

1996 DIPLOMATIC

23 January

Visit of a German Bundestag Delegation (Election Observers)

Topic: Current Political situation in the Palestinian Territories and Elections

Participants: Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Mr. Feldman, MP, Germany; Kai Boeckmann, German Representative Office, Jericho; Martin Kobler, Head of German Representative Office, Jericho; Waltraud Schoppe, MP (Alliance '90/Green Party); Hermann Groehe, MP (CDU/CSU); Dagmar Schmidt, MP (SPD); Dr. Olaf Feldmann, MP (FDP); Jamil Rabah, Researcher, JMCC, Jerusalem; Sheikh Jamil Hamami, Director, Islamic Cultural and Scientific Society, Jerusalem; Suleiman Abu Dayyeh, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung; Terry Boullata, WACT, Ramallah; and HE Afif Safieh, Head of the Palestinian Mission to the UK and to the Vatican.

SUMMARY

The visiting MPs were part of the EU Election Unit and had been to various West Bank cities as observers on election day.

Jamil Rabah started by surmising that the elections were the first political elections in Palestinian history and thus an important historic event for the Palestinian people. He said traditional opposition movements will be weakened to the advantage of the mainstream and a new opposition that may emerge within the elected Council. However, he predicted that if there is not much change in the political situation within six months or so, the traditional opposition will gain more strength. He noted that Fatah benefited a great deal in that much of the opposition did not participate. This gave Fatah 75-80% of the seats despite the fact that it has only 40-45% of popular support. In addition, the recent redeployments of the Israeli army gave Fatah a boost. Of the 88 members of the Council, 51 are from Fatah lists throughout the various constituencies. Of these, 33 did not run as Fatah candidates but as independents as they were not placed on the official Fatah list. One elected PLC member is from Fida, another is closely linked to the PFLP, and three or four members can be said to be close to the Islamists although they run as independents. The rest of the Council are independents. Rabah added that the outcome of the Council election as well as for the Presidency was expected and reflected the latest pre-election forecasts.

Sheikh Jamil Hamami thanked the visitors for their interest in Palestinian issues and stressed that the Palestine Question is far from being solved. He confirmed that the outcome of the elections was no surprise and that a "one-color council" was expected. He said that the Islamists' pre-judgment of the elections was confirmed, including the interference of the Israelis in Jerusalem. Despite the problems during the elections, there were a great many positive things, an example being that the Palestinians as a people - regardless of their political background - conducted the elections in a civilized manner and despite the difficult political situation. The example of former Minister Zakaria Al-Agha in Gaza has shown that

the people judge: he was meant to be elected but he did not succeed because he failed to deliver as a minister. Sheikh Hamami continued that it is the task of the Palestinians now to concentrate on two things: to continue in their attempts to consolidate their state, and to work on the many important political issues despite the problems with the elections and their results.

Asked about whether minorities who lost the election would respect the decisions of the majority, and what the positions of the Christians would be, *Sheikh Hamami* stated that he did not know of any place in the world where Muslims and Christians get along so harmoniously as in Palestine where no serious problems between the two faiths have ever emerged.

There were several questions about the role of Hamas. *Sheikh Hamami* said that Hamas and other Islamists who boycotted the elections do not feel as if they have missed the train. They doubt that the Council will be able to function properly as a representative for the people, and they will focus on the municipal elections, as many believe that they can serve the people better on a local level and that they command an important amount of popular support among Palestinians. He also said that there had been some discussion among Islamists to found an Islamic Salvation Party, which would also be open for Christians. He stressed that pluralism is accepted and promoted by Palestinians.

As to why Hamas boycotted the elections and now criticized the performance of the PNA and Arafat, *Sheikh Hamami* said he was sure that Hamas would have won some seats had they participated and that their boycott does not mean that they have given up their role as an extra-parliamentary opposition.

Terry Boullata noted that while there was a significant amount of attention given to a Christian quota there was insufficient attention to protecting the interests of women. Boullata noted that 53% of the population is women and that while their participation and contributions were readily accepted during the Intifada, they are now once again outside of the decision-making process.