



On the Record: Palestinian Civil Society Under Siege

Issue 9: The Refugee Connection

Contents

- From the Editorial Desk: The Refugee's Right
- The Palestinian Connection
- A Letter to Kofi Annan from the Children of IbdAA

From the Editorial Desk: The Refugee's Right

This issue of 'On the Record' profiles a community center in a crowded refugee camp on the West Bank, which among its many services helps young refugees to use computers.

The center is called IbdAA. (This roughly translates as 'innovation' or 'making something out of nothing.') IbdAA was set up in 1995 by the refugees of Dheisheh camp in Bethlehem to organize social and educational programs for their children. Out of IbdAA has emerged the first Internet cafe to be run from a refugee camp and an innovative information-technology training program for refugees young and old. Grassroots International provides general support to IbdAA's program.

This is an exceptional initiative. Anything that helps refugee children to escape the boredom and tension of camp life is to be applauded. But IbdAA is going much further than this -- it may also be saving lives.

This is because children have been on the front lines of the current uprising, both as protesters and as targets. Over half of Dheisheh's residents are under the age of 16, and five had been killed between September 30, 2000 and the time of our visit in February of this year. IbdAA's computers are one of the few attractions able to compete with demonstrations.

Like the other groups profiled in this series, IbdAA is an innovative example of how Palestinian civil society is responding to the current crisis and empowering its beneficiaries. But IbdAA also stands out among those organizations.

One difference lies in the nature of the politics that guides IbdAA's model of empowerment. IbdAA is encouraging young refugees to go to the heart of what has made them refugees and advocate for a return to the villages in Israel that their parents and grandparents were forced to abandon in 1948. This single-minded focus on the refugee issue is unique among the partners of Grassroots International.

Ibdaa is also notable in that it remains an integral part of the refugee community from which it sprang. It is run by volunteer refugees, not professionals. This makes it a community-based organization with a direct link to stakeholders -- a claim very few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can make.

Another difference lies in Ibdaa's approach to the rule of law. Many refugees view Oslo as a betrayal that could trade away their right to return home, and because of this Ibdaa rejects any effort that relies solely on the limited autonomy afforded by Oslo. For Ibdaa, the rule of law begins with respecting the refugee's right to return to what is now Israel.

Although Ibdaa is a small organization with limited resources, it is highly effective in getting out its message. During a tour of the United States in 1999, an Ibdaa dance troupe met with the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and handed him a letter insisting on their right to return. Readers will find the letter at the end of this issue. Two documentary films are being produced about Ibdaa, testifying to its appeal. [1]

Ibdaa also made good use of the Pope's visit to Dheisheh camp in the spring last year. Hundreds of journalists accompanied the Pope, and most sent their stories from Ibdaa's computer center. In the process, many of them wrote about Ibdaa. This is advocacy of the highest order.

But the refugees would be the first to admit that they are having less success when it comes to their overarching political goal, namely return to their pre-1948 villages. Many would say that this is because the goal is frankly unrealistic: Israel would never allow the return of all Palestinian refugees who now number over five million.[2]

According to this view, those who insist on the right to return are dooming themselves -- and all Palestinians -- to perpetual war and endless heartache.

It was common to hear this sort of skepticism expressed during the early years of the Oslo peace process, when it seemed that an agreement with Israel was within grasp.

Those days are long gone. The right of return is once again back at the forefront of the political agenda, and it is not just refugee support groups like Ibdaa that have placed it there. Two weeks ago, seven prominent human rights groups (some Palestinian, some international) sent an open letter to the Chairman of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) calling for protection of Palestinian civilians and insisting on the right of return for all the refugees. Clearly, Ibdaa's goals are shared by a broader movement. [3]

When we discussed these goals with the residents of Dheisheh, they answered that the right of return is recognized by international law. That right can no more be denied to Palestinians than other refugees. As long as this is ignored, they said, there will be no peace between Israel and the Palestinians. They added that not all of the five million refugees would necessarily want to return to Israel: some might; some might not. The important thing is that the right be acknowledged and not treated with contempt. Human rights cannot be wished away because they are inconvenient.

[4]

It is certainly not our task to question the validity of a basic human right. And even if this demand for total return seems 'extreme' and unrealistic, it should be said that there are many things short of complete return that could be done to improve the lot of Palestinian refugees and demonstrate that the international community understands its legal obligations toward the refugees.

This should start with protection. Palestinians are the only refugees in the world that cannot claim legal protection from the UN system. [5] Yet no population is more exposed during a period of violence and unrest like the present uprising. This applies not just in the territories occupied by Israel, but to host countries like Lebanon, where Christian militias massacred thousands of Palestinian refugees in 1982.

Events such as that massacre and the current uprising in the territories have persuaded Palestinian refugees everywhere that the international community has simply washed its hands of them. It has made them doubly determined not to compromise on their basic rights.

Ibdaa allows the young refugees of Dheisheh to express this with passion. Some may feel that this is exploitative -- that it turns these young people against 'peace.' But peace has never been kind to these refugees, and today they are once again surrounded by violence, lawlessness, and squalor -- none of which is their own making. It is true that some of them throw stones and taunt the Israeli security forces, but most other governments take that sort of provocation in their stride.

These young refugees are the most dis-empowered of all Palestinians. That is what gives Ibdaa's model of empowerment its relevance and intensity.

The Palestinian Connection

Ibdaa is a tiny part of the largest and longest-running refugee crisis in the world. It began on November 29, 1947, when the UN General Assembly voted by 33 votes to 13 to partition Palestine into two states -- Arab and Jewish -- and establish an international enclave comprising Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Fighting had already broken out between Jews and Palestinians and it spread quickly to the entire region after the state of Israel was created on May 14, 1948. By the time a cease-fire came into force, Israeli forces had already pushed beyond the recognized borders of the new state and captured West Jerusalem as well as large portions of the area allocated to the Palestinian state.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were driven out, often with great violence. By the time fighting stopped, only 100,000 Arabs remained in what was now Israel, compared to a pre-war Arab population of around 800,000. In December 1948, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 194 that recognized the Palestinians' right to return home and receive compensation. A special UN agency, the UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), was established to provide them with assistance.

The expulsion of the Palestinian refugees in 1948 continues to cast a long shadow over the Middle East. In 1950 -- the year that the camp of Dheisheh was built -- the refugee population stood at 915,000. Since then it has grown to over five million. One-third of them live in 59 camps around the Middle East, like Dheisheh, which are maintained by UNRWA. Refugees make up 78 percent of the entire population of Gaza. Israel has consistently refused to accept the refugees back and insisted that they be resettled in the countries where they now live. But the host governments have replied that the refugees are Israel's responsibility. In the case of the Lebanon, this has left the refugees exposed and unprotected. Long after the 1982 massacre, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are barred from many occupations and face enormous difficulty in leaving or returning to the country.

The refugee crisis has been further complicated -- some would say compromised -- by the Oslo process. At the outset, the Palestinian position was that the refugees had the right to return to the 1948 villages, which the Israelis rejected out of hand. As a result, it was decided to postpone the refugee issue for the 'final status' discussions.

The refugees of Dheisheh clung to their identity with a fierce pride throughout the Oslo years. Like most of the UNRWA camps, Dheisheh came under the control of the Palestinian Authority in 1995. One of the Authority's first acts was to tear down the fence that Israel had erected around the Dheisheh camp to keep young refugees from stoning Israeli patrols.

Even after this physical demarcation was demolished, the camp population continued to insist on their separate identity. In 1996 they led a revolt in the Bethlehem area against the holding of local elections. As this series has noted, many Palestinians considered -- and still consider -- that local elections were an essential step on the path to a more democratic state, but the refugees in Dheisheh did not want to come under a new local council that was controlled by the Palestinian Authority. This, they thought, would open the way to their assimilation and weaken their status as refugees.

The refugees grew increasingly nervous as the Camp David Summit grew closer, with its agenda of 'final status' issues. On June 26, 2000, a refugee delegation presented a petition to the Palestinian Authority asking it to affirm the right to return as 'sacred and non-negotiable.' The refugees were finding the ambivalence of their own government much harder to resist than Israel's blunt opposition.

Their worst fears were not realized. By the time of the Camp David Summit, confidence between the Palestinians and Israelis was at rock bottom, and Arafat was in no mood to make the kind of concessions that the refugees had feared. Israel offered to take in 100,000 refugees as a one-off 'humanitarian' gesture and to set up an international body to discuss compensation. Arafat insisted on a full return for all the 1948 refugees and their descendants.

Whatever the differences between the 1948 refugees and other Palestinians, they appear to have disappeared under the common threat of the current crisis. But it is easy to see how the differences could resurface in the event of a return to 'peace talks' with Israel. Several Palestinians who spoke to this delegation described the right to return as a thing of the past. One prominent NGO even described the camps as 'marginalized communities' and came close to urging their assimilation.

The refugees, for their part, remain as defiant as ever -- a defiance that is painted on the walls of Dheisheh. This delegation was told that many refugees are less concerned with the practical questions of who should return and to where than having their rights acknowledged and compensation paid for their losses. In other words, it is the principle that matters.

Nothing has preserved the refugees' sense of identity so much as the memory of the villages that were abandoned in 1948. The first residents of Dheisheh came from a cluster of villages in the foothills and valleys outside Jerusalem that are 30 minutes away by car. Most of the villages are now jumbled rocks hidden by pines, but they retain a deep, almost mystical attraction.

The events of 1948 are referred to as the Nakba ('catastrophe'), and they remain extraordinarily vivid, even for those who never lived in the abandoned villages. Ziad Abbas, one of the co-directors of the Ibdaa Cultural Center in the refugee camp of Dheisheh, was born 16 years after his parents were expelled from the village of Zakaria. He remembers being told by his parents how they were forced out by air raids and artillery shells on October 14, 1948. His most precious possession is the key to the family home, which he inherited from his mother. [6]

In January 2000, Shirabe Yamada, a Japanese volunteer who was working in Dheisheh, accompanied a group of children from the camp back to one of the villages named Ras Abu Ammar. Security was relatively lax, and they were able to make the journey in a bus. Yamada described what happened when they arrived:

'The children set off for a treasure hunt. They run between trees and hop across stone walls, joyfully stretching their limbs in the open space and filling their lungs with fresh air that is not found in the camp. They come back to report the discoveries. A rusty white cooking bowl with flower patterns. A large round flat piece of metal, completely rusted in brown -- 'women place this over fire to bake bread,' Mohammed explains with hand gestures. A bombshell, also fully rusted and disfigured from an explosion -- 'I know about this,' Qussay tells me. 'My grandparents were told (by Zionist forces) that they had four hours to collect their belongings and leave before the shelling of the village. So they did.' [7]

Shirabe Yamada was also able to capture the mood several months later in June when a busload of young refugees from Dheisheh travelled to the border with Lebanon to meet other refugees from the Lebanese camps. The meeting followed the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon. This, too, was an emotional affair even though it was conducted through a wire fence.

'The border was crowded with more than 300 people of all ages, clinging onto the fence from both sides. The youths of Shatila, who had arrived there first, cheered with joy when they spotted the group from Dheisheh making their way through the crowd. Handshakes and kisses were exchanged over the barbed wires.'

'Between the fences went a stream of exchanges -- a glass of cold drink poured in Palestine and drunk in Lebanon, photographs of relatives, mobile phones with other family members on line, rings and pendants that were just taken off from necks and fingers, and babies to be held in the arms of the aunts and cousins on the other side. Some groups sat over the coffee to engage in stories and news from the lost decades. 'They are all refugees like us,' watching the encounters Mohammed from Dheisheh commented. 'They speak with the same village accent as ours.'

'Under the burning midday sun and in the dust, the meeting of the youths lasted well over four hours. The back of their T-shirts were covered with names and messages such as 'I will never forget you.' 'I love you very much.' Everything that could be exchanged -- coins, necklaces, hair accessories, wallets and hand-written notes -- went over the fences. And of course, there were more e-mail addresses in everyone's hands at the end of the day.'

Palestinians would not be the first refugees to buoy their morale with thoughts of home, but few other refugees have put up with such poor living conditions for so long. Even this has been turned against them. For example, it has often been said that they deliberately live in appalling conditions to keep alive their right to return.

There is no evidence of this in Dheisheh. It is true that the refugees are determined to resist anything that suggests permanence, but this is not the same as saying that they are indifferent to their living conditions.

Some 11,000 refugees live in Dheisheh, crammed into half a square mile of narrow streets and small houses. Some of the houses were built in 1950 when the land was rented by the United Nations for a hundred years at the nominal rent of a dollar a year.

The inhabitants of Dheisheh are the first to complain about poor services. They point out that the camp has only one doctor for the whole population. The UNRWA runs two schools, but one is under repair, which has led to chronic overcrowding. Dheisheh's 2,400 pupils must study in two shifts, which means that the average student is in class for just three hours a day. The quality of teaching is also poor. There are no parks and no public recreation facilities in Dheisheh.

UNRWA's failings are clear for all to see, but its problems have as much to do with mandate as money. Last year UNRWA administered 59 camps on a budget of \$300.9 million, and as of May 1, 2001, UNRWA was still \$68 million short of its budget for this year. But the real point is that UNRWA is only expected to provide emergency assistance, which rules out any long-term development and even protection. It certainly excludes anything that would suggest 'permanence.'

Ironically, this leads the refugees to hail UNRWA as their best friend even as they lament its failures. As Ziad Abbas explained, the existence of UNRWA helps to preserve the special identity of the 1948 refugees and to prevent them from being assimilated into host countries. UNRWA helps to keep the refugee issue alive.

The refugees' sense of collective identity is firmly rooted in camps like Dheisheh, although this is not to say that those who leave the camps cease to 'feel' Palestinian. According to Ziad Abbas, at least 25 percent of the camp population has left and moved elsewhere -- some to make their fortune in the United States. But, he said, 'they remain Palestinian refugees,' he said.

In a sense, the IbdAA Cultural Center is a response to the charge that the refugees of Dheisheh are indifferent to their own living conditions. IbdAA is first and foremost a hard-nosed response to the lack of amenities for their children.

Today IbdAA owns two buildings, one of which towers over the entrance to the camp. This is a solid structure, which rather suggests that the refugees know that their stay in Dheisheh is likely to be a long one. The real point is that they -- not foreign aid workers -- should decide how permanent the structures should be. This is the psychological side of empowerment.

In some respects, this could be a statement of IbdAA's philosophy. IbdAA started as an initiative for camp children, and its first achievement was to organize a dance troupe for 24 girls and boys. The troupe was invited to tour Europe, and IbdAA grew quickly from this modest beginning.

IbdAA's members were determined to improve the quality of life for their children, and donors were impressed. The money began to arrive, and today IbdAA runs 13 projects, including a kindergarten, nursery, guesthouse, dance troupe, library, and sports teams. Ziad Abbas estimates that they directly benefit 800 children.

IbdAA employs eleven full-time and three part-time staff. Together with the two (unpaid) directors, they are constantly seeking potential projects that will improve living standards. In the course of conducting a recent survey of health in the camp (with help from a Japanese NGO), they found that old and disabled people receive no support whatsoever. This could be a new project, says Ziad Abbas. They are also planning a newsletter for the children.

In spite of the range of its community activities, IbdAA's inspiration remains defiantly political. For example, the dance troupe uses traditional folklore to depict the story of the Palestinian refugees. Each bedroom in the guesthouse bears the name of an abandoned village.

IbdAA also runs an 'oral history project' that attempts to raise awareness among the children about their heritage and roots and includes the abandoned villages that their parents and grandparents left in 1948. The villages are their holy grail, and they provide rich material for essays, pictures, letter-writing, and even web sites. [8]

The computer center dates from 1997, when IbdAA received a grant of 20-year-old computers from Great Britain. At the time, information technology was still in its infancy in the camp, and only ten families owned computers. The IbdAA administrators made use of one computer and dialed up to the Internet through a single telephone line.

A small number of refugees who had some knowledge of computers volunteered to dismantle and rebuild the old machines, which were then tested out in the camp during a six-month trial run. The experiment was a dazzling success, particularly with the children. Indeed, there was so much interest that the IbdAA committee decided to join a promising project at Bir Zeit University, known as AcrossBorders, which aimed to unite Palestinian refugees in different countries by e-mail. Canadian aid money provided another ten (new) computers, and IbdAA purchased another six with its own funds, together with a server and router.

At the same time, young 'techies' in the camp put their minds toward designing a web site. Jihad Abbas, Ziad's nephew, had been a founding member of the dance troupe. He attended a course in web design at Bir Zeit and also spent his own money to attend a course on writing HTML (web text) in Bethlehem. He was helped by another web designer who had been introduced to computers by his father at an early age and now worked in a computer laboratory in Bethlehem.

The sudden arrival of information technology created a huge buzz among the children of Dheisheh, who had been starved of such opportunities. The computer center organized training courses for children and even women, with each course lasting for two months.

Four courses were under way last summer under the supervision of 19-year-old Jihad, who found himself earning good money -- 1,050 shekels a month. His pupils ranged from preschool kids as young as seven, to adults with no previous computer experience. So many camp inhabitants began coming to the computer center that the IbdAA committee decided to levy a fee: six shekels an hour for adults for use of the Internet, three shekels for use of computers only.

As the kids became more proficient and familiar with e-mail, they began to attract messages and even spar with young Israelis over the Internet. 'We received messages asking why we did not recognize Israel,' said Ziad Abbas. 'The kids replied by asking why the Israelis did not recognize the rights of the Palestinians.'

All this triggered a small information revolution in the grubby, crowded camp of Dheisheh. It has led boys to attend classes with girls -- something that does not happen in the camp's two schools. It has also given a new lease on life to elderly refugees who had long ago resigned themselves to a life of boredom. In just three years, the number of computers in use in Dheisheh has increased tenfold.

With computers came e-mail. American friends put IbdAA in touch with a social worker in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, who organized letter-writing from Shatila. Youngsters from Dheisheh replied by e-mail from IbdAA. The only way that their friends in Shatila could reply was to visit Internet cafes in Beirut. There is now so much demand in Shatila that the camp authorities are trying to organize a computer center modeled on IbdAA.

This explosion of innovation has proved irresistible to foreigners. At one stage or another, the young IbdAA web designers have received help from about 20 foreign volunteers. Two of them came from Oxfam Quebec last summer, expecting to stay for several months, but they left quickly when the uprising broke out in September.

Then, last summer, the IbdAA computer center apparently fell victim to its own reputation. Late one night, the entire center was burned to the ground by an unknown hand. Seventeen computers were lost. The IbdAA committee noted that the router was stolen, containing all of IbdAA's contacts and names. This suggested a political motivation, but the culprits have never been found.

The destruction of the computer center provoked a large, spontaneous demonstration at the camp. 'It was as if a holy place had been burned down,' says Ziad Abbas. Without further ado, the IbdAA committee put out an appeal for more computers and hastened the construction of a second building. Within weeks, a new computer center was up and running, with new machines all donated from abroad.

When we put it to Jihad Abbas, the 19-year-old IbdAA webmaster, that IbdAA's work is political, he looked surprised that we had even asked the question. 'Of course we're political,' says Jihad. 'Everything here is political.'

Particularly networking. When this delegation visited the center, Zayd Aziz Hammash, aged 16, was poring over two messages from Ismail, a friend from Shatila whom he had met at the wire fence in Southern Lebanon in June. Zayd and Ismail had vowed to keep in touch, and now e-mail was making it possible. There are days when Zayd cannot even leave the confines of Dheisheh camp without risking his life. In such a context, e-mail is particularly empowering.

Sometimes, the politics appear extreme. Two young refugees were working at their own personalized web sites, which they had designed. One page carried photos of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, while another showed a photo of the latest Palestinian 'martyr' to fall victim to Israeli bullets. Little bombs bobbed across a third page before exploding on the side of the screen.

Is this an example of the Internet encouraging violence and turning these children against peace? When this question was put to the directors of IbdAA, they deflected it gently. 'Think of the peace that is on offer -- a peace which would condemn these children to live forever in these conditions -- and then ask the question,' said Ziad Abbas.

A more relevant question, he suggested, is whether IbdAA is keeping children out of trouble and off the streets. Abbas would like to think so.

Since the start of the current uprising, it has often been said that Palestinian parents encourage their children to throw stones and even knowingly send their children to their deaths to create 'martyrs.'

This grotesque suggestion infuriates parents like Wafa Al Khatib, who runs the IbdAA guesthouse and has two eight-year-old twins. In the first two weeks of the intifada, she said, it was impossible to control children, many of who were drawn to the frontlines by sheer curiosity. 'Everyone was in a state of complete shock.'

Wafa Al Khatib admits that initially many parents did not spot the risk, perhaps because so many of them had been arrested by the Israelis at some stage. But this changed quickly when the Israelis began firing real bullets at the young demonstrators.

Some teenagers saw the protests as a rite of passage and a test of their courage, and so continued to demonstrate. But most were deeply traumatized. Wafa Al Khatib ordered her own young twins to stay away from the demonstrations. This was difficult, because there was nothing else for them to do in Dheisheh, and they were only in school for three hours a day. 'The rest of the time they watched television.' The brutal fact was that -- apart from the IbdAA facilities -- there is nothing to keep kids off the streets.

Ziad Abbas is a professional cameraman who spends much of his working time filming riots and funerals, and this has given him an acute sense of the danger that faces young people who take part in the riots. Abbas admits that the young people of Dheisheh have been at the forefront of many violent clashes in Bethlehem. (As noted earlier, five had been killed by the time of our visit and scores seriously wounded some were not even participating in demonstrations.) But, says Abbas, 'it is not so easy to control young people. If you forbid something, they will go straight out and do it.'

As a result, the camp leaders have looked for ways to divert the children and channel their anger into less lethal forms of expression. Most of IbdAA's activities for seven- to ten-year-olds take the form of counseling and workshops that are designed to 'get the anger out.' IbdAA also runs an 'emergency project' every Friday, which is also open to children from other camps. This whole day of activities includes theater, self-expression, and games. IbdAA is hoping to hire a full-time social worker to help.

Abbas and his fellow directors also want to start a music project to train young refugees to play musical instruments and to develop some sports activities for young women. IbdAA has already raised the funds to send 21 young refugees -- nine girls and 12 boys -- to college. All of these activities, directly or indirectly, help to keep young refugees occupied.

The computer center has been their single greatest ally. If anything can rival the appeal of street fighting, it is e-mail, personalized web sites, and video games.

But what of the violent content? Ziad shrugged at this. There is, he says, no point in trying to shield the youngsters from violent content or control their right of expression. For example, he is not particularly happy that Palestinian (and even American) children can visit web sites and find instructions about how to make a bomb. At the same time, he would no sooner forbid youngsters from visiting one of these sites than forbid them from attending a protest. The reason is that young people will go where they want -- on the streets or on the web.

The trick, says Abbas, is to 'give them a real alternative and open their minds.' When the uprising began last September, he said, parents even held mock protests inside the camp to divert the frustration and excitement. To some extent, the IbdAA computers serve the same purpose.

We stayed the night at the IbdAA guesthouse. Outside, the streets of Bethlehem were eerily quiet. This is not always the case. Dheisheh is close to various flashpoints, including the Christian town of Beit Jala and the village of Al-Khader. As this issue goes out Bethlehem is the center of fierce fighting. It is little wonder that, as Ziad Abbas puts it, 'no one goes outside at night except cats and dogs.'

Inside, the IbdAA computer center was bustling when we visited. All of the 17 computer screens were aglow. While Zayd Aziz was e-mailing his friend Ismail in the Lebanon, 19-year-old Jihad Abbas explained proudly how he had just come out of a training session for a group of middle-aged men with no previous knowledge of computers. All of them now had e-mail accounts.

It is impossible to say how many children from Dheisheh would have been drawn to the protests if they had not been diverted by the computer center, or how many injuries have been prevented. But when you think of what they face on the streets, you have to be reassured that this alternative exists.

A Letter to Kofi Annan from the Children of IbdAA (September 27, 1999)

The following letter was delivered to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan by an IbdAA dance troupe during their tour of the United States in 1999.

'We are the children of Dheisheh refugee camp, Palestine. Like refugee children all over the world, we are afraid because our future is not safe. And like all children, we want to live in peace. We cannot afford to lose our hope, because that is all we have. In order to keep our hope, we need you to keep your promise to us. Please guarantee our rights as Palestinians refugees. You promised us in the UN Resolution 194 that you would protect our rights. Please keep your promise to us, so that our hope can become true.

'We feel sad because the international community is ignoring our pain, which we have because we are stateless. You, at the United Nations, can help us. Please show us that you care about us.

'Here, on our first visit to the United States, we see the big difference between what we have in the refugee camp and what we as children -- what all children -- deserve to have. This year in Dheisheh, our school building, where 1,100 children learn, collapsed. But instead of sending

more funds for education and infrastructure, we hear that you have decided to reduce the services provided by UNRWA altogether. We need our schools. And we need your help. Please do not close UNRWA.

'We do not have anywhere else to turn to because we are stateless and we must depend on you to protect us. The United Nations can defend us from injustice. Please make sure we are protected now and for our future. We ask this for all the children, not just our group that is visiting today.

'As members of IbdAA, a youth cultural exchange center in Dheisheh, we have had the opportunity to meet children from Iraq, Nicaragua, Rwanda, the United States, and many other countries. We know that they have big problems also. Just like us. Today we are asking you please protect the human rights of all the children in the world.

And please do not forget about us in Dheisheh Refugee Camp.

'Thank you,

'The Children of IbdAA'

The IbdAA Cultural Center, P.O. Box 793, Bethlehem, West Bank, Palestine. Tel./fax: 972 -2-277-6444. E-mail: ibdaa@dheisheh.acrossborders.org.

[1] Mai Masri, an independent Palestinian filmmaker, made the film 'Frontiers of Dreams and Fears.' Ms. Masri spent several months with two young Palestinian refugees from the Shatila camp in Lebanon and the Dheisheh camp in Bethlehem. Smith Patrick is making the second film for the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA). Entitled 'The Children of IBDAA: To Make Something From Nothing,' it follows a group of young Dheisheh refugees on a visit to the demolished villages where their grandparents lived until they were expelled in 1948.

[2] Out of an estimated 5 million Palestinian refugees worldwide, about 3.7 million are registered with UNRWA according to the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA). The total number registered stood at 3,737,494 as of June 2000. They lived in the West Bank (583,000); the Gaza Strip (824,622); Jordan(1,570,192); Syria(383,199); and Lebanon(376,472). See PASSIA 2001 Diary, p. 255.)

[3] The groups include BADIL (the Bethlehem-based Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights); Al-Haq and LAW (two prominent Palestinian human rights monitoring organizations); the Geneva-based World Organization Against Torture; and the New York-based Center for Economic and Social Rights.

The letter asked ECOSOC (1) to call for a periodic review of the protection needs of the Palestinians by the UN Secretary-General; (2) to convene a meeting of the High Contracting Parties of the Fourth Geneva Convention; and (3) to issue a study on appropriate forms of protection. It also requested that the relevant special investigators of the UN Human Rights Commission make onsite visits to the Occupied Territories. The commission has asked eight investigators ('rapporteurs') to visit the territories, but none has yet done so. This letter is notable not just because the groups represent a broad cross section of the international human rights movement, but because it frames the right of return as part of the larger need to protect Palestinians during the current conflict. This unites the entire spectrum of Palestinian political

positions. For the text of the ECOSOC letter, see the BADIL [website](#).

[4] Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right. to return to his country.' This is also expressed in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the regional (European, inter-American, and African) human rights instruments. For further reading, see Ali Abunimah and Hussein Ibish, 'The Palestinian Right of Return,' Issue Paper No. 30, American-Arab Discrimination Committee [website](#).

[5] The UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), which administers 59 Palestinian refugee camps, has no mandate for legal protection. All other refugees in the world fall under the scope of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who does have a protection mandate.

[6] Ziad Abbas writes about the importance of the family in 'The Key and the Lost Present' in 'News from Within,' Vol. X1111, No. 3 (March 1998).

[7] Shirabe Yamada's reports from Dheisheh can be found on the web site of the Middle East Children's Alliance ([MECA](#)).

[8] For how the children see their lives and remember their ancestral villages, see the Dheisheh [website](#).