
AdvocacyNet

News Bulletin 93, February 1, 2007

THE WEST'S AID EMBARGO UNDERMINES THE CAMPAIGN FOR PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS

An AdvocacyNet Opinion, by Iain Guest

As US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice prepares for her three-way meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, she might also want to work in some time for Palestinian women's advocates.

They would probably tell her what they told me during a recent visit to the West Bank and Gaza: by withholding economic aid from Palestinian government institutions and trying to pressure Palestinians into rejecting Hamas, the US and its allies have contributed to a humanitarian disaster, weakened their Palestinian friends and strengthened Hamas' legitimacy. If Hamas is to be beaten, it will be through hearts and minds, not aid embargos.

No-one understands this better than women. The Palestinian women's movement has made huge strides since Oslo, particularly in the area of political participation. But its members are now struggling to preserve these gains in the face of a devastating social crisis and a sophisticated political campaign by Hamas.

This poses yet another threat to the battered Oslo agenda. One of the achievements of the Oslo Accords was to channel the energy of activist Palestinian women into the challenge of building a Palestinian state based on equality and tolerance.

This was not appreciated by the hierarchy of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was deeply patriarchal. As the second intifada ground on, women's NGOs also suffered from a popular perception that they were more at home in UN conferences than at the barricades. Hamas, meanwhile, was building a constituency in the villages.

Nonetheless, the movement for women's rights produced solid gains, and led to the establishment of a Ministry for Women within the Palestinian National Authority, and quotas for women in the local and parliamentary elections. There are, at present, 532 women local councilors throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

These achievements have been all but lost during the last year of poverty, war and political upheaval. The impact on women has been particularly severe. Violence on the streets has resulted in increased domestic violence. An alarming number of pregnant women are anemic. Only 10% of the women in Gaza are in the workforce – and most of them are unemployed.

As in Iraq and Afghanistan, women also appear increasingly vulnerable to fundamentalism. Last month in Gaza, a group called The Swords of Islam claimed responsibility for throwing acid in the face of one young woman who was dressed “immodestly,” and warned women in Gaza to wear the *hijab* scarf. Internet cafes are routinely denounced in mosques for spreading pornography.

At the political level, the Hamas Women’s Minister, Maryam Mahmoud Hussein Salah, has turned the women’s ministry into a bully pulpit from which to attack women’s rights. Experienced civil servants from the Education and Women’s ministries have been fired.

Most of those purged have been from the Fatah party of President Abbas, but Hamas has successfully appealed to the social conservatism of Fatah parliamentarians in killing a draft family law that would end polygamy, raise the age of marriage (from 15 in the West Bank) and give women equal inheritance rights.

Palestinian feminists have been lobbying for a progressive family law for years. The fact that they have been outmaneuvered attests not only to Hamas’ political skills, but also to the appeal of the Hamas message. Huda Naim, one of six Hamas women parliamentarians, told me in Gaza that polygamy protects young women from war, premarital affairs, and the pressure of finding a job. In today’s Gaza, says Ms. Naim, it is the family that needs protection, not women.

This plays well in a society under siege. Indeed, Hamas’s success has been to portray women’s rights - like human rights in general - as “Western” and irrelevant to the tribulations of ordinary Palestinians. This is what has to be challenged.

And it can be done. Given the impact of the crisis on women it is not hard to make the case that women need special protection, and the results are often unexpected. Fatemah al-Khaldi, a divorced social worker, started an organization named Women For Life in the West Bank town of Bidya, to rally women against the Israeli Wall. After the group began to receive complaints from battered women, it began offering legal aid. Ms. El-Khaldi views herself as a Palestinian nationalist, but also a women’s advocate.

There is also growing demand from women for information technology. The Internet might appear threatening to fundamentalists in Gaza, but it promises economic opportunity to women in Qalkilya, a town on the West Bank that is surrounded by the Israeli Wall. I met one woman who spends several hours a week in an internet café, downloading henna designs which she sells at ceremonies. It is her sole source of income.

Such activities turn “women’s empowerment” into a practical agenda that can compete with Hamas’ religious appeal. They can also benefit from the fact that Palestinian women now have their own representatives in local government, thanks to the local elections. I met with a group of women councilors in the town of Tulkarm who are bursting with ideas for women’s projects.

Whether they will have any money to work with is doubtful, because the West's aid embargo also extends to municipal councils. This is totally counter-productive.

If Western donors are serious about building a peaceful democratic state in Palestine, they must ease the pressure on ordinary Palestinians. This will require first that Israel lifts the siege, which is illegal and impossible to justify on security grounds; and second, that Western aid is resumed – if not to central ministries, then to local councils.

So far from “rewarding Hamas,” this would rob Hamas of its main claim to legitimacy and allow secular opponents to compete on an even playing field. From what I have seen, many engaged women would be happy to take them on in defense of women's rights. The way would also be open to invest in community-based women's services. And as we have seen repeatedly in war-torn societies, to invest in women is to invest in peace.

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