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**The Evolution of an Independent, Community-Based Campaign  
for Palestinian Refugee Rights**

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*BADIL-Briefs* aim to support the Palestinian-Arab and international debate about strategies for promotion of Palestinian refugees' right of return, restitution, and compensation in the framework of a just and durable solution of the Palestinian/Arab - Israeli conflict.

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**Background**

This paper discusses the political circumstances in the 1967 occupied Palestinian lands and in 1948 Palestine/Israel which have led to the evolution of new, independent popular (grass-roots) initiatives for the defense of Palestinian refugee rights in the post-Oslo era. It summarizes the efforts at popular refugee organizing since 1994/5, as well as the principles and agenda defined in this process.

We argue in this paper that these independent popular refugee initiatives present an opportunity for the development of a new model of issue-based activism. Under the condition that the backbone of such activism is formed by the popular, independent Palestinian refugee organizations and initiatives, it can help re-connect Palestinian grass-roots organizations with all those Palestinian (and non-Palestinian) activists, NGOs and professionals who are concerned about the future of Palestinian refugee rights, re-build dialogue and cooperation between the Palestinian (refugee) community in the homeland and in exile, and become a strong tool of advocacy for our refugees' rights of return, restitution of property and compensation.

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\* For a description of the socioeconomic situation of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Israel, and Egypt see *Country Profiles* (Bethlehem: BADIL Resource Center, 2000).

## **The Evolution of an Independent, Community-Based Campaign for Palestinian Refugee Rights**

### **Palestinian Refugees in the 1967 Occupied Palestinian Territories and 1948 Palestine/Israel Coping with the Post-Oslo Conditions**

While not wishing to simplify the complexity of the Palestinian struggle and its internal contradictions, since the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, we argue that the rift caused in the Palestinian National Movement by the signing and implementation of the Oslo Accords poses an unprecedented existential threat to the future of the Palestinian struggle. On the one hand, we are confronted with an extremely unfavorable balance of regional and international power and the division of the Palestinian people over its political program (pro or against Oslo). On the other hand, there is deep popular disappointment of and distrust in the political leadership, including both the Palestinian Authority (PA)/PLO and the unsuccessful Palestinian opposition. Popular disappointment and distrust in the historical party-leadership and Palestinian intellectuals affiliated with it has led to an overwhelming "crisis of representation" in the Palestinian struggle, a crisis which is the major reason for the failure of all initiatives aimed at re-building a unified Palestinian program of action since Oslo.

Initiatives for a popular and independent refugee (internally displaced) campaign/movement - appearing on the political map of the 1967 occupied territories and in 1948 Palestine/Israel after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords - are an expression of the current crisis of representation, and a direct response of the refugee community to the exclusion of their rights from the political program of the Palestinian leadership.

#### **I. Grass-Roots Activism in Pre-Oslo Palestine**

By the second half of the 1980s, the Palestinian popular uprising (*Intifada*, 1987 - 1991) in 1967-occupied Palestine shifted the focus of the Palestinian struggle to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The PLO was thus temporarily extricated from the deep programmatic and organizational crisis it had entered due to its eviction from Lebanon in 1982.

Prior to that period, the role of the Palestinian national liberation movement in the occupied homeland (1967 and 1948) was defined mainly in terms of *Sumoud* (steadfastness), while the center of action for the liberation of Palestine via armed struggle and diplomacy, was based in the exile. Deep popular respect and admiration for the liberation fighters, as well as the hope created by the activities of the PLO among the Palestinian community in the homeland, facilitated the recruitment of popular strata to the organizational structures of the PLO in Palestine, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

**In 1948 Palestine/Israel**, this resulted in the "Palestinization of the Arabs of Israel" - a phenomenon much deplored by Israeli researchers and policy makers of that time. The defense of land which had remained in Palestinian hands after the 1948 war, became the focus of Palestinian organizing and mobilization in 1948 Palestine/Israel, especially after the brutal Israeli repression of the first large demonstration in March 1976 (Land Day). The *Committee for the Defense of Arab Land*, dominated by Palestinian members of the *Israeli Communist Party* and *Abna' al-Balad* (PFLP), remained the pillar of the Palestinian national struggle until 1990. The Committee became inactive, however, due to the weakening of the PLO as a result of the 1991 Gulf War, and the re-shuffling of the Palestinian political forces in response to the Madrid-Oslo process. Since the early 1990s, the *Arab Monitoring Committee* (mainly Palestinian mayors and heads of Local Councils, Palestinian members of Knesset), which is characterized by a political orientation along the parameters set by the Israeli Labor Party much more than by the PLO/PA, has assumed a leadership role for the Palestinian community in 1948 Palestine/Israel.

**The uprising (*Intifada*) in the 1967-occupied homeland** was a spontaneous reaction of the popular strata against the heavy and humiliating Israeli repression in the 1980s (Rabin's "Iron Fist" policy). Its transformation from spontaneous protest to organized resistance was facilitated by the presence of the organizational infrastructure set up earlier by the PLO member organizations.

The Palestinian *Intifada* defined itself as a popular resistance movement against the Israeli occupation in the 1967-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The political program of the Palestinian uprising, although maintaining the three historical pillars (liberation, self-determination, right of return), gave priority to the partial liberation of Palestine and self-determination, understood as the establishment of the Palestinian state in the liberated areas, over the earlier vision of total liberation and refugee return. This program was shared by all PLO factions (whether as a tactical or strategic program), and re-established a national consensus and unity which had been deeply eroded following the 1982 PLO withdrawal and destruction of its infrastructure in Lebanon.

The concreteness of the aims of the *Intifada*, and the popular belief in the achievability of its aims, gave rise to broad grass roots support and credibility of the political leadership. The *Intifada* involved and united all social classes and strata of the Palestinian people in the 1967-occupied homeland, including its refugees. Palestinian refugee camps figured among the hard core of the struggle, and refugees, although existing as a special social category, did not represent a separate political category. The moral strength of the popular resistance movement in the 1967-occupied homeland also had a motivating and unifying impact also on the otherwise politically divided Palestinian people and its organizations in exile.

## **II. The Post Madrid/Oslo Period (1991 - 1999)**

### **2.1 Evolution of Independent Refugee Initiatives**

The end of the Palestinian national consensus based on the program of the *Intifada* came with the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent Madrid Conference. The consensus was shattered completely by the 1993 Oslo Accords and the consequent implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian follow-up agreements:

Palestinians of 1948 Palestine/Israel already understood at the time of the 1991 Madrid Conference that they would, from now on, be excluded from the political program of the Palestinian leadership. This caused large numbers of core activists to re-direct their political efforts towards the struggle for equal citizens' rights in Israel, and strengthened the influence of Israeli Labor Party politics among the Palestinian community.

In the 1967-occupied homeland, the establishment of new institutions under the Palestinian Authority (PA), and its role as major employer among the popular strata, led to the destruction of the infrastructure set up by the popular resistance movement. Moreover, the gradual creation of a caricature of a Palestinian state, in parts of the 1967-occupied homeland, radically different from what had been the aim of the popular struggle, combined with economic difficulties caused by Israeli-imposed restrictions on freedom of movement, the continuation of human rights violations, and new PA clientalism and corruption, led to deep and broad disappointment among the Palestinian popular sector. Severe alienation of the popular strata from the political leadership (PA, as well as the unsuccessful opposition) and its unsuccessful national program is the result.

Palestinian refugees in the homeland were especially struck by the negative effects of the Oslo process by the obvious exclusion of the Palestinian right of return from the political agenda of the dominant leadership group (PA) in the 1967-occupied lands. The process also led to the two-fold marginalization of the popular refugee sector from the scene of political action: first, in the framework of the general marginalization of the popular sector, and again, as a result of the exclusion of their central political concerns from the leadership's political debate and action.

Despite the radically different social and political realities of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza (under Israeli occupation and PA rule) and refugees in 1948 Palestine (oppressed citizens of an exclusive Jewish state), both groups of refugees reacted along very similar lines. New, independent refugee initiatives designed as popular movements were established to lobby and pressure the respective authorities (i.e. the PA, PLO, Israel) for the recognition of their legitimate rights, especially the right to return to their homes and properties in what is now Israel. Thus, for the first time in the history of the Palestinian struggle in Palestine, we are witnessing initiatives "by refugees for refugees", i.e. the evolution of refugees as a political category distinct from the Palestinian non-refugee population.

### **2.1.1 Refugee Mobilization in 1948 Palestine/Israel**

The establishment of the *National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel* (NCID), by activists and members of the displaced Palestinian communities in Israel, came in reaction to the exclusion from the agenda of the Madrid Conference of 1948 Palestinians in general, and the concerns of the 200-250,000 internally displaced in particular. A first Action Committee (set up in 1992) recruited some 300 activists from community organizations and political parties, NGOs and Palestinian members of Knesset to its first popular conference held in Nazareth in March 1995. By 1999, the National Committee for the Internally Displaced, established at the 1995 Conference, represents some 60 uprooted Palestinian communities in Israel.

The NCID demands the implementation of UN Resolution 194 in regards to the internally displaced Palestinians as well as the refugees in exile, and lobbies for the inclusion of the file of the internally displaced in the context of the Palestinian refugee question. It organizes protest activities and voluntary workdays to maintain the holy sites in the depopulated villages, gathers demographic and property documentation, and lobbies in the Knesset for the approval of the return of internally displaced communities to their empty homes and properties. The NCID encouraged several Palestinian displaced communities to form local action committees and registered associations, and succeeded to place the right of return of the internally displaced on the agenda of all Palestinian parties and the Arab Monitoring Committee in Israel.

### **2.1.2 Refugee Mobilization in 1967 Occupied Palestine**

The spark for the launching of the popular initiative for refugee rights was provided by an action program developed in a meeting of political activists rooted in the refugee community. The meeting was held in the former Israeli prison compound of *Al-Far'ah*/Nablus District in December 1995; the action program called for the formation of an independent refugee lobby, headed by refugee councils to be elected in a series of popular refugee conferences in the homeland and in the diaspora. The *Union of Youth Activity Centers-West Bank* (UYAC; a union formed by the Youth Activity Centers located in each refugee camp, in order to cope with the discontinuation of UNRWA support and protection) was chosen, in the absence of an appropriate political organization, to carry on this initiative.

Following a series of preparatory workshops in spring 1996, the first *Popular Refugee Conference* was held in Deheishe Refugee Camp in September 1996, directly followed by a similar conference in Gaza. The initiative failed to bring about the desired election of authentic refugee councils, mainly due to the intervention of sectarian party politics. Despite its failure on the organizational level, this popular refugee initiative was successful in defining the basic agenda and guidelines of the struggle for the defense of refugee rights in the 1967 occupied territories. (For details, see: Recommendations of the First Popular Refugee Conference, Deheishe, September 1996 in: [www.badil.org/Refugee/Documents](http://www.badil.org/Refugee/Documents)).

The initiative for the popular refugee conferences (and rumors around the formation of a Conference of Return in exile, as well as the prospect of the final status negotiations with Israel) led the PLO leadership to re-activate its Department for Refugee Affairs and to establish the *Popular Service Committees* as its presence in each refugee camp.

While initially perceived as a threat and tool of control by the independent popular refugee initiative, the Popular Service Committees in the West Bank were rapidly integrated into the grass-roots network, because: i) its members are authentic refugee activists; ii) the PLO Department lacked the means (man-power, infra-structure, and funds) required to build the Service Committees as an alternative to the independent initiative.

Throughout 1997-8, strategy debates, lobbying and protest activities carried out by activists affiliated with the UYAC, Popular Service Committees, and local refugee committees continued; they were joined by members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), especially by the PLC/Refugee Subcommittee whose members were elected by a refugee constituency, and by activists in Palestinian institutions (unions, PNC, etc). In early 1999, BADIL Resource Center undertook a new effort to structure the debate among this loose network of activists and to define priorities and agenda by means of a series of strategy workshops (see summary: Principles and Agenda, below). Despite the absence of a formal structure, the short history of the independent refugee initiative in Palestine can show achievements, among them: the unification of the UYAC West Bank with the Youth Activity Centers in Gaza refugee camps into the Union of Youth Activity Centers-Palestine; the adoption by the PA of the stand that it represents, in legal terms, a "host country" of the refugees in its territory; and, in 1999, the public expression of support for the independent, popular refugee campaign by the PLO Department for Refugee Affairs.

## **2.2 Principles and Agenda of the Independent, Community-based Campaign for Palestinian Refugee Rights**

The following recommendations summarize the results of a series of strategy workshops of West Bank refugee activists and members of Palestinian institutions. The recommendations obtained the support of the PLO Department for Refugee Affairs. (Compiled by the *BADIL Friends Forum*, spring 1999)

### Organizational Principles:

1. Given the current disarray of Palestinian partisan politics and the alienation of the refugee community from the PA and partisan political leadership, a *broad and non-sectarian movement* is the best organizational model to pressure and lobby for the protection of Palestinian refugee rights.
2. The backbone of the movement must be formed by *Palestinian popular organizations and initiatives* that express the genuine needs and demands of Palestinian refugees.
3. The movement must be *independent* from the PA/PLO bureaucracy bound by the Oslo program and independent from partisan interests. It will work to pressure the PLO, in order to prevent a political compromise of the legitimate rights of Palestinian refugees, and assist and strengthen all those forces in the PA/PLO who take a positive stand on the Palestinian right of return.
4. The solution of the Palestinian refugee question is an extremely difficult task. It requires unity and mutual support, and must include the refugees in the homeland (1967 and 1948) and the diaspora in order to overcome the *threat of geographic separation*, and include Palestinian non-refugees in order to avoid *sectarian* activism.

## Agenda

1. The campaign must focus on raising awareness and support for the Palestinian *right of return* in order to counter the position - held by Israel and powerful western governments - that this right is outdated. Palestinian organizations are called upon to raise UN Resolution 194 (Right of Return) in conjunction with UN Resolution 181 (UN Partition Resolution), because Israel continues to refer to the latter as representing the legal basis for the establishment of the Jewish state, while violating its obligation, under the same UN Resolution, to guarantee freedom and rights of its non-Jewish population.
2. Recognition by Israel, of the *right of return as a principle* is a Palestinian pre-condition for negotiations over a concrete solution of the Palestinian refugee question. No concrete scenarios and mechanisms for a solution are to be advanced by negotiators, researchers, and Palestinian institutions until Israel's acceptance of the principle of return.
  
3. Awareness raising and mobilization among the Palestinian refugee community must also address *immediate refugee needs* that result from the heavy economic pressure in the camps.
4. The Palestinian debate about the *concrete meaning of the right of return* in the current political context must be continued and intensified. Central questions must be clarified with the assistance of experts, in order to achieve a sound Palestinian consensus and the unification of Palestinian public speech. Among the central questions are:
  - i) The complementary relationship of the right of return, restitution of property *and* compensation as part and parcel of Palestinian refugee rights to avoid addressing these rights as if they were mutually exclusive;
  - ii) The implications of the right of return as both an *individual* (human) and *collective* (political) right: options of return must be explored on both levels; the debate about return with or without Palestinian sovereignty must be continued;
  - ii) The development of concrete Palestinian scenarios for the option of return to 1948 Palestine/Israel (return to where, under which mechanism?);
  - iii) Exploration of the impact of Palestinian statehood on the right of return in its legal and political context;
  - iv) The difference, according to international law, between return to the PA areas and return to the original homes and lands: In order to prevent public confusion about the concrete meaning of the term, we recommend speaking about the "right of return to homes and properties" (instead of using "homeland" used by the PA to refer to the future state).
  
5. Palestinian pressure for maintenance and improvement of UNRWA services is important, not only because of the services provided by the Agency, but also because UNRWA is an expression of the international responsibility for the Palestinian refugee question.
6. The movement calls upon the PLO to prepare - with the help of experts - position papers for the negotiations with Israel. These papers should be presented to the Palestinian Council prior to disclosure in the negotiations. Since an agreement on the solution of the refugee question with Israel cannot be expected in the short term, a Palestinian strategy for dealing with the delay of this central question must be developed.
7. The movement calls upon the PLO to democratize its institutions dealing with the refugee question, especially the Department of Refugee Affairs and the PLO Service Committees, in order to allow for the involvement of popular refugee activists and experts.

### **III. Towards a Palestinian-International Campaign for the Defense of Palestinian Refugee Rights**

By the year 2000, many of the central activists of the popular initiatives are connected in the *BADIL Friends Forum* (established in 1998), which - through BADIL Resource Center - has begun to develop contacts and cooperation with Palestinians in Lebanon and the National Committee for the Internally Displaced and NGOs in 1948 Palestine/Israel.

Based on the principles and agenda defined for the local grass-roots campaign in Palestine, BADIL proposes an initiative for an International Campaign for the Defense of Palestinian Refugee Rights to NGOs and solidarity groups in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia. This international campaign initiative aims to:

**a) Build a solid international network for advocacy** for Palestinian refugees' rights right of return, restitution, and compensation.

**b) Assist refugee grass-roots initiatives** by means of professional expertise as well as logistic and financial support in: regional networking, service development, advocacy;

**c) Raise international public awareness** for Palestinian refugees' right of return, restitution of property, and compensation. The public awareness campaign should be designed in the context of the anti-racism campaign and highlight the fact that racism, discrimination, and ethnic cleansing policies inherent in the Zionist model of the exclusive Jewish state represent both the cause of the massive Palestinian displacement in 1947-8 and the major obstacle to their repatriation in the framework of a just and durable solution in the future. Public education about the **ongoing validity of the right of return must be the priority** (return is legitimate according to international law; represents refugee choice; is practically possible without resulting in massive displacement of the Jewish population in Israel; is economically more feasible than payment of compensation; will be conducive to regional cooperation and development). International responsibility for Palestinian refugees (protection/UNHCR and assistance/UNRWA) can be highlighted in this context.

**d) Develop tools** (advocacy documents), strategies and logistics for **efficient advocacy and lobbying among key policy makers**;