

### Long live Gaza

The only way to learn how to swim is to get into the water, i.e., to try to swim. The only way to learn horseback riding is to jump onto a horse shouting "Heeeya..." You may need to hit the horse. Falling once or ten times does not matter. The important thing is that you will eventually learn. This is how you learn in all aspects of life, with the exception of love and politics.

In love, we Palestinians do not learn. We believe that loving each other will be enough for everything; Even the establishment of a state and the creation of citizenship that encompasses all aspects of national life - from a national curriculum to the unavoidable national bank and national security.

In politics, we Palestinians do not learn. We keep echoing the voices of those around us who tell us what we already know. We pretend that we are thinking about it, then nod our heads with approval and say, "Yes, we agree".

We always forget that we lived for many years by following the rule, "Live with what we have". Now we insist on providing everything for life and living as we love to, as we deserve to and as Gaza wants. Long live Gaza.

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# Reconciliation: The Palestinian tango needs more than two dancers

✶ **Mohammad Yunis**

The new reconciliation agreement concluded between Fatah and Hamas, sponsored by Egypt, seems to be a step in the right direction. Yet there are few signs to indicate that it will not suffer the same fate as previous agreements between the two movements over the past ten years. The reconciliation has been achieved following fundamental changes in the interests of the stakeholders involved. However, the question remains: "Are these changes enough to end the Palestinian political division which has lasted for over a decade?"

Hamas was the first party to change its stance and priorities by agreeing to all of the conditions stipulated by Fatah. This included dissolving the 'administrative committee', thereby enabling the Palestinian Authority (PA) government to assume its responsibilities in the Gaza Strip, and approval for general elections. Previously, Hamas had offered to accept these conditions if all the measures imposed by the PA in the Gaza Strip were annulled, including cuts in salaries; the forced retirement of thousands of employees; reducing electricity bill payments; and continuing to pay employees working in ministries and on border crossings. However, regional, local and internal changes have prompted Hamas to change its stance. The position of Hamas regionally has been in decline, along with that of its Muslim Brotherhood allies, plus Qatar and Turkey. Locally, the party has been unable to cope with the growing volatility in the Gaza Strip. Instability is growing as a result of a number of different problems, including the ten-year closure of border crossings; shortfalls in the electricity supply; the near-depletion of groundwater reserves (which the UN expects to run out completely within the next three years); and mounting unemployment and poverty.

There have also been two important developments within the Hamas movement itself. Not only does Hamas have a new leadership based in the Gaza Strip, but it has adopted a new political charter in which it has re-defined itself as a Palestinian national liberation movement with an Islamic doctrine. It had previously defined itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine. These two developments opened the door to dialogue with Egypt, which had previously considered Hamas an enemy given its links to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. With the new Hamas leadership in Gaza, Egypt has an opportunity to foster relationships outside of Qatari influence and the old leadership based in Doha.

Hamas officials stated that the decision to accept the terms of President Mahmoud Abbas was taken independently by the party. Particular credit was given to the Head of the Political Bureau, Yahya Sinwar, known for his controversial aim to get rid of what he terms the burdens of governing the Gaza Strip and return Hamas to its original role as a resistance movement.

The new Hamas official in charge of the reconciliation process, Husam Badran, said that the movement had decided to hand over all government institutions, bodies, departments, and border crossings to the national unity government. He added: "We gave instructions to all officials in ministries, border crossings and government bodies to cooperate fully with the government to enable it to assume its responsibilities in the Gaza Strip, including the Ministry of Finance, internal security services, and the police. The government may take over the Ministry of Finance, but in such an event, it must pay employees' salaries because they cannot continue to work and live without payment. If the government wants to postpone this until we have reached a final agreement regarding the status of employees, we accept this."

Regarding security, Badran stated: "We are ready to hand over the internal security apparatus and police immediately. But the question is, can the government handle security in the Gaza Strip? If the government wishes to do so, we will hand over the security apparatus. If the government opts to work according to the 2011 Cairo Agreement, which incorporates a transitional period during which the current security services assume responsibility for a duration of one year until new joint arrangements have been made, we also welcome that".

There have also been changes in Egypt which have enabled an agreement between the two sides. Commentators say that Egypt sees Palestine as a means to expand its role regionally following the decline of its competitors, Turkey and Qatar. Egypt has not disguised its interest in improving stability in the Gaza Strip, which has been a breeding ground for jihadist groups in the Sinai in recent years. Hamas officials admit that they have received dozens of injured fighters from Sinai for treatment after clashes with the Egyptian army. After reaching security agreements with Egypt, Hamas closed all outlets with Egypt and set up a security buffer zone.

Egyptian officials say that developments in the Gaza Strip directly affect Egyptian national security. An Egyptian diplomat

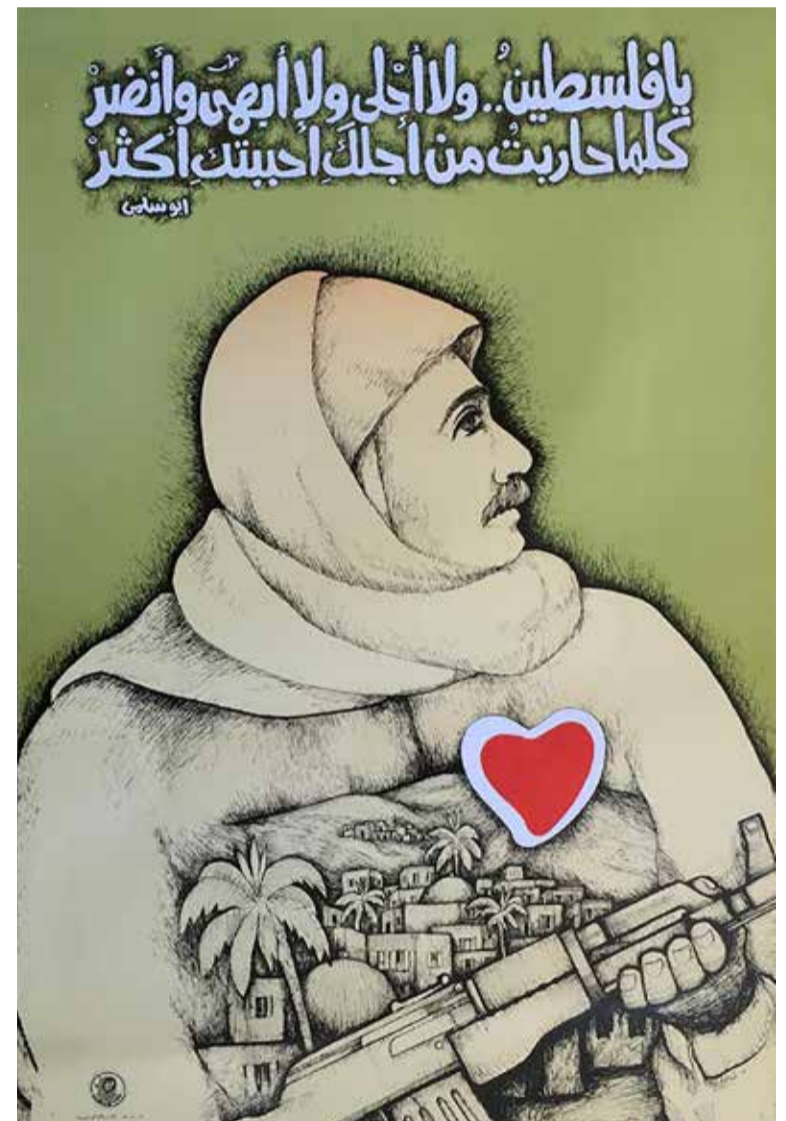
stated that Egypt was quick to supply the Gaza Strip with fuel following the recent measures taken by the Palestinian Authority, not to support Hamas but due to Egyptian concerns about the Gaza Strip becoming a hotbed for terrorism. He added, "Any deterioration in the Gaza Strip will immediately impact Egypt".

Egypt and Hamas have recently reached agreements on security, with the former also making political agreements with Mohammad Dahlan. These agreements have resulted in Hamas playing a direct role in the war waged by Egypt against armed groups in Sinai. As part of this, Hamas and Dahlan have started a reconciliation process funded by the United Arab Emirates, the arch-enemy of the Palestinian Authority. Officials in Hamas describe the relationship with Egypt today as strategic, although the latter continues to wage war against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Analysts attribute Egyptian attempts to bring about reconciliation in the Gaza Strip despite talks with Dahlan to two elements: First, Egyptian hopes to return to a regional role in the wake of the declining influence of its opponents, Turkey and Qatar. Secondly, Egypt is concerned that changes in the Gaza Strip following these agreements will lead to a gradual separation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank. Some American sources have indicated that President Donald Trump intends to reach a peace agreement in the region in which Egypt is to play a fundamental role. These sources state that resolution of the Palestinian issue is at the core of any peace efforts in the region and that Egypt cannot play this role until the Palestinians have been unified.

The third party in this scenario, the Palestinian Authority, seeks to unify Palestinians to enhance its political position whether the negotiations are successful or not. Successful negotiations will require unity between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. If the talks fail, unification of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will be central to the legacy of President Mahmoud Abbas.

In recent months, the PA imposed a series of measures on the Gaza Strip after Hamas appointed an administrative committee to manage the Strip. This was an attempt to force Hamas to dissolve the committee by requiring the approval of the Legislative Council. However, the PA did not revoke the measures imposed on the Gaza Strip once the administrative committee had been dissolved, raising questions about its true motives. In the first Fatah executive committee meeting following the Hamas decision to dissolve the administrative committee, officials quoted President Mahmoud Abbas as



"Oh Palestine the most beautiful, most glorious and most glowing  
The more I struggle for you, the more I love you." - Abu Salma

saying, "Let us wait and see what they will do with the government and then we will decide".

The handing over of ministries, government bodies, and border crossings to the Palestinian government is the first step towards ending the division between the two sides. However, other matters remain unresolved, especially issues of employees, security, arms, and public money. A dispute on any of these issues will cause the collapse of this round of reconciliation, as has been the case previously. Fatah says that it is seeking a reconciliation that will lead to the unification of the authority and security apparatus. Later, they will be looking to dissolve military groups and form one security personnel, one gun, and one authority. Hamas, on the other hand, is demanding the inclusion of around 40,000 of its employees in the PA and retention of its military branch. This is unacceptable to Fatah and is similar to the situation in Lebanon in

which the armed party, Hezbollah, has the authority on the ground, while the government pays the service bill. The key question is whether the two parties can reach an agreement allowing Hamas to retain its underground military apparatus while the PA assumes the responsibility of running the country and the population provided that decisions on war and peace are made unanimously.

Certainly, there is a greater chance this time to reach an agreement that ends divisions and achieves political partnership. However, this relies largely on the intentions of each of the three parties involved: Hamas, Fatah, and Egypt. If any of them intend to engage in this reconciliation for the purposes of maneuvering then withdrawing under any pretext, this will cause the collapse of this round as in previous attempts because the Palestinian tango needs more than two dancers.



## A program that will engage students over three years in six stages

# 'Masari' ... a new approach at Birzeit to develop student leadership and professional skills



Mirvat Bulbul

### Fadi al-Kashef

At the beginning of this academic year (2017-2018), Birzeit University invited the first applications for the Leadership and Active Citizenship Program: Masari, meaning "my career path and trajectory". The program targets freshman students in all majors and aims to develop their leadership and professional skills, initiate their positive role in their community, and assist them to find job opportunities or training during their study or after graduation.

"Masari was the name chosen for this program to motivate students to start planning their path of life from day one at the university, in parallel with their academic programs and extracurricular activities to prepare for the demands of real life with its challenges and unexpected conditions," according to the Vice-President for Planning and Development, Dr. Mirvat Bulbul. She added: "This year, new students will form the first core group for the program, which will accompany them over three years alongside their academic studies and through six training stages: one per semester."

### Bulbul: A system for student networking with the labor market

Bulbul told al-Hal that this program is implemented by BZU to develop and improve the skills of students, and to open up life and career options. This enables students to explore areas they like and integrates them as responsible and active citizens in the development of their communities to compete effectively in the labor market.

Bulbul confirmed that the program's objectives correlate with BZU strategy of encouraging innovation and supporting entrepreneurship, as well as with the decision on integrated education by the Council of Ministers. She stressed the need for continuous development and improvement of the program throughout its various stages, especially as one of its advantages is that it is implemented by Palestinians themselves with the support of the Cairo Amman Bank.

Bulbul explained that the program creates a networking system between BZU students and alumni, and with the labor market through an electronic platform ([careerpath.birzeit.edu](http://careerpath.birzeit.edu)) that allows firms and organizations to post full or part-time work opportunities, training, or cooperative work. It also allows students to build and share their resumes with employers and compete for available opportunities. She highlighted that the platform currently has over 3500 CVs for more than 60 major and minor specializations, and has provided 55 work opportunities. Around 100 institutions and companies are registered on it.

### Marar: Students will undergo six stages

The BZU labor market coordinator at the

Innovation and Entrepreneurship Unit, Suheir Marar, told al-Hal that students will be trained by members of academic and administrative bodies that participated in specialized workshops prior to the start of this academic year.

Marar clarified that each of the six stages is divided into seven lectures per semester, equivalent to 21 training hours or 3 hours every two weeks for each student.

She explained that BZU has implemented the first two stages related to personal skills. These are related to the concept of "self" and provide students with the opportunity to discover themselves and determine their personal values. At the end of this stage, students build their own "personal blog". The second stage is the "career path" where students are trained in basic skills such as writing a CV, conducting job interviews, understanding labor law, trade unions and the legal environment for work. They are also introduced to the labor market and learn about the difference between public, private and civil sectors. During this stage, the student is introduced to available scholarship and grants programs to enable them to choose a path for higher education, a Masters degree or a PhD.

Marar pointed out that the program is designed to meet the needs of freshman students who are in a transitional period in their university life with its social and professional challenges.

Citizenship is the third stage in the program. It aims to provide participants with the opportunity to discover their potential, and how can they be active and effective in their communities. This stage will assist them to create a network of positive relationships that will empower them and enhance their sense of social and environmental responsibility.

The fourth stage is debating and builds on students' skills to conduct organized, efficient and rich debates. Students participate in regular debates on a variety of subjects throughout their university life and later on during their professional life. Thus, it is important to acquire the skills and knowledge for such an experience, especially as these are versatile skills such as drafting questions and answers in an organized, clear and sequential manner, in addition to public speaking skills and self-confidence. At the end of the stage, the students will organize a debate based on the procedures that they have learned. The final stage is social entrepreneurship. This will be implemented throughout two semesters with 120 hours of collaborative work that the student must complete before graduation according to the Birzeit system. Marar added that this stage is special for its promotion of volunteer and public work among students using the relevant skills and knowledge acquired throughout their learning journey over three years, dividing the



Suheir Marar



Bahya Herbash



Eman Hedreh



Iyad Jadallah



Hani Eshtayeh



Mohammad Hussein



Omar Bakri



Sonia Nimer

students into groups who will design and build community responsive initiatives. During this stage, the students will learn how to plan these initiatives, devise fundraising, monitoring and evaluation.

Marar said that upon graduation, the student will receive both an academic certificate and a special certificate for the program comprising six medals for the number of stages completed, provided they have attended all the training sessions. They receive another medal after completing all the requirements in terms of participating in activities, field visits and submitting projects. Al-Hal toured BirZeit University's Ahmad Nejad Zani Center for Excellence in Information Technology where all training sessions take place for stages one and two to survey students about the program.

Student Omar Bakri said that he was surprised to see an additional program entitled "personal skills" on his academic syllabus on the University's academic and administrative portal, Ritaj. He added that he had no idea about the form or content of these lectures but was very interested to attend because he was curious and sensed that it was important.

Student Eman Hedreh told al-Hal that she asked her colleagues about the "personal skills" lecture and only found the answer when she attended the first meeting.

Student Bahya Herbash said that the program had helped her to get involved in the University and to become familiar with her colleagues and their different personalities.

Trainer and lecturer at the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, Dr. Mohammad Hussein, said: "The concept of the program is

wonderful and pioneering. Birzeit University with Masari with all its components of students, academics, administrators and decision makers is not the same Birzeit as before."

Trainer Dr. Sonia Nimer expects that Masari will be very successful in producing creative and innovative graduates who are able to discuss, criticize and debate in society or any workplace. She said: "The program should have existed at BZU before. From the time they start school until they graduate, students are like passive receivers, or in other words are not engaged in the learning process. Most issues are imposed through a book that students memorize to sit for exams. Students expect the same educational pattern in university but face a different reality that promotes their interaction, stresses the importance of their personal opinion, and develops their ability to engage in constructive criticism."

A trainer in the career path stage of the Masari program, Iyad Jadallah, confirmed that he experienced good interaction among the students participating, especially since the program does not include exams or grades like the academic programs. He added that a significant number of students were introduced for the first time to building their CVs and exploring a professional and career path of their own.

The Director of the Samieh Darwazeh Institute of Industrial Pharmacy at BZU and trainer in the career path stage, Dr. Hani Eshtayeh, said that it is hard to judge the success of the program from stages one and two but Masari definitely contributes to the personalities of students and alumni because it focuses on teaching them life skills that they had not previously encountered.



# Unsafe food:

## Concerns raised about the names of offenders and institutions

**Eman Odeh**

Serious food safety violations committed by a number of restaurants and food factories during August and September in West Bank governorates have aroused public concern about regulation. In particular, the authorities failed to disclose the names of premises closed due to food safety regulations, including a cocktail shop and a fried chicken restaurant in Ramallah, a sweet shop in Nablus, and other food shops in Ramallah and Hebron. Many people argue that failure to disclose the names protects the offenders.

Al-Hal learned from Luay Bani Odeh, director of public relations of the customs police department, that 261 commercial cases have been recorded and 49 tons of expired materials were destroyed in August. In light of these dramatic developments, al-Hal addressed those responsible for public health safety to learn about the measures taken to eliminate the phenomena of food adulteration; to examine the extent to which the law is used to prosecute offenders; and to understand why the names of offenders have not been released despite the fact that the public has demanded this to avoid buying from those who are careless with the lives of others.

### Bani Odeh: Revealing offenders' names requires authorization from the public prosecution

Bani Odeh confirmed that the customs police is responsible for protecting the food sector by ensuring the safety of products and commodities, as well as jobs in the marketplace. However, he stressed that disclosure of the names of businesses that violate food safety regulations must be authorized by the public prosecution.

He explained: "The reason for reticence in revealing these names, brands, and trademarks is because we not allowed to do so without



Najat Breiki



Luay Bani Odeh



Suha Arar



Ibrahim al-Qadi

permission from the public prosecution. The offending cocktail shop was closed after midnight when the offices of the public prosecution were closed. As an executive party, we are obliged to remain silent on the case. Images and press coverage that subsequently flooded social networking sites were without foundation, were untrue and involved shops and restaurants that had nothing to do with the case. Thus, we had to come up with a vague statement that lacked details because the case was incomplete."

### Breiki: Concealing names during investigations

In an interview with al-Hal newspaper, the Chief Prosecutor for economic crimes, Najat Breiki, explained that, "The market is inspected daily by inspectors from the Ministry of Economics under the supervision of the economic crimes prosecution."

According to Consumer Protection Regulation No. 21 of 2005 and the pursuant regulations, perpetrators of economic crimes, whether trading goods that have expired, been corrupted or are unfit for human consumption, will have their punishment determined after evidence and

witness statements have been presented to the court. A decision is also taken to close the shops, restaurants or storage units that have committed such violations.

Breiki added: "The public prosecution does not usually declare the names of offenders during investigations out of respect for the principle of innocence until proven guilty. Recently, and in light of the heinous disregard for regulations by some restaurants as evident in images that showed the negligence of those trading with contaminated food, the decision was reviewed."

### Greater commitment to food safety

The head of food safety at the Ministry of Health, Suha Arar, clarified that the routine checks carried out by the Ministry include inspections of factories, restaurants and/or food facilities, as well as rooms, refrigerators, and raw materials. Workers and their practice of preparing and preserving food are also inspected. Inspections are usually conducted by environmental health teams in all governorates.

Arar clarified: "Our task is to enter the location and conduct a visible inspection by checking licensing and whether the environmental

conditions are appropriate. We then check that public safety regulations are complied with. Finally, depending on the type of food being examined, the team may take samples for laboratory tests." Complaints are few, stressed Arar, and consumers bear some responsibility for failing to report food regulation violations.

### Closure of restaurants is not a new phenomenon

The head of consumer protection, Ibrahim al-Qadi, said that every month between five and seven commercial facilities are closed. He explained that this is "...not a new phenomenon. What occurred this time can be attributed to information on social media channels that exaggerated the events and created gossip among the Palestinian public, particularly as these facilities were in the downtown area. We generally receive about 85 complaints monthly, most of which are false, but the number of complaints has been as high as 32 per day recently."

\* Eman Odeh is a student at the Media Department of Birzeit University.

## Mercy Gate ...

## A point to the east of al-Aqsa that Israel seeks to Judaize

**Rinad Wa'eri**

Israeli violations against the Palestinian people never end: oppression, stones, and false charges are omnipresent. Today, the target is the Gate of Mercy: one of the oldest and most sacred of the holy al-Aqsa gates and the only one on the eastern side of the mosque. It consists of two gates, Mercy Gate to the north and Repentance Gate to the south. According to the former head of the Islamic Heritage Committee, Dr. Najeh Bkeirat, it is called several names, including the Golden Gate.

The gate has been closed from the outside by the Israeli occupation forces but still opens from the inside via the al-Aqsa Mosque courtyards. The Gate's building extends over more than 100 square meters. The conflict actually relates to this building, with accusations directed against those previously responsible for it.

The building was used as a hall for performing prayers, readings from the Holy Quran and supplication. Bkeirat noted that the Islamic Heritage Committee had been responsible for the management from 1992 to 2003 prior to the committee's suspension 14 years ago following the closure of the building by a military order from the Israeli occupation forces under false pretexts. This was actually a punishment by the Israelis in response to the flourishing of the holy al-Aqsa compound under the Committee's administration.

### Why is the Waqf charged with terrorism now?

Khaled Zabarqa, a lawyer specializing in Jerusalem affairs, stated that 14 years have

passed since the Mercy Gate building was closed by the military police. At the end of last August, the Israeli police filed a suit against the Islamic Waqf to obtain a judicial decision to close the door permanently. According to Zabarqa, the strange part is that the Israeli police are filing the suit on the basis of an anti-terrorist law.

In light of the status quo, the religious authorities in Jerusalem, represented by the Islamic Waqf Council, the Supreme Islamic Board, Palestinian Dar al-Ifta and the Department of the Islamic Waqf, issued an official statement saying: "We condemn and reject the Israeli police command's attempts to prosecute the Islamic Waqf of Jerusalem in Israeli courts under the anti-terrorism law on the basis that the Waqf Council is a terrorist organization that facilitates the entry of terrorists through Mercy Gate, which is an integral part of al-Aqsa Mosque. There have been false claims that a committee known as the Heritage Committee, which is classified as a terrorist organization, is operating from offices in Bab Al-Rahmah".

The Secretary of the Islamic Heritage Committee, Tawfiq al-Khatib, explained that the Committee's work is confined to providing services to al-Aqsa Mosque. He said that the Committee conducts various activities and projects such as "health clinics; kindergartens; tourist guidance; religious courses and awareness; centers for reciting and memorizing the Holy Quran; maintenance of the Mosque's various facilities; a printing of the Quran project; the Adahi meat project; and water refrigerators in the yards of the

Mosque, plus other activities and projects unrelated in any way to terrorism".

### Israel renounces its agreement with Jordan

Zabarqa stated that acts against the Department of Islamic Waqf, which is affiliated to the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Israel is implicitly renouncing its previous agreements and seeking to create a new reality in Jerusalem. The statement issued by the Department on the 7th of September last year confirmed that: "The Waqf Department is the sole official and religious party that, as part of the Jordanian government, supervises the Islamic holy sites and their endowments. This includes the holy al-Aqsa Mosque and the al-Haram al-Sharif, with all its buildings and spaces spread across 144 dunums over and below ground, that are under the mandate and guardianship of King Abdullah II. This fact has been recognized by successive Israeli governments since the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967 and they have also accepted that the Jordanian Waqf has exclusive authority to manage, supervise and renovate these holy places and their endowments, including al-Aqsa Mosque and the al-Haram al-Sharif. This was confirmed in the 1994 Jordan-Israeli peace agreement".

Lawyer Zabarqa commented: "Israel is attempting to revoke Jordanian sovereignty and guardianship of the al-Aqsa Mosque because otherwise it would have tried to resolve the issue in a diplomatic manner with the Jordanian government. The objective and core reality is to enforce the sovereignty of the Israeli occupation".

### Backstage Israeli policies

Aside from accusations and pretexts, the Israeli discourse has something that explains the current conflict. According to a researcher in Islamic history and the supervisor of Palestinian mosques, Mazen Ahran, who has researched the Mercy Gate: "The Jews believe that the Mercy Gate is a Jewish heritage site and is one of the gates of the alleged Temple. Following the Israeli occupation in 1967, the Minister of War, Moshe Dayan, opened the Mercy Gate. In 2002 the occupation forces enacted a military order to open a tomb adjacent to the Gate from the outside and to dig a tunnel underneath that reaches al-Aqsa Mosque".

### What support is needed now?

Dr. Najeh Bkeirat stressed three actions that will have a significant and effective role if done properly. "The Jordanian Waqf must reactivate its use of the headquarters building of the Mercy Gate with the offices affiliated to Jordanian Waqf. Each Jerusalemite and Palestinian must contribute to the reconstruction of the building and come to pray in its vicinity, while raising awareness of this issue by every means. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League must address this issue and put pressure on Israel to stop it from altering this historical heritage, and the world should prosecute Israel for its intervention in holy places".

\* Rinad Wa'eri is a student at the Media Department of Birzeit University.



# Hanaa' al-Masri... the first Palestinian photographer with a hearing impairment

Qamar Sharif

"With each sunrise, I wake up to my camera, my first love and passion. I go to my work passing by places where my eyes seek out beautiful scenes; my hands shake to take pictures of them. I walk the streets of Ramallah taking a picture of the vendor of the delicious Jerusalem ka'ek, or the whistle of the traffic policeman shrieking at vegetable vendors or at a traffic jam. I miss my hearing but my camera is both my sight and hearing".

This is how the emerging photojournalist Hanaa' al-Masri introduces herself. In spite of her deafness, at 24 years of age she has already managed to achieve success in the world of photography and has been written into history as the first deaf photographer in Palestine.

Hanaa' told al-Hal: "I currently work as a photographer at the National School of Management. I got this job after five months of searching. I was often rejected under the pretext that my hearing impairment did not fit the requirements of the job. I also work as a volunteer with the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) and shoot pictures of their events and parties. I am a member of the Al-Itisal al-Taam Dabket band".

Al-Masri continued with a smile on her face and moving her hands as she used sign language to talk via translator Asmahan Asfour at the PRCS: "My dream started when I was sixteen, but fear and despair were always my companions. One time, I even took the decision to quit school and tear up my rosy dreams to become a successful photojournalist because of my deafness. But when my sister Hiba, who is also deaf, successfully passed the General Secondary Certificate (Tawjihi), I was overwhelmed with joy. This planted optimism

in my heart and soul. I held on to my dreams, and I passed the General Secondary Certificate in 2010". Al-Masri applied to many universities to study photojournalism but most of them closed their doors to her because they lacked a specialized sign language translator. She was finally able to enrol in the Technical College at Deir al-Balah.

Despite deep concerns by other people about al-Masri's ability to continue, they still gave her the opportunity to try to achieve her dream. "I started the first semester at the Technical College which was a big burden. I had numerous difficulties with pits of helplessness and depression. I felt bitter and overcome by fatigue more and more with each passing day. But when I passed the first semester, my spirits revived and I was able to take on the challenges. I earned a number of awards for excellence and innovation".

Al-Masri is an ambitious, persevering girl who draws lines of hope and run after these lines to realize her dream.

Her mentor and specialist translator, Asmahan Asfour, said, "I accompanied Hanaa' for ten years on the path to realizing her dream. In 2007, I was her class teacher and used to see her ambitions hidden behind tears of despair and helplessness as she feared losing her dream. She was depressed at certain times and used to repeat, 'I am deaf...nothing will work out for me'. Those words prompted me to support her. I asked her to join a group of outstanding students who I trained both at school and at home to release them from their psychological problems. Then she participated in a program at the al-Quds satellite station called, "We Dream". She became a model for her female colleagues. Afterwards, she



enrolled in university and, using a camera that she bought from her own savings, she started to work and prove her creativity in a dream that she has cherished since her early childhood".

Hanaa's teacher was not her first or only supporter, but she helped and supported Hanaa's mother. Asfour says, "Hanaa's mother was an active mom who did not settle for a miserable destiny for her two daughters. She was keen to enable them to realize their dreams. She always sought to find them sign language interpreters and used to listen to Hanaa's interviews with curious people who would exclaim, 'A deaf photojournalist!'."

Asfour continued, "Whenever Hanaa's mother felt despair, she would push Hanaa' towards her

dream, repeating, 'Never make a place for despair in your heart. Keep moving forward with your magical hands towards a dream that you have drawn in your head and imagination. Rise high in the sky with your dream, never allowing anything to stop you'."

Asfour concluded, "Today Hanaa' is a member of the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate. She has ambitions of buying a sophisticated camera with which she can reflect the reality of the Palestinian people and participate in world contests representing Palestine in international forums".

\* Qamar Sharif is a student at the Media Department of Birzeit University.

## "I defend my rights": Children in Gaza send messages to international institutions to protect their rights

Najja' Skafi

Children younger than fifteen are addressing decision-makers and international human rights bodies to express their voices internationally, and highlight the violations and crimes that children in the Gaza Strip are exposed to in violation of international law. They monitor violations, gather written and photographic documentation, and hold discussions about the information collated. They learn about laws intended to protect children and prevent such violations. These activities take place at the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution (PCDCR).

Wesam Darwish, aged 15, from Maghazi refugee camp in the center of the Gaza Strip, is one of the participants of the "I defend my rights" project. "I joined the project from the outset with the aim of communicating to the world the suffering of Gazan children like me," she said. "We monitor and document initiatives that support children."

Darwish explained that she had spoken with many children who shared their problems with the project teams. "We learned the secrets of their deprived childhood, the rights that should protect them, and we raised these issues with decision-makers. We were so happy to be able to provide them with any kind of assistance, whether material, moral or psychological, depending on each individual case."

The "I defend my rights" project was launched in 2015 and runs until the end of 2018. According to Darwish, current activities represent "an expansion of our work to reach as many children exposed to

violations as possible and to raise awareness of these violations with the goal of defending their rights. We have observers throughout the Gaza Strip so this is not limited to a certain number or type of violation."

The project has provided extra-curricular opportunities to develop the participants' skills and experience. "The benefits are two-fold," explains Darwish. "Firstly, by engaging in new experiences and meeting people from all over the Gaza Strip. This gave me the confidence and the ability to speak to all kinds of people, from decision-makers to children, and to present, both publicly and privately, the violations they are subjected to. It has also helped with my schoolwork, I am more open to debating with people and am better able to absorb the curriculum and participate in various school activities."

The children involved in this project are well-prepared and trained to talk to children with a variety of psychological problems. They attend lectures on etiquette and protocols to prepare them for the different approaches required when speaking to a child laborer versus a child with disabilities, a child subjected to early marriage or a child that has experienced violence in school.

Tayeb Abu Awad, a 15-year-old from the northern Gaza Strip, stressed: "The response from the children we worked with and their interaction with us was absolutely wonderful. We tried to get away from the regular format of formal and boring conversations by creating a relaxed ambiance

and talking like siblings and friends. This enabled the children to talk easily and openly about the issues on their mind."

According to Abu Awad, members of the "I defend my rights" project do not merely monitor and document violations. They also send messages to international human rights organizations and initiate communications with them; they have participated in conferences, including in the West Bank, to highlight what life is like for Gazan children and have presented cases to Save the Children.

In addition to the valuable information acquired by these children through their ongoing participation in the project, such as learning about legal terminology, forms of oversight and documentation, there are other, less obvious benefits. Abu Awad explained: "We acquired many secondary skills and experiences that have helped us develop into better leaders and to become more flexible and informed."

Lawyer Yusif Salem, the project's coordinator at PCDCR, explained that the project, which is funded by Save the Children, includes the formation of groups of children who monitor and document violations of children's rights.

Since the project started, more than 50 such groups have been formed across all the Gaza Strip governorates. Each group comprises 2530-children and the groups are represented by an overall body called 'The Alliance for the Monitoring and Documentation of Violations of Children's Rights'. The Alliance comprises 30 outstanding

and gifted children aged from 11 to 16 years who prepare reports about the cases that reach them related to violations of children's rights. The data analyzed from these reports and the reports themselves are published in Tamkeen magazine.

Salem explained that project participants are introduced to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, Palestinian child law, and articles in the Basic Law relevant to children. They also receive in-depth training on oversight and documentation, plus the use of documentation tools such as report-writing or using cameras to document the suffering and stories of children through film. For example, they learned how to make a documentary film about a child laborer.

The project comprises multiple activities, the most important of which are the initiatives led by children. Salem explained: "Over the last few years, the groups have led activities such as a soccer tournament for displaced children following the Israeli aggression in 2014, and an initiative to support children who are talented and gifted in sports to learn about parkour (free running) and to take part in parades".

Members have also been able to achieve a positive breakthrough on the issue of heavy schoolbags following meetings with officials at the Ministry of Education in Gaza. The meetings concluded with a decision stipulating that elementary schoolchildren in grades one to four must carry a maximum of four to five books for the safety of their spine.