

Hamza



By Janoub Atatra*

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efore he got sick, Hamza used to dance *dabka* and play karate. He was a happy child, always smiling, and had many friends. When he was ten years old, I experienced the saddest day of my life: One morning, as he was on his way to school, he fell down a flight of stairs. It happened without any reason; his legs just seemed to give out. What happened next was a complete shock. He was diagnosed with a brain-stem tumor growing along and between the nerves. Thus we embarked on the long journey of treatment.

In cases when there is no treatment available in Palestine, the Palestinian government refers cancer patients to an Israeli hospital, helps them apply for permits to enter Israel, and covers the direct cost of surgical intervention and medication. Since 2011, Hamza has had seven surgeries and was given more than 40 days of radiotherapy. When he had to stay for long periods in the hospital, he made friends with the doctors and nurses who all liked him very much. But it was all very tiring, and still there was no progress. So we stopped his treatment for a while. But Hamza got worse. Now, we are trying chemotherapy, hoping that this will help. But Hamza hates the weekly trips to the hospital. At seven in the morning he has to be at Qalandiya checkpoint. The buses are crowded, there are traffic jams, and often he has to wait for a long time; each trip is an ordeal that takes a whole day. Moreover, for the past few weeks, his blood count has been low and he has returned home not having been able to receive treatment.

Hamza is now 15 years old and dreams of getting a driver's license. He plans to study psychology. He goes to school, takes the exams, and gets good grades. He is smart! All the suffering he has experienced has made him think about many things; his ideas about life and people are beautiful and mature for his age. The most difficult thing for him is that he cannot play with his friends. Because he has a hard time



It is 6:50 A.M. and Hamza is ready to go to Jerusalem for a chemotherapy treatment.

keeping his balance, he prefers to stay in the classroom during recess. This is a lonely time. Sometimes his brother stays with him, but most of the time, he is by himself. Hamza would love to ride a bicycle, have friends come over, and go outside or to town with them. But he cannot walk without someone walking beside him and holding on every once in a while. Even though he has physiotherapy twice a week and exercises every day at home, his balance is not improving. On the weekends, we have started to go horseback riding. We are trying to lead a normal life; I want Hamza and us to be as happy as we can be!

Lately, he is often moody and wants to do nothing but spend his time on Facebook. He used to talk to me much more and tell me about how he feels. In fact, I have learned a lot from Hamza. A few years ago I went back to college and earned a degree in primary education. During my internship, I was able to apply many things I learned from Hamza to dealing with the children in school. I loved them and they loved me; the administration and teachers really wanted me to continue to teach

at their school. But they could not hire me because there are not enough teaching jobs. I tell myself that I am too busy with Hamza, but the truth is that I would love to continue teaching! And Hamza encourages me to go to work; he would manage. Every time there is a difficult situation, we try to grow stronger and persevere. All of us. We consider Hamza a most precious gift.

At night, Hamza has difficulties with breathing and must wear a mask. My husband and I frequently check on him; sometimes, I sleep next to him. I am always exhausted. The hardest thing for me is that I am dealing with so much, and there is seldom anyone to whom I can talk. There are neighbors who have children with cancer, but they do not want to talk. I think about starting a support group for mothers of children with cancer.

*This text is based on an oral account given by Janoub and translated from Arabic by the TWIP collective.

Janoub Atatra is a mother of three and holds a bachelor's degree in primary education. She believes that positive reinforcement is the driving factor that helps children learn and develop.