

## Interview with Ms. Ola Awad\*

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*Ms. Ola Awad*

Ms. Ola Awad is the current President of the IAOS. As President of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) she is also responsible for all official statistics in Palestine – the first female in that position. She has had a distinguished career. She holds degrees from the Birzeit University as well as Boston University.

In the interview, Ms. Awad talks about her strategic plans for the IAOS. The plans build on four objectives: *relevancy* in terms of activities and publications in official statistics; *visibility* at the regional and international level, *partnerships* with key regional and international

organizations and *institutionalization* of the activities within the association.

Ms. Awad also talks about PCBS, the work that goes on there and the unique challenges of collecting, producing and disseminating data under very unique circumstances. She shares the PCBS approach to gaining public trust and cooperation, and she reflects on the meaning of being part of the global community of official statistics.

*Thank you for doing this interview. First of all, congratulations. You began your two-year term as the president of the International Association for Official Statistics (IAOS) last summer (July 2015). We would like to start by asking you some questions about the association. It was established in 1985 with an aim to promote the understanding and advancement of official statistics. It has been in existence for 30 years. In your opinion, has the organization met its goal? What are some of the challenges you foresee for the association in the future? Also, in your speech to the general assembly at the 2015 International Statistical Institute (ISI) meetings in Rio de Janeiro you presented your strategy for 2015–2017 and stated that you want to guide the development of IAOS services and functions to meet the growing challenges facing official statistics. The strategy focuses on visibility, relevancy, partnership and institutionalization. Could you tell us a little more about your strategy and your vision for its implementation?*

I am very honored to serve as the president of this association. I have been a member of the ISI for a long time before I became a member of the IAOS. Once I became a member, I got more familiar with the work that goes on inside the association. Being a president-

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\*The views and opinions expressed in the interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics nor IOS Press.

elect for the past two years also gave me the opportunity to be much closer to the association and get more familiar with its policies and its work.

The IAOS is well known within the international statistical community. The question is how to maintain that and build on what has been achieved. What are the areas that require more efforts from us to further develop and meet expectations? What are the challenges ahead that we must anticipate and get prepared for? And of course, how do we seize the different changes and developments happening around us to better serve the association?

Our strategy for the association for 2015–2017 will be to focus on globalization, on the people, the members of the association and on our peer associations. I will explain.

Our strategy aims to provide answers to simple yet challenging questions related to the role of the IAOS in the global statistical community. The focus is now on globalization in the exchange of official statistics. When we talk about official statistics, globalization has become challenging such as the challenges with Big Data. Everything is moving at a very rapid pace.

So this is how we are thinking, how we can add more value to this association to cope with the globalization of our work, the development of official statistics worldwide. We will seek regional and international partnerships to strengthen technical cooperation in the field of official statistics while maintaining the user perspective.

We will do more. The IAOS strongly believes in respect. “Great ideas come from anywhere”. Accordingly, regional cooperation and exchange of know-how crosses boundaries and has no limitations. We also believe in the importance of promoting professional and statistical ethics as issued by the ISI.

We also want to focus more on how we can implement the fundamental principles of official statistics. The UN Assembly approved these principles not long ago. For us, really, this is a great opportunity. The IAOS strongly believes in the importance of adopting these principles and promoting them worldwide. The question becomes, “What is the best way of doing that?”

It is our goal to transform the IAOS to a more relevant entity in the international statistical community. We have assessed our strength and weaknesses as an organization. This has helped us identify strategic directions for the next few years.

The strategy resides on objectives that focus on people – the members, scattered around the globe. We

want to have relevancy. We want to ensure that IAOS remains attractive to its members, and to other peer organizations. We want to have visibility in various statistical events to maintain an appropriate role in global statistical directions. We want to encourage partnership with peer organizations to better serve the global statistical community.

This is our main focus for the next two years. We will work with our membership to find out what they expect from the association and how best to serve them. We want to increase IAOS visibility at the regional and international level, relevancy in terms of activities and publications in official statistics, partnership within IAOS and between the other peer organizations and also meet the challenges of globalization of the statistical communities. We have to exchange information and be able to work in parallel with our official statistics colleagues worldwide.

*You come to the IAOS presidency with very strong credentials. Let us now talk about the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). You are the president of PCBS. When was PCBS established; what is the history of the Bureau; how is it organized; and what are its main tasks?*

It was established in late 1993. It was a small office in Jerusalem. It is the official provider of Palestine statistics. It seeks to provide recent and precise data that cover statistical indicators. We started the work in phases. The first phase was focused on the production of statistics, because previously the occupation had provided the statistics. Now the focus was not on providing the statistics for the sake of statistics, but to provide services to the people in Palestine. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics aims to develop and enhance the Palestinian official statistical system based on legal grounds that organize the process of data collection and utilization for statistical purposes.

It took some time to prove that we are playing a role in Palestine.

In 1997, we conducted the first Palestinian census. The first population, housing and establishment census. The goal was to build a comprehensive information system that represents a true picture of the Palestinian political, economical, social and land situation.

Next, we started focusing on dissemination of the statistics. In 2000, we developed a new strategy focusing more on stakeholders and on how to involve the stakeholders.

In 2007, we conducted the second census. Again it was a population, housing and establishment census.

At this time, our strategy also included the quality of the statistics.

Data quality continues to be a large part of our work, as we continue to add activities. In 2009, we started building a national statistical monitoring system for Palestine. It is our goal to build an administrative record system and central registers to meet the administrative and statistical needs of the Palestinian society.

Since 2009, there has been a lot of collaboration with statistical areas within different ministries in Palestine. PCBS tends to establish administrative records in different Palestinian Ministries to ease its work. For example, in 2011, we joined the data systems of Education and Health. All this would not have been possible without the collaboration and the cooperation of our stakeholders.

In the past, PCBS used to conduct many surveys, but due to the limitations of financial resources, we turned to depending more on the administrative records.

We conducted an agricultural census for the first time with close collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture. Also, now when we talk about the difference between education and higher education and health, for example, the information comes from the Survey of Health and Education.

We are moving in the right direction when it comes to developing the national statistical monitoring system. We have developed many indicators based on input from our stakeholders. We update the information on a regular basis. We have more than 600 indicators pertaining to population and social statistics, geographic and environmental statistics, and the economy.

This system aims to provide an updated detailed and comprehensive database on targeted topics based on coordination, cooperation and open dialogue with line ministries and other national partners to meet their needs and priorities in regard to statistical data flows and deriving indicators that enables monitoring progress made in national strategic plans.

*What are some of the challenges facing the PCBS?*

PCBS has many challenges on the ground, in the field. We are working under special circumstances. We are keen on complying with international standards, for example. But the standards do not take into account working in conflict situations or under very unique circumstances. The political situation in Palestine is a challenge. It is not easy to produce official statistics that meets international standards in a country under occupation.

*Will you conduct a census in 2017?*

Yes, we are preparing for our third census. It will be in 2017. As I told you, it is not an easy task to conduct a census here. You have to arrange for so many different scenarios. You have to study different methods and prepare very hard to be able to complete the task in a good manner.

*The challenges on the ground, in the field. Tell us more about them. How do you prepare to deal with the unknown?*

For example, we have the Apartheid Wall. We are unable to move the enumerators inside and outside the wall. We therefore recruit enumerators from within the community. That is how we overcome that challenge.

We use the handheld personal data devices to collect data. The Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). This strategy is implemented not just because we want to bring Information Technology (IT) to the field, having it on the ground, but because it is a necessity, a way to cope with all the challenges. In one community, for example, we were unable to use a paper questionnaire. A handheld device, a tablet is much easier to use. You have the questionnaire on the device and you can do the data collection that way.

This is how we work. We have so many scenarios. Each scenario has different plans, plan A, plan B, etc. Every single time, we plan many scenarios and develop many different plans for every single program. We need to do that to be ready for what can happen on the ground. You have to be well prepared.

For us to be successful, we must work with our partners and stakeholders. We do not go into alone. We work jointly with our peer organizations and we establish many committees. They are established for a specific project or a survey. We plan with them, and we implement the entire project with them, from A through Z. We try to get the stakeholders involved in implementing their surveys. It requires trust on both sides. We listen to their needs.

Another issue that is important in Palestine, something that helps us overcome many challenges, is to bring a specific statistics to the attention of the community, the society, to the people on a specific day. We have a statistical calendar. We, here at PCBS, link our work to national and international events. We note it on our calendars; link it to all our schedules. We put it on the release schedule for our statistics.

For example, on the occasion of May Day, the International Workers or Labor Day, we have a press release, focusing on everything related to labor and the

labor force. On the World Tourism Day in September, we talk about visits to tourist sites, where the tourists come from, how many guests are staying in hotels, how many hotel nights, etc. There might be days where we can release information about our children or on our elderly. There might be an international population day that allows us to focus on population statistics. This brings out interest in the data.

Trust in PCBS helps with co-operations from the respondents. Take an example from the agricultural sector. In Palestine, the olive season is a big deal. It is an important season. It starts on October 15 and lasts one month. What we do is to go out to the community. We, the agency, the staff, do volunteer work. We collect olives with the people.

The importance of the olive season and the statistics surrounding the olive operation cannot be overstated. We collect data on olives. Olive production is a major part of our agriculture and our statistical reporting on that crop is important. The people in the communities are anticipating the results and they discuss it with us. They are very cooperative and willing to provide the information. Volunteer work collecting olives is one way to establish trust. We do not just provide numbers. We show that we are part of society. We are part of the process when we volunteer to collect olives.

*Your example is a wonderful illustration of what it means to make statistics relevant and personal. Visibility, relevancy and partnerships – it works for the IAOS and for the PCBS!*

*What is high on your wish list for PCBS?*

The list is long. There are so many wishes. Developing the National Statistical System is really high on our list; we also have the upcoming census of population, housing and establishment high on our list; the continuing efforts to empower our stakeholders are very important; helping politicians understand our data and using them in their strategic plans; we would also like to empower our employees; the globalization of official statistics is also on the list. Really, the list is long.

A focus on the global level is also on the list. I just talked to my staff and I said that we are living in the world of globalization. We do not work anymore just thinking about a few concerns. The concerns are now at the global level. This is how you want to develop and empower official statistics.

And the list is diverse. Palestine is a young population – a youth society. More than 70 percent of our population is less than 30 years old. It is a young society. This translates into potential. Potential for the country.

But it is of course also a challenge. The question for the list becomes: How do you fill the needs of such a young population? What kind of statistical indicators do we need to know about their needs?

These are some of the important points that I wanted to bring up. I warned you the list is long.

*I would like to ask you some personal questions about you and your career path. You have been at PCBS since 2000 taking on increasingly demanding positions culminating in the leadership position in 2010. What were some of your assignments leading up to this position?*

Yes, I have been at PCBS since 2000. I started working in the Aids Management Department, then I went to International Relations, and then on to Planning. I served as the Director of Aids Management (2000–2003), Director General for International Relations (2003–2005), Director General of President's Office (2005–2008), then the Assistant to President for Planning and International Relations (2008–2009) and then, finally, before becoming the President at the beginning of 2011, I served as the Acting President for two years.

These experiences have served me well. I started out as a regular employee and moved up through the ranks. I developed my skills more and more. I got more confident. I must tell you something. I never thought I would be the head of a statistical organization.

Likewise, I never thought I would lead official statisticians. But really, I like it. Exchanging experiences worldwide, working at the international level, attending international conferences, being an active member of the ISI and the IAOS, learning more statistics and official statistics, it is all so rewarding.

My background is actually in Economics. I went to Boston University to get my MBA. I took applied statistics. I had experience before working with statistics. To study it and also practice it – that is a very fruitful experience.

*Something caught my interest on your resume. From 1995–1999, you were project coordinator with Pharmacists without Borders? Tell us about this organization and the projects you coordinated.*

In my second year of my undergraduate degree, when as I said I was studying Economics, I applied to work as a student, part-time, for a non-governmental organization (NGO) called *Pharmaciens sans Frontiers*, or *Pharmacists without Borders*. I was working on developing aid and emergency programs. At that

time, 1995, which was after the First Intifada, Pharmacists without Borders worked with the Emergency and Humanitarian Health Program.

It was a unique experience for me as a young student. It allowed me to develop so many skills. Among others, I developed my French language. I learned English. I practiced my writing skills. I learned how to conduct evaluations. I was a student at that time. I was thirsty for learning. It was a big jump for me. Running emergency programs, managing programs, doing evaluations of the programs.

I continued to work for the program after I finished my undergraduate degree. I was ready to join the labor force. But I decided I had to continue my studies. I enrolled in Boston University and earned an MBA. The experience with *Pharmacists sans Frontiers* had a big impact on my life.

*It seems that your career has been one of continuous growth, one experience building upon the next.*

Yes, I have continued to learn. I have been leading this institution since 2009 and now I am also the President of the IAOS. But, every day I am learning and seeing something new. Every single day. This is what I enjoy and this is why I enjoy working on statistics. I enjoy being involved with official statistics. There are always new issues, always a way to learn and grow.

Being involved with statistics at the international level is another learning experience. I tell this to the staff here at PCBS. Getting PCBS known in the region and even now worldwide is a challenge, and overcoming the challenges you are facing, learning the best practices and being part of the global world is what you should strive to achieve. Do not limit your way of thinking. Be open. That makes your work much easier.

*We could not agree with you more. Every time we do an interview, we learn something about another country and we find out how statistics is practiced throughout the world. Today, you have taught us something about Palestine and the way you do your work at PCBS.*

*Before you came to the United States to study, had you seen much of the world outside Palestine? Had you had the opportunity to travel abroad?*

I was actually part of a folk dance group both before and during my university days and I used to travel with my folk dance group to many different places. At the Birzeit University, we had cultural exchanges with other groups in other universities. I went to Egypt, to Cairo University. So I had had some travel experience before I went to the States.

Living in Boston was of course very different for me. I focused very hard on my studies. I was on a mission. It was my responsibility to do well, to adapt to the new world, even to the cold weather (!), to everything new. I loved my new life and I still love going back to visit there. It is such a nice place; the communities there are so unique. Studying abroad is a good experience. I was very lucky.

But I should add, that even being a student in Palestine, in a local university, being active in your own community, being involved in the social, cultural and national events there was also a unique experience. Studying was part of it, but it was not everything.

*Did you find a difference in the way American and Palestinian students are taught statistics?*

In Palestine, it is more theoretical than applied. When I went to Boston, it was more applied than theoretical. It took me a little while to adjust myself to think differently.

*Are women finding a place in statistics in your country? Is it a field that attracts female students?*

In the general population, women may not have found a place, but in the field of statistics, they have. We have between 30,000 and 40,000 graduates from our local universities. More than 60 percent of these graduates are actually females. When you talk about statistics in my country and perhaps even worldwide, statistics does not seem to be a career choice. But this is changing. For the younger generations and for young females, in Palestine, this is changing.

Here, at PCBS, about 35 percent of the staff, the permanent workforce, is female. Among the enumerators in the field, the percentage is more than 70. As is the case in other countries, female enumerators are more accepted than male enumerators by the respondents.

Women are making great strides as heading up divisions and departments!

*You obviously have a very busy schedule. You are talking to us early on a Sunday morning. You must be faced with major time pressures. How do you manage everything? Do you ever find time to pursue other interests?*

I am doing my best to manage my time. On my wish list is more time for a social life. It is very limited at this time. But with the support I have, from my family, from the employees, I can cope with the pressure. You cannot underestimate the support of your family. It is a key issue. It would be very hectic without their help.

Also, you cannot underestimate the importance of the work environment. If you have supportive colleagues, you have a lot of help. Without their support, I could not succeed. I could not succeed as a woman, as a mother, as a wife. I could not succeed in this position.

*We have come to the conclusion of our interview. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share with the readers of our journal.*

Working in the field of statistics has become my passion. It is something I love to do. Being under occupation, and in conflict, causes you to have so many limitations. But working on the global level, you experience more openness, more thoughtfulness, more cheerfulness. And it gives you more insight. It gives you cause for appreciation. I think, the PBCS, although it was established really not that long ago, compared to other NSOs in the world, it grew up fast with so much support, which I really appreciate. You can look at the world differently, move forward. With the globalization, work became different and you look differently at all aspects of your work, not only at statistics.

Another statement I would like to make goes out to my colleagues. We are working as one team. Working very hard. Especially, we have big challenges in Palestine, producing official statistics under very difficult circumstances, under conflict. The international standards do not cover our situation. You have to think, you have to work it, you have to have it. You cannot produce official statistics without standards. It would not happen without the steady input, the high energy, and the commitment from my colleagues. I give them all the credit. Without them it would not work. We are together every single day, we learn together every single day. I want to take this opportunity to thank them very much for their hard work.

To the IAOS, I want to say, I am honored, very honored, to be part of this incredible international association. It is important for people all over the world. We hope that working together, we will be able to achieve great things as an association. It is a great challenge

*We too appreciate the opportunity to be able to think about the world from different perspectives. Thank you for talking to us.*

The telephone interview with Ms. Awad was conducted on September 20, 2015 by Kirsten West and Katherine Condon.

Kirsten West (now retired) worked as a demographer at the U.S. Census Bureau. Her area of expertise was population estimation and census coverage measurement. She has worked on the 1990 Post-Enumeration Survey, the 1991 Evaluation Survey, the 1991 Evaluation Survey, and the 2000 and 2010 Demographic Analysis operation. She holds a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Katherine Condon is a demographer/sociologist at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Office of Policy & Strategy. She holds a PhD from Florida International University (Miami, FL) in Sociology and Anthropology and has a Masters (and is ABD) from University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA) in Demography. Prior to joining USCIS, she worked at the U.S. Census Bureau in the Population Division's Population Estimates and Projection Area's Administrative Records and Methodological Research Branch, as well as in the Decennial Programs Area.