

Detroit Hosts the 2010 US Social Forum Interview with Palestine OnlineStore.com Founder

El Zabri: “Public awareness is the first step in advocacy for Palestine”

Forum and Link Staff:

Under the slogan “Another world is possible, another US is necessary, another Detroit is happening” the US Social Forum made its home at Cobo Center in Detroit from June 22 to June 27. Tens of thousands of activists poured into the Cobo Center to meet each other and attend forums that discuss issues related to justice. The Center for Media Justice had the following on the US Social Forum: “The Social Forum movement - conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum - is a space for social movements and progressive sectors of civil society to meet and share ideas, stories and solutions to confront the world’s continued economic, ecological and human rights crises. The first World Social Forum was held in January 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil...”

The Forum and Link visited the event and interviewed one of the Palestinian activists, Haithem El-Zabri, who flew from Texas to attend the event. The following is the interview.

-Tell me about yourself, who is Haithem El-Zabri? I was born in the U.S. when my parents were here from the West Bank for studies and suddenly became refugees in 1967. We then moved to Italy and then Kuwait, and I came back here to study and live. I majored in Marketing and then got my Masters of Communications in Digital Media.

- Tell me, what brings you to Detroit? I am in Detroit to promote Palestinian products at the Allied Media Conference and the U.S. Social Forum. These big conferences offer a huge opportunity to reach a large number of people who are concerned about social justice and human rights.

- How did you get involved in Palestine activism? I come from a family of nationalists and, as a child, I always heard my parents talking about Palestine. My school teachers in Italy were actually surprised by how much I knew about the issue at a young age, and were surprised to learn from me a totally different story than the one they were getting from the news. Then, during the first Intifada, I enrolled in Birzeit University’s international summer program. Spending that summer in Palestine, witnessing the events, being part of the popular resistance, and visiting Gaza really turned my life around. I distinctly remember a friend in Birzeit pleading with me “when you go back, tell the Americans what you saw and what is really happening here.” And that immediately became

my mission in life. I tear up every time I think about it, because the Palestinian narrative is dismissed by Western mainstream media and that enables Israel to manipulate public opinion and continue its oppression of our people and the U.S. to continue supporting it without facing significant opposition. Public awareness is the first step in advocacy for Palestine and we need to work on it more vigorously.

- Tell me about your website? PalestineOnlineStore.com started off as a small website selling documentary films about Palestine. At the time I launched it, I was only marketing two films that had just been released and were very powerful; ‘Gaza Strip’ and ‘Jenin Jenin.’ And gradually, I started adding more and more films, and now the Palestine Online Store is sells more Palestinian films for home video than any other vendor. Plus, I’ve added a wide assortment of items to the mix, including books, music, posters, maps, hand-



crafts, t-shirts, flags, olive oil, za’tar, and much more. Also, the store’s role has grown from mere reseller to a film distributor, book publisher, and music label. In terms of films, PalestineOnlineStore.com is now



the distributor of a number of award-winning films, including ‘The Iron Wall,’ ‘The Land Speaks Arabic,’ and ‘To Gaza With Love.’ In terms of books, I’ve self-published a booklet that I co-authored, titled “Nakba - The Ongoing Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine.” This booklet was our answer of how to educate people with little knowledge of the issue briefly and concisely (it is only 40 pages long). In terms of music, the store made it possible for Mohammed Al Farra, a young rapper from Gaza, to release his debut CD. The store also produces several t-shirts, posters, and bumper stickers, whenever possible in Palestine.

-Where do your orders come from? Orders come from both Palestinians and non-Palestinians, but mostly the latter. Geographically, they come from all over the world, including even such places as Brunei, South Korea, and

San Marino! Most of the orders come from the USA, Canada, and Europe.

- Where does the profit go? PalestineOnlineStore.com is a project whose mission is to make Palestinian products, and especially informational resources, more widely available and to support the Palestinian economy. So the revenues go back into covering its overhead and developing and producing new materials that serve the cause. Obviously sales benefit and enable filmmakers, writers, artisans, farmers, and others, and enable them to keep doing what they do and supplying us with these needed materials for advocacy. Many items benefit our people back home, especially those that are made there such as handcrafts, olive oil, olive soap, kufiyehs, and the occasional item that we manage to produce there. And several are fundraisers for specific projects, such as the ‘We Sail Until Palestine is Free’ t-shirt, which the store has produced for the Free Gaza Movement and is donating 50% of the profits to them.

- What are your goals and what is next for Palestine Online Store? My vision is for it to be “the Palestinian Amazon.” The next step towards this is to get the website completely revamped by a professional, and this is the highest priority, as soon as the resources for such development become available. So far, I have designed and maintained it myself in static HTML on Dreamweaver. It needs to be completely automated and have features similar to Amazon’s, such as customer comments, recommendations, etc. I would also like to have staff as soon as possible, as this would enable me to focus on business development rather than doing everything. And eventually, I envision offices in every continent, tailoring products for their specific needs (for example, having our films and books translated into other languages), and different websites for each.

- How do you see the state of Palestine activism in the US today? While there is a good number of dedicated Palestinian activists, this number needs to be much greater. There is much to be done in terms of advocacy and it cannot be done without mobilizing the entire community. Here at the Social Forum, the biggest Arab community in America (i.e. Dearborn) is severely under-represented. The Social Forum had many Palestine related events to participate in so why the weak turnout of local activists? In Palestine, young kids face tanks with stones. In America, we have it much easier, and we need to make use of that and stand up for the rights of our sisters and brothers. I would like to mention that the U.S. Palestinian Popular Conference will be convening in Chicago in October, so people who want to be involved should really consider attending that, and I hope to see many from the Detroit area there. That conference’s website is www.palestineconference.org.

For more information on the US Social Forum see <http://www.ussf2010.org/>

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