

## Report: Symposium "Bridges to Palestine"

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March *Dar al Janub – Union for Antiracism and Peace Policy* in cooperation with the *Society for Austrian Arab Relationship* organised the symposium “Bridges to Palestine - On the Humanitarian And Political Situation After The Imposed Sanctions On The Palestinian People”.

### Why bridges to Palestine?

More than one year after the parliamentary elections in Palestine the humanitarian situation is disastrous.

The policy of siege, which has been implemented on economic and political levels, has severely undermined Palestinian society.

The European Union once again faces a dilemma. Although the EU has tended to play a more positive and objective role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than the USA, it has failed to propose new perspectives or show leadership in dealing with the newly elected Palestinian government. Rather than seriously consider Arab and Palestinian initiatives for dialogue, the EU responded to Palestine’s democratic elections by joining the US in a brutal boycott of Palestinian society.

The EU has placed demands upon the Palestinian government while cutting off financial support that the government needs in order to function.

The European Union kept quiet when the Israeli army arrested Palestinian ministers and deputies, and when the Israeli army killed innocent civilians in the Gaza strip on a daily basis. Not even the well-documented massacre of civilians in Beit Hanoun has been condemned. Thus the EU has been conducting a policy of double standards, making demands on the Palestinian side, but not protesting against the Israeli policy of occupation.

Against this backdrop the symposium "Bridges to Palestine" focused on exploring the possibilities for new perspectives and strategies to open new paths of dialogue between the European Union and Palestine.

Dar al Janub organised this symposium because it is more important than ever before to build bridges from Europe to Palestine and not allow the Palestinians to be isolated behind walls.

### About the symposium

Presenters at the Symposium included:

- **Dr. Ahmed al Kord**  
*Mayor of Deir al Balah, Gaza strip, former employee of UNRWA and coordinator of humanitarian projects and development cooperation in Gaza strip for many years.*
- **Dr. Helga Baumgarten**  
*Professor of Political Science, author, University of Birzeit, Palestine*
- **Ramzy Baroud**  
*Palestinian Return Center, Author and Journalist, Editor in Chief of Palestine Chronicle, Author of "Searching Jenin" and "The Second Palestinian Intifada", USA*
- **Dr. Ali Hweidi**  
*secretary general of the Palestinian NGO “Palestinian Organization for the Right of Return - FIRM”, lives and works in the Palestinian Refugee Camp Rashidiyah, Lebanon*

Unfortunately it was not possible for Mayor Ahmed al Kord to attend the symposium in person because the Israeli authorities would not allow him to pass through the Rafah checkpoint between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

(It should be pointed out, that thanks to the correctness of the Austrian authorities, Dr. Ahmed Al Kord did get a Visa for his visit in Austria). Although Israel officially retreated from the Gaza strip in August 2005, the border crossing in Rafah is still controlled by the Israeli military. Even though the checkpoint at Rafah is supposed to be under the control of EU, Egyptian and Palestinian authorities, in practice the only possibility for Palestinians to leave Gaza depends on the decision of the Israeli army. The case of Dr. Al Kord is representative of the situation of thousands of Palestinians, who spend days or weeks holding out at the checkpoint Rafah, waiting for permission to enter or leave. This degrading and economically destructive practice is symptomatic of the broader occupation, which brings untold suffering upon the Palestinian people who live in appalling conditions in the Gaza strip. For this reason Gaza can be accurately described as the largest outdoor prison in the world.

One day before the symposium, the Austrian daily newspaper *Kurier* ([www.kurier.at](http://www.kurier.at)) published an interview with Dr. Al Kord, in which he spoke about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, the sanctions, and the new unity government.. Although Dr. Al Kord could not participate in the symposium Dar al Janub organised a live telephone-conference to Deir al Balah. In his speech Dr. Al Kord discussed how the continuation of the boycott policy is targeting the Palestinian people and undermining the institutions of civil society. He also discussed the role of NGOs in supporting Palestinian society, the obstacles these organizations face from the USA and European Union, and how to overcome these obstacles.

**Dr. Helga Baumgarten** focussed in her lecture on the relations between Palestine and the EU since the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006. She took the opportunity to mention the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EU to reflect on what the EU has achieved in its five decades of existence. She mentioned both the attainments of the EU—fifty 50 years of peace and wealth—as well as its failures, such as how its policies in the Middle-East have not helped to generate the same peace and prosperity Europe enjoys.

Before the parliamentary elections democratization of the Middle-East seemed to be the key to a peaceful future in the region. Many international politicians who monitored the Palestinian elections, like Jimmy Carter, pointed out that they had been both democratic and transparent. More than 80% of Palestinians participated in the voting, the majority of whom were women. Given all the talk about democratization, it is worth noting that this election was one of the freest, fairest, and most representative ever held in the region. “But the Palestinians”, as Baumgarten said, “ did not behave as the West expected them to do.”

Baumgarten explained how the EU on one hand congratulated the Palestinians on their democratic elections, but on the other hand coupled this with strong demands from the newly elected Palestinian government. Hamas had already shown its willingness to comply with the conditions of the quartet, for example by building a Palestinian state within the borders of 1967, which meant recognition of Israel. Furthermore Hamas had been sustaining a truce, which meant disavowing violence and declaring respect for past agreements. But, as Baumgarten explained, the quartet ignored these moves toward peace and dialogue, and instead began a massive political and economic boycott.

Baumgarten also discussed the divisions and contradictions underlying European support for the embargo. Although the EU has supported the sanctions in order to undermine the Palestinian government, it was not willing to let the Palestinian people starve, as the American and Israeli governments would have. At the same time that the EU has supported the policy of boycott, it has also rendered large amounts of humanitarian aid, such as direct aid for hospitals, provision of electricity and water supply, and for the neediest Palestinians

the EU also donated 150-200 Dollars to more than 150 000 persons. At great expense the EU organised TIM (temporary international mechanism) in order to provide humanitarian assistance in a manner that bypasses the new elected government.

Although the European Union is giving a lot of money, it doesn't follow an independent policy to ensure its goals are sustainable. During the past several years the EU has often stood by silently as EU-financed civil infrastructure was destroyed in Israeli attacks with weaponry supplied by the US.. Formulating a more independent policy toward Israel-Palestine would help stop EU investments from being wasted.

On the other hand, whereas the EU's reputation in Palestine had been comparatively good, this too has now been undermined since the EU joined the embargo and ceased funding for infrastructure and democratization projects.

**Ramzy Baroud** stated in his lecture that the question of Palestine is not just a humanitarian question, or a question of salaries for civil servants, but rather it is first and foremost a political question, one that urgently needs to be resolved. The media, claimed Baroud, approaches the issue as if Hamas were the main problem. So he first posed the question of how the situation had been before Hamas came to power, and then explained that Hamas came to power precisely because of the difficult situation that had been created by the so-called peace process. Baroud further stressed that this is not a religious question. Hamas was elected to power because it had refused to play along the American and Israeli line. This role could have been filled by the socialists, the communists or anybody else.

Baroud then explained the conditions imposed on the newly elected government by the quartet and asked whether they are truly fair:

*1. Recognizing Israel:*

The problem with recognizing Israel, so said Baroud, is that Israel has not defined its final borders. Israeli television continues to refer to the areas of the West Bank by the biblical names Jehuda and Samaria, implying a vision of Israel that encompasses all of the Palestinian territories. He further exposed the problem that the Palestinians are being occupied, and at the same time are being asked to recognise their occupier. How can I recognise someone who does not recognise me?

*2. Denouncing violence:*

Baroud elucidated, that more than 4000 Palestinians had been killed in the last years, with an additional 10 000 wounded. There is absolutely no security in the life of any Palestinian in the West bank or Gaza, but Palestinians are nonetheless expected to place security for their occupier above security for themselves: Never in history has the occupied nation been demanded to ensure security for a violent occupier.

*3. Honouring past agreements*

Regarding this issue, Baroud directed attention to the fact that Israel was the one who rejected all current agreements. Ariel Sharon himself said that they were no longer relevant.

For decades the Palestinians have pleaded to the international community, the EU and the USA: "Help us out here, we cannot attain our national independence because Israel will not allow it!" The longstanding Palestinian claim that Israel should be boycotted by the international community for its perpetual violations of international law has absurdly ended in a situation whereby the international community is instead boycotting the Palestinian people. Baroud concluded his speech by remarking upon how the Palestinians have withstood the pressure of the boycott and Israel's most recent escalation. Meanwhile, Israel's recent misadventure in Lebanon has highlighted the limits of its military power. For the first time Israel failed to translate its military power into political victory.

**Dr. Ali Hweidi** began his presentation by discussing the recent Palestinian elections. Although held under conditions of occupation, the polling occurred peacefully and

democratically. Hweidi pointed out that by participating in the democratic process, each voter – regardless of his or her political position – had in fact cast a vote for Palestine. .

He further stressed that Palestinians condemn the hypocritical double standards of the Quartet, which has demanded that the Palestinian National Unity Government renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect international treaties, while failing to demand the same from the government of Israel.

Hweidi argued that after a year of sanctions, the international community had not achieved its goals of marginalizing the Palestinian political process. On the contrary, the recent formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government under the Mecca agreement reflects the resolve and increasing unity of the Palestinian people. For the first time in history, there exists fully a representative government for all Palestinians – both those inside and outside of the West Bank and Gaza. n

Dr. Hweidi lastly directed attention toward the Palestinian refugees outside of Palestine. He focused especially on the very dangerous situation faced by Palestinians in Iraq, who have been subjected to killings and torture. The Palestinian refugees in Iraq should be evacuated temporarily to neighboring countries until end of occupation. Peace and justice in the region will continue to prove elusive without a solution that grants Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes in historical Palestine, in accordance with international law.

## **Conclusions**

The European countries face the challenge of incorporating their own avowed principles into their Middle-East policies.

Europe is still generally seen as an objective mediator in the Arab world, but there remain large gaps in Europe's understanding of the issues, as well as a notable lack of sensitivity in dealing with the precarious destiny of the Palestinian people.

Public discussion in Europe rarely questions whether the demands and conditions placed on the Palestinian people are balanced and morally justifiable. Palestinians are daily portrayed in the European news media as victims of the Israeli occupation, but at the same time the Palestinians are expected to guarantee the security of an oppressive occupying force. Many countries already recognize and maintain normal relations with the democratically elected government in Palestine, including European countries like Switzerland and Norway. Such positive actions as diplomatic recognition respect the legitimate democratic process in Palestine, and they are important steps in realizing a peaceful, just, and democratic solution to the conflict.

Dar al Janub - The Union for Antiracism and Peace Policy organized this event with such a goal in mind. We seek to support and strengthen constructive initiatives toward a just peace, demand more positive action from Europe, and above all take a stand against the siege and the isolation of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, by opening new channels of dialogue between Europe and Palestine we hope that Europeans will be able to hear more authentic Palestinian perspectives, which remain chronically underrepresented in the media.

Approximately 100 visitors attended the symposium. After the presentations the audience had the opportunity to pose questions. After the discussion the buffet was opened, the proceeds of which will benefit Palestinian Aid Projects in the Gaza strip.

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