

Bassem Eid

The start of the First Intifada in 1987 was a watershed moment for the Israeli human rights movement. Suddenly, reports about human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli army became an issue that was intensively discussed in every day politics. Bassem Eid, who had grown up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jerusalem, was a key figure in those discussions. On behalf of the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem he was among the first to travel throughout the country collecting evidence of atrocities committed by the Israeli army. With the establishment of the Palestinian National Administration in 1994, he increasingly turned his attention to human rights violations committed by the Palestinian authorities. For this purpose, he founded the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group.

Interview

The interview with Bassem Eid took place on September 6, 2016, in the office of one of his colleagues in Jerusalem. Since he was preparing for a lecture tour to the USA set to begin the next day, he only had one hour to spare. Nonetheless, he was very engaged in the conversation with Professor Dr. José Brunner (Professor of the Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas at the Tel Aviv University) and Dr. Daniel Stahl (coordinator of the Study Group Human Rights in the 20th Century). The interview was conducted in connection with two other conversations with [Raja Shehadeh](#) and [Gadi Algazi](#) about human rights activism in Israel.

Stahl

You grew up in Jerusalem, right?

Eid

I grew up in a refugee camp in Jerusalem. I was born in the old city. In June 1966, which is exactly one year before the 1967 war, the Jordanian government decided to remove 500 Palestinian families from the Jewish quarter in the old city of Jerusalem to the Shuafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem. I lived there for 33 years. From 1966 to 1999. The forced move as very strange for the people. To date, nobody has found any explanation as to why the Jordanians took such actions. And this is why old men talk about rumors that the 1967 war wasn't really a war. There is the notion that King Hussein^[1] sold Palestine—or the West Bank—to the Israelis. Otherwise, why was I moved to the refugee camp? What other explanation could there be?

Stahl

Were these rumors discussed at home when you grew up?

Eid

Yes. At the time I used to hear these rumors from the old men while they were sitting and talking. There are still many people who believe these rumors.

Stahl

How dominant was politics or the discussion of politics in your family?

Eid

Politics weren't really dominate. I think that my family could have been considered completely apolitical. But my oldest brother is a member of Fatah.^[2] He was considered a prominent member of Fatah in Jerusalem. I think in 2012, during Salam Fayyad's last government,^[3] my brother was appointed as the Minister for Jerusalem Affairs. But I think that he only held that position for 40 days. Then he resigned from the government because he was a Minister without a job. What did, »Jerusalem affairs« mean? And at that time, Salam Fayyad refused to open an office for him in Jerusalem, because Fayyad was a little scared of the Israelis.

Stahl

Was your brother already politically involved at home when you were young?

Eid

No, I don't remember.

Brunner

How many brothers do you have?

Eid

We are nine brothers and one sister.

Brunner

Did your other brothers also become involved in politics?

Eid

No, not, at all. Only my brother and I were involved. Our political perspectives used to conflict. For example, I was very critical of Arafat.^[4] He was very close to Arafat. I have six brothers who are still living in the camp with their families. All of them are married and have children.

Brunner

Given your upbringing, what made you become a human rights activist?

Eid

I remember that—probably a few years before the beginning of the Intifada—I got a job as a freelancer on the Israeli newspaper, Kol Ha'ir. I started writing about Palestinian issues. I then became a reporter for the occupied territories. Kol Ha'ir is a local, weekly Jerusalem newspaper which is still published today. My Hebrew is fluent.

Stahl

How did you get this job?

Eid

I think that I wrote two different articles in two different Israeli newspapers. Then the

editor of Kol Ha'ir contacted me and offered me the job. He asked: »What about writing a weekly report on the occupied territories, or stories related to this, or whatever you want?«

Stahl

What were these articles about?

Eid

I never dealt with politics. I interviewed specific people, and I wrote far more humanitarian stories for Kol Ha'ir at that time. When the First Intifada^[5] started, some Israeli public figures decided to establish an Israeli human rights organization called B'Tselem^[6]. They knew my articles and asked me if I would like to have a field job in B'Tselem. This took place when the Intifada started, and the Israeli army committed many human rights violations against the Palestinians. It became clear that an organization such as B'Tselem was very important.

Brunner

Were you always stationed in Jerusalem? You covered the West Bank, but you lived in Jerusalem?

Eid

Yes, I lived in Jerusalem. I travelled about two or three times a week to Gaza. I would head there in the morning and come back to Jerusalem in the afternoon. I covered all of the occupied territories, not only the West Bank but also Gaza. In fact, I covered Gaza much more than the West Bank because more violations were committed in Gaza than in the West Bank.

Brunner

Did you have problems with the authorities traveling as a Palestinian from Jerusalem to Gaza? Did you encounter any problems in doing your job as a field worker?

Eid

No, I never faced any problems. There were Palestinian activists and probably the only problem that I faced in the beginning was that it was a little strange for people that a Palestinian was coming to investigate an Israeli violation on behalf of an Israeli organization. I was never threatened or kicked out from any of the houses that I entered. However, through conversations with people I noticed that they sometimes found the situation strange. I then decided that I would report about a specific case that I investigated each week. I began to publish a weekly story in the Al-Quds newspaper^[7], which was the most, let's say, public newspaper and one of the main newspapers, in the West Bank and Gaza. This paper was in Arabic and that gave me increased support among the Palestinians, especially when, based on my articles about a particular case in which a Palestinian was killed, B'Tselem sent a letter to the Attorney General. The Military Attorney General decided to bring that soldier to justice. That incident gave me a huge amount of, let me call it, moral support from the public towards the work that I was doing.

Stahl

You say it was strange for the Palestinians that you worked for a Jewish organization. Did

you also find it strange in the beginning, that a Jewish organization contacted you?

Eid

No, it really wasn't strange for me because I had known other Israeli organizations, such as the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, who were dealing with these kind of cases. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel^[8] was a huge organization and it used to bring cases to the Israeli Supreme court on behalf of Palestinians. So it wasn't strange. In 1992, I received an award from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel honoring me as a human rights activist for my work in B'Tselem and because of my articles in Al-Quds newspaper. Through my articles they saw that I was trying to raise awareness about the issue of human rights.

Stahl

Did you personally use the term »human rights«, or was it just that others saw you as a human rights activist?

Eid

Human rights was a very new topic for me. When I was in school, I had never even heard about the issue of human rights. I think that I started to become involved in human rights through reading Hebrew newspapers. There used to be several Israeli organizations, and some of those used to publish reports about human rights violations. Some of these reports were covered by Israeli newspapers. That is how I became increasingly aware of human rights issues.

Stahl

Did you already have contact with, or observe the work of, Al-Haq^[9] before this?

Eid

No, before then I had never even heard about Al-Haq. There was also another organization that was formed before Al-Haq. If I remember correctly, it used to be called the Palestinian Human Rights and Information Center. It was during the First Intifada that I began to learn about those types of human rights organizations in the West Bank and in Gaza. That is how the platform of human rights increasingly started to grow.

Stahl

Did your articles talk about human rights, for instance the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Or did you refer to some specific articles of the Declaration?

Eid

No, I don't think so—in the beginning, of course not. Certainly not when I was in Kol Ha'ir. During the First Intifada and in my pieces in the Al-Quds newspaper I started using specific articles because that was how I could prove that a certain incident constituted a human rights violation. It was one of the ways in which I could show that a certain act went against a specific article in the International Declaration for Human Rights or the Geneva Conventions, for instance. I remember that I completed two different training courses in Strasbourg France at the International Institute for Human Rights. I believe the first one took place in 1991. B'Tselem sent me. They covered all of the costs, including the registration, the accommodation, and the flight. I think I took the second course in 1993. It

was a higher level of course. Those courses gave me the basic knowledge concerning all of the human rights conventions.

During the First Intifada the Palestinians were very aware of human rights violations. Because they became increasingly aware of the issue of human rights, they began to contact and report to me.

Brunner

As an activist who spent so much time in the occupied territories, did your human rights approach find an echo among the Palestinians whom you met? Was it something that they could communicate with or relate to, or was it something rather strange to them?

Eid

Let me say it like this: I think that during the First Intifada the Palestinians were very aware of human rights violations. Because they became increasingly aware of the issue of human rights, they began to contact and report to me. They realized that incidents, such as when a soldier entered one of the houses and mixed together the wheat and the sugar, were a violation of human rights. People began reporting these incidents to me. Then I would go to the field and collect testimonies. So, yes, people were aware of human rights issues.

Unfortunately, when the Palestinian Authority came to power it seemed as if people cared less and less about human rights. It was not the priority. During the First Intifada, and before the Palestinian Authority came, human rights were a priority within society. Today, people do not care. I believe that people do not care about human rights because they are scared to report any violations committed by the Palestinian Authority.

However, they are still aware of human rights in relation to the Israelis and are still reporting any human rights violations committed by the Israelis. They are still contacting B'Tselem. Yet, people are scared to report any violations of human rights committed by the Palestinian Authority.

Brunner

In your work, you cooperated with Al-Haq on the one side and with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel on the other side ...

Eid

Yes, I cooperated with many organizations.

Brunner

... but also with international organizations like Human Rights Watch.

Eid

Yes, of course, Human Rights Watch. I remember them very well. Occasionally they went on the same missions as I did to collect information and I used to take them to the field. Of

course, I worked with Amnesty International. From time to time I was invited to conferences by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. When they were publishing a report about human rights violations committed by Israel they invited me to come and give a report since I was one of the eyewitnesses to these violations. Unfortunately, I realized later on that these organizations are, in my opinion, more of a political organization than human rights organization.

Stahl

When did you realize that?

Eid

I realized that after the Palestinian Authority came to power in 1994.^[10]

Brunner

In what sense do you feel these organizations were or are more political than human rights based?

Eid

I realized this as, for years, they turned a blind eye to the human rights violations committed by the Palestinian Authority, while continuing to chase after and report on any violations committed by Israel. In my opinion, those actions display a political position not one based on human rights. For example, they reported on Palestinian prisoners inside Israel, but they also should have been reporting on those who lost their lives under torture in the Palestinian Authority's jails.

Stahl

Now Amnesty International have their reports, but part of their work also concerns prisoners of consciousness. Were there any attempts to have some prisoners of consciousness kept in Israeli prisons?

Eid

What they call a prisoner of consciences is a type of prisoner who has been arrested and kept under administrative detention. However, administrative detention alone is a violation of human rights, because keeping people under administrative detention, means ignoring these people's right to go to trial or for justice.

The Israelis have this type of law, which they consider an emergency regulation. Sometimes they hold people under arrest for three, four or a maximum of six months by signing a form from the commander of the West Bank. Now imagine that you have been arrested. You're taken to jail. You don't know exactly what the charges are. You are not allowed to know what the charges are. Now, this type of law does not exist only in Israel. I know many Palestinians in Palestinian jails, whether in Gaza or the West Bank, who were in jail for months without charges or a trial. I did not hear anything about Amnesty International or the Human Rights Watch considering them prisoners of consciences.

Brunner

I wonder whether you could say a bit more about your concept of human rights, because

you speak of people being imprisoned without trial, or being tortured. And of course, these are severe violations of human rights. But when I look at the picture of the West Bank, I see a military occupying power that, for instance, prevents Palestinians from moving through checkpoints, from moving along the roads, that prevents children from being able to reach school, or sick people from having medical treatment. These are also violations of human rights.

Eid

Of course.

Brunner

Thinking about the larger picture, I wonder whether Israel isn't a greater violator of human rights than the Palestinians. This might explain why international organizations are more interested in the Israeli violations.

Eid

In my opinion, human rights in Israel and Palestine cannot be divided. It is one package. It doesn't mean that while there are severe violations committed by the Israelis, we have to turn a blind eye to the 'lesser' violations committed by the Palestinians. I don't think we should try to see a balance in violations of human rights. There is no balance. It is one package. And I think that all violations should be reported. The region is full of violations, not only by the Israelis, of course, but also by the Palestinian Authority and, of course, by Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, the human rights issue is not a priority for the international community right now. I think that what is going on in the Middle East these days, and how Islamic terror is growing, means that the international community is paying less attention to human rights violations. One of the problems, in my opinion, is that there is no protection in the Middle East for the victims of human rights violations.

Releasing a report about this violation or that violation is not enough because the next year we will see a report released about the same violation. This begs the question: what instruments does the international community have available to them to stop or rather decrease these violations? It looks like an impossible situation. I ask the question because, unfortunately, I didn't see any effective measures.

Stahl

I would like to hear a little bit more about your cooperation with B'Tselem. Who did you work with in B'Tselem?

Eid

They all were Jewish. I don't remember whether there was a Palestinian employee in B'Tselem at that time. I don't remember whether there was an Arab Member of the Board at that time either. All of them were Jewish.

Stahl

Was there a certain person that had an impact on how you thought about the conflict and

how you saw the things?

Eid

No. I think the only influence on me from B'Tselem was from seeing how these people, the employees, and the Members of the Board, were working hard to keep their own society strong by condemning and protesting their army's violations against another nation. That was very interesting.

Stahl

Were you involved in the decision-making process within B'Tselem? Or were you considered to be more of a field worker who went out to get the reports?

Eid

No. I used to participate in meetings, but the employees were not the decision makers. We would sit in meetings. We would talk. We would negotiate. We would be involved. But the decisions would come from the members of the B'Tselem board.

In 1993, I noticed that more Palestinians were killed by other Palestinians, as so-called collaborators, than by the Israeli army.

Stahl

How did it come about that you decided to leave B'Tselem? Was there a conflict between you and the other members?

Eid

I think that the conflict happened in 1996. Actually, no, let me go back a little bit earlier. In 1995, I reported to the Members of the Board about severe violations, about the Palestinian Authority's use of torture against Palestinians: torture by the Palestinian security forces against Palestinians.

Actually, let me go back even earlier. In 1993, I noticed that more Palestinians were killed by other Palestinians, as so-called collaborators, than by the Israeli army. As I remember it, during the First Intifada we had 600 Palestinians killed by the Israelis, but we had 1,200 Palestinians killed by Palestinians.

Stahl

Where did you get these numbers from?

Eid

I got them because I was involved in the research. In 1993, I suggested to B'Tselem that we needed to put together a report about the internal killings of Palestinians by Palestinians. Then we brought—I brought—collected testimony and even some statistics from some other organizations. Now, no Palestinian organization wanted to be involved in reporting this kind of severe violation—Palestinians killing Palestinians. No one wanted to be involved.

So, I collected some material, and the board members decided that yes, B'Tselem must conduct research into this. We started research in the middle of 1993. And I think the report was published on the 5th or the 2nd of April 1996—one month before the Palestinian Authority came to power.

Now, that report almost created conflict between myself and the Palestinians. They said: »We remember you. In the past few years, you used to come to investigate the violations committed by the Israelis against Palestinians. Why do you want to get involved with Palestinians against Palestinians?« Then I would have to explain. But we did the research. I collected hundreds of testimonies and the report was published.

Now, let's move to 1995. In the beginning of 1995, I discovered a number of cases of torture by the Palestinian security forces against Palestinians. I went to the Members of the Board of B'Tselem, and said, »Look, I have this kind of statistics and this kind of testimonies.« The members then decided to conduct research on this topic but said, »You, Bassem Eid, should research and write it, because there is more credibility to it if it's written by a Palestinian than if it is written by a Jew.«

I answered that I had no problem doing that. I started collecting testimonies and going to meet families. I wrote the report. Then, I translated it into Arabic. This was the only report that had been translated into Arabic by B'Tselem because we wanted the Palestinian Authority's response to this report.

I remember I went to Jericho and I gave the report to somebody called Jibril Rajoub.^[11] He used to be the head of the Preventive Security Force. Most of the violations talked about in the report were perpetrated by the Preventive Security Force. At that stage the fight started between myself and the Palestinian Authority over the report. Rajoub even reacted to the report. He sent us a written response, and we published it alongside the report.

But he accused these people of being collaborators, traitors, and of helping the Israelis. He depicted them as drug dealers and as thieves. That is what he said. It was as if they had no rights. For him, they were not human beings. Today, even terrorists are considered human beings, and they have rights. When they are brought to trial or whatever, they still have rights. They still have rights even though they are terrorists and have killed civilians.

The report was published in 1995. In January 1996, we had the first Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections. I used to have contact with a French organization called Reporters Sans Frontieres (Reporters Without Borders.) In October 1995, I suggested to them that we needed to create a committee in the West Bank to monitor the Palestinian public media and how they were dealing with the topic of the election.

It was interesting. This was the first time in Palestinian history that the Palestinians had the right to vote and to be involved in the elections. Reporters Sans Frontieres decided that it would be very interesting. We rented a small house between Ramallah and Jerusalem and we began to record Palestinian TV and radio programs that were related to the election campaign.

In the first official week of the campaign Arafat received seven minutes on Palestinian TV, but during that time he never allowed his competitor to appear on TV. We wrote a press release, and I conducted a press conference that all of the foreign media attended because it was the first press conference that took a position against the Palestinian Authority and, especially, Arafat. I was arrested that same night by Arafat's security force, which was called Force 17.

At that stage I lived in the camp. When I went back there at 11pm that evening I found someone in a uniform waiting for me in a car. He approached me, and said, »You are Bassem Eid?« I said, »Yes, I am Bassem Eid.« He said, »I want to invite you to Ramallah for a cup of coffee.« Without hesitating, I said, »Let's go.« He said, »Do you want to come in my car, or you do want to drive your own car?« I said, »I will drive my car.«

Then he said, »Listen, I must tell you the route that we should take.« He wanted to avoid the Israeli checkpoints, because he was wearing his uniform. And the Shuafat camp is part of Jerusalem. According to the Oslo agreements, Palestinian officials had no right to enter to the Jerusalem area. While I was driving to Ramallah, I called two French journalists who used to work with me on the committee responsible for watching the Palestinian media. I told them that I had been invited for a cup of coffee and that I was on my way to Ramallah. I was arrested there. The journalists started contacting colleagues the next day. Soon, all of the world heard my arrest.

I was still, of course, with B'Tselem and they contacted Human Rights Watch. Human Rights Watch contacted the office of the US Secretary who was, at that time, Warren Christopher. This was under the Clinton administration. At that time, 1996, Bill Clinton had a very good relationship with Arafat. So, Warren Christopher phoned Arafat and told him »You have five minutes to release Bassem.« He did so because of the pressure from Human Rights Watch. That is how I was released after only 25 hours.

Afterwards B'Tselem held a huge meeting, including the staff and the board members. They had invited some Palestinian activists to discuss an important topic: Should B'Tselem be involved with violations committed by the Palestinian Authority? After three days of discussion, B'Tselem decided not to be involved in Palestinian Authority violations because most of the occupied territories were still under Israeli occupation. B'Tselem's primary purpose was to research the Israeli violations. I immediately stopped and said, »I am sorry. I have to resign from B'Tselem, because I am far more interested in the violations committed by the Palestinian Authority.«

I found that the Palestinians not only needed protection from Israeli violations, but they also needed protection from the Palestinian Authority.

Stahl

How did this shift of interest take place? You started as a researcher on Israeli violations.

Eid

Well, I think that I was still protecting the same people. I found that the Palestinians not

only needed protection from Israeli violations, but they also needed protection from the Palestinian Authority. And, from 1994 to 1996 I never saw any Palestinian human rights organization report about the violations committed by the Palestinian Authority. I said to myself, »I am probably the one who will have to do it.« That is why I resigned from B'Tselem. After four months, I established the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group.

Stahl

Would you say that there was a certain moment or a certain experience when you that compelled you to focus on Palestinian human rights violations?

Eid

No. I think that I had thought about it and I found that due to the credibility I had earned by reporting on Israeli violations, I also should investigate the Palestinian Authority violations. Even those from the Israeli right, who used to criticize me in the many interviews that they gave to the media, said very clearly that Bassem Eid has reported truthfully on the Israeli violations.

Brunner

How long did you work for the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group?

Eid

I worked in my organization from 1996, or let's say the beginning of 1997, to 2011.

Brunner

Why did you stop?

Eid

We used to be supported financially by Europe, whether through the EU, or through one of the European countries. It looked to me as if Europe and the EU changed their policy. Europe became far more interested in the violations committed by the Israelis than the violations committed by the Palestinians. Europe's belief that Israel was the only oppressor in the Middle East, created a lack of funding to the organization and its projects. Therefore, I decided to quit my work.

Brunner

Did the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group publish reports?

Eid

Of course, I published a number of reports. We used to have a big website. I think we used to publish six different reports a year.

Brunner

In English?

Eid

In English and Arabic, not in Hebrew. We used to print our reports. We wrote our reports in Arabic. We used to print 100,000 copies and attach them to newspapers—generally to Al

Ayam, which was distributed mostly in the West Bank and in Gaza. Because we printed our reports in Al Ayam, the paper helped us to distribute them.

Brunner

And the Palestinian Authority allowed you to undertake all these activities and to distribute your reports?

Eid

Yes.

Brunner

So in a way, the Palestinian Authority behaved in a democratic manner.

Eid

In some cases, yes. Sometimes, yes.

Brunner

You were not threatened by the Palestinian Authority?

Eid

Not at all.

Brunner

Even when you reported on their violations?

Eid

Even when I reported on violations.

Brunner

How can you explain this?

Eid

As an example, there was a case in 1998 that I remember. I published a report about how the security forces were collecting money from prisoners. I had collected 56 different testimonies about businessmen who were running businesses. I am talking about the West Bank, not Gaza. These people had been accused of faking receipts by the Preventive Security Force. They used to arrest someone and bring him to prison by saying, »Listen, we collected the receipts that you faked. And we discovered that you have to pay 2 million shekels. We need half a million in advance and then you can give us checks.«

Now these people were businessmen. They had money. They would start calling their relatives to come to the prison and bring half a million shekels. The Attorney General of the Palestinian Authority also came to the prison and collected the money in cash. But, he gave a receipt. That made Arafat crazy because I got those receipts from those who had been accused. I received 56 receipts for 8 million shekels. Of course after I published the report, I conducted a press conference. The report was widely covered in the international media. A week afterward, Arafat's adviser called me, and he said, »The President wants to meet with

you immediately in Ramallah.«

Immediately, I said that I was not interested in meeting with Arafat. Then they called my brother, who was a prominent Fatah member and very close to Arafat. The same adviser contacted my brother and then my brother contacted me. And he said, »You should have to do it.« I said, »No, no way, I am not interested in meeting with this person,« because I had already realized what the message from Arafat would be: »Don't display our dirty laundry.« I was not interested in hearing that kind of message. That was the conflict that almost took place between me and the Palestinian Authority.

Stahl

Who cooperated with you in this human rights group? Who were the members?

Eid

All of the members were Palestinians. They used to be students at centrist universities in Gaza and in the West Bank. They were mostly research students from the faculty law. The Members of the Board were some respected people from Jerusalem.

We had a Board Assembly and Members of the Board. The Board Assembly was comprised of people from East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. But the Members of the Board were from Jerusalem because, in order to get the Israelis' permission to establish the organization, I needed people with Israeli ID numbers.

Brunner

How many people were involved in this organization?

Eid

The Assembly Board was made up of around 70 people. It used to meet once a year. There were six Members of the Board in Jerusalem.

Brunner

How many researchers did you have, more or less?

Eid

I used to have eight different researchers, one secretary, one translator, and one fundraiser. Usually, we were based in Jerusalem. The organization was dissolved in 2011. We donated all of the material that we had, the archive, to the faculty of law at Birzeit University^[12] because they were also teaching (they had a kind of special course) on human rights. So we gave everything to them.

Brunner

What have you been doing from 2011 to now?

Eid

Up to now, I have become much more involved in politics.

Brunner

What kind of politics? What do you mean by politics?

Eid

It is much more a kind of political analysis. I provide a lot of political commentary. I used to participate in big radio programs on the Israeli station, Reshet Bet. I was there for three years. I was on a weekly program on Israeli TV in Arabic for 14 years, from 2000 until 2014. The Hebrew name of the program was Du-Siah (Dialogue). It was a kind of dialogue about current affairs between two Palestinians and two Israelis. I was there for 14 years. Since, let's say 2014, I have become increasingly well-known because of my work on TV and radio. I began to be invited to attend and to lecture at several conferences around the world. That is what I have been doing for the past three years.

Human rights was not a priority—it's not the priority of the international community.

Stahl

Why did you leave the aspect of human rights aside a little bit and focus more on commenting on politics?

Eid

Because, as I told you, human rights was not a priority—it's not the priority of the international community. These days, the terror surrounding the Middle East is the priority. At the moment, most of the donations that used to go to protecting human rights, go toward humanitarian aid in war zones around the world. Look at how much Syria needs money. Look at how much money Gaza needs for humanitarian aid. So the budget to provide humanitarian aid came from the budget previously allocated for human rights.

Stahl

In the 1990s, there were some attempts to formulate something like Islamic or Arabic human rights. For example, the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights.^[13]

Eid

I don't think that the Arabs are really clear about the issue of human rights.

Stahl

And you were never involved in these discussions?

Eid

Not at all. I used to know some human rights activists in Egypt. Right now they are members of the government and they do not care about the rights of the people. Even they became, in my opinion, new violators of human rights.

I used to say all the time that we—the Arabs, and the Muslims, of course—don't have a culture of human rights. It is a Western topic and an aspect of Western culture. It is not an aspect of Arab or Muslim culture.

Brunner

But you want it to be part of your society?

Eid

I want that but sometimes you have a kind of conflict between our religion and culture and Western culture. For example, a murderer, according to our religion, should be executed. Imagine that as a Muslim, as an Arab, I stand up saying I am against the capital punishment. Then people, the Muslims, consider me a godless person.

I have faced that already. While people are demonstrating in Gaza to kill a killer, I am on Israeli TV in Arabic calling on Arafat not to sign the capital punishment. So, imagine how much trouble I would be in.

Brunner

Thank you for this interview.

Fußnoten

1. Hussein bin Talal (1935-1999) 1952-1999 King of Jordan.
2. Fatah, a Palestinian party founded in 1959, is since the end of the 1960s the strongest faction within the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which fought since 1964 for the liberation of Palestine. After the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1994, Yasser Arafat was President of the Palestinian National Authority, which was established as a government for the Occupied Palestinian Territories.
3. Salam Fayyad (*1951), 2007-2013 Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority.
4. Yasser Arafat (1929-2004), 1964-2004 President of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and 1994-2004 President of the Palestinian National Authority.
5. The First Intifada was a Palestinian uprising against the occupation of Palestinian territories. It started in December 1987 and lasted until 1991.
6. B'tselem was founded in 1989 by prominent Israelis in order to report about human rights violations in occupied territories.
7. Al-Quds is a Palestinian daily newspaper.
8. Association for Civil Rights in Israel was founded 1972 to protect civil rights in Israel. Later, it broadened its scope and worked also on human rights in the occupied territories.
9. Al-Haq was founded in 1979 as a Palestinian human rights organization. Its base was in Ramallah.
10. The Palestinian National Authority was established in 1994 after the signing of the Oslo Accords as an independent government of the occupied territories.
11. Jibril Rajoub (*1953), 1994-2002 head of the Palestinian Preventive Security Force.
12. The Birzeit University is a Palestinian University in the Westbank.
13. The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1990 by the member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Zitation

Lebensgeschichtliches Interview mit Bassem Eid, 6.09.2016, in: Quellen zur Geschichte der Menschenrechte, herausgegeben vom Arbeitskreis Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert, URL: www.geschichte-menschenrechte.de/bassem-eid.