



The Palestinian Civil Society

The Palestinian civil society nuclei started forming almost one hundred years ago in the time of the British Mandate. The beginnings were in the form of civil societies, labor unions, and in the start of political movements. The distinguishing factor in the development process of the Palestinian civil society structures is embodied in the absence of freedom and abnormal social, economic and political conditions. Whether it was the British Mandate, the Jordanian rule of the West Bank and the Egyptian rule of the Gaza Strip, the establishment of the state of Israel, the displacement and forced immigration of most Palestinians to refugee camps inside and outside Palestine, or the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967.

Throughout its formation, the Palestinian civil society organizations were working hand in hand with Palestinian resistance movements, and even the Arab liberation, political, national, and religious movements. Although such relations may feel contradictory at times they have been and still are strong and well connected. With the purpose of aligning the Palestinian society in opposition of occupation and to respond to the essential basic needs of survival for Palestinians, the Palestinian civil society institutions played a vital role in organizing and massing of Palestinians in many structures and social and fundamental frameworks such as labor unions, charitable organizations, nongovernmental organizations, popular committees, and voluntary work committees. These critical efforts were fully embodied through creating a resistance developmental environment, which were quite evident through the high popular participation in the first Intifada.

Besides their national role, these institutions played an important role in building up the internal democratic structure of the Palestinian society and in promoting principles of human rights, democracy, participation, worker and women rights. They also provided essential services to various sectors including educational, health, environmental, agricultural, developmental, and rehabilitation of the disabled.

Following the conclusion of the first Intifada, the Oslo peace accord, and the start of the peace process, the Palestinian territories witnessed a major shift not only on the political level, but also on the social and economic levels. **The distinguishing factors of this period are:**

1. Despite the signing of the Oslo accords and the formation of a limited jurisdiction Palestinian Authority, the key issues of settlements, the establishment of the Palestinian state, Jerusalem, refugees, borders, water resources, and the occupation of the Golan Heights remained unresolved. The continued occupation makes it impossible to achieving a final resolution and lasting peace.

Main Office: P. O. Box 725, Sateh Marhaba, Ramallah, Palestine

Tel. (02) 240 7839 Fax: (02) 240 5777

Nablus Branch: P. O. Box 714, Al Masri Bild., Al Najah St., Nablus, Palestine

Tel. (09) 238 6760, (09) Fax: (09) 2385966

Bethlehem Branch: Al mtayfeh, Hossan, Bethlehem, Palestine

Tel. (02) 277 9707 Fax: (02) 275 1420

Website: www.bisan.org

المكتب الرئيسي: ص.ب. 725، سطح مرجب، رام الله، فلسطين

تلفون: (02) 240 7839 فاكس: (02) 240 5777

فرع نابلس: ص.ب. 714، بناية المصري، شارع جامعة النجاح، نابلس، فلسطين

تلفون: (09) 238 6760، فاكس: (09) 2385966

فرع بيت لحم: المطيفة، حوسان، بيت لحم، فلسطين

تلفون: (02) 2779707 فاكس: (02) 275 1420

Emails: info@bisan.org

2. The wide divide in the Palestinian society over the acceptance of the Oslo accords directly affected the civil society establishments.
3. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority, with around 160,000 employees including around 40,000 in the security forces, led to an exclusive dependency on foreign assistance in paying salaries and for any economic or developmental projects.
4. Over 250,000 Palestinian workers which form the major economic force in the territories since the Oslo accords in 1993 and up to the second Intifada, depended mainly on work in Israel.
5. Both the Palestinian Authority and the donor community did not invest in job creation through the development of the productive economic environment. In addition to lack of transparency and corruption and the formation of a category who benefitted from the existence of the Palestinian authority, most of the foreign assistance money was utilized to cover salaries of the security apparatus and authority employees.
6. Armed clashes between Palestinian factions again Oslo and Israel continued. The fact that Palestinian factions could not agree on common grounds, continued to widen the rift in the Palestinian society in general. In return the Israeli occupation government sustained its policies of land confiscation, building settlements, control of passage ways and borders, and continued to control economic and security aspects of the Palestinian existence.
7. The signing of the Oslo accords resulted in a debate over the role of civil society organization. The debate covered the nature of their relationship with the Palestinian Authority, their funding, their vision, and the position of the Palestinian Authority towards these organizations. **The debate resulted in:**

- Abatement of support for civil society organizations and its redirection towards the support and building of the Palestinian Authority.
- After a long deliberations and debates between the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian network of nongovernmental organizations, the Palestinian law of civil society organization was passed through the legislative council.
- A noticeable shift in the vision and objectives of many civil society organizations took place through restructuring and institutionalization efforts. This shift resulted in the abandonment of their grassroots and public basal structures which was especially evident in a number of women societies and some unions. These changes came mainly in response to the change in the political scene and to satisfy the requirements of donor organizations. Thousands of Palestinian activists and volunteers turned to employment whether it be in the security forces or in other establishments of the Palestinian Authority and other institutions of the civil society. The vision of resistance and opposition in the face of occupation shifted to a vision of sustainable development under occupation. Many organizations shifted their vision to promote for democracy, civil rights, participation while considerably reducing their role in provided services. The role of some of other organization and unions demolished and some were either incorporated within the structure of the authority or controlled by key authority figures. A new form of organizations having no popular support came to existence.
- The independence of civil society organizations and the abandonment of their political duties disrupted their relations with the political movements. In other specific sectors, the role of civil society organizations working with the grassroots diminished with the role of nongovernmental organizations amplified. The main exception to these prevailing conditions was the operation of political Islam organizations (Hamas) which continued to operate at the grassroots level. With complete harmony, these organizations combined between providing

services to the public through their network of social and service organizations, and promotion for the Islamic ideology and beliefs. The results are clearly witnessed in Hamas's ability to mobilize the crowds and in the sweeping win in the last municipal and legislative elections. The role of democratic and progressive political movements was quite limited; their organizations performed poorly and they failed on the political front as well.

Seven years after the signing of the Oslo accords, and a number of following agreements, day by day it becomes more impossible that this agreement could lead to a Final settlement. This message was manifested loudly and clearly in the summer of 2000 at the second Camp David summit where, for the first time, final settlement issues were discussed. Since that summit, it has become quite clear that Israel is not ready to answer to the Palestinian rights, and that it has the unlimited support of the United States government in its refusal to adhere to the International legitimacy and resolutions. Despite the tremendous pressure of the United States government during the summit, the Palestinian delegation refused to compromises on key issues such as the right of return, Jerusalem, and Israeli attempts to legitimize the existence of large settlement blocks in the West Bank. The Palestinian position during the summit, and the summit overall outcomes proved that the Oslo process has reached to a dead end which gave way to the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000. This date marked the start of a new era of violence which we are still suffering from today. Israel reoccupied all areas of the West Bank, destroyed most of the infrastructure which was built since Oslo such as security forces locations, roads and highways, Gaza port, and Gaza airport despite the fact that most of these projects were accomplished with foreign assistance money especially European. Israel imposed a complete closure on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and denied entry to tens of thousands of Palestinian workers to their work places in Israel. Both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were divided into small cantons separated by over 450 military checkpoints which restricted the movement of people, goods, patients, and ambulances. The use of brutal military force by Israeli was characteristic of this period and especially evident through use of fighter jets, tanks, and other heavy artillery to bombard the unarmed Palestinian population. Vicious incursions caused the death and injury of hundreds and the arrest of thousands of Palestinians including women and children. Most devastation was witnessed in areas such as Rafah, Beit Hanoun, old city of Nablus, and Jenin refugee camp. So far and since the beginning of the second Intifada, over 5056 Palestinian have been martyred and around 49,000 injured of which almost 10% are estimated to have permanent disabilities.

Following are the main results of the second Intifada and the Israeli acts of violence:

- Unemployment rate rose to an unprecedented 55% of the Palestinian labor force resulting in direct loss of over 18 billion dollars to the Palestinian economy in the end of 2006. In addition, over 60% of the Palestinian population is living under the poverty line which has many negative impacts on the health, educational, and social conditions.
- A mandatory shift from developmental to humanitarian aid was a direct results of the Israeli actions on the ground. It became obligatory for the Palestinian Authority and the civil society organizations to focus their efforts on relief to prevent the collapse of the political and social system and the services sector. A large percentage of Palestinian households became dependent of foreign assistance for their livelihood. The health programs focused their attention to relief efforts as well to prevent the collapse of the health system and to handle the consequences of the prevailing conditions on the health sector. The health efforts concentrated on providing primary health care to the poor, devastated areas, secluded areas, and areas under siege as well as providing vaccination services and providing needed physiological care. This applies as well to the education, disabled rehabilitation, and agriculture which changed the priorities of the civil society. Overall, relief efforts became the

main focus and advocating for civil society issues such as human rights, democracy, labor rights, and women issues was pushed to the background.

The construction of the separation and annexation wall came to add new dimensions to the suffering and isolation of the Palestinian people. The wall deprived Palestinians access to valuable resources such as water and agricultural land in addition to doubling the health, educational, and economic problems they face. More importantly, and from a political angle, the wall embodies a unilateral attempt of Israel to impose a final resolution and establish the wall as official borders between the Palestinian promised state and Israel including the complete annexation of Jerusalem. This comes in opposition to the international rejection to the separation wall and the International Court of Justice resolution which considering the wall illegal and demanding the compensation of all Palestinians damaged from the wall.

- The Palestinian territories became severed from each other, people and goods movement was denied which in turn resulted in a new kind of social and physiological problems. Internal civil violence, murder crimes, and family honor crimes increased considerably. The absence of the role of the security forces, the paralysis of the legal system, the overall chaos, and the spread of thousands of armed militias controlling the streets increased the deterioration of the conditions.
- The imposed siege on the Palestinian Authority and President Arafat until the time of his death, the refusal of the United States government and the Israeli government to deal with the Palestinian Authority was augmented by the so called war on terror by the USA post 9/11 events. A complete harmony in political interest and direction, based on the Zionist Christian right views, between the USA and Israel became obvious.

In the midst of these circumstances and events, the Palestinian condition witnessed stirring events in the passing of president Arafat and the holding of Palestinian presidential elections resulting in the election of president Mahmoud Abbas "Abu Mazen." It is worth mentioning, that although Abu Mazen was accepted by both the Americans and the Israelis, they never dealt with him as a real partner for peace. The Israeli occupation policies continued without any progress in any new peace initiatives to move the peace process forward. Despite the unilateral disengagement from Gaza Strip and the move of around 8000 settlers from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank settlements, Israeli retained its control over the security and economic condition, remained in control of borders and crossings, and conducted a number of brutal military incursions into Gaza since then.

Moreover, the Palestinian scene witnessed municipal and legislative elections in 2005-2006 which resulted in a clear win for Hamas over Fateh and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) factions. **We can see four main reasons for the win for Hamas:**

1. Clear failure of the Oslo process and the fading of any horizon for Palestinian to reach a real peace through this process. Israeli has managed to crush this process by reoccupying the West Bank, policy of separation, destruction, construction of the separation wall, and the Israelization of Jerusalem. Add to that the absence of the International role in pushing forward the peace process, and the clear bias of the USA administration to the favor of Israel.
2. The deteriorated performance of the Palestinian Authority represented by Fateh on the political, security, and social services levels, in addition to spread corruption, spread of chaos, and the competition between Fateh members in the elections.
3. The harmony in the performance of Hamas on political, services, and social levels. Another important factor is the strong relations Hamas maintained with the public through its many Islamic, services, and publicity networks.

4. Weak and scattered democratic and social factions who were unable to reach to common factors. In addition a number of other coalitions who tried to establish a third democratic stream in the political scene in Palestine due to the lack of resources, weak social structures, and disconnection from popular support.

With the forming of the first Hamas government, the international community and Arab countries boycott the government and foreign aid was discontinued. Around 160,000 Palestinian Authority employees were denied salaries which lead to a further deterioration of the Palestinian economy, and had serious effects on the social conditions, economic conditions, and on the living conditions in general. Most Palestinian were left to wonder, why doesn't the world respect the results of the Palestinian democratic process? Was it not a transparent and legal process by everyone's testimony? Is democracy what Israel and the United States accepts or decided to refuses?

Internal clashes between Fateh and Hamas which lead to the death of over 550 Palestinians and the abduction of tens in a clear struggle over authority increased the intensity of the conditions. Psychologically this had a tremendous effect on Palestinians belief in the justness of their cause and in their political factions! The only thing keeping the ghost of the civil war away was the forming of the unity government this month.

And now, where does the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian society stand?

Current conditions and future outlooks:

After an elaborate and strenuous process, most of the political factions succeeded in forming the long waited unity government. The most important results of this process were avoiding a disastrous civil war, ending internal fighting, and Palestinians regaining trust in their selves and their friends in them despite the difficulty in overcoming the consequences of this crisis on the internal level. Even though the beginning of the end of the political and economic boycott of the Palestinian government from the international community, especially from European and Arab countries, are evident this does not mean a complete end of the political and economic crisis Palestinians are living under.

On the political level, there are no big horizons for a serious and real change in the peace process that may lead to the ending of occupation and resolving final settlement issues (Jerusalem, settlements, and refugees). Despite the new government's acceptance of the Arab initiative and international legitimacy, there is a variety of internal Palestinian interpretations which threaten the destiny of the unity government and its future stability in the case that partial agreements are reached. On the other end, the increasing weakness of Olmert's government and the decline in its popularity is pushing it to take a standpoint which would lead to cosmetic changes in the relations with Palestinians without indulging in final resolution issues until the next elections. Add to that the increasing support for the far right wing in Israel and the diminishing of support for the labor party and the left. On the international level, we witnessed a clear impartial American stand point towards Israel, and impotent Arabic role, and a shy inactive European position which is compatible politically with the US position. Therefore, the most probable future scenario is the continuation of the peace process dilemma and a continued deadlock in the political process. Since a serious change in the international position towards imposing an international resolution is unlikely, perhaps the only possible changes are superficial changes far away from the essence of the problem.

On the economic, social, and internal Palestinian levels, the forming of the unity government will reflect positively in avoiding civil war and internal fighting. If the new government succeeds in restoring the rule of law, restoring order, rebuilding the security forces and legal system, reinforced

transparency and good governance, and combated corruption it will gain a great acceptance. This will also have reflections on the legal and legislative levels and on human rights and woman democratic rights. The split of the authority between two major parties with a weak democratic opposition would perhaps support the centralization of authority within these two parts in addition to strengthening the forces and institutions of both sides and in return further weaken the democratic forces. In turn this will threaten political plurality and weaken the constituents and activities of the Palestinian civil society. Consequently, the Palestinian civil society has the historical responsibility and the challenging task of preserving the past accomplishments of the civil society, developing and furthering these accomplishments, preserving the political plurality and principles of democracy and participation, consolidation of human rights and principles of equality, and protecting the interests of the poor and the marginalized.

In conclusion, we can summarize the role of the civil society institutions for the upcoming period as follows:

1. Active and serious participation in the resistance of the Israeli occupation from one side, and building a democratic Palestinian state from another. Considering that Palestinians are still living a national liberation and occupation resistance phase, all the constituents of the civil society must have a primary role in this period each in his area of operation. Strengthening the steadfastness of the Palestinian people, assembly of all powers, and widening the public participation in resistance are the most important duties for the Palestinian civil society.
2. Serious participation in building a democratic Palestinian society; one of the most important duties of the civil society organizations is the struggle for the building of a strong, democratic, and sustainable civil society on the basis of good governance, rule of law, and political diversity. The civil society cannot be active without organizing its relations with the Palestinian Authority especially in a legal and developmental framework built on the basis of national policies geared towards achieving the priorities of the local society. In addition, a democratic civil society cannot be established without caring for the poor and marginalized and guaranteeing their social, legal, economic, and political interests and concerns. This cannot be achieved without the establishment of a new social era based on the principals of social equality, social justice, respect for human rights, and that guarantees the principles of democracy, public participation, and political diversity. The establishment of a civil society which encourages wide public participation, civil society organizations, unions, and active women movement is sure to guarantee and defend the rights and interests of the local society. Regardless of the form and ideology of the governing political group, establishment of a wide based civil and active civil society is sure to transfer a large part of the political, economic, and social decision making process to the masses and minimizes the centralization of authority.
3. Participation in fulfilling the needs of the local society and working on the development of a vision and creative developmental models geared toward the needs of the society although providing basic services to the Palestinians is supposed to be the direct responsibility of the Palestinian Authority. The prevailing security, political, and economic conditions oblige the civil society organizations to provide part of these services as a part of a complementary relationship with the Palestinian Authority. Taking into consideration the limited abilities of the Palestinian Authority, the accumulated experience of the civil society organizations and their ability to come up with creative low cost models responding to the interests of the poor and the rest of the local society will enable the local society and give it ownership and participation in developmental project rather than being an end user. The Palestinian Authority has an important and principle role on the level of drawing plans and general policies, but the role of national organizations and civil society organizations is not less important on the level of developing democratic models for social development ensuring enabling and strengthening public participation. Overall, national organizations adopt an

understanding of social development which depends on the principles of comprehensive development that is centered around the human being and is not only dependent on social, economic, and political development, and human rights. The definition they adopt is more progressive than the tradition one that includes basic education, food, and health needs but is more encompassing and includes a much wider definition including the identity with its political, economic, social dimensions as well as the lawful rights and self independence for all citizens.

To accomplish these roles, following strategies should be activated:

1. Mobilization and Influence Strategy

- Influence laws, legislation, regulations and public procedures of the decision makers in general and the Palestinian Authority in specific. The objective of this process and mechanism is to influence the three branches of authority: legislative, executive, and judicial to formulate and develop legislation, policies, laws, and appropriate procedures that are in harmony with the needs and priorities of the local society. This is the primary condition for a human development process that ensures a strong connection between relief and development. The essence of this process is based on the belief that political, economic, or social decisions cannot be made behind closed doors by an elite political or educated group, but rather through a clear mechanism that guarantees the participation of the civil society. Protecting the rights of the poor and marginalized and ensuring social participation is an essential form of resistance and must be proclaimed rather than given.
- Influence regional and international public opinion for the support of the national Palestinian rights. This is a vital role for the great importance needed to make heard the voice of the Palestinian civil society on Israeli violations of human rights, the psychological, social, economic, and political effects of the occupation, and that occupation is the main obstacle standing in the way of sustainable development in Palestine. Also, for mobilizing support for the basic rights of the Palestinian people which are guaranteed by the international legitimacy and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through a establishing a wide network between the Palestinian civil society and international organizations and networks and the solidarity movements in the world.

2. Awareness Building Strategy

It is natural to have diverse visions, and intellectual, cultural, economic, and social backgrounds in the Palestinian society, but what is more important is to create a democratic atmosphere where such ideas can be freely discussed in full participation with the civil society and in return the rule of democracy, diversity, equality, and forgiveness principles for all citizens.

3. Service Provision Strategy

In response to the needs of the Palestinian people under the current political and economic conditions, and as an attempt of the civil society to create developmental models based on popular support and accommodate the needs of the poor and the marginalized.

4. Institutional, Organizational, and Human Resources Development Strategy

Enabling the civil society through a social transformation process cannot be achieved without the capacity building of civil society institutions. Neither it is possible without building social movements and grassroots organizations that believe in their roles and are well prepared for it

through activating change on social, economic, cultural, political, democracy, development, social justice levels, and respect of human rights.

5. Networking, Coordination, Consultation and Cooperation Strategy

For Palestinians, coordination and networking has gained exceptional importance considering the dangers surrounding the Palestinian reality and the lack of available resources. Due to the importance of collaboration of efforts in building the Palestinian Independent State and building an enabled and strong democratic civil society, coordination and cooperation, both in planning and implementation, is sure to strengthen and increase the role of civil society organizations and is the only guarantee to accomplish the desired social transformation. Coordination supports the creation of a balanced and effective relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and opens the horizons for the civil society to tackle international issues such as globalization, combating wars and poverty, struggle for international peace, and for cooperation with various international movements and organizations.

Desired Social Transformation:

The diversity of ideologies and visions in the Palestinian society makes it hard to reach national consensus over the desired final vision for the society and to determine the necessary goals and objectives we seek through a process of social transformation. The political Islamic currents push for a change toward a society governed and run by Islamic law which affects all aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life of Palestinians under the slogan “Islam is the solution.” This not only poses a direct threat to diversity, democracy, and respect of individual freedoms but it also encourages a single sided authority, a culture of alienation, and a single culture. In return, Fateh and the Palestinian Authority, up to the forming of the unity government with the participation of Hamas, took a liberal mid-stream position characterized by building an authority controlling both political and economic decisions, encouraging tribalism, and nepotism inside the society. It is based on providing political and economic benefits to that part of the society which is strongly connected with the authority and its key figures. Its political and economic decisions are governed by international organizations such as the World Bank and free market and to execute these policies it depended on a centralized decision making process, many security forces, and tens of thousands of government employees in different sectors.

In the opinion of progressive and democratic forces in Palestine, the social transformation should lead to a democratic civil society where values of social justice, democracy, participation, and equality prevail and where political, economic, and social rights are guaranteed for all sectors of the society. A democratic society where the rights of the poor and marginalized are respected, and where the civil society is empowered and participated actively and effectively in building a strong society upon these principles.

To accomplish that, we must build capable and effective programs and tools to work with the Palestinian public and maintain a harmony between political and social work. Roles must be independent, but share a common general vision concerning political, economic, social, and cultural issues. Progressive and democratic political factions must be supported and empowered starting with the civil society organizations who believe in these values through expanding their role and programs in order to interact and form a true partnership with the public. In addition, the existence of active social movements, grassroots organizations, and public frameworks is another guarantee to accomplish the desired social transformation.

Perhaps it is best to concentrate on the youth to accomplish this transformation. As the biggest category of the Palestinian society, the youth have a greater chance of success in this transformation given they receive the proper chance. Being the category that will rule in the future, the values and beliefs they carry today will shape the future values of the Palestinian people.

Therefore, it is important to give the youth a complete and fair chance to participate in the decision making process for social, political and developmental decisions. This can be accomplished through comprehensive and effective strategies which enable the youth to build their movements and youth organizations and become involved in all aspects of life as effective decision makers rather than as marginalized and future players.