



COMMENTARY | REFUGEES

When Exiled Communities Act

By: Oraib Rantawi · May, 2012

The invitation by the Palestinian community in Germany to speak at their events on the solemn occasion of Land Day (March 30) was, at a personal level, filled with significance and emotion. Prior to the event, I had had many questions about the extent to which this – and by extension other – exiled community was concerned about and engaged with the Palestinian cause.

What I found in the small city Dortmund (pop. 600,000) were hundreds of Palestinians families of all ages that had traveled many miles to commemorate the occasion. All the political parties and factions were also represented. Banners and keffiyehs were raised and loudspeakers blasted the voice of Fairouz, songs of the revolution, and the sounds of Palestinian folklore. Young men and women spontaneously danced the Palestinian dabke, and photographs, embroidery, and paintings hung on the walls, depicting the historic cities of Palestine and the various episodes in the people's struggle and lives.

Even the children – the fourth generation of Nakba survivors – cloaked themselves with keffiyehs and flags, unmistakable symbols of resistance and of a determination to hold on to land and rights regardless of the passage of time. Their very presence signaled a defeat of the Zionist movement's founding fathers maxim that the "old will die and the young will forget," as Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion put it.

That the community was engaged in Palestinian current affairs was clear from the many questions and comments they asked me about interviews I had given to the



BBC or Al Jazeera, or weekly columns I had written, both recently or many years earlier. Every time a speaker mentioned the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), or a Fatah, Hamas, Popular Front or Democratic Front martyr, the hall resounded with clapping and applause. I sensed that all were longing for the reawakening of their national movement, that they missed the PLO, their sole legitimate representative, and fervently wanted the reconciliation process to succeed.

In my presentation, I spoke of current Palestinian realities in light of the collapse of the option for negotiations and the limited horizons for peace. We discussed the need for the rebirth of the PLO and the revival of the Palestinian national movement. It was an opportunity to address the pivotal role Palestinian communities in exile have to play in pushing for reconciliation as well as the reconstruction, restructuring, and reactivation of the PLO.

It is worth recalling that, during the Cairo dialogues and agreements around reconciliation, the Palestinian leadership – Fatah, Hamas, and all other parties – reached a consensus on the need to revive and democratize the PLO, beginning with the Palestine National Council (PNC). It was agreed that the PNC must not be shaped by “appointments” and “quotas” for political parties, but rather constituted anew through voting and ballot boxes. Alas, nothing has happened so far to implement these decisions, not because the reconciliation process has been derailed so often, but because there is no seriousness in dealing with this issue. It is as if the promises were made simply to appease the people and to appear in tune with the changes brought about by the so-called Arab Spring.

So far, no one has visited the Palestinian communities abroad and nobody has accurately mapped their distribution and numbers. There are no electoral registers, and we know nothing of the potential electorate. I even heard a discussion by local activists about the exact size of the Palestinian community in Germany, with numbers ranging from 75,000 to 250,000!



If the Palestinian political parties are really serious about their commitment to democracy, they should survey the size of Palestinian communities, map their geographic distribution, prepare electoral registers, and register voters under the oversight of an impartial and fair body around which there is consensus. Such a process would undoubtedly take many months, and yet there are those who repeatedly insist – without careful consideration – that we need PNC elections within three months of the establishment of the reconciliation government.

As I spoke to the Palestinian community in Germany, I insisted that we must prepare for elections. The Palestinian communities themselves should begin to coordinate and to undertake survey and registration activities. I briefed the community about an initiative that Palestinian activists are already carrying out under the slogan "Register! I am Palestinian" (the PNC Registration Campaign www.pncregcampaign.org) so that Palestinians can practice their rights as citizens to select their PNC representative in a free and transparent manner.

All of the people I spoke to showed a surprising level of interest in this idea and acceptance of it, something that I believe is happening in other countries. This deserves full encouragement from the leaderships of the PLO, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and all Palestinian parties, as well as independents. In the absence of this community-led process, and without providing every Palestinian citizen 18 years or older with a chance to vote, all this talk of PNC elections is merely ink on paper, a night mist that evaporates in the morning sun.



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