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**THE ROLE OF PALESTINIAN DIASPORA INSTITUTIONS IN  
MOBILIZING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

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Note: The references in this document have not been verified. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.

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## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
	<i>Chapter</i>
<b>I.</b> Introduction.....	1
<b>II. PALESTINIAN INSTITUTIONS IN THE DIASPORA</b> .....	2
A. Development, rehabilitation and relief organizations.....	2
B. Research and information bodies .....	3
C. Community groups .....	4
D. Solidarity organizations.....	4
<b>III. REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE: MOVING FORWARD</b> .....	6
A. Development versus steadfastness .....	6
B. Vision and goals .....	8
C. Building a human rights community .....	8
D. Supporting the sustainability of diaspora institutions .....	9
E. Agenda for action .....	9

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper shares the goal of the Arab International Forum, namely, to mobilize the Arab world and Palestinian diaspora and establish a clear agenda in support of independence and rehabilitation.

This paper first provides a brief overview of Palestinian diaspora institutions and their track record in mobilizing the international community. It then examines ways of strengthening the role that these institutions can and should play, including in the rehabilitation and development of the occupied Palestinian territory.

For the purposes of this paper, development is defined as the management of national economic, social, environmental and cultural resources in a way that promotes progress for the people of a given country. However, this definition raises the question as to whether such development can take place under conditions of occupation, or whether sovereign independence is needed. In order to address this question, it is necessary to draw a distinction between development, on the one hand, and support to the survival and steadfastness of the Palestinian people, on the other hand, until international law is applied and basic human rights are secured.

The term “Occupied Palestine” is used rather than occupied Palestinian territory, since the modern state of Palestine exists through the 1947 United Nations Resolution 181, the partition plan that led to the creation of an Arab state and a Jewish state in mandate Palestine. The term “Palestine” was recognized most recently in the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the wall, issued on 9 July 2004. Moreover, Palestine has observer status at the United Nations.

Reference to “Occupied Palestine” does not imply non-recognition of the State of Israel, which exists in fact and has been a member of the United Nations since 1948, responsible to the international community for upholding international law and, in turn, protected by the international community under the United Nations Charter and international law.<sup>1</sup>

In this review of Palestinian institutions in the diaspora, the term “Palestinian” is used to refer to any grouping that is substantially engaged in some aspect of implementing international law as it relates to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or in supporting Palestinian survival and steadfastness. In other words, not all Palestinian institutions are exclusively Palestinian and many were not even established by Palestinians. A focus on exclusively Palestinian institutions would result in a fairly short paper.

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<sup>1</sup> The borders of Palestine are not settled and neither are those of Israel. The borders between these two states would be established in any final settlement. Ideally, the borders proposed in the 1947 partition plan would be the starting point for such a discussion.

The term “institution” is used to refer to any organized group with some established track record and life span, whether or not it is formally registered as a non-profit or non-governmental organization (NGO) in the country in which it functions. Defining an institution as a registered body with staff and resources would also result in a brief paper, since volunteers and solidarity groups do much of the work on the Palestinian issue and are often not registered and have no staff and budgets.

## **II. PALESTINIAN INSTITUTIONS IN THE DIASPORA**

Far more Palestinian institutions exist in Europe and the United States of America than in the Arab world and other regions. Moreover, Palestinian institutions in the Arab world tend to focus on survival and steadfastness, rather than mobilization for independence. In part, this situation has arisen because rights to freedom of speech and organization are circumscribed throughout the Arab world, but it can also be attributed to the specific problems, related to Palestinian political organization and advocacy, which differ from one Arab country to another.

Palestinian diaspora institutions can be grouped into four broad categories, namely, development, relief and rehabilitation organizations, research bodies community groups and solidarity organizations. The activities of institutions are discussed below in terms of these four categories.

### **A. DEVELOPMENT, RELIEF AND REHABILITATION ORGANIZATIONS**

Palestinian diaspora development relief and rehabilitation organizations include institutions such as Association Najdeh in Lebanon, the Welfare Association in Switzerland, Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and Universities’ Educational Trust for Exchange with Palestinians (Unipal) in the United Kingdom and American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), United Palestinian Appeal and the Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development in the United States.

The areas of work covered by these institutions include nutrition and other basic supplies, housing, medical relief, support for education at all levels and cultural development. Some institutions such as the Welfare Association and ANERA cover all of these areas while others, such as Unipal, which deals with education, focus on a single area. These organizations attempt to ensure that their support will enable the Palestinian people to build their capacity for self-reliance to the extent possible under conditions of occupation.

The population groups that these institutions serve are mainly refugees and Palestinians living under occupation. Two population groups that are largely neglected by diaspora institutions are Palestinians residing in Lebanon and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Although the situations of these two population groups are very different, they share two common characteristics. Both need support in order to articulate their rights to education, health and work, among other rights and both need external

assistance for development because state assistance for this purpose in their country of residence is limited.

Some of the institutions mentioned above were established by Palestinians, namely, the Welfare Association, the Jerusalem Fund and Association Najdeh while others were established by Europeans and Americans upset by the violations of international law and human rights and determined to provide support in the face of their governments' passivity or active collusion. A British woman founded Unipal, for example, using her own resources that she and her husband subsequently transferred to the organization. Americans founded ANERA shortly after the 1967 war. In most cases, individuals or groups have decided to establish an institution after meeting Palestinians or visiting Palestine.

Institutions in this category have had considerable success in institution-building. In other words, they have managed to maintain themselves, their staff and resources in order to sustain their efforts to serve the Palestinians. A number of institutions established by Palestinians have been through difficult times, partly because of insufficient experience with institution-building in the non-profit sector, but a number have also managed to survive and grow.

The Welfare Association was established in 1983, following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The Welfare Association was the only institution established with the specific purpose of supporting Palestinian development. It engaged in comprehensive programme planning, monitoring and evaluation and had a solid budget for doing so. However, during the 1980s, the Welfare Association raised the question of whether or not development was possible under conditions of occupation. The conference that it convened on this subject in Oxford did not reach any definitive conclusions.

#### B. RESEARCH AND INFORMATION BODIES

A number of institutions abroad support education and research on the Palestinian question. Some, such as the Institute of Palestine Studies in Lebanon, the United States and France, were established decades ago by Palestinians. Others, such as the Association of American University Graduates and, more recently, the Trans-Arab Research Institute, were established by Palestinians and other Arabs and focus on the Palestinian cause in a broader sense. These groups have played important roles in the provision of educational materials and resources, although some have experienced institution-building and budgetary problems.

Their work is being carried forward by new groups, such as the Electronic Intifada, using the Internet and other information technology tools. This group was established in 2001 and has done an extraordinary job in reaching out with daily news items and reports from Palestine, working with volunteers on a shoestring budget.

### C. COMMUNITY GROUPS

Over the years, several associations have sprung up to nurture and maintain relationships among Palestinian diaspora communities. These include institutions such as the Ramallah Association in the United States and the Association of Palestinians in the United Kingdom. Some community associations in the United States have been able to institutionalize, and hold annual conventions that are attended by thousands of Palestinians and raise thousands of dollars. While such groups primarily cater to the needs of communities in the United States, they also provide valuable support and funding to their hometowns.

However, groups such as the Association of Palestinians in the United Kingdom continue to operate on a volunteer basis, without staff and other resources. This is partly because the nature of European society differs from that in the United States, where there is an established model of “hyphenated” American identities, such as Irish-Americans or Polish-Americans and the majority of Americans, with the exception of native Americans, are from an “old country”.

In recent years, Palestinian activists in the diaspora have begun to organize in order to advocate the right of return. Al-‘Awdah, the Palestine Return Center was formed after the first conference on the right to return was held in Boston in 2000 and brought together hundreds of Palestinians from across the United States. Al-‘Awdah has chapters in many different American cities and operates mainly on a volunteer basis. A similar group has formed in the United Kingdom.

A new initiative to collect data on Palestinian refugee communities in exile was launched by Nuffield College in Oxford in July 2004. Known as Civitas, the purpose of this project is to collate information on all groups and institutions dealing with Palestinians. Refugee communities will be asked about the type of structures that they would like in order to better communicate with their national representatives and the issues of importance that they would like to raise with their representatives. The project will run for 18 months and aims to enable refugees to participate in shaping their future.

### D. SOLIDARITY ORGANIZATIONS

Solidarity organizations are the largest group of institutions working with the Palestinians. Over the years, solidarity groups have sprung up throughout Europe, in Canada, the United States, South Africa and elsewhere. Shaml, a solidarity group established in 1994 by academics and human rights activists, even lists solidarity groups in Japan and Australia on its web site.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Available at; [www.shaml.org](http://www.shaml.org).

Many of these groups have come into being because of the presence and activism of Palestinians who have successfully mobilized their own networks to organize support for their rights while other groups were formed by groups and individuals of various nationalities outraged by the violations of international law and human rights.

Solidarity groups often combine information with advocacy, as is the case of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU), established some years ago in the United Kingdom by pro-Arab British politicians, as well as Women Against Occupation, a group established by activists in Canada and the activist group Stop United States Tax-Funded Aid to Israel Now! (SUSTAIN), which has chapters throughout the United States.

The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) was established by Palestinians living under occupation and expatriates after the start of the second intifada in order to protect Palestinians facing the occupying forces. Activists from ISM also returned to tell the story of occupation to their communities and media in the West. The international prominence that the movement has gained is due in part to the fact that some of its members were killed in their efforts to protect Palestinian lives and homes using tactics of non-violent resistance.

Many Palestinian solidarity groups are active on university campuses throughout the United States and United Kingdom. The European parliament is another arena in which these groups are now active. A recent phenomenon is the growth of strong Jewish anti-occupation groups in the United States with agendas based on human rights and social justice that are very close to the Palestinian agenda, such as Jews Against the Occupation (JATO) and the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). Several groups established to support Arab American civil rights, such as the American Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI) also have a strong Palestinian focus, which is evident at their annual conventions.

Increasingly, such groups are working to hold governments accountable for their foreign policy as it relates to Israel and Palestine and corporations accountable for their investments. In this regard, two notable and relatively new developments have taken place, one at the national and the other at the international level. At the national level, a number of advocacy groups in the United States formed an umbrella coalition in 2001 known as the United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. Membership of the coalition has grown from four to more than 140 member groups in a mere three years. Member groups include national organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee, ADC, Global Exchange, SUSTAIN and Black Voices for Peace, in addition to local groups such as the Oregon-based Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights, other Muslim, Christian and Jewish groups as well as Arab-, African- and Asian-American groups. The focus is on holding the Government of the United States accountable for its foreign policy within the



framework of international law and human rights. The strategy of the coalition is information, education and mobilization. This is the beginning of the first serious movement against the Israeli occupation of Palestine at the national level in the United States.

At the international level, the United Nations is once again convening international conferences for non-governmental organizations working to support Palestinian rights. These conferences were held on an annual basis throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, when the participating NGOs filled the halls of the United Nations. However, once the Oslo Accords were signed the international support movement disbanded. It is now being rebuilt. Three successive United Nations conferences were held in September 2002, 2003 and 2004 in New York. The conferences provide an invaluable opportunity for networking and the exchange of information and experience and serve to set the stage of an international movement against the occupation.

Efforts such as these are important because their objective is to influence and shift public opinion so that it, in turn, influences and shifts public policy. They do so by focusing on the occupation, holding governments accountable and providing an umbrella or framework through which groups can network across borders, exchange skills and experience and grow.

### **III. REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE: MOVING FORWARD**

Many Palestinian institutions abroad have focused on advocacy and information in order to promote human rights and international law. Some have supported relief, rehabilitation and steadfastness. A small number have supported socio-economic development. The experience of these institutions raises a number of questions, as to whether Palestinian institutions in the diaspora should be asked to redouble their efforts in support of development alongside their other efforts, whether there is a need to identify the major obstacles in the way of more meaningful support and whether this experience can provide guidance for moving forward effectively.

#### **A. DEVELOPMENT VERSUS STEADFASTNESS**

The Oslo years and the second intifada have demonstrated that development cannot be sustained without national liberation, for two reasons. First, it is impossible to manage national resources under occupation when the occupying power is intent on colonizing land, water and other resources. During the seven years between the signing of the first Oslo Accords in 1993 and the year 2000, the number of settlers in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem doubled, from 200,000 to 400,000. The Israeli occupying forces have repeatedly destroyed whole sectors of the Palestinian economy as well as the institutions of government and society, most dramatically since April 2002. The Israeli occupying forces control all entrances and exits to and from Occupied Palestine so that any flow of people, goods and even humanitarian

relief is entirely dependent on Israel. All earlier development efforts in Occupied Palestine have been laid to waste.

The second reason is that a government cannot be held accountable to its people for good governance or its neighbours for security under conditions of occupation. The Palestinian Authority, established by Oslo, has been continuously eroded since its establishment. The debate on national liberation has been transformed from the drive for freedom and self-determination for the Palestinian people to the need for security for Israel. The present situation has effectively made the Palestinians responsible for the security of the occupying Israeli soldiers and settlers.

In view of these two reasons, it could prove difficult to make the case that Palestinian institutions should support development in the same way that NGOs do for and in other third world countries. However, it is possible and necessary to argue that solidarity work should be linked with relief and support for rehabilitation and protection, in order to support Palestinian steadfastness and survival until independence. For example, AFSC HQ in Philadelphia organizes regular speaking tours for Quaker groups throughout the United States. These groups now collect funds from their members for the benefit of the Ramallah Friends Schools, among other things. Other solidarity groups attempt to twin cities, such as the city of Olympia in Washington State (home of slain ISM activist Rachel Corries) with Rafah in Gaza. Friends of Birzeit University groups have been formed in the United Kingdom and the United States that provide resources and advocate freedom of education.

A two-way process of education is supported by Unipal, which provides English-language teaching in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon and introduces British students to a knowledge and understanding of the situation and daily lives of refugees. The Jerusalem Fund intends to do more to link its humanitarian relief programme with the work of the Palestine Center, the Fund's educational arm established in 1991, so that resources invested in Palestine can serve to make the Palestinian story better known in the United States.

Through redoubling efforts to link relief and rehabilitation on the one hand and solidarity and advocacy on the other, Palestinian institutions abroad can support Palestinian steadfastness in a number of ways, as their efforts serve to:

- (a) Enable Palestinians to tell their own story and allow the international community to hear it first hand, so contributing to the growth of an international movement for Palestinian human rights;
- (b) Provide protection for Palestinian resources and investments by mobilizing diaspora communities to help a school or provide free passage for goods and services;
- (c) Increase the sources of assistance reaching the Palestinians to enable them to survive and endure until independence is achieved.

## B. VISION AND GOALS

Perhaps the most serious problem facing Palestinian institutions in the diaspora is the absence of a vision and strategy for the Palestinian people articulated clearly and cogently by the leadership. Without a vision and strategy to achieve common goals, efforts remain scattered. Moreover, the arena is left open for Israel to frame the debate in terms of its own security and the lack of a Palestinian partner.

Peace efforts have long focused on bringing the parties back to the negotiating table. However, negotiations that take place under occupation cannot lead to sovereign independence, as is evident from the 15 years of negotiations that began with the Madrid Conference in 1991 and continue to the present day. In fact, under the Geneva Conventions, direct agreements between an occupying power and an occupied people are presumptively invalid for this very reason.<sup>3</sup>

In view of this, the role of Palestinian institutions in the diaspora must be to push for an end to occupation. Once that is achieved, Palestinians must be given the right to self-determination in line with the principles of international law and United Nations resolutions. Indeed, a critical role for Palestinian institutions is to shift the framework of debate from Israeli security to Palestinian rights, including the right to self-determination. Palestinians in the diaspora do not live amid the chaos and turmoil of occupation, which clouds vision and judgement. They must use this advantage to help develop a clear vision and strategy for the Palestinian struggle.

This will involve using a common language in order to convey the message. The key principles of human rights and international law provide a framework and language around which all groups can agree. This framework has enabled diverse groups to find a home in the United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. As a minimum, diaspora institutions should promote the use of the terms “Palestine” and “Occupied Palestine”.

Without a clear vision, strategy and goals, different groups will target different issues with no common framework and their scattered efforts will not add up to an irreversible drive for independence and self-determination.

## C. BUILDING A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY

Palestinian institutions need to invest in their own understanding of international law and human rights and then broaden the understanding of the communities in which they live. The Palestinian cause rests on human rights and international law but the vast majority of people working in peace and social justice

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<sup>3</sup> See United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation Fact Sheet, “Ending the Occupation: It’s the Law”. Available at: [www.endtheoccupation.org](http://www.endtheoccupation.org)

issues have very little knowledge of what this means and simply pay lip service to the subject.

An understanding of the conventions signed by governments on the regulation of behaviour in wartime, under occupation, and in times of peace is essential if governments are to be held to account for their policies, not just with regard to Palestine but also Iraq and other areas in which international agreements have been violated. This also means that Palestinian institutions must at least understand if not engage with other social justice and human rights issues. Solidarity is not a one-way street.

In order to build a human rights community, it is important for Palestinian institutions to invest in mobilizing the Arab community and not take its support for granted. New generations are growing up without any information about the conflict or its history.

#### D. SUPPORTING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF DIASPORA INSTITUTIONS

Most Palestinian institutions need support in order to support Palestinian relief, rehabilitation and independence. The capacity to manage staff and committees, raise funds and establish realistic goals and work plans that appears to be second nature in Western cultures is less common in the Arab world. Still, these capacities can be learned and investment must be made in these areas. The good news is that the younger generations of Palestinians and Arabs growing up in the diaspora are absorbing these knowledges as their own second nature. The hardships caused by dispersal are compensated by the fact that this has led the Palestinian people to grow in maturity and strength.

#### E. AGENDA FOR ACTION

Four priorities should head the agenda for action by Palestinian institutions in the diaspora, as follows:

- (a) Link relief and rehabilitation with information and advocacy;
- (b) Contribute to a common vision, message and goals based on human rights and international law;
- (c) Invest in the understanding of human rights and international law by groups and individuals in the international movement in support of the Palestinian people and in its links with other peace and justice movements;
- (d) Invest in the capacities of the Palestinians under occupation as well as expatriates in the diaspora to manage and build sustainable institutions.