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## I. The Future of the Palestinian National Identity: The Relation Between the Returnees and the People of the Homeland

Speakers: Dr. Gabi Baramki, Dr. Ma'rei Abdul Rahman

*Participants:* Ibrahim Bisharat, Ihsan Attieh, Laila Carmi, Haifa' Baramki, Diana Safieh, Buihaina Shabani, Nabil Sha'ath, Gabi Baramki, Dr. Mohammed Jadallah, Mustapha Hichan, Ali Shehevan, Imad M. Zahiry, Abed Arnaout, Zaki Abu Al-Halaweh, Samir Saadaddin, Muriel Asseburg and Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

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### Summary

**Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi** welcomed the speakers and participants to the seminar and explained that the purpose of the session was to address the future of the Palestinian identity and to discuss the relationship between returnees and the people in the homeland, as well as the future of the PLO. For the past three decades, the PLO has been the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Whilst Palestinians are currently building a civil society in part of the homeland under the umbrella of the PNA and the elected representatives of the Legislative Council, the question is how the relationships between the PLO, the PNA, and their constituencies in the homeland as well as in the Diaspora are likely to develop.

After giving a brief historical summary of the important role Palestinians have played in the development of the Arab identity and the Arab National Movement, he said that in the 1960's, Palestinians moved away from depending on the Arab consensus to achieve Palestinian self-determination; the Arabs in general moved from [*qaumiya*] to [*iqlimiya*] and started to struggle for a Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian or Iraqi identity. Meanwhile, Palestinians started to develop their own national movement in various dimensions.

He then went on to talk about the role of various Palestinian forces in the struggle. He said that in the late 60's, there was a serious decline in the role of the Palestinian elite, i.e., the big families, landlords, and intelligentsia; and the society witnessed the emergence of middle-class groups from amongst businessmen and residents of the refugee camps. They succeeded in redirecting the PLO, which was established during the Arab Summit of 1964. The PLO remained, from 1969 until Oslo, the embodiment of Palestinian national ambition. Throughout all these years, what helped to maintain and strengthen the Palestinian-Arab identity was the awareness of the constant threat posed by the Zionist movement and the ever-increasing number of Jewish settlers.

Today, following the signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993 and the historical mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO, Palestinians are negotiating with the Zionist leaders. Does this mean that the dimension of the resistance movement that has united Palestinians and helped them to maintain their national identity and struggle for freedom and independence has been lost? How do Palestinians define themselves today? He expressed his hope that this session could provide the answers to these and many other questions.

**Dr. Gabi Baramki** stressed that Palestinians have always defined themselves in relation to somebody else; they have always defined themselves vis-à-vis the Jews and Israel. By doing this, they have taken the same approach as the Israelis, who labeled the Palestinians as 'non-Jews'.

He emphasized that the Palestinians lived under Ottoman occupation for more than 500

years, and that they became part of the Arab Liberation Movement, defining themselves as 'Arab-Palestinians', without looking at the religious differences in their ranks. Today, Palestine is much smaller than it was before and it is delimited by other Arab states and the Mediterranean. Palestinians do not feel, and have no desire to feel, that they constitute just another part of Greater Syria or the Arab Nation: they have their own identity. And the only solution to overcoming the old definition is for them to have their own state; only then will they be able to define themselves as 'Palestinian-Arab'.

The Palestinian identity is built on a sense of belonging to the Palestinian homeland and the pride attached to being part of the Arab-Islamic identity, with its culture and heritage and the unifying force of the Arab language. Two major factors have influenced the development of the Palestinian identity: the first, the government of part of the homeland by other Arab states since 1948; and the second, the Palestinian Diaspora. Differences between different groupings of Palestinians arose over time because, being scattered all over the world, they were unable to communicate with ease. The communication between the people of Gaza and the West Bank, for example, was only made possible when both areas were occupied by Israel in 1967.

The people in the homeland experienced the pressure, the torture and the daily problems related to life under occupation, but they were able to live on their own soil - to live in the homeland. The people of the Diaspora experienced a far greater degree of liberty but had to cope with being parted from Palestinian soil. They were allowed to move around more freely and to found associations. Thus, they were able to influence the organization and development 'inside'.

Today, we are witnessing a sad development. The 'inside' part of the people had the chance to participate in, or rather witness, the democratic experience - however limited - of the Israelis; as a result, it always resisted the idea of becoming part of an Arab regime, such as Jordan. The 'outside' has experienced something else - the rule of the PLO. In the Liberation Organization, it was necessary to take decisions quickly and to maneuver in a secret and flexible manner. The 'outside' experienced the leadership style of a revolutionary movement.

The Palestinian state, it was assumed, was destined to become the 'spearhead of democracy' in the Middle East; this, unfortunately, no longer seems to be the case because the state is being built by the 'outside', by the people that were part of this revolutionary experience. *Dr. Gabi Baramki* emphasized that in building institutions, the most important thing is to keep in mind the objectives, instead of emphasizing the disparity between the 'inside' and the 'outside'. Palestinians should aim at building a civil society that forms the base of an autonomous state and that serves as a democratic example for the region.

***Dr. Ma'rei Abdul Rahman*** stressed that until today, a Palestinian state - as a center for all Palestinians and a democratic model in the Middle East - has remained a dream. Oslo has brought recognition of the existence of the Palestinian people by the enemy, but it has not provided an answer to the quest for a Palestinian state.

He stressed that even though there is no doubt about the existence of a Palestinian people, there is no cohesion, no unity of this people. There are huge differences between the refugees and regular citizens, between the cities and the countryside, between Muslims and Christians. He related this, to a large part, to underdevelopment and the lack of industrialization. The large differences and problems between the 'inside' and the 'outside' are just a part of this greater framework: the 'inside' has been confronted with reality; the 'outside' has merely been dreaming the dream of liberation.

He said that the structure of the PLO could not serve as a basis for building the state because of all its defections that have now come to the surface, such as personal interests. He stressed the necessity of developing critical and constructive dialogue with the PNA instead of concentrating too much on the 'inside'-'outside' conflict. Another important issue is the necessity of taking responsibility for the Palestinian Diaspora, and particularly for educating and training its youth.

**Dr. Mohammed Jadallah** stressed that even though the PLO is no longer so powerful, the PLO vision is as clear as ever before and Palestinians still feel the same attachment to and affection for their homeland. He stressed that the whole discourse on the 'inside'-'outside' relation is a question of two different standpoints that clash: one that favors liberal democracy and one that rejects it. What Palestinians face now is the necessity for them to liberate themselves from the occupation whilst simultaneously building their state.

In his contribution, **Dr. Nabil Sha'ath** tackled the following points: He stressed the positive contributions of the 'inside' as well as of the 'outside' to the building of a homeland and the national identity and their interdependence during the different stages of Palestinian steadfastness and resistance. He said that without the 'inside', the people in the homeland and their steadfastness and resistance, the 'outside' would have been without a cause and all the 'outside' Palestinians would have been assimilated in various countries. Furthermore, without the 'outside' and their sense of belonging, their commitment and their struggle, which took place under extremely difficult conditions unlike those experienced by any other liberation movement, the 'inside' would not have released from their prisons and become free. Both parts of the nation were needed to complement each other and to work parallel and together for a homeland and a national identity.

He went on to stress that the main problem in today's scenario is not between the 'inside' and the 'outside'; it is the gap between Gaza and the West Bank - geographically, politically and demographically. Palestinians, it is clear, need to work hard to close this gap.

He emphasized that in such a complicated situation, it is important to go step by step and, instead of blaming the PNA for everything that is going wrong, everybody should engage in constructive dialogue and criticism. He said that Oslo has been but one of the possible strategies for achieving a Palestinian state. Were this strategy to be unsuccessful, other strategies would have to be adopted.