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Editorial: Land, first and foremost

Three years have passed since the start of the Intifada in September 2000 and the Palestinian state has not come into existence. Every time we are close to the establishment of this state, the situation deteriorates making the birth of such a state impossible. In September 2000, we were very close, but Sharon's visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque destroyed all of the efforts that had been made towards peace. This was a calculated move made by Ariel Sharon to make the situation explode.

Now, the Road Map is supposedly holding out hope of a solution, while Sharon continues the construction of his Apartheid Wall. It is another means to confiscate more land and consequently deprive more Palestinian families of their source of living.

Land has always been at the heart of the conflict. It has been confiscated under variant security pretexts. Settlements and by-pass roads were built, many Palestinian houses were demolished and numerous trees were uprooted. Roads were bulldozed to force people to emigrate and added to all this is the campaign of shelling and assassination.

The Road Map may be our last chance to return to the path of peace that has become even more elusive with Sharon in power.

Sharon, through these measures as well as through the isolation and humiliation of the democratically elected Palestinian president, is trying to make the life of Palestinians so miserable that life and death will be equal in their eyes. If he succeeds, nothing will matter anymore.

Widad Yousef: Courage in a shared struggle

Widad Aref Yousef agreed to marry Fareed Shihada Salama despite his hearing and speech disabilities. She has been working on ways to generate income to pull her family out of their poverty and suffering.

Widad, 29, recalls the past ten years of her life since she agreed to marry her cousin Fareed, who is deaf and dumb as a result of meningitis. Despite his disability, he experiences life with deep feeling, and Widad considered him a hero.

“Although my family objected to the marriage, I insisted on marrying Fareed, and we started our life together. We worked as farmers, with Fareed managing an irrigation system and driving a tractor. He also planted crops, but when they failed he worked in construction inside the Green Line. We eventually went into debt.

“I started trying to think of other work I could do to help us live in dignity. So, I learned to sew and about a year ago I started making flower bouquets and other handicrafts from simple materials like pasta and wooden sticks. I started selling my products in local stores. Sometimes, I was only able to make a couple of sales, which did not bring in enough money. I was unable to afford transportation, which was made even more difficult by the Israeli assault on and closure of our towns. However, I did not lose hope and kept working to expand my market to larger stores.”

Widad travels to Jenin to look for markets for her work and is trying to buy a sewing machine to help her children. As for her husband and companion, she said he only received two years of education at a special school and cannot read or write. But, she said, this does not make him less of a husband or a father because he is a kind person. Their three children learned sign language in order to communicate with their father. He hopes to be able to buy a hearing device that will finally allow him to hear the voices of his loving wife and children.

Early Marriage: children having children Ahmad Saleem, Ramallah

“I will never let my daughters repeat the story of marriage,” said a woman from a village near Ramallah who got married at the age of 15 to a man who was 17 years older. I could not enjoy my childhood like the other girls. I had my first child when I was barely sixteen and was then responsible for a family, a husband and a house.

It is well documented that early marriages are quite common in Palestinian society. A report published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2001 mentioned that the percentage of males married under the age of 15 was zero, while for females it was 2%. Seven percent of the male population marries between the ages of 15 and 19, and 18.4% of the female population. Between the ages of 20 and 24 years, 21.1% of males and 58.6% of females marry. It is clear that early marriages have a negative impact on women and often result in conflict which leads to divorce.

Stories told by grandparents, relived by grandchildren Fayez Abu Oun, Gaza

“Get out of the house and take whatever you can carry before the bulldozers bring it down on our heads,” shouted Safa’s father. The little girl could not understand the warning but she had to leave her bed during Israel’s heavy shelling of Rafah and the loud planes. It was 3.00 in the morning. She grabbed her coat and wrapped it around her body before she ran out into the street with her family, away from the destruction.

Dozens of other children found themselves in the same situation watching Israeli bulldozers demolishing their houses, furniture, trees, lives and dreams. Suddenly Safa remembered her school bag and the pictures she had drawn in on of her books. “Was my bag torn apart like those displaced families?” She wondered if it had been destroyed. She tried to run back to the house to salvage it, but her mother stopped her and explained that the Israelis were destroying the house and its contents.

The bulldozers completed their task of demolishing seventeen houses on the border separating Rafah from Egypt. Safa was made a refugee in a tent along with other families reliving the experience of her grandparents.

In Nablus, the Israeli occupation soldiers demolished the Al Masri building, where many Palestinian families were living. They lost their life investments and their dreams in the wreckage. Many of the owners of the apartments had not yet finished paying off the property. Once again, Palestinians were made refugees and deprived of even the dream of a comfortable home.

Their very lives are a target of the occupation forces. One woman was on her way back from receiving medical treatment at Palestine Hospital in Cairo, when the ambulance she was in was stopped at the Egyptian side of the borders until the Israelis allowed her husband and the nursing team to transport her in a Red Crescent ambulance to Gaza. A soldier ordered her 55-year-old husband inside, with no concern for his sick wife who was left without care under the burning sun. The sick woman, who has difficulty breathing due to a heart-related disease, begged the soldiers to let her husband stay with her until they finished the entry procedures, but they showed her no mercy. They left her alone in the ambulance where she died, in pain and loneliness. Her husband was not even able to say goodbye to her. After many hours at the checkpoint, he and the nursing team returned to the ambulance and found only a body waiting to be transported; her soul was gone. The husband fainted. It was he that the ambulance finally transported to the hospital for treatment.

Pioneer projects: women’s hands and ideas Hanadi Dweikat, Nablus

Palestinian women contribute to the struggle against occupation at all levels. However, the number who have managed to start and run successful small businesses is small.

Maha Zyada, 26, established her own beehive project to produce honey in the village of Madama to the south of Nablus. Although she had three children, this did not prevent her from pursuing this idea and succeeding.

Maha said, “In the beginning it was a way to fill my spare time. I enrolled in training courses in the village in order to keep busy. Being a mother did not stop me from going further with my ambitions. I took courses in agriculture, embroidery of Palestinian dresses, bee keeping and food preservation. I also took a course in public health and first aid.

“After the bee keeping course, the trainers distributed hives to the participants in order to start a collective project. Eight months later, we were able to sell our first products. It was difficult work and our bees abandoned the hives twice. We also had problems in marketing our products because of the economic situation. So we established an association for bee keepers

and solicited help from the Ministry of Agriculture to market the products. We persisted, and we hope that our project will grow.

Another group of women opened a supermarket for women. The idea came to Muntaha because when women go to the market they often cannot find a woman to attend to them. She and her sister-in-law opened the supermarket in 1995. They employ only women. They face the same problems with their business as does everyone else as a result of the occupation. Restrictions on movement have decreased the number of clients.

Abeer Taha is one of the women who have developed their artistic talents. She says she discovered that she was gifted when she was young and while she was out of the country she took several art courses. Upon her return, she opened a store to market her hand-made crafts. She makes flower bouquets and decorates chocolates for weddings and birthdays. She also does embroidery on handbags and schoolbags. In the beginning the project flourished, but the current Intifada has brought many difficulties. However, she remains optimistic about the future.

Another model project is the fast food cafeteria opened by Hala Dahshan in Jerusalem. Hala loves cooking and spends many hours in the kitchen. After having taken several training courses in management and cooking, she opened her cafeteria. She works with a group of women to make snacks and pies. She is also hoping to expand her services to catering and home delivery.

Many women entrepreneurs have proven that women are able to contribute in all sectors. It is an invitation to all women with talents to develop them and use them to the greatest extent possible.

Palestinian women prisoners: assault, solitary confinement, deportation

A report published by the Palestinian Prisoners' Club on 4 September 2003 revealed that the administration of the women's jail in Al Ramlah has ordered prisoner Irena Sarahnah, 27, from Al Dhiesha Refugee Camp, to be deported to Russia within three months. The prison administration ordered her to provide NIS 3000 for the purchase of an air ticket for her expulsion. Her response was that, "I struggled for Palestine and I will remain in Palestine even in jail." The Prisoners' Club lawyer, Hussam Younis, appealed to the Israeli High Court against the deportation order.

Irena Sarahna is of Russian origin; she is married to prisoner Ibrahim Sarahna from Aldhiesha Refugee Camp near Bethlehem. She was arrested with her husband on 28 May 2002 and was charged of helping "suicide bombers" enter Israel. She has a child who is currently living with her in-laws in Al Dhiesha.

The same report also revealed that two female prisoners, Asma' Hussein, 18, from Tulkarem and Manal Ghanem from Nablus, were severely beaten on their way back from the courthouse. Guards threw the two prisoners on the ground, knowing that Manal Ghanem is pregnant. The prison administration placed Ghanem to solitary confinement. The 75 female Palestinian prisoners in Al Ramlah jail experience numerous forms of harassment and their lawyers are prevented from meeting with them.

French artist Dubousque documents daily life in Palestine
Yousef Al Shayeb, Ramallah

After having produced a series of documentary films, the French director Dominique Dubousque spent five months in Palestine to make his latest film, *Palestine – Palestine*. The film was presented in Paris and received positive review. It presents the human aspects of the Palestinian question and moves from the day-to-day reality under shelling, siege and killing to the simple dreams people have to live like all other human-beings. Dubousque says he did not want to present any analysis of the situation in Palestine but only project the life of Palestinians through the main characters, Nidal and his wife, who as they get married, laugh, sing and dance express their refusal of the occupation.