

Groundwork for Hope

interview with Fidaa Shehada

In the long-running conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, democratization has been proposed as a source of resolution and, ultimately, peace. President Bush put the spotlight on Palestinian democratization with his 2002 announcement of the roadmap for peace in the Middle East, and many Palestinians have been working to create a democratic framework in which, despite the ongoing conflict, citizens can live normal lives. In a conversation with Fidaa Shehada, who has trained governmental, nongovernmental and private sector staff in crisis management, *democracy at large* explored the impact of the conflict on democracy building.

democracy at large: *How does the Palestinian-Israeli conflict affect your democracy-building work?*

Fidaa Shehada: It's hard to talk about democracy with people who live under occupation. For example, you'll hold a training workshop for young people about democratic good governance and how to hold local government accountable, and attendees will arrive sweaty from the checkpoints or a run-in with soldiers. If you talk about the importance of elections, the young people ask whether refugees and the Palestinians in East Jerusalem will vote. Sadly, democracy doesn't always seem relevant to the Palestinian situation. You talk about the responsibilities of the municipalities, and they know very well that their municipality doesn't have the sovereignty to implement what we are talking about.

dal: *How do you answer the questions they raise?*

FS: I explain that while the occupation is our major problem, we might do a better job of solving it if we address our internal problems. The young people who attend our workshops see the corruption in the Palestinian Authority, and it affects their lives. They know that the Palestinian Authority has control over this problem, and you hear them criticize the Palestinian Authority for it.

I assure them that we need to work on both the internal and the external situations, and I encourage them to examine what we can do internally to make our situation better. I also try not to talk about democracy in a theoretical way. I try to relate it to their daily lives. I break the concepts up and talk about the impact equal rights can have on their daily lives. Some people argue that democracy is a western concept, but I try to convince them that democracy is related to us, east or west. It's a way for people to express themselves and participate in shaping their future.

dal: *How does the conflict impact Palestinians' ability to build democratic institutions?*

FS: First of all, the Palestinians have no real sovereignty over their land and natural resources. The Legislative Council has no role in decisions related to peace negotiations or the economy. Even if they created a liberal legal and political system on paper, they don't have the power to implement it.

One very serious consequence of the conflict is that, with the closures, citizens can't meet with government officials and have a dialogue. Sometimes, the young people make an appointment with a legislator and then find, because of the closures, he

or she couldn't reach the office and they can't meet. Similarly, many court cases never go forward, because the judges can't reach the courts.

And now the Palestinians want to hold elections. But how do you hold elections under these conditions? How will candidates campaign, and how will voters reach the polling places?

Another impact—more difficult to quantify—is the loss of hope. One day, I didn't have a lot of work to do, so I called 20 of the young people I work with just to see how they were. I called them at 2:00 in the middle of a regular day, and I was shocked to find that almost half of them



were sleeping or doing nothing. These are healthy young people, and this should be the time in their lives when they have fun, go to school. But there was a closure, and the way to Birzeit University was closed. A big problem, especially for the young, is the feeling that they don't have a role. They've lost all hope. It's a big obstacle, and it threatens to impoverish and alienate a generation of young Palestinians.

During a later month-long curfew, I couldn't do any work so I gathered the participants in my project just to talk about the situation, which was really bad. I think it was the worst time in my work as a trainer, because the situation makes what you say about democracy seem unworkable. It's embarrassing. But I felt better after getting everyone together. They had many suggestions for action, like creating a listserv to chronicle what was happening. This is exercising democracy, even just holding a dialogue. Not everyone agreed with each other, but it was helpful to sit together and think wisely, to express our opinions, to offer each other support. The most important thing is to keep hold of hope. Afterwards, we could talk about how to make the municipalities work better, but in the bad times you just have to have hope.

dal: *How might democracy impact the conflict?*

FS: The tools of democracy will enable the Palestinian public to participate in decisions related to the conflict. This participation would help make them more responsible and accountable in any solution to the conflict. In addition, building

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and reforming our institutions will enable the wise use of Palestinian resources. Gaining control over corruption will also help Palestinians regain international trust and support, and redirect international focus towards the occupation and how to implement a just solution.

dal: *Did democracy seem within reach when the peace process was healthier?*


FS: Oslo was all about security; democracy has rarely if ever been a topic of discussion related to the peace process,

but democracy became a Palestinian need. People saw the corruption and realized that things weren't improving. In '97, a group of reformers got together and started investigating these issues. We in the NGO community started to organize roundtables and conferences on democracy and institution-building. But at the time of the second *intifada* [in 2000], a debate developed between those who want to build accountable institutions and those who think that the focus on democracy will undermine the national struggle for independence. Today,

there is a growing Palestinian constituency that believes in the need for democracy but the outcome of the internal debate is not yet clear.

dal: *Do you think there is hope for democracy in Palestine?*

FS: In the near future, I am not very optimistic. The future of democracy in Palestine depends on several factors, including the outcome of the present confrontation with Israel. In the long run, it will not be possible for Palestinians to develop a real democracy without a political settlement. Developing a successful Palestinian democracy also depends on changes in the discourse and programs of Palestinian parties with respect to their commitment to democratic procedures and values. In addition, changes in the Palestinian economy are of major importance: its internal integration as well as its relations with neighboring economies.

The Palestinian Authority is still a very young entity. Its legislators have little experience, and “democracy,” “citizenship,” “legislation” and even “corruption” are new terms for everyone. The concept of the “rights of citizens” is still becoming familiar. In the past, it was smart to avoid paying taxes and to disobey laws. If you didn't obey the rules of the Israelis, that was power. But when the person collecting the taxes is Palestinian, things should be different. Palestinians need training in citizenship. They are still learning what their rights are in a democracy. We need time to allow people to learn what it is like to be a citizen. 

Fidaa Shehada is a former National Endowment for Democracy Reagan-Fascell fellow and a former officer in crisis management at the Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development (Panorama).

An Israeli soldier and Palestinian man argue at a Bethlehem checkpoint.

