

When he was 10, he and his family were forced to flee their home in Jaffa and became refugees in the southern Lebanese village of Ghazieh. That was the event that changed Talal Abu Ghazaleh's way of thinking forever. He still remembers the agony of walking four hours a day, back and forth from his home in the diaspora to the nearest school in Sidon, regardless of freezing cold or boiling heat.

"I felt the pain of being a refugee during those walks," he recalls. "The pain could have been transformed into a grudge, but I decided to convert it into a useful energy, to a productive energy. I told myself that maybe this (fleeing home and become a refugee) happened to give me an opportunity," he told *Weekend Review* in an interview during his recent visit to Dubai to take part in an educational conference. He was right. And he took full advantage of the opportunity and succeeded.

Abu Ghazaleh, who later was qualified for a full scholarship to pursue his higher education at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the late 1950s, today owns scores of companies with offices in 80 countries. The first two were established in 1973; Abu Ghazaleh Company (Tagco) for accounting, and Abu Ghazaleh Intellectual Property (Agip). The third, specialising in consulting, was set up shortly afterwards. Twenty-five more companies followed.

"I decided [while in his teens] that my response to the enemy [Israel] should be through winning it over in a civilised manner," he said. "I decided I will take revenge by being better than him. I can say with pride that my companies are the product of a person of Palestinian origin. They [Israelis] can't claim that it [Palestine] was a land without people to people without land [Israelis]," he said in reference to a phrase used by Israel for Palestine.

Because of his status and in his personal capacity, Abu Ghazaleh reached top positions in several specialised groups and UN teams focusing on the areas of expertise he works in. He still remembers how he was elected to co-chair of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force (UN ICT TF) only two months after the 9/11 attacks, which were carried by 19 people – 15 of them Saudis.

After the attacks, many Arabs and Muslims were harassed just because of their names, origin and backgrounds. He was invited in his personal capacity as one of eight prominent figures in the world in the field of information technology, along with scores of officials and experts representing many countries.

"After I was elected a co-chair, I asked to speak and said thank you all for your confidence in me and for electing me despite the fact that you all know I am a Palestinian, an Arab, a Muslim, a Jordanian ... I can't thank you enough," he said.

Silence prevailed in the hall and was only broken a few minutes later by the clapping of the US representative, David Gross. Others followed him in applauding Abu Ghazaleh.

Asked whether he feels he has been subjected to Israeli pressures throughout his career, he said, "No, I held positions that they can't put pressure on because they are not political positions. I had never accepted a political position in my life and I believe each person should focus on his or her speciality," he said.

"Speciality leads to excellence. When each one of us works in his speciality, and does not wear so many hats at the same time, not being a minister, and a journalist, a lawyer and a head of a political party and a poet, [we succeed]."

Born in Jaffa on April 22, 1938, Abu Ghazaleh comes from a wealthy family. His father, Tawfiq, who he said has lived for 107 years, was in trade and business. He was the dealer for many oil companies, such as Shell and Mobil, in Palestine. Tawfiq was the first to run an ice factory then, his son said. One of Abu Ghazaleh's elder brothers owned the first public transport company, running buses between Jaffa and occupied Jerusalem.

"I still remember that he (father) asked me to stay away from three things: politics, gambling and lying, and said I could do everything else."

"What to do then?" Abu Ghazaleh asked. "Trade", the father answered.

Until today, Abu Ghazaleh prefers to stay away from politics. And because of religious reasons, he doesn't gamble. As for lying, he asked his father about the reasons. "Because it will stop you from doing anything wrong. You will speak the truth always because you don't want to lie," the father responded.

Years passed before Abu Ghazaleh realised how he acts like his father in certain times.

Long ago, before the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Abu Ghazaleh recalls his father was sitting in the café – which was not only



Abdel-Krim Kallouche/Gulf News

Forever learning Talal Abu Ghazaleh says he reached many high positions because he proved he can learn, study and give opinions

From refugee to achiever

Palestinian Talal Abu Ghazaleh credits life's lessons and his enemies for the business empire he built

a place to socialise but also to do business during those days – when somebody came running to alert him of a fire in his oil warehouse. "Was anybody hurt?" was the immediate reaction. And when the answer was no, he replied, "Be careful so nobody gets hurt. Money can be compensated, but the human soul can't be replaced."

Years later, a fire broke out in one of Abu Ghazaleh's offices in Saudi Arabia. "Was anybody hurt?" was his first reaction. "Then I remembered my father and smiled."

It was not only the father who taught the son, but life itself. "Whoever wants to be something in the world should remain a student. I am a student today, the same way I was yesterday. I keep learning from everything I see and hear everyday, and every person I meet," he said.

Moreover, "whoever wants to succeed needs to know that there are enemies waiting for him. (And) I love my enemies. [Enemies] get the best out of you and they stop you from making any mistake As long as my enemy is telling me 'watch out, I am waiting for you to make a mistake,' I can't go wrong."

Abu Ghazaleh's enemies, he said, had

helped him to excel in his work, and for this, he is "grateful".

Back in early Seventies, when Abu Ghazaleh established his accounting firm, he still remembers the "fierce war launched against him by the giant firms, because a new entity was established and it was not western at a time when only western firms dominated the field".

"My enemies in 1972 are my colleagues now. They didn't want me to be with them then, but now they have accepted me and this is a feature we have to admit of the Westerners; they accept the strong, though they try to stop you from being strong at the beginning. I am not talking politics here."

He feels proud that he is persistent in his inquiries and positions he takes. "I have reached many high positions because I proved I can learn, study, conclude and give my opinion."

He spoke of his meeting with Nelson Rockefeller, the American businessman, philanthropist and politician who served as 41st vice president of the United States under president Gerald Ford, and as the 49th governor of New York.

During the meeting which occurred hours before Rockefeller's death on Jan-

uary 26, 1979, the New York governor taught Abu Ghazaleh a lesson by giving him the example of the elephant and the mosquito, which came up during conversation. "Victory is not to crush your enemy but to win a moral war with them while you are the weaker part. Never underestimate the power of the weak," Abu Ghazaleh said of what he learnt from the conversation.

Another example of his "continuous learning" occurred when he attended a meeting in San Francisco in 1962 and heard for the first time in his life the phrase "intellectual property". It got his attention and admiration. He started an awareness campaign in the Arab countries explaining the principle.

"I can't forget a nice incident happened to me in Bahrain. I was visiting Manama and my friend, the then chair of the Kuwaiti Chamber of Commerce, Abdel Aziz Saqr sent me to see his friend, the Bahraini chair of the Chamber of Commerce, Ali Fakhrou. He sent him a letter recommending that he meet me. We sat together and talked. Twenty-five years later during a ceremony felicitating him, he said a friend recommended him to meet a young man whose name was Talal Abu Ghazaleh. 'I was optimistic, but when this young man started talking about intellectual property, I told myself, this man has lost his mind, he is talking of owning minds. How do you own others' minds? Today, this young man [has proven] he was right and we were wrong'."

After establishing his empire, Abu Ghazaleh says his role "is to offer the vision and what we should do to serve this [Arab] nation". His latest project, International Digital University, was derived from watching little children, including his nearly 3-year-old granddaughter, searching on the iPad – he has four children and nine grandchildren.

"These children, born in the digital age, have the nationality of knowledge students. When they go to schools and universities, they get a shock by dealing with the people and instruments that have nothing to do with their knowledge. The result? They quit colleges.

"Most knowledge people dropped out. Bill Gates didn't drop out because he was a failure ... he dropped out because the university couldn't teach him something he didn't already know." The technology revolution has entered several fields, including medical, where surgeries are done online, but not education.

This, he says, is going to be the focus of his work in the future.

Businesses and upcoming projects

- In the next few weeks, Talal Abu Ghazaleh is expected to release a study about those of Palestinian origin world-wide, regardless of their nationalities. "This will not be good news to the Zionist enemy because I will be talking about a people that can't be eradicated and you can't deprive them of their homeland and you can't uproot them if their number is that big."
- In the near future, he will launch his brainchild online encyclopedia: Tagipedia. It is going to be in Arabic and offers "correct geography and history".
- In 2013, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Digital University was established, and it offers classes on its "cypher cloud". So far it has established relations with 30 universities from Australia and India in the east to the UK and US in the west. He says he wants to offer education to anybody living anywhere in the world in any university he or she wishes to join.
- He says his Intellectual Property Company is the only company to run its business through information technology. "My client in Chicago doesn't need to send a letter, or an e-mail or a fax or anything. He has a password through which he opens his folder in my company. He takes any information he wants, and sends any instructions he wishes to be implemented, and any questions he has."
- All companies of Abu Ghazaleh are under the umbrella of Tag-Org (Talal Abu Ghazaleh organisation). They are in different fields, including translation and education. At present, Tagco is among the top global players in auditing, and Abu Ghazaleh's translation company is the biggest of its kind in the world.