

What future for young Palestinians in Jordan?

by Jason Hart

Muna, aged 12

In those months when she attends school on the 'morning shift', twelve-year-old Muna gets up at around 6am. Her twenty-year-old sister, Randah, is usually the first person awake. Having already completed her prayers, Randah is busy making the final preparations before leaving for work. Soon Um Khaled sits up on her thin mattress, observing the preparations of her daughters and offering warnings and instructions. Then, after a quick cup of tea and a piece of bread, Muna steps around her older brothers, still sleeping on the floor, and heads up to the main street for the five-minute walk to school.

Weaving her way through the cramped classroom which she shares with 48 other girls, Muna squeezes onto a small bench next to her best friend, Laila. Apart from a short break at around 9am, Muna and her classmates remain busy with their studies until the day's end at 11.15. The sound of the school bell rings behind them as Muna and a crowd of friends exit from the playground gate. Stopping only to buy some bread for her mother and a small snack for herself, Muna is soon back home, changed out of school uniform and engaged in household chores.

The remainder of her day will be spent cooking, washing dishes, making tea for guests or family members, and tending to her young nephews and nieces. In between these various tasks she does her homework and watches some television until around 10 or 11 o'clock when she lays a mattress on the floor next to Randah and falls asleep.

In many respects Muna's daily life is typical of girls of her age from impoverished families throughout the Arab world: a quiet routine of study and housework in cramped conditions with relatively few opportunities for leisure pursuits. However, less typically, Muna's life

and future are the direct object of political discourse and negotiation on local, national and international levels – for twelve-year-old Muna was born and lives in Mukhayyam al-Hussein, an UNRWA-administered refugee camp housing some 50,000 people in Amman. Her grandparents were born in villages in what became Israel in 1948. Her parents were born in Gaza, at the time under Egyptian control, and fled to Jordan in the wake of the 1967 War. Muna's name is listed in the small blue book held by her family, proving that they are registered as refugees with the United Nations. The right of Muna, her family and her neighbours to return to Palestine has been stated clearly in resolutions of the UN and has remained central to the discourse of and about the refugees ever since 1948.

At the same time, Muna is also, in many respects, a Jordanian. She was born in Jordan and, apart from a brief trip to Iraq several years ago, she has never left that country. Although her education is paid for by the international community, and her teachers are registered refugees themselves, she studies the Jordanian curriculum. Her parents and older siblings all hold Jordanian passports and soon she will be entitled to do so too. However, since they are considered 'Gazan', their passports must be renewed every two years, instead of the customary five. With the different nationality status come certain restrictions.

The stalling and ultimate abandonment of the Oslo Peace Process, within which the fate of the five million or so refugees was due to be discussed, has left the future of young people like Muna profoundly uncertain. Will hers be the generation that ends the exile of more than half a century and redeems the homeland? Will they be fully absorbed and integrated into Jordanian society? Will economic and political circumstances cause them to leave Jordan in search of better opportunities abroad, as many have done before them? Would

other states allow such movement in an era of increasing border control? Or will Muna and her generation be instrumental in the creation of a pan-Islamic community, transcendent of these national borders?

Muna at 21

These are questions that I asked in my doctoral thesis in the late 1990s. Today Muna is married. Some day soon she may well become a mother. Her children will be part of a new generation in whom the 'international community' will probably show as little interest as it did in their parents. Keep them housed, provide the minimum of services and hope the refugee 'problem' will go away. But Muna will never forget where her parents came from, and the reason why she grew up an impoverished 'Gazan' in a refugee camp. Her children will know this too. And what of their future?

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New director for RSC

The Refugee Studies Centre is delighted to announce that Professor Roger Zetter has been appointed as the new director of the RSC, starting on 1 October. He joins the RSC from Oxford Brookes University. Professor Zetter's research encompasses the impacts of international humanitarian assistance, the experience of protracted exile, repatriation and post-conflict reconstruction. His work has been based in Southern Africa, the Middle East and more recently in Europe where he has been exploring the causes and consequences of European deterrence and restrictionism.

