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Palestinian expert to speak at conference

Born blind at refugee camp, he teaches at St. Mary's

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Born blind in a squalid Palestinian refugee camp, where five of his brothers died from the unhealthy conditions in which they lived, Hisham Ahmed has overcome long odds to become what he is today - an assistant professor of politics and international relations at St. Mary's College in Moraga, where he teaches students about the intricacies of the Middle East.

An expert on Palestinian society and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Ahmed is respected among his peers in the United States and in the Palestinian territories, where he was an unofficial adviser to Yasser Arafat and wrote political analysis for current President Mahmoud Abbas.

As he stands in his Lafayette apartment and holds his 2-month-old daughter, Noor, Ahmed jokes that fatherhood gives him less time for work. He's busy preparing for next week's start of the academic year, and for a conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that begins today in Berkeley. He's also recovering from an injury last week that temporarily left him in a neck brace.

At the two-day conference, which is sponsored by a Palestinian Christian organization, Friends of Sabeel - North America, Ahmed will talk about Palestinian life under Israeli military rule. Like other Palestinians, Ahmed is critical of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, saying its checkpoints, miles-long separation wall and other restrictions have imposed undue, systemic burdens on Palestinians.

The situation has worsened even since Ahmed lived as a child in the West Bank camp of Deheisheh, where he, his sisters and younger brother Mohammed, who was also born blind, were raised in a one-room house with a temporary, metal roof that leaked when it rained.

"The occupation is really entrenched more than ever before," Ahmed said. "The wall is contrary to international law and contrary to rationality. It is often built on the same plot of land that a Palestinian family owns, separating the family members from each other."

But Ahmed is known for being frank about Israeli and Palestinian leadership, and in the same breath, he decries the fighting that Hamas and the Fatah wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization have engaged in for the past year.

Ahmed's 1994 book, "From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Rise of Hamas in Palestinian Society," was blunt in its assessment. He wrote that Hamas relied on conflict to attain power, predicted "a Palestinian civil war" if tensions between Hamas and the PLO increased, and quoted Palestinians who said they identified with Hamas only because other Palestinian factions failed to offer them hope.

Because Ahmed is frank about Palestinian politics, he upsets some Palestinians who want more of a cheerleader, he says. In fact, Ahmed's father, Hussein, was worried that Ahmed would become a target of militants if he stayed in the West Bank, where he was a political science professor at Birzeit University. Ahmed came to St. Mary's last fall.

"My father was absolutely concerned about the internal Palestinian situation," Ahmed said. "He knew quite well that I would come and go out on television for interviews, and on the radio and in newspapers, and (my family) was very concerned I'd be hurt as a result of what I may have to say."

It wasn't easy to leave his father or siblings, including Mohammed, who opened a successful food business in the West Bank when he was still a teenager.

"We were very fortunate that we had our family, which was so supportive and was so believing in us," said Ahmed. "Here we were, two boys who were blind. One would expect my family would despair. But my parents always believed that we could even do better than others. It instilled confidence."

Ahmed has lived in the United States several times before, including the years he spent getting his master's degree and doctorate at UC Santa Barbara. But his move this time is permanent, he says. He lives with his wife, Amneh, and Noor in an immaculate, tree-lined neighborhood.

Ahmed, 44, chose St. Mary's over universities in the United States, Canada and Europe that were courting him. He solidified his reputation when, in the days leading up to the 2006 Palestinian elections, he was one of the few analysts to say Hamas would make surprising gains. After that, more foreign diplomats sought him out for his observations.

These days, it's freshmen and sophomores who go to Ahmed with urgent business.

If you go

A conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, sponsored by Friends of Sabeel - North America, will take place today from 1 to 9:45 p.m. and Saturday from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. at St. John's Presbyterian Church, 2727 College Ave. in Berkeley. For more information, go to www.fosna.org.

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