TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East
“Rula Hardal: Life as a Palestinian Citizen of Israel”

DATE
Tuesday, November 28, 2023

FEATURING
Rula Hardal
Research Fellow, Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel

CSIS EXPERTS
Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program

Transcript By
Rev Transcript
www.rev.com
Jon Alterman: Rula Hardal is a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel, a former lecturer at the Arab American University, and a former professor at Al-Quds University. She completed her doctorate in political science at the University of Hanover in Germany, and she’s about to become the Palestinian co-director of A Land for All, an Israeli-Palestinian political organization. Rula, welcome to Babel.

Rula Hardal: Thank you.


Rula Hardal: Yeah, it’s quite complicated because I deal with that as a political scientist, not only in my daily life but also in my academic life. It’s to be a Palestinian born, raised in Israel, part of the Palestinian people but also being a minority inside Israel and being an Israeli citizen. I also lived abroad for 10 years in Germany and came back and decided to live and work in the West Bank. Later on, I moved back to Israel for my academic work. Yeah, it’s quite complicated.

Jon Alterman: Can you talk about your decision to move to the West Bank and what you found there?

Rula Hardal: Well, when I decided to come back from Germany after 10 years there, I decided to be in a Palestinian context in terms of society, life, and academic engagement. I got an offer from Al-Quds University, and I worked there for six years. I discovered that even though I feel very connected to the Palestinian people, and I searched the Palestinian society in terms of politics and national movement, I had the feeling that I’m still on the edge of the Palestinian society and the Palestinian narrative. I didn’t feel very connected, and I felt also that the other side don’t look at me as being pure Palestinian.

Jon Alterman: Was that mostly intellectual, cultural, social? I mean, how did you feel most connected? Obviously linguistically, you’re very connected, but how did you feel connected? How did you feel disconnected?

Rula Hardal: It’s the problem of a lot of intellectuals, the feeling of being disconnected from their society, their values, and their way of life in their societies. But in this case, there is another level of being or feeling disconnected. All the time, I’m living between the two ends of the spectrum of being very connected and even, I would say, very rooted to both the Palestinian and Israeli society, and between the other side of the spectrum to be disconnected and to feel, "No,
no, I don't belong to all of you. I have other values. I don't feel that I'm part of this collective identity or collective narrative."

In this way, sometimes I watch all what's happening on both societies in an anthropological way. I cannot ignore that the way I think and the way I act and maybe the way I write and analyze everything, it comes very deeply also from being a Palestinian and a Palestinian in the state of Israel, and a Palestinian who lives and worked for a couple of years in the West Bank, in a very specific reality of the Palestinian people. In a way, I live under occupation in my daily life when I leave my apartment and go to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv or Haifa.

I'm a kind of privileged Palestinian because I have Israeli citizenship but still, I live under occupation. If the army decides one day to close the checkpoints for one hour or two hours or one day, I'm actually stuck like any other Palestinian here in the West Bank. So, it's a complicated reality which I choose to live in, in a way, and in the other way I didn't choose it because I was born as a Palestinian and born having the Israeli citizenship.

Jon Alterman: Did you find a difference in the way your fellow faculty engaged with you when you were teaching in the West Bank and in Jerusalem versus the way students engaged with you?

Rula Hardal: No. Actually, the differences are between people who could handle all of these complexities and those who could not. Some people think all the Palestinian people are Palestinians regardless of their citizenship, geographic place of birth, maybe place of living. Other people have a kind of suspicious point-of-view and look differently at the Palestinian people who live in Israel and have Israeli citizenship or maybe Palestinians who were born abroad or came back to Palestine. This is something that you don't feel, actually, all time, or you don't feel it in your daily life or daily interaction with them.

It comes up in different occasions and special complexities, but it is not something that you will feel or suffer from all the time.

Jon Alterman: Do you sense a jealousy, a distrust? I mean, what are the sorts of emotions that you feel are going on the other side?

Rula Hardal: Maybe jealousy? Jealousy because having Israeli citizenship in this situation, in this reality, is kind of a privilege in the eyes of the Palestinian people who live under the occupation, and they don't have Israeli citizenship. Israeli
citizenship gives you the opportunity to move freely, for example, between the borders or between the two sides through the checkpoints.

It gives you the opportunity to drive your car and to go wherever you want. For example, to the beach without special permission from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) or any other authority. It gives you the opportunity to use the Israeli airport to go abroad.

Jon Alterman: You’ve thought a lot about the issue of peace. I’m wondering what your experience teaching in the West Bank and in Jerusalem has done to shape what you think a peace might look like . . . the possibility of peace, especially with such differences that you’ve described between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank.

Rula Hardal: First of all, I don't really like the word "peace" because when we speak about peace, we speak about certain kinds of conflict between two sides or two parties. And what we have here in Israel and Palestine, it's not only conflict.

We need to be more accurate and to name things as they are. We are speaking about having a complex set of policies of the Israeli authorities against the Palestinian people. Not only the Israeli authorities or government but also, we should refer more to the Zionist ideology and the Zionist movement in order to start framing the reality in Israel Palestine.

It's not only settler colonialism. It's also having two national groups and two national movements considering Zionism not only as a colonial force but also a national movement. So, we have conflict between these two national movements—the Palestinian one and Zionism. We have the reality also of military occupation, a kind of special apartheid in part of the land. And we have a systematic state discrimination against the Palestinian people. So, analyzing or understanding the reality on the ground under this complicated paradigm helps us when we speak about any solution, not only to speak about peace.

We need more than peace in order to change the reality to be more equal or to bring more justice for the Palestinians and the Israeli people. That's why I don't like the word "peace." Peace is okay, it's nice, but it's not enough in this case. We need to speak about recognition, reconciliation, and the reality that has been established between the Israelis and the Palestinians during the last maybe 100 years.
Jon Alterman: What do you make of the Israeli assertion that this is really all about security. And the reason there can't be the sort of complete equality and the withdrawal of military presence in the West Bank and around Gaza is that it's necessary by security, and the argument is, look at what Hamas did on October 7?

Rula Hardal: I do understand the need for Israel as a state and as people for security and for the feeling to be secure, taking into consideration all that's happened between the Palestinians and the Israelis during the last seven decades. But, much more important taking into consideration the collective memory of the Jewish people following the Holocaust.

Working very closely academically with Palestinians and in Palestinian universities with students and colleagues and being involved politically and scholarly in Jewish institutions with Jewish Israeli colleagues gave me the opportunity to understand more deeply the very individual and collective deep psychological aspects of the Palestinian and the Zionist Israeli narrative. But again, to the issue of security, no. It's not about security in the way you put it and not in the way that we are witnessing since October 7.

I think every state has the right to protect its national security and the security of the people but in this case, we cannot only stick to the security considerations that the Israelis speak about all the time.

When Israel is using very humiliating instruments and policies, controlling every aspect of the Palestinian life, they cannot have security because even though we had periods where the Palestinian people didn't resist the occupation in violent ways. People who were never here or in Israel and Palestine maybe cannot imagine how is it to live under military occupation, or to live in Gaza strip, for example. When you live in the biggest prison on earth, you are not allowed to move, and you are speaking about the most basic human rights, the right of movement, the right for dignity and for respectful life. So, I cannot accept the security argument claimed by the Israelis to justify controlling the Palestinian people. The only way that I can see to solve this problem is to end the occupation and give the Palestinian people the same individual and collective rights as the Israeli Jewish people.

Jon Alterman: As you think about the work you're doing, what do you think the future of both Israelis and Palestinians is likely to look like?

Rula Hardal: I do believe that both people are going to stay here in this place between the Jordan and the sea. As you know Jon, I'm involved in a political organization,
“A Land for All—Two States, One Homeland.”

We are speaking about an advanced form of the classic two-state solution, and we believe that we are different from the classic two-state solution. When the Oslo Agreement was signed between the PLO and the Israeli government and attempted to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel, we believed that both people have the right for self-determination in the form of the modern nation state.

In this sense, I would like to live in one democratic country for both Palestinians and Israelis. But taking into consideration the interests, mindset, and reality on the ground today, both Palestinians and Israelis are not there to give up their desire for self-determination. That’s why I still speak about the importance of having two sovereign states for the Palestinians and the Israelis.

But we speak also about sharing the land and not separating or dividing the people and the land based on the right of belonging of the Palestinians and the Israelis to this land as a homeland. Palestinians and Israelis consider this place historically and even theologically a kind of homeland.

We speak about two states with open borders and with an upper political economic unit that can operate for the two states and not having complete separate and independent states.

And the last point that we speak about is recognition and reconciliation as very important principles when we speak about solving the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It’s not only about signing a peace agreement, but it’s a process of reconciliation and recognition of the collective rights and individual rights of the two people for equality, dignity, and justice. We also need reconciliation and recognition of the suffering of the two people in their own history, be it the Jewish people and the Palestinian people through the Nakba and after the Nakba.

Jon Alterman: What percentage of Palestinians and Israelis do you think would start off opposed to that kind of idea, and what’s the process by which you think you could reassure people that this is actually a pathway toward resolving the conflict?

Rula Hardal: I’m going to say something that maybe will shock you. I do believe that the majority of the Palestinian people will accept such a solution or such a political vision.
Unfortunately, less so among the Israelis. You know the Israelis live in a privileged reality compared to the Palestinian people. And when we speak about such a political vision and settlement, we speak also about giving up some of these privileges.

But also, if we speak more deeply about what should happen in order to reach this political vision, I think in terms of the national narratives of the Jewish Israeli people and the Palestinian people, we need something deeper, what I call decolonizing Zionism and Zionist perception from supremacy and the feeling that the only people who have the right to belong to this place are the Jewish people.

On the other side, when we speak about the Palestinian national collective narrative, also the Palestinian people need to have a kind of transformation in their mindset towards the Jewish people and especially the Israeli people who live here. Palestinians need to see that Israelis also have equal rights to describe themselves as a national group.

The Palestinian people need also to have this transition from claiming Palestine, historic Palestine, to be for the Palestinian people to another attitude, to share the land with others.

Jon Alterman: And it’s your judgment and experience that the extremists in the Palestinian community will be controlled, as one hopes extremists in the Jewish community will also be controlled if this were to move forward?

Rula Hardal: If the whole issue of Palestine/Israel will be solved tomorrow, we will still have extremist groups on both sides. But I do believe that the majority of that population, the Palestinian and the Israeli, are not extremist. I still believe that, even following October 7.

We don’t have any choice. We don’t have any other choice for both of the people. We don’t have that luxury to allow these small extremist groups to win in this situation. We are the majority. The people who like to live in a normal situation without violence and without any kind of supremacy and control of one group over the second one.

Jon Alterman: I think, usually, you deal with a wide range of people. You deal with Jewish Israelis, Palestinian Israelis. I assume you also deal to some degree with Palestinians in the West Bank. What are the range of views you hear about October 7 and the war? Is there a sort of consensus? Is there a big split?
there a spectrum? How would you describe the attitudes of people you engage with toward the war?

Rula Hardal: It’s a spectrum when we speak about the Palestinian people as well as the Israeli people. It’s a spectrum of opinions and feelings, but we can find some common feelings that all the people feel. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have the feelings of fear and deep worry about what is coming next and the future. There are also feelings of anger on both sides.

On the other side it’s also very natural for any group or any society to go back and to position itself in the very basic national feeling to protect itself. It brings automatically, if we like it or not, patriotic nationalist feelings and attitudes.

But what I also would like to emphasize in this case is that I do believe from what I hear and discuss with people, both people are tired from the death and from this violence and from the repeated waves of escalation. The two groups are tired from suffering, and especially the Palestinian people. They are the most to suffer in this situation, and they are the most interested any solution more than the Israelis. Unfortunately, but this is actually the reality.

Jon Alterman: Do you think as somebody involved in peace building or reconciliation or however you want to frame it, that the events of October 7 have brought us closer to resolving this issue? Or has it fueled the extremes, increased distrust, and pushed us further away? And if you’re not sure now, when do you think we’ll be able to tell?

Rula Hardal: What we are witnessing now since October 7, I feel that the gap and the trust between the Israelis and the Palestinians is much complicated. We are in a kind of regressing a lot of years back in our history. Accordingly, we need to restart from a different standpoint than we've been before October 7.

It’s frustrating because what happened on October 7 is something new, something different when we speak about the relationship between the Palestinians and the Israelis, at least during the last maybe 40 years. Even the Second Intifada still has very, very difficult and negative associations among the Israelis. I think what we are witnessing now is another level of escalation and another level of fear.

It is a broken situation, broken feelings between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We hear more extremist, pessimistic, and violent voices among the Palestinians and the Israelis, following not only what happened on October 7
and the Israeli war against the Gaza Strip following it, but also the whole media discourse, and the feelings and the consequences of these events, the war on Gaza, the massive killing and destroying of Gaza Strip, the Israeli threat of a Second Nakba and transfer of the Palestinian people, and also the brutal attacks of Hamas against the Israeli civilians in Southern Israel.

It’s a very significant break between the two people, and I think we need, after the war ends, a lot of intra-national and international work in order to recover and re-envision our attitudes and national narratives, and to start healing from all of these bad feelings and trauma. It will take years to be able to build real bridges in order to continue together and to start settling the conflict in a way that serves the interests of the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Saying all of that, we don’t have the privilege to wait years in order to keep our engagement for peace and solve and end the occupation. It is also now the time to keep speaking about hope and about the opportunity. The only opportunity to save the Palestinians and the Israelis is to solve this conflict and to reconcile.

Jon Alterman: Well, Rula Hardal, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Rula Hardal: Thank you. Thank you, Jon.

(END.)