

Struggling Alone for My Children's Future

Sa'diya Al-Liddawi - Al-Wihdat refugee camp, Amman, Jordan

By Anne Paq

The Al-Liddawi family lives in the middle of Al-Wihdat refugee camp in Amman, one of the biggest camps in Jordan. They come from Jaffa, but came to Jordan from Gaza, which means that they have a different status than most other Palestinian refugees in Jordan. They cannot have a Jordanian passport and have restricted access to services.

Born in 1963, Sa'diya, the mother, is the heart of the family. Since her husband Omar died in 2000, she has had to take care of her eight children on her own: Rula (24 years-old, married and pregnant, finished university); Rana (22 years-old finished university and just submitted her application to become a teacher); Mohammad (20 years-old, student in accounting); Khaled (19 years-old studying to become a surgeon); Saeed (17 years-old student in final year of high school); Ahmad (15 years-old); Mahmoud (14 years-old) and Rawan (12 years-old). All of them were born in Gaza except for Rawan, so they are all registered there and with the Israeli authority as Palestinians born in Gaza.

They live in very dire conditions as they have only a room, a lounge and a kitchen. They also have a small courtyard where things have piled up next to the few hens and rabbits they keep. This is their improved situation; a few years ago, they were obliged to live in one room with no proper toilets. A developer appalled by the bad conditions they were living in decided to help them by building two additional rooms, which is still not enough. They need an additional 7000JD to complete the work in the house.

In such a bad environment Sa'diya has accomplished miracles. She puts the education of her children as a first priority. She herself had to leave school when she was 14 because her family did not have the money for her to continue. She does not want the same thing to happen to her own children. She has struggled to push her children to get educated and she can be proud of the results. They are all good at school, and the older ones are in university. One is also immediately struck by their inner kindness which contrasts with the rough life of the refugee camp. She has also to struggle to get some help for Rawan who had problems at birth, which led to heavy surgery and the loss of one kidney. Later, Rawan got deeply burned on her arms. Some French doctors offered to perform a surgery for free but her case requires additional surgeries and help.



Jaffa (The Bride of the Sea) was Palestine's largest and most vibrant metropolis. It was the centre of Palestinian industry, producing cigarettes, cement, tile and roof tiles, iron casting, cotton processing, traditional handmade carpets, leather products, wood box industry for Jaffa oranges, textile, presses and was home to most of Palestine's publications. Its centrality to the Arab Palestinian society and economy forced the UN to include it in the proposed Arab state in the 1947 partition plan, which did not stop 5,000 Zionist troops from besieging the city for three months leading up to Israel's declaration of statehood. The poorly armed and trained defenders of Jaffa included tens of international volunteers who came to defend Palestine, notably from Yugoslavia. The majority of Jaffa's inhabitants were forced to flee using boats, ending up in other Palestinian coastal cities like Gaza, or further in Egypt and Lebanon. Soon after occupation, the Zionists blew up and bulldozed three-quarters of Jaffa's Arab section, and only the al-Ajami, Old City, and small part of al-Mansheyyah neighborhood survived demolition. Most of Jaffa's historic Suqs (markets) were destroyed, including Suq al-Nahaseen, Suq al-Balabseh, and Suq al-Maslakh. In 1954, Jaffa became a suburb of Tel Aviv, and since then both cities are known by Tel Aviv-Yafo. Jaffa's Old City neighborhood has been mostly converted to an Israeli artists' colony, the main port has been closed, and its main Clock Square now called Kikea Hagana (The Haganah's Square) in honor of the military force that destroyed the city and ethnically cleansed its people.

The Struggle for Jaffa Continues

Over 500 Arab Palestinian families of Jaffa currently face eviction at the hands of Israeli authorities who also plan to confiscate half the land of Jaffa's historic Tasso Cemetery. A major campaign to defend these families' right to stay in their homes and against the Judaization of Jaffa is underway. You can learn more at: <http://yaffastruggle.wordpress.com>



Land Day demonstration in Jaffa, March 29, 2008

Sa'diya's family history is, as with many Palestinian refugees, marked by several exiles. Her family was first expelled in 1948 and then she had to leave Gaza. In 1948, her father and mother came from Jaffa. They were terrified and fled on foot. Sa'diya was born in 1963 and grew up in Maghazi camp in the Gaza Strip. Her husband, Omar, was also a refugee, from Al-Qubaibeh, close to Ramle and they also fled to Gaza. Omar also had to flee Gaza during the 1967 war for fear of being arrested by the Israelis so he went to Jordan. Omar and Sa'diya's families were neighbors and during one of his visits to Gaza, he married her. Sa'diya was 17 years old at the time.

Life in Gaza was not easy and things got even more difficult when the first Intifada erupted. Sa'diya was going back and forth between Jordan and Gaza. Every time she gave birth she went to Gaza to register them there. Every time she fought to have Palestinian papers for her children. But since 1996, she has not been able to return to Gaza. She has not seen her family since then. She calls but the calls are very expensive. She thinks about them a lot, especially knowing what they are going through "*I wish I could help them and I miss them a lot.*" Omar was working in the mosque but he died in 2000 from an infection.

Left alone with all her children, she has struggled to earn money to put her children through school; she sells things, fixes and rents out bicycles, does some cleaning and sewing, and cooks humus. The family also gets some help from time to time from an orphans' aid agency.

Talking about their status and conditions as refugees she feels that "*we have no rights.*" She points out that as far as education is concerned the available resources are limited. UNRWA schools only provide the service until children reach the age of 15, then they cannot go to university without paying fees that are very expensive. Because they are from Gaza, their status is also different. They cannot have permanent Jordanian passports. They are considered Palestinian residents who can go back to Gaza. They were recently told that they could stay in Jordan only until the children completed their primary education. This means that they will be able to stay only until July. The Jordanian authorities have, however, said that they can stay since the Rafah border crossing is closed. When it opens they will have to go. But for Sa'diya there is nowhere to go back to; "*I do not have a place to stay and my relatives are very old.*" Sa'diya does not carry a Jordanian, but a Palestinian passport. Her husband did get a Jordanian passport and her name, as well as her children's names were marked under it, but it is no longer valid.



View of Baqa'a refugee camp, Jordan, 2008 (©Anne Paq).

For Sa'diya, the *Nakba* evokes painful thoughts: *"I feel the pain of my family and parents. I remember how my husband's brother was born between the cactus."* The *Nakba* is only part of the history of the suffering of her family, *"I cannot forget the past, the suffering of the war, and seeing the tanks."*

She recalls one episode when all of her family could get permission and went back to visit their land of origin in 1975. They visited the place where her aunt used to live. In Jaffa, where her parents lived, the house was closed. Some Jewish people told them: *"take your house if you want but go away! This is not your land!"* The house was inhabited by a black Jewish man who let them enter. The place was renovated. Looking around, Sa'diya felt "jealous" and "shocked". She is attached to the house of her parents, to its memory, as if she had actually lived there: *"I felt very angry because I remembered how we used to live there. We were many families but happy."* Until now the documents of the house remain with them.

Sa'diya believes in the peace process but in a peace that will not be only in words:

"We want to live with all of our rights, we want them to be real. The solution is to live in Palestine, to offer us a house where we can live peacefully, where children can go to school and afterwards get a job. We want to have a good life as all people. If only the Jewish people did not take our land, my children would have grown up on it and made something precious in our homeland. How can we return now, Jaffa is full of Jewish people? And there is no place for us in Gaza."

Sa'diya nevertheless hopes that nations will support peace. Some Arabic countries are trying to help, at least financially. She added: *"for all Palestinians, the blood must stop. The peace process has to be for all Palestinians or there will be no peace."*

Looking at the future, she states: *"now we live in Jordan but I wish my children can build Palestine. I want a good future for them. I am trying to keep them on the right path and take good care of them. I expect them to study in Jordan and then return when they have the opportunity. Our country needs doctors."*

One of her sons jumps into the conversation to say: *"I see myself as a creative teacher because I had many bad teachers. I want to make successful students who will go back to build Palestine. I do not remember Gaza as I was too small but it is not about memory, it is about the heart."*

As we left, one of her sons showed us proudly some research he made for school about his village of origin. The memory of all the places does not vanish with time and Sa'diya children's beautiful eyes smile when they start to talk about their future in Palestine.



Sa'diya's house in al-Wihdat refugee camp, Jordan, 2008 (©Anne Paq).



Sa'diya and three of her children (©Anne Paq).