

Proud to be a Palestinian

By Zeina Abu Hamdan., 14 year old girl from Kofor Akab, West Bank

5 April 2006, Kofor Akab, West Bank. Today is our day, it is Palestinian Child's Day. I am proud to be a Palestinian girl, one whose self-confidence increases every day and who constantly grows stronger, despite the worsening political situation.

Today, on my way to school, I crossed, as usual, the Qalandia checkpoint. Most people probably do not realize what crossing the checkpoint can entail, nor could they appreciate just how difficult it is for me to simply arrive at school in order to continue my education.

Each time I pass the checkpoint, my mind is flooded by so many memories, including those of an eight-year-old child who was once upon a time inside me, before we came to Palestine, and who upon arriving in Palestine, found herself feeling both scared and insecure.

It wasn't easy for me to adjust to living here in Palestine. Not least of all because I found it hard to accept the fact that living in Palestine is different from living in any other country of the world.

For example, at the beginning, whenever someone said the word 'checkpoint,' I would think to myself, "So, what's the big deal?". I soon found out, of course, that the checkpoints *are* a big deal, something of which I became acutely aware when an Israeli soldier at one of the checkpoints snatched my schoolbag away from me because I hadn't responded quickly enough to his demand.

Yes, I remember crying all day because of that particular incident. I honestly never imagined that passing a checkpoint would be so hard, so hard, in fact, that eventually my parents started to limit my 'coming and going hours' and the places I was allowed to go and so forth, all because of the checkpoints.

Living outside Palestine was so much easier; at least I felt safe. It's not that I regret coming here to live, but I do hope that I can feel safe again.

I ask you, is it fair that an eight-year-old child to hear shooting outside her house while she's trying to watch TV? Is it fair that her parents have to take her to their room in the middle of the night and turn off the lights without her knowing why? Is it fair that out of all of the cars waiting at the checkpoint, the soldiers always seem to pick on my father's car to be checked? These are the questions that an eight-year-old girl asks herself, and even though, today, the checkpoints are most definitely a 'normal' part of my life, I will always resent the loss of innocence that for me, and many other Palestinian children, they will always represent.

It's also unfair that I cannot visit my friends, considering how impossible it is for us to meet now that we are separated by blocks of cement because of the Barrier. But then, life for Palestinians has *always* been unfair. It's not fair, for example, that other countries get to celebrate things like strawberry festivals, while all of our celebrations are connected to politics and are anything but festive.

As hard as I try, I don't think it's possible for me to explain exactly what the Palestinians are going through. I doubt, very much, that any of the words in existence could adequately describe our suffering. What I find amazing, however, is the fact that with every checkpoint that is erected, with every seed that is planted, we, the Palestinians, grow stronger in terms of our determination to survive. That, in itself, is something of which all of us should feel proud.

Today, marking Palestinian Child's Day is supposed to be a special day, a day when we, the children of Palestine, proclaim our rights. We're talking here about basic human rights, including the right of every adult to be able to look back at her/his childhood without having to re-live the arrest of her/his brother, or the shooting of her/his father, or any incident that has become so 'normal' for Palestinian children.

The reality is, of course, that even if the day *does* come when we're able to live in a free country, when we're able to sing our national anthem without fear of being punished, and when we're no longer sad but happy, *even then*, we, the children of Palestine, regardless of how old we are, will continue to pay the price of our forced maturation and our premature loss of innocence, both of which are wounds can never heal.

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