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The role of youth and women in the peaceful resolution of the question of Palestine

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PLENARY I

**The situation of youth and women
in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,
including East Jerusalem**

Paper presented by

Mr. Akram Natsheh
Youth Against Settlements
Hebron

The Youth Movement in the West Bank through the group Youth Against Settlements

Youth Against Settlements

I shall speak here about youth groups in the West Bank and the amount of influence that those groups, which have come to form part of the Palestinian struggle, have, through the experience of working with Youth Against Settlements, an independent youth group that has adopted the path of non-violent popular resistance against the occupation. First I shall talk about the group and conditions in the city, then about the independent youth movement phenomenon in Palestine: its achievements, its challenges and the hopes cherished by the youth.

The form of settlement activity in Al-Khalil (Hebron) differs from that in other areas of the West Bank. The case of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) is somewhat similar, but it is harsher in terms of the settlement question and the occupation focuses on it efforts to create new settlements. In most areas of the West Bank, settlement activity is centred around Palestinian towns and villages and the boundaries between governorates, but in Al-Khalil, settlement activity is found right in the heart of the old city, directly impacting the life of every Palestinian or visitor to the city and revealing the forms of racial discrimination that the inhabitants and anyone who visits the city experience.

The occupation has created five settlements in the centre of the city, whose inhabitants are known for their intense hostility to the Palestinians. According to the reports of human rights organizations, those settlers have carried out in the city various acts of aggression against Palestinians, the most egregious of which was the massacre committed in 1994, when settlers killed 29 people praying in the precinct of the Ibrahimi Mosque. In addition to those violations, the practices of the occupation army constitute further oppression of Palestinian citizens through the establishment of permanent military checkpoints, of which there are now more than 100 within an area of less than one square kilometre, in addition to repeated searches and the prohibition for Palestinians to use Martyr Street, which links the north of the city to the south, in a clear-cut policy of racial discrimination. The city is subject to a special agreement known as the Hebron Protocol, according to which the city is divided into two parts: one under Israeli security control, which comprises the centre of the city where the settlements are located and the areas surrounding it; and the other, the suburbs, being under the partial security control of the Palestinian Authority.

Given this difficult situation to which the city is subject, there was no choice but to take action to stop the violations of the rights of Palestinian citizens and let the world know what is taking place there. A group of young people therefore undertook to do that by creating Youth Against Settlements. From the very outset the group adopted the principle of popular resistance against the occupation and since its creation it has carried out hundreds of actions and stoppages with a view to putting an end to the human rights violations and making those violations known around the world.

The group has engaged in many activities and programmes aimed at the implementation of its principal objectives, such as the following:

Beit al-sumud (House of Resistance), our group's most splendid success story. It involved a Palestinian house in the Tall al-Rumayda district which the army had converted to a military checkpoint. After it was evacuated, the settlers occupied it, but the group conducted an outstanding popular legal and rights battle that lasted more than an entire year in order to have the settlers evicted from the house, after which it was converted to a cultural centre and the group's headquarters. In that centre dozens of cultural events are held, as well as remedial courses for school students, especially residents of the area, which is deemed one of those most exposed to harassment.

The international campaign for the opening of Martyr Street. This campaign has been organized by solidarity workers from over 15 countries around the world to obtain the opening of the city's Martyr Street, closed without any reasonable justification. The group works to organize activities aimed basically at opening that street, which is of vital importance to the Palestinian residents. The campaign is centred each year around the 25th of February, the anniversary of the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre. This year the campaign organized 35 events in various countries around the world to demand the opening of the street to Palestinians and an end to the racial discrimination taking place there.

The members of the youth group work toward making life easier for citizens in areas threatened by settlement activity, through volunteer work carried out in cooperation with other youth groups. Such work includes helping in the harvesting of olives and grapes and reclaiming agricultural land, in addition to some repair work.

The group also participates in action to support persons exposed to hostilities, standing with them when such acts occur, documenting the hostilities with video cameras, publicizing the hostilities and turning over the recordings to organizations active in the area of human rights and publishing them via the social media and sometimes on television channels. This activity has significantly curtailed the acts of aggression, especially through the full documentation of the violations. Many times the settlers commit acts of aggression then submit reports to the police, but the documentation of those events has helped to reduce them, in addition to creating awareness among the citizens about how to proceed legally when their rights are being violated.

The last line of action is that of informing and conducting tours for foreign visitors from various countries and with varying degrees of awareness of the real situation in the city and the suffering of its people, which amounts to the harshest form of racial discrimination. We request them to communicate what they have witnessed to their countries, and in fact many of them have joined the international campaign to open Martyr Street and participated in activities.

The youth groups in Palestine operate separately, each group working on a particular issue, and just as the Youth Against Settlements group works on resisting settlement activity within the city of Al-Khalil, dozens of youth groups are active in respect of other issues, such as the demand for the right to travel or resistance to the wall, in certain areas, or the right to housing, especially in areas classified as Area C, in which the occupation does not permit Palestinians to build.

The nature of the individual issues on which the youth groups work and the fact that each of them works in a different region sometimes render it difficult to unite their efforts fully. Nevertheless, on the ground there does exist field coordination and participation in the activities carried on by those groups. There are many instances of participation in the villages of al-Walajah and Bil'in, in addition to the fact that we receive the participation of dozens of youths from various towns and other groups in the activities we carry on. On certain occasions, moreover, all the youth movements and groups join together in one action, as for example to show solidarity with prisoners or on the occasion of the commemoration of the day of al-Nakba.

As we and all the youth groups in Palestine see it, there are hundreds of achievements which, viewed individually, might appear small, yet when those achievements are measured at the level of the nation, they are great, and our hope still resides in our aspiration for complete liberation from the occupation. Such achievements have involved the return of land from the settlers, the opening of roads, the building of housing, support to those living in caves or the enabling of some owners of land to have access to their land after being prevented by settlers. Those actions have made the lives of citizens much easier: the opening up of a single checkpoint means a great deal to those who travel the roads, so what can it mean if many checkpoints are opened, much property is taken back from the hands of the settlers, buildings are built and life is made easier for those living in the vicinity of the settlements?

Like other groups, our youth groups bring together youths from various sectors of the population and different political views and ideologies, uniting around the idea of popular resistance. You may find a leftist, an Islamist, a Christian and a secularist in any of the groups, a fact that brings into any group numerous views and ideas and contributes to the creation of new forms of conducting the struggle. As for the political programme, everyone agrees with what is agreed on by all Palestinian factions: the demand for liberation from the occupation and the establishment of the Palestinian State.

Our group and most other youth groups are independent movements that do not align themselves with the factions. Their emergence is an expression of the inability of the factions to include Palestinian youth and the absence of opportunities for the youth within those factions: it is a new phenomenon in Palestinian society. In this or any other youth group one may find youths that are members of factions who have not found in them their own long-term objectives or approach to the struggle and have turned to the youth groups. In the group, however, they shed their factional cloaks.

Factions have tried to subsume the youth groups within their framework, but have not managed to do so, since they wanted the youth to be a group of soldiers but gave them no share in leadership or in terms of opinions. As a result, the young people have preferred to remain outside the organizational frameworks. Some factions have tried to swallow up activities and events to their own advantage: for example, last year's events of 15 March, on which the youth called on people to take to the streets to protest against the ongoing split but were surprised to see that the flags and elements of the factions and the divided leaderships had beat them to the street in an attempt to turn the events to their own advantage.

The youth effort is a voluntary undertaking by the Palestinian youth to play their role in building a society and ridding it of the occupation. We do not want any recompense, for we consider our reward to be liberation from the occupation and participation in the building of our State and our society.

Consequently, we and many other youth groups operate on very low budgets. We do not try to operate beyond our capacity and use the lowest-cost means for organizing our events. We use left-over cartons from shops to write our slogans. We copy our invitations to activities with a minimum of expense and design. We make use of social media, e-mail and groups to send out invitations, and communication via the information media to publish invitations as news items and unpaid material. The use of these things greatly reduces costs, especially since we and many other youth groups are independent of any parties or backers.

What raises the cost greatly, on the material side, is the fines and bail paid for the release of activists when they are arrested by the occupation army during activities. Such occurrences are often more than we can bear, so that we sometimes turn to rights organizations to assist in engaging counsel and in some cases putting up bail. Most of our financing is from the local community, as well as from foreign solidarity workers who offers some material support, for which we are grateful.

Foreign solidarity constitutes a fundamental part of the youth movement and non-violent popular action to resist the occupation. Foreign solidarity workers and some Israelis make up a fundamental part of this form of struggle. Their participation in activities and events sometimes softens the violent response of the occupation army; indeed, when such workers are present, the soldiers act less violently than usual, lest any injury or harm be inflicted on any foreign solidarity worker owing to possible problems with his or her embassy.

The experience of solidarity with the Palestinian people is very rich, most solidarity workers being youths from various movements and groups from around the world, to whom we express heartfelt thanks. Many times their participation is not confined to action within Palestine, but extends all over the globe in boycott campaigns and the organization of events and protests against the occupation in various countries of the world.

Our anti-occupation activities are non-violent and we do not intend to clash with the police. Despite that, however, the occupation army deals with our events and activities with great violence, especially when no journalists or foreign solidarity workers are present. We constantly announce that we are non-violent and do not want any clash, but no sooner do the soldiers see Palestinian flags flying, a demonstration being organized and shouts against the practices of the occupation and the settlers than they come out and start arresting people and firing gas canisters and sound bombs at participants, striking and attacking people as they go.

In so doing the occupation is giving the worst possible picture of itself, as the whole world sees that, while we are not carrying any instrument of violence, it, on the contrary, breaks up events with violence and arrests. The use of violence has not resulted in any reduction of the youth movement's staging of events; on the contrary, every time the occupation, in its suppression, steps up the violence, participants can be certain that the occupation has been harmed by that form of struggle.

Attempts at deterrence no longer work with the youth, yet the occupation seeks by means of them to reduce local community participation. Once in a while it succeeds in doing so, but such success may lead to more violent inclinations on the part of the street and recourse to violent means.

We have the sympathy of the local community, which constitutes our base. While the occupation uses a variety of means to try to separate us from the community, we strive assiduously to expand our social base. The number of persons who participate in activities increases and decreases according to the names of the different activities as well as their time and place. In Al-Khalil we notice that the event that takes on the greatest depth and in which participation in the street is greatest is that calling for the opening of Martyr Street on the anniversary of the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre, held on 25 February of each year. Thousands took part in the event this year, due to the fact that for the Al-Khalil street it is a painful commemoration.

As for the participation of women in our activities against the occupation, we notice that it is increasing year by year. In conservative areas such participation is slight, owing to fear that women might be subjected to arrest and the social problem which that represents. Over the past two years, however, the participation of women in the popular resistance has risen. We observed that such participation began with events in which there was no direct clash with the soldiers, but we now notice that many women participants are leading demonstrations in some regions. Perhaps you noticed, last month, a picture of a Palestinian woman activist raising the Palestinian flag over the Israeli military mechanism ("skunk cannon") used to pump foul-smelling liquid onto the demonstrators.

Youth groups have become an important factor in Palestinian political life and the Palestinian political scene on the ground. They agree among themselves on general notions relating to the Palestinian right to be liberated and establish a state, and they stand out in their independence from factions, a position that gives them flexibility in dealing with new developments, both political and in the field, and the ability to state their opinions with candour, away from political and factional considerations and calculations of gain or loss.

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