
Janice J. Terry

*The Wandering Palestinian* is a remarkably open and honest memoir by a Palestinian-Syrian American political activist and feminist.

Ameri’s father, a Palestinian from Jaffa, married a wealthy Syrian woman from Damascus, but after the loss of historic Palestine in the 1948 war, the family fled to Amman where Anan spent her childhood, although the family also periodically visited her mother’s childhood home in a grand old building in a historic area of Damascus. Unlike many families of the era, the Ameris placed a high value on education, encouraging both Anan and her younger sister, Suad, to attain university degrees. After earning an MA in Sociology at the University of Cairo, Ameri, then in her mid-twenties, moved from Amman to Beirut for a job at the Palestine Research Center.

While in Beirut she met Abdeen Jabara, a civil rights lawyer based in Detroit, Michigan. An Arab American of Lebanese descent, Jabara was a civil rights lawyer and a passionate spokesperson for the Palestinians. Following a whirlwind romance, Ameri moved to the United States “for love.” She and Jabara soon married and, after the complicated process of obtaining the necessary “green card” that enabled her to work, Ameri began a long journey to find her professional and political way.

In the early 1970s, the United States, but particularly Detroit, was riven with political and social unrest. In 1967 Detroit had been torn apart by civil unrest following a police raid on an after-hours bar or “blind pig.” The demonstrations and brutal police reactions that followed exposed the deep racial and economic cleavages in the city. The anger, uncertainty, and political upheaval were still very much in evidence. Ameri was surprised and disheartened by the blatant racism and discrimination in housing, enforced by widespread “redlining” in wide swaths of the city where people of color could not secure loans for mortgages.

Ameri lovingly describes meeting the large Jabara family who maintained many of the traditions and mores regarding family, food, and women’s roles from their native Lebanon. Although she does not belabor the point, it is highly ironic that at the very time middle-class Arab families, like Ameris, were racing to become more Western and liberal, immigrant families like the Jabara’s struggled to maintain traditions and gender roles from the old country.

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Without a driving license or car, Ameri was shocked that she could not walk to shops, cafes, or parks. As the “motor city,” Detroit was a city of cars, and people drove everywhere on the huge freeways that criss-crossed the city. Public transport was minimal or nonexistent. After some amusing trial and error, Ameri learned to drive, secured a license, and got a car (p. 67).

She also secured a job at the newly formed Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) located in Dearborn, a western suburb of Detroit where a number of Arab immigrants, especially Yemenis, had settled. The city’s notoriously racist mayor attempted to remove the new immigrants under the guise of urban renewal, but the community successfully fought back and ACCESS was one of the institutions that emerged from that struggle.

Ameri also began working toward a PhD degree at Wayne State University. Among the university’s many highly politicized and active Arab students, Ameri began to gain her footing in her new country. She pulls no punches in describing the political turmoil and faculty in-fighting at the time, nor of her hard work in successfully achieving her doctorate.

In the late 1970s Ameri also became active in, and ultimately President of, the Palestine Aid Society of America (PAS), a registered non-profit organization that publicized the Palestinian cause and sold handicrafts, especially embroidery, to raise money for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. She served as president of PAS until retiring in the early 1990s. Her descriptions of various fundraising activities and the difficulties presented by the constant struggle to obtain donations, not only for Palestinian refugees, but for Arab American organizations in general, is particularly insightful and deals with a crucial issue that is often neglected in accounts of Arab American organizations. For Ameri, as it is for many Arabs and Arab Americans, Palestine was and remains the most important issue (pp. 100–102).

As Ameri settled into a new job and a promising academic career, she also began to resent the traditional housekeeping and social roles expected of her at home and on social occasions. Not surprisingly, this caused tensions in the marriage, or as she eloquently describes it, the relationship was on “a slippery slope of deterioration” (p. 116), and the couple divorced in the late 1980s.

After leaving PAS, Ameri applied for and received a Peace Fellowship at the Bunting Institute of Radcliff College at Harvard, where she researched the impact of the Oslo Accords on Palestinian civic society. As her year at the Institute drew to a close, she learned that it was customary for the female fellows to give a gift to the Institute. Ameri suggested giving a framed piece of Palestinian embroidery (pp. 203–204), but it was rejected for being “anti-Israel,” thereby showing that when it comes to Palestine, even sewing is political.
In 1997 Ameri returned to Detroit to become the Cultural Arts Director for ACCESS and shortly thereafter she remarried. In 2000 ACCESS purchased an old furniture store in central Dearborn. After the building proved impractical, it was torn down to provide the site for the new and first ever Arab American National Museum (AANM) that opened in 2005. Ameri became the museum’s first director, a position she held until her retirement in 2013. Her account of the development, design, and construction of the Arab American National Museum (AANM) (p. 79) is fascinating. She particularly emphasizes the incredible assistance and advice provided by the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Her story also provides insights and guidance to those seeking to establish other non-profit institutions or cultural programs, as well as describing the process of acquiring artifacts for display and documenting the histories of individual Arab American families.

Although the memoir does not include an index, there is a useful glossary and endnotes. *The Wandering Palestinian* is a highly personal, clear-eyed account that should appeal to a wide range of readers including those interested in the immigrant experience, Arab-American political activities, urban history, especially Detroit, the Palestinian struggle for independence, or those who simply want to enjoy a highly personal and frank account of one woman’s journey in moving from the Arab world to the United States. One hopes that, in the future, Ameri will expand on her experiences with AANM so that, in addition to learning about Arab American immigrant experiences, others may benefit from descriptions of the many and varied educational and cultural programs offered by the museum.