



Defence for Children International/Palestine Section  
الحركة العالمية للدفاع عن الأطفال / فرع فلسطين

## **60 Years after the *Nakba*: Three Generations of Palestinians Reflect on their Past and Future**

This year, 15 May marks 60 years since the Palestinian *Nakba*, or catastrophe, the displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their ancestral lands. Today, Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons represent the largest and longest-standing case of forced displacement in the world where two out of every five refugee is Palestinian<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning of 2007, there were approximately seven million Palestinian refugees and 450,000 internally displaced persons, representing 70 per cent of the entire Palestinian population worldwide<sup>2</sup>.

Three generations of Palestinians now live in dismal conditions in refugee camps across the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Two generations of Palestinians have been born and raised in the camps, originally meant as a temporary humanitarian solution for the approximately 750,000 Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948<sup>3</sup>. Today, over one third of registered Palestinian refugees are under the age of 15. Because of the ever-increasing restrictions on movement within the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and the construction of the Wall, many of these children have never set foot on what was once their family's land. Nonetheless, a shared narrative and collective desire to return home binds each successive generation of Palestinians whether they are living in refugee camps, under Israeli occupation, or across the diaspora.

Bethlehem's Dheisheh camp, the fifth largest refugee camp in the West Bank, is home to 11,000<sup>4</sup> Palestinians representing three generations of refugees. Established by UNRWA<sup>5</sup> in 1949, Dheisheh's residents come from 45 villages in West Jerusalem and Hebron that were depopulated, occupied or destroyed by the Jewish armies beginning in 1948. More than one third of the camp's residents are under the age of 15<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Backgrounder on 60 Years after Al-Nakba, Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> First Interim Report of U.N. Survey Mission for Middle East, 17 November 1949 (A/1106).

<sup>4</sup> UNRWA Registration Statistical Bulletin/ Q4 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

<sup>6</sup> UNRWA Statistics, December 2007.

In a quiet corner of the sprawling Dheisheh camp, Defence for Children International-Palestine Section (DCI/PS) interviewed three individuals representing three generations of the al-Issa family. Originally from the village of Zakariya in Hebron district, members of the al-Issa family have lived in Dheisheh since 1950. Sh'aban Akram al-Issa, 16 years, his grandmother, Jamila Abd al-Rahman 'Audeh al-Khatib, 70 years, and father, Akram Atallah al-Issa, 47 years, share their stories, hopes and fears, as well as the enduring effects of the Nakba and subsequent decades of Israeli occupation on their lives.

***“We are forced to grow up while we are still children”***

Sh'aban Akram al-Issa, a soft-spoken and shy teenager seems mature beyond his years at the age of 16. He was born in Dheisheh camp and spent much of his childhood there. But unlike the thousands of other Palestinian children still living in the camp, Sh'aban is lucky because his family moved to the nearby city of ad-Doha in 2001 when he was 10 years old. He is lucky because the odds were stacked against him. Less than one quarter of the families living in Dheisheh have migrated out of the camp since its establishment almost 60 years ago<sup>7</sup>. Just a few kilometres north of Dheisheh, the quiet and less crowded neighbourhood of ad-Doha seems a world away, but strong links remain between the communities. Much



like Sh'aban's family, many of the neighbourhood's residents once lived in Dheisheh camp then bought land, built homes and moved as economic circumstances allowed. While ad-Doha could be regarded as a step up from living in the refugee camp, for Sh'aban and his family, neither Dheisheh nor ad-Doha is really home.

*“Palestinian children do not lead normal lives,” says Sh'aban Akram al-Issa, 16. “We are forced to grow up while we are still children”.*

For the al-Issa family, home is the village of Zakariya. Situated approximately 25 kilometres northwest of Hebron, Zakariya had a population of 1,180 at its peak in 1948<sup>8</sup>. On 23 October 1948, several months after the creation of the state of Israel, the Israeli army occupied and partially destroyed the village. The remaining houses, school and mosque became property of the Jewish National Fund and Israeli government<sup>9</sup>. Some Kurdish and Khazari Jews later took residence in some of the Palestinian homes, including Sh'aban's family home. Today, the area is known to Israelis as Kfar Zakhariya, situated west of the Wall that permanently cuts the area off from Sh'aban's family in Dheisheh.

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<sup>7</sup> Estimate by Galib Al-Biss (CSO Amari), 2005

<sup>8</sup> PalestineRemembered.com

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Although Sh'aban has never set foot in Zakariya, he knows it well through his grandmother's stories. Known as Um Akram, Sh'aban's grandmother was born in Zakariya in 1938. She tells him about the simple and happy life she lived in her village. Her ancestral home was surrounded with the sweetness of fig and pomegranate trees. Water was abundant and the land plentiful. Their family's wealth comprised of 50 dunums of land, as well as 50 sheep and 15 cows. They lived off their land, growing wheat, barley, corn and a variety of vegetables including cucumber, squash, eggplant and tomato. As a child, Sh'aban's grandmother played jump rope and hide-and-seek with her friends and listened to the stories of her own grandmother Safia. Today, she shares some of these very same stories, such as *Freit Roman and the Ghoul* and *Mohammed al-Shater* (the smart one) with her grandchildren.

When the *Nakba* began, Sh'aban's grandmother was just 10 years old. Her family left Zakariya on foot on 15 October 1949, just days before the Israeli army besieged and occupied their village. In the year that preceded their exodus, Sh'aban's grandmother vividly recalls hearing about the massacre in Deir Yassin and the news of Jaffa, Haifa, and Nassra falling to the Jewish army. Residents of Zakariya began to flee their village in early 1949 when the Jewish army took the nearby villages of Beit Shamish, Jirash, Rafat and Mughellis. *"The people had witnessed killings and fearing another massacre like Deir Yassin, they left their homes and villages out of fear,"* Um Akram explains.



70-year-old Jamila Abd al-Rahman 'Audeh al-Khatib, Um Akram, shares her family history and stories of the Nakba.

Some families however, like that of Sh'aban's grandmother, remained through the fall of 1949. *"In September, we cut the corn and began the olive harvest in October,"* she recalls. *"Many [Palestinians] were killed by the Jewish armies while harvesting olives on their lands. Altogether, 21 Palestinians were killed from Zakariya during the Nakba,"* and Um Akram can recall many of their names and familial ties. In the midst of the attacks, airplanes littered the landscape with leaflets telling people to leave their villages for safety. Sh'aban's grandmother's family decided to leave with every intention of returning once the situation calmed.

*"People thought they would be gone for one or two months and return home. They didn't take anything other than what they could carry, and what were they going to carry?"* she explains.

Twenty Palestinian families from Zakariya fled to al-Ramle, but Sh'aban's grandmother's family took a different route. She walked with her family members over 20 kilometres to the home of her father's friend in Hebron. Her father locked the house, took the key – which Um Akram's brother still has to this day – loaded wheat onto a camel and set out on foot with his family. They remained in Hebron for about one month and then the Red Cross transported them by truck to an area near Jericho called al-Nuwei'ma. There, the Red Cross provided them with tents in which Sh'aban's grandmother would live for the next six months. It was 10 May 1950, almost two years

after the founding of the state of Israel, when the Red Cross moved Sh'aban's grandmother's family once again to the Dheisheh refugee camp. She was 12 years old at the time and has lived in the camp to this day.

With the start of the war in 1948, the primary school in Zakariya was closed and in the two years that followed, there was no formal education or schooling available for children. Shortly after Sh'aban's grandmother's family arrived at Dheisheh, an enterprising group of educated Palestinian men began to teach the children in makeshift tents to put an end to their interruption of schooling. In 1950, UNRWA built its first primary school in the camp and formal education resumed. Sh'aban's grandmother had not enrolled in school before the war started in 1948 and in the difficult years that ensued following their arrival at Dheisheh camp, she did not have the opportunity to begin her education. Today, she considers herself illiterate but says she can read numbers and manages to get by.

In 1950, when Sh'aban's grandmother and her family arrived in Dheisheh, the Red Cross was once again present and provided each family with a tent as well as monthly rations of food staples such as flour, margarine, lentils, fava beans, and hummus. Sh'aban's grandmother explains that the food rations were insufficient and families often went hungry. She contrasts this difficult situation to life in Zakariya where the land was plentiful and no one ever wanted for food. That same year, UNRWA began to operate its refugee assistance programme and in 1956, after almost seven years of living in tents, Um Akram's family built their first single room, which was a three by three metre house, in the camp.



Dheisheh in the 1950s.  
Photo credit: IbdAA Cultural Centre

Um Akram raised her seven children, four boys and three girls, in this cramped home amidst the difficult conditions in the camp. There was no running water inside the house so Um Akram had to walk three kilometres outside of the camp to fetch water for the household only to return the same distance while carrying the heavy buckets of water. As she walked outside the camp, Um Akram endured the stigma of her refugee status in the form of glances from Palestinians fortunate to be living outside of the camps. Inside their home, several family members were cramped in a single room, which served as either sitting room, kitchen, or bedroom depending on the time of day. During the winter months, the unpaved alleyways and narrow streets in the camp became pits of wet mud where people would often lose their shoes, if they were lucky enough to have them in the first place. It was a challenge to bathe the children regularly and keep the household clean, especially in the winter, without running water in the home. It was also a challenge to keep the children well clothed and fed with money scarce and the little assistance offered in the camp.

In spite of the conditions in the camp, Um Akram took exceptional measures to keep her home clean and to protect her children from the many illnesses that were rampant in the camp, especially measles, which claimed the lives of many children. In the 1960s, UNRWA awarded her the top prize – 60 dinars – for having one of the cleanest homes in the camp.

***“Then she started to throw stones at us so we did not return again”***

Insistent on their desire to return home, Palestinian families made repeated attempts to go back to Zakariya and reclaim their homes. Sh’aban’s grandmother recalls that families were expelled and some even killed when they tried to go back. *“Every week, the Jews would count the number of people in Zakariya and expel those who had come and tried to stay,”* she says.

Although many Palestinian homes in Zakariya were demolished, some remained, including that of Sh’aban’s great-grandfather. Newly-arrived Jewish immigrants built homes where Palestinian homes once stood while others moved directly into those homes which remained. Zakariya’s school and mosque remain standing to this day on the land christened Kfar Zakhariya by its new Jewish inhabitants. Sh’aban’s family home remained for many decades before it was destroyed in the early 1990s. Sh’aban’s grandmother recalls taking her children for visits in the early to mid-1980s:

*“I used to take my children to my father’s house once a week to pick pomegranate and figs. One woman came to me once, she was a Kurdish Jew. I told her this is my village and this is my father’s home. I would say, ‘This is my village and this is my house, where I was born.’ And she would say, ‘No, it’s not your father’s village.’ She spoke with an accent and I didn’t understand her well. Then she started to throw stones at us so we did not return again.”*

For Sh’aban’s grandmother, the suffering of the *Nakba* will endure for as long as she is separated from her ancestral land. Without hesitation, she says she would return to her village if given the opportunity, but she knows there is little possibility for this to happen within her lifetime. She is hopeful that her grandchildren will some day return and has taught them about their family’s history and heritage so the younger generation will not give up this right.

*“We must tell our grandchildren about our history, our heritage, and where we are from. We are not from Bethlehem, we are from Zakariya... even my grandchildren say, ‘I am from Zakariya, not Dheisheh.’ We are living here [in Dheisheh], it’s true, but we are oppressed.”*



A photo of Zakariya taken in 2006, including the village’s original mosque.

Photo Credit: Palestine Remembered

***“The word Nakba is easing what actually happened”***

Sh’aban’s father, Akram Atallah al-Issa, 47 years old, spent the first 40 years of his life in Dheisheh camp. The eldest of seven siblings, Akram remembers his mother’s preoccupation with cleanliness and although it may have seemed excessive when he was a child, he now appreciates the care his mother had for her children and their home. He grew up in a single-room dwelling with his parents and two sisters next door to his grandparent’s house. *“At night, we would sleep like sardines in the same room,”* he recalls. Eventually, his father built a *zinco* or aluminum-walled kitchen, which by night doubled as a bedroom for Akram, who was seven at the time, and his five year old sister.

As a child, Sh’aban’s father would play in the narrow alleyways and streets of the camp with his younger siblings. During the muddy winter months, he remembers that it was especially difficult for him and his siblings to keep their shoes clean. Fearful of the punishment that would await them at home, Sh’aban’s father explains, *“My siblings and I would stop at the UNRWA well, which was approximately 200 metres from our house, to clean our shoes before returning home. Then we would jump from stone to stone from the well to our front door to avoid muddying our shoes again and being punished at home.”*

Sh’aban’s father was just six years old during the June war of 1967, but he vividly remembers, *“In the war of 1967, my father and grandfather built an underground shelter where we would spend our nights. One of my uncles wanted to flee to Jordan but my grandfather said, ‘I have become a refugee once in my life, and I will not do it again. I refuse to move from this place and if any of you leave, I will shoot you.’”*

For Sh’aban’s father, the *Nakba* generation is not just his parents’ generation, but his generation as well. As a young boy, he learned that Zakariya was his ancestral village, and heard all the stories about the war of 1948 and the difficult years that followed. Sh’aban’s father feels that he did not just hear about the stories, but he lived through them as well. For him, the *Nakba* continues today through the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.

*“I do not believe the Nakba ended in 1948. It is a continuous process where the techniques have evolved over time. In the past, they forced people to leave their villages through direct military operations. These days they [the Israelis] do not allow us to build houses even on the land that we own, and they are building the Wall, which limits our access or ability to build other things. I could even say that the word Nakba, or catastrophe, is easing what actually happened. It’s much more than this, much more. I believe very strongly in what Ilan Pappé has said. It is ethnic cleansing... this is what the Nakba was for me.”*



Akram Atallah al-Issa, 47 years, believes the *Nakba* has not yet ended.

Sh'aban's father reflects further: *"If the Nakba ended in 1948 and the people became refugees for a while and then they resettled and they are not living under occupation, and they do not have settlements, and they do not have 11,000 Palestinians inside prisons or Palestinians being injured daily, I am sure the people will begin to reconcile themselves with the issue. What has happened since the Nakba in 1948 and what is happening today is only deepening the suffering of the Palestinian people."*

Growing up in the camp, it was sometimes difficult for Sha'ban's father to come to terms with his family's refugee status. He would wonder, *"Why do they call us refugees? Why are we living in the camps? Why do they have streetlights in Bethlehem but we do not? Why do they have gardens and we do not?"* He even admits that as a young boy, he, along with his friends would damage fruit trees and streetlights in nearby Bethlehem or al-Khader village because they perceived these things to be luxuries that they did not enjoy in the camp. Looking back, Sh'aban's father blames the Israelis for robbing him of his childhood. *"It is this feeling of anger and resentment that compels young children to start throwing stones at Israeli soldiers as an almost daily habit,"* he explains.

At the age of 14, Sh'aban's father began to throw stones at Israeli military vehicles that patrolled the main street just outside of the camp. When the first *Intifada* began in 1987, he was 27 years old and in prison, but this was hardly his first experience in Israeli prisons. He was arrested for the first time in 1975 at the age of 15 for throwing stones at an Israeli military vehicle. He spent three nights in detention after this particular incident. Altogether, Sh'aban's father was arrested about nine times between 1975 and 1990. In 1987 he spent 6 months in prison, the longest continuous sentence he served. He says, *"For me, the Intifada started before the first Intifada. I have been living a continuous Intifada."*

Sh'aban's family lived in Dheisheh camp up until the year 2001 when they moved to ad-Doha just a few kilometres to the north. In the preceding years, Sha'ban's grandparents acquired a large tract of land within the camp and built a bigger home with the help of his father and three uncles. Two of his uncles agreed to stay in the camp and build homes on the same piece of land, while Sh'aban's father and another uncle decided to build homes in nearby ad-Doha. Despite moving out of the camp to a beautiful home in ad-Doha, the strong ties to Dheisheh are impossible to break.

*"When people ask me where I am from, I say I am from Dheisheh camp, originally from Zakariya. I love the camp and go there almost daily. Even if you ask my children, when they ask them in school, they say they are from Dheisheh camp. They have a kind of loyalty to the camp, I don't know why, but probably to show that they have a history and that they are proud of it,"*

Sh'aban's father explains.



Names of several of the 45 villages from which Dheisheh's residents originate. Included among them is Zakariya.

Today, Sh'aban's grandmother lives in a larger, more comfortable home in a quiet corner of the Dheisheh camp. His two uncles have their own homes situated along the walkway leading up to his grandmother's front gate. Fruit trees and green areas planted with vegetables and flowers surround and connect the three homes and provide a quiet and safe area for Sh'aban's younger cousins to play. For a brief moment, it is easy to forget that this is still Dheisheh as the sound of birds and scent of flowers are reminiscent of an altogether different place. Several metres away from Sh'aban's grandmother's home, tucked away behind the fruit trees stands a small, square concrete structure with a door. This structure, the family's first home built with UNRWA assistance in 1956, much like the keys to his family's home in Zakariya, serves as a stark reminder of Sh'aban's family history and the home and land that they lost.

This history has been passed down from generation to generation and Sh'aban's father remembers visiting Zakariya several times as a child. The first time was in 1972 at the age of 12 years old. He recounts one particular visit with his maternal grandmother in 1972:

*"I went with my grandmother and the house in which she was married was still there. My grandmother started to tell us about all the different trees. There was a fig tree and a pomegranate tree in the yard. And there was a Kurdish Jew living in our house at the time. When he saw us outside, he started to shout at us, 'You are not allowed to come into the garden.' My grandmother started to cry because being there reminded her of her childhood. She was married when she was a child, at the age of 13, so for her, that house and the trees were so important. And from the different visits with my grandfather and uncles, I know the names of all the wells and the different mountains. I believe I know the village quite well."*



The mosque in Zakariya in 1938 (left) and in 2002 (right)  
Photo credit: Palestine Remembered

The last time Sh'aban's father saw the family home was in 1985. It was destroyed in the years that followed, and he hasn't been back to Zakariya in the last 12 years. These days Sh'aban cannot go to the area where Zakariya once stood because the Israeli army requires a permit, one that is very difficult if not impossible to obtain. Before it became almost impossible to reach, Sh'aban's older brother Nidal, 19 years old, visited just once, but Sh'aban and his younger, 11-year-old brother have not.

Sh'aban's father is however, hopeful and optimistic about the future: *“My message to our people is to not give up. Sooner or later, our cause will be successful. We are going to survive in the end. Maybe not in my generation, but in my children's generation. We must keep our history with us, and with our children”*.

***“The occupation makes no distinction between young and old”***

Sh'aban also shares his father's hope for the future. He was born and raised in Dheisheh camp until the age of 10, when his family relocated to ad-Doha. As a child, he remembers playing in the camp's alleyways with his friends and attending the UNRWA school for several years before transferring to the private school in ad-Doha. Sh'aban excels in science but prefers to study a specialised trade or handicraft when he completes *Tawjihi*, or final year of secondary school. Much like his father, even though Sh'aban no longer resides in the camp, all of his friends still live there and he often finds himself hanging out there rather than in ad-Doha.

One of the most frightening experiences Sh'aban lived through occurred on the very first night his family moved into their new home in ad-Doha. Just 9 years old at the time, Sh'aban recalls:

*“On our first day in our new home, the Israeli army fired approximately 33 artillery shells around the house. Two artillery shells struck and damaged the house directly. We left the house, terrified. I remember seeing a person from the security forces enter the house during the shelling and he was injured in the face and bleeding. I cannot nor will not forget what happened that night. My parents told me afterwards that one shell came very close to me. I do not know how I was spared but what happened was terrifying and this memory is what I will keep with me from my childhood.”*

Sh'aban sees Israeli soldiers in his neighbourhood and at the checkpoints almost daily, and admits he is sometimes afraid of them. He does not believe in throwing stones at them because he sees it as having no impact and being even dangerous. In fact, several of Sh'aban's friends have been wounded or arrested after throwing stones at Israeli soldiers or army vehicles and he wonders if it is worth this suffering.

Sh'aban knows his family's history well and has heard much about his grandmother's village through her stories. *“I heard about the mud houses, the trees, the fresh water, and all the pretty places in our village...stories about how life was beautiful and simple back then,”* he says. Sadly, he has never seen Zakariya for himself as his ancestral lands lie on the other side of the Wall and it is almost impossible to get a permit to enter Israel. Sh'aban's entire young adulthood has coincided with the second *Intifada*, which has brought even greater restrictions on movement for Palestinians and a dramatic increase in the number of children arrested, injured or killed. This reality weighs heavily on him.

*“When the second Intifada started I was 8 years old. I remember how we used to go to Jerusalem or enter the 1948 lands before the second Intifada without permission, and*

*how the situation has changed so that it's now impossible for us to enter Jerusalem since the start of the second Intifada. And then there's the Wall, and the many checkpoints spread throughout Palestine. Many children are dying and being arrested in this Intifada and I do not see any result from all that has happened."*

Despite these difficult experiences, Sh'aban has tried to lead as normal a teenage life as possible. *"I do not participate in demonstrations because they do not have any benefit. I try to distance myself from any kind of political activity, and instead spend time with my friends,"* he says. His advice to Palestinian children: *"Do not throw stones. Protect your lives because the occupation makes no distinction between young and old"*.

### **A Common Dream**

Despite generational differences, the interviews clearly revealed some common themes such as stolen childhood, innocence lost, a longing to return home, and an undying hope for a better future. While Sh'aban's grandmother was forced to leave her family home in Zakariya when she was just 10 years old, Sh'aban is lucky to have moved out of the Dheisheh refugee camp to a nearby neighbourhood at the same age. But while his grandmother holds on to happy childhood memories amidst the vast land, rolling hills, and sweet fruit trees of her ancestral village, Sha'ban's most vivid childhood memories consist of Israeli tanks, soldiers, and the deafening sound heavy artillery fire.

Sh'aban's grandmother never completed her education as a result of the war in 1948 and ensuing years in refugee camps. By contrast, Sh'aban and his father have attained a much higher level of education – but to what end? Today's youth face greater restrictions on their freedom of movement and less opportunity for employment as the Israeli occupation tightens its grip on Palestinian lands. In Dheisheh camp, the unemployment rate among males is an astonishing 30 per cent<sup>10</sup>.

More importantly, Palestinian boys hope to survive through young adulthood and live life free from the arbitrary arrest and detention that cruelly steals the youth of thousands of Palestinians. Having lost their own childhood to forced displacement and the harsh reality of life in the refugee camps, the *Nakba* generation has witnessed the innocence of their children's youth lost to the occupation and the first *Intifada*, and that of their grandchildren to the second *Intifada*. Nonetheless, the older generation has kept hope alive by sharing their stories and family history with their children and grandchildren so the younger generations will not forget when the older generations die. As the *Nakba* generation passes on the keys and deeds to their homes and land to the next, the commitment to the struggle for freedom, rights, and dignity lives on. After decades of waiting for their right to return to come to fruition, the *Nakba* generation now hopes that their grandchildren will return and bury their remains on what was once their land.

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<sup>10</sup> Unemployment statistics (CSO/2007), UNRWA.

## Palestinian Child Refugees and International Law

Palestinian refugee children are particularly vulnerable and require special protection in the context of the Israeli occupation. Refugee children are increasingly marginalised as refugee camps face higher rates of unemployment and poverty. In addition, refugee camps are frequently the target of Israeli incursions, home raids, and search and arrest operations that put the lives, as well as the psycho-social well-being, of refugee children at tremendous risk. In Dheisheh camp, almost every child in the camp has lost either a family member, friend, classmate, or neighbour through Israeli violence or imprisonment<sup>11</sup>.



The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides the most important legal framework for the rights of refugee children. State parties to the Convention are legally bound to respect the universally recognised rights of refugee children and to provide them with the same level of protection, care and resources as children who are nationals of the particular state<sup>12</sup>. As a State Party to the UNCRC, Israel has repeatedly failed to accord Palestinian children the same rights as Israeli children despite its legal obligation to do so.

Article 6 of the UNCRC recognises each child's "inherent right to life" and calls on State Parties to ensure the survival and development of the child to the maximum extent possible. Palestinian children, particularly refugee children, live in constant fear of military attacks and reprisals. Even within the confines of their homes and schools, Palestinian refugee children are exposed to grave danger. DCI/PS has documented numerous cases of children injured or killed during Israeli military incursions while in their homes or schools. Since the start of the second *Intifada* to this day, DCI/PS has documented 962 cases of Palestinian children killed at the hands of the Israeli military while not involved in any combat activity.

*States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life. States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.*

UNCRC, Article 6

Article 24 of the UNCRC established the child's right to "the highest attainable standard of health" as well as access to health services. This includes access to primary health care, nutritious food, and clean drinking water. Closures, curfews, violence and a worsening economic situation have caused an increase in malnutrition, with children hardest hit. A major problem facing families in the refugee camps is lack of access to a safe and reliable supply of drinking water. As an example, on one of the days DCI/PS conducted interviews for this report in Dheisheh, some households in the camp had no running water for the fourth day in a row. In general, there is a high prevalence of disease due to overcrowding inside homes, lack of insulation inside of homes during the winter, and high poverty levels.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibda'a Cultural Centre

<sup>12</sup> Palestinian Refugee Children, International Protection and Durable Solutions. Badil, Information and Discussion Brief, Issue No. 10, December 2006.



A sprawling and overcrowded Dheisheh today

In Dheisheh camp, one UNRWA health centre provides free primary healthcare services to the camp's 11,000 residents. The caseload for UNRWA health clinics is quite high. In 2003, UNRWA clinics averaged more than 110 visits per doctor per day<sup>13</sup>. In 2003, a group of local and international volunteers established the community-based Ibda'a Health Committee in order to meet the overwhelming demand for medical and mental health services in the camp. The Ibdaa Health Committee, which is closely affiliated with the Ibda'a Cultural Centre, independently operates two additional health centres where volunteer physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counsellors provide treatment, education and prevention services.

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<sup>13</sup> Health Brochure, UNRWA.

Related to overall health and well-being, Article 27 of the UNCRC further provides the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development including proper nutrition, clothing and housing. Palestinian refugee children endure tremendous emotional stress in their daily lives. They bear the stigma of their refugee status, are limited in their freedom of movement, and have very few outlets for recreational activities. They live in overcrowded conditions where more than five family members sometimes share a single bedroom, lack access to water, electricity, and proper insulation and face deepening poverty.

*States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.*

UNCRC Article 27

Palestinian children also live with the constant fear of being attacked or killed or having their homes arbitrarily demolished. During the first *Intifada*, the Israeli army effectively turned Dheisheh into a prison, surrounding the camp with a high barbed-wire fence and sealing all but one entrance, which they controlled through a revolving gate. Inside the camp, violent confrontations between Israeli soldiers and residents played out in the narrow streets and alleys. Children were often the victims of violence and arbitrary detention and arrest. Since the start of the second *Intifada*, refugee children in the oPt have exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as bed-wetting, nightmares, poor performance in school, and aggressive behaviour in alarming numbers.

Article 28 of the UNCRC provides every child with the right to an education. Much like Dheisheh's health centre, the two UNRWA-run schools in the camp are under-resourced and overcrowded. UNRWA provides a compulsory basic education programme to registered refugee children aged 6-14 free of charge. The programme includes six years of primary education and three years of preparatory education. After completing their basic education, Palestinian refugee children enter either government or private schools to complete their secondary education.

Both the UNRWA boy's and girl's schools in Dheisheh have more than 1,200 students each which severely impacts the children's ability to learn and excel. The rapidly growing refugee population poses the biggest challenge to the provision of free and good quality education. Almost all of UNRWA's schools operate on a double shift where two separate groups of students and teachers share the same buildings and facilities. The first group uses the facilities in the morning and the second group in the afternoon. This need for double shifts results in fewer school hours for the children, prevents schools from offering extracurricular activities, and disrupts family schedules. During periods of intense fighting and Israeli military incursions, schools are often shut down, resulting in significant losses of precious class time.

Every child also has a right to play. Given the often violent and tense political circumstances in which Palestinian refugee children grow, play becomes even more essential for their mental, as well as physical well-being. Article 31 of the UNCRC provides for the right "to engage in play and recreational activities" and "to participate

freely in cultural life and the arts.” The densely populated Dheisheh camp provides few outlets for children to play an engage in physical and recreational sport activities. There are no playgrounds, parks or football fields within the camp. There is one public garden, *Alfineeq*, but green areas are sorely lacking in this concrete-dense camp.

Dheisheh camp is home to several community-based and non-governmental organisations that provide much needed services to its residents. Perhaps the most well-known of these organisations is the Ibda’a Cultural Centre. Ibda’a, or creativity, is taken figuratively as creating something out of nothing. The Ibda’a centre is a community-based organisation providing educational, social and cultural programmes for the children and women of Dheisheh camp. The Centre serves over 1,500 children by providing a safe space and much-needed outlet for children to express their hopes and fears through varied activities such as art, dance, music, sports, and education.

Sixty years after the *Nakba*, Palestinian refugees lack a durable solution for their plight. Humanitarian assistance alone cannot replace political measures to ensure respect for international law in the occupied Palestinian territory and to protect the rights of Palestinian children, refugee and non-refugee alike. DCI/PS calls on the State Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to uphold the provisions of the respective Conventions as a moral and legal obligation and to promote a just, permanent solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the question of Palestinian refugees, on the basis of international law.

For Palestinian refugees of all generations, the right of return is sacrosanct. This right is enshrined in International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law as well as numerous UN Resolutions. UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948 states “*refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.*” In 1967, UN Security Council Resolution 237 also affirmed the right of return of Palestinian refugees displaced during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights further provides that “*everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*” Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention contains a similar provision strictly prohibiting forcible transfer of protected persons from occupied territory to any other territory. Since the 1970s, the United Nations has repeatedly reaffirmed that Palestinians are entitled to self-determination, independence and the right of return, but a lack of accountability has impinged on the realisation of these rights.<sup>14</sup> There can be no just and lasting solution to the current conflict without addressing the issue of Palestinian refugees and upholding their rights in accordance with international law and UN Resolutions.

Let Sh’aban’s generation be the last generation of Palestinian refugees – 60 years is enough!

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<sup>14</sup> al Majdal Special Nakba 60 Isse 36/37 Badil, p13.