

# Community/Israel news

## How an Arab resident of Jerusalem came to play a pivotal role in improving the lives of Arab women in Jerusalem - as the result of a project sponsored by the Jerusalem Foundation

By BERNIE BELLAN

We've had a number of articles in this newspaper about the Jerusalem Foundation over the years, some of which I've written, while others have been written by Simone Cohen Scott, who has been spending winters in Jerusalem for many years now. Frankly, writing about all the good work done by foundations can come across as a little dry.

You can include all the figures you want explaining how much foundations have contributed to the betterment of a particular group or geographic area, but what can really liven up an article is a story about an individual or group of individuals whose lives were changed to a significant degree as a result of something a foundation has done.

So it was that when I attended a program on May 7 at the Asper Campus that was titled "Shared Society in Jerusalem: How we live together," what captured my interest more than anything was hearing one story in particular of a member of a panel representing the Jerusalem Foundation that had been touring various Canadian cities for one week prior to arriving in Winnipeg.

That person's name was Riham Abu Snineh. Riham is an Arab native of Jerusalem who has been managing a portion of a program sponsored by the Jerusalem Foundation known as MATI (which, as Simone Cohen Scott explained in an article in the April 12 issue of this paper) is an acronym in Hebrew that, when translated into English, means the Jerusalem Business Development Centre.

The program began in 1991, Simone noted, "with the support of the Jerusalem Foundation, as a way to provide an economic solution to unemployment."

According to information provided by the Jerusalem Foundation, MATI "offers training and small business loans - helping marginalized populations in Jerusalem break out of the cycle of poverty, particularly in east Jerusalem."

Now, as you're probably aware, despite Jerusalem having been reunited in 1967, the Arab portion of the population has been extremely reluctant to integrate with the Jewish population.

Riham Abu Snineh herself was typical of almost all Arab residents of Jerusalem - up until 12 years ago. As she explained to the audience on May 7, although she had graduated as a lawyer, she didn't speak either Hebrew or English. Like the vast majority of other Arab women in Jerusalem, Riham was unable to find work. (According to a table presented during the program, 74% of Arab women in Jerusalem age 25-64, are unemployed. Interestingly, the figure for Arab men in that age group is much better, with 69% employed. That figure is quite comparable to Jewish men, where 71% are employed. Neither figure is particularly impressive, however. The high rate of unemployment among Jewish men is largely attributable to the large number of ultraorthodox in the Jewish population who would rather spend their time studying than working - or serving in the army.)

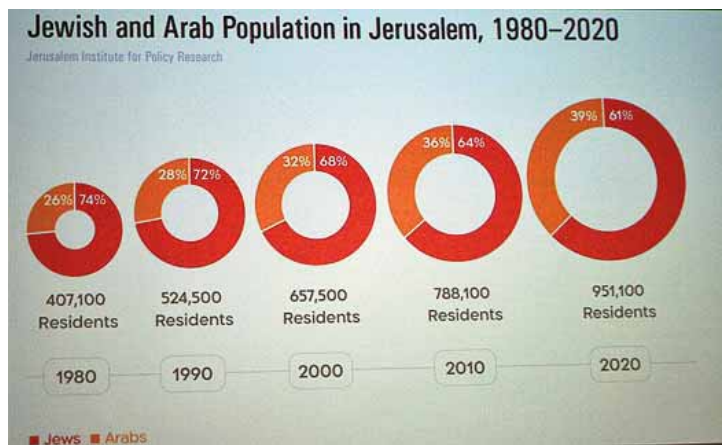
Not being able to find work, Riham wondered about the possibility of going to work for MATI. But, as she noted on May 7 (speaking in Hebrew, which was translated by Jerusalem Foundation of Canada Executive Director Nomi Yeshua), she "wasn't sure about joining an Israeli organization. Who are these people?" Riham wondered.

But, after learning more about what MATI was all about, in 2012 Riham did accept a position with MATI. As she explained, "I convinced myself I would take a position with them because they shared my values."

And what are those values? As Simone wrote in her April 12 article, "MATI helps with the forming of the idea for a service or a product: provides the basics of how to begin; the education and training to see it though; a business plan; adaptation of business models; basic budget assessments; arranging loan assumption; and any further guidance; under-girded always by English and Hebrew instruction."



**Jewish Federation President Gustavo Zenter introducing members of the panel from MATI (the Jerusalem Business Centre), a project sponsored by The Jerusalem Foundation (l-r): Nomi Yeshua, Canadian Executive Director, The Jerusalem Foundation; Zvia Shelly, CEO of MATI; Riham Abu Snineh, East Jerusalem Manager of MATI; Michal Shaul-Valej, Deputy CEO, MATI**



**A graph showing the exponential growth in the population of Jerusalem from 1980-2020. While the total population, including both Jews and Arabs, has more than doubled in 40 years, the proportion of the total population that is Arab has grown from 26% to 39%.**

Has MATI made a difference in the lives of women, both Jewish and Arab, in Jerusalem?

You better believe it has.

Here are some figures provided during the program on a leaflet that was distributed to audience members. (I know. I began this article by saying that reading about the work done by foundations can be a little dry, but it helps to flesh out the more abstract notion that Simone described with some actual figures.)

In 2022, through a particular program run by MATI for Jerusalem women known as "Turning Point", 450 women participated in that program. Out of that program 69 business plans were developed, 250 businesses were established and expanded, and 450 new jobs were created.

Riham is the East Jerusalem manager of MATI. In the past 12 years she has become fluent in Hebrew. As she told the May 7 audience, "I started to make a difference. I learned how much we don't know about each other."

It was also under her guidance that MATI established a branch in east Jerusalem in the first place.

"Today we have 40 different projects," Riham observed, helping individuals with such things as "financial management, budgeting, and saving."

MATI now has an annual budget of \$3 million, of which 40% comes from the government, while the rest comes from private donations. (By the way, the Jerusalem Foundation raised \$50 million altogether last year. The Asper Foundation has been supporting activities of the Jerusalem Foundation since 1995.)

At one point in the program though, Joel Reitman, who is President of the Jerusalem Foundation of Canada, told the audience that it took Riham two years to obtain a visa to enter Canada.

That observation intrigued me, since I was aware that, like all Arab residents of Jerusalem, Riham would have been able to apply for Israeli citizenship and thus obtain an Israeli passport, thereby shortening the time that it would take to obtain a visa to come to Canada to just a few weeks.

I was almost certain that I knew the answer that Riham was likely to give to the question that I asked her, which was "Why didn't you apply for Israeli citizenship?" but I wanted to hear how she would answer it.

Her answer was a reflection of the deep ambivalence that almost all Arab residents of Jerusalem have about living in a city that Israel now claims is united.

As translated by Nomi Yeshua, Riham explained that the vast majority of Arab residents of Jerusalem feel a strong connection to the Palestinian Authority, but when the security fence was built, they were cut off from their brethren living under the Palestinian Authority. "They have to reassess how they feel about Jerusalem," Nomi explained, "and it's an ongoing process."

I'm aware that this article might not have been quite what one would have expected to read when it comes to reporting on a program titled "Shared Society in Jerusalem: How we live together." I was simply so intrigued by the presence of an Arab woman on a panel discussing how one particular program supported by the Jerusalem Foundation has benefitted Jerusalem women, both Arab and Jew alike, that I wanted to focus on that Arab woman's perspective.

As Riham observed, however, the process of integrating Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem is an "ongoing process." But, if she's an example of what can happen when someone puts aside their reservations and says they are going to work together with someone with whom they had almost nothing in common previously, then perhaps there is hope for the future.