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## Twilight Zone / Camp of broken dreams

By [Gideon Levy](#)

Who among them will still be alive in another five years? And who in another 10 years? Who will be a free person? And who will be in prison? Who will be healthy, and who will be maimed? Who will find work and who will be unemployed? These thoughts were hovering in the room, but nobody brought them up.

But even without a specific assessment of the chances of life and death, failure and success of these young people, it was a very sad and oppressive conversation.

Four boys and one girl, all 18 years old, who in another week will be taking their bagrut matriculation exams. They have spent the past few months studying for the tests, some more and some less, without anyone being able to give them a clear answer as to why they need to do this at all. What will they get out of their bagrut exams, other than bringing pleasure to their parents, when their future is so doubtful?

As the children of refugees, residents of a refugee camp, perhaps the third or fourth generation with refugee status, their chances of breaking out of the circle of occupation and poverty into which they were born are slim. Nevertheless, they are nervous about the exams. When they finish them, in about four weeks, and the results are posted, their families will make big parties for those who pass the tests, usually only about half of the examinees. In Palestinian society, success in the bagrut exams is reason for a celebration.

We sat in the apartment of one of the families, in the Jenin refugee camp. We interviewed the girl separately: They study separately. We gathered the boys at random, and despite that, almost all of them bore the scars of the struggle: bereaved sons and brothers, a home that was demolished when they were younger, brothers in prison. In this belligerent refugee camp there is almost no family without a history of bereavement, demolition or imprisonment.

Had you met them in Tel Aviv, you would not have noticed any difference between them and Israelis of their age: the strong body, the short hair, the brand-name jeans and T-shirt, the endless playing around with the cell phone and Winston cigarettes. But there is nevertheless one difference: In Tel Aviv they smoke blue Winston Lights. Here they smoke regular, red Winstons.

The home of the Ayoub family: The son Ahmed is 18. His brother, Yaman, was killed, as was his cousin, Amjad Husseini. His classmates sit together in the spartan room, which looks out on a yard full of junk. Ahmed, Mohammed Batawi, Mahmoud Samour and Mahmoud Tubasi are all students at the Peace School for boys in the city. Batawi lost his father: Ahmed Batawi was killed in February 1988 when Mohammed was one year and 15 days old. He has no recollection of his father. Mahmoud Tubasi is also an orphan: His father, who worked at a plastics factory in Afula, died of an illness. His brother was sentenced to 32 life sentences for his part in attacks in Haifa and Karkur. The family home was demolished. He has two other brothers in jail.

A few days ago, they completed their last pre-bagrut exams, and now they are studying a few hours every day for the bagrut. Additional activities: they hang out, they go down to the city; they hang out, they go down to the city. Ahmed's father is angry that his son comes home after 11 P.M. Mohammed has no father, and he is allowed to come home by midnight. Ahmed is the best student, but Mohammed studies the hardest. English is the most difficult subject for all four of them. Ahmed has 50 in English. The exams will be in seven subjects: Arabic, English, history, geography, religion, biology and mathematics. In history they don't learn about our Holocaust, but they do learn about the Balfour Declaration and the 1948 war.

The first exam: on June 6, Arabic, with the second part of the exam on the following day. Then, at intervals of a day or two, all the rest of the exams, some of them in two parts. They have to bring ID cards, and the yellow card that confirms the right to be tested. Three testers supervise in the classroom, you are not allowed to bring cell phones and you are not allowed to bring calculators. There are 42 students in a classroom, each of them will sit at a separate desk, it's hard to copy. Everyone takes the exams. The results will be published in July.

What do they want to be when they grow up? Soldiers in the Palestinian Authority. What about going abroad? Ahmed is thinking about taking a military course in Pakistan. Mahmoud Samour doesn't want to go abroad at all, and the most distant dream of the other Mahmoud, Tubasi, reaches Jordan. Thailand? Tierra del Fuego? India? The shores of Costa Rica? They haven't heard of them. Why do you want to study? Ayoub's father replies in their name: "For their future." Have you heard about the stabbings in Israeli nightclubs? They haven't heard.

Who will be the doctors of the next Palestinian generation? And the lawyers? Not they. Maybe students from other places, not from this refugee camp. Yes, there's one guy in their school, by the name of Mohammed Bishara, who is very smart, and maybe he'll be a doctor in the camp. All the rest only want to be fighters. This is the

generation of the second intifada: They have lost a lot of friends and missed a lot of days of school. If the occupation was meant to destroy their society as well, it has been very successful. Tubasi, whose father died and whose three brothers are in prison, feels that he has to take care of his family. He has no desire to continue studying in this situation.

Has any of them ever been to Israel? Tubas once worked for two weeks in Umm al-Fahm. Batawi visited relatives in Umm al-Fahm. They were also once at the Dead Sea when they were kids, and they even swam in Lake Kinneret. A first smile on their faces. That was before the intifada. But they have never met Israeli Jews, not even people their age, except for the soldiers at the checkpoint, and during searches and incursions. What's the difference between you and the Israelis? "There you don't see tanks, there you don't see incursions, there you don't see dead people," says the brother of the perpetrator of mass terror attacks, Tubasi.

What would you say to Israelis of your own age? "We would tell them how we live." Would you want to meet them? "No, not right now," says Tubasi. An Israel Air Force plane roars above us, drowning out the conversation. All night they heard a UAV chiroing above their heads. Five jeeps entered the camp toward morning to search for wanted men.

Ayoub has a wish: "That the Israeli army will leave and we will live in our freedom." Tubasi: "When the occupation leaves, we will be able to begin to think about ourselves." Batawi: "Our own Palestine. It's ours up to the sea. And we will return to Palestine and the Jews will return to the places they came from." Tubasi hopes that they'll return to his village, Umm al-Shuf, near Haifa. His father was born there.

Don't you have any personal dream, that isn't national? An oppressive silence. The atmosphere in the room is gloomy. They are silent. To become rich? To travel abroad? A sports car? "The conditions here don't allow them to dream," interrupts the Palestinian mother, Umm Yaman, the mother of Yaman who was killed, and Ahmed who is preparing for bagrut. Her son, Ahmed: "I dream of returning to my village, next to Umm al-Fahm." Tubasi: "I once dreamed of being a computer engineer, but the conditions won't allow it." Batawi: "I have no personal dream. My dream is the dream of the Palestinian people." Samour wants to marry and start a family. Will you fulfill your national dream? Tubasi: "It is written in the Koran that in the end we will win. Now Israel is strong, but there were British and Turks and Crusaders here - and they disappeared. Fifty years, 100 years, 200 years."

Isn't there any possibility that the two nations will live here together? Tubasi: "There was a hudna [cease-fire], and there were attempts to live together, and the Israelis violated everything. No, there's no room

for peace any more. We tried and it didn't succeed. The Israelis are not willing to live in peace." If the Israelis change? Samour: "If we feel that they really want peace, then we can talk." Batawi says that there is no chance, and Tubasi says that peace will be possible only if they return to their villages and to Al Aqsa. Not before. A word to Israelis of your age who will read this? Tubasi: "You can't do anything or say anything. Sharon speaks in your name. We haven't heard a word from you all these years. Sharon decides for all of you."

Maybe Ahmed's father, Faisal Ayoub, has a wish for his son? "What can I wish? Even if he succeeds in the bagrut, where will I get the money for his studies? I haven't worked for four years."

A well-kept home in the camp, the home of the Al-Khatibs. Nida is 18, and is also preparing for the bagrut. Her father has a store for building materials in the camp. Wearing a white head scarf and a black T-shirt, Nida is already deeply immersed in her studies for the exams in biology and geography. She sits over her notebooks and her books for eight to 10 hours a day, much more than the boys we met. Nida explains the difference by the fact that the boys are freer to go out, and the girls are more tied down to the house. The hardest is religion, although her grade is 95, and the easiest is mathematics, although her grade is 81. A student in the Al Zahra school for girls, she is fifth in her class. There is a clear ranking there.

Why is it important to you to succeed in the exams? "To make my parents happy and to continue to study history or geography, and to be a teacher." Nida doesn't want more than four children; her family, 11 sisters and two brothers, is too large. "But they are all studying," interrupts her father, with eyes sparkling. What about going abroad? Nida looks at her father in confusion. A personal dream? Only to finish studying. And then? She would have liked to study law and be a lawyer. But in her society, nobody goes to a female lawyer, so she gave up the idea. She doesn't want to live in another society. Only to improve her society. What would be different in your life were it not for the occupation? "Everything would be open and it would be possible to travel wherever you wanted."

"Isn't there any hope that things will be better?" asks her brother, and Nida hugs the white pillow, which she hasn't let out of her hands during the entire conversation.

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