



## Welcome President

If we think about the most suitable phrases to use to welcome the new president of our university, we might say, for example: "Welcome to a family and smooth grounds", but this does not really fit because he is one of our family and grounds. If we say: "Welcome dear" this is not suitable either because it is more familiar than it should be. What then?

Let's say: "Welcome to a family and rough grounds", which is closer to the truth.

Birzeit is beautiful but twisted and in bad shape!

Yet what is wrong in being twisted if the direction faces upwards to greater power, truth and advancement, and towards the nation and its unity?

Our hearts and hands stretch out.

Bring us together, President, and we are grateful to you.

Editor-in-Chief

AL HAL - Thursday 21/5/2015

4 PAGES

INSIDE

**02** "I am a refugee"... A reflection of the new face of modern Palestinian asylum

**03** Peaceful resistance returns to Gaza despite controversy about its effectiveness

**04** Hasan ...a heart that wanders from explosive engineering to planning surprises

### Interview with the next President of the University

## Dr. Abu Hijleh: Birzeit University will maintain its academic excellence locally and in the Arab world

- We will try to facilitate the educational process for students in light of the financial crisis facing the University
- We look forward to a greater role by the PA in support of university education

#### **Kholoud Al-Helu**

The incoming President of Birzeit University, Dr. Abdel Latif Abu Hijleh, stressed that the University will maintain its academic excellence and will enhance its status. He said that Birzeit will work to facilitate the education of students despite the financial crisis facing the University.

These statements were made in an interview conducted by Al-Hal with Dr. Abu Hijleh following the announcement by the Birzeit Board of Trustees that he had been appointed as President of the University from the first of August to succeed Dr. Khalil Hindi.

On the issue of fees and financial crisis, Dr. Abu Hijleh said: "Even a student who pays his fees in full without any debts is subsidized by the University by at least 40%". He stressed that the University has an important role and immense responsibilities to cover all expenditures that ensure a constructive and fruitful educational process, not just for Palestinian society alone, but also for Arab and international societies.

Abu Hijleh added: "The Palestinian Authority should pay a proportion of expenditures and fees because this is in the common interest. Students are our children and we should all support their educational journey in their own country so they do not need to travel outside".

The message that he wishes to convey during his presidency is to maintain Birzeit University in top place among Palestinian, and even Arab universities, on academic, ethical and innovative levels. His perspective of the future of Birzeit University is to improve at every level, in line with cultural and intellectual advancements among students by virtue of the creative teaching methods at the University.

Dr. Abu Hijleh was a professor in the Chemistry Department at Birzeit University and Vice President for academic affairs. He earned his PhD from Mississippi University in 1981.

The following is the text of the interview:  
New teaching methods

\*What practical steps will be taken to promote academic and educational standards once you assume your responsibilities as President of Birzeit University?

Academic and educational standards at Birzeit University are good and everyone knows that the University has distinguished itself at every level, whether academic, educational or ethical. This good position among Palestinian and Arab universities will be maintained. I will try as much as I can to maintain this standard and achieve progress by developing new and different teaching methods for students and staff.

\*Are there any changes or amendments that you intend to introduce at Birzeit University? There is always a need for change, and in many areas such as the deans of faculties or vice presidents or heads of departments. In my opinion, these dynamic changes are necessary in any institution, not only educational institutions. These are intended to maintain standards and to ensure that objectives are achieved fruitfully and in the correct manner.

\*Are there any suggestions for a solution to the financial crisis experienced by both the students and the University?

Financial problems always exist in universities and not only at Birzeit University. This depends on how much the university can cover its expenses from donations, grants or contributions by the PA, which are almost nonexistent. In fact, in general Palestinian society suffers from a continuous financial crisis in all aspects of life; this is reflected in the inability of students to pay all their tuition fees and other university charges. The administration of Birzeit University should help them so that the financial difficulties are not an obstacle that impedes their educational future and ambitions. Even those students who are capable of paying all their dues in full are subsidized up to 40% by the administration as part of the university's contribution to assist all its students as much as possible. I believe that our society is benevolent and would not begrudge any help for needy students through donations and grants, given their good academic performance. This necessitates the cooperation of the administration, students and graduates.

We may also benefit from Zakat money and those in charge can allocate a proportion of this as ongoing charitable funds for students in support of the educational process. This

does not apply only to Palestinian society but to all Islamic society internationally, which shoulders part of the responsibility towards students of all universities.

Students from Jerusalem

\*A group of students proposed a project to transport students from Damascus Gate in Jerusalem to Birzeit University. What do you think of this? Do you support the idea in view of the daily problems faced by students from Jerusalem in particular at Israeli checkpoints and borders crossings and the continuous delays they undergo?

Certainly, the University administration can assist by providing them with what services we can regardless of other interventions. It is our duty to provide our students with facilities to ensure the proper achievement of educational goals, taking into account the interests of all students and the promotion of societal and national commitment among our students.

\*The student movement has always been part of the Birzeit University community. What is your position in this regard today?

It has been excellent and will remain so. Freedom of opinion, thought and respect for the opinion of others will be maintained within the limits of the law and norms that we accept as educated people dedicated to serving all of the Palestinian community, not only on an academic level. I believe that this is one of the secrets of success of Birzeit University at every level.

The fees crisis

\*Is there any intention to reduce the cost of a credit hour that was raised this year?

We cannot reduce the cost of the credit hour in light of the limited resources available and the absence of any contributions from the PA. This creates a barrier to the reduction of fees, given the University's goal to maintain a productive educational process. I estimate that students cover up to 50 or 55% of their tuition fees and the rest is covered by the University. Therefore, when students call for a reduction in the credit hour costs, they are asking the University to cover about 70% instead of 40% of their tuition fees. There are also staff and other services that the University needs to cater for and it cannot bear all the costs alone. We call upon the government to contribute at least 20% of



Dr. Abdul Latif Abu Hijleh

the students' tuition fees. This is their duty. They should assist the higher educational sector by allocating a fixed budget to support national universities and prevent students from leaving the country.

Admission rates

\*New students will enroll next September. Are there any changes to the number of admissions or the numbers of students accepted?

The number of admissions depends on the number of students applying. If the number is large, competition increases and the faculty in question will raise the admission requirements, selecting the highest averages. In addition, there is the absorptive capacity as some faculties can only absorb 50 students, for example. In such cases, we are not obliged to accept 300 students because this would conflict with the University's goal of maintaining an efficient level of education for students and professors and would be detrimental to the University.

We are not the ones who determine rises or declines in admission rates. This is determined by the students who apply to the University and whose grades are defined in the secondary certificate. At the same time, the University's financial crisis is not associated with rises or declines in admission.

# “I am a refugee”...

## A reflection of the new face of modern Palestinian asylum

✶ Majd Hamad

From the alleys of the refugee camp, the refugee emerged and was thus named. From the alleys of the refugee camp in the countries surrounding Palestine, the refugee built his life for decades. Palestinians were expelled in 1948, but the phrase “I am a refugee” took on new meaning recently when Palestinian refugees in Syria were forced to move again to other places in Syria or to neighboring countries.

From this second asylum and the resettlement of Palestinians, the film “I am a refugee” was screened during film festival week at Al-Kasaba Theater in cooperation with the Heinrich Boel Foundation. Lina Ghanem, the film project coordinator, said: “The concept of this project arose during the commemoration of the Nakba (catastrophe) in view of the displacement of Palestinians and the difficult conditions of Syrian Palestinian refugees”.

Films were selected within the framework of this concept and the festival included five long and five short films directed by Palestinian and Syrian youths. Some were produced by the Heinrich Boel Foundation and some by Biddayat. Films were screened in Ramallah, Jenin, Nazareth and Jaffa, then the following week in Gaza.

Lina said that the films were carefully selected: Films were international and some had won prizes, such as the film “Return to Homs” which received 80 awards and “Silvered Water” which won 10 awards. The selection of films was based on issues concerning Syrian Palestinians and the issue of Syrian Palestinians seeking refuge in Lebanon.

The interest of the Heinrich Boel Foundation in this film festival is not unusual as they have a program on democracy and human rights. In Syria, the Foundation has produced several films on the current situation and their interest in this film festival week may be attributed



Rene Widangel



Carol Mansour



Lina Ghanem

to several factors. Rene Widangel, the representative of the Heinrich Boel Foundation in Ramallah, insisted on screening these films in Palestine because of the close relationship between the Syrian problem and that of the Palestinians. He believes that the screening of these films internationally is very important, especially in Palestine and Ramallah since Palestine is directly associated with Yarmouk refugee camp. Today, Rene observes, the repercussions of the first Nakba are still apparent. Heinrich Boel Foundation presented this film week to Syria.

The opening film, “We cannot go there now, my dear”, is a 42-minute documentary directed by Carol Mansour relating many aspects of Syrian Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Characters of different ages act in the film. The oldest is an original refugee from Acre, 67 years of age, and the youngest is an elementary school girl who left her home in the refugee camp and moved to Lebanon. Missing her home and the alleys of the refugee camp, this thirteen year old child innocently describes her desire to return and

her feelings of estrangement.

The film relates all their stories; most of them left Yarmouk camp to seek refuge and protection in Lebanon. They tell their stories. Some lost a parent and lost any chance of return. They are people who lived for years in Yarmouk camp, settled there, had a life after they or their parents were once displaced from Palestine. Now they were forced into exile again, leaving their houses and lives, even their belongings and clothes, to live a new Nakba in a new form. From Yarmouk camp in Syria, they left to Lebanon and some made it to Switzerland and France.

Film director Carol Mansour, a Lebanese of Palestinian origin, attended the opening of the film festival. A discussion took place following the screening of the film. This was not her first experience of handling humanitarian issues, but in this film she focused on the attachment of people to the camp and their great pain at leaving it. She quoted one of the film characters saying to another: “As you leave the camp, you should know that there will be no return afterwards”.

The film director found it impossible to describe her feelings about being in Palestine to the audience, but noted that this film was very close to her heart because her parents were from Jaffa and Haifa and were displaced, taking refuge in Lebanon following the Nakba. The Al-Kasaba Theater will screen an entire week of films dedicated to the issue of new forms of asylum: “multiple refugees” as Carole described it, or the “other face of the Palestinian Nakba” as Lina defined it. It is a cause that the entire world should be aware of, particularly the Arab world according to Rene. He added that this film week is held to attract attention and raise awareness, and also to expand people’s interaction with the films screened.

It seems that the phrase “I am a refugee” will not be erased as Palestinians who made their home in the alleys of the camp were forced to leave again and to become a new cause. Close to 80,000 Syrian Palestinian refugees have had to seek refuge outside Syria. The film week at Al-Kasaba Theater highlights their issue and their displacement, which did not end with the end of the Nakba.

## Netanyahu government...a testimony of misery for the right, left and Israeli society

✶ Nazeer Mjali

Benjamin Netanyahu recently started his term in office as head of the new Israeli cabinet and will have, if he completes his term, the longest stay in office of all previous heads of government in Israeli history. Although a superficial achievement that puts quantity over quality, it should not be underestimated as it is the main priority that Netanyahu sets for himself.

While this is a source of pride for the man, his wife and other family members, it is testimony to the deficiencies and misery in Israeli society, and even in the right wing. Before we discuss what kind of government this will be, the tragedy that exists in Israel is represented in the fact that a character like Netanyahu could stay in office for this period of time and that the Israeli parties: left, right and center, could not succeed in overcoming him to rid Israel, its friends and allies of the man and his problems. After he scored a personal victory in latest elections (17 March 2015) on the corpses and heads of his closest allies in the right wing (where he appealed to their supporters and smashed the Jewish Home party from 12 to 8 seats, Yesrael Beiteinu from 13 to 6 seats and Shas from 11 to 7 seats), he formed a government in which not even one minister from his Likud party was satisfied with his post. The Defense Minister, Moshe Ya’alon, kept his post but was upset because Netanyahu imposed on him a deputy responsible for

the settlements and civil administration in the army. The Minister of Transport, Yisrael Katz, was promised the Ministry of Interior, while the Minister for Interior, Sylvan Shalom, found himself leading half a ministry because Netanyahu granted the Shas party many of its powers. Benyamin Menahem Begin, brought in by Netanyahu during the last days of the election battle, was forgotten when the ministerial portfolios were distributed. Then, Netanyahu remembered him and made Begin a Minister without portfolio, to Begin’s surprise. But this was not the only surprise, as his friend Tsahi Hanegby, who had supported Netanyahu over recent years, was stunned to hear Netanyahu declare in a Knesset session: “I am grateful to Tsahi who has accepted to head the government coalition and the foreign and security committee”. Tsahi issued a statement expressing his anger and declaring that he knew nothing about what Netanyahu had said. Jelaad Ardan is another minister who was shocked by Netanyahu’s strategy. He is the Knesset Member who ranks second after Netanyahu in terms of popularity in the Likud Party. He was popular for defending Netanyahu and his wife Sara during the announcement of their financial scandals. He was known as Netanyahu’s most faithful minister and was expected to be given the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but Netanyahu offered him the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, the smallest ministry with 20 employees including a driver and security staff. Ardan decided to decline the offer and

stayed out of the government.

In light of these events, Likud ministers reached the same conclusion: Netanyahu is obsessively self-centered. He cannot bear to have any prominent figure at his side as he views the popularity of any minister as a threat to his position. All those who reached second place after him in Likud found themselves outside the political arena, such as David Levy in the 1990s, Gideon Saeer and Jelaad Ardan. If we add to this his management of negotiations for a government coalition, where he failed to form a government until the last minute when allies started to exert pressure and suck the life out of him and almost got everything they wanted. Thus, he is a fragile leader vulnerable to pressure and blackmail. Some even wonder if there is a risk that he could be blackmailed in future negotiations with the Palestinians.

However, the biggest problem in the new Israeli government is that it is not new in relation to the political issue. It is such an old government and resembles Yitzhak Shamir’s extremist government. It is a government that rejects the peace process and the settlers enjoy their greatest influence since the 1967 occupation. This government will continue its confrontational policy towards the US administration of Barak Obama and will not abstain from being embroiled in animosity with European governments.

Some opponents deem it as “the best government for the Palestinians” as it allows for support to develop for the Palestinian cause in the West.

Some see it as a dangerous government that will export its crisis by fabricating wars, leading to deterioration in the region and sending it back tens of years. Some people consider it a national disaster for Israel that will lead to the loss of its most significant achievements in democracy and freedoms, pushing it rapidly towards becoming a third world country. The decision to grant the Ministry of Justice to Ayelet Shaked from the Jewish Home party is the beginning of the assault on the independence of the judiciary, the cornerstone of democracy. Minister Shaked does not conceal her opinion that the elected political leadership must override the judiciary. Netanyahu’s decision to retain the Ministry of Telecommunications [for himself] suggests anticipated blows to freedom of the media. These strikes against the third and fourth authorities (the judiciary and the media) imply the weakening of the most important guardians of democracy.

The only consolation for Israelis is that such a government may not last long. However, the formation of such a government following the early elections is proof of the bleakness and misery of the Israeli right, which previously had better leaders like Menahem Begin, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, as well of the Israeli opposition, which has failed to find a strong personality capable of defeating Netanyahu. In fact it is testimony to the deficiencies and misery of Israeli society as a whole that this man could be elected in round after round in spite of all his flaws and failures.

## Peaceful resistance returns to Gaza despite controversy about its effectiveness

✶ Nisreen Mousa

Peaceful resistance has returned to the front line in the Gaza Strip, taking off in the east of Khan Yunis, famous for its fertile land where people are engaged in agriculture. These farmers were betrayed in the last ceasefire agreement with the Israeli occupation and did not achieve their goals. The so-called "buffer security zone" imposed by Israel on land 500 meters to the west of the border threatens their survival and they lost access to thousands of dunums of land. This is their only form of resistance, backed by hundreds of supporters, in an attempt to express their voice to the world at large so their suffering may be heard.

Politicians and activists view the reintroduction of this early form of resistance as a solution to public struggle since it allows people to embrace revolution once more after it was taken over by factions and confined to armed resistance. Others view this strategy as equally unworkable with Israel, which defies all international conventions and treaties and flouts Palestinian rights; they argue that the occupation understands only the language of force and guns.

### Necessary resistance

Nafez Ghuneim, member of the political bureau of the People's Party, believes that the popular resistance that emerged recently in Khan Yunis is an appropriate form of

struggle against Israel. He refused to call it peaceful resistance, saying: "We are not throwing flowers to the occupation; this is non-violent resistance".

Ghuneim added: "In general, popular resistance is more suitable to the current situation in view of the changes that have occurred. It can be successful if it adheres to certain conditions, the most important of which is not to bow to a particular faction, and it must be governed by one national reference. Also, it should not be sporadic and should involve everyone, being continuous and popular rather than confined to political organizations".

On the possibility of whether it could become a substitute for armed resistance, Ghuneim said: "Different forms of resistance must not conflict with each other and should not be used to serve foreign agendas. It should be governed by the national interest to bring us closer to achieving our goals".

### Unsuitable arena

Mukheimer Abu Saada, political analyst and Professor of Political Science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, disagreed and said that peaceful resistance means to engage peacefully with the Israeli occupation in the occupied territories, villages, refugee camps and cities. How is it possible to engage with the occupation while it is outside the Gaza Strip, besieging it with barbed wire and walls?



Abu Saada stressed that the concept of peaceful resistance is useless in the Gaza Strip because of this lack of direct engagement, although it is more efficient in the West Bank. He pointed out that other forms of resistance exist such as an economic boycott.

### Spontaneous resistance

Journalist and activist Hani Shaer regularly covers the weekly march in Khan Yunis and confirmed that this type of resistance is on the rise, especially at times of ceasefire, and a growing number of young people go weekly to the border area to wave

Palestinian flags in an assertion of their right to possession of this land. On the impact of this resistance, Shaer said: "If it was not effective, the Israeli forces would not have suppressed it, especially as they fear that it is an extension of what is happening in the West Bank or the flame of a new Intifada in the Gaza Strip".

### Giving up

Journalist Rami Abu Marahil disagreed with Shaer: "This type of resistance is gradually disappearing, be it peaceful marches, the boycott of Israeli goods, media campaigns

and the condemnation of crimes committed by the Israeli occupation". He added: "Peaceful resistance was suppressed internally, and not by the occupation, because of our concentration on survival due to the absence of basic livelihoods that oblige people in the Gaza Strip to seek a living rather than resistance. More giving up in this regard is anticipated".

### Participation as a duty

Ibrahim Syam, a young man from Rafah, stated that he had participated several times in marches launched from the east of Khan Yunis to protest against the practices of the Israeli occupation, in particular the establishment of the buffer zone.

Syam sees his participation as a national duty to support farmers to oppose the practices of the occupation. He believes that popular resistance complements armed resistance and one does not cancel out the other.

Khaled Yusef, another young man, confirmed that the suppression of the marches in Khan Yunis by Israeli occupation forces makes him more determined to participate as it is proof that it irritates the occupation forces and exposes their practices to the entire world.

Yusef stressed that the halt in armed resistance due to the ceasefire must not abandon farmers to the mercy of the occupation. People should support these Palestinians who are being crushed by the practices of the Israeli occupation.

## "Master's in prison"... Palestinian footsteps in the history of freedom

✶ Noor Abdel Fattah

The Israeli occupation want prisons to be a graveyard for the living and a tomb for their ideas, culture and innovation, but the resilience and determination of detainees has drawn a different reality in those graveyards by creating educational and revolutionary mini academies inside the dark walls.

Detainees have held many strikes over time to reflect their belief in the importance of education and reading. Notably, the strike of September 1992 won approval to allow higher education and the entry of books required by detainees.

This issue of Al-Hal documents the academic successes of some released detainees who earned their degrees behind prison bars. Thus, they did not lose years of their life in vain and are now free and empowered with academic degrees and knowledge to qualify them for work in many disciplines.

### Abu Muhsen: Master's degree from the Hebrew University

Jamal Abu Muhsen (aged 42), an ex-detainee from Tubas, earned his BA in Political Science and International Relations and his MA in Israeli Studies from the Hebrew University.

Abu Muhsen says: "I received the most encouragement to study in prison when I met detainee Marwan Barghouti, who was the first to push us to study and earn a degree to enable us to find a job after release. We have a huge amount of free time in prison and education was the best way to make use of it". Abu Muhsen adds: "We face many



Ismail Shabah

Tayseer Al-Bordini

Jamal Abu Muhsen

Ismat Mansour

difficulties during our studies, mainly by not allowing a student to take many credit hours. This results in it taking eight or ten years sometimes to obtain a BA degree. Also, the prison administration applies punishments against us by preventing us from studying and sitting for exams. This can cause a delay of an entire semester in some cases. Some textbooks reached us, but others were confiscated under pretexts of security".

### Al-Bordini:

#### MA in Human Rights

Tayseer Al-Bordini (aged 45) from the Gaza Strip was imprisoned for 18 years, during which he earned his BA in International Relations and an MA in Democracy and Human Rights.

Al-Bordini says that education is very difficult in prison and the disciplines allowed are limited to political science and international relations. University registration takes place via the prison administration. Correspondence with a university must pass from the department officer in prison to the education officer, to the director general, then to the university, and

vice versa when the reply is received. Detainees usually submit three items of research and undertake one comprehensive exam in lieu of the MA thesis because they are not allowed to do a thesis. Al-Bordini conducted research on topics related to the extent of democracy in the State of Israel and its courts that deal with different categories of citizens, including the detainees themselves. He says: "I chose these aspects because I believe they are of interest to Palestinians in general, and particularly to detainees". Tayseer says with disappointment: "Personally, this experience gave me a lot, but on a social and practical level it was not useful because institutions and universities were not interested in former prisoners and refused to allow us to teach at these universities, although we are more familiar with Israeli studies than the existing academic staff".

Ismail Shabah, a former prisoner (aged 44) from Rantees, spent 15 years in Israeli prisons, two years during the first Intifada of 1987 and 13 years during the Al-Aqsa Intifada. He studied International Relations for his BA and chose Israeli Affairs for

the MA degree. According to Shabah: "These specializations fit the difficult conditions in prison and our daily contact with the Palestinian, Arab and international political situation, including the implications and impact on the Palestinian cause and on Palestinian detainees".

He adds: "The main difficulties I encountered during my study were providing references and the continuous inspections by prison warders, who destroyed some papers. At the time, when we were calling on the prison administration to approve our demands for education, disruptions came from Palestinian educational institutions". Shabah expressed his disappointment with the reality he faces after release from prison. "In practical life, my degree was not useful. I used to be an officer in the Palestinian services, but the PA retired me with a pension as if they want to make us an example for others not to engage in real struggle". Mansour: a problem with the Ministry Ismat Mansour, a former detainee (aged 38) from Deir Jir, earned his BA in Journalism from the American World University. He argues that the most

important problem studying in prison is that the prisoners do not know which universities they are allowed to enroll in and which ones are accredited. The detainees are focused entirely on the availability of opportunities to study and earn a degree, which they consider an accomplishment in itself.

Ismat pointed out that 520 detainees are registered to study at the Islamic University in Gaza. This operates on a system based on the fact that when there are ten detainees in a specific prison who hold a Masters or Ph.D from an external university, they are recognized as lecturers. The university provides them with courses in disciplines that need no scientific study such as history, theology and Arabic language.

Ismat applied for a Master's degree in the Israeli studies program at Birzeit University, but his Bachelor's degree was not recognized and he was told to request an exception from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, which rejected his application.

Mansour says: "Although I am proficient in Hebrew and have sufficient knowledge for this program, the Ministry does not accredit the American World University or degrees earned from universities in the Gaza Strip in view of the political conflict".

Mansour is now leading a campaign for the right to education for detainees and the formulation of an academic committee to evaluate the case of each prisoner. The committee would calculate the individual's accredited credit hours and other universities and Palestinian institutions to recognize the certificates allowing the individual to work or study.

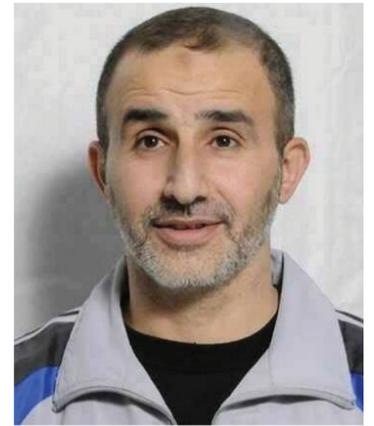
## Hasan ...a heart that wanders from explosive engineering to planning surprises

✶ **Mohammad Haniyeh**

He carries the art of war and the art of love in his heart. Although immersed in the suffering of prison and wardens, he sends happiness and love to the person who defies the restrictions and barriers of solitary confinement and has taken a place in his heart and soul, turning his dark prison cell into a laboratory that spreads rays of love. She made him taste coffee, which he had never had before. He knew of her passion for coffee, which he started mixing with honey and, sometimes, candy. Hasan Salameh (aged 44), known as the "hero of the holy revenge operation", was arrested in 1996 for the fourth time after a long history of eluding the Israeli occupation. He was accused of planning three commando operations that resulted in the death of 46 Israelis and the injury of dozens more. He was sentenced for 48 life imprisonments plus 20 years. Hasan had never dreamed of a bond or relationship with a woman because of his life sentence: "Living for many years in solitary confinement required a special psychology on my part". Twenty years after his detention, he was tossing in bewilderment and worry in his small cell, awaiting good news of his release in the exchange deal for the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. During this, one of his darkest and

most painful times, he was taken by surprise by a letter from Ahlam Tamimi, a female prisoner, which reached him via his lawyer, who visited him every few months and represents his link with the outside world. He said: "I thought that the letter was about my solitary confinement because Ahlam is responsible for cases of isolation. This was the period of negotiations for Shalit and I thought that my name was listed in the exchange deal, but the letter was about Ahlam's wish to find me a partner as she believes that people like me need a non-conventional marriage". While in prison, Ahlam had a relationship with her cousin, Nizar Tamimi, who was also a detainee. They were both released in the exchange and thus, their marriage broke the barriers of the impossible. In the same way, Ahlam wanted to create a dream of marriage for Hasan, who says: "I did not object, expecting her to choose the girl after we were freed, but I did not expect what happened". Hasan's fiancée, Gofran Zamel, a former detainee, says: "I told my friend Ahlam the secret I kept in my heart about my desire to marry Hasan". She decided on this 'crazy relationship', as everyone else described it. Ahlam formed the link between the heart of her friend and that of Hasan, who is

serving a life sentence. Many messages were exchanged between Ahlam and Hasan. After rounds of 'hard negotiations' about the destiny of a girl who decided to do the impossible with this relationship, Hasan sent a letter to Ahlam saying: "I have no objection to a relationship while I am in prison, provided that we give ourselves a period of one year or a bit longer. If I am freed, we will marry. Otherwise she has no obligations and is released as I do not want to do her an injustice". In Gofran's prison, celebrations were heard to announce the start of a battle of love by a fighter proficient in explosive engineering and explosive devices. After the letter giving his approval, Hasan became puzzled about questions to do with the unknown future. The biggest challenge was how to tell his family, who thought that the solitary imprisonment had taken its toll on his mind when they learned of the news in a letter he sent to them through the Red Cross. The Fatiha [verse from the Quran] was read thanks to the determination and attempts by Gofran to convince her family after she was released. But the strangest and most curious incident occurred on a Thursday, a few hours after Hasan's return from the court, when he heard on the radio about his



Hasan and Gofran... a love story that started in prison, awaiting a happy ending in the name of freedom.

'engagement'. That was Hasan's first encounter with love and joy. Gofran says: "I have never met Hasan because I am not allowed a visit for security reasons, but I was able to see him in visual communications via the mobile phones smuggled into prison after his release from solitary confinement". Prior to that, they used to communicate via mail and radio stations. Hasan had never read love stories before or watched love movies, but his instinct led him to the unimaginable. On each birthday, he prepares his gifts and surprises. Even inside the walls of the university where Gofran studies, he cast his shadow by arranging a

surprise for her in the lecture room. Gofran adds: "We will celebrate in the heart of Gaza as in our dreams. I will make my husband the cup of tea he likes and we will woo the sea every morning". She sighs and holds her mobile, a gift from Hasan for her birthday. He follows the latest developments in mobile technology to bring his beloved the most recent phone, together with many other gifts, some that he makes and others whose design he recommends as inspired by his imagination. He is proficient in arranging surprises from behind the bars in which the rays of the sun sneak in every morning after a dark night.

## "NOOR for strong women"... refugee women and mothers of disabled children teach cookery to foreigners

✶ **Aseil Eid**

In the midst of the suffering in Aida and Al-Azza refugee camps, the mothers of children with special needs decided to overcome the barriers of injustice and to bring light into the darkness of their children's world. They aimed to prove that a hand cannot deflect a blow unless there is a will and belief. If there is a belief that the hand will deflect the blow, it will do so, but without that belief the hand will be crushed. Dozens of children with special needs are enclosed within the walls of poor houses in refugee camps in the absence of basic human rights. Due to being different, their rights have been lost within the injustice of society, the conditions in private institutions and the difficult living conditions. Their mothers created a micro enterprise entitled 'NOOR for strong women' to assist their children and bring them happiness. Islam Jamil, one of the founders of the project, says that the idea began with a foreign woman volunteer in Aida refugee camp who offered them assistance to start a private enterprise to meet their needs and those of their children. Among many ideas, cookery lessons were the favorite. The idea of the project in Aida refugee

camp was to offer cookery lessons to foreigners and visitors and provide them with food for a small sum of money. In some cases, visitors can stay for a few days to get introduced to the camp and its hard life. Islam adds: "I did not have much hope in the success of the project, but we decided to start this experiment to help our children. The lack of money and a suitable location led to lessons being given in my home, despite its small size and the restriction this caused for my family". The group adopted the name "NOOR for strong women" for the project, which started in late 2010. This name was inspired by the fact that their children would move from the darkness of their houses in the camp to the light of life outside. Islam stated that the project encountered many economic and social problems. At the beginning, the people in the camp did not accept the idea. There was a lot of criticism and they were denied any assistance from officials on the grounds that they did not have a license. Some people had even advised Islam repeatedly to put her son, who suffers from cerebral palsy, in a private home to get remove him as a burden! Islam says: "We started with three women, then five, then seven. Now we

are 13 women, mothers of children with special needs and women who are the only breadwinners in their households. Language was another problem that we faced since we are not proficient in English language, but with the help of foreign volunteers and visitors, we had language lessons". She continues, laughing: "I used to mix up words like saying 'kitchen' instead of 'chicken'. They would laugh and we all laughed as they explained my mistake". These mothers not only used the proceeds of their work to meet the simple needs of their children with special needs, but managed to sponsor the education of four of the children at specialized institutions whose high costs they were never able to pay before. Islam says: "After a certain age, the school would not accept my son, who suffers from cerebral palsy, due to his condition so I gave his place in school to another child. The child badly wanted to go to school and his family could not afford the school costs. I still remember how he came back crying with joy after his first day at school". Rania Jamal, the wife of martyr Abu Odeh, recalls the first trip the group arranged. "A year after the voluntary work and collecting the proceeds for families of children with special needs in the camp, we managed to arrange a



Noor's strong women with an international trainee who is learning cooking.

trip to a place in the West Bank for 100 people, including children with special needs and their families". Adaya Maradis said: "I had done two months of volunteer work with UNRWA when I learned about this project in one of the cookery classes at the camp". After three years of volunteer work with the group, she said: "This experience has had a significant impact on my life and helped me to understand things better. I am really happy to be part of the change they are making". The project did not stop with the kitchen: Ideas and initiatives came in waves from the parents at the camp and volunteers, all willing to expand the

project. Someone donated his house to become a location for cookery lessons and moved with his family to another place. Another person who speaks English fluently allocated an hour for a tour to introduce visitors to life in the camp. The mothers became united in face of their difficult circumstances and the injustices of society and private institutions. They were able to reclaim the rights of their children and to realize some of their dreams. Their biggest dream of establishing a school for children with special needs in Aida and Al-Azza camps awaits an opportunity to be implemented.