

## Access to justice for Palestinians

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Written by Jeffrey H. Waugh

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**Professor Reem Bahdi at the University of Windsor Faculty of Law is doing her part to address human dignity concerns in the courts for Palestinians, coinciding well with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights last week.**

The primary goals of the four-year Initiative on Judicial Independence and Human Dignity project are to ensure independence of the judiciary in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, along with incorporating human rights into the legal system. The project has received \$7 million in funding, mainly from the Canadian International Development Agency.

Bahdi, who is the Canadian co-director for the project, says Palestinians always thought of the law as an instrument of oppression rather than an instrument of justice. The project plans to alter this view by placing human dignity concerns into minds of the judiciary and the community at large.

Human dignity, in the legal sense, refers to the intrinsic worthiness of every person, and is seen to form the base of human rights. According to the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”

One part of the project provides training for judges to consider human dignity with every case that comes across their docket. Already, 30 judges have been through the intensive three-month training course that combines academic training with practical methods such as mock trials and an apprenticeship program, where the trainee judges work under the supervision of senior judiciary members.

The plan is to have 160 judges complete the program. Palestinian co-director Mudar Kassis says judges are showing an increasing desire to become ambassadors for human dignity through their work in the courts.

Along with strengthening judicial independence and enshrining human rights into case law, the project also helps support community coalitions to cement the long-term survival of the project’s goals.

Through these community coalitions, there will be a variety of public awareness and education campaigns promoting the interaction of the public with the judiciary.

The project lists activities such as involving media outlets to cover judicial developments, exploring the meaning of judicial independence and professionalism, identifying acts that threaten judicial independence, and explaining the purpose and the methods behind preserving and defending the independence of the

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The project was initially announced and funded by the Canadian government several years ago, but halted in 2006 after the Hamas-led government was sworn in on March 29 of that year.

In a release issued at the time, Canada stated it was pulling support because the newly elected Palestinian government had “not addressed the concerns raised by Canada and others concerning non-violence, the recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap for Peace.”

The funding was renewed a year later, following the appointment of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Windsor’s law school says Bahdi’s project fits well with its institutional theme of access to justice.