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Consensus-Building for Liberation: Reflections from Lebanon

By: Jaber Suleiman · July, 2023

Consensus-building can be a long and challenging process that requires all stakeholders involved to be committed to reaching an agreement. In the case of the Palestinian liberation project, achieving consensus among the forcibly fragmented Palestinian people is both particularly difficult and of critical importance in order to create a united national movement. What, precisely, is the role of consensus-building in the context of a liberation struggle? [1]

Al-Shabaka Policy Analyst Jaber Suleiman sheds light on this question, drawing on examples from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the lived experience of Palestinians in Lebanon. Suleiman has worked as a consultant and coordinator for the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Forum at the Common Space Initiative, formerly affiliated with the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) Support Project on Consensus Building, Civil Peace, and Constitutional Strengthening in Lebanon. With extensive experience in consensus-building practices, Suleiman offers reflections on what worked, which struggles arose, and how such efforts in Lebanon can inform a wider consensus-building process for Palestinians.

Consensus-Building in the Palestinian Struggle

Consensus-building takes on a uniquely important role within the context of an emancipatory project. Confronting settler colonialism and military occupation necessitates national unity in order to forge an effective liberation movement. Overcoming political, religious, ethnic, and ideological differences is crucial, as it allows for collective and unified confrontation with the oppressor.

In the context of Palestine, consensus-building is of great importance for resisting Zionist settler colonialism bent on the erasure of the Palestinian people, culturally and materially. In fact, the PLO emerged in 1964 through consensus precisely to achieve this goal. And although the PLO constituted a national front in its mission and charter—much like Algeria's National Liberation Front, South Vietnam's National Liberation Front, and South Africa's African National Congress—it underwent several periods of division, including the 1978 Camp David Accords, the 1993 Oslo accords, and thereafter. External factors certainly hampered the PLO's ability to achieve its emancipatory goals, but the destructive divisions were also an inevitable outcome of failed leadership that deviated from consensus and abandoned the organization's Palestinian National Charter.

While there have been many attempts to reconcile divisions within the PLO—including the 2005 Cairo Declaration, the 2006 National Consensus Document, the 2007 Mecca Agreement, and the 2011 Cairo Agreement—all have failed. This is largely due to the lack of political will among Palestinian factions, especially Fatah and Hamas, to prioritize achieving an inclusive national consensus over their own agendas and narrow interests.

It is worth noting that one of the largest consensus-driven initiatives in Palestinian history stems from civil society, through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement. The movement is steered by the BDS National Committee (BNC)—the broadest coalition of Palestinian civil society groups—and was originally endorsed by over 170 Palestinian organizations during its July 2005

launch.

A Case Study on Consensus-Building: Palestinians in Lebanon

Lebanon is a unique context given its many sectarian and political divisions, but the 1989 Taif Agreement, officially known as the National Reconciliation Agreement, was a crucial milestone for building national consensus and restoring peace in the country following 15 years of civil war. Unfortunately, Palestinians were excluded from the reconciliation process, even though they were undeniably part of the war. Nonetheless, there were several attempts following Taif to forge a reconciliatory consensus between the Lebanese and Palestinians in Lebanon.

In May of 1991, on the sidelines of the Arab League summit in Cairo, Lebanese Foreign Minister Farés Boueiz met with the head of the PLO's political department, Farouk Kaddoumi, to discuss preliminary reconciliation efforts. As a result, several Lebanese ministerial committees were formed to initiate dialogue between both sides. The Palestinians also formed a unified delegation consisting of PLO and opposition factions.

The two sets of delegations held their first meeting in September of 1991, during which the Palestinians presented a memorandum entitled "The Civil and Social Rights of the Palestinian People." The thrust of the reconciliation agreement was that Palestinians would hand over weapons in exchange for civil rights. Subsequently, the Lebanese delegation requested time to review the document and respond to the Palestinians' demands. However, the response never came, and the dialogue was suspended. This was due to the lack of Lebanese political will to reach consensus on the exchange and to lingering resentment towards the Palestinians following the war. As a result, Palestinians in Lebanon endured many more years of oppression in Lebanese camps.

Throughout the rest of the 1990s, the PLO continued its dialogue efforts with

Lebanese policymakers, presenting another memorandum in 1999 entitled "Towards a New Palestinian-Lebanese Relations." Nonetheless, Lebanese counterparts failed to utilize the directive in any concrete manner.

It was not until 2005 that reconciliation efforts between the Lebanese and Palestinians were again revived. In November of that year, the prime minister's office established the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), a governmental body meant to tackle different aspects of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. The committee was tasked with: collaborating with UNRWA to address the socio-economic, legal, and security conditions of Palestinian refugees in the country; regulating Palestinian access to arms in and outside of the refugee camps; and exploring the re-establishment of relations with PLO representatives in Lebanon. Importantly, the PLO's offices were reopened in Lebanon in 2006—having been shut since 1982—and upgraded to the status of embassy in 2011.

In January of 2015, the LPDC launched an intensive internal Lebanese dialogue among representatives from different parliamentary blocs to discuss the rights and living conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon. The committee initiated this dialogue on the basis that any reconciliation efforts between the Lebanese and Palestinians first require Lebanese consensus on fundamental issues. The outcome of the dialogue was a document titled "A Unified Lebanese Vision for Palestinian Refugee Issues in Lebanon," released in January of 2017. Unfortunately, different parliamentary blocs failed to abide by the stipulations of the agreement as outlined in the document; thus, the vision remained a theoretical framework that had no tangible effect on Lebanese state policies towards the Palestinians.

Palestinian representatives in Lebanon also took steps to reach reconciliation through consensus. For example, in January of 2008, Palestinian Ambassador to Lebanon Abbas Zaki issued "The Declaration of Palestine in Lebanon," which

represented an apology for any harm the Palestinians caused to Lebanon during the PLO's presence in the country prior to 1982. Three months later, in response to the Palestinian declaration, over 40 Christian Lebanese figures convened at the Frankness and Reconciliation–Remembering April 13 conference and issued a counter-apology for harm they committed against the Palestinians.

These initiatives raised public awareness and encouraged dialogue in Lebanon about the need to address fundamental aspects of the Palestinian presence in the country, allowing for the creation of the Common Space Initiative (CSI). The CSI was established in 2009 as a UNDP project in Lebanon. In 2011, the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Forum (LPDF) was created within the CSI. Since then, the LPDF has worked to bring Lebanese and Palestinian communities together in order to change prejudiced and stereotypical thinking on both sides, while also pressuring Lebanese legislators and policymakers to discuss the basic human rights of Palestinian refugees. This is particularly difficult given the tumultuous history of Lebanese and Palestinian relations in the country, which has entrenched misconceptions, fears, and acrimony between the two communities.

In addition, the LPDF faces the challenge of overcoming obstacles created by the Lebanese governing establishment, especially those related to discriminatory Lebanese policies that regulate the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. Compounded with the lack of will among Lebanese legislators and political parties, the ruling elite refuses to address the basic rights of Palestinians in Lebanon within the context of universal human and refugee rights protected by international law. Undoubtedly, this is in part due to the fear among different Lebanese constituents that, if Palestinians are afforded basic rights, they will remain in Lebanon and upset the country's precarious sectarian balance.

Lessons to Inform Future Palestinian Consensus-Building

There are examples of successful consensus-building initiatives created by

Palestinian civil society organizations from which Palestinians can draw.

As co-founder of the Center for Refugee Rights (Aidoun) in Lebanon, I was part of an effort to forge a reconciliation and reconstruction program with the Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies (Masarat) in Ramallah, with the support of the Finnish Crisis Management Initiative (CMI). This program ran from 2012-2016 and hosted meetings in different Arab cities, with the participation of high-ranking figures from the PLO and Hamas, as well as independent researchers and academics.

It also resulted in the production of two documents: "Reconstruction of PLO Institutions," which was the outcome of several consensus-building sessions that took place between December of 2012 and March of 2013, and the "National Unity Document," which was produced in February of 2016 and laid out a phased transitional plan to achieve consensus between the participants. Aidoun and Masarat even organized a meeting in Lebanon in June of 2016 among civil society organizations to discuss these materials. Like other initiatives, these proposals remain theoretical frameworks and have yet to be realized.

In August of 2015, Aidoun and Masarat held a consultative meeting on ways to reactivate popular representation and develop a unified position for Palestinians in Lebanon. It was a grassroots initiative to unify, rebuild, and activate the popular committees that were formed in Palestinian refugee camps while the PLO operated in Lebanon. This was particularly significant, given that camps are divided politically between Fatah-led PLO committees and others affiliated with the factions of the Hamas-led National Coalition forces. The meeting was attended by representatives of the PLO, the coalition factions, and civil society organizations, and resulted in the formation of a ten-person committee consisting of representatives from the three aforementioned actors.

While these efforts have met the same fate as other reconciliation and consensus-

building initiatives, given the complexity of the reconciliation process itself, successes were achieved from which lessons can be gleaned.

The three main Palestinian constituents in Lebanon—the PLO factions, the National Coalition factions, and civil society organizations—were able to agree on a unified vision regarding the Palestinian presence in the country and related human rights and livelihood issues. That is, Palestinian factions and civil society organizations succeeded in overcoming—or neutralizing—the state of Palestinian division in order to present unified demands to the Lebanese state. They did so on more than one occasion.

Fundamentally, the process of consensus-building remains a valuable achievement in and of itself. Rather than merely focusing on the final result–i.e. whether national consensus has been achieved–it is imperative to highlight the means with which such a goal is reached. Consensus is a long-term objective; the building of it through these initiatives facilitates trust, camaraderie, and a radical rethinking of current political paradigms for those involved.

Of course, the situation in colonized Palestine differs from that in the diaspora, and confronting settler colonization on a daily basis requires a particular approach to consensus-building. Indeed, overcoming Palestinians' forced geographic fragmentation across colonized Palestine and the diaspora would just be the start. Additionally, reforming and reconstituting the PLO as a unified national front would need considerable work among Palestinian representatives across the world—work that seems increasingly unlikely with the ongoing Palestinian political divide.

However, the instances of success among Palestinians in Lebanon indicate the power of consensus-building. The political factions and civil society organizations came together to agree on demands to present to the Lebanese state, knowing well that waiting for consensus to be built from the top among the

ruling powers would undoubtedly lead to continued division. This remains true today and points to the necessity of adopting a bottom-up approach to achieving Palestinian consensus.

1. *To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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