

Let's talk about Gaza

Daily Challenges of the Youth in the Gaza Strip

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Although Muhammed Sbaita obtained a degree in English Literature and is now working as a freelance translator, he has until today not left the place where he was born: The 28-year-old comes from Shujayia, a neighborhood in the Eastern part of Gaza City. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Muhammed about his daily life, how it is affected by the occupation, the siege and the Hamas government, and his dreams and hopes for the future.

Muhammed, how do you see the situation of the youth in the Gaza Strip?

Although the youth in Gaza makes up around 73 per cent of the society¹, they are highly marginalized. Unfortunately, we don't play any role in economic or political decision-making. Neither the government nor the NGOs are giving us the chance to decide on our current situation or the future.

The young generation in Gaza is oppressed by both the occupation and the Palestinian Authority. We are spending our, what others call golden years suffering from the Israeli aggression and the imposed siege, closed borders, electricity cuts and the internal conflict between Fatah and Hamas.

Is the government responsible for this situation or is it the youth themselves?

The youth is the main source of energy for any country, but in order to activate this energy you have to support them by providing them with good education, by creating job opportunities, by supporting youth projects, and by giving them the chance to lead the society. In our case though nothing of what I mentioned has been happening.

Hamas has been controlling Gaza since the Palestinian elections in 2006, and this happened through the people's choice. Why do you think they received such a great support?

I believe that Hamas won the elections not because they are good, but because other parties were worse. The people wanted to punish them through the elections. Changes were badly needed at that time, and Hamas managed to present a beautiful picture of them to us. Now, we are discovering that everything became worse than ever before.

How did everything become worse? Does the Hamas government as a conservative or Islamist government affect your daily life?

Yes, they affect every second of my life. I have to think twice before I do any step in Gaza. In my perspective as a human being, I have the right to walk with whomever I want in the street at least, as

¹ According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2014), 73.1 per cent of the population in the Gaza Strip is below the age of 29 years. C.f.: http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang_en/881/default.aspx#Population.

the street is a public space, and public spaces shouldn't be controlled the way the Hamas government is doing it in Gaza.

I can't walk in the streets with a female person, may it be my sister, a colleague or my girlfriend, without a policeman or a Hamas security guard asking me about our relationship, and why we are walking together. The government sticks its nose into every aspect of our lives. In addition to the oppression by the Israeli occupation, Hamas also oppresses us.

This also relates to celebrations, public holidays and a lot of different occasions in Gaza. The Hamas police prevented the people from celebrating New Year's Eve, and the Christmas Eve. They considered this celebrations as "non-Islamic celebrations and not related to Islamic traditions". We as young people can't freely plan any social activities in Gaza.

How do you and your friends spend your daily life in Gaza?

Most of the young men in Gaza spend time either looking for a job or killing time by playing football, sitting on the beach or smoking shisha.

Fortunately, we have a beach in Gaza. I can't imagine Gaza without a beach! I used to walk to the last point of the harbor, just to sit and to see Gaza from the beach. This scene makes me feel as if I have left Gaza.

Have you ever travelled outside of Gaza before?

Imagine that I am 28 years, and I still haven't had the chance to leave Gaza yet! Although I tried many times before, I haven't made it because of the closed borders and the policies of the Israeli occupation.

How does the Israeli occupation affect your life?

My father used to be a worker inside of Israel. After the Intifada, Israel introduced a lot of very restrictive Israeli regulations. He now can barely make a living in Gaza.

The continuous Israeli aggressions against us have often exposed my family and me to danger. I have lost relatives who were killed by Israelis. The imposed siege makes Gaza the biggest prison in the world.

What are your hopes as a young man living in Gaza?

I want to live peacefully in my country without worrying about new Israeli aggressions against us Palestinians and human beings. I want to have the chance to change the current government by new elections with a great participation by the youth. Finally, I aim at living a decent life with decent job and at starting a family.