



Resilience of a Refugee

By Hashem Abushama



Upon finishing the Palestine National Exams (*tawjihi*) with a score of 98.8% in 2012, after much deliberation, I decided to apply to schools in the U.S. to study economics and peace and global studies. As a student who attended the UNRWA (United Nations for Relief and Works Agency) schools and the Arroub Public High School, this was an almost unfeasible dream. With English skills that were primarily rudimentary, and an educational system that is not particularly designed to prepare you for American colleges, the U.S. seemed to be farther than the sun. But a year later, I received my acceptance letter from Earlham College, a small liberal arts college in Indiana.

When I first arrived to Earlham, it did not take that long for me to start identifying the differences between Earlham and Arroub—a small refugee camp where I grew up, just outside the city of Hebron. I perhaps did not realize how stark the differences were until I visited home after my first year. I noticed that living in another reality makes you notice things about living under the Occupation that you would not normally notice. Sadly, because of how harsh the Occupation is, we have no choice but to get used to life under it. After a year at Earlham, the image of an Israeli jeep entering Arroub and arresting a 15-year-old kid was no longer “merely a part of the daily reality.” The smell of tear gas, the sound of rubber bullets, the yellow gate at the entrance of Arroub; all of it looked different to me, becoming living proof of an unjust reality that needs to be challenged. In many ways, these realities of the Occupation also became reminders to me about the value and importance of my own education and the power of my story as a Palestinian refugee.



Hashem with the guys at Arroub Refugee Camp.

Needless to say, the Occupation is not the only thing I see when I visit home. An image from Arroub that I will never forget is of the long lines of people at the entrance of Hebron Public Hospital, waiting to donate blood to my friend, Mu'taz, who lost multiple blood units after being shot by an Israeli settler. Whether you knew Mu'taz or not, it did not matter. What mattered was that Mu'taz needed help.

I also clearly remember the fireworks that filled the sky right after the Palestine National Exam scores were broadcast. Although our high school is not an actual school but a rented house, every year, several students earn more than 90%, with some students earning the highest scores in the district of Northern Hebron. Indeed, the people of Arroub bring to life Mahmoud Darwish's poetry: “We have on this land a life worth living.”

The day-to-day reality in refugee camps is more than just statistics about incursions, injuries, and shootings. There is also an inspiring response from many in the refugee communities. How are we to articulate their lives and struggles without romanticizing the reality?

Though those are two seemingly contradicting images of home—one of hope, and the other is of suffering, despair, and injustice—they are not isolated from each other. In a place like Arroub, where the unemployment rate is 40% and the political reality is incredibly harsh, one might wonder: why would an 18-year-old, who has little to no access to resources and opportunities, fight fiercely and passionately for his education?



Arroub Refugee Camp.



Hashem Abushama at Earlham College, Indiana.

I find the answer in a quote from my father, Jaber, who spent 30 years of his life teaching English, including at the high school in my refugee camp.

"They can occupy our land, but they can't occupy our minds and it is our responsibility to flourish. Education is our only weapon," my father always says. To my senior class of 15 students, this quote was particularly meaningful because of our high school's situation. The school has no walls, no playgrounds, and no gardens. It has tiny classrooms and, above all, is understaffed. Yet, the spirit of education thrives—a spirit that is firmly planted in all of its students. It is this spirit that guided me while applying to colleges in the U.S. and raising funds to support my education at Earlham.

Having arrived to the U.S. with generous support from multiple donors and organizations, I still needed to raise additional money in order to continue my education. As a friend and I were chatting in front of my dorm, the idea of crowd-funding came up and a few days later, I started my GoFundMe fundraising page. In addition to the multiple donors, many individuals

have helped me pay for a year and a half of my two remaining years at Earlham. I started the campaign thinking that I would be overwhelmed by sharing so much about my life in such a public way, which proved to be true. I, however, became more overwhelmed by the support I have received. Throughout this ongoing journey, I have learned that many prominent leaders suffer from economic hardships, but through their perseverance and dedication to their education, they become rich intellectually and emotionally.

This is not only my story. In the ocean of significant success stories of many Palestinian refugees, my story is only a drop. The two images of home, along with the stories of resilience and determination of Palestinian refugees, are what Palestine is to me. Trying to articulate what that means, while addressing the complexities of the day-to-day situation in Palestine, has proven to be a real challenge.

On multiple occasions, I have been invited to speak publicly about Palestine. The most recent invitation was at the UN headquarters, where I represented Palestine refugees



Hashem representing Palestine refugees at the UNRWA's 65th Anniversary, UN headquarters.

at the UNRWA's 65th Anniversary. Along with five other Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria, I was assigned the task of offering a glimpse into the lives of refugees at this high-level conference. It was in the halls of the UN where the two contradicting images of home seemed to be extremely challenging to address. On one hand, an emphasis on the severity of the daily reality is highly important. On the other hand, highlighting the inspiring refugee communities' response to their daily reality is equally important. But, how are we to do this without romanticizing the life of a refugee? While our reality is part of what motivates us to become accomplished, it is that reality that we are rejecting.

Hashem Abushama is an undergraduate student at Earlham College, where he is double majoring in economics and peace and global studies. At Earlham, Hashem has served as the convener of Student Organizations' Council and the convener of Students for Peace and Justice in Palestine. He is an active member of BDS Earlham and is also the elected president of the Earlham student body.

Our Readers Say ...

"I remember that my parents once told me a story about a mysterious man. They were going on a road trip to Nazareth when their car broke down. They pushed it to a gas station, where they were trying to find help. That's when a guy showed up, out of nowhere, tapped on the car, asked them to run it, tapped again and said, 'the FINKLER don't work,' and walked away. My parents still don't know what that means."

Subhi Khoury, Jerusalem

"We were at Disney World and my brother and sister decided not to tell me that 'The Mummy,' is a scary rollercoaster. Instead, they said it was a simple game, nothing to be scared about. When we went up and it started, I got so scared I threw up on both of them. That's the definition of karma."

Suheil Mustaklem, Ramallah

"Being unemployed is really difficult. But I like to stay optimistic that the economy will get better. For now, it gives me an excuse to sleep in!"

Mahmoud Faraj, Jericho

"I'm studying to be a doctor now. The amount of studying is ridiculous. But it'll all be worth it in the end. The few times I've gotten to work with patients have been incredibly rewarding!"

Farah Merza, Palestine