**Interview with Wafa Al Yassir**

**2013**

**TAPE 1**

**Wafa AlYassir:** You want to ask questions or…

**Nicola Pratt:** I will ask questions, yeah. When and where were you born?

**WA:** I was born in Lebanon, and from Palestinian parents, both of them they came from Jaffa to Lebanon. And I lived all my life in Lebanon so I don't know Palestine. And I don't know if I will have the chance to visit Palestine and see Jaffa one day, so maybe this time will come and maybe not, I don't know. But I really feel I have this kind of feeling that I really want to see Jaffa because I remember what my grandfather used to tell me, how beautiful this city was and the memories of my grandfather so I want to see it to compare what he was telling me and reality. So, this is my background, I lived in a Lebanese community, I never lived in a camp, I was, as you can see, I was a privileged Palestinian in a sense but I started facing, I was palestinain you know, I had a Palestinian nationality and I was holding ??? (1:47 French term) especially issued by the Lebanese government for the Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon, so my problems started when at school I wanted to go with my friends on a trip to Egypt and then I realized I was different because I was not granted the visa. I knew I was Palestinian and all this but I didn't realize that I would start facing problems in my life you know. So this was the first shock in my life that I couldn't travel like my classmates. And then the other problem in the university, I wanted to go to Jordan to attend a basketball game between our university and the university in Jordan and also I was not granted the visa to Jordan. And I realized that it seems that I will face a lot of problems when it comes to my mobility, because of my passport. And then when I graduated it wad the biggest problem; because when I graduated from the university I applied to so many jobs and usually the AUB are taken like this and it's part of that and I studied business, it was highly demanded in the market, and in spite of that, everybody was telling me that, sorry because you are Palestinian we cannot employ you. So this was a very big problem for me at that time and I felt no matter how you are living, no matter if you have money or don't have money, you are a refugee and you are treated accordingly. And then my suffering started to increase when I realized I cannot work in the country because I'm Palestinian. Of course, since I was 14 I started to be a political person, and this was the effect of my father, my father was encouraging me to know about my history, our cause and he pushed me to be active. And I joined the Palestinian students union or something like that and started to be active with the union but I was young at that time, and then I don't know how, I joined one of the Palestinian political factions, and I started to be very active when I was a student in the school. I was active and everything, demonstrating, collecting money and clothes and sending them to the South for the people who were really suffering from the Israeli bombardment for the villages in the South, so I was really active and I was reading and I was of course getting a political education and even a military training and everything. I was so ambitious and I was so active and full of energy at that time that I wanted to do something for my country, my father was very supportive, my mother was not supportive because she was afraid, I was a female and you know there is this traditional attitude towards female that you have to be ice, you have to grow up as a woman and get married and all this, so I refused all this traditional way of thinking and tried to find for myself something else. So I was very active in the school and in the university, I was in the business students club and we were doing everything and of course we were doing lots of debates with other students in the university about Palestinian issues and we had rightists ??? (7:32 riots?) in the university and we had clashes, lots of clashes you know. So I remember for example when Sadat signed the peace agreement with Israel and we had a demonstration inside the university, and we were protesting, we demonstrated inside the university and we protested against this accord with Israel. And, because I was Palestinian and I couldn't find work then I applied to the United Nations and I started working in the United Nations in research, but I continued my activism in the afternoon and during weekends I continued to be very active in the students organizations. So I was very active with the students mainly, even after I graduated, this was my main concentration on the students organizations and political organizations, so we were mobilizing young people, we were educating, giving them awareness and all this, and so I worked with the United Nations and I continued to be active and then until the 1982 Israeli invasion. I was involved and I was a member. After that I stopped, I terminated any activities with the political organizations; because you know it was… I was disappointed in so many ways about… from the leadership, and I felt that there was something wrong in the way they started dealing with issues, I didn't like the corruption that was inside the revolution and I was critical in so many ways to how the people were behaving in Lebanon, you know, our people. And so the invasion out an end to my activism as a member in the political group, but I converted my activism into something else. I started to be involved and be interested in the socio-economic issues related to my people. But I benefitted my political background and invested all this kind of background, I invested all I learned from my background in my work in the Palestinian community. So, I left the UN and I worked with Team International, and o started working with a group on a project, the socio-economic conditions for the Palestinian people in West Asia countries, and we implemented this project and while I was finalizing, we were finalizing this project, something came to my mind that, you know we are doing research all the time and producing recommendations and resolutions whether in the UN or now with this project, and nobody is doing something complete for the people on the ground, so, so many ideas I was discussing with a friend who was working with me called Nabeel Badran, and he died during the war but… to start thinking of programs to be implemented for the people in the camps. And we were talking at that time after the Israeli invasion what we can do in the camps after the exodus of the PLO and the absence of any PLO institutions that used to give services to the people, the Palestinians, and so the Palestinians in the camps were left with nobody to help them, only the PRCS continued to work, and all the Palestinian institutions affiliated to PLO they were gone. So the people were left uncovered, unprotected from the social and socio-economic fence, you know. So we started thinking what about starting something for the youth because at that time the army was controlling the camps and detaining males, and the situation in Shatilla for example was really so bad, in most of the camps, but I was really close to Shatilla, I was visiting Shatilla most of the time and I sense that the situation is horrible, and so we were seeing young people doing nothing, staying on the street and even… so, we said about vocational training for young Palestinians? And we started in 1983-84 to start a program like this, we established something called Vocational Training Committee, and we attracted some Palestinians who were very good technical trainers, and we initiated a program. I was working in Team International yet… while we were working in Team International, planning these things. I don't know what happened. And we initiated a program, a vocational training program with INRWA, and at that time the only vocational training center for UNRWA was destroyed by the Israeli invasion, by the bombardment, and so UNRWA was very positive and it gave us all the instructors that used to work in its center to work with us, and we started in Burj Al-Barajneh camp in 1984 vocational training for young Palestinians. So this is how I started to be involved in the socio economic fields and then at the same time I did a small research for UNESCO about employment possibilities for women in Lebanon and while I was presenting the findings I met a Norwegian, a representative of the Norwegian people's aid who was in the meeting and after the meeting he came to me and told me we are interested in establishing vocational training programs in the camps and it was really an opportunity for me, and I left Team International and I decided to go and work in the camps. So I was eager to do something practical, I was fed up with research, I was fed up with political talking, I wanted to implement all my ideas and do something practical, something that I see that the people are benefitting from. This was my thinking and I went and I lived in Shatilla, not lived, but I lived the whole day in Shatilla working, you know, I was diving in water during winter, the situation was really very bad inside the camp, so I had my office in Shatilla camp and I established another kind of vocational training related to business and office practice and also it was kind of cooperation with UNRWA as a joint program, and here I started to be very active in everything. Of course I was active politically, but as an activist not linked to any political group, I was cooperating with all the political groups when it comes to the benefit of the Palestinian people living in the camp but I kept and equal distance from everybody, I said I didn't want to be political, I want to be an activist in the socio-economic field. And I started working with NGOs because at that time there were no NGO's except 4 after 1982 there were only association Najdeh, the Resuscitation of the Palestinian camps, the Palestinian Association for the Development of the Camps, this was it, and the House of Steadfast Children, and the Arab Palestinian Women Union. Only 4, and even these 4 were not able to move a lot, the House of Steadfast Children and Najdeh, the army closed their offices, so it wasn't easy for Palestinian associations to work freely as before. And there was really a vacuum, there was a great need for associations. There was a great need for civil society organizations to develop, to solve certain problems that started to emerge after the exodus of PLO, there were lots of problems to deal with, so these 2 associations, the Norwegian people's aid and the vocational training committee, they started giving vocational training for young people in Shatilla and Burj Al-Barajneh, and then in… after a while there was the war of the camps, I remember, I don’t forget for example when I was in Shatilla in our center, the youth started to be active and they opened in front of our center a club for youth, and there people who were very active and there were lots of clubs in Shatilla camp for young people, and in 1985 I saw that Amal movement people came and burned the youth club in front of us, it was on fire. And I was there watching together with 2 expatriates, one Danish and one Norwegian physiotherapist, and we were really very offended and the 2 expats wet to Nabeeh Berri and protested, of course not me because I'm Palestinian. So this was just before the… so I felt there was something wrong with the relation with this Lebanese political group who was affiliated with the Syrians a lot, they want gross ??? (21:34) cooperation with the Syrians, politically and… and this was a kind of a phase before the war of the camps. Of course, we continued our work and also we established, as Norwegian People's Aid we had a project for the disabled people, we had a rehabilitation center to treat war injuries, and also we had a public health project, this is through Norwegian People's Aid and at that time, you know, there was shelling also because the civil war was continuing at that time and there was shelling all over West Beirut all the time, so the expat staff were called to be out of the country and I was put as an officer in charge. Ad when I was an officer in charge I started the vocational training program, the school in Beirut and the school in Burj Al-Brajneh, other than the other vocational training committee that was formed and started working also in Burj but on the technical skills. So this was the, you know, this was my start when I started to work with the Palestinians in the camps, and then we started combining our work, not only giving services, but the services it was you know, even if you give services but it has a political background, why you are doing? You want the people to be strong, you want the people to survive, you want the people to be able to voice their concerns, so… after a while, after we worked in the field, concentrated on the field of services, we started to work a lot on advocacy. I had I think a very important role in mobilizing the NGOs that I was working with towards working for the rights of the Palestinians, you know the right to work, the right… all the other rights, the right to associate, because we had the right to own property at that time, we lost it in 2001 only. So, all the rights of children, we had very important work on the child's right, on the rights of women, rights of the refugees in general. So this was another way of political work. And I think it's as effective as the… even more effective than when you are a member in a political group, you feel more free, you feel… you know, you isolate yourself from problems and competition inside the political groups. I felt it was better for me to work freely in… you are not part of a hierarchy anymore, but you implement what you see that it helps the people. So this was… then the war of the camps was really still it has… I have a kind of scar in my heart when I talk about the war of the camps, it was very hard. It was very hard. Ad at that time it was a kind of conflict between Arafat and Assad and Hafez Al-Assad wanted Arafat to go to Damscus, to go out from Lebanon to Damascus in 1982, and he refused because he said that if I go to Damascus the Palestinian decision will be affected to a great extent by Hafez Al-Assad ad by the regime. So he refused and he went to Greece by sea, so this offended Hafez Al-Assad, of course maybe other issues also, and there war of the camps and the tools, the Amal movement was the tool in the hands of the Syrian Regime, and I['m talking something very dangerous, maybe the Amal movement will not be happy to hear that, but really what they did was really dirty, they sieged the 3 camps in Beirut: Shatilla, Burj Al-Barajneh and Rashidiyyeh, for 6 months, and they didn't allow any food, any water, anything to go to the camps, and it was heavily bombarded from artilleries, and it was really very hard, and I was concerned with the displaced people because the people were escaping from Shatilla and Burj Al-Barajneh camps, and they were afraid, they didn't know where to go, and at that time there was an unfinished building nect to the Russian embassy which is situated here in this area. And next to the Russian embassy the refugees came and they settled on the streets around the Russian embassy because they felt first of all that area was controlled by the progressive socialist party, the PSP, and also it was protected by the Russian embassy, so they couldn’t dare to go to this area the Amal movement, so the people felt protected in that area. So they were on the streets and I will never forget how they were really very weak, they had nothing except the clothes, they had no blankets, nothing, and they were begging please help us and I was really I was going every day to my place and I was crying for hours because I didn't expect that my people would be in this situation. Then we started to mobilize resources, the first resources that we mobilized were from Welfare Association which is a Palestinian NGO, donor NGO, and I was a member at that time and I had good relations so I called them and explained the situation so they sent me some money and we started our relief work. Together with some other activists at that time who volunteered to work and some NPA ??? (29: 55) staff, and this also, you know, from this work, relief work during the work of the camps, another association emerged from this which is NUR ??? (3:15) that deals with the displaced people. The displaced Palestinians and those Palestinians who are living outside the camps. So, because displacement continued and till now we have the displaced from the war of the camps, so an association emerged. You see, it was the emerging of the NGO's was as a result of a direct need of the people, and it was really horrible, you know at that time it was several times the people were displaced, even when the siege ended, of course it was horrible, people in Burj Al-Batajneh were eating cats and they didn't have any food and , the people who died during the camp war they couldn’t bury them so in Shatilla they rempved the toiles of the mosque and buried the people in mass graves inside the mosques, so it was really very bad, after 6 months it opened a little bit, it stopped, the siege was stopped, but the attacks used to occur from time to time, you know, it didn't stop completely. So this was a very tough period of my life, you know. Because I was living the situation. In 1982 I was also active with the students and… but it's something else when you see the people, even the massacre after 1982, I didn't feel it, I saw it in the newspaper, of course it was something very brutal and it was really something very bad to happen, but I didn't feel it directly, you know what I mean? I saw it in the newspaper, I read about it, I saw the photos, but the war, but it was Israel who was involved in the massacre and protecting the people who were doing the massacre if we ??? (32:55), and you know when there is something with Israel we sort of accept it because they are our enemy, we expect anything from Israel, but to have a Lebanese political group who was initiated in a way by Arafat to have this kind of aggression against the Palestinian people, I say why is that hatred? There must be a reason why this hatred is developing inside these people, because the Palestinian were good you know, even the PLO was good, it was financing

TAPE 2

**Wafa AlYassir:** it was helping this group, you know. And it was really very, very painful to see how the people were displaced several times. Coming and going, and until now we are still having very negative impact of that war, there are lots of people who are still displaced and living in Gaza building. Gaza building, even it's a displacement center, it was burnet several times from Amal movement. And the people used to escape and then come back and establish themselves again and then another aggression so it kept being like this 1985-86 for the whole two years and it was not final. So…

**Nicola Pratt:** Gaza building is in Shatilla?

**WA:** It's in Sabra.

**NP:** Ah, Sabra.

**WA:** It's in Sabra. It used to be the hospital and then when the displacement occurred at that time during the war of the camps, the displaced people occupied these building to live, because they lost their houses. And, so they were an easy target for the Amal movement. So this was a very difficult period and I was very active in offering all sorts of support to the people, you know, displaced, and then after the camps were opened also we started working inside the camps, of course we moved our projects as we lost everything as Norwegian people's Aid, we moved our projects, we relocated or projects in Mar Elias Camp, because there was a gentleman agreement at that time that Mar Elias camp will not be attacked because it's protected, it's near the monastery and the Greek Orthodox church, so it was not attacked, so most of the NGO's they relocated their projects in this camp. So, we finished with this period and of course we started dealing with the effect of the war of the camps, and… and then we started more or less to talk about the right issues, you know I'm talking about certain periods that really affected me, you know. In 2000, and there was a period in 1995, when I was in Beijing conference and when we were back in the plane the Lebanese government took a decision not to let any Palestinian into Lebanon,and at that time I got to know about this in Dubai because we were having a stop in Dubai before we came to Beirut and my father told me the Lebanese government took a decision that no Palestinians will be able to enter so you have to manage and to depend on yourself and you try to find what you can do. And it was the shock of my life at that time that, where to go? I was born in this country, this is the country that I know. I never lived in any other country so what can I do? It was really something very bad, so I had my fiancé with me and his mother and lots of Lebanese women with me coming from the Beijing conference and they said maybe we can fix something so come with us to Beirut and we will try to do something. Ad I came to Beirut and they were shouting at me and they put me in the same plane back to Dubai and my suitcase was left in Beirut and I had a small handbag only and I didn't have money even so the women that were with me I the plane they collected money and they gave me some money and I went to Dubai and they even kept me at the door where you enter from the plane, before the security, so they didn't allow me even to go to the free market or the… so it was really horrible and they told me you have to go back, we can't allow you to come into Dubai, you don't have a visa, you have to go back to Beirut. I said what about to keep flying in the plane between Beirut and Dubai? And they said you have to pay for the ticket because you came back on the plane and you have to pay. So they took 800 dollars from me, they collected 1000 from me and they took 800 for the ticket. And one of the 100 dollars they said this is false we don't accept it so practically I was left with 100 dollars. And I asked an Indian guy, can you give me a coin to call my brother? Ad he gave it to me, so I called my brother who was in Dubai, I told him, look, I'm stuck in the airport, they sent me back, try to do something. And he came to the airport, and he saw me from behind the glass and I was very far away from him and we were trying to communicate by writing on the paper tissue and telling him I need money, I need cigarettes, and then an Emirati guy said what are you doing? I said, look, this is my story, and this is my brother, if you can let me talk to him he wants to give me money. Then he said okay, we entered, he opened for me and he told my brother give her the money. And he gave me the money. He wanted to give me cigarettes but he said no, she can buy. So he took my passport and he told me, okay, I will keep your passport here but you can go to the airport upstairs and you can buy, you have lots of shops and duty free shops and you can buy whatever you need. So I went up and at least I ate, I bought some cigarettes, and whenever they were announcing Beirut planes I used to go and hide somewhere, in the toilet, somewhere, because I didn't want to be sent back and… and I stayed like this until I saw someone, I was sleeping on a couch and someone came and said, are you the Palestinian that is stuck here? I said yes, and I saw another Palestinian coming with that man an Emirati guy and they took us to an office and they told me, you don't have a relative to stay with? I said yes I have, and my brother entered. So they gave me 72 hours and it was not enough for me and then I had somebody who fixed a special visa for me, he knows the president, the Lebanese president and I got a visa to camp, but it was a really very bad experience, and there were lots of Palestinians that were stick at the airports and they were sent back from wherever they came because the Prime Minister at that time he was afraid that Qaddafi kicked out all the Palestinians because he was threatening Palestinians that he would kick out all Palestinians from Libya, so Lebanon was afraid that the Palestinians would come to Lebanon so they took this measure without any exceptions, so and so later on they regulated it. And from that time we started having a re-entry visa imposed on us, whenever we go, when we're outside Lebanon, we used to go to the security and get a re-entry visa, so practically they started controlling the residency, because the Palestinians have a permanent residency visa in Lebanon and now, at that time, they touched the residency right. And then it was regulated, after then there was a change in the government. But this was very bad and very hard on the Palestinians in Lebanon. Then later on the same person who is Rafiq Al-Hariri who did that, in 2001 he also issued this decision that nobody can own a property in Lebanon except if it's somebody holding an identity of a recognized state. So practically it excludes only the Palestinians, all the foreigners from all over the world they have the right to own property up to 3000 meter squared in Lebanon, but the Palestinians cannot own even a flat to live in. and then that's why we became aware as civil society organizations that the solution is that we start…of course services are important but we should start working, start organizing campaigns for the rights, to put pressure on the Lebanese government and the decision makers and also to talk to all embassies and diplomats to put pressure on the Lebanese government to change these decisions that were really very bad and of course to grant civil rights for the Palestinians. And we started working on all these rights, we have the campaign related to the right to work and we had a very big demonstration after which, you know, they granted some rights related to the right to work, they did an amendment, but this struggle will continue when it comes to the right of the Palestinians in Lebanon. The Palestinians in Lebanon their presence was always looked upon as a burden. Nobody is accepting the presence of the Palestinians. The Shiites do not want more Sunnah to be in the country because the majority of Palestinians are Sunnah. The Christians do not want more Muslims to be in the country, so each one has their own reasons why to refuse granting Palestinians some rights. And even friends who are very close to the Palestinians like Hezbollah used to say we are with the Palestinian Cause and with Palestine and with the struggle ad all these ice words, but the alliance between Hezbollah and the free patriotic movement in Lebanon was more important than the alliance with Palestinians, because there are considerations for them, internal issues that are more important. So even Hezbollah when they have the representatives of Hezbollah in the parliament, when there was a vote about the rights of the Palestinians of course we didn't see their hands going up, you know. So, that's why you know the… it is a struggle and I'm still very active in this when it comes to struggling for the civil rights of the Palestinians and part of the negotiations now going on between the Palestinians and the Lebanese, I'm a member in the Common Space initiative, which is a forum for Palestinians and Lebanese to have a dialogue concerning all these issues, all these rights. And, in this common space initiative, you have politicians, Lebanese and Palestinian politicians and Lebanese and Palestinian activists, civil society activists. And, to tell you the truth I don't think it is leading anywhere, we are trying, of course all of us you know, we are with the rights of return to Palestine, of course both Palestinians and the Lebanese but each one from his own angle, the Lebanese want to get rid of the Palestinians and they want to see that the right to return is implemented, the resolution is implemented. But of course the Palestinians for political reasons they are with this right, and of course, okay, we are against implantation, we are against implantation, all of us are against implantation, so why are you afraid? Palestinians are against implantation, we want to hold the Palestinian identity and the national identity but they are afraid. They are afraid, you know. And they are more easy with the work, the right to work than with the right to own property, it's near to impossible that they want Palestinians to own property in Lebanon. And their experience, especially the Rightest Christian political groups, they are still afraid of the Palestinians, you know, even we are agreeing with them when it comes to disarmament of Palestinian factions and giving, organizing the arms inside the camp and all this, we are giving so much compromises. So that we can put them at ease and look at the humanitarian issue of the people who are not involved in this, who were not involved at any time in the struggle you know with them or the fight with them. So they are afraid to grant Palestinians rights because they feel that the rights will be a step toward their implantation and naturalization so, this is the situation, but we will continue to struggle as civil society organizations and we will not stop until we will get some rights at least for the people, for our people, because the socio-economic situation of the Palestinians in Lebanon is very bad, so we have to improve the situation. Maybe giving them rights will not introduce so many differences, lots of change, but at least the right to work yes because it will allow people to work and generate an income especially youth, but it's good to feel that you are equal, you have rights, and then the market can play, the market will decide who will be employed and who will not be employed, but everybody should feel that they have the right, the same right as his equal, as the Lebanese, why not? Now 7% only maybe of the Palestinian refugees were born in Palestine, so the majority of the refugees living in Lebanon they were born in Lebanon. So they are more or less Lebanese in everything. So… so these are the important stops in my life that affected my activism or why I started working in this field. It was a very important decision to convert, maybe I should… if I stayed in the United Nations maybe I would have now more security, better income, a better life maybe as a person, but I think it was worth it, to convert totally from bring working in the United Nations with good income to something else. And of course there was its of danger involved, moving around when there was shelling and fighting, there was lots of danger involved in our work but now if I look back it's worth it, because we achieved something, we reduced the suffering of the people, we educated young people and helped them to get employment, we gave treatment to disabled people ad integrated them in society, we helped, we improved the situation of women, of children, so you feel that… and also we let our voice be heard to the politicians in Lebanon and to the international community, that the Palestinians have a voice, and you should hear it and you should respect it. And I think this had an effect on the politicians in Lebanon, why now they are accepting negotiations or dialogue, there were periods in Lebanon where there were no negotiations no talks whatsoever between Palestinians and Lebanese, even the Palestinian political groups couldn't have a meeting with a Lebanese official. So now we are reaching, in a situation where we are sitting with them, we are talking, there is the Palestinian-Lebanese dialogue committee, that we are invited all the time to discuss issues, the common space initiatives which is a dialogue forum between Lebanese and Palestinians and of course in 2005 when the Lebanese government decided to open the PLO representation office, this was a really important step from the Lebanese government and from 2005 onward the situation started getting better and better, because the Lebanese started to open up a little bit to discuss issues related to the Palestinians , but talking about Palestinians was a taboo before 2005. It was a taboo, nobody wanted to discuss anything related to them, as if these people do not exist in Lebanon, but now it's better, you feel it's better, we are sitting, we are discussing, the politicians with the civil society organizations, we are demanding rights but of course the international community should play a role also. The international community they are not putting pressure on the Lebanese to give more rights, they are not giving what they promised to give to UNRWA to improve the situation of the refugees, they always… now UNRWA has been always in deficit. And we cannot give the service, we cannot give this service because we don't have money and we are in a deficit. So we cannot blame Lebanon all the time for the lack of the rights; because… I believe there are 3 parties that are involved: Israel, which is the cause of the problem of the refugees, the international community who recognized the state of Israel and that is supporting Israel since 1947 till now, and the host country. So the international community forgot all about their responsibility and the responsibility of Israel, and they only blame the Lebanese. Also we as Palestinians don't agree, we don't agree with that, because Lebanon is one party and we understand the situation of the Lebanese, that they are, really… they have their own set of problems, you know Lebanon, you see the situation, still they have to reconcile, to have reconciliation among themselves, still there are lots of issues, the Lebanese people are deeply divided and disagreeing on almost everything. So they feel that it's too much to have the Palestinian issue on top of that and now they have the Syrian displacement so the situation is becoming very complicated. So, I don't know if this was enough, you know I talked about Lebanon in general where I lived, but I don't know if you want to ask me more specific question.

**NP:** Yes, could I? let's start… I have a number of different questions but let's start with the more recent, the questions that are about the more recent period. I'm interested to know, what do you think is the reason for the change in the attitude of the Lebanese government after 2005? You said that before 2005 it was a taboo issue for the Lebanese to talk about the Palestinian rights, so do you…

**WA:** Yeah, I think, you know, 2005 it was the assassination of Rafiq Al-Hariri and the Cedar Uprising. I think this had an effect, and the withdrawal do the Syrian forces, you know so the Syrians are not controlling the politics of Lebanon anymore, maybe to a lesser extent, but not like… one day they were controlling everything in Lebanon, it was really an occupation, it was an occupation, and no politician could say anything about what the Syrian want, so this gave the freedom of the Lebanese people when they had the Syrian forces out of Lebanon, and then the Prime Minister that came after Hariri, Fouad Al-Saniora, politically he had a background, you know, he was believing in Arabism and all this, so his background is very… and I give him the credit for this, he started the Palestinian-Lebanese dialogue committee and he opened the PLO, and this was a very important step. I think he wouldn't be able to do that if the Syrians continued to be in Lebanon and controlling the politics of Lebanon. Still you have half of the Lebanese maybe affiliated with the Syrians, but it’s something else when the Syrians were occupying Lebanon, you have Syrian soldiers everywhere and they were controlling the politic, they were deciding on everything, so they got a blow after Hariri's assassination, especially that all the people believed they had a role in assassinating the Prime Minister. So the Cedar Uprising and the exodus of the Syrian soldiers from Lebanon I think had a role in creating this change. Maybe they believed in that, that they should have a dialogue but they couldn’t at that time talk freely about what they really think, you know.

**NP:** What I want to ask you is your opinion about the rise of political Islam, have you noticed that working in the camps? When did it become apparent? Does it pose any challenges?

**WA:** Of course. First of all, this is really very… the emerging of these fanatic Islamist groups in the camps it was really something very strange, it was… it is something that was not normal for the Palestinian society. And as an activist I think all the Palestinian activists that are working with me and working together we are worried about this phenomenon, and of course we are facing challenges, because if we don't act against their effect it will have a very serious implication on the Palestinian society. You know, they are trying to control the pre-school education, they are trying to absorb youth, so if they put in the mind of these young people and children these ideas of fanaticism or of Islam the wrong way or in a wrong way, I think it will affect the Palestinian society that is not very religious, the Palestinian society is not religious, due to the effect of the political groups some of them were Marxists, Maoists, from various, so it was an open society in Lebanon, and not very religious, and those who are religious they are religious because it's between them and God, it's not because they are members of religious groups. This is how the society was, but these people are very different. For example in Ain Al-Hilweh, you know, we know, who are the Palestinian political groups, we know Hamas, okay religious but at least Hamas has a leadership that if there is any problem you can go to this leadership and you can negotiate with them, you have FATAH, you have all these political groups, but the political groups that are inside Ain Al-Hilweh for example now they are not from these, from the… they are very strange to us, strangers, we don't know who is funding them, we don't know who are their leaders, if there is a problem, if they do a clash with Fatah or any other…

TAPE 3

**Wafa AlYassir:** other organizations, we don't know who we should go to and talk to. Mainly in Ain Al-Hilweh, and I think the challenge is to improve the socio-economic conditions in the camps so that the people will avoid being part of these Islamist organizations, because poverty is pushing young people to go and join them because they give money, they help the whole family, if a family is sending their children to a certain Islamist kindergarten, they help the whole family, and they don't take money from them at all, and they have social programs, so they are attracting the families and the young people to go to and join them, and the only way to defeat these people is to for the secular organizations is to improve their work inside the camps and try to offer services for the young people and for the families, to try to reduce the effect of the Islamist groups. I'm not against Islam as a religion, but I'm against these organized… personally, you know, these fanatic groups and Islamist groups, the political Islamist groups. Because we were proud that we don't differentiate between religions. As Palestinians historically in Palestine people living in peace together, we didn't have any sectarianism in our society, we were proud of it, we are not religious, we think… we have political affiliations, maybe we compete or we fight each other according to political affiliations not because of religions or beliefs, religious beliefs. So we were happy that we were like this as Palestinians, but now the situation is different. So the way to fight is to improve our work, socio-economic work in the camps, and to reduce poverty, to eradicate poverty, because it's now allowed… 72% of the Palestinian refugees are poor.6.6% are categorized as extremely poor, you know, extremely poor and they cannot sustain themselves and have the necessary food on daily basis. So, what do you expect from these people? Young people are staying on the street doing nothing, what do you expect from them. Of course they will be absorbed, not only by fanatic groups, now they are trying to absorb Palestinian youth in the struggle in Lebanon between the sectarian struggle, and this is very bad you know, and they are attracting them, the Sunnah are trying to attract the young Palestinians to fight with them. And this is really even worse, it's not only Muslim-Christians, now it's Sunnah-Shiite, and there is a danger that they are using the Palestinians, the both parties you know, Shiite and Sunnah, they are using the Palestinian youth, and this is very dangerous and I think the political groups, the Palestinian political groups are aware of this and they are trying to do something about it, we as civil society organizations also we want to do something about it, not to be used as Palestinians in this struggle, the Sunnah-Shiite struggle… so this is the challenge, and of course I always tell the funders and the donors and the foreigners, if you want to fight terrorism and stop the effect of the Islamist groups growing in the camps, of course you have to invest more in development and in helping the people in order to improve their socio-economic conditions. If you give a young Palestinian the chance to go and study and continue studying and go to university and get married and form a family why he should kill himself? Then he would love life and love the life of others and appreciate what he has, but if he hates himself and he has nothing and his father is unemployed, there is domestic violence inside the family because of the very extremely bad socio-economic conditions and he is doing nothing, he is not saying any prospects in his life, then he will hate himself, he will hate others also. So this is the challenge, to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinians inside the camps. And of course the political groups should do something also to stop this fighting going on inside the camps. And also the Lebanese have a problem, why are they allowing these people? It's very astonishing that Ain Al-Hilweh camp is sieged as a prison and there's only one entrance and the Lebanese army is at the entrance, how do things go in for these people? It means that there are some people from the Lebanese army or I don't know, they are facilitating the entry of weapons to these people who are sieged in the camp. You see what I mean? Like Fatah Al-Islam when they came to Nahr Al-Bared. How did they move from the borders to Nahr Al-Bared? Where is the Lebanese security? They didn't detect them? They came and they controlled the camp and then they started fighting them, there are things also the Lebanese government has a responsibility to control these groups and not allow them to enter into Lebanon. And the places that these people like to go to are the Palestinian camps… so we have a big challenge. We have to start with the children. In their KGs what kind of programs they give? What do they tell the children? They tell them that you have to be afraid of God and you have to do this and that, in spite in the KGs related to the secular NGO's they teach them how to sing, how to dance, how to play, how to see colors, how to draw, so this is different, you are preparing a young child in a different way than they are doing, these children will grow up to be monsters. Obeying orders because of religious reasons, and this is very dangerous and we are realizing the danger involved in this.

**Nicola Pratt:** do you think there's a challenge to the secular NGO's to increase their activities in the camps?

**WA:** There is a challenge, but of course it depends on the funding. The funding that these Islamist groups is much more than what the secular NGO's are getting. Secular NGO's are closing their KGs; because they don't have the necessary funding for that. While the others have all sorts of funding, from where? This is a big question mark. So… but we discuss these issues among ourselves, and we are very keen about putting plans how to face this, especially with the children, but if you don't have fund what can you do? That's why I'm saying that the international community has a role to play in this. You know, the war on terror is not by bringing planes and bombarding certain… the war on terror has also a factor other than military factor, the socio-economic conditions of the people. And the United States and all the other countries that have alliance with the United States, they should realize this, that the war on terror is not only using their muscles and their military power you know, they can't destroy the terrorism if they want just to use their military power, they have to increase their support to improve the socio-economic conditions in the poor areas, in the poverty zone. This is what I believe. This is more effective.

**NP:** Can I ask you a question about your… how was it growing up Palestinian and not living amongst other Palestinians? How did that feel or how did that affect your feelings when you went to work in refugee camps.

**WA:** No because there are around 56% who are living in camps and the others are living outside the camps, you know, but it didn't affect, because I told you I always felt as a Palestinian because my grandfather, my father was putting this into us, into our minds that we are Palestinians, we are from Jaffa, he was informing us how they left and all this, I never felt that I'm not Palestinian, my Palestinian feeling was very strong, and this is wha tis nice about the Palestinian that they are putting in the minds of their children that they are Palestinian, that they have a country that was lost and that… you know, they are putting the sense of pride that they are Palestinians, and now I see my brother, he has 2 small girls and if you ask them they will tell you: we are Palestinians from Jaffa or from Jaffa, Palestine, and this is part of our struggle, to tell our children about their origin and that… because the struggle should continue from one generation to another, and I think at a certain point we will be able to go back to Palestine. And at least we are telling the Jews that we are ready to live with them, we are even stating that we want a one-state solution where everybody lives in peace with equal rights, you know. What would they want more than this? But they don't want this. But I don't have any problem in my affiliation as a Palestinian, but it gave me a better opportunity to be more integrated, to have Lebanese neighbors, in the school to have friends, you know, so I had also the effect of the Lebanese culture more on me than other Palestinians living in the camps. But also being involved politically in the Palestinian students organization and Fatah, I was really at a young age, I was feeling more Palestinian all the time than Lebanese, but then I married a Lebanese and I became a Lebanese in identity, but all my cells inside me are Palestinian, I feel more Palestinian than Lebanese even I'm holding the Lebanese passport, so this issue of they are afraid to give Palestinian IDs or rights to Palestinians so that they won't forget Palestine, this is nothing, because you can be Lebanese, Canadian or American, or anything, all the members in the Right to Return Coalition they are holders of foreign nationalities, not Palestinians from the camps, because they are the ones who are trained to work for their right of return. It doesn't have anything, it facilitates life, it gives you more mobility, it gives you more rights, better than when you are Palestinian, but it doesn't change anything inside you.

**NP:** How did you feel… when did you first visit a refugee camp?

**WA:** When I was in the students' organization we used to have working days on Sundays to go and clean and build something or do something, o we had frequent visits to the camps, but it's something else when you live there, when you work the whole day and communicate on daily basis. But when I started I had some resistance from certain people in the camps, because I am Palestinian from outside the camp, so they had this kind of attitude in the beginning but then it disappeared you know; because I was very close to them, visiting the people and they were sending me food every day to the office and inviting me for coffee and… no, I didn't have because I'm Palestinian you know, I'm not different than them, but we stayed outside the camp because my grandmother is Lebanese also. So it was her family helped to integrate us in a way, and helped by giving them a house or… so that's why we lived outside the camp because we had relatives who are Lebanese.

**NP:** Can I ask about, something you didn’t mention I think in the beginning which is the year in which you were born? If you don’t mind

**WA:** No, I don't. I was born on the 18th of February 1954.

**NP:** 54. And when did you graduate from university?

**WA:** 78. I was supposed to graduate before but my mother died, she had cancer and I was late by one semester, so I graduate in February 78 from university… but that's why in 1967 I was still in the school in the intermediary level, still. I was about the finish the intermediary, and in 1967 I remember my grandfather, both of them were from Jaffa, they were promising me lots of things you know, if we are going back, I remember the mood you know, at that time they thought that they would go back to Palestine in 1967, and they were promising me presents and listening to the speeches of Abdul Nasser, poor them! They were hoping, they were expecting that they would go back, but… and now I feel pity for my father because he is always opening the channel of Palestine and he is crying whenever he sees a documentary on Jaffa, and he was something like 19 or 20 years when he came out, and I feel pity for him, at least I don't know what I'm missing, but he knows.

**NP:** What did your father do?

**WA:** Now he's an old man, he's 86. He is sitting all the time watching Palestine, we cannot watch anything when we go and visit him, he has Palestine channel and there is a special program where they go around and show the various areas, and they put so many documentaries on Jaffa, so he cries and all the time when we go back, still when we go back, and he was telling me and telling my brothers, go and invest, don't buy any flats here, don't invest anything, go to Ramallah, even if they want us to go back to Ramallah it’s okay, at least it's Palestine, but we should go back, we should invest there… he knows what's he's missing, we know we have this strong feeling that we are Palestinian but it's something else when he was born there, he living 19 or 20 years of his life there, so I feel pity for him, sometimes it's very important, they feel these old people that they want to be buries in Palestine, it's very important for them, and that's why Edward Said or some of them they asked to be, like Hisham Sharabi, all of them they asked that they want to be buried in Palestine, it's very important for the people to be buried in their own country. This is something, we are talking about death, but for the old people it's very important. I remember my grandfather; he was telling me that before we left Jaffa we opened a new cemetery, because the old one was full so we made a new cemetery for us, so at the end of his life he was talking about the cemetery, the new cemetery that they established in Jaffa. This is very important for somebody who is knows that in one or 2 years he will die, so it was very important why he was talking about the cemetery at the end of his life. It's because he knows… it was an internal wish from him that he wanted to be buried in this cemetery, in his own country. This is really bad for the old people who were born there, I feel pity for them.

**NP:** Can I ask you what's your best memory of your life so far?

**WA:** The best memory of my life?... maybe it's strange that I don't answer so quickly because…

**NP:** Actually a lot of people have to think about it first

**WA:** You know, there are certain memories you know, I can't say one of the best, of course when I was accepted in the university, it was a very nice memory when I was accepted, when I graduated, when I got a good job. But this is something normal, but to say something… we didn't have happiness in our life here if you want to talk at the collective level. We always had something, a certain kind of sorrow inside us. And on top of all I had also a personal tragedy in my life, that I lost my mother when I was young and she left me 5 sisters and brothers, you know, it was difficult, so I didn't live… and I was very political, I didn’t live as a young person, I didn't live that life you know, as a youth, how to behave as a young person. I was always more serious than my age because I had this political affiliation that I thought I have to behave, I have to be very respected by the community that I was working in, but there are certain memories related to my families when my youngest brother also graduated, when he married, it was very nice. I have nice memories of graduating people. On Friday I had graduation for our schools, and it always gives me, education gives me a very nice feeling, this is the best time that I have I my life when I see these young people are educated and graduating from universities, from vocational training, I have this touchy feeling towards young people, it gives me really happiness, on Friday I was really… and I always cry when I see them. And maybe I feel the sense of achievement when I see these young people, when I go around and I see somebody who own a company and he graduated from our school, and he is employing people from the graduates of our school. These are nice moments you know. But to tell you the truth, we didn't have so much happiness in our lives, you know, something… because we always feel this kind of sadness that we don't have rights, that we don't have a country, that we are second class citizens, even if you are better than the Lebanese in your educational achievement, even your family, the origin of your family, they always look upon you as a second class person. So, you don't like it in so many ways. You feel always there's something missing in you. I have a brother who is very successful in the Emirates now, he's the vice president of a very big multi-national company, and still he's always feeling insecure, because he says: I'm Palestinian, maybe they will kick me out and bring somebody who is more mobile, who can serve them in a better way, so he is always having this sense of insecurity inside him. He studied in very well Lebanese schools, very good Lebanese schools, he went to a very good university, he's having a very good job in the Emirates, and still he has this fear inside him, he feels that there is something lacking. Always afraid, always nagging, why they should keep me and they have lots of people with nationalities, with passports that they can enter all the countries without any visa or anything, he's always afraid, he's afraid that the Emirates will take a decision to kick all of the Palestinians. He starts to imagine more crises, but he's insecure, and most of the Palestinian young people, they are like him, they are afraid. He's lucky he could get a job in the Emirates but now the Emirates is closed for Palestinian. But, this is what I'm telling you, we don't feel this happiness, we lived in crises, in 1967 I remember in 1967 when they were crying that they took more land, my grandfathers. In 1982 there is the massacre. In 1985 you have the war of the camps. Lack of rights, everything, the exodus of the PLO… in the general sense you don't have nice moments. You are defeated all the time you know, we wanted something… something, a kind of victory in our life. We are losers. We are losing. We lost our country. We are not able, and of course at the political level we are dissatisfied with what's going on, even we don't believe in this, you know, okay we have the name Palestine but we… but practically it's not a country, when the president has to take permission from Israel to enter or to… we had hopes when we started with the revolution, when I joined at least I had hopes as a young person to… to achieve something, but we didn't achieve anything. No achievement whatsoever. All the time we are disappointed and demoralized, even I don't feel that these political groups here even, their performance is not up to the level. So, why I should be happy?

**NP:** How did you feel when the Oslo agreement was signed?

**WA:** We were very critical of the Oslo agreement. Until now, I went to Oslo and I attended a conference on the 20th anniversary of Oslo and we were very critical of Oslo. And it was true, it didn't do anything good for the Palestinians, and… but sometimes I say something, there is one factor that is very good, that was good in this agreement, that all the people who used to be in Tunisia, at least they went to Palestine, this is something that I think is positive about Oslo agreement, that instead of staying in Tunisia at least all the Palestinians went from Tunisia to Palestine. This is the only thing, but it didn't produce anything else that is positive, you know. And the Israelis… also, from the beginning I was critical, I was told by the Norwegians that Arafat when he came to the negotiations they didn't bring any experts with him, anybody else, you know, while the Israelis they brought experts on every issue. So there was something wrong from the beginning. You have professors in the state, you have specialists, Palestinian specialists known in the whole world about certain issues, you should have used them. Dr. Youssuf Sayegh who was a very bright economist and he was writing, he was asked by Arafat to write… to put a plan about the Palestinian economy in a Palestinian state if it happened. He was not taken with him to the negotiations. Rashid… the Khalidis you know who are historians, Hisham Sharabi, Edward Said, there are people known at the international level, you didn't take these people as consultants or one or two of them to go with you, you went…

TAPE 4

**Wafa AlYassir:** you were negotiating Israel, my God! Israel who was bringing lots of experts, so the start even it was not good. You know, it's… he didn't do it professionally and… and of course Israel is not an easy state to give something to the Palestinians, I don't believe they will be ever ready to give something for the Palestinians. We tried, they gave everything, the Palestinian are giving, giving, giving since Oslo agreement and Israel is not giving anything, what did they get the Palestinians? A wall? What did they get? Look at Jerusalem, all the hills around Jerusalem are full of settlements, they are building settlements, they are destroying houses. I don't see that they are giving anything. And maybe they will deport all Christians and Muslims from Israel and create a pure, pure Jewish state. These people do not want to be integrated, they live in war, they are living on war, and they can't live without war, without feeling that they are threatened from their surroundings and they don't want peace. They don't want to recognize that there were people living in this country and they have the right. Look at the States, look at Canada, it's full of people, Norway, now Norway you walk on the street you find people from all over the world, living in peace with equal rights, why do you want to be different, to have a Jewish state? We are recognizing your right to live with us, but give us the chance to go there and live in our original place. Jaffa is empty, all the houses are collapsing now because they are not allowing anybody to reconstruct their houses, so their houses are collapsing, so I would love to go and live in Jaffa, if I don't live the whole time maybe I will go and visit, and… why, there are lots of spaces for us to live there, with equal rights, you have the rights, we don't want to like our ancestors, they want to force them to the sea, no, we don't want to throw anybody to the sea, but what we want, our rights, live with us. We live with you, you live with us, you have equal rights and we have equal rights, in a state called whatever, X or Y or Z, it's not important, the whole world is becoming cosmopolitan, you know. People are living from various origins and why, why we don't do that? This is a dream of course but maybe it will come true one day. You know, in Jaffa there are lots of Palestinians from Jaffa, that are married to Jewish women. Jaffa especially, because its people were not very religious and lots of them were communists also. My father was a communist, so they didn't care about it and so, I know lots of people here that their grandmothers are Jewish. So, we didn't have this barrier, the Palestinians are not against people if they are Jewish, they were living in peace, Palestinians are either Jewish or Muslims or Christians. And all these can live in peace together, why do you want to build a state based on religion only? It doesn't work… so…

**Nicola Pratt:** Can I ask a final question, why do you think it's important to keep on being active and keep on struggling?

**WA:** Why it's important? Of course I will always be active because ig I stopped being active I will stop being Wafa, because there is a cause that all of us should keep on working for, you know, and I have people, I have my people suffering, I can't see Palestinians suffering and they are stacked at the hospitals and not able to pay the bills or women detained in the hospital or children, so I can't see the suffering of my people. It's high time that my people live the decent life, it’s high time that my people and we as Palestinians we get a proper solution for our situation, a proper solution, we have to have our rights, because we don't have the right to return, we don't have civil rights in Lebanon, how can we continue living like this? It's not individuals here, as an individual maybe I can live a good life, but then I will not feel happy if I feel that my family members, my people are suffering. That's why, it’s in me, it's an interest built in me since I was 14, and it's par of me who will continue the efforts, and even if I'm retiring after 4 years maybe I'm retiring from my job here but I will always be active if I have the chance in struggling for the rights, and I'm planning to start writing things about my experience during all this period, especially and I want to write on the aid effectiveness issues, from my point of view as a donor and also I want to take into considerations the local NGO's that I used to work with, from the various angles, because sometimes I act as a member of a local NGO because I participated in the initiation of lots of NGO's, of founding lots of NGO's and from the prospect as a donor, maybe I should have the chance to write but I will continue to be active because it's me, it's part of me and as long as we have problems in our society, as long as the Palestinian problem is not solved, I will continue to do something.

**NP:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you or anything that you haven't mentioned until now that you think is important? Anything that you want to elaborate upon that you mentioned briefly?

**WA:** I don't know, we talked about so many issues. There are lots of issues you know that you are mentioning here that, I want to tell you about something that, you talked about Iraq, the war on Iraq in 1991, this issue had a very serious impact on the Palestinians in Lebanon, a negative impact, because when Arafat sided with Iraq against Kuwait and they kicked out all the Palestinians from Kuwait and the Gulf countries and they closed the door, the negative effect on the Palestinians in Lebanon was more than on Palestinians in other places. First of all because the Palestinians do not have the right to work here. So the Palestinians from the beginning they used to study in the good universities and schools here, because UNRWA schools used to be perfect, and they used to go to universities, graduate and go right away to the Gulf countries, nobody looked to work in the country, in Lebanon, unless they are like me, females, but males used to go to the Gulf countries. So this closed a very important door for the Palestinians, the Iraqi war, and I think Arafat committed a very big mistake, a very big mistake; because he really harmed the Palestinians in Lebanon and the Palestinians in general and specifically the Palestinians in Lebanon. Now everything is closed, they don't have the gulf countries, they don't have the right to work in Lebanon, and the Palestinians in Lebanon they used to live on remittances, remittances from the Gulf countries were very important for the Palestinians, you could hardly find a family that doesn't have a member or 2 members in the Gulf, sending money to their families to live on. That's why now we feel the crisis more because these remittances stopped and UNRWA is inefficient enough, that's why we feel the crisis, but the situation was always like this, you know, no employment, nothing, and UNRWA is ineffective and all, but we had money coming from outside, from Palestinians in the Gulf countries. So this was a very serious mistake from Arafat. Why should we side by Iraq? And that's why when the Iraqis got rid of Saddam the first thing that they have done was to look for Palestinians and kill them and torture them, because they were the privileged people when Saddam was ruling Iraq. And we created another problem, so why do we have, and we don't learn as Palestinians, now we are trying to do the same in Egypt and Syria. Hamas was siding with the Muslim Brotherhood, why should we support one side? We shouldn't take sides. We should let the Egyptians decide for themselves and also in Syria we should let the Syrians decide for themselves; because later on whoever will win in Syria we will pay the price from the other part if we are siding. We should not side, let the Syrians find their own way, their own settlement with each other. But we don't learn from our experience. So this war was very important, it had some effect on Lebanon, I think we talked about the war of the… the revolution of the Cedar, but about what's going on now in the region, I think… I think what's going on in the region, maybe we don't like the results now but I think this is a process that started and we should appreciate this process. And I think it has to take its time. If you look in history in Europe and all this, now they reached democracy, but they passed through several periods of unrest and of revolutions and of killing, and I think it's very important that the process started. it was very important that we get rid of dictators. It's high time that the Arab region, the Arab people get real democracy, we will get it, we will get it one day. Maybe after 10 years, maybe after 20 years, because… but the solution is not that we… some of them say, oh look it's Assad, it was better when Assad was there and without these rebels and all this, but you know, he is a dictator, he is a dictator, he was torturing people, the other day we had a Palestinian partner with whom we were working in Yarmouk camp, he died because of torture, tortured for 6 months, a young guy, how could you support such a regime? Torturing people and staying at the head of the regime for 40 years, the father and the son, that's enough, I can't accept… I'm not with Nusra and all these but there are also people from the opposition that are really genuine and they want to do something for their people, I was so impressed by so many young Syrians, who are really trying, who are very well educated, who are really trying to do something for their own country and they want to have democracy, they are eager to learn about human rights, about how to document violations, and we train them on several issues, so I think we should appreciate what's going on, we should not expect everything to be perfect, but one day the Arab people will have real democracy. And I believe it, maybe I will be living, maybe I will not be living, but I'm sure that the Arab people are waking up and they want to see democratic countries in the region. Maybe unite with each other, like they have the European Union, maybe we will have the Arab Union, why not? We have resources, we have natural resources, we have human resources, we have everything, we have the sun, we have plants, we have fruits, we have everything, why not? So, I think… I'm optimistic, I'm not of those people who say look what these uprisings are doing and the Arab spring, it's not a spring, it's autumn. No, the process of change is starting and this process needs time to be finished, you know, the Muslim Brotherhood came to power and then the people saw, they evaluated their performance for a period and then they had an uprising on them. Some people do not approve and they say he was elected democratically, okay, but of course they behaved in a bad way and the people are not happy, they were not happy about their performance. So, the people started talking, started calling for something, before they were accepting and boiling and hating themselves, enough, this is a process that started, we don't want dictators, we want a real democracy and until… and we have to work until we reach real democracy… I am optimistic that the Arab people will have democracy in the future. We don't expect… we don't have a magic, what do you say? The magic…

**NP:** magic wand

**WA:** Yeah, so everything needs time, you know. This is what I believe.

**NP:** A very optimistic note for us to finish on.

**WA:** Yeah, but in the Palestinian issue I'm not very optimistic, but yeah, and especially now with the Arab Spring and all these hanges in the Arab Region the Palestinian issue is becoming very minor these days, for donors and for even decision makers, this is what I feel, because now they are interested in what's going in the region, in Syria, Egypt, Egypt is a very important Arab country, you know. And Tunisia, so the Palestinian issue is becoming marginalized a little bit.

**NP:** But it hasn't gone away

**WA:** No, it hasn't gone away, you know from time to time Israel bombards Gaza or Hamas launch a rocket so it comes back into the news a little bit but… and now what the implications of the Syrian case, the effect of the Syrian case on Lebanon is very worrying, and I don't know these fanatic groups, Nusra, they are coming to affect the Lebanese situation, the involvement of Hezbollah in Syria war is very dangerous especially that the other side of the Lebanese do not accept this, Lebanon is without a government because the Lebanese are disagreeing and I don't think a government will be formed easily in Lebanon, we have so many challenge and I think it's a very dangerous situation that we have to watch and see how we can behave. Of course this will have an implication on the Palestinians as I told you; because the two parties will try to use them, you know we had martyrs with Hezbollah from the camps, and we have martyrs from the other side from the fanatic groups, so as a result these young people are dying for… what is the cause for them dying in Syria? We want them to die in Palestine with Israel but not to be used by this party or that party, so the situation is very dangerous in Lebanon. And we are watching what will happen.

**NP:** So this is, this is it. Thank you very much. It was really very interesting.

**WA:** I will not talk about women because I think Haifa talked a lot about women and women empowerment because we have a very important program, we have an important program on women on the empowerment, the political empowerment of women, and also we copied this program to do political empowerment for youth also, give them skills that enhance their participation in the public life. These 2 programs are very important, I don't know maybe Haifa talked about the women empowerment but the youth also empowerment is very important. The war, the conflict between Fatah and Hamas also I have to say something that we are trying to and the young people are trying to do something and they had so many demonstrations in the camps calling the Fatah and Hamas to stop the division, and I hope that one day Fatah and Hamas, Hamas will be part of PLO, and then they can work from inside to reform the PLO because there is also a Palestinian group that is working on the reforming of PLO, so I think this has to stop because this is affecting negatively the negotiations with Israel and giving a very negative impact on the Palestinians, they should stop this war between them, and try to find ways and compromise to reach to solutions, this is very bad this division, you know Gaza is like a country by itself and then the West Bank and here's Abu Mazen and there's… and now we have another conflict inside Fatah if you are hearing about, you know, there is Dahlan who is inside Fatah is trying to also split from… so all the time we have splitting, but if people are working they forget about disagreeing and splitting you know, because they will be very busy doing something fruitful, but these people are not working, frankly. So, I think I said everything but you know this joke of Busch spreading democracy, this is ridiculous, how can they say that? They think that they can spread democracy in the Middle East by having weapons and having wars and… they are the last ones to spread democracy because they don't respect democracy and human rights… if you need anything you have my e-mail and you can ask me if you want to elaborate on some issues.

**NP:** You've been very, very generous with your time, I really appreciate it. Thank you.

**WA:** You're welcome.

**NP:** Just one more thing I forgot to ask earlier, since when have you been the director in PA?

**WA:** 1986

**NP:** 86, Okay

**WA:** In 1984 I started as a vocational training officer, I established the vocational training program, and I was also officer in charge because I told you they were called out all the Norwegians and expats were called out by the Ministry of Foreign affair in Norway, due to the very bad situation, so they put me officer in charge, from 84 to 86, they were coming from time to time so in 1986 they called me to Norway and they appointed me officially as a country director. And time passed like this because so many issues happened and you know now I ay how could I stay all these years but because we were so busy in so many issues, many conflicts, now it was a little bit peaceful time after 1990 we started having relatively peaceful time, after the Taif Accord and the stop of the civil war, we startd having a relatively peaceful time.

**NP:** Almost 30 years you've been working here.

**WA:** Yeah. 30 years. Maybe it's time to change, but is it worth it to change now? You know I still have 4 years to retire. Actually the Norwegians they gave a very good chance, at least I was employed, getting a salary and working for my people. And this coordination suited me very well, thati have employment and at the same time they are giving me money to work for my people, and giving me resources to do something for my people, and this was a very generous thing from the Norwegian people because they gave me this golden opportunity.

**NP:** Does the PA has any other programs apart from working with Palestinians?

**WA:** We have mine action program in the South, we are removing cluster bombs. But, for women and disability we are working for both Palestinians and Lebanese, and now we are starting to work also with the Lebanese observatory for workers' rights, maybe we will start working on this issue among the Lebanese, but our main focus was on the Palestinians since 1982; because our organization has a solidarity, one of the solidarity organizations with Palestinian issues, and they sent some solidarity groups in 1980, in the last years of the 1970's and the early years in the 1980's and when the invasion started in Lebanon, the Israeli invasion they had a TV campaign in Norway ad collected lots of money, actually after the massacre, after Sabra and Shatilla massacre they collected a lot of money and they came and they started a rlief work in Shatilla, and we started the reconstruction in Shatilla in 1982. They used to give material to the people and money to reconstruct their houses, so they did a lot in 1982 and then in 1983 they started long-term projects, the public house and environment projects in Shatilla, then the rehabilitation center in 1983 and then they started the schools in 1984. 2 schools. And then we started expanding through local NGO's by supporting partners, so now we have 9 partners working, that we support them on annual bases to implement programs.

**NP:** Are they all Palestinian NGO's, partners?

**WA:** Yeah, we have Association Najdeh, we have the House of Steadfast Children, national institution for social care and vocational training, we have Palestinian student fund, we have the national association for vocational training and social services, we have Equality, Youth for Development, lots of these they are taking… we have one Lebanese partner working with women. actually three, but one is strategic, 2 are supported on project bases, so yeah the majority, and of course we have also partners in the mine action program that works on victim assistance and mine risk education, Lebanese partners, but in other ways you know, not in development but in mine action. And all our funding, most of our funding comes from Norway, from the Ministry of foreign affair in Norway and from trade unions in Norway.

**NP:** It's very interesting?

**WA:** Yeah, anything else?

**NP:** I think there are lots of questions I could ask, I'm just…

TAPE 5

**Nicola Pratt:** suddenly aware that I'm taking up lots of your time so… perhaps we can finish today and maybe if I think of…

**Wafa AlYassir:** anything you can…

**NP:** …anything more I can contact you

**WA:** I will answer

**NP:** I will be here until the 6th of November

**WA:** Okay