

The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of **Global Dialogue and Democracy**. MIFTAH
المبادرة الفلسطينية لتعميق الحوار العالمي والديمقراطية



*“Cartoons in the Media Coverage of Mecca Agreement and the
National Unity Government”*

The Second Report

Phase II

Media Monitoring Unit

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Introduction

Cartoons of the three daily Palestinian newspapers Al-Quds, Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, have not been far removed from political developments on the ground in the Palestinian territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip, during the past six months. It is worth noting that the cartoons' monitoring period was completed prior to Hamas' control over Gaza Strip.

The cartoons published in the three newspapers during January 1- March 31, 2007 portrayed reality in a manner that news and news agencies reports had not portrayed. These latter sufficed in conveying events, developments and consequences, while cartoons reflected reality satirically. Cartoons expressed the real mood of the people towards issues they were living, and which constituted a main source of concern, fear, anger and hope towards infighting between Fateh and Hamas, and also towards the Mecca Agreement and the subsequent National Unity Government.

As some may define cartoons as the "art of monitoring perversity and deformation existing in nature" or the "art of comic tragedy" or "tragic-comedy," the Palestinian political cartoon has succeeded in its mission at this stage, in criticizing local political reality, and even the international politics that addressed the Palestinian event selectively and with double standards.

Because cartoons always have some truth in them and constitute a message to the reader to understand the event and the underlying connotation, we at MIFTAH Media Monitoring Unit chose to monitor, through several cartoons published in the three daily newspapers-Al-Quds, Al-Ayyam and Al- Hayat Al-Jadidah, the events of the first quarter of the current year, namely the infighting, security disorder, and the subsequent political developments, particularly the Mecca Agreement and the National Unity Government.

This monitoring process evidently showed that the cartoon coverage of events was much better in the three newspapers and more truthful in expressing events. The cartoons were capable of inferring the dominant event or the political climate that had prevailed during the first three months of the current year.

The predominant events attracted cartoonists of the three newspapers, each according to his/her understanding and style, so that these cartoons reflect their own reasoning, thoughts and perspective towards these events, hence reflecting the silent public opinion truthfully.

Mechanism and Methodology of Cartoon Monitoring

In its monitoring and follow-up of cartoons in the three newspapers, the Media Monitoring Unit adopted the following methodology:

1- Distribution of cartoons between January 1 and March 31, 2007 among the following three main issues only:

- ❖ Security disorder (infighting);
- ❖ Mecca Agreement; and
- ❖ The National Unity Government.

2- Reviewing these cartoons in the three newspapers, highlighting how these cartoons address these events.

We selected the cartoons that are most expressive of the monitored topics, irrespective of the cartoonist himself. We were concerned with how these cartoons express the three identified issues.

Cartoons and Infighting

The three newspapers followed up elaborately on the infighting between Fateh and Hamas, but the cartoon coverage was distinctive, as it seemed closer to the citizens' point of view, especially as the cartoonist restricts his expression to drawings, with no text, leaving it up to the readers to decide what they want of these cartoons, and how they reflect their thoughts.

An example is a cartoon published in Al-Quds on February 3, 2007, portraying a fighter from Hamas, using the "green" map of Palestine as a shield to shoot from behind it at a fighter from Fateh, who is also holding a "yellow" map of Palestine, to shoot at a Hamas fighter from behind it.



Instead of using text, Ja'afari, chooses to color the map of Palestine in two colors-green and yellow-to reflect the identity of the two rival factions, Fateh and Hamas. The artist is even more sarcastic in his criticism of the rivals, exposing their claims that each party is fighting for its own Palestine, and hiding behind their factionalism, using Palestine as a shield, without realizing that as such they are destroying their Palestinian identity. There is strong connotation and deep expression that is more expressive than many reports and analyses.

It is worth noting that this type of cartoons, which has no text, is an advanced artistic skill that is more expressive and has primacy over other forms of cartoons.

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah published a cartoon by Umayya Jeha on January 6, 2007 that expresses the state of frustration and anger towards infighting and its impact on citizens. The cartoon shows an Israeli prison ward looking at Palestinian prisoners through the prison window, with the following comment:

“Your will have a long winter people; those whom you expect to liberate you, are fighting.”



In fact, the comment inside the cartoon is an expression of the public sentiment towards what was happening in Gaza. In fact, the cartoonist mixes national priorities, such as the release of prisoners from Israeli jails, and this might be what citizens needed as they angrily and sadly followed up events.

Ja'afari similarly expresses sharp criticism of infighting in Al-Quds on March 19, 2007.



This cartoon also has no text, as if the artist wants to convey the message that words fail to express reality as it speaks for itself.

The cartoon “guns handshake:” two guns, on the first written “ Hamas” and on the second Fateh, and hands protruding from the guns’ barrels and are shaking. Ja’afari possibly wants to say that this is only a “break” or a temporary calm between one eruption and another, while the handshake reflects deception and treachery of each party towards the other.

Ja’afari, then, observes a period when people silently lived in anxiety, anger and sadness. Umayya Jeha, on the other hand, opts for a different style to express this anger and anguish towards two important events in her cartoon published on February 28, 2007 in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah; the hottest infighting between Fateh and Hamas, and the Israeli excavations beneath Al-Aqsa Mosque.



She not only criticizes the two rivaling parties, Fateh and Hamas, but also criticizes Arab silence towards the infighting in Palestine and the threats against Al-Aqsa resulting from the Israeli excavations.

Jeha uses text in this cartoon in order to express her message to readers. The cartoon shows a man drinking alcohol from a bottle that has the colors of the American flag, in an expression of Arab silence towards what was happening in Jerusalem. It also shows a Palestinian woman weeping for Al-Aqsa, with the following comment written in the background of both pictures: “*Ala bal meen Yalli Btentebeh fil Atmeh*” (Who would notice you being slain in the dark?)

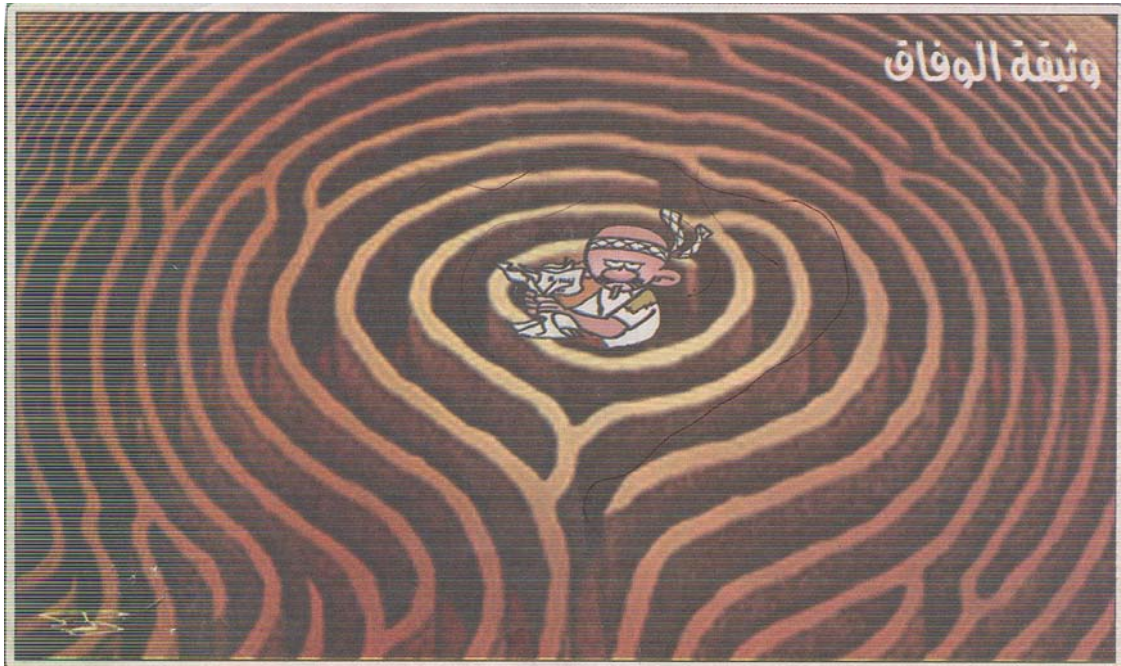
In this cartoon, Jeha uses drawing and text, using colloquial Arabic to stress the gravity of events, and reach out to the largest possible number of citizens. She speaks for the many witnesses, who might have used this proverb to describe the reality they live.

Al-Quds, on the other hand, published on March 15, 2007 a cartoon of a citizen at a clinic and a doctor examining him, with the following comment: “Every time they seem about to reach an agreement over the unity government, I feel it goes down, and every time it seems stumbling it goes up. Is this blood pressure Doc?!”



This cartoon has a very important message, as it expresses the sentiments of ordinary citizens and their anger towards what was going on. Publishing this cartoon was a positive effort the newspaper gave towards enhancing social peace, promoting a culture of internal reconciliation and adopting a discourse of national consensus, rather than instigating and inciting further violence both directly or indirectly.

On January 27, 2007 in Al-Ayyam, Baha Bukhari expresses on a different perception of the tragic reality stemming from the infighting between Fateh and Hamas, marking an important development, i.e. the “National Consensus Document” which the prisoners signed with the aim of ending the crisis between the two factions.



In this cartoon, Bukhari draws a man symbolizing the Palestinian people, holding the National Consensus Document in his hand, and standing amidst the infighting, with no comment. It seems as if he is trying to say that the only exit out of the bloody infighting is the National Consensus Document, which rescues everyone from the dire reality.

These messages in Bukhari, Jeha and Ja’afari cartoons reached out to readers, and compensated for major shortcomings in the coverage of these newspapers, which reported events without any analyses, clarification or explanation.

Cartoons do not only follow up on developments of the security disorder, infighting, and the appeals to end the situation, but also observe the impact of such infighting on the potential for reaching agreement and internal peace. On March 20, 2007, Jeha portrays in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah the security disorder as a monster with claws standing in the way of forming a national unity government,



This time, Jeha uses images with no text, in order to convey her idea to readers. Her choice in portraying the brutality of the disorder is not random, as she deliberately represents it as a monster with huge feet and claws, confronting a small picture of the newly formed government, insinuating the major challenges ahead of the Government, most seriously the security disorder.

On January 17, 2007, Al-Quds portrayed the so-called “Tunnel war” between Fateh and Hamas. The three newspapers addressed this topic in their news and reports, publishing reciprocal accusations. This cartoon, however, carries another message that holds both parties generally responsible for the events.



The cartoon shows two fighters from the two disputant parties, one saying the following comment:

Who?? Abu Ahmad??

Hi, I miss you

“We dug it together.”

The other answers:

“Peace on you ...Welcome Abu Ali”

The tunnels, which were used to confront Israel, are now being used in internal confrontations. At this point, internal Palestinian infighting came to the forefront of Palestinian news, rather than Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the world’s interest shifted, and there were Arab and international appeals for putting an end to it.

A cartoon by Umayya Jeha, published in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah on February 4, 2007, reflects more clearly the shift away from the Palestinian –Israeli to the Palestinian-Palestinian conflict.

لعبة الأطفال أمس .. بكل فخر



لعبة الأطفال اليوم .. بكل أسف



The cartoon portrays two children, each of whom is holding a wooden gun; one has the word “Arabs” on it, and the other has the word “Jews,” with the following comment as heading: “Yesterday’s children game, proudly presented.” The second picture also has two children with two guns, one with the word “Fateh,” the other with the word “ Hamas,” and with the following comment: “Today’s children game, regretfully.”

The first picture has the Palestinian flag raised on rooftops, in an indication of internal unity, while the other has yellow and green flags, indicating Fateh, Hamas, and their division.

This cartoon has more than one message. It aims at the renunciation of infighting, expresses sorrow towards it, and on the other hand, it glorifies and takes pride in the other kind of fighting. It might also imply to the reader that the solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is military, which is a consolidation of the culture of hatred. It is important to note that the use of children reflects the impact of the daily struggle on children, and how they are involved in military action, and this may portray a negative image about the Palestinian people and their attitude towards childhood. This cartoon makes use of the traditional children’s game “Arabs and Jews,” where people use the word “Jews” to mean “Israelis,” with a political rather than a religious connotation.

Cartoons: Mecca Agreement and the National Unity Government

The cartoons in Al-Quds, Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah mark an important phase of the internal Palestinian relations, namely the Mecca Agreement and the subsequent consultations for forming the National Unity Government. They also portray the obstacles that hindered forming this government, the public anticipation and concern about the event, and the efforts that seemed futile then despite media fanfare.

On January 23, 2007 Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah published a cartoon that portrays the state of anticipation, using a known Arab expression in classical Arabic that says, “To those who say, but never do or fulfill.”



This cartoon shows two men standing near a closed gate on which is written “National Unity Government Talks,” while a man said, “*I can hear the noise but cannot see any flour*” (An Arabic proverb that means much ado about nothing).

The talks for forming a national unity government had taken a long time, and stumbled more than once, and there was much talk about obstacles. The public were waiting for results, and as cartoons mostly reflect public sentiments, Jaha succeeds in capturing the moment and expressing it in that same popular language.

On January 27, 2007, Jaha had a cartoon in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah that expresses popular anger towards procrastination and the delay in forming the government, portraying “the people” warning the Presidency and the Government by saying, “*You either sort things out or go away*”.



In this context, Jaha also portrayed on February 7, 2007 in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, the popular and community action that aimed at exerting pressure at the Mecca parties in order that they reach agreement. It has the following comment:

“To Mecca: if you do not reconcile and unite, do not come back.”



This was indeed what the people were reiterating, as they were fed up with what had been happening. The cartoon is expressive, utilizes artistic tools, supported by a text that reflects the public mood, while the runway implies external dialogue that had failed internally.

This cartoon is also sarcastic of would-be ministers. The media had published several names, and Bukhari addresses this issue in his own way, drawing in Al-Ayyam on March 2, 2007 a bus full of ministers or would-be ministers, with the following comment, “If you wish to speed up the formation of the government, give a hand and push.”



The last two words of the text (*give a hand and push*) clearly state what is requested of both parties, or of Palestinian parties in general, i.e., to give up a portfolio here or there; otherwise; a unity government could not be formed. The need to push the bus, i.e. the government, also means that it was defective, and could not move and reach its destination without a push.

There were strong differences then between Fateh and Hamas over the Interior Affairs portfolio, the name of the minister, whether he belonged to one of the two factions, or was independent. It seemed that this constituted a major obstacle hindering the government, as there had been agreement over most other portfolios.

Artist Nasser Ja'afari had a cartoon on March 11, 2007 in Al-Quds of the Interior portfolio (suitcase) that looks huge- to indicate its importance- emanating from the National Unity Government. The Interior Affairs became the theme and foundation of the Government, as it is in charge of ending the security disorder and restoring order.



Unlike in his previous cartoons, Ja'afari does not have any text in this one, but portrays matters that people fully understand and realize. His subsequent cartoons show the difficulties facing the formation and declaration of the new government, with its different ministers.

Ja'afari does not exaggerate in portraying that period in a cartoon published in Al-Quds on March 18, 2007 portraying a sinking arm, holding on to a straw, with the following heading: "The National Unity Government," in an indication that only such a government would salvage the people from the situation they had reached.



Artist Baha Bukhari reflects another aspect of the period that preceded the formation of the National Unity Government, which is the would-be ministers, and the personal interests of some, addressing it in his usual sarcasm.

On March 15, 2007, Al-Ayyam published a cartoon by Bukhari portraying a candidate gathering signatures of support and confidence, with the following text, “*I want to have your...confidence.*”



Two months earlier, and on January 21, 2007 Al-Ayyam had published a cartoon by Bukhari that reflects the obstacles facing national unity, while the text points at a specific person, namely Khaled Masha'al, Chairman of Hamas Political Bureau, holding him responsible for the disorder that obstructed national unity.



The cartoon shows the hero carrying an “oud” (an Arabian musical instrument) and telling his wife:

“For the sake of national unity, I have to sing “Al’ouf Masha’al” (a popular Arabic song).” In both cartoons, Bukhari sarcastically reflects significant political instances and captures in his drawings and text, a reality that the Palestinians were living with all the details showing concern, anticipation and anxiety. The artist utilizes heritage creatively, with the oud and the traditional song

Many citizens were optimistic following the formation of the National Unity Government and were keen on its continuity, growth and prosperity.

Cartoons are also not far removed from the people’s dreams and aspirations, as cartoonists express these dreams in different forms, such as the cartoon by Ja’afari published on February 22, 2007 in Al-Quds.



The cartoon shows a Palestinian woman- symbolizing the people-watering three rose plants on which is written, “National Unity Government.”

This reflects the artist’s and people’s optimism towards the future, and portrays people’s dreams and wishes. Although an exaggeration, it reflects the real hopes of the public.

Jeha also expresses similar optimism in her cartoon published on March 18, 2007 in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, upon the formation of the National Unity Government. She portrays a girl dressed up in the colors of the Palestinian flag (the government) and behind her ropes holding Palestinian flags and flags of different factions, in a scene that resembles a celebration or a wedding.



In this cartoon, Jha uses colors to reflect the mood of the people. The text consists of two words only “the new government.” The formation of the government seemed like a Palestinian wedding of the government.

At the time, the Israeli escalation intensified every time Fateh and Hamas were getting closer to reaching an agreement. Perhaps the height of this escalation was seen when the Israelis began to remove the historic Al-Magharibah Gate Hill that links Al-Aqsa Mosque to Al-Buraq yard.

The local media started to pay equal attention to the events taking place in Jerusalem as that given to the Mecca dialogue held under the auspices of the Saudis.

During that period, newspapers were wondering whether “the holy status of Mecca would contribute to concluding an agreement that sanctifies Palestinian blood and prohibits infighting?”

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah published a cartoon on February 21, 2007 by Umayya Jeha portraying a large egg, on which is written “the National Unity Government,” with a chick hatching. In the same cartoon, the U.S. Secretary of State, Rice, is trying to push it back in, an indication of the American position towards the Unity Government. Jeha has no further text or comment. The sketch spares the need for any comment. It is a strong criticism of the American position and policy, which seemed to be against nature.



Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also published another cartoon by Umayya Jeha on March 17, 2007 that portrays Israeli and American obstacles facing the formation of the National Unity Government.



The cartoon portrays a bus on which the Palestinian flag is raised. In front of the vehicle, stood one American and another Israeli soldier blocking the way of the bus, an indication of American collusion with and its blind partiality to Israel, even when it is related to checkpoints, a familiar scene in the lives of Palestinians.

In their cartoons, Jeha, Ja'afari and Bukhari succeed in affirming the definition of cartoons as “articles in which lines substitute words,” and the intensified expression of an experience that challenges readers and invites them to participate in formulating, analyzing and reaching conclusions. On our part, we also add that the cartoons in the three newspapers record information and facts in a manner that reports failed to do. Cartoons succeed in reaching out and convincing readers, at a time when newspapers failed to do so.

Cartoons and Political and Financial Siege

Cartoons in Palestine generally criticize local social and political conditions. Their sarcasm, however, expanded to include the regional and international conditions, because these latter overlap with the local realities. Hence, the political and financial siege imposed on Hamas Government and on the Palestinian people is heavily present in the cartoons.

On January 20, 2007, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah published a cartoon by Jeha that has the following heading:

“Israel releases part of Palestinian funds.” The cartoon shows an Israeli hand holding a dropper, while a Palestinian, symbolizing the PNA, holds a pot to catch one drop of these outstanding funds.



This cartoon reflects the Israeli policy towards Palestinians and their Authority, as it froze their taxes, and controlled the time when these will be released.

The economic siege had then reached its peak, accompanied by tightening of the restrictions, even on the disposing of Palestinian funds.

Ja'afari portrays what he describes as the “siege series” using only these two words.

On March 1, 2007, Al-Quds published a cartoon describing the conditions of the Palestinian people symbolized by a Palestinian wearing the Kafiyyah, which takes the form of a spoon, in open space and surrounded by barbed wire, counting days in the siege calendar.



Ja'afari does not add any comment to this cartoon other than the two words “siege series,” leaving the reader to analyze on his own. Reality was then self-expressive. As the siege was getting tighter and tighter against citizens and their suffering was aggravating, the numbers of poor people were doubling, the rate of unemployment was soaring to the extent that citizens and particularly public employees were counting the days of the siege, hoping for some relief soon. Ja'afari is successful in the use of the spoon as a symbol of the West exploiting food, or livelihood in order to get concessions.

With the financial siege, the international community also imposed a political siege that continued even after the formation of the National Unity Government that seemed to come in response to the Quartet conditions. The siege, nevertheless, continued, and Palestinians were confused about this international community. Jaha expresses such a confusion in her cartoon published on February 19, 2007 in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, which has the following popular proverb as a heading:

We are perplexed as to where to kiss you, you bald woman. (a literal translation of the Arabic proverb). In other words, we are confused as to how to deal with you

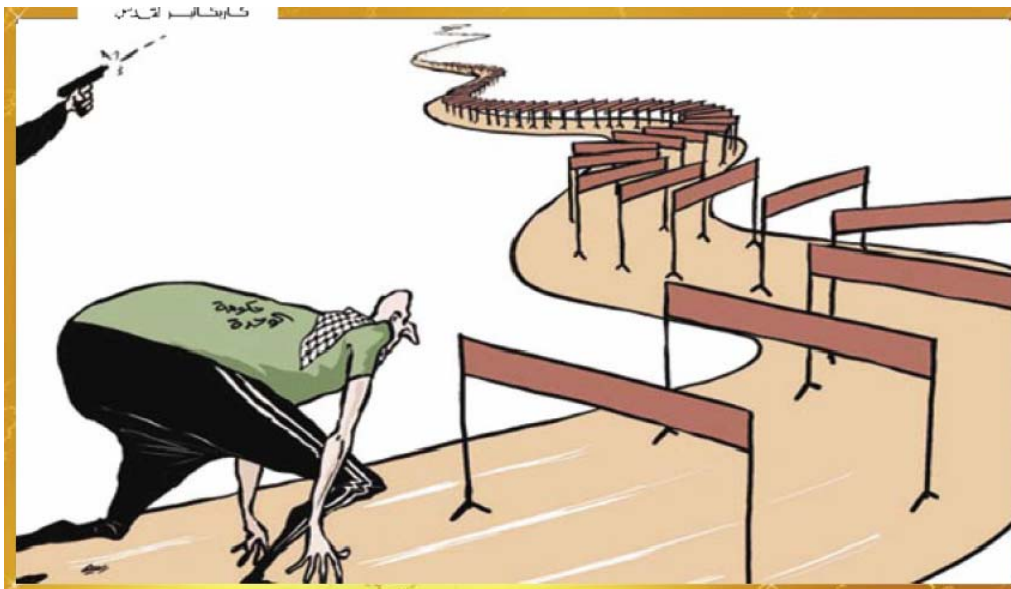


The cartoon shows two men, the Palestinian man saying the above text, while the other man, representing the Quartet turns his back to the Palestinians and their Authority. Jeha uses the popular proverb successfully in representing a political event in a meaningful manner.

Evidently, the cartoon indicates the Quartet's never-ending pressure on the Palestinians, and demands for further concessions. Ja'afari also expresses this idea in his cartoon published in Al-Quds on February 24, 2007, which portrays the Quartet as a huge fist holding a Palestinian with its four fingers and choking him.



Following the formation of the National Unity Government, Ja'afari reflects that stage of political siege that persisted. On March 20, 2007, Al-Quds published a cartoon that shows a man, personifying the National Unity Government, preparing to jump over a long chain of endless barriers.



Findings

- ❖ The cartoons address an important phase in the history of the Palestinian people in an objective, bold and frank manner. They neutrally represent all its internal details and complications, and sarcastically portray regional and international aspects that had a direct impact on the life, livelihood and future of citizens.
- ❖ Although there are only three cartoonists, the cartoons contributed to conveying a different story about important and serious events that the Palestinians witnessed particularly the infighting and security disorder, than stories conveyed by rival parties through the press, radio and TV news services. The cartoons embody the story of the “layman,” his vision, and perception of events, away from political polarization.
- ❖ We did not notice in the cartoons any incitement, abuse, or harm to others or to civilians. The message is strictly human, and expresses the reality of people as it is, utilizing artistic tools in addition to their own texts and comments. Their neutrality draws a picture of reality and conveys to the readers their own thoughts, except for one cartoon by Umayya Jeha, in which she uses children in a war game and uses some text that may be interpreted as glorification of war.

Recommendations

- ❖ It is important that the three newspapers give art more attention, allocate more space for cartoonists and allow them more freedom of expression. If citizens are given space to express their opinions through articles or opinions, they should also be given the right to publish cartoons if the necessary conditions are there.
- ❖ Universities and colleges must give further attention to this art in their academic courses and in teaching art.
- ❖ Civil society organizations must also support cartoon art, attract young talents, make use of these talents in their own publications, and provide them with the necessary training.
- ❖ There should be more concerted efforts given towards collecting and publishing the cartoonists’ work of art, as an educational experience that triggers insight, apart from it being a comic relief tool.