



RUWWAD Report

The Palestinian Youth Empowerment Program

أخبار رواد

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Building Bridges: Ruwwad Youth Ambassadors Visit Key U.S. Cities

“If anyone can bridge the gaps between Americans and Palestinians, it’s us: youth leaders”. These words, delivered by Ruwwad Youth Ambassador Suad Soboh in Boston, were a strong, fitting conclusion to a momentous trip for six Ruwwad youth. Coming at the end of a two-week tour where the team presented a “Made in Palestine” youth leadership model to American audiences, US government officials and university faculty at Harvard and Tufts, Soboh’s statement captured the essence of the entire youth exchange, an event aptly called “Palestinian Youth Voices Heard”.

For most of the young men and women in the diverse Ruwwad group, the trip marked their first time outside the West Bank, their first time on a plane, and their first time using a passport. But these challenges didn’t intimidate the youth; they inspired them: By the end of their trip, Ruwwad’s youth ambassadors had succeeded in sharing their message of positive youth leadership with thousands of Americans and international youth leaders—leveraging their unique status as youth to build ties with U.S. decision-makers and young peers.

One of the the trip’s main highlights was a visit to Washington, DC, where the youth helped build momentum for the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership—a new initiative launched by the U.S. Government and private sector partners to grow the Palestinian economy and create youth leadership opportunities. Addressing USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore and senior staff at the Aspen Institute and Case Foundation, the Ruwwad youth ambassadors gave a frank—and often heart-wrenching—account of the challenges they had faced growing up amid violence, and how they had parlayed their tough childhoods into young adult leadership success. This main message—that Palestinian youth can and do act as positive leaders—was also at the forefront of the group’s presentation to the 19th annual National Youth Leadership Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The team’s final stop was Boston, where they spoke at Harvard and Tufts universities and pitched in for a day of active volunteering with local non-profit CityYear.



A Visit to the U.S. State Department gave youth a rare chance to share their stories with key decision-makers.

At each stop, the youth focused on presenting the perspectives of young Palestinians—but also on learning from U.S. hosts. Amani Samara, a 21-year-old group member from the Jenin refugee camp, found it tough at first to open up and share her story with others. “When I was 15 years old,” she explains, “I woke up to the destruction of Jenin refugee camp. My neighborhood was turned to rubble after the fighting. At that moment I became determined to rebuild what had been destroyed. I wrote a story about the Jenin refugee camp, which attracted praise from a British teacher. He and I then worked together to train other camp children in the art of story telling, through a theater program”. Amani continues: “When American audiences listened to my story, they broke down in tears. At first I didn’t know how I should respond. But I felt comfortable once I realized that they really recognized our humanity as Palestinians, and they understood that we are just like them: humans who want peace, freedom and a normal life.” (CONTINUED ON LAST PAGE)

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This Month In Brief

Ruwwad and Local Colleges Partner on Media Training

TV journalism students at Bethlehem's Dar al-Kalima College spend much of their time feeling like they're caught in the lens of international media outlets, rather than doing what they'd like to do: Capture new stories from behind the camera. Still, these ambitious young leaders haven't given up their dreams of future media careers, especially now that Dar al-Kalima is partnering with Ruwwad to give new graduates the chance to intern in the Ruwwad Media Center and work at local news outlets. The joint project, set to start in June 2008, is part of a larger Ruwwad strategy to turn local journalism grads into Youth Media Specialists—through four-month training courses that combine youth leadership lessons with paid hands-on “learning by doing”.

Raja Hamad, a Dar al-Kalima student who attended a Ruwwad Media Center orientation session in Bethlehem this month, was enthusiastic about the opportunities offered at the Media Center. “What we heard today [from Ruwwad staff] was excellent. This isn't just a training course; there are a lot of those out there. This is a chance to really get your foot in the door with local media networks. That increases my chance of finding full-time work”. Other graduating TV journalists shared Hamad's excitement, after meeting with Ruwwad representatives and learning about the project's approach to youth leadership and social change through the Media Center. “In a tough job market, we believe that this blend of practical training and leadership experience will give these students an edge in the working world,” explained Ruwwad Chief of Party Hisham Jabi. “TV journalism demands technical skills, but it also requires leadership, teamwork, and good communication. This is what we want to offer the Dar al-Kalima students—and this is what we offer to any young person who wants to join us”.

First Person: We Are Youth; Support Our Ambitions!

By Arouba Hamayel, Ruwwad Youth Volunteer

Palestinian youth are mature, creative and eager to develop themselves. They have great ideas and are hungry for chances to turn these dreams into reality. But they can't achieve their goals alone; they often need someone to give them resources and coaching. Ruwwad's youth-led projects are an important first step in this direction: By giving youth mentoring and support to create activities that meet local needs, the projects help Ruwwad youth gain a sense of self-confidence and give them the chance to put their teamwork and organizational skills into practice—often for the first time in their lives. Even if this experience is a “first”, it's still important: It shows that in a society dominated by adults, young people can create change in their communities if they're just given the right opportunities, skills and resources. Youth represent a large and important segment of the Palestinian population. We are a force that cannot, and should not, be ignored. Society must realize the potential of youth and work with us to achieve our dreams. If young people are given opportunities, there's no limit to what we can achieve. If youth are ignored, there's no limit to the loss our generation will feel.

Profile of A Ruwwad Youth Leader: Islam Abu Al Halaweh

Islam Abu Al Halaweh is a true Ruwwad pioneer: The 22-year-old young woman from Hebron was one of the first volunteers to join the Ruwwad Youth Corps, before it became a nationally recognized name. She was also the first Ruwwad youth leader to have her photojournalism work published in national newspaper *Al-Ayyam*.

“Last fall, when I was an intern at the Ruwwad Media Center,” she explains, “I was sent to cover the Jericho Farmers' Festival that Ruwwad was organizing. Suddenly there I was, with a camera, beside all the journalists from the major publications. I just did the best job I could, thinking that at best, I *might* get my photos published in the Ruwwad newsletter. Then I opened the newspaper the next morning and I almost fainted...there was my photo, which Ruwwad had submitted to go alongside the journalist's report”. The experience changed Islam immensely: “I can't tell you how much this has added to my self-confidence. Now I believe in myself more, and I express my opinions more openly. Looking ahead, I really think I have the potential to be a team player in other organizations...so that I can help create positive change in our society.”

Monthly Snapshot: May 2008

- Ruwwad and the Ministry of Youth and Sport prepare to launch a national network of 4 Youth Development Resource Centers and 66 affiliated youth clubs.
- More than 400 visitors enjoy a Ruwwad-led youth photo exhibit in the Northern West Bank town of Beita.
- Ruwwad Youth Ambassadors give 18 presentations on Palestinian youth leadership during U.S. trip



A Closer Look: Youth Photography Exhibit Opens Eyes in Rural Towns

The village of Beita, near Nablus, is alive with excitement—but not because of a wedding or a festival. Instead, it's the arrival of the “Palestine Through the Eyes of Youth” photography exhibit that's creating an atmosphere of celebration in the town. This is the first time in Beita's history that local young photographers, aged 15 to 20, have had their work displayed in their own surroundings; it's a monumental event.

Earlier in 2008, thirty youth from Beita and two other West Bank towns got two weeks of basic photo training in a hands-on project organized by Ruwwad and USAID—and implemented through local partner Sky Media, a Palestinian advertising and public relations company. That course culminated in an exhibit of the young artists' work in Ramallah, the cultural hub of the country. For three days in January, hundreds of visitors crowded a local gallery space; the youth were also featured on international satellite news channels like al-Arabiyya and MBC. But while the Beita photographers were earning accolades abroad, almost nobody in their own village knew about their work. “That's when we decided to bring the exhibit back to their town,” explains Ruwwad Media Coordinator Ziad Nazzal, who took a lead role in bringing the Ramallah exhibit on the road. “This is a town of 10,000 people, and they'd never seen anything like this before. We knew it would be a great experience, both for the youth and for their community”.



A young photographer in Beita learns to hold a digital camera for the first time.

Back in the Beita Sporting Club—now an impromptu art gallery—the reactions of local visitors confirmed that the exhibit was a hit. “Honestly, I wasn't expecting our children to demonstrate such creativity, but they have done so well,” offered the proud father of one young photographer on hand. “We as parents should encourage our kids to get involved in more projects that let them express their talent”. Meanwhile, Atheer Mohammed, one of the young trainees, stood off to the side looking at one of her pictures—elated but also a bit overwhelmed by the energy in the exhibition hall. “I can't really describe my feelings about seeing my photos displayed in front of my friends and family, *and* in my hometown of Beita. It's so incredible, I'm speechless”. But the person with the biggest smile in the room was Mohammed's young colleague Salaam Zahi, whose photo of dusk in the town, artfully titled “The Sunset Is Like a Woman In A Dress With Golden Strings,” won the prize for best overall image in the exhibition. Not only did Zahi get a mention in the newspaper for his work, he also went home with a new digital camera from by Ruwwad program—to help kick-start what he hopes will be a photojournalism career.

While the exhibit ran for just three days, its effects on the town and its surrounding villages are sure to be long-lasting. Says Atheer Mohammed: “I was always a shy girl, but this whole experience—having your photos on display in public, and having everyone come and see them—has given me such confidence. Now I want to become a professional photographer who can show Palestine to the world. And now I know I can do it”.



(CONTINUED FROM FIRST PAGE) For Mohammad Kilany, age 25 and also from Jenin, the experience of traveling to the United States was like a dream. “I will never forget the amazement in the eyes of the people that we spoke to: Their sympathy for our situation, and their strong expressions of admiration for our presentations. These are bonds between Palestinians and Americans that cannot be broken now”. Kilany was also excited about the prospect of U.S. support for the projects that each youth ambassador is working on. “Each of us wants to achieve specific things in our communities,” he explains. “I have been working at a software company that developed a system which uses text messages (SMS) to link youth across the West Bank. This is crucial in a region where military checkpoints make it hard to travel. Now I want to scale this up and use it for elections and for ‘job matching’: Have people vote by SMS from their phones, or get information about jobs...not just here, but all over the world. This will help make elections more fair and safe, and it will help reduce unemployment. Now that U.S. contacts know about my project, I hope they can contribute to help me make this a reality”.

Judging from the reactions of listeners at the Aspen Institute, the Case Foundation, and other tour stops, there’s a good chance that the group’s ideas will find backers: USAID’s Henrietta Fore was quick to seize on the idea of a training program for new engineers proposed by Kilany’s colleague Yazan Nabulsi. The 21 year-old Nablus engineer was asked to send more information and sketch out a detailed training plan.

According to Soboh, the 20-year-old ambassador from Ramallah, the group’s visit was a greater success than anyone had anticipated—especially for the young women in the group. “There was a lot of pressure, because we had to represent our people in a way that Americans could understand. And in general, women in Palestine are not usually given strong public speaking roles. In the end, though, we impressed both our audience and ourselves with the strength of our presentation and the effect it had on others”. 26 year-old Linda Abu Halaweh, from the southern city of Hebron, echoed Soboh’s thoughts: At first, she faced strong resistance from her community about the prospect of going to the U.S. unaccompanied. But this only made her more determined to go—and so she was overwhelmed with joy when her family finally agreed and she boarded the plane with the others. “The struggle I went through, as a woman, to get here made the trip all the more meaningful,” she told new friends at a lunch event at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

As the group prepared to return home, Ahmed Ameer, a 24-year-old ambassador from the Tulkarem region, reflected on the success of the journey--and the importance of the cultural exchange that took place between the Palestinians and the Americans they met. “We ‘see’ them, and they ‘see’ us, but all of this ‘seeing’ happens through TV, where only the most stereotypical images of each group are portrayed.

Are all Americans like Sylvester Stallone or Angelina Jolie? Of course not. By the same token, most Palestinians are not wearing bandannas and firing machine guns in the air either. Now our American friends know much more about us, and we have learned so much about them too. I can’t tell you how much my own perspectives have changed after this trip”.

For all of the young ambassadors, it was clear that “Our Voices Heard” opened their eyes to new opportunities, new ideas and new points of view. They came away from the experience with fresh plans and new contacts across the U.S., as well as a sense of accomplishment at having successfully represented Palestine to what many see as an unwelcoming post-9/11 America. Most importantly, Amani, Mohamed, Suad, Yazan, Linda and Ahmed returned to the West Bank with a new sense of responsibility toward their country, and a new-found drive to create positive change that will improve the lives of their generation and the generations to come.



Learning about the lighter side of U.S. culture at Faneuil Hall Market in Boston.