

FOLLOW THE WOMEN

What is the shortcut to peace in the Middle East? VNP tried to find it out on a bicycle through Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. And found a lot of new friends and points of view on the region.

BY ELENA BOYCHINOVA



Follow the Women is a non-political international organisation and registered charity that campaigns for peace and an end to violence in the Middle East. Under the patronage of Her Excellency Mrs Asma Al Assad of Syria, Queen Rania of Jordan and Bahir Hariri of Lebanon, over 500 women from more than 40 countries around the world work to promote a greater understanding of the region and raise money for local projects such as building playgrounds for children and sewing projects for women in refugee camps. Through discussion events and peaceful vigils the women aim to bring attention to the spiralling violence in the Middle East and to the way in which the painfully slow peace process blights the lives of innocent women and children. The flagship of the Follow the Women initiative is the annual Pedal for Peace Bike ride. Every year around 300 women from around the globe cycle through Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine drawing the attention of international media, political leaders and local communities alike. By promoting bicycles as vehicles of peace and freedom of movement, the organisation inspires and empowers women to take an active role in the peace process. The ride is the brainchild of 2001 European Woman of the Year, Detta Regan, who works as an international youth worker in Wokingham, Berkshire in the UK.





The ride is called Follow the Women (FTW) Ride and has taken place for a 5th time in the last 5 years. The idea is to present the Arab world's perspective of the Middle East peace process, the Palestine issue and at the same time to build up a socio-cultural bridge between the women of the West and those of the Arab world. The main ideologist behind the event is a 58-year old British lady - Detta Regan. As early as 2001 her peace projects earned her the UK Woman of Europe Award, and right after the first Follow the Women Ride she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. It turned out that, as is often the case, the peace ride is a far safer way to get to know a certain region compared to an independent trip. The organisation was great with volunteers from three of the host countries – Lebanon, Syria and Jordan – taking full care of the participants. Only in Palestine did we have to take care of the organisational arrangements ourselves.

In their majority the cyclists turned out to be experienced ladies who were actually united not only by the peace cause but also by the very opportunity to ride their bicycles in an unfamiliar world. This was exactly the case with the group of 60-year-old

'maties' from California led by a Betsey all of whom would show up in eccentric cycling track suits with a cult a la Beatles stamp reading 'Strawberry fields forever'. During the first round through the territory of Lebanon thanks to the locals the pack was supplied with fresh food, drinks and juices at every stop. The bad taste in our mouths was left mostly by the views of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. So close to the beautiful 'Paris of the Middle East' as the Lebanese proudly name their shiny and chic Beirut, and yet such an ugly, almost grotesque world. A world granted out of pity in which already three generations of Palestinians were living for the day thinking about their Odyssey – the return to their native Palestine.

It was hard to understand and accept the poverty which the people of Sabra and Shatila were forced to live with. It was just as hard for one who was unfamiliar with the historical details to grasp the desire of two generations, living and dying there, to return to a Palestine that even their fathers had not seen. This paradox – the craving to return to the unseen, unlive in homeland, was effortlessly explained by the Jordanian Lana Al-Salem. As all the palestinians there she wanted to go back to the land of her forefathers even though she was practising a nice engineering profession in Amman. 'We Palestinians

have a strong connection with the land, with the trees whose roots have grown in it. Just like them we will always miss our land. Even the children feel this way', explained Lana.

Sabra and Shatila were fully wired but still electricity was available only a few hours a day. Same thing with the water... Even the slightest of rains turned the streets into muddy, impassable rivers while drinking water was of shortage. There were problems with the sewerage and rats were running all around. 'So what do you think... Can one live normally here? But we are not leaving; we are not allowed to buy real estate properties in Lebanon. We are all here, ten people crammed in one room', narrated the Palestinians.

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Omar was one of them. A 22-year old boy, all smiley and nice. Although he had been born in Lebanon, his ID featured the impersonal title 'temporary residency'. He was tagged 'a Palestinian refugee'. In Lebanon this is a status that dooms one to poverty. 'We have nearly no rights. We can't vote, we can't practise the elite most professions like medicine and law. It is hard to study because we have to work to make a living. Wherever we go, we are the first to be made redundant; our contracts mean nothing. My dream is to live in Palestine. I do not really see it happening but I have hope. Everything in Palestine will be better for us. Yes, we have been accepted here but we always hear 'You are a Palestinian. Go away'', said Omar and smiled sadly.

The fate of 25-year-old Amir was even tougher. He had got the chance to study Dental Medicine in the US, but had been forced to come back. 'It was because of the family; I had to take care of them', told me the young man. Amir had got the rare opportunity to study in Connecticut. He had been so good that he had taught there for another two years but then his mother had widowed. 'No more Dental Medicine. Here I do not have the right to practise. And I cannot leave anymore either', said Amir. A few metres from him stood the Past shaping the Future. In the form of an elderly woman and her





memories of the 1982 massacre. Hundreds of Palestinian refugees were slaughtered by the Phalangist militia groups with the support of the Israeli military. The justification was the alleged presence of the main bodies of some fundamental Palestinian organisations in the camp. The massacre is to this day shrouded in political dialectics. The survivors however remember. The woman proudly posing with a key holder with the face of Yasser Arafat was named Fatima Abdulhadi, and although she looked around 70 it turned out that she was not even 60 yet. The only word she knew in English was ‘massacre’. ‘Twenty-five of my relatives were killed. My children were lucky to have been at school. I myself was stabbed and shot three times’, recalled Fatima crying. This had been followed by years in hospital until she recovered. That day she was crying for attention. As was everyone around her. ‘Do something’, came from the stage, ‘The international information community has been ignoring us’.

The Palestinian camps there were soaked with the pain dating 27 years ago. It was obviously influencing people’s personal lives too. ‘I have a lot of Lebanese friends. But I will never be able to marry a Lebanese woman. My mother has not forgotten. Back then they killed my father; how can she possibly forgive?’, explained Omar.

Naturally the Lebanese themselves had a completely different view of the Palestinians, and as could have been expected, it was politically defined. ‘We love the Palestinians, we support them’, told me Kifa Masoud, one of the activists of the Progressive Youth Organisation. ‘But they must leave’, he added. Problem was that the one-million Palestine population could seriously endanger the political balance in the small and as it was already conflict rent country. ‘It is the Palestinians themselves who do not want to integrate’, disclosed her point of view the Syrian Lama Altavel. ‘In Syria unlike Lebanon the Palestinians are full-right citizens; they can purchase real estates; they can practise any profession. However they perceive Syria as a country of temporary residency. They allegedly came her for a short while, a year or two until the problem in their country gets resolved. And that has been so for 61 years now. If back in time they were 3000, now they amount to 300 000’. Lama worked at a similar refugee camp in her homeland close to Halab.

One of the ‘celebrities’ during our visit to the camp was Lina Arafat. The name was correct – she was the adopted daughter of Yasser Arafat. Lina was one of the founders of the Bike Ride and had been taking part in it since its first edition cycling right next to Detta Regan. She had been born exactly in Sabra and Shatila in the unfortunate 1982. Found in a basket after the attack the two-month-old then Lina and four other children had been found to be completely alone with nobody looking for or know-

ing them. The local authorities had concluded that their whole families had been killed and had started wondering what to do with them. That is when Arafat had stepped in adopting all five of them. ‘He was like a real father to us. I owe him the world. When he died I cried for a whole month. I feel an emptiness now that he is gone’, confided Lina. Presently she was living in Ramallah, making her own living by working in an organisation which supported the Palestinian population. ‘It is very hard; some of them do not have a thing. I buy them rice, flour, potatoes so they have something to eat. I have to be strong, I have no choice’, shared Lina.

The next challenge in front of the cyclists was Syria. In that ancient country everything was organized by the largest local mobile operator MTN in co-operation with the First Lady of the country Her Excellency Mrs Asma Al Assad. Five-star luxury, abundance of food and television crews accompanied the ride all around the country which turned out to be the most religious in the journey.

The charity purpose of the ride got somewhat dissolved in the midst of the luxury. Most of the participants realized the paradox. ‘We owe it to the sponsors. Such was their wish’, explained to me one of the English participants and close collaborator of Detta Regan’s named Ilene Morton. She went on, ‘I am also starting to ask myself’ what exactly it is that we are doing. There are things though, which however small, are important. For example, one of us had not seen her family; they would not let her in

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Palestine. She joined the ride and managed to enter the country, to meet with her relatives. There are several such, purely humane stories which help me see the point. Not to mention the playgrounds for children which were built in the occupied territories with the money that we all raised’.

‘It is very important that young people learn to communicate. A lot of people do not have the slightest idea about what is going on in these countries that we are travelling through’, claimed Detta Regan herself. ‘This ride is an opportunity to sit down and talk about it. Many think that Beirut, for example, is a place of conflicts and wars. After this ride however they have already made friends here; they have a first-hand knowledge about what is going on’. Still she insisted on her opinion – the ride preaches ‘peace from a gender-defined point of view’. ‘We seek out and want to help those who suffer most from the wars – women. This is just a different story, a story about the opportunities for peace in the Middle East. I want the participants as well as everybody we meet to feel inspired by this ride. To realize that they can exist together’, said the 58-year-old activist.

The main topic in Syria was not politics but women. ‘I would like to be a boy!’ That was Lama Altavil’s reaction to a lapsus by one of the organizers, ‘Come on, guys, on your bikes!’ Lama was one of the Syrian women who never parted with their burkas, never even showed her wrists despite the 40 degree heat and the physical exercise while climbing the Syrian hills that led to the Golan Heights. ‘Men here are allowed everything, it is easier for them. They can study and travel. Women are only destined with the obligation to stay at home and to do as they are told’, heated up the 28-year-old Lama Altavil. She turned out to be one of the rebels in the group of Syrian women taking part in the ride. Despite that or maybe exactly because of that she had been granted considerable freedom by her family. ‘With us it is the family that makes the decisions. I have been dreaming of taking part in this ride for two years. Most of my female fellow-students will never be able to become a part of such an initiative.

It is just that I have the support of my family’. The discussion about the role of women in society was existent in Jordan as well, although on a much lesser scale. ‘There is no discrimination of women. At least not in the scale presented by the press. Naturally, the families from the poorer, rural regions are more conservative and there are a lot of limitations there. But those stereotypes are shattered among the educated Jordanians’, claimed the 31-year old Fatima.

‘It is all a matter of economic stability and education’, said Wahdi, an Ammani engineer whom I met at a shisha lounge. ‘Nowadays it is very economically difficult for a man to support his whole family. That is why an ever larger number of even the more traditionally inclined break and avoid these stereotypes. They need their wives to work as well in order to contribute to the income of the family’. Such economic necessities caused a new anomaly – a lot of

cling on the clean mountain roads by the forests of Syria and Lebanon. The big white city was swarmed with people running around on their errands and the pack of cyclists evoked not so much an interest as slight annoyance with the disturbance of the busy traffic as it was.

The group reached Palestine where we were faced with 8-hour check-ups and interviews as early as the border. The Israeli authorities refused to grant entrance to our two Turkish fellow-cyclists because of the diplomatic conflict between the two countries and a protest by the Israeli against a Turkish soap opera movie featuring killings of children by soldiers in the occupied territories. A French lady of Moroccan descent was also refused entry into the country. In spite of the heartfelt efforts of Lina Arafat and the



the women who held firmly to their Muslim traditions, particularly in terms of clothing, found it hard to integrate into the new economic ways. ‘I applied for a job at a bank. However they set a condition – no burka and I should wear short skirts. That was allegedly the dress code of their institution. Naturally I refused. It is not just the religion. I do not want men to look at me as if I were a piece of meat’, said Rasha Swaissi from Syria.

The Jordan experience of FTW was the most tiring and spectacular one for the participants. That came mostly from the fact that cycling along the steep Ammani streets in rush hour definitely contrasted cy-

other Palestinian ladies the pack was not granted access to any of the Israeli sights in Jerusalem, Hebron, etc. ‘Some of the women in the ride have never been on bikes. Very few of them have crossed any of their physical and psychological limits throughout life. Here we are all showing how things can happen, how you can do things which you consider impossible. We are showing them a world that they have thought of as hostile. Hostile not only to them but also to the locals. We are all afraid. And that is only normal. But we cannot allow ourselves to bow before that fear as has happened so far’, concludes Detta.