

# FEATURE

## Couple must clear hurdle of Middle East strife

By Judith Sudilovsky  
Catholic News Service

BEIT JALA, West Bank — To some, their story may be reminiscent of the Romeo and Juliet saga.

But Arwach el-Hodaly, 24, says she and her fiancé, Ibrahim Wahbeh, are simply two serious, practical people who are determined to marry despite the obstacles — both familial and political — facing them.

After overcoming family opposition, the couple has now had to struggle with the effects of the recent Mideast violence on their relationship and their future plans.

Wahbeh, a 38-year-old Catholic with Israeli citizenship who lives in Jerusalem, and el-Hodaly, who is Greek Orthodox and lives in Beit Jala, met more than two years ago at a student conference in Bethlehem. The moment she met Wahbeh, el-Hodaly told her girlfriend that this was the man she would marry.

"I told her I would have a relationship with him and I would marry him," she said. "He was serious. He's not like other men I met who were not responsible and not practical. I need someone who is like me."

And so their courtship began, with Wahbeh coming to her home after two weeks of phone conversations. Her par-



Debbie Hill/CNS

Arwach el-Hodaly and her fiancé, Ibrahim Wahbeh, walk by a small shop in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, Dec. 3. Posters on the doors of the shop show pictures of Palestinians who have been killed in clashes with Israeli soldiers.

ents had reservations: he was too old for her, they said, he didn't own his own home and though he was scholarly and had studied at Haifa University, his job in the ticket office at the St. Peter in Gallit Church would hardly provide enough money to support their daughter.

The el-Hodalys are a financially prominent family of Beit Jala while Wah-

beh comes from more humble roots.

But el-Hodaly was determined, and she would cross the Jerusalem-Bethlehem checkpoint to visit him despite the fact that she did not have an Israeli permit to do so. She refused to get one on principle, she said, since she believes Jerusalem belongs to her as a Palestinian. "My friends would help me. It wasn't easy to tell my family I was going to Jerusalem to have dinner at a restaurant with Ibrahim," said el-Hodaly.

Finally they knew they would have to decide whether the relationship was heading for marriage. El-Hodaly knew what she wanted and Wahbeh went to Haifa by himself for a few days to think.

"I thought seriously about this relationship. To be totally committed and obligated to one person is not easy. I am a very independent person and I needed space and time to think," he admitted. "Maybe one of the reasons I was afraid to get married was financial."

But one year ago, on Dec. 5, Wahbeh returned from Haifa and asked el-Hodaly to marry him.

It took six months to convince her parents to consent to the match and fi-

nally on Aug. 20 Wahbeh went to officially ask for el-Hodaly's hand in marriage. Their small engagement party was held one week later and a Dec. 23 wedding date was agreed upon.

Then the violence broke out and everything changed. El-Hodaly was no longer able to cross the checkpoint to Jerusalem and Wahbeh has only been able to come to Beit Jala thanks to a temporary press card he was issued while he worked with a Japanese TV station.

Oftentimes Wahbeh found himself paying an exorbitant price for a taxi back to Jerusalem after a visit with el-Hodaly as night fell.

In light of the situation they have decided to postpone their wedding to Jan. 21. Instead of a fancy white wedding gown, a burst of flowers and lavish wedding party, el-Hodaly will wear a traditional Palestinian wedding dress and there will be a small reception after the ceremony.

"We need to show we are Arabs and we never forget we are Palestinian," she said.

Instead of marrying at the church where Wahbeh works in East Jerusalem, which is now out of bounds for el-Hodaly's family, the couple hopes to marry at the Catholic Tantur Ecumenical Center, which is located on the border of Jerusalem and Bethlehem so members of both families can attend.

In the meantime, with the rental prices falling in the border area of Beit Jala, Wahbeh has decided to rent an apartment there since he spends most of his free time there with el-Hodaly anyway.

Theoretically Wahbeh could apply for el-Hodaly to get an Israeli identity card allowing her to live with him in Jerusalem, but he refuses to do so for ideological reasons and el-Hodaly has no desire for any Israeli documents.

So for now Wahbeh will stay in Beit Jala, although it is still unclear how he will be able to move between the two cities once his press card expires at the end of December, since Israeli civilians are prohibited from entering the Bethlehem area by the Israelis.

"The future is gloomy," he said. "I don't know what will happen. I just want to go to work and have a family life with love and warmth."

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