



DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

STRANDGADE 56 • 1401 COPENHAGEN K • DENMARK

TEL +45 32 69 87 87 • diis@diis.dk • www.diis.dk

PEACE, AID & RENEWED ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECULAR PALESTINIAN NGOS
IN THE POST-OSLO PERIOD

Michael Irving Jensen

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS

Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark

Ph: +45 32 69 87 87

Fax: +45 32 69 87 00

E-mails: diis@diis.dk

Web: www.diis.dk

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Michael Irving Jensen, Research Fellow, Department of European Studies, DIIS

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Peace, aid & renewed anti-colonial resistance: The development of secular Palestinian NGOs in the post-Oslo period

Michael Irving Jensen

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) in Washington on September 13, 1993 some forty donor states and organisations met and pledged to donate US\$ 2.4 billion over a five-year period (i.e. coinciding with the transitional five year (1994-1999) period of the Oslo process). As the peace process during the late 1990s was characterised by stalemate, the donor community in October 1998 (coinciding with the signing of the Wye River memorandum) decided to extend their aid and to support the Palestinians with another US\$3.3 billion for the period of 1999-2004 (Sayigh & Shikaki, 1999). Although not all the promised aid has been disbursed, the PNA has during the past decade become increasingly dependent on foreign aid, and today the Palestinians are among the most receiving entities per capita worldwide.

The Palestinian NGO community was also affected by the influx of dollars. International donor aid, i.e. development policy, is a tool of foreign policy. Hence providing aid is a reflection of the interest of the donors. Each donor has an agenda that can be friendly or in certain cases coercive. Money is an extremely strong force and it makes people, organisations and countries dependent. In the search for peace between Palestinians and Israelis, donor aid has been – and still is – an important instrument. A main rationale for giving aid was pragmatic: if economic prosperity is brought about, peace will have a better chance. Donor aid was and still is basically given in order to support the peace process as the donors have an interest in stability in the region – as well as securing Israel an improved role in its Middle Eastern environment.

This article deals with the development of secular Palestinian NGOs in the post-Oslo period. It is a contribution to the field of studies that has focused on the development of Palestinian civil society. Apart from discussing the impact of the Oslo accords and the influx of donor aid

on the development of secular Palestinian NGOs, the article will look into how the current al-Aqsa Intifada has influenced and partly revived the national agenda among many NGOs. It will also be discussed whether this revival of the national liberation agenda will spill over into the creation of a new political force that could fill the political vacuum existing between Fatah (PNA) and Hamas.

The focal point of the article is the secular NGOs. These NGOs were mostly established and related to the left-wing fractions of the PLO during the years of the first Intifada, i.e. NGOs affiliated to PFLP and DFLP as well as to the Communist Party, which joined PLO in the late 1980s.¹ These NGOs are not the only ones in Palestine. They have been chosen because they represent a potential third force in Palestinian politics that eventually could break the current bi-polar political system in Palestine dominated by the Authority oriented Fatah and the Islamist oriented Hamas.

The article is divided into three parts: Firstly, the article will outline the shifting roles of the NGO community since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, especially focussing on the first Intifada (1987-1993). Secondly, a section is devoted to an analysis of the effects of the Oslo-peace process and the massive donor aid that followed the agreement during the years 1993-2000. It will in this context be examined how the NGOs became more detached from the issue of national liberation and more oriented towards development. Prior to this discussion the relation between NGOs and the PNA is examined. Thirdly, the current situation will be discussed. In this part of the article both the constraints and the possibilities offered by the al-Aqsa Intifada will be analysed. Special attention is given to how the erection of the so-called "separation-barrier" has acted as a catalyst and re-activated segments of the Palestinian NGO-community and hence brought back on their agenda the issue of national liberation.

Significant parts of the material presented in the second and third part of the article is based on a number of semi-structured interviews conducted with various key persons related to a number of the most central and active secular NGOs on the West Bank. These interviews were conducted during April and August 2003.

1 For a discussion of the role and importance of the Islamist oriented NGO's see Irving Jensen 1998, Irving Jensen 2002, & ICG, 2003.

Palestinian civil society: 1967-93

From the outset of the Israeli occupation, which began in 1967, only the most basic public services were offered by the occupation forces. Throughout the 1970s, a large number of nationalist and Marxist as well as Islamic oriented NGOs emerged in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. And so, the relatively strong Palestinian civil society emerged in a sense both despite and because of the Israeli occupation. Civil society in Palestine materialised in the absence of a state and this has led some researchers to claim that no civil society exists in Palestine (See Roy, 1996). However, most researchers do appear to agree that Palestinian civil society is among the strongest in the Arab world. (Hammami, 2000, Robinson, 2001).

During the 1970s, a significant number of NGOs emerged and most of them were affiliated with and rooted in the various PLO factions. As a consequence, most of them were financed by the PLO. The Islamist organisations were outside the PLO, and they acquired their financial means by collecting zakat in Palestine and through sister organisations in the diaspora. The Communists, who at that time were working outside the frame of the PLO, were also active in the civil society defined as “a set of formal institutions, grassroots organisations and political parties that function and operate outside the boundaries of government”.²

The first Intifada (1987-1993) were the days of glory of the Palestinian NGOs and the uprising marked a turning point for civil society movements and enhanced the establishment of a large number of new civil society organisations. This was especially the case during the first two-three years of the uprising as stated in an interview with the current spokeswomen of the PNGO-network:

“...the work of the NGOs during the first Intifada and even before you can say that the NGOs were kind of a shadow government here...”

Most services within health, agriculture, education and human rights were taken care of by a strong and well-funded NGO sector (Muslih, 1993). According to Sullivan (1996), the NGO sector was in charge of 60 % of the health care, 50 % of hospitals, 100% of handicap care, 100 % of agricultural development agencies and 30 % of educational institutions (including most kindergartens). Some of the NGOs almost had the status of ministries and were closely attached to the local Palestinian community. This was the case with e.g. the Palestinian

2 Abdel Shafi, 2004.

Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) in the field of agriculture and some of the bigger medical NGOs (i.e. Union of Palestinian Medical and Relief Committees (UPMRC))³ in the field of healthcare. By the time the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was established in 1994, the UPMRC had established no less than 31 permanent clinics, 9 mobile clinics serving 200 villages and camps, 11 rehabilitation programmes serving 80 communities and 7 mobile dental clinics serving 50 communities (Robinson, 1997, 42ff). PARC⁴ is by far the biggest agricultural relief committee and by the time the PNA took office, the institutions employed 80 Palestinians working in seven different centres in the West Bank and Gaza (Robinson, 1997).

According to Hammami, the Communist based NGOs were among the first to make contacts with European donor NGOs in the early 1980s. Other leftist organisations followed suit and began to supplement the funding they received from the political organizations by donor money. This process intensified significantly during the first Intifada (Hammami, 2000, 16). Abdel Shafi notes (2004, 10) that the elite during the Intifada years constituted not only the political elite, but at the same time also the NGO elite. Hence, the leftists were both engaged in party politics and in the NGOs. It was only in the wake of the Oslo accords that these leaders were disconnected from the members of the political elite. At the time the majority of the secular Palestinian civil society organizations had a national agenda aiming at empowering the Palestinian community and simultaneously defending the political rights of the Palestinian people. However, as money poured into the NGOs, their leaders realized that many NGOs had become economically independent of their party. By the early 1990s, many of the prominent Palestinian NGOs - to use a sentence from Hammami - “transmogrified into professionally, foreign funded, development-oriented centers” (Hammami, 2000, 16-17). In other words, many NGOs faced a transformation in which they departed from the political aspects of their work and more exclusively paid attention to a professional approach. This tendency became even more discernible during the Oslo years.

3 Doctors loosely affiliated with the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), later renamed Palestinian Peoples Party, established the UPMRC in 1979. The UPMRC developed into a significant and successful NGO during the years of occupation and in particular during the period of the first Intifada (1987-93).

4 PARC was established in 1983 also by professionals closely affiliated to the PCP.

THE OSLO ACCORDS AND ITS IMPACT ON PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

The Oslo accords meant a new era in Palestinian politics, and it led to a process of political, economic and social transformations. Most of the donor aid was channelled to the newly established PNA as all outside actors had an interest in strengthening the PNA due to a consensus that a strong Palestinian National Authority was the guarantor for stability and progress in the peace process. Thus, it was considered only “natural” that the Palestinian National Authority received the lion's share of the aid at the expense of the well-established Palestinian NGO community.

In the wake of the Oslo accords Palestinian civil society experienced the paradoxical situation that while the older and well functioning leftist NGOs were suffering economically, a large number of new NGOs were established. In fact the number of NGOs exploded in the years following the signing of Declaration of Principles. There was a boom in “peace NGOs” or “love your enemy-projects” – as some critics called them – as a clear indication of the influence donors had on which issues should be supported by the Western capitals. Apart from the new funding opportunities for the new NGOs, there were some more structural reasons behind the hike in the numbers of NGOs. Sheila Carapico (2000) has explained the explosive growth in NGOs in the Middle East in general, and she argues that it is related to a social tendency among a certain ambitious segment of society often holding university degrees and in many cases even US or EU degrees, as well as to the cosmopolitanization of human rights and environmental and feminist concerns – especially among urban elites.

Donors and dependency

Paradoxically, despite the raise in donor support the old Palestinian NGO community lost more than half of their earnings during the first years after Oslo (Sullivan, 1996). Hence, a number of the well established NGOs on the left who opposed the Oslo accords were hit hard as the donors tended to support NGOs favouring the peace process. Despite the political development and economic hardship, the majority of the established (pre-Oslo) NGOs managed to survive.

As Alam Jarrar of UPMRC stated in an interview, the idea that donors support civil society naturally has an impact on local priorities:

“The big money is with the governments [...] Governments have their own agenda and they have their own political outlook and they serve their own interests [...] They want to use this money to influence the Palestinian agenda, we know that, and they sometimes use NGOs as agents for introducing their own agenda directly or indirectly” (Personal interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

Naturally, not all donors are equal nor do they have the same agenda. Alam Jarrar underlined the difference between USAID and the European Union (EU):

There are differences, major differences if we are talking about the EU and USAID. USAID explicitly has a political agenda here. They know what the objectives are of the aid that is channelled into Palestine. EU has of course a political agenda, but it is more or less compatible with the overall Palestinian national agenda, which has to do with an independent Palestinian state within the boundaries of 1967 [...] EU is more flexible, more responsive to Palestinian needs, and is trying to go into projects that are also relevant to and coherent with the Palestinian priorities. But when it comes to USAID money it is different, because of the fact that the political agendas are not compatible.

Hence, among Palestinian NGOs there is a belief that the huge influx of donor aid had a severe impact on the local Palestinian political setup especially after the signing of the DoP.

Co-operation between NGOs and Palestinian National Authority

According to a number of academic narratives fierce competition erupted between the NGOs and the Palestinian National Authority with the emergence of the PNA in 1994 (see e.g. Robinson, 2001). Understandably, the PNA had an interest in curbing the influence of the NGOs – of which many were very critical of the signed agreements – in order to assert itself as the main, if not only, and at least unchallenged powerbase in Palestinian society. At the same time, the NGOs had the ambition to maintain their influence. Thus, a tense relationship developed in terms of political influence. Many researchers have stressed the antagonistic relationship between the two sides (see Robinson, 2001). On the other hand, there was also another and more co-operative face to the relationship. According to the current spokeswomen of PNGO, the PNA generally invited the NGOs to co-operate:

“... many policy committees were formed by different ministries so they always invited civil society to be represented...”(Personal interview, Ramallah August 2003).

Also Ayman Rabia from the Palestinian Hydrology Group confirmed that co-operation with the PNA was the rule rather than the exception:

We try to address issues that the government authority or the ministries will not be able to reach, places where it is not within the mandate of those kind of ministries or governments... for example if you want to work in area C, in accordance with the Oslo classification as they cannot implement directly any kind of activity (personal interview, Ar-Ram, August 2003).

This aspect of co-operation was also stressed during interviews with other leaders of Palestinian civil society. Majid Nasser of UoHWC stated for example:

“Within the fields of agriculture and education I think it went perfectly well. They complimented each other in a very nice manner... This good intention between the PA and the NGOs was evident in many, many cases. Now during the Intifada this relation was strengthened in a much better form than it has ever been before”.

This rather good relationship was due to the fact that the PNA was unable to fulfill the needs of the Palestinians. My findings are in accordance with Brown, who also studied the development of secular Palestinian NGOs (see Brown 2003). Brown noted that:

“The PNA sought not to destroy NGOs but to bring them into line; the NGOs sought not total independence from the PNA but merely autonomy and a willingness to use state authority to support their work without dictating it”⁵

During the Oslo years, a division of labour existed between many NGOs and the PNA. Ultimately the PNA cared for the big cities whereas the NGOs were left to take care of isolated villages, smaller rural and marginal areas. Many NGOs were also engaged in dialogue with the PNA concerning the process of making new laws, and many of them were invited by the Authority to discuss issues related to e.g. water, environment, natural resources,

⁵ Brown, 2003, 4.

employment, industry, agriculture.⁶ Despite of this, the relationship was not only one of harmony.

Human Rights: At times a troublesome relationship

Most of the problems between the two sides occurred within the field of human rights. The reason behind this was that numerous Palestinian Human Rights NGOs who until 1994 only monitored the Israeli human rights violations vis-à-vis the Palestinians also began to monitor the violations of the newly established PNA. This caused frictions between the parties. And most of the time outside parties – like EU and the US – who sustained the Human Rights NGOs economically turned a blind eye to the Human rights violations committed by the PNA, as they often were committed on behalf of Israel's security interests.⁷

However, the battles that took place within this field were serious as they were related to the vision of the future state. The struggle was not only related to the relation between Human Rights organisations and the PNA, it was more part and parcel of the problematique of the inside Palestinian leadership (i.e. those leaders who fought the Israeli occupation prior to the DoP from within the West Bank and Gaza Strip) versus the old guard from Tunis (i.e. the clique around the late president Yassir Arafat, who returned to the Palestinian areas in the wake of DoP in 1994). According to Rana Bishara, the old guard from Tunis thought that:

“The internal democratic structure cannot go along with the general national issue, they feel that now it's time for the national issue. Let provocation and bad performance accumulate, and then later on after we finish all political issues we'll deal with that. But we don't see it this way, we see that both things should go together” (Personal interview, West Bank, January, 1996).

NGOs as a source of employment

Employment within the NGO sector is widely perceived and experienced by many among the urban educated elite as a way to achieve upward social mobility. The NGOs are a source of “good” employment attracting the skilled and educated elites – most often at the expense of the public sector. One reason for this development is linked to the political process that took place after the establishment of the PNA in 1994. As Abdel Shafi argues:

6 Interview with Ayman Rabia, Palestine Hydrology Group (PHG), Ar-Ram, August 2003.

7 See EMHRN, 2004.

“With the creation of the PNA, the middle class was replaced by a narrow coalition of senior government bureaucrats, senior security officials and governmental economic and business monopolies” (Abdel Shafi, 2004, 10).

Consequently, the lack of opportunities within the private sector and the emerging state sector made the NGO sector the most attractive to the Palestinian intellectuals. Hence, it could be argued that one elite (i.e. the intellectuals who were educated and brought up in the Occupied Territories) is feeling at home within the NGOs, while they are most often in opposition to the state system i.e. the PNA, whereas another elite (i.e. the old guard from Tunis) is controlling the state as well as a significant part of the private sector. According to Hanafi and Tabar both elites are divorced from any social base (Hanafi & Tabar, 2003).

Furthermore, the increase in the number of NGOs is undoubtedly related to the neo-liberal project experienced world wide in the wake of the dismantling of the bi-polar world order. There is a new focus on “empowering” the individual to fend for him/herself in the face of reduced government service.”(Hanafi & Tabar, 2003). This is also the case in many of the neighbouring Arab countries where this tendency is clearly related to the implementation of structural adjustment programs and the consequent decrease of the state as demanded by the IMF as well as other international organisations.

Alam Jarrar has no doubt as to the role of the NGO sector as primarily being a source of employment:

“...It is also related to the fact that it became a place for social upward mobility for the young educated people, and it became a place for work, not for national liberation” (Personal Interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

De-linking from national liberation: Steadfastness (Sumud) replaced by empowerment

However, a main consequence for most – if not all – Palestinian NGOs during the Oslo years has been the experience of a process in which they have been de-linked from the issue of national liberation and almost exclusively dealt with development issues. According to Alam Jarrar, (UPMRC), the development turned out like this:

“...after the creation of the PA, there has been a shift where NGOs started to think that the agenda now is developmental, not national. The national agenda has been completely taken over, maybe hijacked, by the authority during the first period which is the seven years of Oslo...the sources of funds and maybe the encouragement from the side of donors have tended to depart from the national agenda towards more professionalisation and institutionalisation of NGOs” (Personal interview, August 2003, Ramallah).

Hence, it seems clear that the NGO sector is well aware of the important development that took place during the Oslo-years. The professionalisation left the issue of national liberation to the PNA alone. Another central argument in order to understand the background to how the NGOs turned more developmental during the Oslo years has to do with the fact that the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) after the Oslo accords was seen by the international community as a post-conflict area. This meant that development was now considered a linear process “while in fact conflict is invariably cyclical” (Hanafi and Taber, 2003). This also influenced the NGO communities’ own perception of their role.

As a consequence, there has been a tendency of NGOs becoming detached from their social base, and that to an extent where some NGOs have shown more interest in the foreign donors than in their own constituency. As Carapico has noted:

“... some associations locate their offices for the conveniences of international visitors, not local constituencies. In Jerusalem for example several Palestinian NGO headquarters are clustered near World Bank complex, far from the Arab quarter” (Carapico, 2000, 14).

POST OSLO-PALESTINE: AN EMERGING RENTIER STATE?

The Arab oil states in the Gulf represent rentier states par excellence, but Palestine in the post-Oslo period – along with a number of other non-oil Arab states – is showing increasing signs in that direction in terms of how capital is accumulated. Thus, we have witnessed a tendency that is in fact more or less similar to the way in which Beblawi (1987) has characterized the rentier economy, namely as an economy in which rent predominates and where the economy relies on substantial external rent, as purely internal rent cannot be sustained without a strong productive domestic sector. In addition to this, only a small part of the population in a rentier state is involved in generating rent. Thus, the economy is centred

on a small fraction of the society. Finally and importantly, the government is the principal recipient of the external rent in the economy and will because of this play a predominant role in distributing wealth to the population (Beblawi, 1987, 50-51). The Palestinian quasi-state is to a large extent becoming a rentier state, which first and foremost exists due to “peace-rent” (that is to say donor aid), i.e. its will to create peace with Israel.

One of the central political consequences of the Palestinian rentier state is that the “peace-rent” has allowed the PNA to pursue neo-patriarchal politics. Prior to the Gulf War (1990-91), Arafat as head of the PLO to a wide extent used his control over the financial resources given to the PLO by the Gulf States “to manipulate rivals, sustain cliques, and reward key constituencies” (Brynen, 1998, 197). After the establishment of the PNA in 1994, Arafat has sought to use the financial resources donated by the international community to strengthen his political position. The enormous growth in the Palestinian public sector – only made possible by the donor aid – was the key to his patronage.

As noted by Alam Jarrar a relationship of dependency is created. Although some activists ideally would like to decline subsidies from Western (or Arab) sources as they are concerned about the new dependency, Palestinian civil society does face a situation in which many NGOs can be seen as rent seeking. In that sense they bear a resemblance to the development of the PNA. Just like Palestinian president Yassir Arafat used to be the patron of the PNA, similar structures of this kind of patron-client relationships can be traced in several NGOs - albeit on a smaller scale. This drift was also observed by Abdel Shafi who noted:

“A close look at most NGOs shows that directors play a central role and have almost unlimited powers within their organisations. There is a clear process of “personalisation”.... There is clearly a patronizing pattern in the relationship between NGOs and their constituencies” (Abdel Shafi, 2004,12).

AL-AQSA INTIFADA: A NEW CHAPTER IS OPENING

The Palestinians never tasted the fruits of the “peace of the brave”. During the years of occupation, the Israelis kept building settlements, expropriating Palestinian land, uprooting trees, demolishing houses, building bypass roads etc. Not a single Israeli leader has to this date offered the Palestinian leadership a state on the entire territory occupied in June 1967 – or the right of return, or the dismantling of all settlements. Even in Camp David the Palestinians

were not offered anything that resembles their legitimate minimum demands, i.e. demands that are in full accordance with UN resolutions and international law.⁸

On top of this, the Palestinian people's own National Authority, which was established as a consequence of the Oslo accords, turned out not only to be inefficient in dealing with their Israeli counterparts, they were also corrupt and autocratic. Thus it can easily be argued that Arafat and the Authority were both collaborators and liberators at one and the same time.

As a reaction to the continuing and deepening occupation of the Palestinian land and the inability of the Palestinian leadership to live up to the people's expectations another Intifada took its beginning. Ariel Sharon's visit to Haram ash-sharif in late September 2000 only triggered the new uprising (see Carey (ed.), 2001 & Irving Jensen (ed.) 2001). In contrast to the first Intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the current Intifada at a very early stage turned from a mass uprising primarily consisting of youth throwing stones at the occupation forces into a militarised conflict in which Palestinian gunmen equipped with rifles were up against the Israeli army with all its might including apache helicopters, F-16, tanks, gunboats, etc. The fact that the Palestinians used weapons gave the Israeli government an excuse to retaliate with excessive force. Furthermore the various Palestinian factions – especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad – began using suicide bombs with only brief intervals.

A few months into the Intifada, Ehud Barak of the Israeli Labour Party lost the Israeli election and Likud leader, long-term hawk, Ariel Sharon became Prime minister. It was obvious even prior to the 11 September 2001 that Sharon aimed at not only sabotaging the Mitchell recommendations, but simply preventing a return to any meaningful political negotiations. In the wake of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the PNA more or less disintegrated as a consequence of the Israeli re-occupation of most parts of the West Bank and the destruction of the PNA infrastructure. These moves came as a consequence of Palestinian "terrorism" aimed at Israel.

For the Palestinians it led to the worst economic crisis ever. In the years 1999 to 2002, there was a threefold increase in the share of the Palestinian population living below the poverty line; from 20 % to 59 %. In the Gaza Strip, where some 75 % now live under the poverty line. Approximately 50 % are unemployed because of the closure of the Israeli labour market to Palestinians as well as the restrictions of movement even within the Occupied Territories. On top of this, the health conditions of the majority of the population deteriorated dramatically.

⁸ This has been documented by e.g. Pundak, 2001.

However, the main catalyst for a new role for the Palestinian NGOs was the decision by the Sharon government in 2002 to erect a so-called “security-barrier” between Israel and the Palestinian occupied territories. The “barrier” was not erected along the old 1967-border known as the green line, but significantly eastward, with tens of thousands of dunams of Palestinian land expropriated during the first phase alone, including some of the most fertile Palestinian land in the northern West Bank. For example, the West Bank town of Qalqilya is now in effect an open air prison – like the whole of the Gaza Strip has been for more than a decade – surrounded by the wall on three sides and accessible only by means of a single Israeli checkpoint (Pengon, 2003). As Tony Judt has described this “barrier” it is an “armoured zone of ditches, fences, sensors, dirt roads (for tracking footprints) and a wall up to twenty-eight feet tall in places.” (New York Review of Books, 23 October 2003).

Despite intensive international criticism and the International Court of Justice’s opinion on the matter in the summer of 2004 the Israeli right-wing government under Ariel Sharon continued constructing the “barrier”.⁹ The Israelis justified the “barrier” as a way of countering the “terror campaign” launched by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and al-Aqsa-Brigades, i.e. a security argument, which has proven an effective justification in the light of the global “war on terror”.

These developments forced Palestinian NGOs to “wake up”, and the weakening of the PNA during the first three to four years of the Intifada made the NGOs more important actors than they had been during the times of negotiations (1991-2000).

The new role of the NGOs during al-Aqsa Intifada

A number of Palestinian NGOs began at an early stage to deal with the consequences of the establishment of the “barrier” for the affected Palestinian towns and villages. According to Director Ishaq Jad, his organisation, Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem (ARIJ), was one of the first to begin working on the issue. He pointed out the problems:

⁹ According to the PLO, if the current Israeli government continues to build according to their plan 91 percent of the settlements will ultimately end up on the Israeli side of the ‘barrier’, and between 95 to 98 percent of all settlers will be placed inside an expanded Israel. This way, the Sharon-government will eventually annex some 45 to 55 percent of the entire West Bank. Hence the “barrier” has the consequence that it “occupies, divides, steals Arab farmland” (Judt, 2003) or put bluntly, it destroys Palestinian villages along the green line and in the vicinity of the illegal Israeli settlements.

“We, and the Land Resource Centre, were the first to bring up the issue of the wall and document every aspect of it, we thought we needed more people to work on it ... We cannot go and address the needs of the community affected by the wall, and we cannot mobilise demonstrations against the wall. That is not our role. So therefore we went to PENGON and said ‘okay, let’s have this network, and let’s have a campaign against the wall’ (Personal Interview, Bethlehem, August, 2003).

PENGON is a network of NGOs focusing on environment that was established some time before the outbreak of the Aqsa Intifada, but it was only after the “barrier” was constructed that these NGOs actually began intense co-operation. According to Alam Jarrar, UPMRC:

“...the issue of the wall is an expression of new political involvement... when you talk about the wall you talk about water problems and you talk about agricultural problems, so when they started to work, like PARC and hydrology group [PHG], they started with this perception, but PNGO [Palestinian NGO Network] and GIPP [Grassroots International for the Protection of the Palestinians] shifted this trend to a more direct political confrontation with the Israeli occupation forces in that area and involving solidarity groups in those activities, and now we are at the level where PENGON, PNGO and GIPP are working all together on the wall with a political perspective, and in front of the people there in that area, if you are talking about PNGO and NGOs everybody feels that they are doing an excellent work; it is not only professional or technical work, it is political work as well” (personal interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

Abd al-Latif is an engineer affiliated with the Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG), which is part of PENGON. He is based in the village of Jayyus, which is heavily affected by the building of the barrier. According to Abd al-Latif, PHG (and PENGON) had a number of objectives when they began to engage in the issue of the barrier. He states:

“We had four objectives as NGOs: 1: to coordinate the work of the local communities. 2: to put together with them the operation plans and strategies: how to meet the new crisis in the area, 3: to try to make a database, a data collection for all the kind of losses and impact of the wall on the people and the land, environment and water resources and so on, and of course we have published a lot of press releases on the issue as well as two long reports. 4: to raise the awareness of the Palestinians themselves in this community and in general in the

West Bank and in the Israeli society, also among the international communities represented by the different delegations and consulates here, we also try to invite solidarity groups from the international community” (Personal interview, Jayyus, August 2003).

According to Ayman Rabia of the PHG, who is also engaged in PENGON and the issue of the barrier:

“This is in particular one of the most successful campaigns so far that mobilizes resources that really worked very, very well both on the local and the international level. We are getting a lot of support from different solidarity groups all over the world, and the government started talking about it openly and frequently” (Personal interview, Ar-Ram, August 2003).

Ayman Rabia continues and comments the new spirit of NGOs:

“As NGOs our role is to keep protecting and to keep watching the national interest and this is one of the serious national interests and if we do not join efforts in this very critical moment, I don’t think there will be any more time. This is applicable to other issues as well. Other examples are the humanitarian relief and assistance during the curfews and during the invasion of very long curfews over all the cities and towns of Palestine where all NGOs came together, local and national alike, to send convoys with food, water, medicine etc., these are some of the success stories that we report and we can encourage people to keep doing, keep coming together to just maintain this kind of important work”.

Interviews with leading left-leaning Palestinian NGOs attached to PENGON have shown that the most important development during al-Aqsa Intifada has been the revival of the national issue – as indicated by the above quotes – as well as the important linkage they managed to create not only to the local community, but also to the international solidarity community.¹⁰

¹⁰ This was stressed in a number of interviews conducted with representatives from NGOs such as Pengon, PARC, UPMRC during April and August 2003.

Apart from the issue of the barrier many established NGOs were very successful in undertaking professional action in the wake of al-Aqsa Intifada. They were providing up-to-date information on the number of Palestinian injuries and fatalities, the damage caused by Israeli military operations, human rights violations and the like (see e.g. www.upmrc.org).¹¹

Due to this development most NGOs began to reconsider their position. An awakening is taken place in various fields. Majid Nasser, a prominent doctor in a medical NGO:

“...now during the Intifada many NGOs had to reconsider, rethink again, where are we going. They went back into reality and realised that the national liberation movement isn't over, and the presence of the PA doesn't mean that the national liberation movement is finished. So the second Intifada was an awakening for many of those people, who started to rethink and reconsider their modus of work, plan of action, strategies and sustainability question ...” (Personal interview, Bethlehem, August 2003)

As stated by Majid Nasser the second Intifada signified a new era where the NGOs had to reconsider their position.

American Anti-terror moves and its consequences for the NGOs

Another issue many NGOs would have to reconsider was international donor aid. According to interviews conducted with employees in secular NGOs, many of them do now have a more critical view of international donor aid, as they have become more aware of the donors' political agendas. Ishaq Jad from the research institution ARIJ based in Bethlehem:

“This institute took a decision in the beginning that we don't want to get too involved in the people to people. We are not a grass root organisation, we are a research institution. We also took a position that we don't only work according to the needs of the donors. The top priority for us is to support the needs of our community, not worry what are the needs of the donor”. (Personal Interview, Bethlehem, August 2003).

¹¹ However, a large number of the islamist-oriented NGOs also became of increased importance as the BNP during the Intifada years dropped dramatically (see ICG, 2003).

Donors have their own agenda. Recently this has become very evident especially with USAID. The Palestinian civil society has experienced two parallel developments in the wake of the Intifada. One in which the international community tries to implement its agenda, namely through USAID, and another in which some NGOs together with the international anti-globalization movement attempts to establish another “reality”, i.e. going back to the “old” nationalistic agenda. Firstly, a look into the influence of the new policy exerted by USAID in Palestine. According to Alam Jarrar:

“USAID explicitly has a political agenda here. They know what the objectives are of the money that is channelled into Palestine” (Personal interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

This is a threat to the interests of the Palestinians – especially so as the USAID recently seems to be behind a large inflow of cash into the Palestinian areas. According to several Palestinians in the NGO community, USAID has begun to float the market with donor money. Occasionally to such a degree that organisations and institutions receive more money than they have asked for.¹² However, the donor aid given is conditional. The beneficiaries have to sign an appendix to the agreement between the NGO or local community and USAID. In the appendix, which is headlined “certification regarding terrorist financing”; it is stated:

“As a condition of entering into the referenced agreement, [name of organisation] hereby certifies that it has not provided and will not provide material support or resources to any individual or entity that it knows, or has reason to know, is an individual or entity that advocates, plans, sponsors, engages in, or has engaged in terrorist activity ...¹³

The PNGO-network reacted strongly to the new USAID initiative – and its implicit allegations that Palestinian NGOs supported terrorism¹⁴ – by issuing – in collaboration with a number of other organisations, among them the “General Union of Palestinian Charitable Societies” – a statement in which they made it clear that:

12 Informal discussion with Palestinian informant involved in a central placed NGO in Ramallah, August 2003.

13 Original appendix handed out by spokeswoman at the PNGO, Ramallah, August 2003.

14 In fact this is exactly what the Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom publicly alleged. According to EMHRN, he said on the 21 May, that “most human rights organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip provide shelter for Palestinian terrorists”. EMHRN (2004:12).

“We believe the conditions stated in the annex entitled “certification regarding terrorist financing” and in the contract presented by American PVOs should be considered invalid and be annulled”¹⁵

According to the current spokeswoman of the PNGO-network, it is imperative to stop these endeavours by USAID to affix this kind of conditionality on aid, because if they succeed:

“It will be very easy for the rest [of the donor community] to follow USAID and request the same. But if civil society resists they will avoid doing so... If we accept it will be a severe problem that we will have to face later” (Personal interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

The reason why the NGO community reacted in this manner is closely related to the different ways of defining and understanding terrorism in Washington and Ramallah. Furthermore, the PNGO-network feared that many smaller NGOs would sign the appendix in order to obtain funding from the USAID. The war on terror has its effect also on the Palestinian NGO community. However, the USAID has recently abandoned this policy due to pressure and massive opposition to these American moves.

The NGOs and the anti-globalization movement

Other less influential actors have been active in Palestine during the past few years, namely the international anti-globalization movement. The catalyst for enhanced co-operation between the NGOs and the anti-globalization movement was also the establishment of the barrier. These internationally oriented movements – such as International Solidarity Movement (ISM) - are a grassroot “globalisation of protest”. Although many of such movements apparently only deal with local issues and express local grievances, they do not see themselves as acting within only a local context. Just like the predicament of the indigenous population in Chiapas in Mexico is not an issue only of relevance for the Mexicans, the issue of the ‘barrier’ is no longer a local issue (Ramonet, 2001). It is global. As a Palestinian activist linked up with the international movement stated during an interview in the summer 2003:

“Capitalism has an impact on this conflict. Even the people, who come here from safe countries where there is no conflict like this one, has this idea. The Palestinian people are in the first line against capitalism and imperialism. It is not a

15 Leaflet issue on July 9th 2003 By PNGO et al.

local conflict this one. Especially after September 11 nothing in the world is local.” (Moa, 2003).

That this tendency is widespread has been demonstrated in many of the large anti-war demonstrations during 2003, where Palestinian flags were shown and where the issue of Palestine was unmistakably linked to the new anti-war movement.

Still, the discourse represented by the international solidarity movement and related NGOs co-operating with the Palestinians is not as significant and agenda setting as USAID. This discourse is far from being hegemonic. Nonetheless, the international solidarity movement represents an important discourse running counter to the hegemonic discourse, and they persistently insist on bringing up the issue of Palestine and the need for a solution to the conflict based on international law and UN resolutions. Hitherto, the Palestinian NGOs and their international counterparts have played a significant role in internationally raising the discussion concerning the issue of the ‘barrier’ and its ramifications and at the same time locally trying to help the people affected by the “barrier”. However, they have fallen short of stopping the policy of the Sharon government.

A political spillover?

A large numbers of the activists in the civil society see a need to revive the political left. According to Ayman Rabia, PHG:

“There is hardly any real political parties right now... we are talking about an indirect process, there is a link between keeping a balance between professional and national and the new tendencies in Palestine to create a third alternative somewhere between Hamas, which is the ideological, traditional tendency in society and the Authority, which represents actually the bureaucracy and conservatism and corruption ...” (Personal interview, Ar-Ram, August 2003).

Also Alam Jarrar of the UPMRC is talking about the necessity of reviving the left in order to fill a political vacuum that has arisen during the post-Oslo years. He stated in an interview:

“Now after realizing that this vacuum has been created, we started to realize that it’s very important to go back to this area and try to link between the professional work and the national agenda and to have a sort of balance between a national agenda and a professional agenda” (Personal interview, Ramallah, August 2003).

Hence, there is a need to fill the vacuum between the bipolarity in Palestinian politics between Hamas and Fatah/PNA. A democratic centre-leftist alternative is needed, at least according to many Palestinian activists within civil society. Despite the attempts on behalf of PENGON to help the local communities, there seems so far to have been no political spillover. As one of the big landowners from the Jayyus area, near Qalqilya, stated in an interview during the summer of 2003:

“Despite all their work here in and around Jayyus, the left-leaning NGOs have not been able to benefit politically. It is still only the Islamists who seem to benefit politically from the current situation...” (Personal communication, Jayyus, April 2004).

However, during the second presidential elections in the wake of the death of long-time leader Yassir Arafat in January 2005, the former Communist leader and head of the UPMRC, Mustafa Barghouti received 22 % of the votes. And he was officially supported by the PFLP. A clear indication of the fact that many Palestinians urge for a political alternative.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Donors and recipients have often conflicting agendas. This has also been the case in Palestine. Prior to the Oslo accords, the Palestinian NGO community was very strong, both due to and in spite of the Israeli occupation. NGOs often took the lead in the national struggle for liberation. During the “period of peace”, i.e. 1993-2000, many of these NGOs – both as a result of the political development but certainly also as a result of donor priorities – began to be more developmental oriented. The human rights organisations often clashed with the new Palestinian authority. However, most NGOs co-operated.

A number of other factors also helped to disconnect the NGOs from the issue of national liberation. The development of an educated class of Palestinians with university degrees and wishes of upward social mobility came to dominate the NGOs. In general, the whole process could be said to support the post-Cold War neo-liberal world order. However the ‘death’ of the Oslo process resulted in a new situation. After the breakdown of the PNA, the NGOs experienced a revival.

Despite what many within the NGO community consider an “imperial agenda” on behalf of especially USAID, it is noteworthy that part of the NGO community has yet again attempted

to raise the national issue in the wake of al-Aqsa Intifada. In this regard, the study of the movement against the 'barrier' is interesting. The NGOs within the framework of PENGON seem willing to risk losing donor aid in order to try to renew links with the Palestinians locally and to link up with and co-operate with international solidarity movements representing the anti-globalisation tendency.

Among intellectuals working within the secular NGO community there is a rising awareness of the need to develop a new Palestinian discourse. Hence, attempts are currently taking place in order to benefit politically from the initial success and to create a political democratic and secular alternative to the autocratic authority represented by Fatah and the Islamists within the rank of Hamas. It remains to be seen if the encouraging result in the Presidential elections in January 2005 for the NGO leader Mustafa Barghouti can be perceived as a turning point of the democratic left in Palestine.

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