**Democracy and Democratization in Palestine?   
Donor Organizations’ Perspective**[***Khalil Nakhleh***](http://146.185.164.77/passia.org/meetings/2003/July31-2003-Text.htm#_ftn1)***[[1]](http://146.185.164.77/passia.org/meetings/2003/July31-2003-Text.htm" \l "_ftn1" \o ")***

**My working hypothesis**

My main working hypothesis is this: in a situation like that of the current Palestinian situation in the West Bank and Gaza, where although an internationally sanctioned “National Authority”, with a well-defined jurisdiction, but without real sovereignty, exists, development of a democratization process is not feasible.  Thus, in the current Palestinian context, the prevalent “hit and run”, short-term interventions at “promoting democracy”, by various donor countries, are a waste of resources, with none or very minimal impact, and that resources should be redirected towards more sustained, main stream, public, educational efforts—the necessary pre-requisite for a well-entrenched societal democratization.

**Some conceptual clarification**

Democratization:

It is simply used here as the process of building and promoting democracy, whereby the governance system is based on the rule of the majority, and where the power is invested in the people who exercise this power through a system of representation.  Such a process of building and promoting democracy, and instituting good governance has been recognized to be a very lengthy process, and largely indigenous (i.e., it cannot be transplanted from outside the society).

The context of non-sovereignty:

In the framework of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian National Authority was never viewed as a sovereign entity.  The degree of whatever sovereignty it possessed was determined by Israel.  The most concise description of its non-sovereignty (as of May 1999) was summarized in the Task Force Report of the Council on Foreign Relations (1999:4), as follows:

*“ … The Palestinian Authority has lacked undisputed control over key resources such as land, water, and contiguous territory.  It does not have exclusive jurisdiction over the legal and administrative systems that serve its population, nor does it have unfettered access to external markets.  A large share of its operating budget—40 percent in 1998—remains dependent on transfers of taxes and duties collected by Israel on its behalf, reaching 40 percent of the Palestinian Authority’s domestic revenue in 1998.*

*Furthermore, by May 1999 Israel still exercised full control over 71 percent of the West Bank and 30 Percent of the Gaza Strip, and over the movement of people and goods between the two areas and within them.  Israel also held responsibility for overall security in an additional 19 percent of the West Bank that came under the territorial and functional control of the Palestinian Authority, and in which roughly half the local Palestinian population resided.  Finally, Israel has retained complete control over all external borders, airspace, territorial waters, and the electromagnetic sphere of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”*

This is the context of non-sovereignty to which I am referring.  However, this is not the complete story.  The status of non-sovereignty of the Palestinian National Authority has been remarkably exacerbated since October 2000, with the beginning of the intifada.  Furthermore, the reality and perception of non-sovereignty and dis-empowerment of the people themselves have become extremely magnified over the last 30 some months, with the almost total restriction on daily mobility and access to places of work, services, family visitations, etc., and the real danger to people’s lives and property posed by the occupying forces.

In sum, this is what I mean by the context of non-sovereignty—a comprehensive state of political, social and economic powerlessness.

**Donors’ involvement**

Most of the activities supported involved the provision of technical assistance to allow the Palestinian side to benefit in establishing the representative governance process and setting it on the right track.  The foci of these interventions were: the Palestine Legislative Council, the Executive Authority, the local government, the management of the electoral process, etc.  Additionally, actual interventions targeted human rights organizations, democracy and media, “peace education”, research and democracy, public awareness, etc.

Preliminary assessment: Why there is no impact?

To my knowledge, the only comprehensive assessment of donor development assistance to Palestine in the context of the Oslo Accords, was undertaken in 2000, by the World Bank and the Government of Japan (WB, 2000, “Aid Effectiveness in the West Bank and Gaza”.

In the absence of full-fledged impact analysis studies, the World Bank assessment of “Aid effectiveness” was based on the beneficiaries’ perceptions.  “Surveys confirm”, it was stated, “that Palestinians view the donor effort positively … The Palestinian public also reports marked improvements in a broad range pf services and local facilities … important social and economic foundations of development have been laid, creating a conducive environment for peace”.  However, “both economic growth and the current fiscal balance are fragile”.  **Although, no specific focus in the World Bank study was given to the process of democratization or democracy promotion interventions, one finds certain indications that could be relevant to our current concern,** within the comments on “institution-building” and “civil society”.  “Institution-building”, it was stated, “is an area of key concern … challenges remain with respect to fostering an effective, transparent, and accountable public sector”.  Whereas Palestinian perceptional surveys show positive response to various sectors, “only in the areas of drinking water and public institutions (including democracy and the rule of law) are evaluations negative overall”.

Whereas the general public rated “education and health” to be “the most important areas for future donor assistance, followed by water and electricity”, it considered “support for gender programs, vocational training, democracy (in the West Bank) and solid waste (in Gaza) … as relatively low priorities.”

Concerning “civil society”, the emerging trend is “worrying”.  The “warning signals” include “a declining level of resources available for NGO activities … diminishing ability of NGOs to organize and operate freely.”  This is worrying in view, inter alia, of the broader contribution of the NGO sector “to Palestinian pluralism and democracy.”

On the Palestinian level, the most comprehensive assessment of the status of the evolving democratic process can be found in the annual reports of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens’ Rights (PICCR).

In its *Fifth Annual Report*, covering the year 1999, the Commission summarized the cumulative status of citizens’ rights as follows:

*“There occurred no tangible improvement in the situation of citizen’s rights during the year 1999.  In general, the rule of law remains weak.  No serious steps were taken to establish a separation of governmental powers, and hence the Executive Branch continues to dominate state functions.  This domination of the Executive affected the situation of citizens’ rights and freedoms, as evidenced in curtailments and violations occurring throughout the year.  Although there has been improvement in some areas of citizens’ rights in comparison with past years, there has been delay and retreat in other areas.  Hence, the situation remains as is.  If there were signs of progress they were attributable first and foremost to the actions of particular individuals and not to the****consolidation of institutions upon a strong foundation of constitutional, legal, and administrative reforms.****”*(PICCR 2000:xi).

A recent Palestinian public opinion survey revealed that about 82 percent of those polled in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, believe that Israeli control over the life of the Palestinians—the political, social, economic, security and cultural—militates against the application of democracy in the Palestinian areas (Al-Ayyam Newspaper, 22.7.2001).

Preliminary analysis

I shall start by highlighting a number of general observations:

1-     It is clear from the available assessment reports and studies, and from actual observations on the ground, that the impact of specific donor interventions whose manifest aim is to establish and promote democratization in Palestinian society in the context of Oslo, since 1993, is minimal if non-existent.

2-     It is also clear, to any objective observer of the societal transitional process, that there is a big gap between the positive rhetoric of democratization, whether its source is the donors and/or the Palestinian Authority, and the actual behavior of governance on the ground, at the level of official institutions and individuals.

3-     Furthermore, it is clear that the average Palestinian citizen yearns to have his/her basic rights safeguarded under the law, in a transparent, accountable and equitable system, and to be able to decide on his/her representatives, who then will be responsible to serve him/her, and to defend his basic daily rights, and to hold them responsible for non-performance.

4-     Simply put, then, the objective of the democratization process under discussion is to establish the necessary institutions and values, which will assist the average Palestinian citizen in crossing the threshold from living under direct military occupation, where his/her basic rights were alienated, to living under a National Authority, where his/her basic rights are safeguarded.

5-     As indicated earlier, this is a lengthy process and is largely indigenous, i.e., cannot be instilled from outside the society and communities.

Some critical factors

There are two sets of factors: external and internal, i.e., factors impinging on Palestinian society from outside, and factors emanating from the society itself.

External factors:

         Absence of sovereignty of the Palestinian National Authority and control over human and physical strategic resources, in the context of continued military and economic occupation, collective and individual dispossession, and severe escalation of actual threats to people’s lives and livelihoods;

         Donors’ objectives, in the specific context of the Oslo Accords, and intervention approaches;

         Restricted targets and areas of intervention by donors, and confusion between the provision of new skills and expertise (e.g., managing the electoral process, running and documenting PLC debates, setting up a legislative library, etc), and assisting in instilling social values of good governance, generating public awareness and public discourse, etc.

Internal factors:

         Highly centralized and undemocratic “resistance movement” turned into a “National Authority”, sanctioned by international accords, and the absolute primacy of the Office of the President;

         Formal institutional governance structure, with little or no contents, and without an effective or authoritative mandate;

         Preponderance of traditional authoritarian and non-democratic cultural values, and their re-trenching in most aspects of society in response to obvious external threat;

         Low priority given to activate the NGO sector; on the contrary the attempt by the Government for control and containment is more evident (e.g., the establishment of a Ministry for NGOs, etc).

What is proposed?

To rectify what is happening, in my view, a seminal question needs to be asked: How is democratization introduced culturally, and what are the necessary components for the sustainability and entrenchment of such a process?

1. Intervention should be at the level of **Educational Philosophy and System**, because of the organic relationship between democracy and education.  If donors have a serious commitment to helping the Palestinians in promoting democracy, especially at the level of instituting democratic cultural values, then what has been done, as we saw above, has been a waste of resources.  The democratization process is lengthy and indigenous.  It requires societal and cultural transformation, which can be achieved cumulatively only through the educational system and communal inculcation.

1. If this what is desired, there is no alternative, in my view, but to intervene in a substantial and integrated way to **help**the responsible and relevant agencies in Palestine in **producing, applying and assessing a modern, democratic general education curricula,**which becomes the main vehicle of inculcating the necessary cultural values from one generation to the next.  In order to ensure the cumulativeness and integration, parallel important and selective interventions, which should target, on the one hand, children and youth in their informal learning settings, and on the other, research institutes whose strength and experience lie in posing difficult societal issues for critical deliberations.

1. An effective intervention has to be done in a **cluster approach, with sustained commitment,**and without pressure to show immediate results, in terms of artificial indicators, such as numbers of beneficiaries, etc., and with solid conviction that the ultimate objective is the promotion of democracy.

1. The overall governance environment has to be **decentralized,**in favorof local communities.  Definitely, the general educational system must be decentralized, in favor of Districts and Schools.  The benefiting **communities**must be actually empowered to determine the quality and nature of the education for their children.
2. The proposed cultural entrenchment of democratization cannot take place in the absence of a **vibrant, empowered and unfettered genuine NGO sector, with an active role to women organizations.**