International Affairs Forum speaks with Mr. Ameer Makhoul, General Director of Ittijah, Union of Arab Community-Based Organizations, Israel.

International Affairs Forum: Please tell us about your NGO, Ittijah...

Mr. Ameer Makhoul: Ittijah is the Union of Arab Community-Based Associations within Palestine. These civil organizations are one of the main institutional components of the Palestinian community. Ittijah's member NGOs provide services to the Palestinian community in Israel for the development of the Palestinian civil society while advocating for structural changes on all levels. Ittijah focuses on networking, capacity building, and information sharing within the Palestinian community in addition to policy making as well as policy changing through lobbying efforts.

In order to understand better Ittijah's mission, I think that it is important to look at the history of Palestine and the events that took place in 1948; and realize that the establishment of the State of Israel not only did affect the cities and towns, where the Palestinians were living, but also it deeply affected their social systems and institutions, which were totally destroyed. By 1965, the Palestinians found selves under Israeli military control without any leading institutions and organizations.

Because of this, NGOs are a relatively new structure in Israel. They were first established in the late 70s early 80s in an attempt to provide alternative services to the discriminatory practices of the Israeli State. Throughout all these years, not only have they been working to support the Palestinian people, but they have also been aiming to raise social awareness concerning our problems on a global scale in an attempt to bring about changes in the system. The challenges we face are systematically part of the system.

IA-Forum: Could you expand on some of your NGOs and the services they perform to help Palestinians in Israel?

Mr. Makhoul: Ittijah's member organizations work on diverse fields, namely, on Human Rights, Advocacy and Lobbying, Social and Economic Development, Community Development, Culture and Arts, Women's Rights and Status, Social Change and Research, Education, Early Childhood, Children and Youth, Medical and Public Health, Environment Protection, Political Prisoners, Technological Development, Urban planning, and Unrecognized

Villages. The NGO members work to provide services, promote work, culture, charitable services, and altogether play key roles in serving and assisting the community. There are other organizations that work in villages that lack of basic services including education and health services. In fact, there is a group working to bring about changes in the Israeli educational system, which is the only dominant educational system in Israel.

Ittijah's member organizations that work on international advocacy and lobbying attempt to challenge the current Israeli legal system, since every decision is made according to the laws stated by Israel without consultation with the Palestinian community. You will not find anything discriminatory against Arabs from a legal point of view, but the procedures of the laws are themselves discriminatory. In Israel, the inequality and racial discrimination against the non-Jewish minorities is constitutional; recent laws of the Knesset constantly enforce this.

In addition, the laws focus on concepts such as "collective rights" like those of the Palestinians in Israel, who are displaced and refugees within their homeland. We, t Palestinian people, as time passes by, are getting disconnected from our homeland, our Arab cultural heritage and identity, and even our language.

IA-Forum: Do you get much support from international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International?

Mr. Makhoul: Yes. We are part of the Arab network for NGOs 'Al-Shabaka', the Euro-Mediterranean NGOs Platform, and

we have very good and solid relations with international human rights organizations like Amnesty International, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Defenders for Human Rights, among others. Therefore, we are well connected working within a wide international network, which is necessary for our protection and support as defenders of human rights for the Palestinian civil society and the Palestinian population in general. We also have developed relations with diplomatic corps and embassies.

IA-Forum: What are some of the challenges viewed by your NGOs?

Mr. Makhoul: One main challenge we face is related to perception. We are against Zionism and Israel but not against Jews. The State of Israel manipulates the term 'Anti-Semitism' worldwide. We are part of the Palestinian people and of the Palestinian cause. This challenge is part of the colonial racist nature of the State of Israel.

The challenge that we, as Palestinian civil society actors in Israel face is the fact that Israel is a wealthy nation and a fully developed country. However, the Palestinian minority in Israel es under the same socio economic conditions of people in developing countries. We are trying to get the recognition of these problems from the Israeli government but that has been very difficult; regardless of the political party in control; there is no difference between the Labour Party and the Likud Party concerning their position on the Palestinians living inside Israel.

IA-Forum: How do you think that the Israeli political situation and elections will affect the Palestinian situation?

Mr. Makhoul: What has happened in Israel in the last two years during the Gaza Disengagement Plan and the Israeli elections is a (re) emergence of Israeli concerns about power. Since 1948, the Israeli political trend has shifted to the right. Sharon's party, Kadima, is a mixture of the Labour Party and the Likud Party. During the last elections, in Israel no much attention was given to the voters and public opinion. They were only thinking about national security. At the same time, the term 'peace' has not been mentioned at all. The Israeli National Security is based on two main elements. The first is to say 'no' to the borders of Palestine based on 1967, and the second one is to keep Jerusalem as part of Israel along with blocks of settlements. The new consensus in Israeli politics is that Israel should keep the main blocks of settlements in the West Bank, this implies that all the settlements around Jerusalem (about 140,000 settlers) will be inside the future borders of Israel. Therefore, it is clear that the Israeli security policies seem to be motivated, not by security reasons, but by the confiscation of as much Palestinian land as possible. The road of the new "security barrier", which is built illegally inside the West Bank, proves this view.

The other component is that there are no negotiations for peace agreements. Israel is not interested in a compromise, only to keep colonial power. This does not serve the status of the Palestinians at all, and it is designed only to protect Israel's own agenda and programs.

Terminology needs to be well understood in Israel according to the context in which it occurs; Israelis, for instance, talk about 'development' for the Palestinians, but in practice, this 'development' means that the Palestinians will be evacuated from their own lands which will be confiscated and their community will be lost.

All this is part of the new Israeli agenda. Israel looks at all Palestinians as a single issue, only in the West Bank and Gaza. The international community looks at the Palestinian cause as a fragmented cause. But we look at all our problems as one unified issue, which is a consequence of the occupation of Palestine that started in 1948.

The new consensus in Israel is based on the consequences of what happened in 1948. Israelis try to prove to the West that there is no partner for peace agreements or negotiations, that Israel should be recognized not only as a State but as a Jewish State defined with new borders. They claim that the Palestinian-Israeli issue is totally within the borders of Israel. The Palestinians disagree with that.

In Israel, there are even concerns about what is considered to be 'the left', such as the Likud party, and there is no Palestinian partner. This is very dangerous because Palestinians hear this statement everywhere and interpret it as though there is no Israeli partner. Thus, the image of this situation is an image that has been created by Israel for itself, and what is seen around the world is that the Israelis are victims, but in fact, the Palestinians are the ones living under constant oppression and discrimination.

The late PNA (Palestinian National Authority) elections were conducted in a legal and democratic way, and they were

legitimate. We have been suffering, not only from Israel's policies, but also from theway the world views this conflict, the Palestinians and the Arab region in general. Double standards have been used. If you take the case of Joerg Haider in Austria for example and you compare him to Avigdor Lieberman of the Coalition Party of Israel, you will find that Haider is less radical than Lieberman or even the Likud Party. But Haider was treated harsher. In Israel, you can be very discriminatory, get elected Prime Minister, and the world will consider it as just a part of a democratic process.

In Israel, compromise is not really considered to be an option. Israelis want a unilateral decision. We ask for a compromise but this has been rejected. I think that issues raised during the last Israeli elections proved that they are not looking for a Palestinian partner.

The EU, the United States, and the rest of the world condemn only the Palestinians and not the Israelis for their responsibilities, without understanding the complexity beneath the issue of being living under growing Occupation.

IA-Forum: There have been clashes recently between the Hamas and Fatah parties, something that doesn't present a good image in the eyes of the international community. What's your assessment of Palestinian politics?

Mr. Makhoul: I think that it is very sad to have clashes between groups who should be partners against occupation. Fatah that used to be the main party does not agree with the election results. I think that Hamas not only was elected because of what they are doing, but also because of what Fatah was doing

regarding internal corruption and the style of the negotiations with Israel.

It is mostly a political power game. The fact that Fatah did not recognize the election results has now been repeated by Israel, the United States, and the international community. This undermines the decision of the Palestinian people. It must be understood that having democratic elections and processes under occupation is not an easy process. It is challenging and almost impossible. But yet the Palestinian people did their best and I think that it will make them much stronger.

Even the Referendum which was proposed by the elected Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and made under the dictations of Israel and the U.S. does not respect the vote of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; in addition it is a bypass to the elected government within the PNA.

IA-Forum: What do Palestinians look for, want, from the United States and the EU?

Mr. Makhoul: When Palestinians look at the current U.S. administration and their policies, it does not give much hope. Therefore, there is no disappointment with the US, since we did not expect anything from them in the first place. We are more disappointed by the EU, because we have expected a different stand from them towards democracy, the Palestinian elections, etc.

The US, the EU and the international community should take sanctions against Israel to push them into changing their policies, instead of continuously allowing them to gain more

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power. The international community does not realize how risky the situation is; we are facing a humanitarian disaster.

IA-Forum: What do you think should be done to improve relations?

Mr. Makhoul: Within Israel, the most important thing is to have two entities. I do not think that an integrated approach would be a good one. We should have two entities in order to have a dialogue and see where they we overlap. It is a tough and very challenging issue to work on conflict resolution, and I do not think that it could work in Israel at the moment because the conflict is so strong. Negotiations with Israel are limited because of the imbalance of power, so it is very unlikely that negotiations will lead to anything.

The Palestinian people in Israel and the Palestinian people in general should empower themselves. We have to improve the Palestinian community, culturally, socially and politically, in order to deal with the situation. We do not want negotiations the strong side leads the process; this does not mean that we consider ourselves weak even though others around the world look at us in this way.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Makhoul.

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