

THE KEY

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The Presidency Announces New Appointments Regarding National Armed Forces

PAGE: 3

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

In the face of recent devastating events, we find ourselves grappling with the enormity of the Gaza massacre and the profound loss of more than a hundred journalists who bravely reported from the frontlines. Our hearts are heavy, and our pens struggle to find the words that can adequately express the depth of our sorrow.

The events that unfolded in Gaza have shaken us to our core. The loss of innocent lives, the anguish of families torn apart, and the continued cycle of violence have left us mourning not just as journalists but as human beings. We stand in solidarity with the people of Gaza and condemn any act that results in the loss of civilian lives.

Equally distressing is the tragic toll on journalism itself. The killing of journalists is an attack on the fundamental pillars of truth and transparency. These individuals, who risked everything to bring us the stories that matter, have paid the ultimate price. We honor their memory and salute their unwavering commitment to the pursuit of truth.

In light of these deeply somber circumstances, we made the difficult decision to refrain from publishing our last issue as a gesture of mourning and respect. It is a small tribute to the lives lost, both in Gaza and within our journalistic community.

As we navigate these challenging times, we recommit ourselves to the principles of responsible journalism. We will continue to shine a light on the truth, to amplify the voices of the voiceless, and to stand as a beacon of hope in the pursuit of justice.

In the face of tragedy, we find strength in unity. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families affected, and we stand resolute in our shared determination to build a world where the pursuit of peace and justice prevails.

Sincerely,
The Key Newspaper staff.

Commentary

Western Media Exposed: Dual Standards Reveal Blind Bias Towards The Israeli Narrative

The Western media's bias towards the Israeli narrative has become clear and blatant. Major TV channels and newspapers have stripped away their right and left-wing orientations and professional traditions they once boasted about. The majority of coverage and news stories coming from the occupied Palestinian territories revolve around depicting Israel as the victim, while portraying Palestinians as terrorists, invaders, and child killers.

In this context, channels like Fox News and newspapers like The Independent spread the false Israeli narrative, claiming the existence of photos of Israeli children whose heads were severed by Hamas fighters. The lie did not hold for long and became a subject –

PAGE: 5

Special Interview

PAGE: 4

Beyond Borders: A Palestinian Perspective

News

Israel's Assault on Gaza Sets Grim Record for Journalist Casualties

PAGE: 3

President Ould Ghazouani Lays the Foundation for an Electrical Project in Gorgol and Guidimagha

PAGE: 3

Feature Article

Spectrum of Hope: Advocating for Understanding and Support for Autistic Children in Mauritania

PAGES: 6-7

Analysis

COP 28 – Climate Change for the Uninitiated

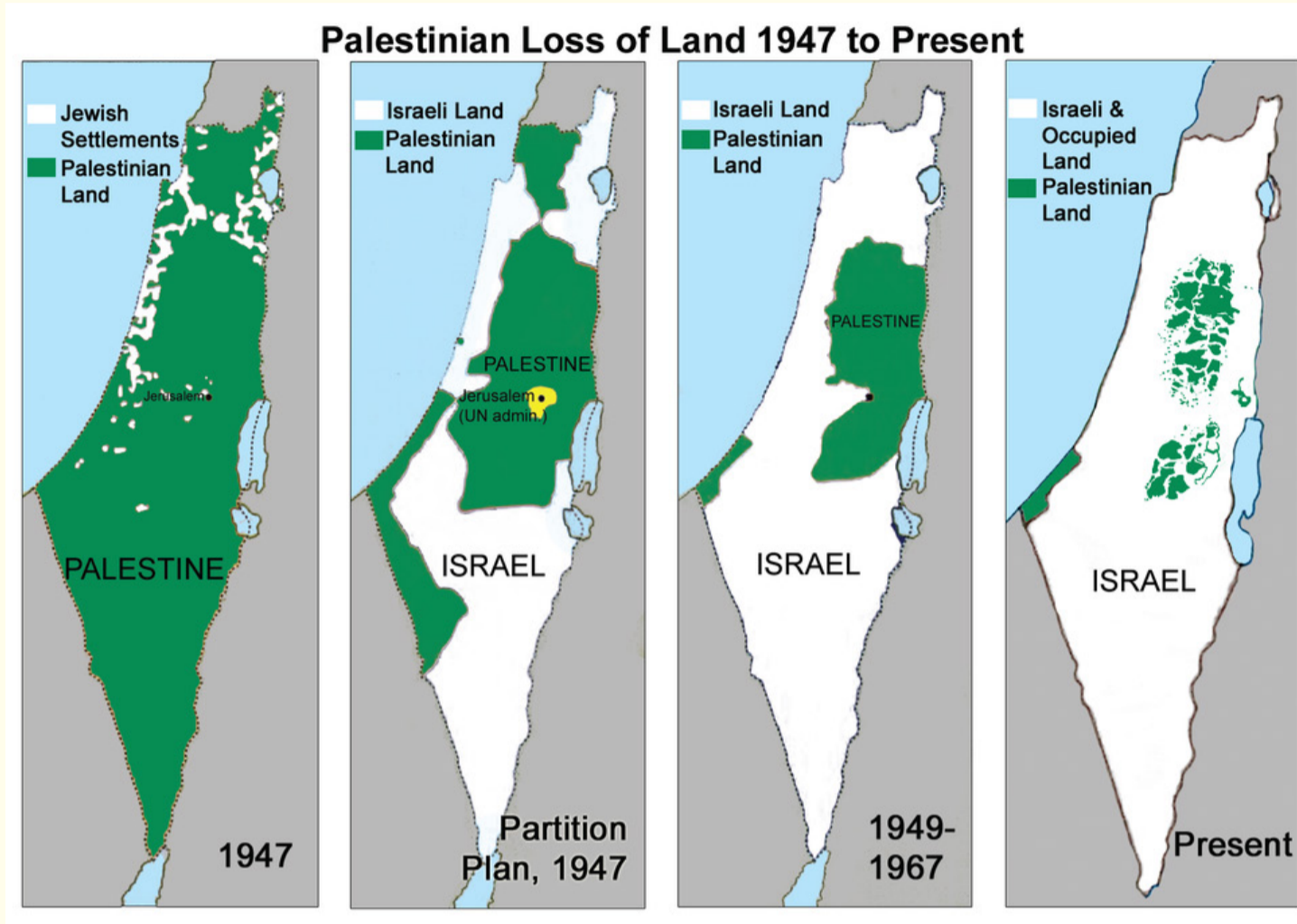
PAGE: 5

History Feature

Zionism: The Final Chapter in Western Imperialism

PAGE: 2

Zionism: The Final Chapter in Western Imperialism



Zionism is a Jewish political movement that calls for the immigration of all Jews to Palestine and establishing the 'State of Israel' as a 'homeland for the Jewish People.' The movement was inspired by the return to Zion, an event described in Ezra-Nehemiah of the Hebrew Bible, in which the Kingdom of Judah (a Jewish Kingdom in the Southern Levant that existed between the 9th and 5th centuries BCE according to the Hebrew Bible) Jews returned to Jerusalem under the Achaemenid Persian Empire (also known as the First Persian Empire).

The word Zionism comes from Zion, a hill in Jerusalem (Al Quds), and is sometimes used synonymously to refer to the city itself. The movement started through multiple small groups in Eastern Europe that promoted the relocation of Jews to the 'promised land' of Palestine. Before being called Zionists, they were called Lovers of Zion, and they were founded as a response to the Pogroms in the Russian Empire (targeted massacres of the Russian Jewish people in the 19th century).

The Jewish question was a term used throughout Europe in the mid-18th century and ending in the mid-20th century (inception of Israel) to discuss the position of the Jews within the European states as a growing minority. Despite their efforts to integrate into the European societies they lived within, e.g., Haskalah or the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the Jewish communities still suffered from oppression, persecution, and disabilities (legal restrictions placed on the Jews in the Middle Ages).

On the 14th of February, 1896, Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist Theodor Herzl (native name Herzl Tivadar), published his pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (lit. The State of the Jews, commonly known as *The Jewish State*), with the subtitle "Versuch einer modernen Lösung der

Judenfrage" (Proposal of a modern solution for the Jewish question). Called "the father of modern Zionism", Herzl also founded the Zionist Organization (currently known as the World Zionist Organization) in 1897, a non-governmental organization that promotes the Zionist ideology.

The organization had the First Zionist Congress in Basel on August 29–31, 1897. The Congress elected the First Zionist Executive and created the Basel Program. The Program determined the official main goal of the Zionist movement which was the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine which was a part of the Ottoman Empire at the time inhabited by Palestinians. The Program also stated the steps to be followed to achieve this goal which were:

- The expedient promotion of the settlement of Jewish agriculturists, artisans, and businessmen in Palestine.
- The organization and bringing together of all Jews through local and general events, according to the laws of the various countries
- The strengthening of Jewish feeling and national consciousness
- Preparatory steps for obtaining the governmental approval which is necessary to the achievement of the Zionist purpose

The Congress met every year ever since until 1901, every second year until 1939, and in 1942 the Biltmore Conference, also known as the Extraordinary Zionist Conference, was held in New York City. The conference demanded that "Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth."

The Zionist movement attempted to persuade the

Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II to allow Jews into Palestine and buy Palestinian land to which he refused profusely. Nevertheless, they managed to sneak immigrants into small groups to not raise the suspicion of the Palestinian population and the Ottoman authorities. However, following the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the end of WWI, Palestine became a British mandate. The movement managed, through the lobbying of the British government, to attain the Balfour Declaration of 1917, commonly described as: "the promise of those who do not own to those who do not deserve." The League of Nations would adopt the declaration in 1922.

In 1947, the UN Special Committee on Palestine divided western Palestine into a Jewish state, an Arab state, and a UN-controlled territory, *Corpus separatum*, around Jerusalem. Violence broke out throughout the country when Zionist militias terrorized the Arab residents, committing heinous massacres, and exterminating entire villages. It is worth noting that these Zionist parliamentary organizations had been terrorizing and committing massacres throughout Mandate Palestine since the 1930s. The violent attacks evolved into the 1948 Palestine War, known as the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) in the Arab world. The war resulted in the Exodus of more than 711,000 Palestinian Arabs from their hometowns and houses. The first Israeli Government prevented the displaced Palestinians from reclaiming their private properties. After the establishment of the State of Israel, The World Zionist Organization's role turned to the facilitation of the migration of Jews to Israel.

By: Varha Abd Selam
M.A. in Mass Communication

President Ould Ghazouani Lays Foundation for Electrical Project in Gorgol and Guidimagha

On December 28th, in Kaedi, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani laid the foundation stone for the electrical connection project between Gorgol and Guidimagha.

This initiative aims to extend the medium and low-voltage electricity networks in the southeastern region of the country, establishing energy distribution and transmission systems to bring electricity to 79 communities with over 130,000 residents in the wilayas of Gorgol and Guidimagha.

With a total cost of 16 billion MRO, funded by the Kuwaiti Fund for Development and the Mauritanian State, the project involves setting up and operating a 33-kilovolt medium voltage network spanning 746 km between the cities of Kaedi and Selibaby. It also includes expanding the existing 90.33-kilovolt distribution station in Kaedi, constructing 632 km of low-voltage electrical lines, installing 103 electrical transformers of various capacities, setting up over 2,000 public lighting units, and providing service to more than 23,000 new subscribers.

Before laying the foundation stone, President Ould Ghazouani received comprehensive explanations about the project from the General Director of the National Electricity Company, marking the official commencement of the project.

The Presidency Announces New Appointments Regarding National Armed Forces

A number of changes within the national army have been announced by the presidency. These changes impacted leadership roles within the army and various security positions. A particularly noteworthy appointment that raised eyebrows among local observers was the appointment of Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Lemine as the Director-General of National Security, previously serving as the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces during the presidency of the now-incarcerated former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Among the announced appointees were: Ahmed Saïd Benaouf as the Chief of Naval Staff, Mohamed Vall Rais as the Assistant Chief of Staff for the Army, Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ould Boyda as the Commander of the Air Force, Abou Bakr Ould Ahmedou as the Advisor Responsible for Security Affairs to the Prime Minister, Ely Zayed Ould Mbarek as the Inspector General of the Armed Forces and Security Forces, Mohamed Ould Lehreitani as the Chief of Staff of the National Guard, and colonel Ahmed Ould Tachfine as the Assistant Chief of Staff of the National Guard,

President Ould Ghazouani Oversees Unveiling of New University Complex

On December 27th, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani presided over the inauguration of the new university complex at Nouakchott University, designed to accommodate 11,000 students. This modern facility increases the university's capacity from 14,000 to 25,000 students. It comprises four faculties: the Faculty of Legal Sciences with 4 lecture halls, 81 offices, and 80 classrooms, the Faculty of Science and Technology featuring 38 laboratories, 10 lecture halls, and 80 classrooms, the Faculty of Arts housing 11 linguistic laboratories, 73 offices, and 35 classrooms, and the Faculty of Medicine with two lecture halls, three offices, and 14 classrooms.



After More Than 80 Days, Gaza Death Toll Reaches New Records

More than 29,000 martyrs and missing persons are a result of the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, with over 7,000 people still under the rubble according to the Government Media Office's Ismail Thawabteh in Gaza. Thawabteh highlighted the difficult health conditions that the residents of the northern part of the sector are facing, noting that around 800,000 citizens in Gaza City and the northern sector cannot access hospitals. Thawabteh also accused the Israeli occupation army of seizing dozens of Palestinian martyrs' bodies.



Israel's Assault on Gaza Sets Grim Record for Journalist Casualties

New data from the government media office in Gaza reveals that since the start of Israel's war on Gaza on October 7, over 100 journalists have lost their lives. Israeli attacks have resulted in the complete or partial destruction of more than 50 media offices in Gaza. Additionally, hundreds of Palestinian journalists and their families have been compelled to relocate to the south.

Facing forced displacement, journalists have had to leave their reporting equipment behind in northern offices, grappling with challenging conditions and frequent communication blackouts in their new locations. Violence against media workers in conflict zones is a clear breach of international humanitarian laws, a violation that Israel has been accused of repeatedly.

Palestinian journalists assert that Israel is intentionally targeting them to suppress their narratives and silence their stories.



Special Interview

Beyond Borders: A Palestinian Perspective

By: Varha Abd Selam
M.A. in Mass Communication

Dr. Houssam Moustapha Sabbah is a Palestinian gynecologist and obstetrician working in the National Hospital and Iman Clinic. His father, Mr. Moustapha Abdelkarim Sabbah, emigrated to Mauritania in 1968. Dr. Sabbah was born in Nouakchott, where he studied until he obtained his BAC degree, he then studied general medicine in Tunisia and specialized in gynecology in Senegal.

I asked Dr. Sabbah to tell me about life in Palestine, how it was before the occupation, under the occupation, and in the diaspora. This is his account of his and his family's experiences as Palestinians who have been forced to leave their home twice, once in Palestine and later to Mauritania. (This interview was translated from Arabic and was edited for brevity and clarity).

"Palestine is a long story," he started, "it is the story of human injustice, the story of a deep wound in the heart of every free human being." He said sorrowfully, and then continued, "We come originally from Barbara, a small Palestinian village about 20 km from Gaza, my parents lived there as did their parents and their grandparents and their great-grandparents and their great-grandparents' great-grandparents. We owned large lands, and we had farms. We had farmers working on those lands. We were doing good, owning lands and living a good simple life."

Barbara was a village with an all-Muslim population with records of its existence dating back to the Ottoman Empire when the first mosque was built during the rule of Sultan Murad III. The village was spread across 13,978 dunams, the larger majority of which are arable land. In 1948, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) forced the population to move out of Barbara. The village was later turned into Mavki'im and Talmei Yafeh after the 1948 war.

"We lived happily until 1948 when Nekba started when the Zionists came in and war broke out. My family was driven out of their home and lands and moved to Gaza. They were placed in the Al-Shati refugee camp in tents by the beach."

Al-Shati refugee camp is a camp that was established in 1948 by the beach in Gaza for the people who had been expelled from their homes in Be'er-Sheva, Jaffa, and Lod.

"The camp life was difficult. As one can imagine, living in tents packed side by side with little to nothing to eat or drink. My father told me about the hardships they had to overcome and the horrifying things they had been through. They lived completely reliant on the humanitarian aid provided by the UNRWA which would distribute food monthly in rations depending on the number of individuals in a family."

The UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) was established in 1949, after the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel on Palestinian land. The Israeli occupation resulted in the displacement of millions of Palestinians inside and outside of Palestine. The agency's goal is to provide direct relief, employment, health care, social services, and education. No other UN agency except UNRWA provides assistance to refugees from a specific conflict or region.

"Two days before the distribution of the UNRWA food rations in 1967, the Naksah, or the 1967 War, broke out. My father told me they had no food whatsoever in the tent. My

father, who was 17 at the time, was the eldest remaining sibling in Palestine. His elder brothers had already emigrated by that time. Despite the war and the bombings, my father walked all the way to the UNRWA center at the refugee camp and carried a 50 kg bag of flour on his back for kilometers on foot to bring back home. When he emigrated, the house they had lived in right after coming to Mauritania was facing the UNRWA building. He resented it. It reminded him of displacement and war, and the hard life in refugee camps."

Dr. Sabbah has spent most of his life in Mauritania. Growing up though, he still spent most of his summer vacations in Palestine, even in the midst of the first Intifada (uprising). That was the first visit he made as a teenager; he had just started to grasp the events unfolding in Palestine.

"I remember the visit of 1989 vividly. It was during the first Intifada when the IDF killed four Palestinian workers after a lot of tension and the people rose up. It was called the Stone Intifada because teenagers, 15- to 17-year-olds, would throw stones at the Zionist armed forces. In response, the IDF would break the legs and arms of those they captured, and they captured many. Due to this, protesters wore veils to hide their identities from the IDF."

The First Intifada started on December 8th, 1987, and as mentioned by Dr. Sabbah, the spark was the killing of four Palestinian workers in a vehicle stopped at a gas station by an IDF truck that collided with the workers' vehicle. However, there were more underlying issues and tensions that led to eruptions in the streets.

Palestinian workers in Israel had been enduring extreme racism and humiliation. They were also paid less than their Israeli counterparts. The Palestinians were being forcibly removed from their homes and subject to violence from both the IDF and the Israeli settlers. Illegal settlements were being built near the al-Aqsa mosque and the entirety of Jerusalem was declared by Israel as its capital despite East Jerusalem and the Old City being considered as Palestinian territory by international law.

"I was married in 1999 in Gaza. It was after the Oslo Accords which happened in 1993 and the Israeli [partial] withdrawal from Gaza. People had so much hope in the accords to bring them peace my uncle (may he rest in peace) named his son Selam (peace). That is how much people had hope that their lives would finally have some peace and normalcy like any other population in the world."

The Oslo Accords, signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), established a peace process for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a mutually negotiated two-state solution. The agreements resulted in limited self-governance for Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip through the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PA). The PLO was also internationally recognized as Israel's partner in permanent-status negotiations about any remaining issues revolving around the conflict. The Accords also stipulated the withdrawal of the IDF from Palestinian territories, which never fully materialized. The most significant outcome of the Accords was the PLO's admission of Israel's "right of existence" on the pre-occupied Palestinian land since 1948, and the implicit embracement of the two-state solution.

"Let me tell you about life after Oslo, let me tell you about

Gaza in particular since that's where my family lives. People of Gaza would spend most of their free time hanging out on the beach and getting ice cream from Kazem Ice Cream, the most popular ice cream shop in Gaza. Palestinians love family gatherings, and with no smartphones at the time, families spend lots of time together. All of this of course did not last long, as in the year 2000, Ariel Sharon went to the al-Aqsa mosque compound, and that started the Second Intifada."

The Second Intifada was ignited when Israeli politician Ariel Sharon visited the al-Aqsa mosque compound. Sharon's visit was intentionally provocative. According to Likud spokesman, Ofir Akunis, the purpose of the visit was to demonstrate that "the Temple Mount would remain under Israeli sovereignty under a Likud government." The months leading up to the Intifada had been tense and clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinians had been going on for a while, as Palestinians protested the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories. Moreover, earlier that same year more than 100 Palestinians were killed by Israeli police with approximately 20 of them being children, and the killing of Muhammad al-Durrah, a 12-year-old who was shot dead by Israeli forces while covering behind his father in an ally in Gaza.

"I hadn't seen Gaza for twenty-four years. Every year, since 1999, I tell myself this year I'll come home, but the circumstances never allowed it. Life has kept me busy until earlier this year. My family kept pressuring me to come home and I finally caved in.

I saw Gaza for the first time in twenty-four years, and I wish I didn't. I saw its beach and its sea. I saw its landmarks and its historical sights. I saw my family and I wanted to stay. I wanted to stay in Gaza. I even started looking up jobs there. It is as if the Israelis read my mind and destroyed Gaza so I could never go back. During this war, we are living while not living, we can't eat, we can't sleep. I wake up every two hours to check my phone for any good news, hoping for a ceasefire. We wait and wait and wait for a text from our family that says we're OK, or we're alive."

Finally, Dr. Sabbah ended the interview with a promise, "No matter what they do, we Palestinians will always rise back up stronger than ever and rebuild what they destroyed."

When we hear about words such as occupation and colonialism, we immediately think of the times before WWII. However, Israel has been occupying Palestine for 75 years. During its occupations, the Palestinian people have been subjected to forced displacement, racism, discrimination, persecution, and administrative detention of adults and children alike (on average 500 to 700 children some as young as the age of 12, a year are detained, according to Defense for Children International – Palestine), killing, and ethnic cleansing. Israel continues to build illegal settlements and occupy Palestinian territories. The international community and the United Nations have accused Israel of committing numerous war crimes and illegal assaults against Palestinians. It has also been described as an apartheid state There are an entire *Wikipedia* pages dedicated to Israel's war crimes and massacres against the Palestinians. History has taught us that regardless of the length of its lifespan, occupations eventually crumble.

Western Media Exposed: Dual Standards Reveal Blind Bias Towards the Israeli Narrative



The Western media's bias towards the Israeli narrative has become clear and blatant. Major TV channels and newspapers have stripped away their right and left-wing orientations and professional traditions they once boasted about.

The majority of coverage and news stories coming from the occupied Palestinian territories revolve around depicting Israel as the victim, while portraying Palestinians as terrorists, invaders, and child killers.

In this context, channels like Fox News and newspapers like The Independent spread the false Israeli narrative, claiming the existence of photos of Israeli children whose heads were severed by Hamas fighters. The lie did not hold for long and became a subject of ridicule in many media decision-making circles. While Arab channels made an effort to host Israeli fi-

gures presenting Israel's perspective, channels adhering to the Israeli viewpoint in their talk shows focus on condemning Hamas. Israel and its media and propaganda circles attempt to link Hamas attacks on the Gaza Strip on October 7th this, year to the September 11th attacks. The Israeli propaganda machine aims to connect the two events to demonize Palestinians, justify their killing, and justify the destruction of their cities.

Western media has become a blatant tool for propaganda justifying the killing of Gaza's children and the destruction of their hospitals and schools. The global conscience is reconciled under the pressure of propaganda with images of the cold-blooded killing of Palestinian children.

Due to the accumulation of media propaganda rem-

nants, the world is unprecedentedly coexisting with the Israeli narrative that criminalizes Palestinians and ignores Israel's crimes and atrocities, contradicting international law and humanitarian principles. The Israeli narrative relies on the world normalizing its occupation and killing of Palestinians as an inevitable fate that the world must swallow, and the global conscience must live with it, turning the oppressor into a victim in a way that serves the political and media lobbies of occupation.

During interviews with some Palestinian and Arab figures, channels like BBC News and CNN try to steer the conversation towards condemning Hamas and Palestinian resistance as the main backdrop, catering to the blindly supportive public opinion of the Israeli narrative. Despite the strength of anti-Palestinian propaganda and their cause, some voices still tweet outside the flock, attempting to prick the global conscience, which is going through a clinically dead stage, out of fear of Israeli lobbies in finance, media, and global decision-making.



Zahra Ahmed Salem

Head of Production at Radio Jeunesse (Youth Radio)

Journalist and Radio Presenter

A Mauritanian media personality and a radio voice appreciated by many listeners of Radio Mauritanie. She is a producer, program editor, and a news presenter.

COP 28 – Climate Change for the Uninitiated

COP28 took place in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - Dubai to be exact - from the end of November until December 12th, at Expo City.

'So, what does COP28 mean?' I hear you ask.

Ahem! COP28 is 'the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change'.

Well, that's a bit of a mouthful, so let's break it down.

Firstly, conferences on climate change are held under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). COP28 will therefore be the 28th such conference. This tells us either 1) that to make a course correction on climate change, the world's in it for the long haul, or 2) that there's been a lack of substantial progress in tackling the negative effects of climate change since COP1, in Berlin, Germany, in 1995.

Actually, it's 3), a bit of both. But more on that, later.

The delegates involved in COP1 came from 117 Parties (countries) and 53 Observer States.

COP28, on the other hand, will involve 200 countries interacting and working together, comprising 70,000-80,000 delegates, 140 heads of state, and 5,000 media professionals.

If you've been living under a rock for the last few decades, you may ask what problem COP28 seeks to address.

The overabundance of CO2 in the atmosphere, mostly!

Yep, CO2 is one of the main culprit gases that have succeeded in making the first week of July this year, the hottest on record. This year is set to be the war-

mest, worldwide, on record. Carbon dioxide - the gas we breathe out and plants absorb, just as we learned about in high school biology. All's well and good when the amount of the gas that animals breathe out, and the amount of carbon dioxide plants convert to oxygen and expel is balanced, but not if excessive CO2 and other 'greenhouse gases' are being added to the atmosphere at an inordinate rate.

Look at it like this. In the distant past, your average Stone Ager would light up a twig-and-branch-fed fire to cook whatever he hunted that day or to keep the cold and the predators at bay. Fast forward to the late eighteenth century onwards, and we have the factories of the Industrial Revolution, artificially-lit cities, and, later, automotive transport, all powered by fossil fuels (coal, gas, and petrol, respectively), emitting much CO2 into the atmosphere.

CO2 is called a greenhouse gas because it traps the heat from the sun that has entered the Earth's atmosphere, much as the glass of a greenhouse keeps in the heat. This raises the temperature of the air and the surface and the oceans of our home planet. Since 1880, it's estimated that the rise in average air temperature has been 1.1oC, or about 2oF. This does not seem a great deal until you realize the average air temperature of Earth in the 20th century was 13.9oC. That said, Earth experiences variations in temperature for a number of reasons, but these are slow, averaging something around a 0.5°C increase over the past ten thousand years.

To offset the rapid rise recently in global temperatures, at COP21 in Paris, in 2015, 194 parties (193 countries plus the European Union) signed the Paris Agreement, a binding accord agreeing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (in addition to CO2, methane is another greenhouse gas, largely emitted in the form of cow and other livestock flatulence), to begin or to continue moving towards the use of renewable energy sources, and, by the end of the century, to limit global warming to 1.5oC above pre-Industrial levels.

Alas, those temperature figures from the first week of July tell us we have a lot of work to do. To this end, much of the refocusing and reconsidering of our approach to tackling climate change will be happening in Dubai, at COP28, later this month.

So, what are the main problems associated with global warming, and what can we, as humans, do about them?

The most serious problems may appear insurmountable and even seem overwhelming at first glance, but we have a whole world full of people to work upon and solve them.

The burning of fossil fuels leads to an increase of greenhouse gases warming up the atmosphere. Marginal lands become uncultivable, pushing more and more people onto less and less viable land. Added to this, the polar ice caps are melting, raising the sea level and gradually submerging lower-lying islands and coastal areas.

By: Paul A. Freeman

Spectrum of Hope: Advocating for Understanding and Support for Autistic Children in Mauritania

By: Varha Abd Selam
M.A. in Mass Communication

In a country like Mauritania, having any sort of physical or mental disability is a social death sentence. An often invisible group among this ignored vulnerable population is those with autism. I “virtually” sat down with Dr. Cheikh Mohamed Fadel Mohamed Lemine (Gohi), the General Coordinator of the National Program for Mental and Neurological Health and Battling Addiction at the Ministry of Health. Dr. Gohi is a psychiatrist who specialized in addictive disorders in Morocco and went on to further specialize in conduct disorders in children and adolescents in France. Alongside his other medical specialties, Dr. Gohi has also written and conducted academic research and articles that have been published in peer-reviewed journals such as BMC Public Health. He hopes to raise mental health awareness in the society through his social media.

“I hope we can successfully shed light on this important matter that concerns many families, particularly mothers,” said Dr. Gohi. “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a term used to describe a variety of neurodevelopmental or neuro-cognitive disorders. It is characterized by a range of symptoms associated with social and communication difficulties, such as limited social interaction and restricted and repetitive behavior. Autism spectrum disorder can manifest in different forms and varying levels of severity” he explained.

Fatima Cisse is a trained nurse and the mother of a 15-year-old daughter who was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. “For me, as a parent [of an autistic child], there is no exact definition of autism,” said Mrs. Cisse, “each person with autism has their specific definition. That’s why we talk about autism as a “spectrum disorder”. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that make diagnosis of ASD tricky as studies have proven how different each ASD case is from the other in their presentations.

I was given Mrs Cisse’s contact by His Excellency Mr Colin Wells, the British Ambassador. Mr Wells has made numerous donations in the name of the British embassy to Le Monde Des Enfants Heureux (lit. the World of Happy Children), a non-profit organization founded by Mrs Cisse. It was created to help integrate and teach those with autism while raising awareness about the disorder. “His Excellency Mr Colin Wells has helped several autistic children with the buses he donated to our organization. He cannot imagine the burden he had lifted from these families.” She said.

The World Health Organization estimates that 1 in 100 children is autistic. The causes of this disorder are still unknown. “Studies have not yet been able to identify a definitive cause. However, some factors have been suggested to play a role in the development of autism. These factors are diverse and numerous, including genetic factors, environmental factors, and early neurological interactions. These factors indicate the presence of problems in parts of the brain that process and regulate sensory receptors.” Explained Dr Gouhi.

Mrs. Cisse also explained some of the commonly referred to risk factors, “we’ve been told that a mother’s weight or stress during pregnancy [are amongst the risk factors], however truly the cause of autism is unknown. Family environment has also been stated as a [possible] cause, but

this is not accurate as well, because we have seen healthy families providing loving and healthy environments [for their children] who have ended up with an autistic child.”

Diagnosing ASD in a country like Mauritania, where the majority of the population is not even aware of ASD or believes in developmental disorders is a big challenge. “(...) It is quite clear that the diagnostic process in Mauritania is not carried out medically as it is done abroad and does not adhere to the rigorous treatment protocols [abroad]. Of course, this can be justified by a shortage of medical personnel, (...) as well as a lack of a qualified team of professionals such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, sensory therapists, and educational specialists.”



Dr Cheikh Mohamed Fadel Mohamed Lemine

As a parent of an autistic child, Mrs. Cisse described the rough journey of getting a diagnosis, “The diagnostic process was very difficult for us because at that time there were no specialists and our country had only one child psychiatrist who was in training in France during that period,” she explained, “The diagnosis is a real trial, we first wandered from marabout to marabout, and then we went to pediatricians. Those who have the means to go abroad [will] eventually find an answer to this unknown pathology, and those who do not have the means are [stuck] at a dead end.”

Getting a diagnosis was just the beginning, and then came accepting it, “(...) it is always difficult to learn that your child is suffering from a pathology or a disease, but thank God we are believers, and always accept what Allah SUBHANA WA TAHALA has chosen for us. And we are convinced that it is the best for us. I immediately accepted the diagnosis and prepared myself psychologically to face this trial that my child is going through, to accompany her with dignity as long as Allah lends me life.”

Mrs. Cisse then proceeded to describe the struggles of being a parent of an autistic child. “When you have an autistic child, you have no life anymore, everything revolves around this child. Having an autistic child means being helpless everyday in the face of this child’s suffering. Having an autistic child means facing the judgment of others. Having an autistic child means exhausting yourself for life. Having an autistic child is a daily struggle to ensure the minimum well-being of your child. Having an autistic child



Fatima Cisse, founder of Le Monde Des Enfants Heureux

means sometimes crying alone, far from the gaze of others. Having an autistic child means sleepless nights. Having an autistic child means a life without a break.

“But having an autistic child is a gift from heaven because the autistic child is innocent, not concerned with this materialistic and cruel world. An autistic child is a source of happiness. Having an autistic child is a chance because our life has meaning as we have a cause to lead, that of the dignity and right of this being. When you have an autistic child, you are more interested in the trivialities of life, all that concerns us is their accompaniment!”

As for the early signs that parents must note, Dr. Gohi emphasized the importance of paying closer attention to children, especially between the ages of 18 and 24 months. “(...) [check the child’s] ability to communicate linguistically, visually, and auditorily. It is necessary to pay attention to some behavioral issues in the child, such as repetitive [behavior] and interactions with others. They should understand that their children are going through some problems that require medical intervention for diagnosis and treatment, and the earlier we intervene, the more we can reduce the severity of the symptoms and thus provide appropriate care for children.” He further stressed, “Do not use medications except those prescribed by a qualified and specialized doctor. (...). Finally, let us not forget that these children will grow up to become teenagers and then adults, so the treatment process is continuous and not only at a specific age.”

Mrs. Cisse’s organization has recently built a center in El -Mina, with the support of a French NGO. “The center takes care of about fifteen children from Monday to Thursday from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm. The purpose of the center is to prevent our children from being confined to their homes. Unfortunately, our children are rejected by regular schools because their care is specific and the [regular] teachers are not trained to support them. A national policy is needed in



His Excellency Mr. Colin Wells, the British Ambassador at the Autism Center

all areas to support people with autism. Awareness must be raised from top to bottom to make this disorder known first, and then try to establish a real support system.”

“My experience with our center and the CHS is very rich in sharing experiences with parents. We can feel the determination of the families who want to move things forward, but unfortunately, the means are limited and there are no suitable structures accessible (...). Our country does not yet have specialists in the field of autism (special education teachers; speech therapists; occupational therapists; psychomotor therapists). In our center, we try to support children and their families in the medical and social fields. If we [are] talk about treatment, it is a real catastrophe. As medications are expensive and are always out of stock. Currently, we have 50 children registered at the center, but only about fifteen receive support because we do not have the financial and material means to support them all. The challenges faced by people with autism: being accepted by society, breaking the taboo around this disorder, finding specialists to support them, and above all helping with INCLUSION.”

“The biggest challenge for me as a mother is inclusion. We need to create dedicated classrooms for them [autistic children] in all schools, raise awareness, stop hiding them, and change society’s perception of them. It is frustrating to hear that my child is mentally ill or possessed by an

evil spirit! My child is perfectly normal and has all their faculties; their way of perceiving things is just “different” and they need specific care. It is a real ordeal to be an autistic person in this society, and it is also a real ordeal to be a parent.”

“There are currently no opportunities for people with autism in Mauritania. At least not for the moment. In the field of education, there is still much to be done, and I believe that the two most urgent areas are raising awareness first and then considering an inclusion policy in all areas.”

“Socially, [people] are starting to talk about autism, and people are beginning to understand this disorder a little, which is not bad. Thank God we live in a supportive and helpful society that helps autistic individuals and their parents a lot. As for employment, it is still too early (laughs), but we are allowed to dream!”

Mrs. Cisse took the opportunity to thank the First Lady Dr. Marieme Fadel Mint Dah who has made significant contributions to the organization. “I cannot end this interview without acknowledging the efforts made by our First Lady for the cause she leads in the field of autism and all people with disabilities.” she then elaborated, “Today, if we talk about autism in the media [and everywhere else], it is thanks to her. She has taken up this fight and tries to do her best to ensure that these people are recognized



Dr. Marieme Fadel Mint Dah, The First Lady at the Autism Center

with dignity, and benefit from all their rights. Dr. Marieme Fadel Mint Dah is, for me, is the emblematic figure of the struggle for the rights and dignity of people with autism. She honored us by coming to inaugurate and equip our center, and many members of our organization (especially mothers) have benefited from funds and materials that she has made available to relieve them. On behalf of myself and all members of our organization, we thank her for her commitment and determination to be at the bedside of those in need.”

“I would also like to thank Mrs. Fatimetou Moctar and Aliou, his Excellency’s [the British Ambassador’s] collaborator. Once again, thank you, His Excellency Colin Wells, and thank you to Jade and her mother who made an exceptional trip for the bus donation.”

Lastly, I asked Mrs. Cisse to address the parents who are going through what she has been through, “I tell the parents to never give up! I ask husbands to support their wives and ask brothers and sisters to help their brothers or sisters who are autistic. I take this opportunity to invite those who are willing to sponsor a child, each according to their means and possibilities. The families are very destitute, and it is difficult. We have a website and a Facebook page if you would like to visit.”

You can **donate** through the organization’s official website: monde-des-enfants-heureux.org
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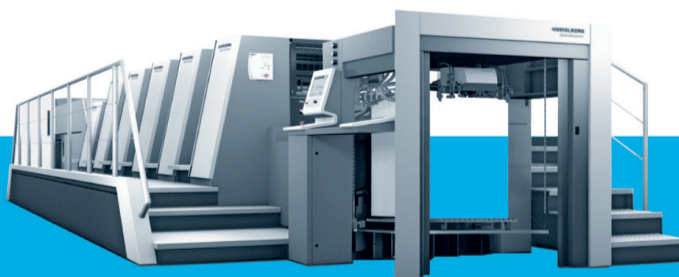


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