

---

The Atkin Paper Series

**Palestinian Civil Society:  
A time for action**

---

Amal Abusrour

---

March 2009

## About the Atkin Paper Series

Thanks to the generosity of the *Atkin Foundation*, the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)* offers young leaders from Israel and the Arab world the opportunity to come to London for a period of four months. The purpose of the fellowship is to provide young leaders from Israel and the Arab world with an opportunity to develop their ideas on how to further peace and understanding in the Middle East through research, debate and constructive dialogue in a neutral political environment. The end result is a policy paper that will provide a deeper understanding and a new perspective on a specific topic or event.

### Editor

*Dr. Peter R. Neumann*

Director

International Centre for the Study of  
Radicalisation and Political Violence  
(ICSR), King's College London

### Editor

*Jeni Mitchell*

King's College London

### Editorial Assistant

*Katie Rothman*

Project Manager, International Centre for  
the Study of Radicalisation and Political  
Violence (ICSR), King's College London

To order hardcopies or contact the editor,  
please write to [mail@icsr.info](mailto:mail@icsr.info).  
All papers in the *Atkin Paper Series*  
can be downloaded free of charge  
at [www.icsr.info](http://www.icsr.info)

THE INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY  
OF RADICALISATION AND  
POLITICAL VIOLENCE



## About Amal Abusrour

**A**mal Abusrour completed a BA in Social Science from Al Quds University, an MA in Politics and International Studies from the University of Leeds and completed a one year non-degree program in public policy and public administration at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. She worked for the Reform Program at the Palestinian Prime Minister Office for two years, before Hamas electoral victory in 2006. Currently she is a civil society activist and works for one of the Local NGOs in Palestine.

## Summary

**T**he role of Palestinian civil society in affecting the political organization of the future Palestinian state should be perceived through the challenge in relation to the state. Paving the way towards democracy and independence are not mere responsibilities of political parties. Palestinian civil society has both the capacity and power to monitor and affect good governance, peace-building, and the forthcoming Palestinian elections through mobilizing the silent majority that evolved after last legislative elections in 2006 and the split between the West Bank and Gaza. This challenge should be twofold; political to establish an independent state and social to create a democratic and functioning society.

---

# Palestinian Civil Society: A time for action

*By Amal Abusrour*

In Western media reports, Palestinian society is often – and exclusively – seen through the prism of militant groups and their political leaderships. The resulting perception is that of a dysfunctional, over-militarised society in which there is no space for tolerance and dialogue. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. As this paper will show, Palestine has potentially one of the most sophisticated and vibrant civil societies in the Arab world, and the failure to recognise and cultivate it as a force for positive change has been one of the great missed opportunities in advancing democracy, peace and pluralism.

The purpose of this paper is to think about the role of civil society in Palestine and, in particular, how it could be nurtured to make a more effective contribution to constructing a peaceful and democratic society. The importance of doing so is underlined by the current failure of Palestinian political institutions. In the 15 years since the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has proved unable to provide the peace and security which many Palestinians had hoped for. The Hamas government, elected in 2006, brought further misery and increased the public's alienation from the political process. Indeed, with divided leadership and rising clan power, civil society is the one remaining pillar that holds Palestinian society together.

The questions this paper investigates are therefore more pressing than ever. How can Palestinian civil society contribute to fostering peace and good governance under the current circumstances? What role should it take in the forthcoming elections? More generally, what approach towards civil society-state relations should Palestinian civil society adopt?

In looking at these questions, this paper utilises three models of state-civil society relations developed by the political scientist Dina Craissati. The first – 'integration' – is based on liberal theory and stipulates that there is no competition between the state and civil society.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the second model – 'rejection' – is drawn from the socialist democracy model and posits that the role of civil society is to attain political rights through class struggle and confrontation with the state. The third model – 'challenge' – derives its principles from 'radical politics' and suggests

---

<sup>1</sup> Chandhoke, Neera. *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*. London: Sage Publications (1995).

that civil society must retain its distinct identity in order to push the state for progressive change.<sup>2</sup>

The paper argues that Palestinian civil society can be influential in shaping the political organisation of the Palestinian government, and that it can play a vital role in defining the political nature of a future Palestinian state. However, it will only succeed in becoming a force for good if – rather than ‘integrating’ with the state or ‘rejecting’ it altogether – it consistently ‘challenges’ the state whilst improving popular participation in political affairs, turning citizens into more active members of the socio-political process. The aim is to break the silence and mobilise the forty or so percent of the Palestinian population who are either apolitical or do not believe that change is possible within Palestine’s current state of political instability and fragmentation.

The paper is based on an extensive evaluation of primary documents and the relevant secondary literature as well as a series of interviews with civil society activists, trade union members, PA officials and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). The first part provides some background on Palestinian civil society. This is followed by sections on the role of Palestinian civil society in fostering good governance and peace-building as well as a discussion of what approach should be adopted with respect to the forthcoming elections. The conclusion offers a list of recommendations on the role of civil society in defining the political organisation of the future Palestinian state.

### **Palestinian Civil Society**

Numerous – often competing – definitions of civil society can be found in the relevant literature, and this paper does not intend to make another contribution to the debate. Alan Fowler captures most of the relevant elements by noting that civil society ‘ranges from groups based on religion and ethnicity to more fluid voluntary associations organized around ideology, professionalism, social activities or the pursuit of money, status and interests of power’.<sup>3</sup> More important, Fowler’s definition highlights the aims and purpose of civil society, which is to ‘allow the citizens of a country to act for what they think is the benefit of society; it gives room for debate on the direction of social development; it makes it possible for people to influence government and business’.<sup>4</sup>

This needs to be kept in mind when looking at the case of Palestine. Like Fowler’s, most definitions of civil society assume the existence of a state and a legal system that respects citizens and their rights. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, however, no proper state, central government or legal system has been in operation for more than four decades. Furthermore, rather than dealing with a state

---

2 Craissati, Dina. *New Social Movements and Democracy in Palestine: A Model for the Politics of Civil Society in the Arab World*. Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers (2005).

3 Fowler, Alan. ‘Strengthening Civil Society in Transition Economies—From Concept to Strategy: A Story of Maps, Mazes and Mirrors’, in Andrew Clayton (ed), *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracy in Transitional Countries*. Oxford: INTRAC Publication (1997), p. 36.

4 Ibid.,

that respects human rights and allows civil society to organise freely, Palestinian civil society has had to cope with both military occupation and often debilitating restrictions that have been imposed by the Palestinian Authority.

Given such constraints, it is astonishing that Palestinian civil society has flourished to the extent it has. Many scholars and analysts have pointed out that – compared with neighbouring Arab countries – Palestinian civil society has been remarkably vibrant, decentralised, pluralistic, and secular. Indeed, despite the rise of Hamas and other Islamic parties, Palestinian civil society has been seen as politically and religiously moderate. A survey on religious attitudes showed that, in the mid-1990s, 20 percent of respondents in both the West Bank and Gaza considered themselves secular. About 60 percent described themselves as ‘observant’, but did not think of religion as the primary source of their identity. Only the remaining 20 percent stated that religion informed their political views and actions.<sup>5</sup>

Another noteworthy feature of Palestinian society is the high degree of political affiliation. There are more than a dozen active political factions in Palestine, ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left. These parties include, for example, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP), Fatah, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), and Islamic Jihad. To a greater extent than elsewhere, politics influences the everyday lives of Palestinian citizens. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Palestinian civil society without considering its politics.

Other pillars of civil society are important too. Student councils, for example, have traditionally played a crucial role in generating a democratic and pluralistic atmosphere, especially during council elections. In fact, results of these elections used to define the political strategy of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in exile, and they continue to represent a significant platform from which young leaders emerge. Likewise, trade unions have been an important forum in which Palestinians have presented their political views and challenged the government through strikes and political lobbying.

It should be noted, however, that significant differences exist between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The refugees that were displaced during the 1948 war have been integrated far more successfully into the West Bank’s social and economic system than those that went to Gaza: 6.4 percent of the population in the West Bank lives in refugee camps, whereas more than 31 percent do so in Gaza. The main reason for this variation is that most refugees in the West Bank have either moved to major cities or left Palestine to work in neighbouring Arab countries, while most refugees in Gaza had to stay where they were.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 Heiberg, Marianne. ‘Opinions and Attitudes’, in Marianne Heiberg and Geir Ovensen (eds.), *Palestinian Society in Gaza, West Bank and Arab Jerusalem: A Survey of Living Conditions*. Oslo: FAFO (1993).

6 Palestinian Bureau of Statistics: Population Characteristics of the Palestinian Refugee Camps. [http://www.pcbs.pna.org/Portals/\\_PCBS/Downloads/book860.pdf](http://www.pcbs.pna.org/Portals/_PCBS/Downloads/book860.pdf) (December 2002).

People in the Gaza Strip are also more religiously oriented than Palestinians in the West Bank. A poll conducted by Near East Consulting revealed that nearly 60 percent of the respondents gave 'Muslim' as their primary identity compared with only 46 percent in the West Bank.

Overall, 53.5 percent of the Palestinian population lives in urban areas, compared to 31 percent living in the countryside and 16 percent located in refugee camps. The Palestinian population is considered to be 'young', with 47 percent of the total population under the age of 15 and only 3.5 percent over the age of 65.<sup>7</sup> As the following sections will show, this young generation needs to play a crucial role in changing the socio-political nature of local communities and fostering a democratic Palestinian civil society.

### **Civil Society as a Vehicle of Good Governance**

The literature stresses that civil society is a precondition for democracy: it is the source of the political system and the prime engine of its democratization.<sup>8</sup> In other words, not only does civil society play an essential role once democracy is in place, but it constitutes the very source of any liberal democratic system that is based on transparency, accountability, and openness.<sup>9</sup>

This section argues that Palestinian civil society can promote good governance if it adopts the 'challenge' model of state-civil society relations that was described in the Introduction. While on certain occasions the 'integration' model may seem more appropriate, civil society organisations still need to 'challenge' the state as a way of promoting good governance and the rule of law. Indeed, this mixture between 'integration' and 'challenge' – with an emphasis on the latter – could be seen during the formulation of the Basic Law and efforts aimed at resolving the dispute between Fatah and Hamas.

Implicitly, civil society organisations in Palestine have for some time adopted the 'challenge' model. They have conducted extensive grassroots training programs, opposed PA domination through lobbying and advocacy, and pushed for the recognition that peace and conflict transformation are beneficial to Palestinian society.<sup>10</sup> As Allam Jarrar, the Director of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, points out:

*Democratic transformation in Palestinian society and building a state is based on good governance, human rights and rule of law. Civil society should challenge the government to adopt more democratic policies [and] civil rights. Civil society*

---

7 Ibid.,  
8 Allen, Chris. 'Who Needs Civil Society?' *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 24, No. 73 (1997), pp. 329-337.  
9 Bush, Raymond. *Civil Society and the Uncivil State: Land Tenure Reform in Egypt and the Crisis of Rural Livelihoods*. Geneva: UNRISD (2004).  
10 Hassassian, Manuel. 'NGOs in the Context of National Struggle', in Benjamin Gidron, et al. (eds.), *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press (2002).

*should create lobbying entities to achieve [and] enhance democratic culture and to participate in solving internal disputes within Palestine.*<sup>11</sup>

The PA is keen to emphasise its democratic nature, because it is the only government in the Arab region that has come to power through free elections. Elections, however, represent only a minor component of democratic rule. The PA often resembles other Arab regimes in its lack of respect for human rights and freedom of speech, which can only be explained by an ignorance of democratic methods or a wilful attempt to dominate society. In either case, civil society needs to monitor the PA and present the clear message that an alternative model of democracy needs to be practised.

In moments of 'integration', civil society organisations have actively supported the PA in the process of formulating progressive laws, serving as impartial lobbying bodies and avoiding confrontation with the government. Sha'wan Marzouq, the Director of Al-Haq Human Rights Organization, noted that during the process of ratifying the Basic Law,

*Civil society institutions played a pivotal role in formulating this law. Civil society managed to support the PA in developing a law that is modern compared to other Arab countries... If this process had been left to the PA to decide, we would have ended up with a Law that supports state domination rather than supporting human rights, civil liberties and freedom of speech.*

Confrontation, on the other hand, occurs when policies and laws violate international human rights conventions or fail to nurture the modernisation of society. Lobbying and suggestions from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society institutions have made it possible for such laws to be changed. Accordingly, Allam Jarrar emphasised that 'during the process of ratification, civil society tends to challenge the state, making sure that respect for human rights and the autonomous nature of civil society are embedded in those laws'.<sup>12</sup>

Civil society in Palestine, however, must go beyond the liberal democratic model. It is not enough for society to support the state's structures and processes in a positive way when the state itself is dysfunctional and distrusted by a large portion of the population. Indeed, what Palestine needs is a jolt of electricity that can challenge and energise the political process. Social mobilisation needs to change citizens from passive recipients to active members of the socio-political process. Active thinking and innovative approaches are needed to create real change, and constructing a framework that facilitates these attitudes will be vital in generating change from the ground up. Indeed, if the 'challenge' model is consistently practiced, civil society will have the freedom to act against political violence, support negotiations and assist in the transformation of conflicts such as the current split between the West Bank and Gaza.

---

11 Interview with Allam Jarrar.

12 Interview with Allam Jarrar.

Recruitment of civil society activists into the government should be seen as an opportunity to maintain and revive the role of civil society in defining the nature of the PA. In the current set-up, members of the so-called technocrat government can leverage grassroots and community members, mobilising them to create a communal base. People must acquire the means and ability to push for their rights, and local leaderships must combat corruption in their communities.

The current situation of institutional breakdown, political disarray, division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, militarisation of fragmented clans and groups, and the conflictual relationship between Hamas and Fatah, are destroying the fabric of Palestinian society. There is an urgent need to address the primary drivers of the current situation: the two parties' political immaturity and incomprehension of the rules of the democratic game. Unless there is new pressure from Palestinians to counter the existing leadership, the Palestinian dream of living in a democratic state will fade.

Civil society, therefore, must play an active role in challenging authoritarian rule and replacing forced obedience with tolerance, dependence with self-reliance, and subjugation with sovereignty and liberty. This challenge would be directed towards any type of traditional, nationalistic and elitist development by means of mobilising women, youth, refugee camps and villages as well as urban dwellers.

### **Civil Society and Peace-Building**

Palestinian civil society can play a significant role in fostering peace-making and peace-building in Palestine. Its function is to promote civic peace in Palestinian cities and towns by creating a culture of conflict transformation and resilience. In doing so, civil society will also make a significant contribution to building peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

At the present time, civil society institutions are working towards peace by providing people with the knowledge and skills that enable conflict transformation and resilience. Such techniques encourage people to live side by side with Israel, but the very same methods are also needed in healing the political division between Palestinians. As Allam Jarrar points out,

*Peace-making is necessary not only in relation to peace negotiations with Israel. Conflict transformation and resilience allow Palestinians to find ways to live together with Israelis... But they are also necessary so that Palestinians can work together in laying the foundations of a democratic state.*<sup>13</sup>

Palestinian civil society institutions have participated actively in peace movements, aiming to eliminate elements of hostility in Palestinian society. This is particularly true for NGOs that have been involved in educational, economic

and social projects, which have enabled Palestinian and Israeli NGOs to share perspectives on possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Civil society organisations have played an important role during the ongoing split between the West Bank and Gaza Strip by meeting with the two parties and others in order to identify a middle ground. Abdel Hadi Abu Khusa of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society noted that these efforts succeeded to a certain extent, but that civil society organisations obviously could not manage to resolve the dispute entirely. In future, it would be useful to combine civil society's 'diplomatic' missions with widespread communal mobilisation, which would communicate popular aspirations for civic peace. Yet it seems as if civil society continues to be reluctant, if not fearful, of confronting the existing two political powers.

Civil society must organise a bottom-up campaign consisting of students, teachers, women, professionals, and NGO representatives to end the division between the West Bank and Gaza. It is time for various 'fragmented' networks to disseminate one message – to call for a consensus, or at least a middle ground, that enables people to focus their efforts and attention on building the foundation of the Palestinian state rather than destroying this dream. Civil society organisations and networks must work beyond their professional, geographical and cultural differences and present one voice, the voice of civic peace.

Peace-building is one of the most important pillars of civil society campaigns, because peace is a prerequisite for the acceptance of democratic rule and civic reform in the Palestinian state. If people want to enjoy democracy, they need to accept the rules of the game: the loser should abide by the rules of this democratic process, and start acting as an opposition. These are some of the values and messages that civil society institutions should disseminate to Palestinians.<sup>15</sup>

### **Can Civil Society Affect the Upcoming Elections?**

The first part of this section describes – and sheds light on the reasons behind – a new phenomenon that became apparent during the election of 2006: the existence of a 'silent majority'. The second part examines whether civil society can play a role in mobilising that silent majority as a way of affecting the upcoming elections.

#### *The Silent Majority*

Palestinian society suffers from the polarisation between two political parties, Fatah and Hamas. Both parties mainly seek to divide or share power at the expense of the people. Polls reveal that the share of people who do not trust any political or religious faction stands at 46 percent and 30 percent in the West Bank and Gaza

---

13 Interview with Allam Jarrar.

---

14 Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME): Summary of PRIME Study of NGOs <http://www.vispo.com/PRIME/ngostudy.htm>

15 Interview with Abdel Rahman Tamimi.

respectively.<sup>16</sup> Eventually this category of Palestinians will withdraw from political life, concluding that their perceptions or voices do not matter. Ayman Daraghme, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, noted that this silent majority consists of intellectuals and educated citizens, and that their silence is considered a statement in itself. In doing so, he argues, 'they are creating a gap in the Palestinian street'.

Most of the interviews that were conducted for this research made it clear that Palestinians have lost confidence in the effectiveness of the existing political parties and their leaders. As a result, people 'disconnect' from formal politics. Indeed, the current political disarray has created an atmosphere of pessimism, diminishing people's hopes that they can contribute to the political process. To restore their confidence, urgent action needs to be taken to create a more unified idea of what democracy means. Citizens should network amongst each other and deliver consistent messages to the PA and the international community. This process could result in a plan that details and consolidates a consistent view of what democracy means to Palestinians today and how it should be implemented.

There was general agreement among interviewees that the traditional style of leadership needs to be changed. Civil society institutions need to mobilise their organisations in order for new, young leaders, who are not related to the current elite, to emerge. Doing so requires collective efforts from civil society institutions – in particular the organisation of public campaigns, workshops and training – so that those leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills to promote democracy, peace-making, human rights, and the rule of law.

Ironically, through their absence, the voices of civil society have been shown to be quietly effective in bringing about the end of Fatah rule in 2006. It seems obvious, therefore, that the silent majority can exercise significant electoral power in the upcoming elections. Civil society and NGOs, however, must be prevented from encroaching upon the role of political parties. Issam Arouri, the Director General of Jerusalem Legal Aid, noted that 'political parties focus on political power and winning majorities... whereas civil society relies on laws, regulations and international human rights conventions as well as pushing for progressive policies as a way of supporting the creation of a modern society'.

#### *How to Affect the Upcoming Elections*

The consolidation of democracy under the Palestinian Authority is still in progress. In order to achieve a more solid and comprehensive sense of democracy, another round of elections needs to be conducted for both the Parliament and the Executive.<sup>17</sup> Yet there continues to be widespread scepticism as to whether voting can make a difference, as well as a general sense of conflict and disappointment. Shawan Marzouq from the Al Haq Human Rights Organization noted: 'There are doubts as

16 *Near East Monthly Monitor of Palestinian Perceptions Towards Politics and Economics: Special Focus on Identity and Religion*. Ramallah: Bulletin Vol. 3, No.10 (October 2008).

17 *Ibid.*,

to whether citizens will participate in the upcoming elections, because they have witnessed the results of previous ones in 2006. I fear that the upcoming elections will see low levels of participation'.<sup>18</sup>

The civil society leaders interviewed for this paper believe that Hamas' electoral victory in 2006 was the result of Palestinian disappointment over the lack of progress in the peace process, corruption in the PA, and an ineffective economy. In fact, a Hamas official admitted that 'the 2006 victory happened for reasons other than Hamas ideology. These results were a protest against the PA's misuse of power and its corruption'. In addition, violence and the militarisation of the second Intifada heightened popular dissatisfaction with the PA's performance. Rather than being in favour of Hamas, Palestinians sought a new leadership that would combat corruption and reform the PA's institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of paving the way for democratic rule, the 2006 elections were a step back. Despite the fact that these elections were fair and held in accordance with international standards, Palestinians did not see any tangible benefits. As a result, there has been a widespread fear that democratic rule might not be applicable within a Palestinian context, especially with the PA still acting as quasi-government.

During previous elections, civil society played a prominent role in increasing popular awareness of the process and in supervising their conduct. As Abdel Rahman Tamimi emphasised, 'civil society institutions played a significant role in formulating the elections law and observing the polling process, making sure that it was fair'.<sup>20</sup> The kind of training and education provided by NGOs in the lead-up to the elections, however, was often based on donors' agendas that made no sense within the Palestinian context. After all, Palestinian civil society has suffered from more than forty years of occupation and military rule. It is difficult for people to foresee or understand how it is possible for their state to become democratic. Democracy, therefore, must be introduced gradually and with patience, reflecting the limited political imagination and aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Some aspects of the previous elections should not be neglected. First, and most important, they showed that elections can change the nature of the government. As Shawan Marzouq put it:

*During the last elections, people sensed that they could change the nature of their government through their electoral rights. Their actions reflected their frustration and their rejection of the corrupt and undemocratic nature of the previous government. People managed to tell politicians that they have a say and they can change the whole political situation in the country.*<sup>21</sup>

This sentiment needs to be drawn upon during the upcoming elections as a way of encouraging people to use their power and select representatives who will abide by democratic principles, human rights, and good governance.

18 Interview with Shawan Marzouq.

19 Turner, Mandy. 'Building Democracy in Palestine: Liberal Peace Theory and the Election of Hamas'. *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2006), pp. 739-755.

20 Interview with Abdel Rahman Tamimi.

21 *Ibid.*,

Interviewees agreed that the next elections should replace the established leaderships that have come to believe that any efforts to progress towards democracy and human rights might threaten their existence. As Tamimi pointed out:

*The next elections will be more difficult because there are some political apparatuses that are opposed to change. To overcome this, we need to work with political and social groups to develop progressive electoral procedures, such as adopting the elections law and increasing public awareness. There is a need to create new young leadership. Similar experiences from other countries reveal that positive social, political and economic change happened only because there were young people in positions of political leadership.<sup>22</sup>*

In preparation for the next elections, the Palestinian Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary and Legal Professions (MUSAWA) collected 10,000 signatures in November 2008 to support the ratification of a progressive elections law. The campaign mobilised the public and encouraged them to lobby the Palestinian Legislative Council. The campaign also presented a memorandum to the PLC containing arguments for a modified law, including the suggestion to conduct legislative and presidential elections at the same time.<sup>23</sup>

Interviewees agreed that Palestinians have learned from previous elections that they need to analyse each candidate's message carefully before voting. Furthermore, citizens should start looking for new political leadership outside the existing two parties. Indeed, a third political entity could emerge because existing parties have proven to be a failure. A new electoral force should present a new model of political leadership which maintains good governance and combats corruption and the misuse of power, representing civil society and drawn from young leaders. This would give Palestinians the opportunity to experience a new leadership, one that will better define the national interest and prove capable of alleviating their people's hardship and suffering.

### **Civil Society and Defining the Political Nature of a Palestinian State**

Interviews reveal considerable concern about the changing role of Palestinian civil society since the creation of the PA. The power and ability of civil society to affect the shape of the future Palestinian state has been restricted, even though civil society organisations are crucial to the successful implementation of statehood in Palestine. Sowing the seeds of a modern democratic state should not be left to political forces, which focus on liberation and independence as the end result. Civil society institutions, on the other hand, focus on liberation and independence as a means to a more challenging end: the construction of a modern democratic state.

The challenge is twofold: politically, the establishment of a recognised, sovereign, contiguous state; and socially, the creation of a democratic, respectful,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>23</sup> The Palestinian Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary and Legal Professions: Campaign to support the modification of the General Elections Law and the Bylaws of the Palestinian Legislative Council (November 2008).

and functioning society. Both challenges are critical to the future of the Palestinian people, and must be pursued in complementary fashion. While Palestine must fight and overcome a military occupation that prevents viable statehood, it must also attack the socio-psychological occupation of people's thinking and behaviour by political forces that exploit nationalism and religion and seek to control liberty, morality and rights under conservative and traditional rules. The path to democratic statehood is founded not only on military struggle, but on civil resistance in order to maintain values of mutual respect, individual liberties, and tolerance. Therefore, the challenge for civil society institutions is to change the attitudes of ordinary people and disrupt the patterns of thinking instilled over decades of Israeli occupation. A widespread popular inability to conceive of a positive vision of the future has created a passive attitude among the majority of Palestinian citizens. They lack faith in their political leadership; this deters them from participating in elections and other events that define their future. People's faith, however, can be restored and newly mobilised by the power of civil society institutions.

How does one construct a working model for a re-engaged and active civil society in Palestine? In liberal democratic Western countries, civil society follows an 'integration' model: civil society supports the government in promoting modern democratic structures and policies, including family law, media, freedom of speech and respect for personal liberties and human rights. While these values flow from civil society, they are also built into government institutions and laws in a mutually defining and reinforcing relationship. This model is not sufficient for Palestine at the moment. The integration model must be combined with the 'challenge' model that more actively engages and informs the public, so that their values can be brought to bear on political structures. The challenge model focuses on ensuring democratic values and freedoms through a solid base of knowledgeable citizens in a grassroots setting, supporting the process of defining the political organisation of the state.

Within this challenge model, Palestinian civil society institutions should work on state-building regardless of what occurs within the process of implementing peace, the eruption of internal clashes, and political chaos. Civil society should respond to political instability by creating strong institutions that influence the government and the conflicting parties. They should also lobby for peace, employing strategies that focus on conflict transformation and perhaps mediation to create the basis for understanding, mutual respect and coexistence. Civil society in this respect is a platform that unifies all other entities and conflicting parties, and may thus help end the political disarray that has been in place since the eruption of the second Intifada.

A strong Palestinian civil society requires a state to function effectively; it cannot implement democratic rules within a weak state or a fragile system. The Palestinian Authority has previously employed the professional skills and knowledge of civil society to develop PA ministries. Thus, if the role of civil society is to provide an environment that supports a democratic state, the creation and employment of skilful grassroots leaders to monitor and assist the state's actions is required. Civil

society also needs to promote modern democratic policies through lobbying and advocacy. The following recommendations illustrate these strategies.

### 1. Revive the Role of Student Councils to Create Young Leadership

These councils represent a wide range of civil society (urban, refugee and rural) and have a tradition of defining the nature of domestic and foreign politics. Student council elections would be more beneficial and successful if students were trained and better equipped to utilise their positions for lobbying and advocacy, and to disseminate their messages to the PA and the public. Civil society organisations have ignored the fact that students and youth represent 25 percent of the total population; they are a necessary element of political change.<sup>24</sup>

The annual student elections are a tradition that every political party and Palestinian individual seeks: they were and still are the only events where students can experience democracy and freedom of choice. This democratic process, however, is not used to mobilise students to take a leading role beyond their university boundaries and disseminate messages of political change. Civil society organisations and NGOs can organise pre-election campaigns to prepare students for their new leadership role, equip them with knowledge and skills, and mobilise them to advocate for change.<sup>25</sup>

This young leadership needs to be created not from Fatah or Hamas but from a third political entity. Interviews reveal that young leaders are perceived as an antidote to the corrupt nature of the PA and a necessary factor in the introduction of a new model of democratic and pluralistic rule.

### 2. Create Bodies That Specialise in the Politics of Influence

By working to replace traditional policies and rules, civil society institutions bring popular attention to political issues of concern. A vision to achieve a modern democratic society should be in place, one that transcends polarisation and focuses on implementing new policies and rules. This entails creating a lobby of civil society institutions to improve policies on human rights, health, education, family law, the media, elections and so on. It also requires a team of experts to define these laws and policies and present the civil society perspective to the Legislative Council. Thus, interest groups and lobbyists can play a pivotal role in political and legal advocacy (perhaps even greater than the role of NGOs, which usually specialise in a certain sector and thus have more limited constituencies).

These lobbying groups must educate their supporters on PA politics and policies and promote the citizen training programs offered by NGOs, unions, voluntary associations and political parties. The second crucial pillar is increasing the experience of citizens in analysing and monitoring PA politics and policies

---

24 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/\\_PCBS/Downloads/book1432.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_PCBS/Downloads/book1432.pdf) (accessed 10/11.2008)

25 Parsons, Nigel. *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to al-Aqsa*. New York: Routledge (2005).

through participation in decision-making at the NGO and political party level. This gives them a significant outlet to practise the politics of influence.

### 3. Create a Comprehensive Socio-political Strategy

Professionals, intellectuals, civil society activists and policy-makers must engage in a collective effort to create a strategy that will identify the mechanisms for achieving the ultimate goal of a Palestinian state. This strategy needs to orient the fight for Palestinian socio-political interests within a resistance that celebrates life rather than struggles for death. It may even prove to be a 'radical' strategy, based on contemporary analysis of civil society as an 'influence mechanism' in promoting peace and good governance.

Civil society can contribute to the creation of a comprehensive socio-political strategy due to its expertise and high level of activism within both local and national groups.<sup>26</sup> These groups can be characterised as 'gregarious', as their connections allow them to share their points of view with a diverse audience. Further, these groups are members of different 'networks', enabling them to disseminate messages across an array of professionals and friends. This wide-ranging discourse and representation can generate a broad mobilisation of socio-political influences that could be used to actively promote new strategies.

### 4. Create a Civil Entity for Peace-Making and Peace-Building

Civil society traditionally promotes the values of non-violence and mutual tolerance. Palestinian civil society aims to protect citizens' rights; to enhance their ability to organise and act freely; to serve as a catalyst for community development; and to foster public participation in order to create a democratic society.

However, militarisation and armed conflict have dramatically changed the lives of the Palestinian people at every level. Violence hampered the ability of civil society to help develop Palestinian politics and society, and it became an observer as it exiled itself from involvement in the conflict. Conflict in Palestine, notably the internal chaos and disarray amongst political factions, has evolved from occasional clashes to intense armed conflict to a 'vigilant truce' – but nothing has reduced the intensity of violence. Instead, there is an unpleasant feeling among citizens that conflict might suddenly erupt and turn their lives upside down, especially when combined with Israeli military actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Peace-building should not be based only on preventing violence (i.e., negative peace). Civil society organisations should focus rather on promoting positive peace, the creation of a peaceful society at all levels. Peace-building is a long-term process requiring conflict transformation, conflict resolution and power-sharing institutions. Civil society organisations aim to create a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding through training programs that foster messages of peace among

---

26 Duffy, Bobby and Pierce, Anna. *Socio-Political Influencers: Who They Are and Why They Matter*. IPSOS MORI (June 2007). [http://www.ipsos-mori.com/\\_assets/reports/socio-political-influencers.pdf](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/_assets/reports/socio-political-influencers.pdf) (accessed 22/10/2008)

citizens; immediate mediation within communities whenever signs of conflict erupt; and campaigns to advocate for peace and peace-building.<sup>27</sup>

#### 5. Establish a Civil Society Forum

The mushrooming of NGOs and networks in Palestine has created a perception that they are merely platforms to attract donor funds, more preoccupied with their own future prospects than with any productive and innovative efforts to improve the role of civil society. The proposed Civil Society Forum would work in tandem with the government, providing suggestions and recommendations and influencing the decision-making process. The Forum would allow civil society to lobby the government collectively, providing a unified message representing public opinion. It would also allow civil society to bring pressure on the government in the policymaking arena, particularly with respect to human rights and other relevant issues on the political agenda.

Furthermore, the Forum would monitor government performance and help keep it accountable to standards of democracy and good governance. Through advocacy, the Forum could also play a crucial role in the democratic discourse between the government and civil society and between the government and the opposition, as well as promote dialogue among the political parties themselves. The Forum would foster a culture of peace by initiating dialogue and problem-solving programs among the public, based on democratic discourse and the concept of shared responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the Forum would prevent the overlapping of efforts by the PA and civil society, and allow people to become active and positive participants in political processes.

---

27 Paffenholz, Thania and Spurk, Christoph. *Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Peace-Building*. Washington, DC: The World Bank (October 2006).

28 Ibid.,

#### List of Interviews

(carried out in October and November 2008)

#### Phone Interviews

*Abdel Hadi Abu Khusa*

Director, Palestinian Medical Relief Society, Gaza

*Abdel Rahman Tamimi*

Director, General Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG)

*Allam Jarrar*

Director General, Palestinian Medical Relief Society

*Ayman Daraghme*

Reform and Change (Hamas), PLC member

*Fadwa Shaer*

Director General, NGO Department/Ministry of Interior

*Issam Arouri*

Director General, Jerusalem Legal Aid

*Jad Ishaq*

Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ)

*Khalil Abu Shmmaleh*

Al-Dameer Association for Human Rights

*Mahmoud Ziadeh*

Democracy and Workers Rights

*Noah Salameh*

Director, Centre for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

*Omar Tabakhna*

Union of Agriculture Work Committee

*Samir Barghouthi*

Director, General Palestinian Centre for Agricultural Development (ACAD)

*Shawan Marzouq*

Al Haq Human Rights Organization

#### Interviews

*Professor Manuel Hassassian*

Palestinian Ambassador to the United Kingdom

*Professor Yazid Saiygh*

Professor of Middle East Studies,

War Studies Department, King's College London

---

### **About ICSR**

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel), and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention Amman (Jordan). Its aim is to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence by bringing together knowledge and leadership. For more information, see [\*\*www.icsr.info\*\*](http://www.icsr.info)

[\*\*www.icsr.info\*\*](http://www.icsr.info)