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Editorial Letter

Dear Colleagues,

It is hard to believe that 25 years have passed since the founding of the Arab Journal of Psychiatry. Creating the AJP was a challenging decision taken at the third Pan Arab Psychiatric Conference in Amman back in 1987. At the helm was Dr Adnan Takriti and I was his Deputy until his retirement as Chief Editor was announced in Khartoum four years ago. The Journal remains indebted to him for his vision and commitment. The first issue was celebrated in Sanaa with articles exploring attitudes towards mental health and outlining the role of psychiatry in primary health care. The impact of war and violent conflict on the psychosocial development of children was as topical then as it is today. Mandour and Hourani launched with their article titled 'Effects of the uprising (Intifada) on the psychosocial development of Palestinian children in the occupied territories' while in the current volume Thabet et al. report on the relationship between mothers' mental health and the prevalence of depression and anxiety in preschool children in Gaza. Both articles serve as poignant reminders that some things in life do not change.

Despite many challenges, the AJP continues to provide an outlet for mental health research in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, it is a rare example of a publication that relies solely on individuals from public and private practice rather than an institution to run it.

So, how will the AJP look in another 25 years? I believe the answer depends upon the outlook of you – the reader. And dear reader, please reflect carefully on this question alongside one very important fact: only a handful of people keep this journal going. The tradition of the AJP has been a noble one. Those who guided its destiny have been the leaders of mental health for the Middle East and North Africa. The upcoming Pan Arab conference in Lebanon should be a chance to recharge the battery of the AJP from both a scientific and administrative perspective. I would like to take this opportunity to call on all of you – reader and contributor alike – who over many years have benefitted from the research published in the Arab Journal of Psychiatry - to offer your support as we continue our stewardship of mental health in the Arab world.

My best wishes,

Walid Sarhan

May 2014

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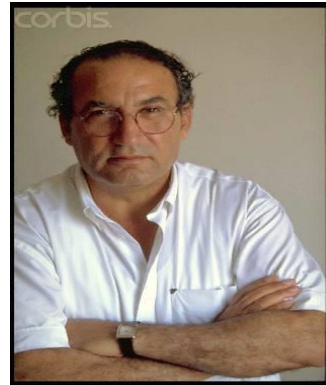
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Rememebering Eyad EL Sarraj
The first psychiatrist in Gaza, Palestine
Unaiza Niaz



I first met Eyad El Sarraj in 1976 when he did my locum job at The Royal Free Hospital, London. And then after three decades, in 2011, we reconnected through the LinkedIn. He invited me to join the International Resource Group of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program (GCMHP) and attend the GCMHP and the International Resource Group Conference at Aswan Egypt, in 2011. Following the conference, Eyad arranged a visit to Gaza by travelling with the GCMHP staff by crossing the Rafah Border from Cairo to Gaza. It was a memorable visit indeed!

Eyad El Sarraj was a dedicated psychiatrist, with a unique charisma, and one of the major factors in influencing mental health care in Gaza. He helped people move beyond their personal and collective trauma to recognize the basic humanity of all human beings his life's work. Human rights and mental health went hand in hand for him who, as a four year old lad, was forced to escape with his family from Bir al-Saba' (now Beersheva) to Gaza when the State of Israel was established. After Gaza and the West Bank came under Israeli occupation in 1967, his father and brothers were among the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were arrested and faced torture under interrogation.

In the 1970s, he studied medicine at the University of Alexandria in Egypt and then in Britain, graduating with a Postgraduate degree from the Institute of Psychiatry and King's College, London. Eyad El-Sarraj, pioneered mental health care in Gaza. He became an internationally recognized human rights advocate criticizing both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities. He rose to prominence during the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli military occupation in Gaza in the late 1980s. It was impossible to maintain sanity under the dehumanizing conditions of occupation. While the first Intifada was at its peak, Dr El Sarraj set about creating a center that would work to overcome the stigma attached to mental illness and provide family and community based treatment on a huge scale. He founded the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) in 1990. The GCMHP had clinics in the refugee camps. He also established a range of training programs, crisis intervention programs, special projects that worked with children and empowered women, and a training and education department offering courses for teachers and nurses, as well as a postgraduate diploma in Community Mental Health and Human Rights.

By the mid-1990s, Dr El Sarraj had become the Commissioner General of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights. When, in 1995 and then again in 1996, he criticized the human rights practices not just of the Israeli occupiers, but of the Palestinian Authority, he was arrested on three occasions and severely beaten and tortured in prison. In April 1997, when he received the first human rights award given by the Physicians for Human Rights, he said "I started as a physician in Gaza and did not want to be involved in politics, but many of my patients were victims of torture and I became drawn into advocacy. Defending human rights is my major obsession."

Amongst his innumerable important positions, he was a consultant to the Palestinian delegation at the Camp David 2000 Summit. He is featured in the book *Army of Roses* by journalist Barbara Victor about Palestinian female suicide bombers. In the Palestinian elections of 2006, he headed the Wa'ad list of candidates, also known as the National Coalition for Justice and Democracy. He also headed a group of Palestinian and Israeli academics working towards a peace agreement. Dr El Sarraj focused in particular on the traumatic effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on children Israel. He described the psycho-traumatic effects on children in 2009 during a three-week offensive by Israeli forces in Gaza after years of rocket fire from there against southern Israel.

“Many children in Gaza are wetting their beds, unable to sleep, clinging to their mothers,” he wrote. “Worse are the long-term consequences of this severe trauma. Palestinian children in the first Intifada 20 years ago threw stones at Israeli tanks trying to wrest freedom from Israeli military occupation. Some of those children grew up to become suicide bombers in the second Intifada 10 years. Nancy Murray said of him: “His courage, decency, independence of mind, and vision of a better world made him a beacon of moral conscience and hope for those Israelis seeking peace with Palestinians and Palestinians struggling with both the occupation and their own ruinous political divisions.”

These qualities earned him respect across the political spectrum and considerable international recognition (as substantiated by the film *The Gatekeepers*). In addition to the 1997 Physicians for Human Rights Award, he was awarded the Martin Ennals Award for human rights defenders in 1998. In 2010, when he was already struggling with terminal illness (multiple myeloma) he was awarded the Olof Palme Prize for his “self-sacrificing and indefatigable struggle for common sense, reconciliation and peace between Palestine and Israel” and the Juan Jose Lopez-Ibor Prize in Psychiatry. There was a feature story about Dr El Sarraj in the Canadian magazine *Equinox*, published in February 1995, which illustrates this quality: “He was once stopped during the Intifada and ordered by an Israeli soldier to extinguish flames from a burning tire with his bare hands. He refused the order. When the soldier threatened to take his identification card, el-Sarraj didn’t protest. ‘Go ahead, take it, I don’t care,’ he said. And when the soldier threatened to beat him, el-Sarraj said, ‘Go ahead, but before you do, I know there is a real human being behind that uniform, and I would like you to show me that person.’ The soldier got tears in his eyes, and then he just walked away.”

Another quality worth mentioning is that he was a prolific writer. His narratives are worth reading. He wrote innumerable articles in both professional journals and for the lay press. He had done seminal work on trauma in children and adolescents contributing numerous chapters in different books in psychiatry. Fluent in English, Dr El Sarraj achieved international respect. His Gaza City home was familiar to foreign diplomats, researchers and journalists seeking his opinions. Speaking at Dr El Sarraj’s funeral in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, the Prime Minister of the Hamas government, described him as “a meeting point for all Palestinian people,” adding, “He is going to be missed by Palestine and Gaza because he was born and lived for them.” Rami Hamdallah, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority government, said Dr. El Sarraj’s achievements would remain as “a beacon for the continuation of the march” of the Palestinian people toward an independent state. Robert H. Serry, the United Nations special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, described Dr El Sarraj in a statement as “someone who persistently stood on the side of human rights, peace and justice.”

Politically independent, Dr El Sarraj championed nonviolence and democracy. In recent years, he was involved in trying to promote reconciliation between Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, and its rival Fatah, the mainstream party led by Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Those efforts have so far been unsuccessful. Issam Younis, director of the Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza, said Dr El Sarraj had displayed a “gentlemanly antagonism” in tackling major issues and national concerns. The failure to reconcile the Palestinian schism “left his heart aching because he was not used to failure, Dr. Eyad El Sarraj leaves behind a bereaved Palestine, a grieving family and friends around the world who will miss him deeply. May Allah rest his soul in peace.

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