

29/5/2017

## **Children Libraries in Gaza...a Visa outside the Walls of the Siege**

By Intisar Abu Jahl  
Al- Hal Newspaper  
Media Development Center - Birzeit University

On sandy unpaved road near the northern border area of Gaza Strip, one can see the brightly-colored walls of the Beit Hanoun children's library; a library that is a second home to dozens of children who are eager to learn and read. The children float from one book to another, searching for wonder and knowledge between the pages. The children quench their thirst to reading tales from international cultures, in addition to developing their ability to read and write, believing that their future depends on the accumulation of their scientific and cultural knowledge. The Beit Hanoun Library is one of two libraries supported by IBBY the other library is in the Shawka area.

Al Hal has gone to visit the library when librarian Abla Hamad was holding an activity that develops passion for self expression through the paper and pen. She told the children a story and asked them to rewrite it with similar events happening in their own lives. Hamad states "the extracurricular reading activities motivate children to read and assures they keep coming to the library regularly."

Hamad states that the activities are generally around reading, creative writing, puppet theatre, drama, parent engagement in reading to children in addition to participating with other institutions when they hold activities. She also said that two students from the library won the first place in children story writing "My First Book" competition, held by Tamer Institute for Community Education in 2014.

Although the library was completely destroyed in a bombing during the 2014 aggression, the Al-Atta' Association provided the library with a temporary library. Together with IBBY, other publishing houses 700 books were provided. The activities initiated at the library attempt at connecting and relating to children's lives.

"The library works for the children mainly from the age of 8 to 15 years. We hold activities regularly that fit with their respective age groups."

"I got my membership at the library four years ago because I am an avid reader. As I continued to visit the library and with the activities I was taking part in, my creative writing talent developed" said 12-year-old Salah Sehweil.

At the age of 10 years he began writing stories and participating in local and school competitions. He also managed to work on better academic achievement. Sehweil expressed his sadness about the bombing of their former library building; he wishes to return to the old library as the new building is small.

Salah adds: "The occupation deliberately bombs our libraries to keep us from being informed and to assure we do not acquire knowledge. We have to challenge the occupation by getting education and by establishing new libraries."

The 12-year-old Mahmoud Al-Masri told Al-Hal that he signed up in the library two years ago at the request of his family. He had problems with reading. He has since overcome his problems, thanks to the library and now thanks IBBY for continuing to support the children of Gaza.

"Reading makes us live the stories of others and develops our imagination," he said.

"The library receives children all week long and runs a variety of activities in all fields," explained Mahmoud al-Hissi, Al-Shawna's Librarian.

He stressed that they are trying hard to constantly provide the library with books, but the lack of material support sometimes prevents it, noting that the library includes 2000 books, 85% of them are children books. Al-Hissi spoke about the need to provide children with books to help them understand their curriculum.

Jehan Helou, who heads the Palestine national section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), spoke of Palestine's accession to the Board in 2003. Helou stated that IBBY-Palestine was able to establish two libraries by the end of 2007 through donations and support, received from the Children in Crisis Project launched by IBBY in 2006 to support children who live under war or natural disasters.

She pointed out that IBBY Palestine wanted to support establishing libraries at the border areas to support children living in there, providing them space for creativity, since the area has no libraries. She clarified that the annual IBBY Palestine membership is currently being paid by the twinning national section, namely the USA- IBBY which has been covering Palestine's membership since 2006.

Helou said: IBBY continues to support Gaza libraries, "Through the heart-warming Appeal launched by IBBY in 2014 during its bi-annual Congress following the bombing of the Beit Hanoun library and the damages to Al-Shawka library, we managed to obtain \$ 30,000 dollars in support of the libraries. IBBY has launched another appeal last April."

She explained that the Appeal is of a moral value, a great showcase of international solidarity by IBBY, as well as its material value. This year the libraries received \$30,000 donated by one international prominent children writers; noting that IBBY Palestine was able to convey the voice of Palestinian children to the world.

Helou spoke of the difficulty of assuring books are sent into the Gaza Strip because of the Israeli occupation's various obstacles, stressing that IBBY tries to deliver the books through the UNESCO. Before the books arrive into Gaza, they are presented before a specialized committee to review book contents and ensure that the books are up to standards containing no extreme or racist ideas.

She added that the fragmentation of the homeland and the military barriers and closures between the two sides of the country prevents hosting influential personalities and authors, and restricts the implementation of joint workshops. IBBY Palestine's field work is linked to the financial support that comes from donors, noting that any activity cannot be run without this support. But Helou affirmed that the main work of IBBY Palestine is implemented on voluntary basis.

Helou concluded by stressing the need to leave children with hope, to promote education and non-violence and improve children's psychological health through reading and extra-curricular creative activities noting that reading is a Safe Haven for All.