

Sarah embraced Islam

It is common for those who feel that there is no difference between anything and the result is just the same to say: "Sarah became a Muslim; the [number of] Muslims did not increase nor did [the number of] Christians decrease".

This is our situation. It makes no difference if they open the border crossing or close it; whether the wound bleeds more or less; or whether salaries for teachers increase by one or two piasters.

What is the difference if Ramadan or Shaaban is a minister or a spokesman or remains silent?

What is the difference if the violinist in our orchestra band plays out of tune?

We are in a situation where minor improvements will not do us any good.

What really makes the difference is having a maestro with whom we can play one tune, that of liberation and without dissonance.

Is the tawjihi testing our ability to accept change?

Abdel Baset Khalaf

The Cabinet's decision to change the system of the tawjihi examinations [General Secondary School Certificate] ignited an uproar which has echoed along the corridors of the Ministerial Council, the halls and lobbies of the Ministry of Education and schools, and with teachers and students to reach every house. The Ministry of Education in Gaza also joined in the debate because they had not been consulted. A press conference held by the Minister of Education failed to allay people's concerns.

Al-Hal addresses the aftershocks of the decision and presents an overview of opinions and positions that address the core issues of the debate.

Two Exams

Education Minister Dr. Sabri Saidam told Al-Hal: "Our problem with the tawjihi is that it tests the mental capacities of the student in a written exam, and assesses the ability to regurgitate memorized information under difficult conditions physically and mentally, but it does not examine the individual's skills. The new system will examine personal aspects such as the ability to work in a team, to take initiative, to manage time, to be creative, to be goal-oriented, and leadership skills. It will test the student personally before focusing on the written exam, combining an assessment of the student's personality with the traditional examination. The new system will be based on an assessment of the accumulative 'achievements' of the student in different projects and will consist of compulsory and elective courses. The Ministry benefitted from international experience in this regard, especially from Britain and America, and combined this with the traditional school system."

Amendment

Al-Hal asked the Minister about his previous statements (that the tawjihi is a dinosaur that should become extinct, and that the public want it to be replaced) and how relevant these statements are to the amendments introduced. He replied: "I believe that the amendments will be even better than I sought before taking office. I called for an end to the enormous psychological pressure put on students and the intrusion into people's privacy by announcing student grades publicly, turning an official process into a show in which students are categorized socially and by class on the basis of the tawjihi results. This year, the results may not be published but will be sent personally or declared by seat number."

Deficiencies

According to the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Hassan Abdel Karim, the tawjihi has many deficiencies because it focuses on questions that require a low level of intellectual ability and tests the



outcome of knowledge rather than the intellectual abilities themselves. It also reflects the information covered by the student in the last year of school and not the cognitive and skills accumulated during 12 years of schooling.

He added: "Despite the negative aspects of the tawjihi, it is considered to be a relatively fair and credible tool with clearly applied rules. It is an acceptable indicator adopted by Palestinian and international universities. Several studies indicate a positive correlation between the exam and future university achievement."

Abdel Karim believes that the current alternative lacks "clear features" and is not the result of genuine research. It is not expected to solve the deficiencies of the current exam system, will not be accepted by the public, and will probably be rejected.

Conditions

Rifat al-Sabah, Director of the Teacher Creativity Center (Ibda), confirmed that there is consensus about the poor performance of the current tawjihi and the need to replace it, but this is not an easy step. It must be preceded by a change in community values and instilling confidence among students and teachers. How can creativity emerge in the shadow of fear?

He stated: "The announcements so far do not constitute an integrated proposal that can be evaluated critically. They are ideas discussed and approved by the Cabinet, but not in the context of a clear plan. These are not the same ideas planned earlier for an integrated process that starts from tenth grade and is accompanied

by options for students of vocational or scientific streams, with the advantage of moving between these tracks."

"Disease"

The founder of the Tamer Institute for Community Education, Dr. Munir Fasheh, said: "The most destructive disease for man and society lies in an assessment that does not ascertain where a person's talents lie, but rather compares people vertically to make each individual feel that he is either superior or inferior compared with another. Evaluating individuals by marks gives the impression that this is impartial."

"When 80 thousand students sat for the tawjihi examination in 2015, 50 thousand passed and the rest emerged with a public certificate declaring them to be a failure. This is a hierarchy that controls the psyche and a disease promoted by words that sound positive such as competition, intelligence and distinction."

Fasheh suggests a solution that starts in elementary school and focuses on aspects of life in the immediate environment. For example, agriculture encompasses (science, math, weather and food); culture (including languages, history - starting with the collective memory, geography, which may begin by an introduction to the location, nature and people); the moon (combines science, astronomy, nature, religion and poetry); and Jerusalem as the only city that more than half of all human beings aspire to visit. These resources utilize all the senses and aspects ignored in our schools and that are necessary to link thought with nature and life.

Argument

The debate on the tawjihi did not stop here. The Ministry of Education in the Gaza Strip announced in a statement issued on 17 January that "the proposal had been made in total independence from them, that they had no idea of its content, and it had not been discussed with stakeholders before it was submitted to the Cabinet, in spite of the importance and sensitivity of this issue in the current situation".

The statement added: "We wonder how the Ministry in the West Bank can adopt such an approach to matters related to education, which is important for all, and take decisions independently and without the Gaza Strip. Even if we had been represented, it would only be a formality to give the impression of unity in the work at the Ministry. This fosters the division and increases its negative implications on education and its outputs."

The following day, the Ministry of Education in Ramallah issued a statement asserting that education "must not be subject to political disputes and must be shielded from these differences". The Ministry indicated that "it had maintained unity since the start of the political division and had renounced animosity and division, as demonstrated by retaining the tawjihi as the sole common exam every year". In a telephone call with Al-Hal, Deputy Minister Mohammad Abu Zaid preferred not to comment on the Gaza statement and stated that the Minister would announce the details regarding changes to the tawjihi.

Why did the Doha meetings between Fatah and Hamas not succeed?

▣ **Nader Safadi**

In spite of some "positive" statements made by a number of Fatah and Hamas leaders about the results of the meetings held in Doha, pessimism and mistrust still hang over Palestinian internal politics, especially after a vague statement was issued that indicated that the two movements had not reached an agreement.

The leaders of both movements have so far avoided talking about the details of the meetings. Some statements call for "no rush in making judgments", which is interpreted by analysts and observers as an obvious indication of failure of the meetings, but both movements are afraid to announce it to the media.

Unresolved issues

The secretary of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, Amin Maqboul, was not optimistic about the outcome of the Doha meetings and stressed that "it is not possible to talk of any progress in those meetings so far. Issues remain unresolved and things look vague".

Maqboul told Al-Hal: "Although we cannot judge the outcome of the Fatah and Hamas meetings in Doha, we can draw conclusions based on the lack of any announcement up to now of the results of the meetings, which remain locked in secrecy and confidentiality by those who participated in them". He explained that no progress had been achieved in the meetings so far, but future sessions could determine the state of the reconciliation between the two movements. Related issues include the formation of a government of national consensus and a date scheduled for convening the meeting of the provisional leadership framework of the PLO.

Maqboul's remarks were not like the optimistic statements of Azzam al-Ahmad, member of the Fatah Central Committee and a participant in the Doha meetings, who said: "The meetings have been conducted in very positive and encouraging atmosphere".

Following his meeting a week ago with Khaled Meshaal in Doha, Maqboul told Al-Hal: "We mainly discussed the formation of a national consensus government in which

Hamas would participate, the meeting for the provisional leadership framework of the PLO, convening a session of the Palestinian National Council, and preparing for presidential and legislative elections".

He continued: "The two movements have gone a long way in their talks". He expressed the hope that the process would witness tangible steps on the ground in the next stage to reflect those understandings, and to have an impact on the population, particularly the besieged residents of the Gaza Strip.

The Hamas statements were contrary to the optimistic remarks of Azzam Al-Ahmad. Hamas spokesman, Sami Abu Zuhri told Al-Hal: "Some issues did not progress and remain unresolved; there are also obstacles that are impeding reconciliation".

He added: "Attaching high hopes and expectations to the reconciliation meeting without any results on the ground is simply selling illusions to Palestinians. What we really need now are concrete steps that lift the siege on the Gaza Strip, open border crossings, and confront the arrogance of the Israeli occupation."

Absence of political will

Al-Hal asked political analyst Akram Atallah about the real reason behind the failure of the Doha meetings between Fatah and Hamas. He responded: "The absence of a genuine political will by both movements is sufficient to undermine any meeting between them".

Atallah added: "There remains great mistrust between the two movements. The last meetings were driven by massive internal and Arab pressure without any progress worthy of mention or fulfillment of Palestinian hopes for unity in the near future".

Atallah did not hide his pessimism about any achievements on reconciliation in the current circumstances. He confirmed that tensions and the exchange of accusations persist between Fatah and Hamas via the media, which does not contribute to reconciliation.

Atallah holds both Fatah and Hamas fully responsible for halting the reconciliation. He claims that the interests of each of the movements are the main obstacle blocking the path to reconciliation, unity and the implementation of previous agreements between them".

Arab Knesset Members pay the price

Calls for the bodies of Palestinian citizens are prohibited in Knesset protocol

▣ **Azhar Oweida***

Campaigns continue against Arab Knesset Members and members of the Joint Arab List. The so-called Ethics Committee in the Knesset issued a decision to prevent these MKs from attending sessions for four months following calls by Jamal Zahalqa, Hanin Zoabi and Basil Ghattas for the release of the bodies of Palestinian martyrs held by Israel.

Al-Hal met with members from the Arab bloc and with lawyer Ayman Odeh, Chairman of the Joint Arab List, to hear about the prosecutions these MKs face.

MK Zahalqa said: "This political decision was taken amidst an atmosphere of racial and fascist incitement against us due to our call for the release of the bodies of martyrs who died in Israeli crimes".

He added: "The head of the Israeli government, Benjamin Netanyahu, started this campaign of incitement that led to the unanimous decision of the Committee for us to be banned from Knesset sessions. In spite of this, we are continuing our work and we adhere to our position on the release of the bodies. We will never ever back down, no matter how enormous the price."

Zahalqa continued: "We will start an international campaign to publicize this decision. We will also file an appeal and submit a complaint to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). We will continue to demonstrate against the decision." He pointed out that this decision followed a ban on the Islamic Movement and the enactment of a law to restrict the work of Arab human rights associations.

MK Hanin Zoabi commented: "This decision enacted by the Ethics Committee is a political decision governed by a racist majority that follows the trend of the Jewish State to tame the Palestinian leadership". She added: "The decision is part of a



Ayman Odeh



Basil Ghattas



Hanin Zoabi



Jamal Zahalqa

campaign waged by Netanyahu against Arab leadership due to his continuous failure to control Palestinians and offer his people a political breakthrough. We are witnessing an Israeli degeneration towards fascism, which is reflected in the laws enacted by the Knesset in recent times".

Zoabi believes that the prosecution of political activists, restrictions on the work of left-wing associations, the ban on the Islamist Movement and the monitoring of FaceBook are acts similar to fascist regimes. It also indicates the failure of the Zionist state to subjugate the Palestinian people and their intensification of racism and oppression as a result.

Zoabi continued: "The Zionist state will not be able to divert us from our convictions. Despite their provocations, we will render their pointless and will pursue our work to address issues raised by the public. Our campaign for the bodies of the martyrs to be released will continue and we plan to meet foreign diplomats and journalists about this issue".

Zoabi concluded: "I call upon the international community to take a clear and robust position regarding the racist policies of the Zionists".

MK Basil Ghattas told Al-Hal: "We see

our presence in the Knesset as a struggle against the practices of the Jewish state to unmask its racist practices against Arab Palestinian citizens in Israel, and to sweep away the occupation and secure freedom and independence for the Palestinian people".

He added: "We work with all our force and by all means to obtain our socio-economic rights and equality. We do this with our heads held high and with dignity in supporting our national identity and collective rights".

Ghattas continued: "We consider the decision taken to keep us away from Knesset sessions (though we maintain our full rights to vote) as a price to be paid for adherence to our principles, rights, and belonging to our people".

He added: "I repeat that the day we refrain or are reluctant to meet the families of martyrs out of fear of the fascist incitement we face, then we have accepted the rules of the game imposed by the Zionist institution. Eventually this would mean that we have lost our political, ethical and moral commitment as elected representatives of our people and as leaders".

In an interview with Al-Hal, Ayman Odeh, Chairman of the Joint Arab List from the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality,

said: "This government, led by Netanyahu, persists in its provocation against Arab citizens and their representatives in the Knesset. The recent campaign against members from the Joint Arab list waged by Netanyahu and his government is only an intensified dose of incitement".

Odeh continued: "Arab members in the Knesset represent the public who elected them and no other member of the Knesset has the right to question their legitimacy or the legitimacy of Arab citizens". He asserted: "Our position is clearly against this cycle of hatred. As we have always repeated, we oppose the killing of innocents, but you need to understand that we are an integral part of the Palestinian people and we believe in the absolute right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state and to defeat the occupation".

The price paid by Knesset Members from the National Democratic Assembly is evidence of their strong belief in belonging to the Palestinian people and to human values. They believe that the exercise of their political duties is a responsibility in the resistance of the Palestinian people.

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Born over half a century ago...

Arab Orthodox opposition regenerated



Shukri Aboudi

Mary Aboudi

The Arab Orthodox parish in the Levant, particularly in Jordan and Palestine, is the largest for Christian Arabs. In Jordan and Palestine, the Jerusalemite Church was begun by Bishop Jacob. He was the apostle and son of Joseph; he was martyred in 62 AD at the hands of the Jews and was succeeded by many bishops and patriarchs, all Arabs. Among them was the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, who was born in Damascus and who received Caliph Omar bin Khattab.

The head of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jordan and Palestine remained with native individuals until the Hellenic plot with the Ottoman Empire, when Greek figures dominated the Patriarchate and eliminated Arabs from the position. This remained the case with the advent of the British Mandate and then the Zionist occupation.

But this has not been the cause of the anger in the Orthodox parish. First of all, the Orthodox Patriarchate lacks parishes and clerics, and also lacks the most elementary rights to serve their parish. The Patriarchate has no theological school to train priests and the option of monasticism is closed to young Orthodox men in Palestine and Jordan, forcing some of them to emigrate to serve outside the Jerusalem Patriarchate in Greek, Alexandrian and Antioch Patriarchates. In addition to the spiritual problems, there is also a national element in the corrupt real estate management of the Patriarchate's property that resulted in ownership being diverted to Israeli settlers and furthering the Judaization of Jerusalem. In addition, the President of the Zionist state was welcomed at the headquarters of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

These reasons, among others, prompted Christians, especially parishioners of the Orthodox Church, to take to the streets in anger against the Patriarch in 2007, under the slogan that he was "unworthy" of the job. King Abdallah of Jordan withdrew his recognition of Patriarch Theophilos for two months, but it has continued until the present day.

In an interview with Al-Hal, an activist in Arab Orthodox Youth, Salameh Shahin, confirmed that the matter of monk Arkadius should not have been the basis for opposition to



Salameh Shahin

Patriarch Theophilos. He said: "Opposition stemmed from an accumulation of acts undertaken [by the Patriarch] from the first day that he confiscated the Patriarchal Chair, from which he is implementing an external agenda that is not at all in the interests of the Church".

Salameh stressed that their "unworthy" campaign targets Patriarch Theophilos in every location that he attends. This was why Arab Orthodox Youth went to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve this year. They asked the Bethlehem Governor for permission to protest against the Patriarch, but their request was denied, despite it being a peaceful protest. This coincided with the expulsion of monk Arkadius, making the protest appear particularly effective and compelling in Bethlehem and Sahour where people were well connected to monk Arkadius. This incident was just one of a series of policies and acts carried out by Theophilos, who behaves as if the Patriarchy's property is his own, which is totally opposed to the teachings of Christianity.

Qanawati: The Patriarch is biased

Journalist George Qanawati said: "We as Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. Thus, anything that harms the Palestinian cause directly harms us. I believe that the opposition to the Patriarch is due to his obvious bias towards the Israeli occupation at the expense of the Palestinian people, many of whom he represents. Thus, any opposition to the interests of the Palestinian people, specifically the Eastern Christians, leads to considerable controversy".

Qanawati added: "One of the reasons for opposition to Patriarch Theophilos is that he failed to adopt strong and overt solidarity with the Palestinian people, as may be expected from a Patriarchy the size of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, which represents Palestinian Christians. There is distance between the Orthodox parish and its head for reasons such as the favoritism or exclusion of certain individuals, including refusing to express opposition to Naddaf, who recruited Christians to fight with the Israeli occupation forces. The head of the Eastern Patriarchy should be Eastern, from near to the parish, and should be well aware of their interests. He should not deal with the occupation as a



George Qanawati

matter of policy, but as an issue of treason".

Aboudi: A Patriarch who does not observe the rules of his parish

The spokesman for the Central Orthodox Council, Shukri Aboudi, stated that the expulsion of monk Arkadius was not the main reason for opposition. Rather, it resulted from an accumulation of acts and disrespect for the laws of the Patriarchy, or those that determine the relationship with the parish, and the appointment of a mixed council (formulated of two thirds of national laymen and one third of clergy). This council now consists of a Greek majority and no Arab monks or bishops have been appointed.

He added: "In my opinion, this is a spiritual and national cause for Christians in which there is international intervention. The decision to remove the Patriarch cannot be taken unless he commits a specific offense, and with the approval of the Synod that he himself appointed; thus, our problem is not a simple one. The best we can do is to combine the efforts of the Palestinian and Jordanian governments to deny him recognition".

Qanawati emphasized that the solution to this issue is to establish committees to disclose all the activities that have taken place during past years, provide clarification of property sales, and meet the demands made by the Palestinians parishioners.

Activist Salameh Shahin articulated the demands of the parish: these are modernization of the Patriarchy's bylaws and the creation of a system capable of preventing internal corruption, because the disposal of real estate and Patriarchate property was attributed to the lack of an administrative system that prevented unilateral decision making by the Patriarch. Another reason for corruption in the Jerusalem Orthodox Church is the absence of a diocese system of a diocese in every city where there are Christians, and from which the priest would convey views to the Holy Synod. This voice is absent here, leaving the Patriarchy under the authority of no more than 100 Greek monks, who dominate the Arab parish of over half a million believers in Jordan and Palestine. The abolition of the Holy Sepulcher fraternal system that prevents Arabs from entering monastic life is also necessary.

Why are there no women referees in Palestine?

Dima Yusef*

Women have participated actively in recent years in various sports, but refereeing is almost devoid of women. Although the Palestinian Football Association organized several championships for sports for both sexes, only eight women referees are registered at the Union.

In the following report, we discuss the absence of women in this role and examine the obstacles to entering this male-only zone.

Cultural obstacle

Tariq al-Naqib, director of the referees department of the Palestinian Football Association, says that training for Palestinian women referees and improving their skills is on the Association's agenda. He added that they have organized a number of special sessions for women referees, but cultural and social barriers are the biggest obstacles to success. Society is still entrenched in customs and traditions that restrict female participation in sports, especially in open stadiums. This drives many women referees to leave the profession and find other, more socially acceptable jobs.

Al-Naqib described women's achievements as referees as mediocre, possibly because of a lack of commitment to the job professionally or as a hobby, and simply seeking to be certified. Al-Naqib said that the Supreme Council for Sport and Youth Affairs, represented by its Chairman Jibril Rajoub, aspires to integrate women into the world of sport. Therefore, domestic and overseas training courses will be offered in the future to develop the physical and technical abilities of women referees and enable them to become experienced to a



Tareq al-Naqib

high standard and to represent Palestine in international events.

Social barriers

Abeer Harb, an international referee, said that the lack of women referees in Palestinian stadiums is due primarily to social factors and ingrained customs and traditions, in addition to a negative outlook towards women referees. Although conservative thinking has changed over time, it remains the most prominent factor preventing girls from entering this field. Although a woman referee may have refereed in several games for girls or young people, she still faces a problem as a woman and the additional pressure to



Suha Ramahi

prove herself as a professional referee as good as any male referee.

Harb said that in her personal experience she was able to overcome these obstacles and to continue refereeing at games, where both female and male players are now more accepting of the concept.

She believes that it is very important to have more women as referees, and in all aspects of sport, since sports make up part of society.

Calls for unions to increase empowerment [of women in sports]

Suha Ramahi, one of the players in the Women's Soccer League, emphasized that investment in the empowerment of female referees would have a positive



Abeer Harb

effect on women in sports. In addition to the advantages of a woman refereeing teams of female players, it will encourage greater female participation in sport. Ramahi added that women are capable of performing this role successfully just as a woman can be a successful athlete or player. She commented that women referees lack the experience to referee in high level games because they lack experience. She called upon the Association to increase refereeing training for females that will enable them to practice their profession in the best manner possible.

* Dima Yusef is a student at the Media Department of Birzeit University.

Jumana Abed ... the first Palestinian woman to fly in the skies of the United States

Bayan Qura'an*

Day after day, Palestinian women are demonstrating their determination and skill to overcome obstacles by joining the most difficult professions and competing with men in all fields. For 25-year old Jumana Mustapha Abed from al-Bireh, flying a plane over the clouds is no longer difficult. Jumana became the first Palestinian girl to fly in the skies of the United States and was selected as one of the best 50 qualified pilots and a source of pride for her country.

Al-Hal met Jumana to talk about her experience: "Ever since I was a child, I dreamed of becoming a pilot. My family did not want me to join this field as their dream for me was to become a dentist. Although my father was opposed to the idea of flying, he gradually encouraged me, but my mother was completely opposed to it because of the risks of this job. After my first successful trial in flying, all my family and relatives were proud of me".

She added: "I did not face any real difficulties in flying. On the contrary, Professor Thomas Cook, who supervised my training, believed in my abilities. Once I was granted my licence in 2012, he found out that I am the first Palestinian woman in the United States

to have a pilot's licence and he encouraged me to pursue my career. However, I face a problem with some people, especially Arabs who did not take my dream seriously, but I have proved myself and realized my dream of flying the skies".

Jumana explained that the first time she flew was in 2012 with a trainer and she was afraid because it was the first time she had piloted a plane. Four months later, she flew on her own and realized that she had become a pilot and that her dream had come true. Since obtaining her licence, she has flown more than 10 types of plane. Jumana graduated from the Premier Flight Academy.

What characteristics must a pilot have? Jumana said: "A pilot needs confidence, motivation, patience, and must be ready to assume responsibilities. Piloting a plane is not as easy for a man as it is for a woman". She aims to become a pilot trainer and to supervise women, especially Arab women, to show them that nothing is impossible and they can realize their dreams and overcome all obstacles in their path. She sent all women a message to aim for the profession they want and where they can excel.

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Jumana was selected as one of the top 50 American pilots.

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Issued by: Media Development Center



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