



On the Record: Palestinian Civil Society Under Siege

Issue 7: The Challenge of Agricultural Development

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From the Editorial Desk: Self Sufficiency is Survival

Olive trees against a rocky hillside.... The solitary shepherd with his flock.... The crowded country market...

Picturesque scenes like this have been associated with Palestine for two millennia. They bear witness to the importance of the land in the life of Palestinians.

In spite of this, agriculture has been declining steadily for several decades. By the time of the uprising last September, the sector accounted for just 7 percent of the GDP of the combined economy of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. [1]

What explains the decline? Part of it has to do with trends that are common throughout much of the world -- urban sprawl, migration from the countryside, poor farming practices. But much of it has to do with the 'de-development' of agriculture in the territories that has occurred under Israeli occupation.

Occupation has denied Palestinian farmers the chance to export their produce to markets where they might compete with Israeli producers. Arable land has been expropriated for settlements. Olive trees -- an essential form of livelihood -- have been torn down to make way for roads or as punishment for security incidents. Palestinian laborers -- like the young man who was profiled in the last issue -- have been driven to leave the land and work in Israeli factories. All this has weakened the agricultural sector.

Occupation also gave Israel control over water, which is perhaps the single most important natural resource in these thirsty lands. According to the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), the Israeli Water Authority destroyed Palestinian wells and exhausted Palestinian water supplies after it took over control of water in the territories in 1982. [2] This exacerbated the loss of water caused by salinity and leaky pipes and further

reduced the amount of water available to Palestinian farmers.

Palestinians feel that the Oslo peace process accelerated the degradation of their rural economy. In the first place, Oslo led to the construction of more Israeli settlements, and more land being expropriated. Second, the policy of closure (first implemented in 1993) made it even more difficult for Palestinian farmers to export to their main market (Israel) and to trade between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Agricultural sales from Gaza to the West Bank fell by two-thirds between 1993 and 1997.

Many Palestinians were also angered that the Oslo process did not make more water available for their personal and agricultural use. Water was designated a 'final status issue' under Oslo. At the same time, the interim agreement (Oslo 2) also made provisions for water: it was agreed that Israel would retain overall control over the flow and volume to the territories, but that the amount available to the Palestinian areas would be increased. The Palestinian Authority would decide how water was used in the areas under its control.

This arrangement has ended up by favoring Israel and depriving Palestinians of sovereignty over yet another productive resource in the territories. It is estimated that three-quarters of all the water that comes from the West Bank goes to Israel. This delegation was told that each Israeli settler uses on average 1,450 cubic meters of water a year -- compared to the 83 cubic meters consumed by the average Palestinian.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that agricultural productivity declined during the years of Oslo and that 8 percent of the entire Palestinian population was receiving some kind of emergency relief aid (including food aid) by 1997. [3]

Coming after all of this, the siege imposed during the current intifada has pushed Palestinian farmers to the very brink. On the one hand, there has been a precipitous 'return to the land.' Thousands of unemployed Palestinians on the West Bank have retreated to their family plot of land in an effort to survive. (As noted earlier, the population of the Gaza Strip is mainly composed of refugees with no such assets to exploit).

On the other hand, these West Bankers are returning to land that is poor and resources that have been exhausted by occupation. They have no water for irrigation and no money for fertilizer or insecticide. They themselves lack basic farming skills because they were forced to leave the land and work in Israel. They are hemmed in on all sides by Israeli regulations. Many of their traditional markets are now closed.

The result is that many more Palestinians are suddenly dependent on agriculture at a time when the land has never been less productive.

In this issue, we look at the efforts of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) to help the farmers of Beit Duqqa -- a small country town on the West Bank -- to ride out the storm.

PARC was set up by four agronomists in 1983. Over the next ten years PARC grew rapidly and also underwent the transformation described earlier in this series, from a community-based

popular organization to a professional service provider. By 1993 the organization had a salaried staff of almost 250 and was providing over half the agricultural extension services in the territories.

How would PARC fare against the criticisms that are sometimes leveled against Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) -- that they have lost touch with their popular base and are pushing a model of development that is too 'abstract' and detached from the political struggle?

Some of the answers are touched on in this issue. PARC can still draw on a network of village volunteers to work on community projects, so to this extent it retains something of a popular base. With respect to its development activities, PARC is trying to make farmers more productive by helping them to reclaim land and conserve water. PARC officials encourage sensible environmental practices like re-cropping and the recycling of waste materials. Where appropriate, they promote new techniques such as dry-land farming.

PARC also pays particular attention to the needs of rural women. In 1993, PARC set up a women's unit that offered extension services and training in nutrition, bee-keeping, gardening, and food processing. Shortly afterwards, PARC also set up a Women's Revolving Fund, which extended loans of between \$2,000 and \$5,000 for plant and animal production. Grassroots International supports a group of 'women's clubs' in the Jericho area, which PARC uses to train women in a range of small-scale economic and agricultural activities. Israeli soldiers prevented this delegation was from visiting the clubs in Jericho.

With these projects, PARC is trying to empower farmers by making them more productive and self-sufficient, and in many respects that is no different from the work of any other NGO trying to promote rural development. But this is Palestine, under occupation. Anything that seeks to increase the self-sufficiency of farmers is also trying to boost the independence of the territories. To this extent, PARC's work is extremely political -- anything but 'detached.'

The real problem -- as with all of the profiles in this series -- is that the task is made so much harder by occupation. The Israeli siege is forcing Palestinian farmers to dig deep into their reserves just to stay alive. They are working soil that is already exhausted; cutting ties with their normal suppliers and outlets; turning inwards and producing for their own family instead of their community.

This is not a viable and sustainable model of rural development. PARC's efforts -- while valiant -- can do little more than slow the tide. The only possible solution is full Palestinian sovereignty over land and resources.

Reclaiming the Rocky Slopes of Beit Duqqa

From the hill where we stood, the land below looked rocky and unproductive. But Bahjat Hussein warned us not to be misled by appearances. In the summer, he said, the valley was ablaze with the blossom of peaches and apples. Palestinian soil is not as barren as it appears.

Bahjat Hussein is fortunate to live in the West Bank village of Beit Duqqa, which has been

targeted for a full-blown integrated rural development program. This project is supported by the PARC, which has chosen to provide concentrated help to a handful of communities in the territories.

According to officials in PARC's head office in Beit Hanina, Beit Duqqa was selected because its farmers have shown themselves to be energetic and hard working. This goes back to the 1980s, when PARC had a network of community volunteers throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip as mentioned earlier. Bahjat Hussein was one of them. Several are still committed to PARC and ready to work for free.

Sixty percent of Beit Duqqa's 1,300 residents are engaged in agriculture, and this gives the town a certain economic resilience that is lacking in towns like Beit Liqqya, which was profiled in the last issue. Beit Liqqya is almost totally dependent on the job market in Israel.

PARC's first goal in Beit Duqqa has been to increase agricultural productivity. The soil around Beit Duqqa may be rich, but the land is rocky and steep. Bahjat Hussein and his relatives own 50 dunums, and in a normal year they would expect to produce half a ton of fruit and olives. At one stage they tried to grow wheat, but the slopes could not hold water and the entire crop perished.

Some years ago, to encourage land reclamation and increase productivity, PARC agreed to negotiate with some local landowners to see whether they would be prepared to surrender some land to the residents of Beit Duqqa. In return, the residents would agree to reclaim some of the landowners' remaining land. A deal was struck.

Land reclamation is backbreaking work. Rocks have to be removed and terraces built before the soil can even be turned. Bahjat Hussein and his relatives worked night and day. When it came time for planting, PARC purchased half the seedlings and brought them to the village.

The farmers grew vegetables on their land during the first two years while the new trees and vines were maturing. Last summer, the trees produced their first crop -- over a ton of apples, almonds, peaches, apricots, and grapes. It was, says Bahjat Hussein, a 'golden harvest.' He and the others had taken a small step on the path to self-sufficiency.

Community Spirit

One of the things that makes Beit Duqqa interesting to its supporters like PARC is an effective local government. The village is run by a village council that comprises five members (including Bahjat Hussein).

These councilors have not been popularly elected, but rather chosen by the five large clans that make up the town's population. This is less than democratic, but the Beit Duqqa councilors take their job seriously.

According to Bahjat Hussein, they successfully lobbied the electricity company not to cut off supplies when the villagers found themselves unable to pay bills. They have also managed to pay for several students from poor families to attend university. The money for this and other public works comes from a small tax on the sale of water and the collection of solid waste, both of

which are in the hands of private contractors.

It is hard to draw firm conclusions from this delegation's short visit, but there is a mood of community spirit in Beit Duqqa and an ability to rise above adversity. By helping itself, Beit Duqqa has also attracted support -- not just from PARC, but from the Palestinian Authority. Bahjat Hussein had high praise for the Authority, which he said had built a girls' school and paved the village roads. It was not often that we heard unqualified praise for the Palestinian Authority.

Reducing Dependency

As noted above, self-sufficiency in the context of occupation has always meant reducing dependency on Israel. This is the unspoken goal of many of PARC's projects in Beit Duqqa and elsewhere.

For example, PARC has put up \$45,000 to build a water filtration plant that will turn liquid sewage into water for irrigation. This will have plenty of beneficial side effects. It will enable fifteen families to water their land. The project will also provide employment, because PARC has also hired villagers to build an access road to the plant. The road will open up 500 dunums of isolated land beyond the village.

But the main objective is to make the farmers of Beit Duqqa less dependent on Israel for water. This is important, not just because all of Beit Duqqa's water comes from rain (which only falls during certain months of the year). We were told that the Beit Duqqa council had asked to construct a large water tank on a nearby hill to collect rainwater, but that the Israeli authorities vetoed it.

PARC is also trying to cushion Beit Duqqa against encroachment from Israeli settlements. After the Israelis built a new settlement opposite Beit Duqqa, blocking off roads and limiting access to markets in Ramallah, the villagers of Beit Duqqa took matters into their own hands and repaired an old road that runs through the valley.

In good weather, this road allows farmers from seven villages to bypass the settlement, evade closure, and reach Ramallah by a circuitous route. But the road is often unusable in winter, so the villagers have asked PARC for gravel and material for help in shoring it up. This would make Beit Duqqa and the surrounding villages just a little less vulnerable to the roadblocks and settlements.

The Olive Oil Company

No matter how hard he tries, the current emergency has shown Bahjat Hussein that he will never be completely independent of the world outside his village as long as he expects to sell produce.

Bahjat Hussein was able to sell \$10,000 worth of grapes last summer (grapes that were produced on his new vines). He delivered the grapes to his client but was not able to collect payment before the outbreak of the uprising on September 29. The crisis blocked all communications and financial transactions, and Bahjat Hussein suddenly found himself in a deep hole. He had been

counting on the money to see his family through the winter. Instead, we found him in exactly the same predicament as Nafez El-Dabbas, the migrant worker who was profiled in the last issue. Both men are digging deep into savings and wondering how to feed their large families.

PARC's response to the closure of local markets has been pragmatic: if the conventional route is blocked, find another way to get there.

One way is through cooperatives. Under a scheme supported by PARC, farmers from the area bring olive oil to a cooperative in Ramallah, where it is weighed and bottled for export to Europe. This is one small way that PARC is able to break the blockade and put some money in the pockets of farmers.

We visited the olive oil cooperative shortly before leaving the area. Eighteen members of the cooperative had been working for eight days to prepare almost 11,000 bottles of olive oil for export. If all went according to plan, the bottles would be packed on pallets, driven to the coast and then shipped to Belgium, where they would be sold in fair-trade stores operated by Oxfam.

This sort of scheme is highly beneficial because so many Palestinian families produce olives. Olive trees require very little input or attention, which makes them the perfect resource to own in an emergency. (This is also one reason why their destruction by Israelis is so damaging.) Bahjat Hussein owns olives, and so does Nafez El-Dabbas.

Olives are harvested and pressed during one month of the year. Farmers then take what they need for their own families and sell off any surplus. In good times, they will be able to stretch this process out over several months and sell when prices are high. But when times are hard, they will be forced to sell off any surplus more quickly.

The current crisis has made it almost impossible for farmers to sell oil in markets on their own terms, so they have been forced to sell off their surplus oil in their own villages at rock bottom prices, according to Salim Abu Ghazaleh who heads marketing for PARC.

When we visited the Ramallah cooperative, 720 farmers had sent oil to it. Each new consignment had been weighed and recorded before being filtered and stored. In an effort to spread the benefits, the cooperative rarely takes more than a third of any one farmer's total production. Each farmer will be paid on the basis of his contribution, once the deal is completed. Everyone gains from this arrangement, including the cooperative workers who earn about 65 shekels (\$20) a day, several of whom are women.

The cooperative is owned and managed by its 18 members, but it could not function without the support of PARC, which covers 70 percent of the running costs (rent and electricity). PARC also buys the cartons and oil bottles in bulk.

During the present siege, PARC's most important contribution has been to find the Oxfam market in Europe and arrange the shipping. On their own, Palestinian farmers could not possibly arrange for this. It is not simply a question of being under siege: Palestinian farmers cannot compete with European producers (Spain, Italy, and Greece), whose oil is heavily subsidized.

The money generated by the cooperative is modest, and in the five months since the start of the uprising, PARC had managed to send out two consignments of olive oil. When we visited, PARC officials were wondering whether they would pull off a third consignment, because the Israelis had refused to authorize the shipment until its day of departure. If they decided to block the export, PARC would be left with the cost of hiring a truck without being able to export the olive oil.

Retreat to the Land

The olive oil cooperative demonstrates the comprehensive nature of PARC's support for villages like Beit Duqqa. It starts with reclaiming the rocky slopes and ends by transporting produce to a European market. Short of selling produce directly, it is hard to see what more PARC could do.

Even so, PARC is barely scratching at the surface. Even when it makes a comprehensive commitment to a community like Beit Duqqa, it cannot provide enough investment to lift farmers out of poverty. The impact of the siege and the emergency is simply too vast and too crushing.

On its own, PARC cannot possibly begin to change this, and some might ask whether it should even try. Would PARC not be better advised to give up this attempt at conventional development and return to the strategy of mobilizing communities that allowed it to flourish in the 1980s?

Some clearly think so. Writing in the March 2000 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Nadine Picadou drew a sharp contrast between the lack of strategy behind the current uprising and the mobilization that had transformed villages like Beit Duqqa in 1987.

Back then, writes Ms. Picadou, villagers united around the goal of expelling Israel's forces of occupation. Today, they draw in on themselves to conserve dwindling resources: 'Loss of income leads people to fall back on renewed forms of family solidarity which undermine the independence of the individual, limit geographical mobility and reinforce relations with family and neighbor to the detriment of national solidarity.' [4]

Sara Roy raised the same concerns, warning of the impact of 'economic enclavization and autarky' on an economy already weakened by years of occupation and splintered by closure. Roy sees a 'turning inward of economic behavior away from international market relations towards more traditional activities and production modes.' Such trends, she warns, 'have further crippled the Palestinian economy.' [5]

This is one more reminder that self-sufficiency on its own is not enough. Unless it is part of a well-planned social movement, with goals, resources, training, community participation, and expert assistance, a 'return to the land' will degrade rather than enhance the rural culture that is so much a part of Palestinian life.

[1] Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (**PASSIA**), Jerusalem, 2001 Diary, p. 259.

[2] 'Palestinian wells were destroyed and water supplies dried up by widespread digging and pumping from deeper wells for Israeli use.' See note 1. Since occupying the territories, Israel has forbidden Palestinians to dig wells for agricultural purposes.

[3] Sara Roy, 'De-Development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society Since Oslo,' *The Journal of Palestine Studies* (Spring 1999), pp. 64-82.

[4] Nadine Picadou, 'Between National Liberation and State-Building,' *Le Monde Diplomatique* (March 2001).

[5] See note 3. Ms. Roy writes: 'Enclavization results from the diminution of economic activity between the occupied territories and Israel (and international markets) and the virtual termination of activity between the territories themselves. Economic enclavization describes a process of growing economic separation or partition or bifurcation that strikingly parallels its political counterpart, Bantustanization.'

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