



On the Record: Palestinian Civil Society Under Siege

Issue 1, Series Launch, June 4, 2001

From the Editorial Desk: Rising to the Challenge

Earlier this year Grassroots International (GRI), a human rights and development organization based in Boston, asked The Advocacy Project for help in promoting the work of eight Palestinian nongovernmental organizations that are supported by GRI.

In late February our two organizations sent a joint mission to the Palestinian territories. The mission was comprised of Souad Dajani, Program Coordinator for GRI's Middle East and Horn of Africa Program, and Iain Guest from The Advocacy Project.

This series of *On the Record* is a report of the mission. The principal author is Iain Guest.

Over the past year, The Advocacy Project has profiled civil society in several countries that have either emerged from wars or are still in crisis. They have included Bosnia, Kosovo, Cambodia, and Guatemala. In each country we found community activists who were rising to the challenge and providing essential support for a fearful, damaged population.

Nothing prepared us for what we saw in Palestine.

Palestinians have been under siege since September 28 last year, when the current Palestinian uprising broke out. According to a three-person mission that visited the territories on behalf of the UN Human rights Commission, Israel has treated the uprising - which followed the collapse of Oslo peace process - like a declaration of war. (1) Between September 28 and May 26 of this year Israeli soldiers and settlers have killed 501 Palestinians and seriously injured 14,207. 149 of those killed have been children under the age of eighteen. (2)

Coupled with this, Israeli forces closed the West Bank and Gaza Strip to the outside world and imposed severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods within the territories. The economic impact has been shocking: when this delegation visited the territories in February, we were told that 51.7 percent of the population on the West Bank, and 72 percent of those in the Gaza Strip were living below the poverty line.

This assault by Israel's formidable military machine is said to be aimed at 'deterring Palestinian terrorism.' Of course there has been violence on both sides and innocent Israelis have lost their lives - as happened in the terrible suicide bombing last Friday. That is inexcusable.

But from the first day of this uprising, when Israelis killed four unarmed Palestinian protesters, the Israeli response has been completely disproportionate to whatever threat exists. The strategy

of closure - cutting off Palestinian communities - is by definition indiscriminate. It is a vengeful act, aimed at crushing the spirit of the Palestinian people. It is also guaranteed to provoke desperate acts of retaliation.

If there is terrorism, it certainly comes from both sides. On one occasion, we were taken on a macabre tour of a neighborhood of El-Bireh, a suburb of Ramallah, that lies in the lee of the Israeli settlement of Psagot. Our guide was Hasan Barghouthi, Director of the Democracy and Workers Rights Center, which is one of the eight groups profiled in this series.

Barghouthi showed us the part of his house that is uninhabitable because of the shooting that periodically erupts from the settlement. He took us up to the roof (with some trepidation) and told us that the settlers periodically fire at his water tank.

At the time, this seemed slightly melodramatic, until we learned what happened to Naim Badran. Badran lived in the same area as Barghouthi, and shortly before we left Ramallah he rang the head office of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) where he worked. PARC is another of the organizations profiled in this series.

Badran announced that his house in Ramallah was being shelled from the direction of the Israeli settlement. He said that his house was on fire, and that he was going to get his children out before it was too late. Badran managed to rescue the children and was returning to put out the fire when another shell tore into his body and cut him to pieces.

As far as we could ascertain, there was no expression of regret or offer to investigate from the side of the Israelis. Instead, Badran entered the growing list of Palestinian 'martyrs.' His body was paraded through Ramallah at a public funeral. If the outside world took any notice at all, it would probably have seen the angry mourners and concluded this was another example of Palestinian fanaticism.

This series of *On the Record* is about the response of organizations like PARC and the DWRC to the violence and chaos that has swept the Palestinian occupied territories since the start of the current uprising. Over the next ten issues, readers will meet:

- Mental health counselors in Gaza helping a family whose house was demolished;
- Human rights monitors who have campaigned successfully against torture in Palestinian and Israeli jails, after themselves being detained and mistreated by both sides;
- A cultural center in a crowded refugee camp in Bethlehem which is using computers to empower young refugees and keep alive their dream of returning to the homes that were abandoned during the 1948 Palestinian refugee crisis;
- Villagers who have succeeded in doubling the productivity of their orchards - only to find that they cannot sell their produce in local markets because of the Israeli blockade;
- A 28 year-old Palestinian seamstress in Gaza who has used credit, and technical advice, to build a business worth \$200,000;
- A social worker who is helping village women to deal with incest in their families;

- Palestinian lawyers who have successfully prosecuted Israeli employers for cheating Palestinian migrant workers of their benefits.

Such activities, carried out in the middle of a war, begin to show how Palestinian civil society is providing essential services to a population that is under siege, while still addressing the deeper underlying inequalities of Palestinian society. It is an inspiring performance.

This series of *On the Record* takes the form of eleven separate issues, including this introduction.

The next two issues (2 and 3) set the context for a series of profiles that follow. Issue 2 looks at how Palestinian civil society has evolved from being an integral part of the Palestinian resistance movement to the more apolitical role of advocating for democracy and the rule of law. Issue 3 explains why Palestinian civil society was so disillusioned with the outcome of the Oslo peace process.

Issues 4-9 profile the work of the organizations that was visited by this delegation. These issues are organized around themes (mental health, human rights, women, workers, agricultural development and refugees).

Issue 10 looks at how civil society manages to speak with one voice, and how this has contributed to its effectiveness.

The final concluding issue (11) answers some of the questions about the role of civil society that were posed at the beginning of the series, and looks at some of the dilemmas that will face civil society as long as the war continues. It also contains a bibliography of sources used in this series.

Each of these issues is organized along the same lines. Each begins with an editorial comment, followed by a profile. Where possible, each issue also contains a direct contribution from the organization profiled. Readers can see photos of the individuals on advocacy net.

The delegation tried to visit all of the Palestinian projects that receive support from Grassroots International. This was not always possible. For example, Israeli soldiers turned us back from Jericho, where GRI supports a women's club. We were also prevented from visiting the village of Abu T'eimeh, in southern Gaza, where GRI supports a clinic.

Where possible, we tried to visit beneficiaries as well as head offices. In fact, the series makes no particular effort to distinguish between beneficiaries and agency workers. The difference should be clear enough to readers.

Furthermore, anyone working for a Palestinian organization is vulnerable to the same problems that affect the people they are trying to help. Dr Eyad El Sarraj, who heads the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), described what it is like to cower in terror as an Israeli Apache helicopter hovers overhead. Everyone in Gaza feels the strain from incidents like this, he said.

'The nature of this crisis is such that, according to this dominant Israeli perspective, the encounter with the Palestinians has moved from a relationship between an occupying Power and an occupied people to one between conflicting parties in a state of belligerency or war, implying a virtual absence of legal and moral constraints, at least on the Israeli side, provided only that a self-serving argument of military necessity is set forth.' (Report of the human rights inquiry commission, para 18. The UN reference for the report is E/CN.4/2001/121, March 16, 2001)

(2) Figures from the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), May 26 2001.

Upcoming issues:

Issue 2: (Series Overview) From Resistance To Empowerment

Issue 3: Betrayed By Oslo

Issue 4: Feeling The Strain (The Gaza Mental Health Community Programme)

Issue 5: Empowering Women - From Small Families To Small Business (The Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees; The Women's Centre for Legal Aid And Counseling; The Women's Affairs Center - Gaza)

Issue 6: Breaking The Dependency Syndrome (The Democracy and Workers Rights Center)

Issue 7: Self-Sufficiency And Self-Survival (The Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees)

Issue 8: In Defense Of Human Rights (The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights)

Issue 9: The Palestinian Connection (The Ibdaa Cultural Center)

Issue 10: Speaking With One Voice (The Palestine NGO Network - PNGO)

Issue 11: Series Conclusion, Consolidated Bibliography