

# Absolute Friends

The Boston Globe has nominated him one of the five leaders of the millennium. He studied at the best schools in America and is currently serving as spokesman for the Abraham Fund. Meet Forsan Hussein.

By Yoav Borowitz  
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The Hussein family's living room in the village of Sha'ab in the Western Galilee is furnished in the best tradition: heavy drapes, wooden divans with plump yellow cushions. On the wall, an embroidered picture of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and opposite it, two black stone engravings of Koranic verses. The only child whose pictures are on the wall is the one who doesn't live at home. The first photo shows Forsan Hussein, 26, with Jehuda Reinharz, president of Brandeis University near Boston; in the second, he is flanked by two gray-haired gentlemen: Alan Slifka, the multimillionaire Jewish philanthropist who brought him to America, and Bill Clinton.

The latter photo was taken shortly after Hussein "introduced" Slifka at a special tribute held in his honor as the founder and president of the Abraham Fund, and as someone who has given millions of dollars to promote Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel. Former president Bill Clinton graced the event with his presence. "I got to meet him three times in the last year," says Hussein, who, at Clinton's request, gave a talk before the former president's staff in his Harlem office. Clinton apparently also realized what all the members of the American elite who have met the young man from Sha'ab have: that they are seeing the future of the Israeli Arab voice and its name is Forsan Hussein.



Twenty months have passed since his last visit to Sha'ab, when he made a special trip to attend his eldest brother Samer's wedding. Since the summer of 1996, he has returned only for brief visits, once a year at most, before going back to his residence in the eastern U.S. Last August, he moved to Washington, D.C., after five years in Boston and two in New York. In May 2000, Hussein earned a bachelor's degree with honors from Brandeis University, and was the only one of his 800 classmates to be included on USA Today's list of Academic All-Americans. The Boston Globe also selected him as one of the five leaders of the new millennium.

Forsan is currently home on a semester break from his studies for a master's degree in International Relations and International Economics, with a concentration in International Development (with the Middle East as a regional specialization) at SAIS—the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. At the same time, he is serving as a spokesperson for the Abraham Fund, which supports dozens of Jewish–Arab coexistence organizations in Israel. Before beginning his studies, he worked for two years as the fund's communications' associate and gave dozens of lectures across North America. In recent years, as a consequence of his many appearances, Forsan Hussein has met a very distinguished and eclectic assortment of people: Senator George Mitchell, former ambassador Sam Lewis, Middle East mediator Dennis Ross, the late professor Edward Said, tennis star Andre Agassi ("my only idol") and actor Jerry Stiller. He was especially excited to meet George's father from "Seinfeld": "Jerry is a great guy, but I told him that I'm not talking to him until he introduces me to his son, Ben Stiller, who is one of my favorite actors."

The Hussein family gathers around the small dining table in the kitchen while Hadiyah, the mother of the family, fusses over the pots. The family of eight eats in shifts. In the background, the sounds of soccer emanate from the television: This evening's match between Hapoel Tel Aviv and Betar Jerusalem is about to start. The Hussein family's youngest son, Ashraf, is an avid soccer fan, but two months ago, the skinny 14-year-old stopped playing on the village team. "The team isn't nice, the kids don't know how to play," he says. His older brother Forsan looks at him proudly. "I played soccer my whole childhood, until I left the country, basically," he says. "But then there wasn't a team in Sha'ab. Now there are youth teams, Hapoel, Maccabi. I don't know, things have changed here."

### **From Sha'ab to Boston**

Six kilometers southwest of Karmiel, 15 minutes east of Acre, is the village of Sha'ab – 5,500 residents, most of them Muslims. Mohammed Hussein, the father of the family, is working to build a house for his second son, Feras. "I paid a contractor NIS 35,000. I build as much as I can myself," he explains. Mohammed has been unemployed for four years, after 35 years as a construction worker. He gets by on unemployment payments and "if there's a job here and there, I go," he says. Hadiyah has devoted herself to running the household since the birth of Samer, who now lives with his wife Nadia in an apartment above his parents' house. Samer is 31.

Forsan Hussein, the third child in the family, does not live here anymore. The seeds for his move to America were essentially planted in him at age 10, when he was part of the first session of the Shemesh (an acronym for Sha'ab–Misgav–Shorashim) summer camp program, aimed at developing friendships between

children from the Arab village where he grew up and the two neighboring Jewish communities. That's when his affinity for the "world of coexistence" was born, the world that led him to where he is now.

"My first encounter with Jews was in fourth grade," recalls Hussein. "It was Tu Bishvat [Jewish Arbor Day] and my class paid a visit to Shorashim. Up to then, I thought Jews were the embodiment of pure evil. I remember how my grandfather used to take me on his donkey to the olive grove outside the village. He would grab a lump of earth from the ground, take a deep sniff, kiss it and then throw it away. He said that the Jews were the ones who stole the olive trees from us and chased many of us from the village. I was scared to death of the Jews."

At what age did you realize that you were part of a minority?

Hussein: "By age five, I understood that I was in a minority, and an oppressed minority. Every time a helicopter or plane passed over the skies of Sha'ab on the way to Lebanon, all the kids in the neighborhood would sing: `Plane, our plane, what brought you to our neighborhood? Your neighborhood is full of lice and ours - of peaches and pomegranates.'"

The horror stories didn't stop the curious boy from plunging right into activities with Shemesh, where he also worked as a counselor for eight years. After high school, where he excelled (earning a 98 average on his matriculation exams), the family lacked the means to send him to university, so he went to look for work in the Karmiel industrial zone. "Because I didn't serve in the army, they wouldn't look at me, so I started working with my father in construction in the Ramle area."

Fortunately for Hussein, his old friend Harry Rhodes, one of the founders of Shemesh, told him about the Slifka Scholarship for Coexistence, which offers funding for bachelor's degree studies at Brandeis University in Massachusetts for two students, an Arab and a Jew, from Israel.

As someone who was competing for the scholarship on the Jewish side, this was when I came to meet Forsan Hussein.

"I wanted to find young Arabs and Jews with potential and enable them to study whatever they wanted, in the hope that they would be involved in the American experience and maybe one day return to Israel and influence relations between Jews and Arabs," explains Brandeis president Jehuda Reinharz in a telephone interview from Boston.

After competing against 15 other candidates from the Arab sector, Hussein won the scholarship, and within three months, he traded in Ramle for Boston. "He arrived here a shy and frightened young man," recalls Reinharz. "I remember our

first meeting. He didn't open his mouth. After a year, it was already hard to shut him up."

Hussein's acclimatization to the university, which is named for the first Jewish U.S. Supreme Court justice, was very swift. In his first year, he and a number of friends founded a Jewish-Arab dialogue group, in which students from various universities in Boston participated. In his second year, he shared living quarters with students from Bulgaria, Greece, Bolivia, the Czech Republic and Romania at the "International House," which sought to promote pluralism on campus. He majored in two subjects - sociology and "peace building" - a major he designed with a combination of courses from various disciplines dealing with conflict resolution, the problems of minorities and world development.

Prof. Gordy Fellman is one of several faculty members who took the foreign student under their wing. "It was clear from the start that this was a special student," Fellman, who four years ago published the successful book, "Rambo and the Dalai Lama: The Compulsion to Win and its Threat to Human Survival," said in a phone interview from his home in Cambridge. "I remember that in his first year, he was in my course on the Arab-Jewish conflict and I noticed that he didn't understand the words that were coming out of my mouth. Two years later, he was already my 'teaching assistant' and correcting the others students' grammar."

What does Hussein know today that he didn't know when he arrived in America?

Fellman: "Like a number of other Palestinian intellectuals, he understands very well the reason for the Jews' presence in Israel. He understands and studied the Holocaust. He is well-versed in the Jewish narrative, but he would like Israelis to get to know his narrative, too."

Brandeis students got to know "Hussein's narrative" via a weekly radio program on the campus station called "Just Like You," which he co-hosted with an Israeli student, Michael Bavly. On the program, Hussein and Bavly demonstrated the cultural stratification that exists in Israel, with its Jewish and Arab sides, through music, recipes, discussions of current events and even theological debates. The program became such a phenomenon that National Public Radio did a story on it.

"As soon as Forsan set foot on the campus, he managed to touch the other students," notes Fellman. "In recent years, I've seen Forsan forced to withstand more than a few critical attacks from Jews and even from Arabs who saw him as a traitor, but when that happened, he never attacked in return or shrank from a dialogue. On the contrary - he always tried to reason with his interlocutor. Somehow it succeeded, because he always remained authentic. He has an extraordinary ability to identify tragedy, to deal with it and at the same time, to love his friends and the things he enjoys. He moves easily between worlds -

from the small Arab village, to the urban Israeli world, to the intellectual academic world in America."

### **`I'm the professional'**

When Hussein comes to Israel, he finds it hard to remain calm. Too many things anger him. It makes him unhappy to see lack of education in Arab society and how a lot of his childhood friends have a very hard time trying to enter the work force in Israel.

"I have close friends who worked two or three years in construction just to pay for university, then they went and did a B.A. in Haifa and now they're working as waiters. But what makes me even sadder is to see so many people deciding not to study because they think it's a waste of time and money. They say to themselves: `I'm Arab, so it will be hard for me to find work no matter what.' And when there's no work, then people begin to chatter, to talk nonsense about one another, and the things they fight about – it's a disgrace. This week, for example, there are [second-round] elections in the village. You should hear what everyone is saying, how they're putting everyone down. Sometimes I pray that there would be National Service so people would do something and go to study. What happens now is that life passes right under their noses and they watch it go by."

This isn't easy for you say, I take it?

Hussein: "I'm sorry, but I'm different from my friends. I want to drink wine freely in my home because I like it and I know that it's healthy. But I won't drink because my family is religious. This whole issue of honor – it's great that we have honor, but sometimes it's too much. One of the differences between East and West is that in the East, we use all this big, lofty talk – all this politeness that I admire and despise at the same time. We're `sweet talkers,' we're `charmners.' We have 25 ways to say `How are you?' Yallah, let's start keeping it a little shorter!"

The anger and irritation that accompany his every visit to Israel are not directed at his side alone. "As soon as I land, I become conscious of the fact that I'm an Arab in Israel, it's very ironic. I'm in my country, but before I've even left the plane, the security person takes me aside and starts asking me who I am, what I am, what am I doing here. This is not the way I wish to be greeted in my home. Of course I understand the need to guard the state's security, though I'd expect the security professionals to have a little more precise sense of who's dangerous and who's not. My problem is that every time they do the security checks on me, they try to communicate by their tone of speech or their expression that they're superior to me, and that I cannot accept. I never project to them that I am the underdog."

How do you do it?

"I'm sure of myself. I know who I am and I know that they're basically just trying to do their job. My responsibility is to direct their condescending attitude to a better place. The best way is just to tell myself that I'm the professional, not them. I look at them as an equal."

Hussein's rhetorical skills have already earned him a reputation in the United States. He has given over 200 lectures, most through the Abraham Fund together with his friend from Brandeis, Bavly – a 30-year-old who grew up in Herzliya Pituach and served as an officer in the Israel Defense Forces and recently completed law school at Suffolk University in Boston.

"We always say that there's no one to talk to on the other side. Well, here's a person who not only is willing to talk, he also wants to talk. And most important, is interested in listening," says Bavly. "This listening derives in part from an amazing motivation to learn about everything that is happening around him, and in part from the great pleasure he gets from all this information that he devours. His commitment to coexistence is not something he chose out of thin air. It's not like he said to himself – I could be a soccer player, an architect, a lawyer or someone who makes peace. He lives it in the most natural way. It's an inborn talent."

Do you envision him as a future politician?

Bavly: "Forsan appreciates the possibilities that come with being a political figure. In the end, the power to change policy rests with the one in authority, with the elected public official. But he isn't coming to this conflict from a position of power, he's coming to it as a citizen of the State of Israel who wants a better life for himself and for the society he lives in."

### **Concepts of leadership**

"If he comes back here, he'll find his way to the highest levels, I have no doubt about it," says Dr. As'ad Ghanem, a professor of political science at the University of Haifa, who assisted Hussein with several academic papers. "I'm encouraging him to go on for his doctorate and then come back here to serve as a reinforcement to those Arab intellectuals that have already achieved positions of influence. However, there's a difference between him and the Arab intellectuals in Israel in the sense that he hasn't been spoiled yet. They have already found their way into the existing power and social structure. Their efforts are aimed at preserving the system and he still has that spark in his eye of someone who wants to change things. I hope the fact that he became an adult in an outside society will ensure some kind of stability in terms of his

unwillingness to accept certain social phenomena in our society, unlike our leaders."

Ghanem's hope is echoed by Hussein. "Let's put our cards on the table. Our leadership is lousy," he says. "The most important thing for the Arab politicians in Israel is the agenda of the Palestinians in the territories. I have great respect and love for the Palestinians in the territories, they are part of my people, but today we are two different blocs and this has to be understood – one nation, two blocs. We share a past, but we live in two different realities and will never have the same future. I want a leadership that represents me, that is concerned with my problems and tries to make my life better. I don't want a militant leadership, but one that understands the real power of the minority. A leadership that knows how to get along within the system, and which can unite the Arabs in Israel, a leadership that will internalize the value of reciprocity. Instead, our political representatives are divided into so many subgroups: Azmi Bishara's league, the communists, the Islamic Movement and those that don't belong anywhere."

What would a politician like Bishara say about you?

Hussein: "He'd say that I'm not nationalistic enough, that I'm not concerned enough with the homeland. My stay in the U.S. has made me a less romantic person, not in terms of love – I'm less romantic when it comes to slogans. I'm much more rational. I don't let myself get carried away by all those big words. I want to think about them more. We have to redefine concepts like nationalism. Who is a nationalist – someone who takes a Palestinian flag and marches in the streets of Tel Aviv shouting, 'Death to the Jews'? If so, then I'd rather not be a nationalist at all than wrap myself in this mantle and cause the death of innocent people. Nationalism can go screw itself if even 1,000 people have to die for Palestine to be liberated. What is this land worth to us if, in the end, we bury so many bodies in it? The value of life is the most sacred thing that God gave us, and I'm not a religious person."

How do you deal with militant Jews that you meet, or with Palestinians?

"In the course of my lectures, I've met Palestinians as well as very right-wing Jews. It's not easy to deal with either of them, but I must admit that I've received harsher threats from the Arab side. A few months ago, at the end of a lecture at the University of North Carolina, a Palestinian-American in the audience stood up and said: 'I think that a person like you who defines himself as a Muslim and an Israeli should be shot and killed.' Some Muslims who were sitting in the back of the hall stood up and applauded. I took a deep breath, looked straight at him, and said: 'I believe that one can live or die for the sake of a [lofty] purpose, and I choose to live. But if, within this process, death is a possibility, then I won't be the first to die and I surely won't be the last.'"

## Business and tennis

Life in three different worlds – American, Jewish-Israeli and Arab – is not always a summer camp. "I have Jewish friends who come home with me and kiss my mother. My best Arab friends wouldn't ever dare to touch her. When I go out with an Israeli or an American friend to a club or a lounge, I really enjoy it because I blend right in. The Arab world is a totally different world. But one of the things that keeps me sane is that I never forget where I came from.

"On the other hand, I feel like the people in the village, and even my family who raised me, don't really understand me anymore. Don't get the wrong idea: The people here are proud of me and they let me know it. They also want to know what's going on with me there, but from their questions, I can see that they will never be able to relate to my life there. It's always, 'How's it going?' 'How's America?' And 'When are you finishing your studies?' – even during the three years when I wasn't studying. They always ask me, 'When are you coming back?' and then they say, 'If I were you, I wouldn't come back. Things are a mess here.' But a few seconds later, they say, 'There's no place like home.' Very often they'll ask: 'When are you going to marry someone from here already and take her with you to America?' – as if she's just like a couple of tomatoes that you stuff in a bag."

For the past year and a half, he has been dating Alesa, a Jewish actress from New York. Three weeks ago, Alesa arrived for a 10-day visit in Israel. "She had a very good time here, but one of the things that is hardest for me is that I still haven't found the magic formula for how to connect the three worlds that I live in. Mahatma Gandhi said that the happiest man is the one who never left the village. For me, that idea is bittersweet, because leaving the village was one of the biggest blessings that God gave me, but it was also a curse."

Like every Israeli who spends an extended amount of time in a foreign country, Hussein expects the return to Israel to be very difficult, but he wouldn't consider anything else.

"In a lot of ways, returning to Israel will definitely be a huge sacrifice for me," he says. "My life there is amazing and exciting. But it's all studying and preparation for what I want to do in the future."

And that is?

"When I finish the current degree, I plan to get an MBA from Harvard, Stanford or Columbia. After that, I'd like to start businesses that would connect Israel with the Arab world, including Palestine, of course. With the money I'll make and the partnerships I'll create, I'd like to establish public institutions, like schools that would foster a new leadership among the Arab youth. I want to teach them Excel,

to prepare them professionally and academically, to expose them to the scholarships available in the world. I want to bring tennis to the Arab sector. Overall, my goal is to work to improve the situation of the Arabs in Israel, the Palestinians in the territories and all the other citizens in the state. But you know what? If I'm fortunate enough in business to be able to employ poor and unemployed people, than I'll have done my share."

So you're headed for business, not politics?

"I've learned that money buys political influence and therefore my order of priorities is like I've said, but once I've met all the other goals, that will be the goal."