

Civil Society in the West Bank:

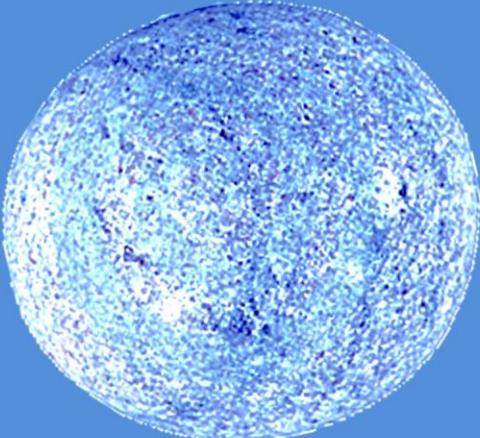


Between the rock of occupation



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The stone of the Palestinian Authority



By Silvia Nicolaou-Garcia
Briefing Paper
January 2010

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MIDDLE EAST M **ONITOR**
www.middleeastmonitor.org.uk

Civil Society in the West Bank: between the rock of occupation and the stone of the Palestinian Authority

Introduction

Palestinian civil society in the Occupied West Bank today faces one of its most daunting challenges in decades. Saddled with a military occupation Palestinians must also contend with an authority that impoverishes them while enriching itself. Media reports abound of widespread financial corruption at the heart of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) while ordinary Palestinians are routinely denied of basic services and rights. Acting in the name of bringing order and security to the territory, the PA has closed scores of charities and dismissed thousands of public servants because of their real or perceived political affiliations. Although the unfortunate ordinary Palestinian people are the immediate victims, according to Professor Norman Finkelstein there is a much broader Western message behind these acts, which is to [“teach Third World people what democracy means, and that means you elect people who we like, or you pay a price. And so the Gazans have to pay the price of electing the 'wrong' people into power”](#). That price is also being paid by the people of the West Bank deemed to belong to the “wrong” party.

Although the US and Israel have to bear most of the responsibility for such ongoing abuses they are not the only ones to blame. The PA is equally complicit in engendering the new culture of cynicism. One of its potent weapons wielded today is known as the certificate of *'husn al suluk'* - good conduct. Throughout the West Bank possession of this document has become mandatory for public service employment. Anyone with established or perceived links or sympathies to the Islamic opposition, and Hamas in particular, are disqualified automatically.

On their part, Israeli officials acknowledge openly the PA's collaborative role in supporting the occupation. Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon noted that PA President Mahmoud Abbas failed to take into account his own people's suffering during the Israeli invasion of Gaza last year: "Fatah pushed us away to do with Hamas" (Jerusalem Post, 2 October 09). Furthermore, Abbas submitted to the whims of Obama's administration and Israel's supposed peace negotiations.

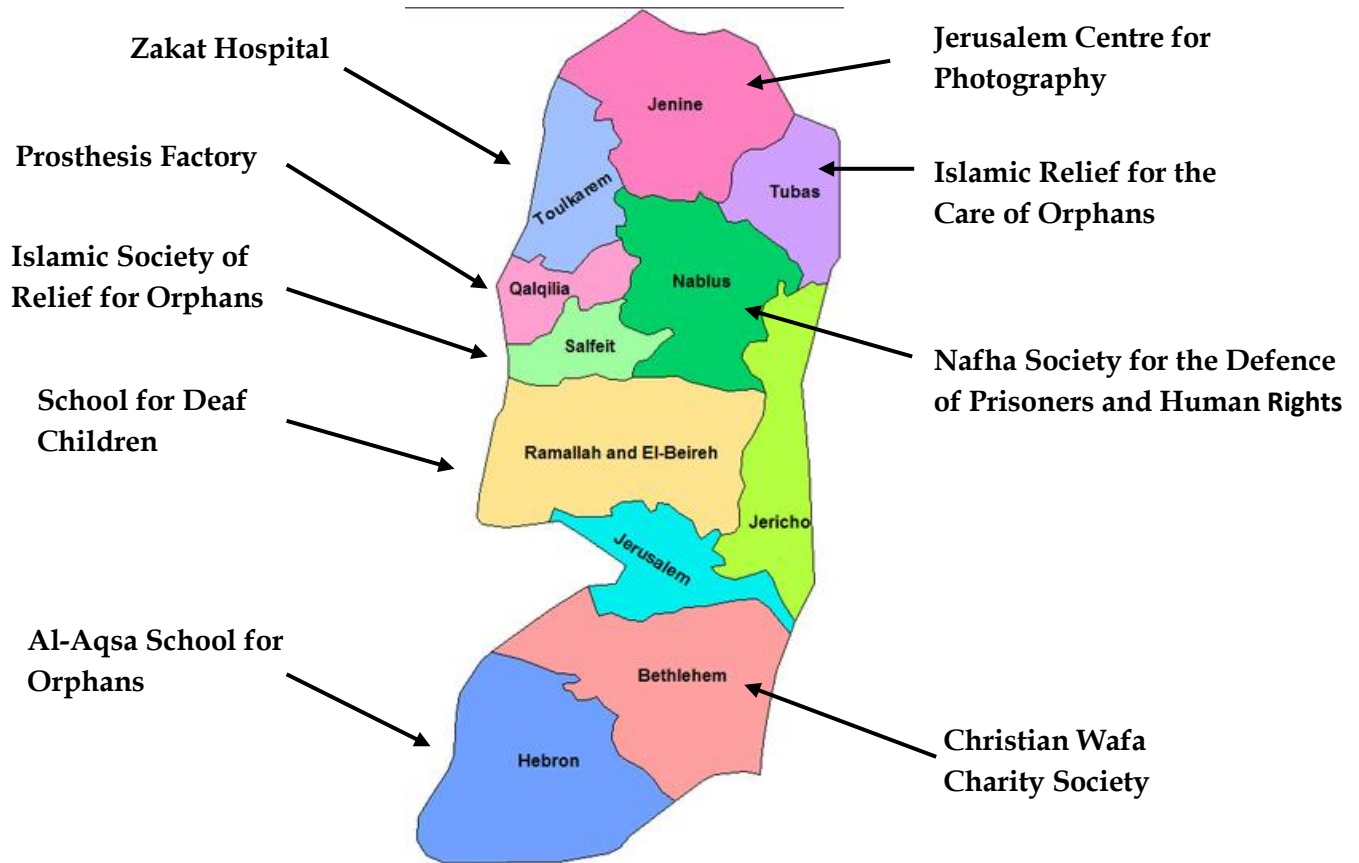


The pinnacle of his treason was reached when [Abbas bowed to US and Israeli pressure and agreed to defer a UN discussion of the Goldstone report](#) until March 2010. Time after time, the PA has castigated and let down its own people, rendering itself a willing partner in Israel's collective punishment of the Palestinians. So why would the arbitrary closure or grabbing hold of charities with supposed links to Hamas be an exception? In what follows, we examine how the Abbas government has stifled civil liberties and ruptured the fabric of society, as part of its professed campaign to prevent a Hamas takeover in the West Bank.

Depriving the Palestinians of their only viable means of sustenance: charities

The Middle East Monitor has obtained first-hand evidence of how schools for disabled children, youth societies, hospitals, kindergartens, orphanages, sports clubs, women's cooperatives, media outlets and other West Bank charities have been closed by Palestinian intelligence agents simply because of their suspected ties to Hamas or their religious character and the supposedly "inevitable risk" that entails. This "risk" is a hoax and an attempt to delegitimize the movement which won the last free and fair democratic elections conducted in the occupied territories. Needless to say, the PA has classified every charity with an "Islamic" character as a hotbed of Palestinian politics. Christian charities in the governorate of Bethlehem have also been shut down.ⁱ





Examples of charities which were closed down in the different governorates in Palestine

As can be seen from the above picture and the annexed documents, a handwritten closure order is normally delivered to the charity on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. In some cases, the charity building has been burnt down completely,ⁱⁱ its contents have been confiscatedⁱⁱⁱ or there has been a takeover of its management and control.^{iv} Not only do security forces break into the schools and confiscate computers, telephones and other equipment, but shops and establishments affiliated with the charities are also raided. [Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq has commented on the destructive manner in which these raids are conducted](#): In a school in Beit Ula^v, security agents seized three school buses, a van, computers and important documents. When asked for reasons for these acts, the Minister of Religious Affairs in the West Bank stated that the charities



have been closed and their funds have been disbursed mainly because of their political affiliation. Meanwhile, officials at the Palestinian Interior Ministry say that they are not aware of such formal closures taking place.

The devastating effect of the charity closures on Palestinians in the West Bank cannot be stressed enough. These organisations cater for their needs and for making good on the deficiencies in the services that are supposed to be provided by the PA, including housing because of Israel's policy of house demolitions and the lack of access to adequate health facilities.

The dismissal of civil employees by the Palestinian Ministry of Education

The discrimination against the Islamic charity sector is not the only example of the PA's arbitrary policies. The [Authority has fired hundreds of school teachers and other civil servants from their jobs for unexplained "security reasons,"](#) once again under the guise of fighting Hamas influence in the West Bank.

The dismissals are generally ordered by American-funded, private military-security agencies like the General Intelligence Agency (Mukhabarat) and the Preventive Security Force (PSF). This is a real test for what are mainly Islam-oriented civil employees, many of whom have been fired abruptly from their jobs and have had to seek work in Israeli settlements in order to support their families. Annex 3 contains a selection of names of civil employees who have been dismissed without reason. The table contains the employees' dates of appointment, and how long they taught for before their status was revoked. As can be seen from the data, this was often less than three months.^{vi}

The case of Ahmed Abdul Qader is typical of an educated and experienced teacher who was - based on no sound rationale - fired from his job by the Ministry of Education. Ahmed obtained a BA in English Literature from the University of Hebron in 1991. In 1996 he was accepted as a teacher at a local boarding school. In 2006, however, he decided to move to a public school in order to ensure future pension and retirement benefits. He took the standard exam for new teachers and obtained the highest score among all applicants, so the Ministry of Education hired him as a public-sector teacher. In October 2009, he received a letter stating that he was fired from his job because he was not granted security clearance from the above-mentioned security agencies.



Nora Riyahi^{vii} and Sayyed Fawaz^{viii} from the Hebron governorate both obtained the certificate to teach, but it was not renewed after a year on “preventive security” grounds. The PA did not spell out the exact reasons behind the dismissals and claimed that “*the government has the right to dismiss any public employee without any explanation.*” This policy is completely against international labour standards, whereby the employment of a worker should not be terminated unless there is a valid reason for such termination connected with the worker’s capacity or conduct based on the operational requirements of the undertaking, establishment or service. Furthermore, reasons for dismissal based on religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin are not valid.^{ix}


Conclusion

The PA’s decision both to shut down the charities which take care of the orphans and to dismiss public employees who work in the education sector is extremely unfortunate and completely unacceptable. Not only does it violate international labour standards and puts the PA’s policies to shame, it has also had a devastating effect on Palestinian society, since the benefits provided by these charities cover for many service lacunas therein. The poor, the orphans, the disabled and the children are being deprived of humanitarian aid and support. In the same way, trained teachers are not able to impart their knowledge to the children in their care, despite the fact that some governorates in the West Bank lack educational staff as a result of which [classes are often overcrowded](#), leaving students in an environment which is simply not conducive to learning.

The [Independent Human Rights Commission](#) in Ramallah stated in its January 2010 report that there are currently 9 complaints against the Ministry of Education in this regard, with 362 cases still outstanding from previous months. They regard the dismissal of civil servant employees as contrary to public service laws, civil rights and the principle of equality.

At MEMO we would like to raise awareness of this issue and call on the PA to restore the charitable status of these associations and enable them to perform their much-needed role in society. Their inability to deliver vital services will lead to the further deterioration of the living conditions of the Palestinians, placing the policies of the PA alongside those of Israel and the US in the oppression of the Palestinian people.



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BREIFING PAPER - January 2010

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- ⁱ The Wafa Charity Society in Bethlehem was closed down by the Preventive Security Force.
- ⁱⁱ The Raid Khansaa Ladies Charitable Association building in Ramallah was burnt down completely.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The contents of Al-Aqsa TV station in Ramallah were confiscated, including computers, telephones and other equipment.
- ^{iv} Annex 2.
- ^v A Palestinian town in the Hebron governorate.
- ^{vi} Annex 3.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} http://www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/InternationalLabourStandards/Subjects/Employmentsecurity/lang--en/index.htm

