

SIGNS OF SOCIETY. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

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INTRODUCTION

The situation of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has lasted for over a century with half of the century of increasing violence, especially after the Six Days War. The long-standing occupation has been leading to mental take over by this issue and dehumanization of opponents in both parties' minds. Although in last decade one could see some symptoms of peace process, especially after Oslo agreement, violence always erupted despite the official papers.

In this paper I will examine the conditions of societies in the Palestinian Autonomy and Israel with special emphasis on NGOs. Although it is obvious that civil society cannot be narrowed to the non-governmental organizations, one can say that the NGOs are the most visible and measurable among the signs of existence of civil society.

NGO Monitor defines NGOs as autonomous non-profit and non-party/politically-unaffiliated organizations that advance a particular cause or set of causes in the public interest. The range of causes on which an NGO can focus is unlimited, but a cardinal principle is that NGOs operate in a manner consistent with the objectives for which they receive funds. Donations are an NGO's lifeline because they are independent organizations. Funding can come from governments, the UN, private

trusts and philanthropies, individual donations, religious institutions, and, in many cases, other NGOs.¹

NGOs can contribute to democracy through challenging governments and promoting social interests, but they themselves are not democratic institutions and have no democratic accountability. An NGO is only accountable to its particular funding organizations and members. Despite that, NGOs activities are often the most powerful tool in society's hand and can be recognized as the most important sign of societal vitality.

I do strongly believe that activities of non-government organizations are the most important sign of a living society, which may have importance in any situation of infra-state conflict. The construction of the paper is built up with this idea. First of all, I want to show some theoretical points of civil society and peace solution. Secondly, I will describe the Israeli and Palestinian civil society situation. Following chapter belongs to international NGOs and their influence in the conflict area. The next part is about cooperative Palestinian – Israel NGOs and the last one includes a case study of the cooperation of both parties in different environmental NGOs. All finishes with a short conclusion chapter.

It is important, that there are more Israeli's sources and analyses than Palestinian's. This situation is easy to prescribe if one knows anything about differences between the societies and despite some problems it can be solved by foreign sources. I do not want to touch discussion about any bias in world public or scientific opinion. This paper has to discuss the NGOs in Israel and the Palestinian Territory with special focus on possibilities and difficulties of existence of common NGOs system between the societies and ways for using it in peace process.

THE NGOs AND PEACE PROCESS

There is a lot of definitions of civil society but the problem is in practical use of them in specific situation. Many of the researchers fail to take into account that civil society is not a universal concept and that its features are the products of a specific social and cultural circumstances. In other words, a context is crucial for understanding and rethinking civil society concepts. Therefore, not all manifestations in the sphere of political participation and collective action attest to the existence of civil society in the sense that the concept will be defined here.

Civil society does not stand mechanically between citizens and the state or the market, as a multiplicity of voluntary organizations that provide non-state services

¹ NGO Monitor website – www.ngo-monitor.org

to the population. Although this large-scale phenomenon of intermediary organizations has attracted much attention recently, in its essence it is far from being a phenomenon of social change or substantive transformation which is in the essence of the new definition of civil society.²

The relationship between new social movements and the actual or potential civil society is sometimes very complex. There is a lot of studies about them but not so much about any influence of it and its role in peace building and peace keeping, which is crucial for this paper. Despite this fact, the role of NGOs in peace processes, especially in peace keeping and relations buildings, is growing in our eyes to the most important institutions and leaders nowadays.

The signs of that are visible in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which said that it is crucial “to give greater opportunities to the private sector, non-government organizations and civil society, in general, to contribute to the realization of the Organization’s goals and programs.”³ The same attitude toward the NGOs’ role can be found in the World Bank’s official statements as well as in others.⁴

This importance is more visible if one looks the peace process and realization of agreements in North Ireland, Algeria or Palestine. Although the peace agreements were signed many times, there were problems based on the will of the sides and interpretations of the agreements.⁵ This situation was built up by differences in perceptions and between internal and external acclamation of the sides as well as in short time aims realized by the opponents of the signing parties. This destabilization ruined the peace processes.

The unique role of some NGOs in the Middle East can be described as stabilization and link building between antagonists. This is necessary not only in society – to – society relation and as support for the political elite claims, but also as an active partner in legitimizing and backing the struggle of understanding each other.⁶

² B.-E. Uri, *The Role of Civil Society of the West Bank of the Mediterranean* (VIU, Venice, June 2003), pp. 2–3.

³ *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, note 6, paragraph 30 (18 September 2000) – UN website.

⁴ A. Gerson, *Peace Building: the Private Sector Role*, “The American Journal of International Law”, Vol. 95, No. 1 (American Society of International Law, January 2001) p. 104.

⁵ Sussman Gary, Muliro Artur, “When the Ink Has Dried:...” [in:] *Development*, Sage Publications, London 2000.

⁶ Keeping away from the discussion about the definition of NGO, it is needed to point out that most of the Arabic NGO mostly engage just in social help and redistribution of goods among poorest parts of society. For more information see: Maha M. Abdelrahman, Maha M., *Civil Society Exposed. The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2004).

There are some strategies which can be used in this mission by NGOs. Building peace and understanding in a conflict situation needs active work for it. Such aims as humanization of the second party make common ground for future dialog and reaching is them much easier with NGOs. The same is with creating is common background for discussion and narrowing gap between societies' cultures and mentality. Even such an easy case as language of contacts sometimes becomes crucial. While quite a good part of Palestinians can speak Hebrew, only few Jews speak Arabic and a language of common discussion and dialogues is still English. This situation exclude majority of non-English speakers and in my opinion it is a good illustration of fields for NGOs in situations as in the conflict area in Israel/the PA.

In the Palestinian Authority (PNA) and Israel, NGO peace work has involved the "peace movement," the activities of which directly relate to peace seeking and to joint practice-oriented projects in different social realms that pursue peace through indirect means. Before the Oslo agreements, peace-based NGOs initiated cross-society contacts and exerted pressure on the governments to begin negotiations. During the peace process, while NGOs continued to act as pressure groups, they also focused on helping to prepare their societies for peaceful coexistence and mutual co-operation⁷

In 1999, a conference organized by The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East brought together over 40 Israeli and Palestinian NGOs that were interested in cooperation⁸. Some NGOs were engaged in cooperative projects in the educational and economic projects, human rights, health policy, social policy, and environmental policy. The experiences of these NGOs showed that the cardinal problem faced in co-operative work was the asymmetrical relations between the co-operating groups that reflect the asymmetric distribution of power in the conflict. This asymmetry is based on different levels of experience within the degree of professionalism and the fact that each organization is embedded in a more or less developed society, and the availability of fundraising and other sources. Other difficulties in carrying out joint work included confrontation and bad relations that have often existed between the two nations, the mentioned above inability to express oneself in the partner's language, deep cultural differences, ignorance, and insensitivity of the other's culture, Palestinians' limited freedom of movement due to security measures imposed by the Israeli government and military, and the difficulties in disengaging political disturbances from the joint work.

At the same time, it is necessary to realize that only a small part of both societies has been involved in peace-building, and that the fragility of such undertakings has

⁷ *Israeli-Palestinian Peace – Building: Lessons Learnt Manuel*, E. Hassassian, Kaufmann (ed.) (Princetn, Spring 2005), pp. 1–2.

⁸ The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East website (actual at 1.08.2007).

often revealed as a result of terror made by committed fundamentalist extremists from both sides. Even the most insignificant minorities when driven by 'God's will' can effectively disrupt the peace process. A serious impediment to face-to-face contacts results from the closures of the Palestinian areas that often follow incidents of terror. Still, there is a need to recognize the presence not only of physical barriers, but also of psychological barriers that are no less difficult to overcome while neither side is still able to display significant levels of reciprocal compassion.

The facts on the ground have placed Israel in the position of relative strength, generating an asymmetric relationship with the Palestinians that make joint efforts towards peace-building more difficult. The Palestinians will not assent to claims of a 'lasting' peace before the Israeli power and the international community both recognize some basic aspects of 'justice'. Thus we find the first gap between the goals of the Israeli side – with a noticeable and at times very active 'peace movement' – Peace Now in its best moments could gather more than 200,000 in Tel Aviv – and a much smaller constituency led by a significant number of skeleton NGOs that make up the 'human rights community'.

THE PALESTINIAN NGOS

There is a popular opinion that the development of civil society can be recognized because of a number and extend of NGOs in a country. There is also a counter-opinion, which claims that the role of non-government organizations is linked with weakness of the state and fulfills this part of the state's activities which is left by it. Both of them can be applied in the case of Palestine and both of them can be true and we have to remember that the situation in the Palestinian Authority is far from the normal situation of the state.

The Palestinians non-government organizations were established in the 1920's and 1930's as welfare organizations working for common wealth and profit among the Palestinians. The rapid growth of them took place after the Six Days War in 1967 with occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by Israelis. Further development of the third sector in the Palestinian Authority was during the first Intifada period and just after it.

The peak of the Palestinian NGOs in the region was in the mid-1990s when their service reached "60 percent of primary health care service, nearly 50% of hospital care and 100% of disability care⁹" and "nearly 100 percent of all agriculture extension,

⁹ J. Zaucker and others, *Toward Middle East Peace and Development...*, [in:] *Interaction Occasional Paper*, Washington, December 1995, p. 17.

training and research; and about 30 percent of educational services, including almost all kindergartens and day care centers.”¹⁰

This enormous power of the third sector in the Intifada and following period was caused by the special situation inside the Palestinian Authority with it powerless and control still in Israeli’s hands. Moreover, the credibility of the organizations was built on the contrast with the corrupted and notorious Arafat’s administrations, which directed huge share of the foreign donations into the NGOs projects. The number of organizations reached the number of 1500 and employed between 20 000 to 30 000 people. The numbers can be a little misleading because of Israel’s control under registration and its policy as well as the special status of some “service groups” doing the same work like NGOs without the NGO’s status¹¹.

Geographically, most of the NGOs, 40 percent, are located in the Ramallah – Jerusalem – Bethlehem area with about 18.5 percent of them located in the Gaza Strip, 13 percent in Hebron and only 25.5 percent in the northern area¹². Despite that, most of them provide service in all of the Palestinian Territory and the headquarters locations have no importance for the covering area.

Quality of the Palestinian NGOs is hard to estimate because of differences inside the sector. While some of them are well equipped and have well trained staff, others are widely criticized because of the lack of professionalism and non-accountability. Some of the problems are caused by multiplication of identical organization in the name of the party competition. In results there are plenty of similar organizations competing in the same fields. It is obvious that it can cause the unnecessary operational costs. This tendency is, however, fixed by popular unions and networks as it has place in health care service.

The health care services are probably the most divided area for the Palestinian NGOs but almost all of them are grouped in two main health unions. Three others coordinate specific organizations like Voluntary Union of Women’s Societies for nursery’s NGOs. This situation is also typical for all areas of NGO’s activities in the PA. Moreover, there are also networks for cross-sectoral coordination with the biggest the General Union of Charitable Associations in Palestine (almost one of third of all Palestinian NGOs are its members) as a main one.¹³

Relations of the NGOs with the Palestinian Authority have been specific since the start. First of all, there was never-ending competition for foreign funds between

¹⁰ D. Sullivan, *NGOs in Palestine: Agent of Development and...*, “Journal of Palestine Study” XXV, No. 3 (Spring 1996), p. 94.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Anera website – www.anera.org (actual at 1.09.2007).

¹³ D. Sullivan, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

the PLO and later the PA and the Palestinian NGOs. When, for example, the European Community moved the fund from the Culture and Free Thought Associations of Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip to the PA, the first organization lost more than 60 percent of its year's budget¹⁴. Moreover, the mentioned above tendency for fractionization made some of the NGOs hostile to the PA and provoked some restrictions from their side. The problem was deepened by attempts of the PA ministries to strengthen their control under wide community of the NGOs.

Therefore, the officials of the PA used the intelligence and security services to take control under NGOs and collect information about their workers and leaders. Especially the Hamas' organizations were targeted by the authority with high intensity and in 1995 the Ministry of Social Welfare gave up the process of normalization in NGOs area in the name of controlling the Hamas and similar groups' activity. The explanation of it given by minister was: "we do not want Iran or certain other groups or countries sending money into Palestine to undermine us, the government, and the society."¹⁵ As a result, the rest of the NGOs were cut off from foreign funds and participating in more than one NGO was prohibited. Having any money except month funds on bank account and cooperation with any foreign, not belonged to the PA jurisdiction, organizations were prohibited as well. The minister of social welfare had granted the right to dissolve any organizations or withdraw permission and initiate any types of new regulations by him/herself.

These regulations gone too far even for the international community and donors, which generally support the tightening of the PA control under the Palestinian organizations. Despite this fact, two rounds of talks between the PA and the NGOs leaders still had no results and solutions were postponed to post-election period. Although Mahmud Abbas won this election, there are no new solutions in this field nowadays and the law of organizations still waits.

The problem of the gap between state and the NGOs was joined by the problem of the gap between the NGOs and the society during the second Intifada. The existing organizations were not able to articulate the society's demands and needs. Moreover, while they provided very accurate information about injuries and casualties, they were not able to establish any connections with political powers like political parties or resisting groups. On the other hand their struggle to maintain independent non-political position can be by someone understood as a quite safe strategy for future. Notwithstanding, the emergency aid during the Intifada repaired

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 96.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 98.

the NGOs budgets and gave them new source of maintenance despite the 50 percent drop of the total Palestinian income in this period.¹⁶

In conclusion of this chapter, one can say that the Palestinian civil society can be developing and reach some achievements. Still dependant on the foreign funds and donors, it won a battle against the restriction from the PA and could use its power effectively. At the same time it is continuously losing support from foreign sources while the accountability of the PA is growing. Some of the organizations are included into the state structure, which can be the best solution for both sides, others need some ways of cooperation with the state as well as the state needs the cooperation with them.

NGOs AND ISRAEL

When compared to the Palestinian one, the number of Israeli NGOs is impressive. In similar population as in the PA, exist 34 000 organizations in almost all areas of activity nowadays.¹⁷ This situation, however, was not typical in the state history before the dramatic changes of 1980s.

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, it was a non-liberal state with national ideology with statism and collectivism, which effectively stopped the growth of the alternative structure and made it much more complicated to organize society out of the state control. In the late 1970s, the number of non-governmental organizations was still under 3 000 and diversity among them was not very impressive. This situation fitted ideally the conception of nation-in-arms, which the army adopted and the war project as its focal point.¹⁸

The outbreak was performed by society in 1982 as a result of amendment of new association's law two years before. Reasons for this change were many, but the most important was economical crisis of traditional welfare and the non-liberal state. Although this economic revolution was not only Israeli, an importance of the change in the world market was crucial for this country. The liberalization and privatization made the space for people activity and in few years many new organization were established.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 99.

¹⁷ E. Zaidise, *The Role of Civil Society in Developing and Consolidating Democracy: Evidence from Israel*, paper from European Consortium for Political Research Joint-Sessions of Workshops Uppsala, Sweden, 13–18.04.2004 (ECPR April 2004), p. 16.

¹⁸ B.-E. Uri, op.cit., pp. 2–4.

Especially after the Russian – Jewish immigration in the early 1990s and Camp David Agreement, the economy boomed and the government found itself in a new position. Moreover, a permanent crisis on the political stage upset many citizens who found new motivation to be active in providing basic needs in the new economic situation. The unprecedented wave of protest shocked Israel with a manifestation of over 100 000 people. The main movement, “Constitution for Israel” was a new power in the stage and created new pressure. At the same time, it ignored completely the Intifada, which occurred in this time.¹⁹

Because of the facts given above, Israel was ready to reform the structure of its bureaucracy and the processes of providing social services. The reforms in the public sector included the transfer of public services to nonprofit organizations, privatization of government controlled industries as well as quality control procedures or strategic planning. Areas of privatization included the public housing sector, construction, infrastructure, telecommunication, and others.

These reforms ended Israel’s archaic, quasi socialist, state control of the economic and political systems. Indeed, Israel started to introduce free market economy that had been viewed as a great success in the West for over one hundred years. Consequently, the public policy reform gave an immense advantage to the Third Sector. In fact, at the turn of the 21st century, the Israel Third Sector included some 30,000 associations of individuals and groups who claimed to share a common purpose and have been registered with the Ministry of the Interior as Non-Profit Organizations (“Amutot”). In 1999, NGOs employed 10.7 percent of the Israeli non-agricultural work force, and produced 12.8 percent of the Israeli GDP. Between 1991 and 1995 total NGO expenditures grew by 13.5 percent and the number of their employees grew by 19,000. Moreover, “between 1980 and 1993 the population of Israel grew by 35% (from 3,921,000 to 5,327,000). During these years the number of government employees decreased by 22% (from 66,631 to 51,995).”²⁰

This fast growing of the Third Sector in Israel is today very diversified and highly developed, which is especially visible when compared to the situation before 1980s. There are all types of NGOs from pro-democratic or charity to environmental and hobby-promoting as well. Only animal rights, for example, are defended by 15 organizations with specialization in this topic. This wealth is generally free of strong political connections and in the political-active part generally contests or supervises existing political class. For instance 96% of pro-democratic organizations have no

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 11–13.

²⁰ N. Nachmias, *The Government of Israel’s Control of NGOs: Legal Dilemmas and Structural Constraints*, „International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law” Vol. 3, issue 2 (Spring 2003).

connections with political parties.²¹ This situation gives the Israeli civil society room for free activity but also force the government and the Knesset to pay a special attention.

The special focus was given to the public granting to NGOs. Because of hard criticism the Knesset amended the Non-Profit-Non-Government Organization (NGO) Law of 1980 to include accountability and transparency requirements. The next step of the government included issuing numerous regulations aimed at strengthening the government regulatory powers. For example, the 1996 amendment provided the Ministry of the Interior, the institution which controls all registration process, force the authority to demand from NGOs disclose and enumerate their expenditures and sources of income. Moreover, NGOs were required to submit an annual budget and activity reports, completed and approved by the special institution. In September 1998, the Ministry of Finance issued a series of regulations aimed at ensuring the execution of these amendments, and next year the Ministry of Finance followed up with a series of detailed regulations mandating six government ministries that had been the main distributors of funds to NGOs, to establish a computerized process of control to identify duplication in grants and other forms of abuse by NGOs.

Perhaps the most important regulation was issued on September 23, 1998, by the Government Auditing Committee. The regulation established the “Proper Management” principle mandating every NGO applying for government funding to receive from the office of the Registrar, a certificate of “Proper Management”, which approves the NGOs management practices and policies. This certificate has to be submitted to the Ministry of Budget that approves the NGO’s eligibility to receive public funding and tax benefits.²²

Among the surprising civil activity in today Israel a special position belongs to the so-called cooperation organizations. These groups are generally a new trend which came up to the picture after the first Intifada with the peace process and all events around. One such group is the Abraham Fund Initiatives founded in 1989 to promote co-existence between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The groups’ goals, as stated in their mission-statement include: “Promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and trust between groups; strengthening individual group identity by building respect for the rich diversity of Israel’s ethnically mixed society; and achieving an environment of social and political equality for all citizens of Israel.”²³

²¹ E. Zaidise, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

²² N. Nitza, *op.cit.*, pp. 3–8.

²³ www.coexistence.org – site introduction (1.09.2007)

In addition to these goals, which are representative of this category group, this organization also includes among its aims a unique objective: “implementing advocacy campaigns that raise awareness on issues of tolerance, democracy, and equality within the State of Israel; and institutionalizing efforts for the development of coexistence policies and programs for acceptance in all segments of Israeli society.”²⁴

Coming back to the main discussion about the Israeli NGOs, one can find that the financial backing is a little different than in the Western organizations. Support from abroad has an enormous importance for the Israeli NGOs and cannot be compared to the rest of the modern liberal countries’ societies. While the total expenditures of the Third Sector were 33 billion NIS (over US \$8 billion), the Israeli government had transferred to the NGOs 23 Billion NIS (about US \$5.5 billion) – over two thirds of the total annual expenditures of Israeli NGOs.²⁵

The formula for the state granting in Israel is also specific, because it is included in the regular state budget. The rest was given by foreign donors, mostly American Jewish, although this tendency shows some signs of changing since the start of the second Intifada. First of all, donors from the US and other western states lost those believes after the Israel’s violence shown by media. Secondly, the society part in financial support for non-governmental organizations is growing in time.

INTERNATIONAL NGOs IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE

The discussion about the international non-governmental organizations in Israel and the Territory is very complicated because of the problems with definitions of the international organizations as well as the difficulty of finding trustworthy information and statistics. While some organizations officially claim themselves “international”, many times it means just that they tried to avoid Israeli control and restrictions. This implicates the problem of accountability of some organizations if they are dependant on everyday societies problems and one has to remember that some of them are international only by name.

The example of this kind of organizations is given in the next chapter, so I am not going to discuss it now. It has to be mentioned, however, that this kind of organizations is getting more popular nowadays on the wave of civil resistance and implementation of new technology and globalization of the world social market.

Despite that, the most important part of the international non-governmental organizations is still made by about 200 foreign organizations which have special

²⁴ E. Zaidise, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

²⁵ N. Nitza, *op.cit.*, pp. 16–18.

privileges in registration of local branches if compared with the binational or local multinational organization. Giants like the Amnesty International, Freedom House of Oxfam are powerful enough to have impact on politics and situation in the region as well as in the other parts of the world. The power of them lies in big opportunities of soft power which can be used by them as mobilization of the foreign public opinion.

Also the credibility in the case of International NGOs is generally much higher than others. All of the INGOs spend together 6 billion dollars per year and have possibility to increase those funds if necessary²⁶. Just for comparison, the year's deficit of the Israeli budget is less than 10 billions, which shows us the scale of the International NGO. Notwithstanding, one has to remember that the fund for NGOs in the PA are decreasing, which touches the INGO as well.

The soft power and money, however, are not going together with the strong power and the INGOs are still depending on regulations and restrictions if not the will of states where they are working. This is especially visible in Israel, which did many times moves which had to show "who is ruling this country". The example of this occurred in 26th 2003, when the IDF did not give the permission to enter the Gaza Strip by any NGOs and 30 INGOs and NGO from the PA were occupying the stadium and caused damages²⁷. At least the Israeli side gave the permisions for crossing the border but one week out of camps can be dangerous.

COOPERATIONAL NGOs

As it is said in the start of the previous chapter, one can find it difficult to decide which non-governmental organization in Israel and the Palestinian Authority is international and which is just marked to be seen as one of them or is composed by two inhabiting these area nations. It is also claimed that the reason for that is in restrictions made by the PA and the Israeli authority and it is not very difficult to prove this thesis. While the PA officially denied to recognize any joint Palestinian – Israeli organization, Israel used to delay the procedure with no end.

Although the regional branches of international NGOs have no problems with the procedure, the binational NGOs face problems in both areas. The PA regular denied registering any joint organization and the same practice is common in history of the Israel policy toward the mixing Palestinian – Israelis NGOs. Because of that,

²⁶ IPCRI website – www.ipcri.org

²⁷ Palestine Monitor – www.palestinemonitor.org

most of them are registered abroad, especially in the US like the Friends of the Earth Middle East described in the following chapter.

This is the reason why it is impossible to find the number of the joint Palestinian – Israelis NGOs operating nowadays. Despite that, the importance of them should not be underestimated. Number of fields covered by this kind of organizations as well as the importance of coming together Israelis and Palestinians are enough for remembering the binational NGOs.

The subjects of cooperation are wide and start from common emergency service, where almost 2500 specialist are trained annually for the Palestinian needs²⁸, and cover such fields as education, with even join Arab – Hebrew education, dialogue between societies, human and woman rights or environmental issues. There are also some joined local communities like the School for Peace in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, which provides the way for discussions and understanding between societies²⁹.

The joint NGOs have a little different feature than the rest of national organizations in the region. While most of the local organizations have smaller support from abroad and are not involved in wide research in the world, the international cooperative NGOs have strong links with one another and operate often on a different level than their local counterparts. Because of that the cooperative organizations are especially vibrant.

THE CASE STUDY OF COOPERATION NGOs – FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST

Due to the size of Israel and the Palestinian Authority all environmental problems are complex and cannot be solved only by one side. Moreover, the geographical location and climate provoke many specific problems, especially with water and its preserving. Because of that, the countries in the region have no other options than to cooperate with each other and this idea is provided by non-governmental environmental organizations as a promotion group.

The founding of the Palestinian Authority started the growth of non-governmental organizations operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Among those NGOs are those, which are acting in the fields of environmental activism, education, and

²⁸ R.H.B.Fishman, *Palestinians and Israelis Cooperate on Emergency-Medical Services*, "Lancet", 00995355, 04/19/97, Vol. 349, Issue 9059.

²⁹ R. Hallabi, *Jewish – Palestinian Encounter in a Time of Crisis*, "Social Issue Journal", Vol. 60, No. 2, (Spring 2004), pp. 373–387.

policy promotion. Among other activities and importance of them especially their contribution to institution-building and policy-making in the environmental sector within the Palestinian Authority is very important but it is not the main focus of this paper. Therefore, I concentrate on their relationship to the larger process of expanding civil liberties and developing the functional model of participation as well as the achievements in cooperation.

As it is said in the previous chapter the multinational organizations class has many similarities inside it. The Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information and its affiliated Joint Environmental Mediation Service, the Palestinian-Israeli Environmental Secretariat, and Friends of the Earth-Middle East are all geographically located within the West Bank or East Jerusalem, in the Palestinian areas. Despite that fact, they are identified mostly with their Israeli and international donors and partners and face subsequent challenges of legitimacy. All conduct their work primarily in English and all face crises associated with the violent interruption to the Oslo process in the second Intifada and reversion to open hostilities³⁰.

With one notable exception, all the international environmental NGOs were also formed in the immediate afterglow of the signing of the Declaration of Principles, when the environment was viewed as an issue around which Israelis and Palestinians could come together. Since that time, the appeal of cooperative environmental initiatives has faded rapidly.

It is a natural attraction to environmental issues as a means of drawing Israeli and Palestinian societies together. Environmental benefits and risks are shared between communities and across borders. There is no way to stop pollution on the border. Around the world, environmentalists call for collective responses to transboundary environmental threats. These same appeals that motivate the world's environmental activists—a common ecological heritage facing common threats— exist in this case maybe stronger than in other places³¹.

Let us use the specific example of the Friends of the Earth Middle East. This organization is typical in many ways for the Palestinian – Israeli cooperational organizations. It was established in December 1994 by South African-born Israeli Gideon Bromberg. Although formally it is the US' NGO, in reality it is the partnership of Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians. The main headquartered is in Amman and regional offices are located in all countries of the participants.

Firstly known as Eco Peace, it was the first umbrella organization with this kind of membership, and its peak had more than 200 partner organizations. EcoPeace became

³⁰ M. Zwirn, *Promise and Failure: Environmental NGOs and Palestinian-Israeli Cooperation*, "Middle East Review of International Affairs", Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2001), p. 2.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

the Middle East member and representative of Friends of the Earth-International, the world's largest network of environmental organizations, and changed the names in 1998. FoEME is the only Friends of the Earth branch that operates on a regional rather than national level, and its formation differs significantly from other chapters.

As it is said, due to the difficulties of registration in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, FoEME is registered in the United States as a non-profit organization. Most of its funding is from Western consulates and representative offices, and pro-peace Jewish groups in the United States. Additional supporters include European and North American environmental NGOs and a range of peace groups.

FoEME's objectives include "strengthening NGO capabilities in cooperation with governments, assessing the transboundary environmental implications of development projects, forging a common environmental agenda among NGOs, information collection and sharing, and promoting sustainable development and peace in the region. As one can see, it is not narrowing only to environmental issues.

Some particular projects include renewable energy, a regional development plan initiative in the Gulf of Aqaba, and research on the environmental implications of trade and investment in development projects. According to Salah, interviewed at FoEME's East Jerusalem office, FoEME is trying to define new links between funding agencies and the Ministry of Environmental Affairs, via the World Bank working group on Palestinian NGOs.

The organization was heavily hit by the Intifada. "We don't see any public activity taking place—certainly not for the next three months and maybe not for the next six months.³²" That period will surely be extended further in the current political climate. FoEME's project to declare the Dead Sea basin a World Heritage and Biosphere Reserve in the United Nations Economic and Social Council has fallen through, as has its work on a Jordanian-Israeli cleanup of the Gulf of Aqaba and its opposition to a planned USAID funding of Palestinian highway system. The East Jerusalem office in which this interview took place was closed due to fears of violence and no updates of the FoEME website or new publications have emerged since early 2000³³. Reportedly, all cooperation with Egypt has ceased, as Arab professionals who cooperate with Israelis are blacklisted and boycotted. Last month occurred some signs of improving situation, with the decision of implementation of the FoEME's plans of joint Israel – Jordan program of restoration of the Death Sea.

³² Friend of the Earth–Middle East, *Building Partnerships to Promote Ecologically Sound Development in the Middle East*, website: <http://www.foeme.org/> (1.09.2007).

³³ *Ibidem*.

THE CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is necessary to underline that the importance of the NGOs in the region is not easy to define and calculate. This situation is made by the substantial build up of a society and NGOs as its signs and parts. Moreover, due to the globalization process, it is not possible to control completely a society without closing borders and cutting any ties with abroad.

Some of the situations faced by the NGOs in the PA and Israel are similar, while others are totally different. Both authorities, for example, are trying to take control over the NGOs and made many restrictions against them. In both of them restrictions are not equal and pro-freedom in popular liberal way of defining, because some kinds of activities are welcomed while different ones are still not allowed, no matter officially or not.

What is different, is that most of the NGOs in the PA is made up by foreigners or with cooperation with foreign donors. This makes them more sensitive makes any pressure from outside and in some cases (Hamas) can provoke the authority. Moreover, they are less able to expose their points of view because of the common national agenda and situation of oppression.

On the other hand, no one can say that Israeli NGOs are free from pressure with 2/3 funds coming from the state's budget. Even in this state some kinds of NGOs have problems. If it is not made by official decline of registration, then it is made by delaying of it with no time defined for the procedure.

The civil societies in the countries and their visible picture of NGOs are different and there is no discussion in the point of their being. The problem lies in fitting them together in common aim of peace and development, which cannot be established in modern world without the public opinion. The NGOs' work in this field can be priceless.

As one can see in the case study of the Friends of the Earth Middle East, the organizations can escape from the local administrative problem, but it is still dangerous that they can lose time and sources for this move. The uncomfortable environment is only one part of the common puzzle, but quite important and cannot be forgotten.

The next important point is made by the cooperation not only inside one organization, but also between them. There are, for instance, some attempts to organize an umbrella organization for all Palestinian and Israeli human rights group and some of the umbrellas organizations achieved some success in grouping together former opponents. If the Israeli for Palestinians, and vice versa, can be seen as a normal human being and the popular picture in both countries will be conscious of the second parties' point of view with wide understanding of the cultural and social background – then the way for peace can be much easier and no “road map” will be needed.