

# Serving Palestine with Love

The American Federation  
of Ramallah, Palestine



By Terry Ahwal and  
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virus and the bungled response by many international governments created an unprecedented global catastrophe. This failure prompted the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine (AFRP) into action. After assessing the dire situation in Palestine, former President Danny Harb and the AFRP board of

in 2020 the COVID virus hit the world like an uncontrolled tornado and hurricane combined, devastating the world and killing multitudes of people without mercy. The scourge of this

directors took several vital actions to ensure that the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation were not to be forgotten. Working remotely, like everyone else, the AFRP set up its emergency plans to aid the Palestinian people.

The AFRP Medical Mission headed by Bajis Katwan and Dr. Rajai Khoury sprang into action to send a million units of PPE and shipped them directly to the Ramallah municipality and hospitals. To ensure delivery of the shipments, the AFRP's Government Relations Committee contacted Senator Dick Durban to urge him to push Israel to the immediate release of the shipment to the Palestinians.



■ A doctor from the AFRP Medical Mission.



■ Physicians from the AFRP Medical Mission during surgery.

In addition, the board of directors authorized sending US\$100,000 from the relief funds to needy families, in addition to dedicating more than US\$5,000 each month to this cause as long as needed. Another US\$100,000 was donated to the Ramallah hospital by the Ramallah Foundation, which further sponsored 48 emergency COVID beds to help ease the crisis in Ramallah.

Despite the constraints and hardships faced by AFRP members, the AFRP Human Service Network, especially Bassam Eways and Maher Ajlouny, launched a fundraising campaign for the medical mission, sanitation project, and other needs of the people in Palestine. In addition, Salem Abdulnour raised US\$60,000 for the relief fund. When the vaccines became available, the AFRP led the effort to secure help for the Palestinian people. When rumors swelled about Israel preventing Palestinians from receiving their vaccines, the AFRP and other Palestinian coalitions did not rest

until the United States pressured Israel to allow vaccines in the occupied territories.

This long-drawn-out explanation is only a small sample of the work done by the AFRP and its members. Since its inception, the AFRP core mission has been to keep its members in the United States connected and engaged and to maintain ties to our beloved Palestine, specifically Ramallah. Palestine is our heart and soul. The aroma of Palestine seeps into our veins regardless of the distance or the time that passes. With all its tragedies and beauties, Palestine shapes our dreams and destinies. Even when we venture away to seek a restful life, we find that we can only rest in the bosom of Palestine.

Not a day goes by without working for our people in Palestine. Being exiled compels us to work for our native land in order to heal our souls. We have a spiritual attachment to Palestine. The people in Palestine may fret about their circumstances,



■ Delivery of masks and PPE to help Palestinian hospitals combat COVID-19.

and rightly so, but we in the diaspora ache for its embrace. We therefore endeavor to gather and engage in order to be with each other and to help our motherland.

For 65 years the AFRP has lived and thrived by this motto. The founders of the federation and the Ramallah Foundation set up a base, and their descendants continue to broaden it so that Palestine is not forgotten. Since the AFRP is built on actions not words, its founders and successive leaders have relied on actions rather than words to build the federation. Recognizing that education is our path to victory, the founders set up scholarships for people from Ramallah who live in Palestine and in the United States. The AFRP awards 60 scholarships a year to deserving and needy students. Members such as Paul Ajlouny and the late Hanna Salah set up scholarships in their names

to help students. Others give anonymously to maintain the fund. Some of the recipients have become leaders in their own fields.

Education is only one of many programs that are sanctioned by the American Federation and the Ramallah Foundation. The AFRP Relief Fund, established 50 years ago, continues to provide operational and emergency funding to many nonprofit organizations in Ramallah. The AFRP raises and sends over US\$30,000 annually to schools and agencies outside times of crisis as well. Since the beginning of the COVID crisis, the AFRP has sent US\$5,000 monthly to support 200 families who are affected by the crisis. The AFRP Woman-to-Woman Program sent US\$25,000 to assist women in need of support. Every penny raised from our generous donors is sent to the people who live under the Israeli occupation.

There are many reasons to smile in Ramallah and Palestine, but one of the main reasons is that the Ramallah Foundation and the AFRP Medical Mission are making sure that children born with cleft lips are treated by volunteer doctors who not only operate on the children but also train local doctors who are not able to travel because of the occupation. Funds for this program are donated by the Ramallah Foundation. Children are not the only beneficiaries. Ramallah's vulnerable elderly live safely in a nursing home built by funds donated by the Ramallah people. Today, John Joubran is leading an effort to raise US\$4.5 million to build a new home for the elderly to ensure that their last days are restful.

Contributing money is but one element of support to Palestine. Built on a solid structure, the



■ Participants of the AFRP cultural and exchange committee visiting the apartheid wall.

AFRP's leaders and members are always ready to heed the calls of the Palestinians in Palestine. The hands of our forefathers who planted the olive trees in Ramallah never dreamed that their trees would be cultivated by their American-born descendants who travel intentionally to Palestine to harvest olives with local Palestinians and protect them from the Israeli settlers. Even though they are blacklisted and sometimes banned from entering Palestine, they have stepped up their efforts to advocate on behalf of Palestine.

The significance of olive trees, fig trees, and olive oil is not lost on our community. They symbolize our resistance and connection to a land we cherish; we therefore use every opportunity to promote and raise awareness of the theft of our land. Najwa and Afif Baba who lead the Ramallah Club of San Francisco and their active members made it

their mission to promote and sell these products and send the money to Palestine. For 41 years, the Ramallah Club has led a coalition of Palestinian civic organizations to celebrate Palestine Day, which sheds light on the beauty of Palestinian culture. Thousands of participants feast on Palestinian dishes, listen to Palestinian music, learn *dabkeh* from local Palestinians, and, most important, highlight the ugliness of the occupation. Many non-Arabs attend the event, including elected officials who are no longer afraid to support the Palestinian people. For the last few years, the mayor of San Francisco has issued a proclamation to honor "Palestine Day."

The creators of the AFRP Project Hope never dreamed that people such as Dr. Jessica Haddad, Attorney Natalie Kandah, and Kathy Harb would use their vacation time to lead college-aged men and



■ Participants of Project Hope visiting Ramallah Municipality.

women to volunteer in Palestine. But each year since 1997, a group of twenty or more students have left the comfort of their homes to work in Ramallah. They build parks, clean streets, paint schools, volunteer in nonprofits, and much more. While in Ramallah, they established connections with their peers and returned with a purpose to serve. Project Hope participants such as Julie Eadeh joined the US State Department to ensure that our voices are heard from the inside. Nicole Khamis, a law student at Harvard Law School, is now the chair of Harvard Trek to Palestine.

We never cease to take the opportunity to pay homage to Palestine and its heroic resisters. Even in death we pay tribute to Palestine. Many of our members choose to honor their deceased loved ones by directing their donations to the Greening of Ramallah Program. We challenge our grief by beautifying Ramallah and donating money to plant trees in Ramallah. To make Ramallah and the West Bank child-friendly, the AFRP has joined the Muna and Basem Hishmeh Foundation and Bank of Palestine to build playgrounds for children throughout Palestine.

■ Young American Palestinians helping local Palestinians pick their olives to protect them from Israeli settlers.



With the odds stacked against us, the AFRP and its members continue to march on in support of our brothers and sisters in Palestine. There is no shortage of people who dedicate their lives to support the Palestinian people. Frankly, it soothes our hearts to be there for our suffering families in Palestine. As much as the AFRP does to help Palestine, it is not enough! AFRP works will continue to intensify and will not cease until the occupation is gone and the Palestinian people are free.



■ Project Hope participants striking a pose at the Nelson Mandela statue.

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\* Rami Ayyub, Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Palestinians accuse Israel of preventing COVID-19 vaccine transfer to Gaza," *Reuters*, February 15, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-israel-palestinian-idUSKBN2AF1UG>.