

Balata – history from a camp - and a social project running out of money



**In cooperation with Palestine Committee of Norway
Trade Union Section**

Balata – history from a camp

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About two thirds to three quarters of Palestinians worldwide are refugees (the figures depend on the estimates and definitions). About one third (approximately 1,4 million) of refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) still live in refugee camps, most of them in Jordan (42%), 23 % in Gaza, 16% in the West Bank, 10% in Syria and 9% in Lebanon.



There are 59 official refugee camps (official according to the definition of UNRWA, there are several more, which are not recognised), 19 of them in the West Bank. Balata is the largest camp in the West Bank with 25,000 inhabitants (on an area of 1km²).

The unresolved refugee question and the right of return of Palestinian refugee have been one of the main obstacles in every Israeli-Palestinian negotiation and will be in the future. The demand for the right of return has always played a central role in the Palestinian national movement and is a crucial part of the Palestinian identity. No Palestinian party has been willing to give up the right of return and also Fatah, strongly backed by the West, consists mainly of refugees. At the same time refugee camps are viewed as problematic areas, especially the youth from refugee camps often have a bad reputation.



Traditionally, most of the resistance against the occupation has taken place in the refugee camps. Martyrs also mostly come from the camps. Frustrated youth with built-up hatred and no future perspectives are easily recruited for resistance. The Israeli army views the camps as the main source of violence and resistance (in their view 'terror') and therefore invades regularly, enters homes forcibly and arrests people. Almost all inhabitants of refugee camps (including women) will be arrested at some point for time frames between a few days and many years. This in turn increases the willingness of being active in resistance against the occupation. Many times the army also destroys the infrastructure of the camps, in order to stop 'terror groups', as they say. This makes the already very unsatisfactory infrastructure often even less functional.



Until today, there has not been an organised movement of the refugees. This might be surprising but is connected to the nature of the problem. The refugees are spread to lots of different places, are not organised and are busy with daily problems, like improving their living conditions, surviving, and getting food for the family. Lack of perspectives and resignation create a vicious circle that becomes difficult to escape.



Because of the difficult and stressful circumstances, the potential for violence is higher than in other areas. There are no official studies, but social workers also speak about increasing use of drugs, especially among youth and young men. This tendency has a negative effect on other problems, like petty crime.

Lack of future perspectives threatens the social cohesion of the society. With the resulting frustration, inner-social and familiar relations deteriorate, as the rising numbers of domestic violence show. There is a chance that readiness for and acceptance of violence will further increase, which will lessen the chances of a peaceful coexistence between the peoples in this region.



The two Intifadas gave the youth a task, they turned into heroes and had authority and power in their families and the society. At the same time, there was always fear of prison, or the experiences they would face in prison. Frequently one hears about torture and other abuses – these experiences usually remained unresolved and undigested. This hinders a healthy development immensely or makes it impossible. During the last years, the youth increasingly spends their time on the streets. Within no time, the youth turn from heroes to social fringe groups.



The youth here often have lots of ideas, but do not know how to express them and how to realise them. They lack a lot of knowledge, knowledge about their rights, about social relations, about leadership. They need support in these fields urgently. It will do them good to give them responsibilities and tasks. They need to feel useful for a change.

The families often do not have enough resources to help their children and absorb the mounting problems. Children do not have the privilege anymore to grow up like kids. The girls have to remain at home, help in the household and hardly ever leave the home. One girl says: “Nobody listens, nobody is interested, and everyone yells all the time.”

Life in Balata is getting worse constantly, so the need for psycho-social support is steadily increasing. Teachers and parents are overwhelmed, helpless and are increasingly losing control of the youth. Lots of young people spend some time, often several years in prison (as political prisoners). When they return to the society, they are heroes and at the same time, they have not developed during those years and behave like teenagers. Integrating them back into life in the camp is difficult but extremely necessary. Similarly women who come back from prison often have difficulties readjusting to the roles expected of them in the family. There are a lot of expectations involved, frustrations rise quickly, leading often to aggression, sometimes domestic violence if pressure is not released in some constructive way.

At the same time, Balata is kind of a lawless space. There are the occupation forces with many invasions, but the Palestinian police has only been established before the last Intifada. However, during the Intifada, the

Israeli army was entering the camp frequently and the police did not have any influence at all. Today, people are not used to the police as a law enforcement agency. Hardly anybody will call the police if there is a problem and laws are not respected as such.

Given the lack of political perspectives the disillusion in the Palestinian society is high. Today people experience less direct violence through military attacks by the Israeli army than before, at the same time desperation has been growing and the belief in a better future has disappeared. The occupied territories have traditionally been marked by a high social mobilisation, today there is not much left, what could be clearly seen, for example, during the war in Gaza in January 2009. The huge disappointment in the peace process, the different negotiating periods without real improvements of the living conditions have left people without many beliefs behind who are not willing to easily enter another process for peace or anything like that.

The above described situation strongly affects youth and children who as weakest parts in the family often have to absorb the complete contextual pressure. This pressure can be felt through violence or neglect in general and causes not only a variety of psychological and psychosomatic symptoms but also has long-lasting consequences on their emotional and cognitive development and behaviour. Learning difficulties or disabilities are among these consequences, which can lead to a vicious circle of failure, rejection, disappointment, violent outbursts, hyper-activeness, depression, more rejection, etc. Parents and teachers are usually overwhelmed and are not able to detect the symptoms and offer adequate professional support. There are too few social workers and/or psychologists in Palestine and the ones that exist often have too little practical experience.

The Palestinian refugees are a central theme in Palestinian politics, but at the same time, nothing is changing. The refugee camps are in a precarious situation in several ways. The living conditions in the camps are disastrous, which has multiple effects, as described above. Add to that the strange situation of being somewhat extraterritorial entities – the camps are not under the administration of the PA and as the UN is renting the land of the camps as well as providing basic services (though insufficiently), they are officially 'belonging' to them. In practical terms this means that Balata lies within the borders of Nablus, but the municipality does not provide services to the inhabitants (like garbage collection, schools, etc.). Camp residents cannot vote in municipal elections. Even though the situation in the camps is very dire and whoever can afford it will leave

There are three schools in Balata established by the UNRWA, those schools are from the first grade to the 9th grade and they take more than 6 thousand students. High schools are provided by the PA and they are outside the camp, the number of students continuing through high school is decreasing since it is becoming costly and mainly of the lack of vision for hope and the future that education is dropping from being a priority to the youth specially the boys. Good percentage finish high school and continue to university but is becoming less now because of the high expenses to attend university and the bad financial situation of most families in the camps. Another major problem of reducing number of students going to higher education is the lack of jobs and high unemployment rate that is 46% in Balata and 51% in general among university and college graduates.



It is more girls now that finish high school and may continue to universities, depending on finances and opportunities they continue to higher education, masters and PHD, but is a smaller number. Most people in Balata who has a job, it is in the lower income level, that is why poverty level is very high and can be around 70%

Psycho social support project, the Balata family center.



The project aims to address and absorb physical and psychological burdens in the refugee camp in order to reduce or positively redirect frustrations and aggressions; to strengthen women in their role, so that they will be able to deal with difficult circumstances and to lessen the potential for aggression within their families and to develop alternatives to the violent discharge of accumulated anger; to offer youth safe spaces where they can reflect on their situation, have alternatives to meeting on the streets; to allow constructive dealing with acute cases of violence, in order to support a healthy development and to prevent an increasing tendency to violence and/or crime.

Project description:

Project background and Problem analysis:

The Palestinian refugee camps are areas of immense tensions. There is not enough space, there are hardly any playgrounds for children, schools are overcrowded, and housing is dense and scarce. Young people growing up in the camps often do not have any visions for the future. Lack of opportunities leaves them in a hopeless state of mind. A tendency toward abuse, violence and crime is natural, obvious and constantly increasing. At the same time, there are very few facilities addressing the amounting problems within the society. The organisations that do exist often lack professional training in psycho-social support, a field completely underdeveloped and in no way adept to address the needs and challenges. In some cases, there are organisations and individuals with professional experience but they are often just addressing few cases or are not known in the society. In Balata, there is only one counsellor available, through UNRWA, who works from 8 to 2.30. There is no specialised unit in the camp.

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Lack of future perspectives threatens the social cohesion of the society. With the resulting frustration, inner-social and familiar relations deteriorate, as the rising numbers of domestic violence show. There is a chance that readiness for and acceptance of violence will further increase, which will lessen the chances of a peaceful coexistence between the peoples in this region.

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Target groups:

The project will be working with any interested parties seeking help and support on the psycho social level whether they are individuals or groups or organizations. All the residents of Balata are victims of violence either it is coming from the occupation or the local domestic violence that is spreading immensely on all levels in the camp.

The kids of the three schools in balata boys and girls are a primary target group to work with through activities and group therapy that will end up with individual cases. Also working with the rest of the family in a continuation of the support to the children. Women and men are also a target group mainly on couple or individual basis.

There are now problems of getting funding to continue this vital project. There are fundings for the year till september and then it will be hard to keep providing services to the people here.

Give these kids a chance.



About our funding situation:

The current funding is from GIZ, the German development cooperation.

They are more into infrastructure and physical projects, and they are also working with the PA directly. They are cutting down to finish the civil peace service program that we are getting funding through.

The current funding is around 135 000 EUROS per year which include everything, salaries and activities, training and running cost.

We have nothing to do with UNRWA when it comes to funding. They do not support us on any level, even though we have a partnership with them and we work in their schools. We support all activities financially through this project.

The work is increasing and we will need more people to work- Currently we have two full time social workers and 2 part time, plus paid volunteers to keep up with the load of work.

The expected budget needed is 140 000 – 150 000 EUROS per year, 30% is for worker wages and the rest for activities and running cost. We are currently talking to different institutions to help so whatever we can get from each resource will be great, and we will add them up to get it all.

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