

## Law School Partner on Palestinian Judicial Education Project



Prof. Reem Bahdi

By Laura Pearce

The Federal government has increased by \$4.5 million its financial commitment to a Palestinian Judicial Education Project that will be implemented by the University of Windsor, the Institute of Law at Birzeit University, and the Palestinian High Judicial Council. Windsor Law professor Reem Bahdi will work closely with Dr. Mudar Kassis of the Institute of Law at Birzeit University, and Justice Assad Mubarak, High Court Judge and Chair of the Palestinian Judicial Education Committee, in overseeing the Project.

The funding announcement came May 27th, following a meeting between Prime Minister Paul Martin and Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, during the President's visit to Ottawa. In early February, Professor Bahdi participated in a 3-day conference entitled *The Conference on Judicial Education and Human Dignity*, which was attended by about 40 high-ranking Palestinian judges and other legal experts. Held at Birzeit University, the conference focused on the promotion of human rights and respect for human dignity in the Palestinian judicial process.

Federal Court Justice Doug Campbell, Chief Justice of Alberta Catherine Fraser, and retired Supreme Court Justice Claire L'Heureux-Dube joined Professor Bahdi in Birzeit, and continue to volunteer their expertise in the development of the Project.

The Project's inception can be traced to a feasibility study undertaken Bill Graham was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Professor Bahdi traveled to Palestine on several occasions as part of that study and determined, as a result of extensive consultations with Palestinian human rights groups, scholars, judges and educators, that a successful Canadian-Palestinian partnership could be developed to support a human rights-centred judicial system.

Dr. Fayaz Manji of the Human Security Program at Foreign Affairs was the first person to understand the importance and potential of this project, observes Bahdi. Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew and International Cooperation Minister Aileen Carroll, have indicated their strong support for the partnership, as it is consistent with the Prime Minister's commitment to support Palestinian institutions, states Professor Bahdi.

Ministers Pettigrew and Carroll have a strong vision of how Canada can best support the rule of law and justice in Palestinian society, she notes. As the first and only Palestinian-Canadian law professor in Canada, I am very pleased that Foreign Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) have put their faith in our Project."

The Project, says Professor Bahdi, differs from traditional judicial reform programs in that it is participatory. Palestinian judges took the lead in presenting themes at the conference, and were receptive to continued support from their

Canadian colleagues. Ongoing dialogues, and a sense of trust, are essential to making the program work as a partnership, she states. The judges themselves have to be leaders in this initiative, and [we] are full partners with them. [So] they help set the agenda. We make sure that our priorities are their priorities. We're not forcing an agenda on them. The judges work in partnership with us at every level, including the development of policy and programming and in the actual implementation of the education sessions.

Palestinians participating in the judicial education project are not simply learners they are teachers, too. We should do more of this kind of thing, says Professor Bahdi, noting that the Project helps her and her Canadian colleagues learn more about their own legal system, and ways *it* can improve.

It's an unfinished project, both in Canada and in Palestine, says Professor Bahdi, whose own interest in human rights was fostered and encouraged when she interned for the Palestine section of Defence for Children International as a law student for 4 months in 1995 and again in 1996. Professor Bahdi will visit the West Bank and Gaza at least three times a year for education sessions, and Palestinian judges are expected to visit Canada at least once a year.