate was not

authorized to function in that role. As a result, ANERA and other recipients of USAID funds functioned in a bureaucratic vacuum in the early years of collaboration with USAID. But ANERA had a well-established role in the occupied territories and was an early recipient of Camp David largesse, so we were given a good deal of freedom. That meant that once USAID/Washington approved grants, ANERA was able to administer them directly, always providing regular accounting and progress reports to Washington.

From its inception ANERA’s modus operandi was simple: we sent funds to recipient organizations through bank transfers. Dr. Davis or I would travel periodically to the West Bank and Gaza to meet with grant recipients and interview potential grantees. This arrangement gave ANERA maximum operating flexibility. It also meant minimizing official contact with the Israeli occupation authorities.

Soon after ANERA began receiving USAID funds however we were informed that the State Department expected ANERA to open an office in East Jerusalem. Various reasons were given but it appeared there was Israeli pressure on the State Department to have a locally-accountable presence to interact with the occupying

authorities. It became clear that as long as ANERA continued to receive USAID funds -- which had become an important part of our overall revenue and permitted us to engage in a wider range of activities in the occupied territories -- we would have to establish a Middle East office.

I made a trip to Jerusalem and met with Labib Nasir, Director of the East Jerusalem YMCA. He had recently built an impressive facility that housed the Palestinian YMCA programs, with an on-site hotel and restaurant to generate operating revenue and teach practical skills. The hotel was named "Aelia Capitolina," the name of the city the Romans rebuilt on the ruins of Jerusalem after the Jewish revolt of 70 AD. Labib had been accountant/bookkeeper for the original Jerusalem YMCA. When it ended up in West (Israeli-held) Jerusalem in 1948, he moved the programs for Palestinian youth to a site on Nablus Road in East Jerusalem overlooking the so-called Mandelbaum Gate, the only official crossing point between East and West Jerusalem. During the long process of fund-raising and constructing the East Jerusalem YMCA, Labib and his wife Doris lived in a tiny apartment on the roof of the next-door building belonging to the Near East Council of Churches. After the Nasirs took up residence in the

YMCA building, the penthouse remained empty until ANERA rented it.

The question of the first ANERA director in the Middle East was important, since he (or she) had to be knowledgeable about development activity and able to represent ANERA effectively with the occupation authorities. We were extremely fortunate with the engagement of Henry Selz, who had been recommended to me by Ann Lesch, a long-time Middle East specialist who knew Henry's work with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in the Middle East. Henry was a widower living in Cyprus but he readily agreed to discuss the ANERA position with me. Simply put, Henry was perfect for the job. A World War II ambulance driver for the Red Cross who graduated from Harvard after the war, Henry had served with CARE, AFSC, and other non-governmental organizations in the developing world. In addition to his wide knowledge and experience, Henry had a feisty personality and a strong backbone. He would make good use of those qualities once the office opened and he and ANERA's work became subjects of frequent, intensive interest by the occupying authorities.

After ANERA started working with USAID, we broadened our programmatic approach to include economic self-help

projects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was a great advantage having a skilled representative on the ground because Henry could keep in touch with the local population and assess needs. It was far more effective than our previous practice of sporadic visits that had resulted in spotty assessments.

One of the early USAID-funded projects was a new public library in Hebron. The recently-elected Mayor, Fahd Qawasmeh, was progressive and eager to develop the ancient city's public sector. The ANERA-supported library freed up the original library building, where Mayor Qawasmeh was able to consolidate a number of municipal services.

One issue we dealt with on a regular basis at ANERA was how we could tell the Palestinian story without running afoul of our obligations as a non-political organization under U.S. tax law. As it turned out, we took advantage of numerous opportunities to inform the public about the Palestinian situation. ANERA was invited regularly to testify about the Palestine refugee issue before Congress, thanks in part to a cadre of aides who felt the Middle East issue needed more thorough vetting than was customary on the Hill. And, ANERA's direct-mail funding-raising project

reached hundreds of thousands of Americans several times a year, providing a platform to effectively present the Palestinian refugee story and generate needed revenue. ANERA officers and Directors were often called upon to give talks about the Palestine issue and the office also provided limited research support.

ANERA has been fortunate in the selection of its Directors and Board Chairmen. As the first, Dr. Davis set the example. He was a Midwest farm boy who obtained a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics who was forever changed by his five years as Commissioner-General of UNRWA from 1959-64. Originally seen as a "place-holder," Dr. Davis became a champion of Palestinian youth. He tirelessly argued that these young refugees, mainly sons of peasant farmers, were growing up in semi-urban refugee camps without access to land and the ability to learn the skills of their fathers and grandfathers. Dr. Davis oversaw the creation of a network of schools teaching practical skills to the youth so they could transition to the rigors of more modern economies.

Dr. Davis's successor as Chairman was Evan M. Wilson, a retired Foreign Service officer who had served at one point

as U.S. Consul-General in Jerusalem. As Consul, he was the U.S. diplomat principally responsible for relations with the Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which were under Jordanian rule during his tenure. Mr. Wilson spent most of his career dealing with the Middle East and authored several books on Jerusalem and U.S. Middle East policy. Mr. Wilson brought scholarship and conviction to his role as ANERA Chairman.

By the time I moved on to other pursuits, ANERA had chosen its third president, Peter Gubser, whose credentials included service as a senior Ford Foundation official in the Middle East and a scholarly/writing background that included sociological research in Jordan. It was another fortunate choice in leadership.

One life-changing lesson I learned long ago, and even more so during my tenure with ANERA, is that no matter what other work I might undertake, the Palestine issue, with all its contentions, frustrations and rewarding moments, never gets out of one's system.

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Since 1968

American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) advances the well-being of people in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon and Jordan. Through partnerships and close consultation with local groups and communities, ANERA responds to economic, health and educational needs with sustainable solutions and also delivers humanitarian aid during emergencies.

Incorporated in 1968 to help ease the suffering of Palestinian refugees after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, ANERA is non-political and non-religious and is one of the largest American non-profits working solely in the Middle East for 40 years.

ANERA's work is made possible through the support of thousands of private donors around the world and grants from numerous public and private institutions.

*For more information about our programs
and how you can help, please contact us at:*

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