

HUMAN SECURITY

Stories from Below



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Introducing Ourselves: The Middle East Youth Forum

“The strength of our meetings lies in the openness of its participants to discuss such issues, and the desire to exchange different perspectives, to have heated debates, all of this in a constructive way with respect for one another.”

This is the first booklet of the Middle East Youth Forum (MEYF). Initiated by IKV and the Chair on Human Security of VU University Amsterdam¹, the Netherlands, a group of young people gathered in Amman in March 2006 for a summer school. The meeting was born out of a wish by Iraqi student-activists, suffering an ongoing civil war, to meet other students and activists in order to share and learn from each other. Our first objective, therefore, was to teach issues of human security at an academic level, and provide an open space for dialogue between young people from the Middle East.

1 VU stands for ‘Vrije Universiteit’, which means ‘Free University’.

As is often the case during a conference, the participants were inspired and motivated to continue their cooperation afterward. Usually however, they go back to their own city or village and, overwhelmed by the issues of everyday life, do not live up to the commitments made at meetings such as this. We probably all surprised ourselves that, this time, the commitment remained and our interest or even curiosity for one another was strong enough. Through emails and visits, people stayed in touch and this led to another meeting in Istanbul, right after the war in July 2006 between Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Israel. The timing was excellent, since people needed an opportunity to talk about what had happened since the last meeting in Amman: the continuation of violence in Baghdad and elsewhere, the sudden and unexpected war in Lebanon, the growing possibility of a civil war in Palestine, and so on. The strength of these meetings lies in the openness of its participants to

discuss such issues, and the desire to exchange different perspectives, to have heated debates, all of this in a constructive way with respect for one another. Of course this was not always easy and sometimes debates (for instance between participants from Europe and the Middle East on democracy) were too intense. But in the end this is what it is all about: people having the opportunity to discuss and to learn. We certainly hope that this process will continue for the times to come.

During the first two meetings the MEYF was founded and the ownership of all activities came to rest with the MEYF. This included the summer schools, called gatherings from now on. Each gathering is a mix of 'old' and 'new' participants as we strive for both continuity and enlargement. The program is developed by a preparatory team made up of members of the MEYF. The third meeting will take place in Cairo, in cooperation with the Ibn Kaldoun Center, and will focus on identity and conflict.

The topic of this first booklet of our MEYF is human security. Human security is a core issue of our network: most participants of our network

face human security issues and work within this broad notion. Many examples of this were discussed during our meetings and it was decided to make a small booklet. Participants of the network share their experiences on how their security is threatened, how they feel, how they try to make sense of it all and even to change the situation they are in. Unfortunately, every day reality makes it impossible to publish the real names of participants. This is a sad fact of life in the Middle East, and illustrates the need for young people to strive for peace and security for all in the region.

We intend to publish more booklets than this one! If you would like to stay updated or if you are interested in this forum, please contact us: abbawi@ikvpaxchristi.nl.

**Rana Abbawi and
Miriam Struyk**

Human security

Human security: Finding a Definition

Human security is a buzzword that appeals to many of us. But what is it, and how did this relatively new notion so quickly gain ground over the last years? In the first place, human security is about the everyday reality of violent conflicts and poverty, humanitarian crises, injustice and inequality. It is about freedom from fear and freedom from want. Human security emphasizes the security of individuals, communities and global humanity as a main

concern equal to, yet distinct from, the security concerns of the state. This sounds rather rosy, but what does it really mean?

How did this term become part of our discourse, and how can we – students and activists – learn from this notion in our pursuit of peace and justice?

New security situations demand new security approaches: intrastate wars in which national states are unable or unwilling to protect citizens

have increased rapidly since the end of the Cold War. The difference between *human* and *national* security is crucial. National security implies protection of the state from outside threats, while human security involves the protection of citizens and communities from every kind of (political) violence, including that from the state. Human security is thus essential in current conflicts, but national and human security neither oppose nor exclude each other. They can

“While human development is about giving people choices in various areas in life, human security is about creating conditions for people’s physical safety.”

be mutually reinforcing, though this certainly is not always the case. The protection of citizens from external threats is a necessary precondition

for the safety of individuals, but is not sufficient: over the last century, more people were killed by their own national authorities than by foreign armies. On top of this, when one looks at today’s conflicts, notions such as ‘state’ and ‘army’ are diffuse. Often there are many militia’s, sometimes linked to ‘the state’, sometimes loyal to sub-states or parallel states within the state

(such as in Lebanon). Furthermore, the involvement of the international community has both elements of a 'state' (think of UNMIK in Kosovo, or OHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and non-state (NGOs, terrorist groups) actor.

"When we restrict ourselves to unarmed initiatives of human security, the notion fits in very well with civil society. Our organisation strongly advocates the link between development and security. While human development is about giving people choices in various areas in life (education, jobs, etc.), human security is about creating conditions for people's physical safety. This can to some extent be done by people themselves, taking action in order to guarantee security for themselves, their community or others (solidarity). Human development and human security as a bottom-up concept is about people being agents, being active. Human security approaches from states or outside actors should build upon, and sometimes correct, the efforts and capacities of those directly affected. Thus, human security should be seen in a broad sense, not only provided by states but also by the people directly involved. Though far from pretending to be an exhaustive list, or even providing a definition for

human security, the following points do help in defining the notion:

The notion human security was coined in a report of the Human Development Report of the UNDP in 1994. The concept of human security focuses on four essential characteristics:

1. It is a universal concern relevant to people everywhere.
2. The various components of human security are interdependent. Most hazards are no longer isolated events, confined within national borders. Their consequences are global ('problems without passports').
3. Human security is easier to ensure through early prevention rather than by intervention later on.
4. Human security is people-centred. It is concerned with how people live in a society².

2 Frerks, G. and B. Klein Goldewijk (2007) 'Human Security: Mapping the Challenges' in G. Frerks and B. Klein Goldenwijk (eds.) *Human Security and International Insecurity*. 21-44 Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers.



The notion of human security applies therefore both to the community and to the individual level. It has been developed and researched over the last years and a lot has been written about human security strategies, but most of it is top down. What we, in our network, are interested in is 'human security from below'. How do people themselves react when their lives are endangered? Do they flee, do they seek security within their own group, be it family, tribe, or ethnic group? Do they organise themselves into neighbourhood groups, in militia's, in non-violent resistance groups?

Human Security From Below: Three Levels

People in danger will try to provide human security ('freedom from fear'³) at three levels:

- **Self-protection.** There are numerous initiatives people will take when their security is threatened. When your city is bombed or shelled, you will blind your windows, keep the children at home and hoard food. Faced with (civil) war, people start to move to places where their own (ethnic) group has a stronghold. Many will try to leave the country. Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are among the most widespread phenomena of self-protection in a country during war.
- **Horizontal protection.** In situations of war, it is very important for people to be connected to lifelines. In particular, it is essential to be in touch with the free world in order to sustain

3 Faber, MJ (2007) Human Security from Below: Freedom from Fear and Lifelines Operations' in Boer, M and De Wilde, J (eds) *The Viability of Human Security: From Concept to Practice*. 147-172 Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press

hope that one day the war will be over. There are numerous lifelines. Lifeline operations are of all times, and are applied in each and every war situation. In our day it has become a focus point for civil society: citizens protecting citizens. Life lines can be organized through the use of internet, international activists supporting citizens in conflict areas in various ways (providing financial means, lobbying for protection, getting people out etc.) or for instance this Middle East youth Forum. Vertical protection and horizontal protection have in common that in both cases the referent subjects (people) are in charge of their own security situation. That is no longer the case at the third and final level.

- **Vertical protection.** If security cannot be provided from within, people in danger may appeal to outside powers for intervention in order to protect them and restore (international) law and order. The UN are considered to be the global authority, mandating regional organizations or coalitions of the willing to undertake interventions in war situations, often with the explicit objective to protect people in danger (by installing safe areas or a UN Transitional Authority). Besides the UN, some countries might decide to

run their own show, like the Americans and British did in the case of Iraq. We have to realize that for people whose human security is at stake, it is – certainly in the short term – quite irrelevant whether or not a humanitarian intervention is stamped by the UN. Humanitarian interventions can provide human security on the ground (since the operation is most often, at least in part, executed by soldiers and police men on the ground), but not always.

Human Security: Conflicting Agenda's

Too often people refer to human security – as was the case in the nineties with the notion of civil society – as something ‘good’, as something we all want, from which no evil can come. Indeed, as something which combines the interests of people in conflict areas, and not as something that can also cause conflict. But the human security of one group or individual can very well conflict with that of another group: is it in the interest of citizens of North Iraq to have open borders with the rest of Iraq? Will Serbian Kosovars say that the NATO-led intervention in 1999 which provided human security to the Albanian Kosovars also increased their human security? Short and long term interests can also differ: is it in the

long term interest of citizens to form their own militia for human security reasons in a neighbourhood of Baghdad? Within a conflict area, groups often have different ways of providing human security for themselves, or of interacting with other actors who may be able to intervene in providing security on the ground.

Thus, whilst the notion quickly took hold in the world of academics and activists, the concept and, more importantly, the implementation of it, is still very new. Human security approaches and instruments still need to be explored and to be put on the international agenda. What is necessary for (for example) the UN, NATO or the EU to be able to implement a human security strategy? Human security is thus a new concept, with a highly mobilising character, but it is as yet far from implemented at the international level.

Human Security: About People

Hopefully this introduction gave you a bit of an insight into why and how the notion of human security came about. But in the end it is not about theories and interesting academic debates, it is about what is mentioned in the UNDP Human Development Report:

“In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode into violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity”.

As for me, the MEYF is an inspiring example of human security. The forum is first of all a network of people discussing their fears, and their strategies to combat them and to change their societies for the better. They discuss human security both at the level of self-protection and at the level of horizontal protection. It is therefore a people’s network aiming to work together for peace in the region. The network itself is an example of horizontal protection. Members provide ‘lifelines’ to each other by providing moral support, by discussing the situation, by offering people a chance to stay at their house for a while, and by disseminating the information received from other members. A great example is the transnational initiative called ‘Life Lines’ that resulted from the MEYF: students setting up an international network with the objective of supporting their Iraqi colleagues (www.life-lines.nl).

The stories presented in this booklet are all different – some write about state security, some about security when the state fails – but all of the stories are written by young people searching for security, and feeling the need to do so together. As individuals and as members of communities and families they do not feel safe. Our forum is about people claiming space to debate, to argue, to dance, to sing, to shout, and to express their solidarity with one another. It is about people of Iraq informing us about their struggles and fears. *“Should I leave my neighbourhood and move to another area in Baghdad, where ‘my’ ethnic group forms a majority?”* It is about brave women fighting for their rights and security and making a change. Read the telling story of Hind from Egypt, or about not feeling safe since you can not be with your family, as Nimallah shares with us. It is about ‘outsiders’ expressing their concerns to the Iraqi members, by listening or by disseminating their information. It is about Israeli participants who feel welcome at the forum and discuss openly with their friends from the Middle East on how their security is entangled with that of others in the region. It is about tough discussions on how human security of one group can endanger human security of

another group. It is about the hardship of being a dissident in your own society, and how valuable support from such networks can be. And it is – as we all learned from one of the members from Beirut – about being able to sleep in your pyjamas, since you do not have to worry about suddenly having to run out of your apartment in the middle of the night.

Miriam Struyk



Human security stories

Pyjama story

Summer Plans

It was summer time, people were enjoying their vacations all around the country, traffic everywhere, the superb night life was promising, beaches were full of tourists, and the mountains were providing a fresh atmosphere for any one who seeks to pass a wonderful vacation in the most beautiful country in the Middle East, Lebanon.

On the 11th of July 2006, I was having a normal daily life: I went to my work, came back home, relaxed and planned to spend my night at the opening of a new famous Sky Bar lounge. I went to this lounge at 9:30 and was amazed at the beautiful country that I live in. Sea view with the best music, most fashionable clothes with luxurious looks, expensive cars and much more... I realized this night that I would not plan to spend my

“I still remember spending one week wearing my jeans, afraid to wear my pyjamas, because I did not know when I would have to escape from my home and go who knows where in order to not be injured or simply killed.”

summer anywhere other than Lebanon because I felt that I had everything: my friends, my family, and every thing that I wished for was in Lebanon. I went back home, and planned to visit my par-

ents who are living in the south of Lebanon the next day after I got out of work.

Phone Call

On the 12th of July everything started to change.

I woke up in the morning, took my lovely car and proceeded with my daily life. I got a phone call from my mom at 12:00, telling me that Hezbollah had kidnapped two Israeli soldiers from the southern Lebanese – Israeli border in order to exchange them with Lebanese prisoners in the Israeli prisons. I still remember that I was wondering what the reaction would be to this operation...but I kept my plans to finish my work and go and see my parents in the south as I had promised my mom.

Three hours later, I got a new phone call from mom again but this time I could hear the screams of my nieces over the phone... The war had started. Everything was a shock; I could not imagine my nieces crying because of the bombs all around. First, I thought my mother was making fun of me, and that there was nothing to fear for. But it turned out that there was a lot to worry about. The situation was weird.....my boss called for an urgent meeting to inform all staff that Israel was threatening Lebanon and our security would be at stake. I called my mom again to inform her that I would leave the office and go see her as I had promised. She refused and told me to stay where I was because the roads were not secure and she could hear the Israeli aircrafts above her head. I went back to my house in Beirut and switched on the news. It was crazy, the first, second, third and even the fourth bridge that link Beirut with the south were destroyed, suddenly within less than two hours.

One Week in Jeans

What could I do now? Suddenly I was stuck, I couldn't see my family any more. I went to one of my friends' houses to see what was going on, and could not believe what I saw:

streets empty, people running to get food and some people closing their stores. I spent the night at my friend's house because I didn't want to stay alone. We were watching the news, amazed of what was happening in our country. Suddenly everything was burning: the main bridges, the roads..... I was calling my family every now and then to make sure they were ok because Israelis were bombing all the streets surrounding my family's house. Up to that moment I could watch the news and call my family without hearing any bombs, but at midnight the bombing started to come closer and closer...now what to do?

I spent all night watching the news and thinking of a way to live under these critical circumstances. I couldn't sleep at all and waited until morning to run and get some food from the nearest market, and bought a simple radio that worked on batteries because I knew that the second night we would not have electricity any more: usually the Israelis bomb electricity stations in every war. I was right. They bombed the electricity station the second night... Same scenario.

Now what? No electricity, bombs everywhere and I was sitting shaking with fear, praying that I could see my family one day. What had happened

to my summer plans? What had happened to my beautiful country? Nobody was laughing any more, everyone was crying now. I still remember spending one week wearing my jeans, afraid to wear my pyjamas, because I did not know when I would have to escape from my home and go who knows where in order to not be injured or simply killed.

Is This Normal?

I heard the news, massacres everywhere, and there was no way to stop these criminals from killing Lebanese children. I wondered why all the hate was surrounding my country. Do these two Israelis whom Hezbollah kidnapped justify the killing of more than 1200 Lebanese civilians, the destruction of more than 30,000 houses and the bombing of more than 80 bridges resulting in the total destruction of the Lebanese infrastructure? And much more? Is it a normal reaction that in just three hours a country like Israel takes the decision to get rid of a whole population? And spends 33 days of killing and destroying and spreading fear and hate everywhere? What kind of future can we build in this situation?

Dayana



A Female Doctor in Baghdad

Escape

On June 25th 2006, a female doctor in Baghdad went to her hospital, as she did every day, in one of the hottest areas in Iraq. At 11:45 am the shooting started, so the chief doctor asked her to leave the building quickly. But the driver of the doctor did not come because all the roads had been closed by the army.

So she had to stay in the hospital waiting for the situation to calm down, with her friend who was also a doctor, two assistants and her chief doctor, with no electricity and in very hot weather. But the shooting did not stop, it got stronger and stronger. And they stayed at the hospital till 2:30 pm, when they decided to leave the hospital and try to escape by foot. But at the gate of the hospital there was an armed man (he was not from the police or the Iraqi or American army), standing about 10 meters away from them.

They asked him to help, but he said that all the roads were dangerous now, and closed, and that the fighting was everywhere. However, he offered to take them to another man who was armed as well and who could guide them to a safe place, where they could take a car with which to escape.

Relieved

After 5 kilometres of walking through the poorest and oldest part of the city, where armed men with their creepy weapons were walking and running, the guide suddenly stopped and talked to some armed men. They were arguing which way was the safest way for us and then they decided to let the doctors into one of the houses till the situation calmed down. But the doctors were afraid and one of them started crying. They went to a very old house, which was a bit creepy but the people were very nice to the doctors. The fighting took

“But the doctors were afraid and one of them started crying. They went to a very old house, which was a bit creepy but the people were very nice to the doctors.”

place right in front of the doctors: they saw captives, cars and weapons belonging to their enemy. And they heard women screaming.

Then after 1 hour they took the doctors and put them in one small car and drove the doctors to a safe place. On the road they saw a horrible situation: many crashed and burned cars, dead people, and an abandoned city. They took a taxi and he drove them to another place, after that we were relieved, yes WE! Because the female doctor was ME!

Oras



Human Security is needed in Iraq

Freedom From Want.....

Human security today is an extremely important objective in Iraq. As it is understood, human security can help shift the focus of the debate in the direction of what humanity really wants, rather than what the state, government or a few of them want. We should ask ourselves, then, how we can protect ourselves, because the core of human insecurity is vulnerability. Human security does not only involve security, but also development. That means safety for people from both violent and non-violent threats: taking people as point of reference. To some extent, the former regime provided economic security through food rationing, thus combating hunger which is a non-violent threat. But no part of Iraq lived in a situation of human security, because human security provides the condition under which people can enjoy freedom from both fear and want. The regime secured 'want' at its minimum level and connected it strongly with fear: the food ration card was issued by the Ministry of Interior, in charge of security, in connection with the Ministry of Trade. Thus the people had

no freedom of movement inside and outside Iraq. Generation after generation in Iraq grew up with the fear of war and violence. Those generations nowadays are fathers, teachers, managers, etc. Women feared losing their sons, husband, loved ones, etc. Young girls who have grown up in that environment are now mothers, teachers, doctors... and so on.

Fear: a Human Security Factor

After 9/4/2003 a new state started to be built, one which we did not know yet. Challenges flamed up. Terror: extremists creating havoc, extremists with so many different ideologies. Muslim extremists, nationalists, running for power, many people form the backbone of the resistance to change. Ordinary Iraqi people have not yet tasted democracy. From the 'want side', the government cannot provide jobs. More than 30% of the people are unemployed, most of them young, both skilled and unskilled, university graduates and school quitters, male and female. But the most staggering factor is fear. Vehicle-bombs, suicide bombings: they have become a common

means of attack. Militias of the ruling parties are everywhere, machine guns part of their outfit, and they are mostly young people. Young people, unemployed, with no chances, are easy to be recruited by the militias. They represent a real threat to the ordinary people's lives.

Focus on Young Iraqi's

We all believe that human security means building security from below. As we concern ourselves with people, our main focus should be young people, young people

from Iraq. The role of civil society hereby cannot be underestimated. Iraq has some experience with civil society, but that experi-

ence has been interrupted too many times. Most NGOs support a party or a certain power, meaning that we have not yet witnessed real NGOs.

Many Iraqi NGOs are trying to represent civil society, but the lack of experience, support, networks and international relations are abundantly clear. On the other side of the problem, there are no UN agencies in Iraq: this will provide extreme difficulties in providing humanitarian relief to the people, and the backing of (local)

NGOs. The Iraqi government wants to take the NGOs under its wings, but does this by means of interference and law.

At universities, student organizations are mostly controlled by Muslim-Shea'a parties in the middle and south of Iraq because they have the necessary support and funding, combined with a lack of awareness. But the majority of the students are not member to such organizations, organizations that have not held any democratic

conference and with

nearly all leaders being appointed. At other end of the educational system we find no NGO at all, no social activities (parent

boards, trips, communication: all non-existent).

Why? Most Iraqi families stay at home to protect themselves, and of course their children: if the child is a girl the fear of kidnapping is doubled. No Iraqi family allows their children or youngsters to go outside their house after school time.

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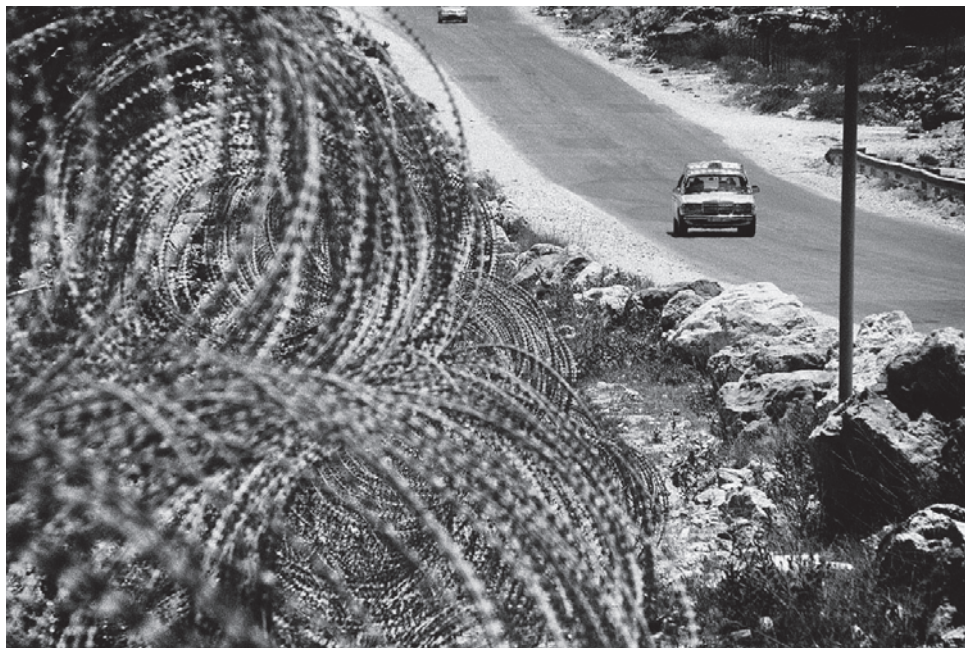
Towards Human Security

The educational system can be used for building self-confidence among young people. Using the

time at school, they must be put in touch with young (international) people, other schools and other Iraqi youngsters by means of internet, campaigns, and so on. Most Iraqi schools are poorly equipped and modern IT is nearly non-existent. There is so much that can be done and we need to work on so many levels in order to come a bit closer to human security.....

Oras





My Brothers are Shetaheem!

Family Identity

Every human being wherever he lives in this world has the right to start his own family and to live with them in peace. This inherited right of humanity since the beginning of time is also recognized in all national and international agreements as a legitimate right for every individual.

In my understanding, a family consists of a mother, a father and their children who are living together. But the definition of a Palestinian family is totally different according to the “democratic” Israeli law. My mother is a Christian Palestinian who holds a blue colored personal identity card, what they call the Israeli ID, whereas she does not hold the Israeli nationality. Rather, she holds a Jordanian travel document because she is a citizen of Jerusalem (The Eastern Part). After the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the annexing of Jerusalem to the “State of Israel” in 1967, the citizens of East Jerusalem were considered foreigners and thus subjected to the Israeli Law for foreigners:

they were foreign residents on what is called “Israeli land”. This law is still valid till today and according to it, the citizens of East Jerusalem are not allowed to vote for the Parliamentary Israeli elections. They are only allowed to vote for the municipal elections.

My father is a Christian Palestinian holding a green identity card, called the Palestinian ID. He also holds the Palestinian Nationality since he is a citizen of the West Bank. After the occupation of the West Bank and of the Gaza strip in 1967, the inhabitants of those areas were given identity cards with an orange colour. After signing the agreements of Oslo in 1993 and the coming of the Palestinian National Authority to the West Bank and Gaza, they substituted the orange ID cards with the Palestinian green ones and they issued Palestinian passports for the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza.

I have three younger brothers and one younger sister. They all hold the green Palestinian ID cards: what they call “Shetaheem” in Hebrew. I,

however, hold the blue Israeli one, because when I was born, the Israeli law was still applied to Palestinians, implying that the child is related to its mother. Accordingly, I was related to my mother and registered on the blue Identity card of my mother. After my birth, this law no longer applied to the Palestinians and my mother could not register my younger brothers on her ID. Because of this difference in identity cards, the Israeli law separates the members of one family and deprives them from the right of living together under one roof as a family and under normal conditions.

Special Permission

Due to the tough Israeli measures and the complications of the occupation, it is not allowed for citizens of the West Bank and Gaza holding the Palestinian green IDs to enter Israeli areas without special permission. This permission can only be issued by the Israeli Military Correlation office and according to several conditions. Often, such as during the Jewish Holidays or for “security” reasons, those conditions become impossible. For example, the applicant has to be older than 35 years, or young people are deprived from any permission for several months.

These severe procedures apply automatically to my family members because they are citizens of Bethlehem, thus from the West Bank, but not to my mother or me because we hold the Israeli blue IDs. We are actually obliged to live alone in Jerusalem because we are not allowed to live with the rest of the family in Bethlehem. In sum, my family lives apart, separated from each other: my father and my younger brothers and sister live in Bethlehem on the West Bank and my mother and I live in Jerusalem alone. This is despite the fact that my parents do not have any problems regarding their relationship.

Fined for Family

I am totally convinced that the Israeli law is cruel and unfair, and is committing a big crime against my family and me. According to this law, I cannot drive in the same car with my brothers. I cannot even take the same roads they take to go to Ramallah, for example, or to Jerusalem. The citizens of the West Bank have their special roads. If I would take the same road, I would get fined. I have often wished to be able to travel with my brothers to Areha in the same car, listening together to music and laughing and having fun. I am deprived from this joy with them.

It does not stop here. I cannot walk with my brothers together in the streets of Jerusalem and we cannot go to public parks. They cannot join me to buy my graduation outfit or to buy together a gift for our mother on her birthday. We cannot go together to a restaurant and enjoy a meal in the old city or to take a trip to the seaside during the weekend. We cannot even pray on Sundays together in the Church of the Resurrection.

I would like to mention some of the very bad incidents I have lately had with my family. The first incident happened in East Jerusalem when I, with my brothers, took a taxi to go home (our mother's house) which is located nearby Safaf town. After 5 minutes of driving, the taxi driver asked us about our IDs and when he found out that my brothers held the Palestinian green IDs, he stopped the car and asked them to leave it immediately and allowed only me to stay with him because I hold the blue Israeli ID. The second story, which is more painful, happened when I was in the car with my two

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years younger brother and my mother. We were stopped at an Israeli checkpoint. They humiliated us for three hours under a burning sun, after which they suspended my mother's driving licence for one month combined with a financial fine. The reason was that she had with her in her car her son, my brother, who holds a green Palestinian ID, i.e. Shetaheem.

It is normal for people who are driving citizens from the West Bank or Gaza without permission to receive huge fines, up to 35000 Shekel (almost USD 8000) combined with a prison sentence up to 6 months.

The Democratic State of Israel

Isn't strange that this is happening in the “State of Israel”? Which considers itself as the state number one in the Middle East regarding democracy and its practices in all aspects of life, and in protecting its citizens and defending human and animal rights? According to my understanding of the concept “human security”, I cannot see how a human being can

feel safe if he is forced to be separated from his family by an oppressive and cruel Israeli occupation.

For me, each day is a new challenge that I have to live with and which causes in me a strong feeling of loneliness. I wake up each morning to find my self home alone, eat my breakfast alone, watch TV at night alone, get groceries alone, while the rest of my family lives in the other house in the city of Bethlehem and are only 10 minutes away without the Israeli barricades at the entries of the cities and the apartheid wall which is separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

It is very difficult to be a member of a Shetaheem family. I wonder if this is the civilized human impression that Israel is trying hard to reflect upon the world. Moreover, on the 14th of May 2006, the Supreme Israeli Court has again ratified the law, issued in 2002, which forbids the reunion of Palestinian families. My family and thousands of other families are victims of this law which does not comply with the value of justice. This law obviously discriminates between the Israelis and the Arabs, and between the Jews and the Muslims and Christians living

under a state that considers democracy and equality to be its highest values. In fact, this situation reminds me of the apartheid regime and the inhuman discrimination that was applied by South Africa and the Unites States to their citizens, between the Whites and the Blacks.

Today Israel is considered as the only country that prevents members of one family from being united and from living together. The only reason behind that is simple: we are Palestinians living under an immoral cruel illegitimate Israeli occupation.

Could you, dear reader, imagine yourself living now with your family who loves you, could you imagine the pain I am feeling everyday when I walk next to my brother from the same flesh and blood and being afraid of him because he is..." Shetaheem"?

Nimallah

Correspondence With a member from our MEYF in Baghdad⁴

“I thought: if we have such kids who in spite of the hell outside want to learn, and who face terror with a laugh, then we will get through this period.”

(1) A Touching Story

Dear friends,

Today I would like to share a very touching story of human security. In the middle of the eighties the Iraqi army started their military operations in Northern Iraq against the Iraqi Kurds, what we call the Anfal operation. Even chemical weapons were used against civilians. Thousands of Kurds were removed from their villages, separated from their families and imprisoned in the desert of Dewania, a few miles from Iraq's southern border

with Saudi Arabia. One of them was a woman in her forties who left her family and kids with their grandmother and went to work in a tobacco factory. That day she was captured, beaten and removed to that prison, to be found 20 years later by a nomadic tribe wondering alone in the desert, with no food or shelter and no memory of what had happened to her except for a few fragments. My organization, the Iraqi Al-Amal association, adopted this old lady's cause and we moved her to our office in Dewania in the south of Iraq. After a few months of medical treatment and rehabilitation, we gathered enough information on what had happened and were able to locate her village in Northern Iraq. Today we had a reunion of her with her family and son whom she did not see for more than 20 years. She will now go back to her village as soon as possible.

4 Unfortunately we cannot mention his name, due to security reasons (red).

I wish this story to help people in understanding what Iraqi people have suffered during

the Saddam days, and why we need to stop the violence in Iraq so that we can heal our wounds and, as people, be able to start to recover and build our lives.

Your friend,

Wamith

The following email was sent by one of the members of our network, when the violence was getting more and more extreme in Baghdad. The email moved many of us and people from all over Middle East and Europe sent mails to him (red.).

(2) Breaking Curfew

Dear friends,

I don't know what to say? I just broke the curfew in Baghdad to get to a place where there is some internet 'cause I have been isolated from the world for the last 40 hours as prisoner in my house. The phone and electricity is dead and I see the world from the news on my radio or from the sound of explosion and the sight of smoke in the sky. Why are they trying to destroy

us? Why? I hear the news and it is all about Iraq and Lebanon. Lebanon, the pretty country that I visited a month ago. I went to see a museum and saw Aljumeil's statue. He was assassinated. He talked about a non-ethnic country and now my own country is torn under the rage of ethnic groups, why?

I don't know when I will be able to contact you again or if I will survive this disaster 'cause they are attacking Sunni communities, and by birth and family ties I am considered a Sunni. Even though I feel Iraqi. I pray that we get out of this alive and ask God to forgive us and make the end come peacefully.

Till I contact you again,

Your friend from Baghdad

**Member of the Iraqi Al Amal Association
and the MEYF**



(3) Depressing News

Dear friends,

I am sorry it took me so long to write to you. I was hoping things would be better so I could put some good news in my email but there was none so I had free time and I said I better send a story on human security. First I want to thank you all very deeply for your kind letters when we were on curfew, it really gave me energy to get out of the very black and depressing situation. But unfortunately things are getting worse in Baghdad since the Al-Sadr city explosions.

Let me tell you a bit more about that horrible day when I sent you my e-mail. After the explosion that day I went to work in the hospital and afterwards went to my NGO work as I do every day. It was a normal day and after we finished work, we celebrated the birthday of our accountant and then we went home. We found out that the attack in Sadr city was very bad (about 250 killed and some wounded). A curfew was announced and we stayed inside our houses and after a few hours we started to hear mortar attacks and Katyusha rockets. I went to the roof to see smoke coming

from a nearby mosque, they had burned it, and the militia were active in our neighbourhoods in spite of the curfew. It seemed no one could stop them. I did not freak out 'cause we had seen this during the time that they blew up the shrine in Samura. But the electricity and phone went dead (the phone till now does not work as they cut the main line in the ground) and I started to receive phone calls on my mobile phone from relatives and friends and they told me attacks were taking place on every Sunni in the city (I remembered at that moment that I was considered as part of Sunni society). So I was left alone with my mother in our house in the dark and every hour we got news by mobile or by radio that people were burnt alive and others were kidnapped to be killed at the funeral of Al-Sadr victims. Our neighbours had escaped Iraq last month and we had no one we could trust near to us. I had no weapons (I do not believe in them) and my mother was afraid that once I would go out they would shoot me because of the curfew. It took us about 40 hours in that hell until I finally decided that I preferred to get shot rather than to stay at home. I went to a friends' house near to us, a few blocks away. They had a generator and Internet so I could send my famous *[famous as he received so many responses*

to this email, red] letter to the Middle East Youth Group. The father of my friend told me to go and bring my mother and stay with them. He gave me a gun with no bullets and said 'now if they come to you shoot, at least they will shoot you dead and not kidnap you so that something even worse will happen to you'. I went home but my mother refused to go and she made a good decision 'cause after 2 hours it got dangerous when cars attacked my friends' block. As their neighbour is a general in the Iraq ministry of defence he called for the army tanks to stop the attack.

The curfew finished, but security is still very bad. Armed groups are destroying Baghdad and kill people and the city. People are now exchanging houses, if you are Shia and you have relatives or Sunni friends living in a Shia area you go and live there and they move to your house in the Sunni area. I called people in a Sunni area (even in Tikrit and Mosul) but last year I filed a suit against Saddam on behalf of my late father (murdered by Saddam) it would not be safe for me to move there, and what about my mother? So I rented a house near the church of Holy Mary in a very Christian area of Baghdad, where they hit us every night but it was better than the rest of

Baghdad. That's all my depressing news and stories from Baghdad, people are trying to face this reality and I try to keep my good spirits. Yesterday my office in the hospital was hit by BKC shots, one just missed me but I took the bullet to make a souvenir of it or medallion. Anyways, I think this letter is very long so I want to thank you all again for your letters, they really made me focus on things.

**Thank you, my best,
Member of the MEYF**

(4) We Will Get Through

Dear friends,

Again thank you all for your emails, I truly found in them a lot of energy to go on, thank god the curfew ended but there still is violence in the shape of Katyusha rockets that destroy innocent civilians houses.

I returned today to my work, went to the hospital but after 2 hours we evacuated it after an attack from the terrorists on us, they hit us with 2 rock-

ets. One missed and the other hit the lab. Then a sniper start to shoot at us, 1 bullet went through the window and hit my computer so I will not play any games for a while. Thankfully we had no patients and we hid till the sniper went to lunch. Then we took the ambulance and crossed the bridge to Baghdad city, I was a little shaken but I went to my organization office to check on my friends I had not seen them in 5 days. I met the small kids that came to get training in computers and in conflict resolution, they were all there making jokes and finding funny things to say on the disaster that we are going through and I started to feel comfortable and safe. I thought: if we have such kids, who in spite of the hell outside want to learn, and who face terror with a laugh, then we will get through this period.

The last week was very hard on me, many things have change for ever for me and I need to do a lot of thinking, but I believe now more than ever that what we do as group is the most important thing to the future of ours and the world.

Thanks for all your letters again

Your friend from Baghdad



My story of human security

I Never Felt Scared

I live in Jordan, in the capital city Amman, and security is the most valuable thing in our country. I never felt scared when I walked the streets or when I was at school, in a restaurant, at a cinema or going out somewhere, always there was someone or something or a general atmosphere bringing me safety and security. When I was very young it was my parents, I never felt scared except when I got lost from them, when I was at school it was the place itself, the teachers and the atmosphere in general. When I walked the streets it maybe was the light that I could see around or maybe the people in the streets going and coming with no sign of fear on their faces or maybe the policemen or security men who checked people at the doors of restaurants or cinemas or malls.....

When I was very young I used to stay up late in the weekends, playing in the streets with our neighbours. I never felt scared nor did my parents, as they knew all the families in the neighbourhood and there were more than 6 embassies

around our house. Thus, there were policemen all around our area as well as the old man who was living in the apartment on the ground floor. He used to sit in his balcony watching us all the time, and if we went a bit far, he used to tell our parents. We didn't use to like him but he was a source of security as well. When I became older, I became more aware that I should be careful when I'm alone in the streets, when I take a taxi, that I shouldn't go to a place that I don't know. I realised there were some restrictions in order to protect myself from bad people.

Trembling With Fear

But yet I'd never had the feeling of insecurity until these terrorist attacks of the three hotels in Amman. The first time I heard the news, I couldn't believe that this was taking place in our secure country. I know a lot of people who were in these hotels at that time. I couldn't have imagined that I'd lose them in this way. I was at a friend's house celebrating her birthday, and that was the first time that I drove back home trembling with fear. The streets were completely

empty, everywhere policemen were closing the roads that led to the hotels. The following days we didn't leave our houses except to go into the demonstrations against these terrorist attacks or to give condolences to the families of the victims.

We stopped going out to restaurants or cafés and we started gathering at houses to spend time together. But just a couple of weeks later or even less everything was back as it was before, except for new checkpoints at the doors of every restaurant, every café, every hotel, every mall, every marriage hall, everywhere more policemen

“I don't know if this is how things should be, if the normal way to maintain security is to have these checkpoints and these security procedures, but what I do know is that it pleases me and that it means more security for me.”

in the streets and a general feeling of more security procedures being taken everywhere. I don't

know if this is how things should be, if the normal way to maintain security is to have these checkpoints and these security procedures, but what I do know is that it pleases me and that it means more security for me.

Eventually the inner feeling of security came back & nothing was left of these attacks except one of the worst memories of crimes against humanity.

Reem

Idealism versus realism

Israel is Confused

Most of the time I try to explain Arab politics to Jews in Israel. Perhaps in this forum my job is to explain Israeli politics to Arabs. I'll start with a discussion I had the other day with a friend. We were talking about the future, trying to assess where the conflict between Israel and Palestine is leading to. "Israeli society" my friend said, "Is confused since 1967. On the one hand it wants to control as much land as possible, and on the other hand it wants to stay a Jewish society." The contradiction between the two is that the more land Israel controls, the more Palestinians it has to include. For many years Israeli society was able to live with this contradiction by keeping the Palestinians in a lower status and not allowing them to become part of the state. Since the Palestinian revolt in 1987 (Intifada) the price of keeping control over all the occupied territories has become too high, and the mainstream of Israeli society is looking for a compromise that will keep as much land with as few Palestinians.

*"Israeli society" my friend said,
"Is confused since 1967."*

A Just or a Probable Solution?

Within the mainstream of Israeli society the debate is between withdrawal to the 1967 borders on the one hand and annexation of several percentages of the West Bank (where most of the settlers are concentrated) on the other hand. This last option will prevent Palestine from becoming a viable state, because it will be cut through the middle by Israeli presence, and will resemble the South African Bantustans.

Another marginal voice (which I am a part of) is asking whether Jewish society has a right to self-determination in a land that was mostly Palestinian. The few Jews in this group support the Palestinian's right of return and believe a Bi-national state to be the just solution to the conflict. They look at Israel as a de facto Bi-national state because of the Palestinian 20% minority inside it.

"A Bi-national state will never materialize." my friend told me. "Everywhere in the world – Yugo-

slavia, former Soviet Union – you see nations separating from each other, so why should our case be different? Israeli society could never agree to it.” With this in mind I ask myself where I should put my energy: fighting for the more just one state solution, or for the more probable two state solution. Perhaps it is a matter of time: first two states and then uniting them.

Youval



Women in Iran

My name is Shadi. I was born in Tehran in Iran in 1966, studied Psychology at a university in Tehran and started working in a big factory as a social worker. I got married to a physician when I was 25. After a while I found out that he was not the right partner, but due to rules in our country I couldn't consider a divorce. So I tried to deal with the problems. Four years later I delivered a girl into this world and I understood that I couldn't be patient any more. I then decided to discuss this issue with my parents. I told them that I had wasted 9 of my best years. That to me it was not possible to continue with him anymore, and that I would take care of my daughter. My father agreed and we started the divorce process.

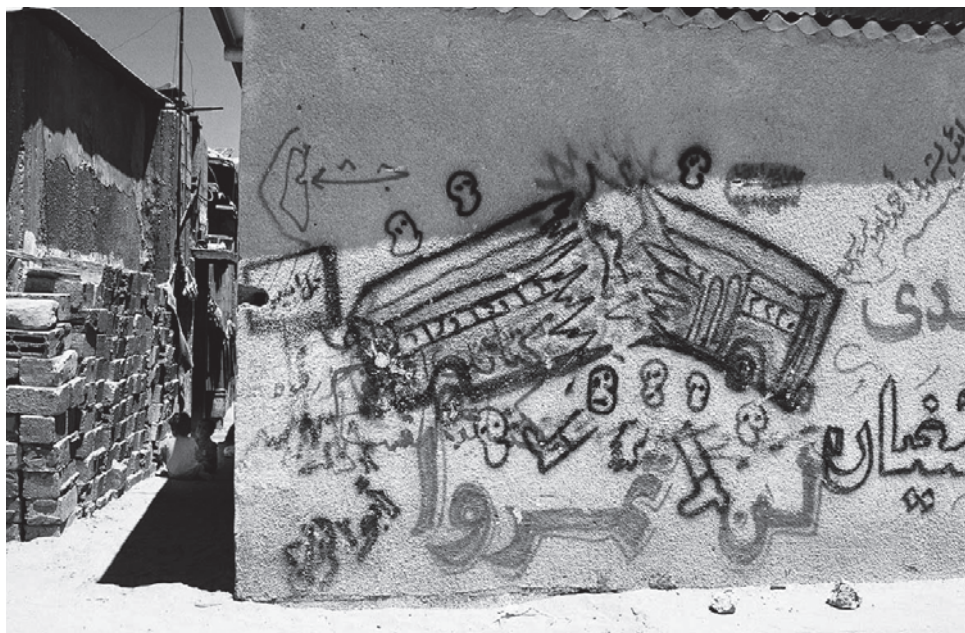
After breaking up, I bought a new house to keep my privacy. I gave my daughter to her father when she was ready to go to primary school. I wanted to leave him the responsibility of bringing up his daughter. Now she is 9 I can meet her

3 times a week, and I have a good relationship with her step mom and the father. I'm going to marry again, but I can say I know my new partner well, because we were colleagues for 6 years and close friends. By the way, we lived together freely in my house for about 1year. There are so many problems for a divorced woman in Iran, but everything depends upon your attitude. If you are optimistic and you have strong desire, YOU CAN DO EVERYTHING YOU WANT. Where there is a wish there is a way.

“If you are optimistic and you have strong desire, you can do everything you want.”

Best Regards,

Shadi



That day...

My “Home”

I never felt secure like I felt at the Hebrew University. Since I left Paris at the age of eighteen, the place where I was born and grew up, and came to live and study in Israel, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was my second home. I remember that on the day I arrived to the university I had to find my way in the building's labyrinth and ask for the Faculty of Humanities, so much was I a stranger to this place. It took me a while to get to know the different buildings and departments of the university, to learn its shortcuts, the opening hours of the library, the best places to eat and the quiet shadowy corners where you could have a short nap sleeping on the grass on a hot summer day.

The university is the place where I grew up physically, emotionally and psychologically. For almost nine years, my whole life was connected to the university. I stayed there from the age

“When I think about the university, along happy memories, come feelings of pain, suffering and distress. This was the place where I blossomed, but also where my life was changed forever.”

of 18 until 27, studying English literature and Art History, graduating in Art History and later working as a researcher at the Centre for Jewish Art. Even my first job was related to this institu-

tion: I guided groups of foreign students on the campus, so they wouldn't be lost as I had been on my first day. The campus is also the place where I met most of my friends. What I loved about the Hebrew University is that I could meet people from such different countries and cultures: Russians, Chileans, Israeli Arabs, Dutch, Americans, Turks, Ethiopians, Italians, Moroccans, Austrians, Japanese.... And the most amazing thing was that we were able to communicate in Hebrew!

For two years, I lived in the campus dorms. My haven was a single tiny room that I shared with a roommate who was also a friend. I enjoyed walking “home”, especially during spring and summertime when I came early enough to watch

the sunset remnants in the beautiful view on the Mount of Olives. The university is located on Mount Scopus, which as its name indicates, offers one of the most gorgeous panorama's of the city. On those pleasant days, the air had something special: it was warm and filled with blossoming perfumes. Sometimes, when I had stayed longer than expected in the library or when I had a paper to write, I would look at the starry night and be overwhelmed by the glitter of the incalculable number of stars that seemed to me as small diamonds. At these particular moments, I could just pinpoint that I was happy, as if joy and bliss had become palpable.

A Safe Place for Lunch

At the end of July 2002, I received a phone call from my friend Diego: he wanted to say goodbye before leaving for Peru to assume his first diplomatic position at the Israeli Embassy. I came to know Diego, a new immigrant from Buenos Aires, at university while we were both guiding groups there. We became close friends and had known each other for 8 years. When Diego suggested that we meet for lunch at university, I felt relieved. At that time, we were living under the constant threat of terror. Almost every day, that

year, there was a bombing in a cafe, on a bus or in the street. People left home in the morning without knowing whether they would come back alive in the evening. Jerusalem was one of the favourite targets of the Palestinian terrorists and there was a feeling that no place was really safe. So when Diego asked me to meet for lunch on the campus, I felt relieved. It spared me the anguish of having to decide on a restaurant where to go out at night and continue having doubts about the choice until the evening passed.

One Last Story...

After finishing some technical matters he had to settle in order to obtain his Master's degree in administration, Diego came to my office so we could walk together to have lunch. I suggested eating in the Education building cafeteria, but after we found it closed, we opted for the air-conditioned Frank Sinatra cafeteria (named after the famous American singer who donated the money for the pavilion). It was very hot that day, 38°C, and the place was crowded, because everyone, like us, had come to look for a cool place to eat. After we finished our meal I reminded Diego that I soon had to go, since I had a meeting at work at 2 o'clock. Yet Diego wanted to tell me

one last story. In the middle of his story, at 1:45, the bomb exploded. Diego was killed on the spot. He was one of the 9 persons murdered that day. I was lucky to survive and was among the ninety persons injured. The university, which meant so much to both of us, which was a place we loved and in which we loved, had suddenly become hell. An Arab Israeli who had worked as a painter at the university had placed the bomb inside the cafeteria that he chose because he found it crowded with students. The Hamas terrorists targeted the Hebrew University because it was a symbol of tolerance and coexistence, a place where Israelis and Arabs could study peacefully.

Since that day, when I think about the university, along happy memories, come feelings of pain, suffering and distress. This was the place where I blossomed, but also where my life was changed forever. This is where my friend David Diego Ladowski was murdered at the age of 29, and where I received life as a present ten days before my 27th birthday.

Since that event, security doesn't mean the same to me anymore.

Eliad





Hind's Story

“Outrageous” Behaviour

I remember a dream I had while dating a lawyer, the first man who proposed to me years ago. I saw a bride dressed in white, very beautiful except for one thing. She had no hands; her husband had cut them off. My fiancé was in fact conservative, he wanted to change the same qualities he found attractive in me, my independence and ambitions. Needless to say, that engagement didn't last. Little did I know how prophetic my dream was, or how I'd have to fight to make the woman in it whole again. Egypt can be a tough place for people who dare challenge the status quo, but I was lucky because my parents are fighters too, my father was imprisoned for his political beliefs and subsequently barred from teaching in state colleges despite holding a doctorate in economics. My mother is a psychology professor who took a high-paying job teaching in Saudi Arabia to support us until dad could get a business going. She travelled alone, leaving my brother and I with our father in Cairo, an outrageous

move for a married woman in the eyes of most Egyptians.

The Sanctity of Virginity

After graduation from the faculty of Fine Arts, a famous art director hired me as assistant on some high-profile TV shows. Then I landed my first job as costume designer for a movie starring a popular young comedian. The work was demanding and I loved it, though I had little time for friends. I'd dated since high school, when holding hands was considered a sign of love. We were that naïve. Later things became more complicated since the boyfriends usually proposed. Dating was a test, a preface to marriage. My fiancées were jealous and protective because they saw me as their future wife. Being alone is rarely an option since people live with their parents. In any case, pre-marital sex can have consequences you tend to avoid. Our society regards virginity as virtually sacred, even in these changing times. The problem is that while men can sleep around before marriage, they

expect their wives to be virgins. In Egypt you can have an operation called hymen repair, to provide the desired illusion. Women know that if they told the truth about their past, they'd stay single. The lie extends to how you act in bed, i.e. inexperienced. Virginity is more than a religious issue, it's one of many traditions men insist upon. Although I'd had boyfriends, I was a virgin when I met Leena's father. But if I wasn't, I wouldn't have lied. I could never play that game.

An Expedient Wedding

I met Ahmed on the set of a sit-com pilot. I was doing costumes and excited because it was a 1940's period piece, my first. The lead was played by Ahmed el-Fishawi, the son of two famous actors, Farouk el-Fishawi and Sumaya el-Alfi. At the first fitting, Ahmed was wearing a loose t-shirt. I took it from the sides and stretched it tight across his chest. He was tall with a long, muscled torso, perfect for the high-waisted trousers men wore in the 40's. He pulled back, feigning shock and said the only woman who had ever touched him that way was his mother. I looked up and asked wryly if he'd swear to that on his mother's life. My retort made him laugh.

Perhaps because of the 40's clothes, Ahmed reminded me of the romantic leads in old movies. There was no denying our attraction, so when he proposed an *urfi* marriage I barely hesitated. The *urfi* is an Islamic contract between a man and a woman that is signed by two witnesses but is not registered in legal documents. However, it's not acknowledged with an expensive public wedding so it isn't considered as respectable, nor does the wife have the same rights as in a registered marriage. The advantages of *urfi* are privacy and expediency. If things didn't work out, we would simply agree to destroy the contract. So we wrote the paper and a friend of Ahmed's signed. I kept the contact with the intention of getting another signature. Once we had the *urfi*, we started sleeping together. He was my first lover and so tender that I thought he knew what it meant to me.

Religious Moods

When we first met, I'd thought I could help Ahmed. He seemed torn between following his father's social agenda and finding his own way. He prayed daily and his religious feelings clearly troubled him. On his TV program, he'd supported the conservative views of a preacher

named Amr Khaled, who has a huge following. The public had loved the idea that the son of a notorious actor had become a spokesperson for moral youth. Ahmed's popularity, I realized, relied on the contrast. After our marriage Ahmed seemed more confused than ever. As the strong woman who was supposed to steady him, I felt defeated by his ups and downs. He was divided between his father's influence, his religious persona and the life we might have had together. I finally told him I wanted time to think. I wanted him to feel my absence but I didn't hold out very long. We tried again for several weeks before Ahmed's father invited him to Beirut. I had a new ad project, in addition to some film work, and told myself this was our chance to make the break. We'd been together just three months. While Ahmed was away I started feeling tired and blamed it on my heavy work schedule. My office at the ad agency was spacious and overlooked one of Cairo's busy streets. One morning I arrived at nine, closed the door and put my feet up to rest for a moment. I awoke several hours later to the sound of blaring

"I hope that Egyptian women will learn that they needn't accept men's decisions as final, or lie to escape the stigma of a society that prefers appearances to truth."

horns and screaming phones, frantic and a little scared.

I Chose to Be a Mother

I never kept track of my periods and it was a girlfriend who said I should get a pregnancy test. When the doctor called with the results, he asked whether I wanted them to be positive or not. I was standing in my office by the window, but I was looking inside of myself. In that moment I chose to be a mother and the doctor confirmed the pregnancy. My girlfriend tried to comfort me, saying we could surely find a doctor for an abortion. I was horrified. Instead, I planned to tell Ahmed how things stood. I ad-

mit, I had hopes, but was resigned to have the baby even if it meant being a single mom.

I was very concerned about how Ahmed and my parents would take the news. Time dragged while Ahmed was in Lebanon. Each day on my way to work I crossed the Nile, wishing hard that things would come out right. Sitting in traffic I'd count the ships on the river, and the number

of times we'd made love. I must have conceived almost at once. I thought of my child and of names for boys and girls.

I phoned Ahmed as soon as he returned. He promised to call back but never did. I began praying more than usual, and reading the Qur'an in my spare moments. I was scared but I thought things through and prepared for the worst, that is, that we would marry officially, then divorce, and I would raise our child alone. I even accepted the idea of Ahmed marrying someone else. It never occurred to me that he might refuse to acknowledge our marriage or deny the baby was his.

Not Ready for a Family

After two weeks, I swallowed my pride and went to him. To my relief, he hugged me as if holding something precious, or at least that's how I felt. I rested my head on his chest and he stroked it protectively. He said he'd missed me and I forgave him for not calling. We sat down together on the couch. He told me I was beautiful and asked if I'd gained weight. I wasn't showing yet, but Ahmed guessed the truth. 'You're pregnant' he said, and went quiet, then he said softly that he wasn't yet ready for a family. He said we should consult a

sheikh, a religious authority, to ask if abortion could be permitted.

I bit my tongue, certain that the sheikh would only confirm that abortion is forbidden. I told Ahmed calmly that I couldn't kill my baby. After a moment Ahmed asked if I still had the *urfi* paper. I confessed I hadn't gotten another signature. He said he would, so I gave him the contract, the only proof of our marriage. I had no suspicions. On the contrary, I was happy and resolved to tell my parents about their grandchild. He called as I was driving home, telling me to rest and take care.

The next day Ahmed called from the office of Sheikh Safwat Hegazi, one of Egypt's many TV preachers. Apparently all we had to do was sacrifice five camels each and give the meat to the poor, then fast for 60 days until sunset –and god would forgive us for aborting. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or scream at the absurdity. I dared the sheikh to make his verdict public. Not only did he refuse, he viciously promised I'd never see the *urfi* paper again. I went cold with the realization that Ahmed wanted a way out and the Sheikh had given one. Hegazi was right about

one thing, I never saw the contract again and I didn't see Ahmed either.

DNA

We talked - endless, alienating phone calls, full of pleading and bargaining, distractions that made work a nightmare. I told Ahmed I'd abort if he married and divorced me first, or if he returned the *urfi* contract. He refused, but my ploy revealed what I needed to know - Ahmed wasn't taking any chances. He had no intention of giving the child his name, even when I promised to relinquish child support. My position struck me with deadening force. In Egypt, without a marriage contract, only the father can register a child's birth, or in his absence, the child's grandfather. Without a birth certificate, my baby would not officially exist.

The inevitable confrontation with my parents was painful. They were angry and I left in tears, hardly knowing where to go. Our house is on the edge of the desert, a harsh and empty place, like the hollowness I felt inside me. But I should have known better than to doubt them. I was staying with a girlfriend when my father came to talk. I told him I had a right to choose my own and my

child's future, without giving in to a man, and that if I had an abortion for appearance' sake, I would hate myself and expect him to hate me too. My father is not the emotional type but his eyes filled with tears. He swore he'd stand beside me. Later, he and my mother met with Ahmed's parents but it was no use. They too suggested I abort rather than 'ruin my life'.

I had no choice but to take Ahmed to court to establish both paternity and the validity of our marriage. No sooner had we filed the suits when journalists released the information to a public avid for celebrity scandals. I informed Ahmed of the lawsuits and promised him he'd lose. I even warned him about DNA testing, the first he'd ever heard of it. He's not alone. In Egypt, paternity and marriage suits are usually judged on the basis of witness testimony, not the most reliable method. Many women feel intimidated by a process that places their honor in question without promising definitive results. Additionally, many laws favor men and society looks down on women who make their private lives a legal matter. Consequently, women tend to avoid the courts altogether and as a result, they relinquish their rights.

Ahmed was convinced that no one could oblige him to take the DNA test. He stuck to his story in front of the judge, that we were never married, that the child was not his. Imagine my joy when the courts ruled in my favour on February 24, 2005. My case sets the precedent for placing the burden of proof in paternity suits on the male. The DNA test provides a far simpler and discreet means of determining paternity than was known in Egypt before. Hopefully women involved in paternity suits will make use of the precedent and thousands of children left in legal limbo by irresponsible fathers, can finally be given their rights.

A Better Egypt for My Daughter

My case has attracted a lot of attention, which hasn't been easy on my family, but this ruling makes it all worth while. Meanwhile my marriage suit will help raise awareness of women's rights and responsibilities in an *urfi* marriage. Always keep a copy of the contract! I hope that Egyptian women will learn that they needn't accept men's decisions as final, or lie to escape the stigma of a society that prefers appearances to truth. I also want them to know that so-called religious men don't always have their interests at heart. Perhaps if our hypocrisies are brought out

into the open, we'll have the courage to change.

I've started keeping a diary for Leena, filling it with notes about how she's growing, about my work and dreams, as well as memories and pictures of Ahmed. It's therapeutic for me and a record of her father as I knew him when we were still in love. Filmmakers have approached me to write a screenplay of my story. But it's far from over. When I look at Leena, I know it's just begun. I want her to grow up in a better Egypt, one I can say I helped to shape.

How the Story Continues

Now, we're in March 2007, a lot of events took place from when I got to know Ahmed until now, a lot of struggle, segregation and pain. I've written some dates in order for the reader to be able to keep track of the events and imagine how long have the this course of action taken.

In August 2003, I got to know Ahmed during the sit-com preparation. In December 2003, Ahmed and I got married. In March 2004, I discovered I was 10 weeks pregnant, and I told Ahmed. In June 2004, and after the endless conversations with Ahmed and his family, I reported the mar-

riage incident and the loss of the *urfi*' paper at the police station, as per my lawyer's advice. In October 2004, I gave birth to the lovely Leena. In January 2005, the first court case for the paternity suit against Ahmed took place, and in February 2005, the court demanded a DNA test for paternity proof. From the last date and for a whole year, there were endless court cases for hearings and testimony. In February 2006, the judge was changed and he ruled refusal of paternity proof, I lost the case, and I lived like a dead corpse for the next three months. Even though I thought the appeal case would take a minimum of three years, I was stunned when the judge bestowed a ruling on the very first appeal court case after questioning both Ahmed and I and seeing the baby, this was in May 2006. I WON THE CASE; I GOT THE NAME FOR LEENA EL-FISHAWY!!

Now, and after the happy ending of my story, which I consider a *happy beginning*, since I still have a lot to do for other people. I plan, after gaining sufficient experience, and finishing the MA that I started in Gender and Women's Studies, to establish my own NGO in a few years time. It is my goal to be an active participant in changing not only the law, but also the greater societal consciousness that contributes to the ongoing oppression of women in Egypt.

Hind



Colophon

Text and editing: Rana Abbawi and Miriam Struyk

Photography: Ronald de Hommel, Geert van Kesteren, IKV and Pax Christi archive

Design and print: Drukkerij Moretus B.V., Rijswijk, The Netherlands