

FOCUS



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In This Issue

1. Guest Column: Dr. Nabil Qasis, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation
2. The Central Election Commission: Realizing and Aspiration
3. Financial Reform
4. A Summary of the 100 Days Plan
5. Voices from Bethlehem
6. Judicial Reform: Strengthening Law and Order
7. Building for Justice in Nablus
8. Palestinian Civil Society and the Reform Process
9. AMAN, Reform, and UNDP
10. Enhancing Decentralization in Local Governance



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**For information of subscription
requests, please write to:**
P.O. Box 51359 Jerusalem
Tel: (02) 6268200, Fax: (02) 6268222
E-mail: registry.papp@undp.org
Website: <http://www.papp.undp.org>

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Guest Column

Dr. Nabeel Kassis Minister of Planning

After the incursions in the spring of 2002, President Arafat addressed the Parliament on the 15th of May, concerning the internal problems of the Palestinian Authority (PA). He asked the cabinet to focus on reform, resulting in the 100 Days Reform Plan, which was issued on 23 June, 2002. The 100 Days Plan calls for comprehensive reform throughout the government, renewal of the legitimacy of elected officials through democratic elections, rearranged ministerial structures, and reinforced separation of powers. Reform Support Groups have been formed to aid with the reform process in the areas of Ministerial and Civil Service, Market Economics, Local Government, Financial Accountability, Civil Society, and Judiciary/Rule of Law.

Much has been accomplished since the 100 Days Plan was first introduced; leaving no doubt that the political will to reform exists. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) has passed the Judiciary Law, the Central Elections Commission has been established, there has been consolidation in the Ministry of the Interior, PNA funds have been moved into a single treasury account, civil service reform has been working towards a leaner and more responsive civil service, and the Supreme Judicial Council has been reappointed, giving new life to the Judiciary. One of the most obvious and forceful signs of the will to reform is the appointment of the Prime Minister, which makes the cabinet more effective. However, much remains to be accomplished.

For the vast majority of the Palestinian people, reform is not currently at the front of their minds. They will wait to see what the results of this reform will be before they pass judgment; meanwhile the innumerable hardships of daily life consume their thoughts. Yet when the affairs of the government are open to the eyes of all and when someone wronged can seek justice in a court, the reform will become a reality for the public. One does not pursue reform for the sake of reform, but in order



Dr. Nabeel Kassis, Minister of Planning and Chairman of the Ministerial Reform Committee

to serve the people. They are the ultimate masters and beneficiaries of government, and reform is not carried out as a favor to them, but because they deserve and demand it.

The Palestinian people must be engaged in reform. Although their minds are consumed by other pressing matters, they must have a hand in this process to give it momentum, and to give it course. It is, after all, their voice and spirit from which the current reform effort springs. Reform in this case is something internal that predates international interest in this reform process. We have set our own benchmarks.

Dr. Nabeel Kassis is the Minister of Planning and Chairman of the Ministerial Reform Committee. He came to politics following an academic career as a nuclear physicist, in which he taught, researched, and acted as an administrator. Dr. Kassis' accomplishments include the foundation of the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute, participating in the Peace Process from the Madrid Peace Conference onwards, administering the Bethlehem 2000 project, and publishing on diverse subjects. Throughout the Palestinian Authority reform process, he has been a key figure, acting as a catalyst and guide.

The Central Election Commission: Realizing an Aspiration

Despite the fact that it has no idea when the elections might take place or what the new electoral law will look like when it is passed by the PLC, the Central Elections Commission (CEC) is working on a plan for running the Palestinian elections.

On paper, the development plan looks impressive. It envisages 961 voter registration centers, each registering a maximum of 3,000 voters in 16 voter districts; an estimated 1.8 million people eligible to vote, comprising almost half the Palestinian population; polling stations planned to handle 600 voters each, with a maximum of five polling stations per center (a total of 2,883 polling stations); and an estimated 13,000 staff needed for voting, and 3,500 for registration.

Uncertainty hangs over the heads of the CEC team as they attempt to make concrete plans for a phantom election. Deryck Fritz, the Advisor of the Electoral Affairs and Public Relations Units of the CEC, and a UNDP Consultant, has worked on elections for the past 9 years. After working in elections in Cambodia, Mozambique, Western Sahara, East Timor, and Fiji, he has considerable experience on which to draw. According to Fritz, when compared to the other elections he has worked on, "this one is characterized by uncertainty. No one knows when there is going to be an election or if there is going to be an election."

Dr. Ali Jarbawi, the Director of the CEC, elaborates on the reasons for this uncertainty: "we don't have a timeframe because we are working under many ambiguities." According to Jarbawi, there are political and security concerns impeding the election: "Up to this moment we cannot meet as a commission, let alone have our employees going from one place to another. We meet through videoconferencing, and I don't think you can hold an election through videoconferencing, or even prepare for an election via videoconferencing."

Elections have not been held in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) since 1996. Most recently national elections were scheduled for January



CEC Headquarters

2003 and local elections were scheduled for March 2003. When the elections were postponed, no new election date was set, although there is some speculation that elections may occur 100 days after any future withdrawal of Israeli troops from the oPt and an end to restrictions on the movement of Palestinians.

In support of the elections, the Government of Japan has donated \$1 million, through UNDP, to aid in setting up the CEC. In December of 2002, the CEC was established with a core group of personnel. Since that date, the CEC has grown – and learned – very rapidly. It is estimated that the total cost of the election, from registration, to polling and counting, will be approximately US\$18 million. The bulk of that funding has been

pledged by the European Commission which has earmarked 10 million Euros in addition to technical assistance. Along with Japan and UNDP, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United States are providing support to the election process.

Nicolas Garrigue, a UNDP Capacity Building Advisor and Advisor to the Training Unit for the CEC, says that despite the fact that the CEC staff has little to no experience in running an election, they are making great strides and are quick to learn. "They had to learn a lot and they really learned on the job," he says. Garrigue and other election experts have been employed as part of the \$700,000 UNDP grant to provide technical assistance to the CEC.

According to Ashraf Shuaibi, Chief of Operations for the CEC and UNDP TOKTEN Consultant, "to plan for an election is very challenging for us. We have to address too many scenarios at the same time: if this happens what are we going to do?" Nonetheless, as Chief of Operations, Shuaibi has been mapping out voter registration plans and polling station matrices. While the CEC waits expectantly for a timeframe and a new electoral law, its efforts have been dedicated to planning, policies, and procedures, all of which will be

essential in the pre-election rush. When an election is called for, it will take the CEC an estimated nine months to complete the process. However, the CEC knows that it may be forced to carry out elections on short notice, and is doing everything possible to prepare.

Despite the uncertainties, the CEC remains optimistic and dedicated to the democratic electoral process. Dr. Jarbawi, reaffirming the importance that the Palestinian people assign to elections, says, "It is self-evident that we need elections. The Palestinian people have been asking for elections for the past few years, because this is the proper way in which you choose your leadership, and you legitimize the leadership by the people electing their representatives."

Dr Jarbawi adds: "There is no other way to have political participation on the one hand and accountability on the other hand, except by holding periodic elections ... the attitude of the Palestinians is one of aspiring to a democratic political system." While much of the world focuses on the daily tragedies of the conflict, the CEC is working behind the lime light to ensure a fair and free elections process that realizes this Palestinian aspiration for democracy.



Birdseye view of downtown Ramallah

Financial Reform: Profile of a Reformer

At the centre of the reform effort by the Palestinian Authority (PA) is financial reform. The leading champion of this drive to set the Palestinian financial house in order is the Finance Minister, Dr. Salam Fayyad. A relentless advocate for transparency and accountability, Mr. Fayyad's achievements in the area of financial reform are impressive. They include the introduction of the 100 Day Reform Plan (profiled in the next page) which became a blue print for financial reforms in the PA. This former development expert, who served as the representative of International Monetary Fund to the PA and holds a PhD in Economics, left a comfortable job to follow through on his principles.

Despite the tremendous hardship of the past three years of Intifada, the Palestinians achievements in the area of financial reform are indeed remarkable. They include the creation of a single treasury account for all PA income. In the past, many ministries held in separate bank accounts the revenues they collected as fees from such things as stamps, health insurance or transportation. This meant ministries that by the nature of their mandate collected less fees were poorer than ministries that collected more fees. Now, all this income is centralized in a single bank account.

Another impressive and indeed revolutionary move was the issuance of the first detailed, public Palestinian budget, of US\$1.24 billion, and its placement on the Web (is the budget at www.mof.gov.ps). Added to this achievement was the identification of Palestinian Authority assets overseas which amounted to US\$ 600 million in 79 ventures around the world. The Ministry of Finance not only published the results of its findings, clearly identifying the officials involved in these investments, but also retained the services of an auditing firm to examine their value and ownership structure, so that they can be sold off and investments centralized under a new supervising agency.

Perhaps one of the most important moves in this reform effort, championed by Dr. Fayyad is



provision of a direct salary deposit for all members of the security forces. This not only means the introduction of a transparent pay system that weeds out patronage, but also provides the security forces with an efficient, reliable, and timely pay schedule that has the added bonus of giving these employees the opportunity to build bank credit and to apply for loans.

Dr. Fayyad eloquently outlines the simple yet profound principle behind the need for reform in the Palestinian Authority. While "poor governance is not an excuse for colonialism, as Dr. Fayyad argues, "the occupation does not give us a license for bad governance."

A Summary of the 100 Days Plan

In June 2002, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasser Arafat approved the 100 Days Plan. After reaffirming the PA position on the political situation, the 100 Days Plan sets forth goals for the Palestinian reform effort in the general, public security, judicial, and financial, and other domains.

In the general domain, the 100 Days Plan aims to reinforce the separation of powers within the government, restructure PA ministries and institutions, make ready for elections, put all laws that have been passed into effect, improve the standard of living of Palestinians, rebuild infrastructure destroyed in the occupation, and assist families whose loved ones have been killed, wounded, or imprisoned in the conflict.

In the area of public security, the Plan emphasizes the need to consolidate and reform the security forces, and restructure the Ministry of the Interior, so that it can take complete control of all branches of security. It also expresses the desire to “give utmost attention to the need of the population for safety, order, and respect of the law...”

In the financial domain, the Plan highlights the need for reform in the Ministry of Finance, including the consolidation of funds into a single treasury account, the creation of a PA investment fund, limiting the number of people employed in the public sector, completing “a modern pension scheme,” developing internal auditing, working on the budget and budgeting procedures, and reorganizing the financial relations between the Ministry of Finance and local governments.

In the judicial domain, the Plan lists activating the judiciary; building courthouses, offices, and modern prisons; implementing the Judiciary Law; preparing “draft laws, decrees, and decisions” in anticipation of the Basic Law coming into force, and establishing a body to deal with legal cases to which the PA is party.

In other domains, the reform seeks “to reinforce national, patriotic, and religious ethical and humanistic values, having in mind that Palestine represents a holy land to the whole world, and renounce fanaticism in the educational curricula and spread the spirit of democracy, enlightenment, and openness on a wide scale.” The Plan then goes further, saying that it seeks to increase the role of the Ministry of Al -Waqf “to serve the national and religious objectives” of the PA, solve the financial problems of educational institutions and hospitals, evaluate public institutions that do not currently operate under the umbrella of a specific ministry, keep the security services out of civilian affairs that fall under the responsibility of the ministries, improve the public workforce through training and better employment practices, coordinate a more effective diplomatic corps, “rebuild the management boards of government institutions,” and take action to stop pollution of the environment.

For more information or to read the entire text of the plan, visit: http://www.mopic.gov.ps/key_documents/100days.asp

Tribute to Fallen UN Colleagues

On August 19th, 2003, a bomb exploded in the UN headquarters in the Canal Hotel, Baghdad. This senseless act of violence resulted in the death of 23 UN personnel and the injury of hundreds of innocents, including the head of UN’s mission to Baghdad, Mr. Sergio Vieira De Mello. While we at UNDP/PAPP share the tremendous pain and shock that the whole world felt from this tragedy and mourn our colleagues’ passing, we also wish to celebrate their lives and draw inspiration from the principles which they made eternal. As the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Anan put it:

“...each was committed, each had braved hardships, set aside longings for home or for a quiet life, and conquered their fears...each showed the world the caring, principled face of the international civil service. Each gave us something to be proud of ...”

Voices from Bethlehem

In Bethlehem that day the sun was hot on the children's faces. Police officers directed traffic and kept a watchful eye on the activities transpiring in Manger Square. Shopkeepers were busy hawking their wares amidst an abundance of pedestrians, and small children gathered in the shadow of the Church of the Nativity to raise their voices, now that the Israeli forces had withdrawn from the city in accordance with the Roadmap. Small hands held hand-written signs and clutched Palestinian flags. Over 100 small voices sang out into the square in an enthusiastic rendition of their national anthem.

Majd, clearly a bright and confident young woman, acted as a spokesperson for the group of children. She stood unabashed in front of a knot of journalists to deliver a message of the protest. Their protest was political – they were calling for an end to deportations and imprisonment outside of Palestinian territory – but the protest had another message that transcended their overt demands: these children demand to be heard. Majd explained, "I think it is very important to raise our voice because sometimes if you raise your voice people will hear you... they might hear you and the whole system will change".

With politics permeating their daily lives over decades, Palestinians are a lazy politician's nightmare. Everyone has an opinion; politics are taken in daily doses over tea, in taxis, and on the streets. From conspiracy theories to sophisticated and highly studied opinions on international politics, you can find it all in discussion in Palestinian cities, towns, and olive groves. This is not democracy imposed from above, but democracy surging up from the roots of society.

Robert Giacaman, one of the owners of a religious items store in Bethlehem, is concerned first and foremost about the potential practical implications of governmental reform. Giacaman lists street repairs, electricity, an improved economy, and jobs as his primary wishes. He is especially concerned with the wellbeing of young Palestinians in the difficult job market. Murad David Murad, a falafel vendor in Bethlehem, also wants to see practical outcomes of the reform. "There is a great need for improving the services the government is providing as well as hospitals, care centers, and even repairing roads," he says, quickly adding that the

political situation is hindering this process.

The owner of the French Baker, a restaurant across from the Muq'ata'a in Bethlehem, agrees with Murad. "Every Palestinian wants democracy, peace, and stability, but they will never happen while we are being occupied since occupation is one of the main obstacles for achieving a democratic state," according to the restaurant owner. "Reform," he states, "is a national desire, and we need to live in an orderly, democratic country." But in order to attain democracy, in his opinion, first Palestinians need freedom, and "there is no freedom under occupation." Young Majd also emphasizes the importance of freedom, saying, "We need freedom and we need it fast."

Giacaman ties the attainment of democracy to elections: "As in any state in the world there should be elections, every three years or five years. The people, they choose their leadership, but maybe in the beginning it is not easy to choose leadership." He goes on to say, "I think and I wish that our Palestinian Authority can achieve real democracy and I think that this is what they are working on." However, Giacaman knows that the results he hopes for may not be immediate, saying, "It's not easy because we are starting, and to start things, in the beginning it is very difficult."

Murad seconds this opinion, saying that although Palestinians have not yet had the chance to truly understand the meaning of democracy, they "seek a free democratic state."

Giacaman has a strong opinion of the meaning of democracy. "You know what democracy is?" he asks, "It is also to live, to have the possibility to live, to go whatever we want, no limit; we want to choose our ways. Nobody can stop us or tell us you can't pass from here or from there. What we wish is to choose our way that we can travel, to find our jobs, to find our future for us and for our children."

Children holding a demonstration in Bethlehem



Judicial Reform: Strengthening Law and Order



*Abdel Kareem Abu Salah,
Minister of Justice*

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) is entrusted with the administration of judicial facilities without infringing on the supervision of the judiciary by the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC). "We at the Ministry of Justice have inherited difficult responsibilities", says H.E. Abdel Kareem Abu Salah, Minister of Justice. "First we

need to restructure the Ministry, find premises for the Attorney General's office, and at the same time finalize the relationship between the Ministry and the SJC in light of new Palestinian legislation."

Impressive progress has been made in the area of judicial reform. The SJC was recently reappointed, following a presidential decree on 14 May 2003, and the powers and jurisdiction of the already illegal State Security court have been negated by a decree issued by the Ministry of Justice on 27 July 2003. Judicial authority is assumed by the courts under the supervision of the SJC. The SJC makes decisions on appointments, assignment, transfers, promotions and disciplinary measures in accordance with the law and organized regulations.

In addition, the cabinet has adopted a bylaw for the establishment of a judicial training institution for judges, public prosecutors and employees of the court. A new Deputy Minister was also appointed, a post that was never filled before. The Ministry of Justice is currently in the process of restructuring all its departments in order to efficiently fulfill its responsibilities. As for its cooperation with donor countries, both the MOJ and the SJC are working with donors on plans to rehabilitate and build new court houses, training centers and to restructure the Ministry.

"If the judicial system does not function well, then all other aspects of democracy become negligible, because justice is the basis of institutional development. Confidence in governmental institutions is essential for any future Palestinian government to have full authority. This is why

the reform process is so essential," Minister Abu Saleh stated. "Law and order must be enforced in order to protect the general welfare and defend the public and individual rights of the Palestinian people" added the Minister.

Furthermore, successful reform will help to improve the welfare of the Palestinian people on both the economic and political level. A strong judicial system for instance, will assist in fighting corruption, hence giving greater incentives to private investors to boost the local economy and engender more confidence from the international community in the PA's ability to govern an independent sovereign state.

For the Palestinian Minister of Justice, "The UNDP Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian people has played an important role in the establishment and development of many Palestinian institutions. Most recently, we have obtained its commitment along with funds from the Government of Japan to build new premises for the Ministry in Gaza. We are also seeking funding to establish a forensic lab to examine samples and materials essential to solving crimes, especially the ones related to drugs."

Now that the Ministry will have the premises required for smooth operations, according to the Minister, "What is really needed is a strong judiciary which is independent and has the power to raise the level of judicial performance and remove the obstacles that have traditionally impeded its ability to function properly".



A Palestinian police officer directing traffic on the streets of Bethlehem

Building for Justice in Nablus

UNDP is currently completing the construction of a courthouse in Nablus as part of an overall effort to provide adequate infrastructure for the reformed justice sector to carry out its functions and bring rule of law to Palestinian society. Funding for this project comes from \$2.5 million from the Government of Japan. A courthouse in Khan Younis and a new building for the Ministry of Justice are also to be built with funding from the Government of Japan in the near future.

Bassam Rashid, a UNDP contracted engineer for the courthouse project, says, "For many years the courts have been performing at a very low level, with no police, no jails, and no power to enforce the law." It is hoped this new court house will reinvigorate the justice system for the district of Nablus.

Yet, one should not underestimate the challenge that Rashid and his colleagues face in seeing this new court house built. Constant impediments by checkpoints delay or often present the delivery of materials, which according to Rashid, caused construction to lag six months behind schedule. He gives an immediate example: "we are waiting for asphalt since yesterday; we are anxiously waiting and hoping that the asphalt will pass



The new courthouse in Nablus



The interior of the new courthouse

the checkpoint." Sometimes the workers plaster and tile inside the building during a curfew, endangering themselves in order not to get too far behind schedule, and because they cannot afford to forgo the day's wages.

The building project has employed an average of 40 people at a time for the past 2 years. "It means a lot of help for their families," says Rashid. But the workers and their families are not the only ones who are being helped by this construction. The long-term benefits of having a courthouse notwithstanding, Rashid describe the immediate impact of the building process on the people of Nablus: "Life in Nablus is a big misery for its people. A project like this gives them some hope, some jobs, this may give them a message that someone in the world cares and feels what they are feeling."

Rashid cautions that the future of the courthouse depends on the peace process and the reform process, which to him "are one package... without peace, this courthouse will not function." "I hope," he says, "that the Ministry of Justice is able to make 100% use of this building."

Palestinian Civil Society and the Reform Process

Reform is indigenous; make no mistake about it. While the Palestinian reform effort has been in fashion of late in international circles, it has been a topic of conversation in the occupied Palestinian territory for quite some time. Need proof? Dr. Hanan Ashrawi and Dr. Azmi Shuaibi are proof in the flesh. Dr. Ashrawi, politician, academic, and founder of the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), has been such an outspoken proponent of reform that she resigned from her position as Minister of Higher Education and Research in 1998 to devote more time to advocacy for reform. In the fall of 2002, Dr. Shuaibi, a member of the PLC and Secretary General of the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (AMAN), collected signatures on a petition for a no-confidence vote on President Arafat's cabinet. The petition forced the vote to be put on the schedule for the following PLC meeting. The cabinet was subsequently dissolved to avoid the vote, the current cabinet was appointed, and the PLC demonstrated a measure of confidence and power.

"Reform is not new or externally imposed," Dr. Ashrawi asserts. "The most notable steps to reform started with the Declaration of Principles," she says. In other words, reform began at the formation of the Palestinian Authority. However, the overwhelming concern with peace-building, in the face of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, meant that nation-building was not served well. The Peace Process came into the foreground, notes Ashrawi, while the Palestinian people became "victims of a punitive peace process." But peace and nation-building, she cautions, "are mutually dependent

processes; only an empowered people can make peace."

Now, however, Ashrawi sees the opposite problem occurring: "the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. There is a desire to see reform and democratic processes, without a real venue for a peace process." In her opinion, one cannot have peace or reform alone; they must come together. For reform to take root, the occupation must be curbed. Dr. Ashrawi defines two mentalities to be fought on the road to peace and reform, "revolution superimposed on nation-building and occupation superimposed on peacemaking."

The pulse of the reform effort, according to Ashrawi, should be quickened, as it has not produced the results that she would like to see. However, the largest obstacle to reform according to Ashrawi, is the occupation.

For the reform process to be a success, in Ashrawi's opinion, the people need to see that the PA emphasizes accountability. In addition, reform needs to be institutionalized, but even more it needs to be internalized by individual people.

Ashrawi says that for the reform to be genuine it "needs to be a collective endeavor that will bring in the public." The reform process, she stresses, must be "people owned, Palestinian owned." Dr. Azmi Shuaibi is both a member of the PLC and the Secretary General of AMAN. He was one of the participants in an October 2002 public video conference, which was opened to all representatives of civil society organizations, and to



Dr. Hanan Ashrawi



Dr. Azmi Shuaibi

which a government observer was also invited. The conference resulted in a Civil Society Reform Plan, which has been influential in recent PA decisions. Most notably, one of the suggestions resulting from the civil society conference was taken by the Prime Minister, who made the Ministerial Reform Committee a national committee, composed of members of the government, the private sector, and civil society.

The participants of the conference would like to see the 100 Days Plan amended. Shuaibi says that it is necessary to redesign the plan, and thinks that reform should move more quickly than it does.

As an example of a step needed in the reform process, Shuaibi stated the need for all public bodies to be under the control of a supervising authority. Some public entities are not currently under the control of a specific ministry. In the economic sector, Shuaibi says that the Palestinian Authority must clarify the status of companies that it owns or is associated with. Of these companies, "It is not clear if they are private or public, because they are mixed," he says. Because of the ambiguity of their status, these companies are hard to monitor.

In Shuaibi's opinion, the reform effort has already produced some good results, such as the transparency of the budget following financial

reforms, which included the consolidation of PA funds into a single treasury account. He also cites the decision of the cabinet to stop extracting a tax from the salaries of government employees without the corresponding tax legislation in place.

Much remains to be done. Shuaibi says that getting the reform on the level of government that is closest to the people – that of civil servants – would be a significant step. He would also like to see a policy of equal opportunity employment in action. Another important benchmark for Shuaibi would be an election. "The people gave us their vote for 5 or 6 years, not 7," he says.

Both Ashrawi and Shuaibi agree strongly that the reform agenda should not be mixed with other political agendas. Ashrawi insists that all concerned should avoid politicizing reform, democracy, and human rights. "These things need to exist apart from other political processes, so as not to be jeopardized," she says. Shuaibi gives the example of the Roadmap as a political issue that the diverse parties of the occupied Palestinian territories – in true democratic fashion -- have differing opinions on. On reform however, "even extreme political parties agree."

For more information on such civil society initiatives for reform visit: <http://www.miftah.org/>

AMAN, Reform, and UNDP

In February of 2000, a group of highly respected Palestinian civil society organizations came together in the name of good governance, integrity, transparency, and accountability to form AMAN, the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity. The Coalition saw the barriers that Palestinian society was facing, and responded with a totally indigenous initiative to promote the above-stated ideals in Palestinian institutions and society at large.

With conferences, action plans, research, workshops, public meetings, and other thought-provoking and engaging activities AMAN nurtures the spirit of democracy in Palestinian culture. At the same time, AMAN acts as a monitor of the reform effort, reminding those concerned that the reform is in place for the sake of the Palestinian people, above all else.

In 1999, the UNDP provided \$236,000 to aid with the founding of the coalition. In 2001, the UNDP granted another \$100,000 to the young coalition, to aid in the activities of AMAN surrounding their National Action Plan, including development and administration costs. Now other donor institutions are supporting AMAN. Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, founder of the coalition member organization MIFTAH, says of the UNDP-AMAN relationship: "The UNDP started with us; they were among the first to help start the coalition. So far, UNDP has been the leading partner in this effort."

For more information on AMAN, visit the organization's web site: www.aman-palestine.org

Enhancing Decentralization in Local Governance

There was a quiet election in the occupied Palestinian territory this past summer, one that did not make international headlines. The election was in six out of sixteen Micro-Regional Planning Committees (MRPCs) (the title for these committees has been changed to joint services councils for planning and development (JSCPD) as of September 1, 2003). MRPCs are made up of members of local authorities in 16 "micro-regions" which are defined by specific criteria that contribute to the functionality of the micro-region. Each member local authority in the micro-region identifies one of its members to represent it in the MRPC. Then nominations are open for membership in the Executive Committee (EC) of the MRPC. The EC is composed of one third of the member local authorities in the MRPC and includes the Chair and Deputy Chair.



UNDP's Local Rural Development Programme (LRDP), in partnership with the Palestinian National Authority, in particular the Ministry of Local Government (MLG), and with generous contributions from the European Commission, the United States Agency for International Development, and the UNDP itself has been operating since 1994. MRPCs have the fourfold purpose of planning, coordination, fundraising, and capacity building for their member local authorities. Some MRPCs have flourished after becoming independent of LRDP assistance (new

MRPCs have an initial two-year support period) and even the new MRPCs provide powerful forums for communities to identify and prioritize their needs. Each MRPC has a joint project, which both provides necessary services to the local community and earns funds for further community development projects.

One example of success is the West Dura MRPC in Hebron district. Water is scarce in the region, so the Palestinian Water Authority gave the MRPC a point from which to draw water and a tanker. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) agreed to pay the cost of transportation and the cost of the water if the MRPC would distribute water to its constituents. It will be free of charge to the poor and for minimal charges to the others based on a specified list prepared by the ICRC. In less than six months, this MRPC has earned \$30,000



and played a key role in securing the distribution of safe drinking water to the area. The MRPC's chairperson, Waleed Abu Sharar, sees a difference in local governance since the founding of the MRPC. "Before the establishment of the MRPC," he says, "The Ministry of Local Government took the role of identifying needs and implementing projects without local community participation. Now we see the MRPC is playing a leadership role in ensuring that the local community participates in identifying and prioritizing its needs."

Suleiman Abu Mufereh is the chairperson of the MRPC for the Eastern Rural Areas of Bethlehem, which encompasses nine villages with a total of 5,000 inhabitants. He agrees that there has been a change in the relationship between local authorities and the Ministry of Local Government since the foundation of the MRPCs. According to Abu Mufereh, "the Ministry of Local Government's verbal support of decentralization has become concrete with its support for the MRPCs.

The MRPC in Eastern Rural Areas of Bethlehem District is extremely active, having supervised the building of schools, health clinics, two kindergartens, an activity center for women, and more than 30 kilometers of internal roads in the District. It is funded by both a community contribution and USAID, and it is expected that this MRPC will start to generate revenue from the joint project, which has earning from a public works unit that includes loaders, tractors, and sewage trucks. This MRPC is also extremely concerned with education and capacity building. Its members are currently working on an educational campaign about the environment and sewage disposal. According to Abu Mufereh, none of the villages in the area has a wastewater network; instead, all use rudimentary septic tanks. These villages, he notes, are situated on top of "one of the biggest aquifers in the West Bank." "Some say the pollution has already started," he says.

When asked to identify the biggest needs of the MRPCs, Abu Mufereh lists attaining freedom of movement and building the skills of the local authorities as the top two priorities. Abu Mufereh himself has to travel in three separate forms of transportation between his village of Teqoa, where he is the mayor, and the MRPC office in Bethlehem. He has not been able to drive his car on the main road to his village since May 2001, and says that there are 21 dirt barriers isolating villages at this time. "The most important thing," he says, "is letting the inhabitants of the local communities move."

Restrictions on movement aside, the future of MRPCs looks good. The MLG with the technical support of the LRDP completed the merge of the MRPCs bylaws with the MLG rules that govern the JCSP to expand the mandate of the (JSCs). Previously, these councils' duties were limited to providing specific services that are not necessarily defined by the community, as their priority needs.



Now, councils have the title "Joint Service Councils for Planning and Development" and their mandate have been expanded to include participation in the planning for developing the rural areas through the enhancement of the local community participation in identifying and prioritizing their needs, to coordinate and cooperate with both the governmental and non governmental institutions, mobilize resources for the council, and enhance the administrative and management capacity of the member local authorities. "The LRDP is focusing on the objectives, functions and responsibilities for these local authorities regardless if they are called MRPCs or JSCPD". says Shifa Jayousi, an Institutional Strengthening Specialist for LRDP.

The actions taken by the Ministry of Local Government with regard to JSCs are both a concrete sign of reform in local governance and an endorsement for the work of MRPCs. The existing JSCs will now take on a more active role, effectively decentralizing authority. In addition, the relationship between JSCs/MRPCs and the Ministry of Local Government is being defined more precisely – another step on the road to reform. These accomplishments are facilitated by the success of MRPCs, which have demonstrated the effectiveness of this model of local governance. In the words of Abu Sharar, "MRPCs are a sample of reform."