



# TWiP: An Inadvertent Archive for Palestine



By Sani P. Meo

# I

t was 1998, and guess what? The (so-called) Middle East peace process was deadlocked! To be fair to history, I should mention that after nine days of intense negotiations between Yasser Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu, an interim agreement was signed on October 23 that year at Wye River Plantation.

The Wye River Memorandum called for a second Israeli redeployment, from 13.1 percent of the West Bank. Soon after, and as usual, the Israeli leaders refused to implement the terms of the agreement. The pretext was that Palestinian efforts to guarantee Israeli security were inadequate.

In 1998, Yasser Arafat clearly believed that he could still achieve his goal of an independent Palestine through negotiations, but he was in a thorny position between the rock of Israeli intransigence and, as it turned out, Israel's firm decision to never grant Palestinians a state, and the hard place of waning popularity caused by his leadership style (which some saw as autocratic), allegations of corruption, and the increase in Hamas's political influence.

Similar to Arafat, and despite a lot of frustration, most Palestinians also believed that their independence could still be achieved through goodwill and negotiations with Israel. People had been empowered two years earlier when an election in the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem, had been conducted in January 1996. International observers admitted that the elections were generally

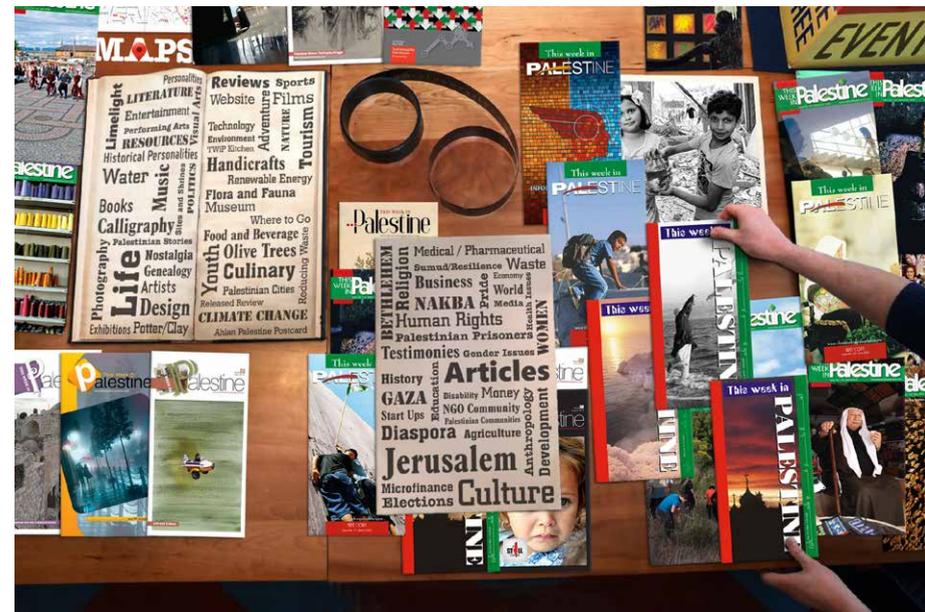
free and fair. Independents won 35 of the 88 Council seats, while Arafat's Fatah movement won the remaining seats. Hamas did not take part in the elections. Arafat won the leadership of the executive authority with 88 percent of the vote. Also, in July that year, Palestinians won a major diplomatic victory at the United Nations General Assembly, which voted 124 to 4 to upgrade Palestinian status to a "non-voting member." Palestinians had been granted observer status at the UN in 1974.

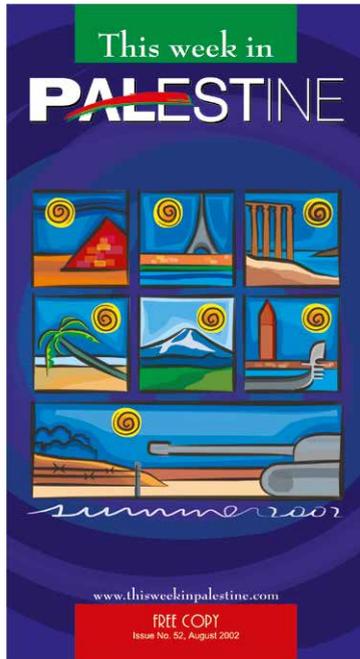
Against this backdrop, the dawn of the third millennium was quickly approaching. With the lull in widespread violence, many pilgrims and tourists were coming to the Holy Land, and there was certainly some optimism in the air. As far as we Palestinians were concerned, millions of foreign visitors were expected to flock to the places where Jesus was born and crucified and visit Al-Aqsa

I remember well the day I picked up the first issue of *This Week in Palestine*, never realizing that twenty-three-and-a-half years later I would pick up the 290<sup>th</sup> issue – with the same excitement and emotion as a father who sees his newborn child for the first time.

Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam, and the magnificent Dome of the Rock.

Sometime towards the end of 1998, Dr. Ghassan Khatib, founder and director of the Jerusalem Media





Throughout much of the second Intifada, conditions were horrible. Curfews, closures, incursions, and repression were rampant. There were many days and weeks when people could not get to their workplaces, but their determination to get things done remained. During these trying times, *This Week in Palestine* always appeared at the beginning of each month. Having witnessed all this, Luisa Morgantini would constantly refer to the magazine as “the miracle of Palestine.”

and Communication Centre (JMCC) and later minister of labor in 2002 and planning minister in 2005–06, came by to suggest that we, Turbo-Design, partner to publish a weekly periodical that provides the expected pilgrims and tourists with information about where to go and what to do during their stay in Palestine, and perhaps include some narrative about Palestine. The material was to be published in a small-size, easy-to-carry, free-of-charge booklet. A *Time Out* sort of publication, but Palestinian style! Having been in the market for 13 years already and being in the position to produce such a pamphlet, we immediately welcomed the idea and went into partnership with Dr. Khatib. It was agreed that advertising fees would cover the cost of production, and the partners would then share the remaining millions! The

first issue of the flimsy, 16-page *This Week in Palestine* was printed and distributed in December 1998.

From the outset, it was clear that getting content, editing it, doing the layout, and printing it all in one week was an impossible task. In fact, the periodical soon became a 24-page publication and kept growing until it reached 100 pages, as it is now. We decided to keep the name *This Week in Palestine*, but during its first year, the mini-magazine was a bi-monthly publication, and in November 1999, it became a monthly publication. Another structural change took place less than a year later when we realized that with the absence of regular funding, it would be better for such a project to be run by a private-sector company. We amicably ended our partnership with Dr. Khatib in

October 2000, a couple weeks before the second Intifada broke out.

For long months, pilgrims and tourists stopped coming and, understandably, advertising stopped as well. After some deliberation and hesitation, not only did we decide to keep going, but we also decided to beef up the editorial content, thus pushing the publication towards becoming a serious magazine. Being in the Holy Land, we knew that tourists would sooner or later come back, not to mention the fact that there is a huge number of English speakers in Palestine, both locals and internationals. Tourists did come back, and we've kept going to this very day. In fact, we have never missed a single issue.

Our journey has been nothing less than amazing, and we have experienced just about every emotion a person can think of: we have been proud, scared, frustrated, ticked, ecstatic, angry, nervous, hopeful, and even embarrassed when we made mistakes. Topping all this comes passion. Maybe the following incident will sum up what I mean by passion. Some time ago, Tina, our content editor, sent me a message: “Are you up?” It was 2:45 am! I have often come close to throwing in the towel but then stubbornly continue the journey despite all. I wouldn't know what to do anyway!

To date, we have put out a total of 290 issues. Given that *TWiP* is a thematic publication, we have covered all sorts of topics that include women and gender issues, youth, culture, tourism, the economy and the banking sector, cuisine, human rights, agriculture, disability, water, heritage, identity, *sumud* (steadfastness), sports, sites and shrines, cities and towns, municipalities, and many, many more. There were issues that stood out, such as the May 2002 issue on Jenin Refugee Camp after the Israeli incursion, the December 2004 issue after the death of Yasser Arafat, the February 2021 issue on Palestine in the nineteenth century, the August 2021 issue on West Jerusalem, and the complementary, current May 2022 issue on Life in Pre-1948 Jerusalem that prompted one of our readers to write to say that the issue made him cry. Call me a wimp, but I also cried when I read the first draft of Nahla Assali's article “Why Can't They Fix the Shutters?” published in the August 2021 issue. I should also mention the extraordinarily rich and beautiful March 2022 issue on the Palestinian *thobe* (traditional costume). In addition, we have featured scores of Palestinians personalities (from doormen to the rich and famous), artists, and authors; we have covered books about Palestine, exhibitions, and recipes, and have suggested a





On June 22, 2014, twelve Israeli soldiers raided the offices of *This Week in Palestine* that were a block away from Manara Square in downtown Ramallah. After breaking down the multilock door, they stole *TWiP*'s two main servers, along with several desk computers and laptops. The soldiers did not leave any note, and we have not heard from the army since. We never contacted them either. A week later, the July issue of *This Week in Palestine* was distributed.

huge number of places to visit. We should not forget our events section that includes the most important cultural activities that take place all over Palestine. As an English publication, *TWiP* has become a gateway to the world and provides a credible Palestinian narrative from Palestine in addition to bringing out the best of Palestine.

We certainly are not the only ones to provide content. In fact, there are several Palestinian institutions that offer amazing content, such as the Institute for Palestine Studies which, among other journals, publishes the renowned *Jerusalem Quarterly*. The list of content providers is beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to at least mention the policy think tank Al-Shabaka, which is another brilliant source of information.

Geared more towards infographics, Visualizing Palestine also shines in visual communications.

The greatest recognition of our work has come from our readers. In a nutshell, it has been our readers' comments and feedback that have kept us going. Historically, two comments have repeatedly stood out. The first is "You make us proud," and the second, "You have reconnected us with Palestine." In addition to our readers' support, we're proud to have been the recipients of three awards, with a fourth promised for this coming September. A.M. Qattan was the first institution to acknowledge our work. I have no recollection as to what year that was, but I remember being on a stage and receiving a plaque, feeling elated. The second award was received in January

2015 from the World Media Summit/Global Awards for Excellence 2014. *Haaretz* newspaper won the same prize. The Chinese news agency was somehow involved, and I received the award in Beijing. The third award was granted by Paltrade in January 2019 in recognition of *TWiP*'s role in promoting Palestine. This September, *This Week in Palestine* will receive Rebuilding Alliance's Storytelling Award, also in recognition of its role in "Promoting and documenting Palestinian issues."

True, the project was born out of a need and, in the absence of a similar product, has proven to be beneficial to a lot of people, both locals and visitors. We have never denied the fact, however, that since its inception, *TWiP* has been a private-sector project that we had hoped would be sustainable and profitable. It remains a private-sector project, though the sustainability/profitability factor is in question. The project has essentially become a far greater endeavor than we could have imagined and borders on a mission, a calling, and a way of life. I have always wished that we could focus only on what we do best, i.e., provide rich and credible content that would promote and document Palestine. Maybe at some point we will get to that fun stage! In the meantime, we've been extremely lucky to boast a huge number of local and international institutions, in addition to individuals, who have stood by us financially whether as sponsors, supporters, or advertisers. Although I can't list all those who have engaged with us financially, a sample of our sponsors and clients includes UNDP/PAPP, Fadaat Media, Bank of Palestine, Bayti Real Estate Investment Co., Pharmicare, UNICEF, Rawabi Municipality, PALTEL GROUP, Central Bureau of Statistics,

Palestine Investment Fund, Ministry of Culture, the European Union, Massader, PADICO Holding, World Food Programme, UN-Habitat, Ambassador Hotel, Jerusalem Hotel, Jericho Resorts, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, UNESCO, UN Women, Representative Office of Norway, Jerusalem Council for Development and Economic Growth, Piacenti Spa, Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine, ICRC, UNFPA, WCLAC, TAAWON, Gloria Hotel, George Garabedian (GGC), Christmas Hotel, WHO, ESNM, Yabous Cultural Center, The National Bank, American Colony Hotel, Oxfam, Business Women Forum, Co-water (GROW - Canada), Bethlehem Development Foundation, CARE International, and Drosos, , in addition to many individuals, including Hani Abu Dayyeh, Bassim S. Khoury, Munib R. Masri, Samir Naim Abdelhadi, Maha Abu Shusheh, George Al-Ama, Rizek Abusharr, and many, many others.

With around 6,000 professionally edited articles on various sectors and themes, *TWiP* has inadvertently become a source of information about Palestine. We have already announced our plans to make available online our entire archive, with articles categorized by topic. The first phase of this project has already been accomplished through the categorization of a few hundred articles. In a recent trial, I was able to choose a certain category and access the list of published articles that pertain to that category. This feature is not yet open to the public, but it will be once we have a critical mass of categorized articles. It takes time to categorize 6,000 articles, you know! Once it's done, access will be available by subscription. This is the only way we can sustain ourselves.

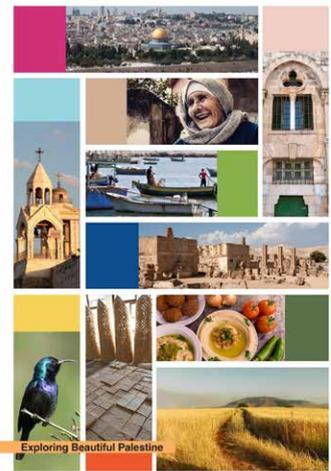


I can't end without acknowledging the people who actually produce *This Week in Palestine*. As publisher, I am mostly in the forefront, and so most compliments are directed to me personally. It's often embarrassing when I know that I am only one member of the team. An author in this edition, after seeing his article go through content and language editing, wrote, "You have an amazing team." I replied in the affirmative and added that I don't know what I did to deserve such a team. Considering the working conditions, the truth is, I would have left a long time ago!

Long Live Palestine.

*Sani Paul Anton Boulos Anton Meo is the publisher of This Week in Palestine. He is also the publisher of Filistin Ashabab, an Arabic magazine that targets Palestinian youth. Sani is married to Maha Khoury and the father of Dina and Maya Bartholomeo.*

Page 13 features the logos of some of our sponsors and clients whom we had the honor to engage with during our journey.



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