

PREFACE

This volume contains the results of a participatory civic needs assessment undertaken in 2004 and 2005. Carried out by Palestinian refugees and exiles, and implemented by activists and local leaders, the work provides a unique record of contemporary Palestinian civic and political voices. Meetings were held in order to listen to and provide a platform for those Palestinians voices that are rarely heard, the men and women who live in *al Shatat* (the Palestinian dispersal in 1948 and after). They discuss herein issues of political representation, the concerns and mechanisms for engagement and renewal, and the connections that do and do not exist with their national representative the PLO, the host countries where they currently live; and crucially, with other refugee camps and communities, including their own.

The work is presented in the following manner: a table of contents lists the sections of the two parts of the report. The first part of the report, written by the project director, is taken up with a brief explanation of the project – its inception, aims, the process and the method of implementation. Part two of this report contains the findings themselves – the real substance of the project, which was undertaken in order to bring to light the opinions and recommendations of Palestinian refugees and exiles on the issues that concern them. This is followed by two annexes. The first is a partial list of the meetings held over a period of seven months. The second annexe contains the project literature written collaboratively and produced during its implementation. The findings themselves, in part two, have a detailed table of contents which present the contributions made in the meetings clustered under sets of themes.

There is no conclusion at the end of this volume, since the very density and sophistication of the contributions means we possess more than recommendations for action. In their suggestions are also the means and mechanisms to achieve them. Of course one can immediately note certain key commonalities in our current Palestinian discourse: the desire for direct elections to the Palestine National Council (PNC), for the reactivation and democratic reform of the PLO institutions, for the implementation of the Right of Return. Still, the conclusions and their force, energy, and richness create the foundations for research, practical institutional design, and political and civic activism for years to come.

This project was launched at the beginning of the second Intifada, and emerged from the predicament that had given rise to it. It took a number of years to take shape, construct, and come to fruition. The labour that went into creating this work was collective. In the acknowledgements at the end of the report can be found a list of some of the institutions, individuals, and groups that helped it get underway. As someone uniquely placed in this endeavour from its inception, it is tempting to take the opportunity and the space provided to explain and discuss the special nature of this work, its profound importance (especially at this critical moment in Palestinian political history); above all to make the connections, analyses, and recommendations that my vantage point as director, and intimate involvement in its processes, have offered.

Yet to do so would contravene the principles of this collective work. This platform should not be wrested away from those one has sought to provide this service to, and would diminish the remarkable contribution made by the participants, who are the real authors of this report. It is sufficient to have generated the vision and crafted the practical steps to implement it. Accordingly, the recommendations, interpretations, and directions will be developed by those making use of this reference tool in the future, for it contains the civic spirit of a people who, even in the worst conditions, have articulated both the agenda and the steps ahead in crystal clear terms. All the answers are here. Politicians, international agencies and institutions, local and national groups and bodies, political parties, associations, Palestinians both inside and outside of Palestine, and above all the younger generation of Palestinians, to whom this work is offered, can find in these pages much more than the aspirations of a people. In its findings lies the practical blueprint for the path ahead.

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