

20 June

Roundtable with a presentation by Dr. Emile Sahliyah, The University of North Texas

Topic: The Limits of State Power in the Middle East: Social and Economic Constraints

Participants: PASSIA Staff; Nahla Asali, Birzeit University; Sheikh Jamil Hamami, Researcher, Al-Quds University; Dr. Albert Aghazarian, Head of Public Relations Office, Birzeit University; Issa Kassissieh, Orient House; Lea Perez, US Consulate, Jerusalem; Allison Hodgkins, Academic Director of the School of International Training, USA; Susan Ziadeh, US Consulate, Jerusalem; Hania Bitar, Jerusalem Times Newspaper, Jerusalem; Amjad Hidmi, US Consulate, Jerusalem; and Dr. Anis Al-Qaq, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation.

SUMMARY

Dr. Emile Sahliyah covered two basic topics: the limits of state power in the Middle East and democratization in the Arab World. On the former topic, he noted that while much has been written about the decline of the power of the state over the past few years, it is assumed that the state is still unchallenged in the Middle East. He questioned this notion, saying that ethnic/sectarian tensions, economic difficulties, transnational ideologies (pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism), regional and extra-regional intervention and the lack of democratic political systems all pose serious challenges to the state in the Middle East.

Dr. Sahliyah then went on to explore the last of these topics in an attempt to explain the essentially complete failure of the Arab world to democratize while countries in Africa, South America, Europe and Asia have all made steps in this direction. He gave an overview of the most widespread arguments for the lack of democratization. He named the patriarchal nature of Arab society, the practical application of Islam in Middle Eastern society, rentierism, the political economy of oil, the lack of a well-educated, economically self-sufficient and politically independent middle class, the absence of sufficient grass roots activity for democracy, and the involvement of the US as the most commonly articulated explanations for the poor record of democracy in the Arab world.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi brought up several points in response to the presentation. First, he noted the fundamental dispute between those who believe progress without democracy is impossible and those who believe democracy is not essential to progress. Secondly, he raised the question of *shura*, its relation to democracy and how it has been exploited in the past. Thirdly, he asked about the role of women, and noted that this is a major issue in Palestinian society. Finally, he brought up the example of the arrest of Iyad Sarraj as an example of Arafat acting as all the other non-democratic Arab leaders act.

Dr. Sahliyah remarked that some of these comments touched on the crucial question of what we mean when we speak about democracy. It

has many aspects: institutional separation, cognitive recognition by leaders of democratic principles, procedural democracy (i.e., suffrage, limits on political officials, contested elections, etc.), pluralism/interest-group representation, economics (the question as to whether poverty and democracy are incompatible), social democracy (social equity in exchange for giving up political rights, as Syria claims), or the fundamental civil rights of all people. He noted that the last of these is the most important, and that specific political and other types of arrangements will fall into place if people's basic civil rights are respected.

Nahla Assali asked if democracy and Islamic concepts of *shura* and *Zakat* are reconcilable.

Dr. Sahliyah responded that democracy has been flexible and has adapted to new realities, and so must Islam. He asserted that Islamic concepts have traditionally been applied in an elitist way and must be interpreted with the modern world taken into consideration. He noted that Israel is an example of a society with significant fundamentalist elements that play by the rules of democracy. Most important, he stated, is that the civil rights of all be respected - everything else will then take care of itself.

Sheikh Jamil Hamami pointed out the differences between democracy (the rule of the people over themselves) and *shura* (people raising issues in public) as well as between taxes (regressive and taken by force) and *Zakat* (progressive and moral). He quoted the leader of the Islamic Welfare Party in Turkey as saying not to fear Islamic government, which will respect the opinions and rights of all people. *Sheikh Hamami* and *Dr. Sahliyah* then engaged in a dialogue in which the former emphasized many of the shortcomings of democracy while *Dr. Sahliyah* emphasized the need to be flexible in interpreting Islam as well as democracy in the context of the modern world.

Dr. Albert Aghazarian interjected that this was an old issue dealing with the question of one's basic world view and, as such, was too big to be easily resolved. He pointed out, however, that the Islamic concept of *Ijtihad* is a built-in mechanism of flexibility and that there is undoubtedly room for dialogue between secularist and religious thinkers.

Dr. Anis Al-Qaq stated that there is no perfect model of a democratic political system. He noted that the question to be raised is why one country is more democratic than another, and specifically, why Palestinian society is showing undemocratic tendencies. He wondered if some kind of national training or education is necessary to prepare people to participate in a democracy. He gave the example of Israel where the army is a common experience that serves as a bond and as a link to Israel and its system.

Dr. Aghazarian said that Israel was the worst example to use of how to build a democratic society. He also criticized *Dr. Al-Qaq* for what he saw

as a tendency to justify some of the policies of the PNA. He emphasized a need to look squarely at reality and not to justify observed shortcomings.

Issa Kassissieh asked about the possibility of compromise between the Islamist and secularist camps. He also wondered about the American sanctioning of the PNA's decision to establish military courts and asked whether this is what the Palestinians had to look forward to in a democracy.

Sheikh Hamami responded that there is no problem in establishing a dialogue between Islamists and secularists. The main problem has been that there has been insufficient communication between the leadership of the PNA and the people. There are some forms of limited pressure from the people, but arresting Sarraj and putting people in front of military courts is unacceptable.

Lea Perez defended the US in saying that its efforts are designed to save the peace process, without which the Palestinians will be much worse off. She noted that any American would deplore the activities of the military courts. At the same time, she emphasized that the Palestinians were ultimately responsible for setting up those courts and for finding ways to protest and change them. The Palestinians should not blame the Americans for the way other Palestinians choose to deal with terrorism.

Allison Hodgkins asked about the possibility of conducting a national struggle and building a democratic state at the same time, given the different exigencies of these two tasks.

Susan Ziadeh noted Iraq and Syria as examples of Arab societies that have sizable middle classes, yet have not evolved into democracies. She asked what could be learned from this observation in the light of Dr. Sahliyah's initial remarks.

Hania Bitar pointed out that the Palestinians have a sizable middle class that is well-educated but still not economically strong. She wondered what effect the middle class would have on the development of Palestinian democracy.

In conclusion, *Dr. Sahliyah* noted that dialogue between secular and Islamist elements is indispensable in the state-building process. He reiterated the primary importance of civil rights and noted that even with the difficulties posed by external and internal threats during this nation-building period, these rights must never be sacrificed. If they are protected, other issues will tend to be resolved. He applauded the group for talking about these issues and stated that this was an important first step on the road to a productive democratic society.