

Part II

Introduction to the Findings



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Introduction to the Findings

In the following pages are the findings of meetings held over a period of seven months in 2005. In the Annexe A of this report can be found the list of these meetings, the dates they were held, and the types of meetings convened. The findings in this section are the exact transcripts of what was spoken by the participants at these meetings. It is not the purpose here to assess or shape the character of these voices, nor to evaluate them by exploring their relevance, or highlighting their importance. The substance of the findings, where thousands of Palestinians describe, analyse, and discuss the issues that concern them and make a series of specific and general recommendations is precisely where the contribution and expertise reside.

What has been done here is to provide a systematic thematic organisation and classification of the conversations and discussions that took place. These have been broadly classified under the questions produced and set out in the Guidelines to the Debates (also see Annexe), which formed the framework for these discussions. Accordingly, the work preparing the presentation of these findings has consisted in the careful arrangement of the themes, and the creation of headings, sub-headings, and titles under a detailed table of contents. This layout will hopefully provide suitable landmarks and sufficient direction for the reader to be able to follow the flow of the issues raised in the meetings, as well as grasp the complex and dynamic contribution made by Palestinians, who created the entirety of the contents themselves. In order to engage the readers in the issues that arose, as well as orient them through the dense and rich expression of popular civic articulation, it is useful to highlight a few of the unique features of this methodology, and the kinds of contribution it provides.

So as to provide a useful context for appreciating the resource contained in the findings, readers might want to take the following seven factors into consideration. These have arisen as a result of the encounter between two critical features in this collective work: the methodology of participating in and recording the participatory meetings, and the current political and civic conditions of the Palestinian refugee and exile communities.

I

Unlike opinion polls or surveys, interventions made by participants in the meetings rarely focus on a specific question, theme, or sphere of importance in a narrow declarative way. Instead they provide a rich context, understanding, and appreciation of the issues being raised. Although the themes in Part II have largely been arranged under one of the headings of the civic, political, or institutional structure the participants refer to (the PLO, the host country, humanitarian agencies, their own refugee community, etc), particular discussions are always broader and richer in character. Further, because of the unique predicament facing Palestinians in civil, social, economic, and political spheres, many of the concerns are directed at more than one level, and relate to more than one issue. Participants in the debates also commonly understand how each sphere and concern is linked to the other through these issues, or what institutional design needs to take place in order to make this link. Therefore these detailed contributions provide recommendations that are more sophisticated and developed than the class of answers which might be provided in a poll, survey, or questionnaire. However, in order to maintain the flow of the material for the readers' sake, and to connect a part of one meeting to other

parts held elsewhere in a collective manner, long discussions have had to be arranged in distinct and discrete paragraphs.

Part of the universal commonality of civic and political rhetoric is the method and style of the arguments that are made in collective meetings. When expressing what needs to be done, or recommending a course of action or a particular civic structure, interventions are invariably prefaced by a discussion of why this particular suggestion is needed, as well as a reasoning of what went wrong to create this particular circumstance or need. A suggestion on future action can only be persuasive and agreed upon if an understanding of the nature of the problem is shared. There must be common agreement on what is the nature of the problem, and especially upon why it arose. Therefore many recommendations made in the findings are located in a line of reasoning that first articulates the problems being faced, and the precise reasons for these problems. It has been impossible to separate descriptions of the existing state of affairs, and recommendations of what to do about them into separate headings. And indeed to separate them in this manner would be entirely artificial, and detract from their contribution.

II

Another feature of collective meetings is the very dynamic of the gathering itself, and how common agreement, decisions, and understandings were sometimes achieved in them. There are two ways this occurred on a deliberative level, and as they cannot be replicated in the layout of the findings section of the report, it is important that they be highlighted here.

First, in most of the meetings, the tenor and level of the contributions developed substantively as the meetings progressed, and many began to take real life towards the second half of the meeting. After the sometimes lengthy opening introductions, setting out of the meeting guidelines by the moderators, the early contributions often took the form of ceremonial speeches, more similar to traditional public meetings where local leaders speak for an extended period. As the meetings would progress, with more people contributing in an immediate, frank, and direct way, the tenor of the meetings could change quite rapidly and dramatically; the progression from audience to participant substantively altered the nature and substance of the discussion.

Not everything of importance that happens in a meeting can be recaptured in written form. Thus, for example, the relevance of a particular comment which took place at the very end of a meeting, which seemed to sum up a general mood, and captured an essential contribution to the general interest, or a crucial interjection that responded critically to a preceding intervention and changed the direction and tenor of a meeting. Such moments, and their effects and weight cannot be replicated unless we were to include the thousands of pages of rough transcript in the chronology in which they took place. However the importance of such moments is not to be underestimated. Many meetings lasted for over 5 hours, as participants did not want others to speak for them, but wanted (and demanded) to speak for themselves, adding to the discussion in their own voices. After some large meetings, those that were hesitant to speak - or too shy to do so - did go on to other syndicate meetings organized by the project, more enthused and with more confidence to speak up. Many exile

and refugee communities organized subsequent meetings, outside of the scope of the project, so as to continue the discussion. Again, those that were silent listeners played the role of both witness and participant to what was being articulated and understood. This type of participation was equally valuable to the verbal contributions.

There was another way in which this deliberative process was significant. In many meetings (in particular syndicate and smaller meetings), a deliberative exchange was enacted for substantial amounts of time. This meant that participants engaged in a collective (rather than individual) process of discussion, where common objectives were arrived at through discursive evolution. Participants carried forward a development of the discussion at hand, each contributing to a furthering of issues being aired, and kept to the subject matter in order to achieve common understanding. Of course those who did not speak during these moments were also contributors, as they did not interrupt, disagree, or otherwise break the commitment to the common discussion. (see pages 149 to 152 - Women's Meeting, Athens)

III

Many of the meetings marked the first time the Palestinian exile or refugee community had met for several years as a whole, or had taken the time to discuss civic and political issues of this nature in such an open forum. In some host countries it was the first time they had met in this way, as opposed to in small groups, single issue events, or at large weddings or national celebrations. Accordingly, some of the discursive process engaged upon was not entirely progressive in its deliberation; indeed on many occasions people would get involved in other participants' comments, would

disagree, interrupt, be interrupted in turn, and an argument, debate, and counter-argument would be advanced simultaneously. At other times this would be interrupted by random interjections on different subjects. Although it was clearly very constructive and helpful for the community to engage upon these early collective discussions, it was much more problematic to attempt to make an audible and comprehensible transcription of the event. With several people speaking at once, often little could be deciphered on the tapes by the transcribers, and sometimes what was transcribed became fragmentary. This certainly did not reflect the fact that these moments were frequently powerful and useful for the meetings, and the participants themselves.

IV

The contributions are further characterized by the variety of preparation undertaken in different areas, due to a range of geographical, political, social, and organization constraints on the ground. The difference between a minimum model being applied (as above) and a maximum model (see Part I for the different models) created diverse levels of awareness about the nature of the project, and the level of informed understanding of the issues that were being discussed. Particularly in the case of Lebanon, where an immense and detailed preparatory set of pilot workshops, preparatory meetings – both formal and informal – and widespread information through dissemination and mobilisation was undertaken before the actual meetings, and where such detailed background work was possible this made for an extremely informed, reflective, and serious contribution by the participants. Further, the model used for the meetings themselves, in the setting up of both public and syndicate meetings across

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the country in the different regions of the refugee camps, meant that the level of participation was extremely high. As a consequence, the recorded debates were the result of positions that had been carefully analysed, discussed, contested, and developed over a period of several weeks, and this is reflected in the declaratory, highly meticulous, and substantive contributions made by the refugees in Lebanon.

V

A unique aspect of the meetings was the types of issues that were explored as a result of the huge expanse of host countries where meetings were held. Two factors need highlighting here. One issue particular to location is the status of Palestinians, and the relationship they have forged with the host country. This has raised many unique factors, entirely connected to the particular set of civic and political circumstances in which Palestinian refugees live. The second, equally important point that emerges from the range of places in which were held is the extraordinary commonality of certain key issues. The most striking feature of this work is the close identification that Palestinians share on the nature of the challenges that face them, and even on the solutions to address these challenges. Certain persistent issues were raised in meetings and can be seen as universal, such as the need to reactivate unions, direct elections to the Palestine National Council (PNC) for those in exile, safeguarding the Right of Return, and the need for a census and the issuing of identity papers. Sometimes these demands were addressed to a particular body, but most of them were addressed to all national bodies, and were thus not grouped under one heading, but can be found throughout the text.

VI

In two host countries meetings took a more constrained course. Preparatory meetings were held in Syria at an early stage of the project, but in the end permission to hold these meetings was not granted by the relevant authorities. Accordingly, the materials included here are only from those early general meetings during which time formal discussions were held with officials about the possibility of convening substantive meetings. As such, these partial records do not possess the status of findings in the way other do. These early meetings were exploratory and informal, with no formal moderating from the project team, and they all lacked the same conditions – the sets of questions that were finalized by the moderators, the technical conditions such as taped meetings, or the same level of public preparation – under which other meetings were convened.

In Jordan a set of meetings were recorded but also do not comprise an equivalent part of these findings. Some two and a half years on, we are still waiting for permission from the relevant Jordanian ministry officials to hold these civic meetings in the Palestinian refugee camps. However, the very early pilot meetings held in Jordan (where the broad issues of the project were discussed in a general way) have been incorporated in the findings. They provide a useful summary of the views of some of the refugees there. Although in Jordan and Syria only informal preparatory or pilot meetings were held, and therefore we do not claim they hold the status of the other meetings included here, the project team thought their inclusion might prove both useful and illuminating.

VII

A final feature of the meetings was that the conditions they were held under directly influenced the kinds of contribution made by the participants. In Egypt, for example, the meetings were held in secret, as meetings of this nature are not allowed in the country. In Iraq, the challenges in holding meetings in the face of the ongoing security situation were matched only by the courage and determination of both moderator and participants to ensure they were convened (see Moderator from Iraq's discussion, page 256). The value of these contributions, and the style and method in which participants discussed the issues, take an added weight from the complex and extraordinary challenges the refugees face in the ability to discuss these simple everyday civic matters at all. Therefore, to be consistent, inclusive, and above all protective in the presentation of the voices of the participants we have published here, we have removed all relevant names. This has meant the loss of information that might have otherwise been useful for the reader, in particular in recognizing the large proportion of women participating and contributing to the discussions. The transcripts and tapes are now reserved in their entirety in the archived database at Nuffield College, and this archive can be accessed through application to the College and the Project Director. The confidentiality of some of the participants in certain host countries needs to be preserved until such a time that international and national protections of individuals have created the necessary conditions for free access.

VIII

Further findings: The Meetings in Palestine and the Moderators' Meeting

Two further sets of meetings are included in the Further Findings Section (see page 231), those held in Palestine, and a three day meeting in Cyprus where some of the moderators were able to come together to discuss how they had implemented the debates in their host country. For the Palestine discussions, these meetings were held under different conditions from the earlier debates, and thus are not included in the main findings. First they were arranged by local moderators in four regions (Nablus, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Gaza) according to neither the minimum or maximum model, but instead constructed to address and include NGOs, representatives of the popular committees and national forces, as well as Right of Return and other activists from the refugee camps. Although the moderators involved had expressed an interest to hold a similar set of public meetings to those convened elsewhere, time and budget constraints unfortunately prevented a similarly comprehensive process to be carried out inside occupied Palestine. Certainly NGOs and other local associations were, at the time the project came to a close, seeking to convene meetings to include internally displaced Palestinians inside Israel and the 1948 territories. It is hoped that these committees and associations can make use of the findings to advance the ideas of holding meetings so that the next stage of this work carries even greater inclusivity of the Palestinian people. As for the last set of findings, these comprise extracts from the taped discussions held over a period of three days at Cyprus in the early autumn of 2005, where some of the moderators met, many for the first time. Unfortunately visa, travel document, and

travel restriction issues prevented the moderators from a number of host countries from attending these discussions, such as Spain, Australia, Italy, the UAE, and Chile, so these findings are only a part of the views of the many moderators and activists who ran the meetings in the Palestinian *Shatat*. Two of the moderators, from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, had yet to convene the meetings in their countries, and so were discussing matters in advance, rather than retrospectively.

IX

Language, Translation, and Transcription

Most of the meetings were conducted in Arabic. This is the case for all the meetings held in the Arab world. In some European countries, the meetings were held in a mixture of Arabic, English, and the host country language, but with Arabic still predominating. This mixture of languages was particularly the case in the Sweden where different generations spoke to each other and with their peers across different languages. Palestinians of the younger generation, and Palestinians who have lived for longer periods of time in host countries, tended to rely upon the local language, for example in Chicago, Australia, Sweden, Detroit, and Toronto. However, the meetings were sometimes a mix of Arabic and English as older members of the community preferred to speak in Arabic, and often the younger generation was able to understand Arabic yet were uncomfortable speaking in it. The Chile meetings were conducted in Spanish.

All quotes were derived from an arduous and delicate process transferring different types of tapes into CDs, the transcription of these recordings into documents, the translation of these documents into English, and finally, the editing

the Arabic for standardization and correlating between the English and Arabic quotes. The only exception to this is the meetings that were held in Australia where the quotes are drawn from detailed written minutes of the note-takers.

Apart from Australia, all quotes in Part Two are from recorded meetings. However, there were also meetings convened for the project that we were not able to include here. Numerous preparatory, public, and syndicate meetings were either not recorded, or their sound was irretrievably distorted and inaudible, which makes their inclusion in the report impossible. These include certain preparatory and syndicate meetings in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, the US, France, and Yemen, and public meetings in Austria, Riyadh, and a day-long public meeting (accompanied by a series of smaller meetings which included a meeting for Palestinian children), conducted in Ottawa. A full list of meetings held is available in Annexe A.

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Translators' Note

Part Two consists of transcriptions of meetings where people spoke in a mixture of local Arabic dialects, Modern Standard Arabic, and sometimes also combined local languages with Arabic. It is difficult to translate these without losing the style and idiosyncrasies of how people speak in a political setting. Very often certain forms of understanding, expressions and definitions – though self-explanatory to those present – are difficult to translate to an English-speaking reader. Those speaking would often make use a variety of terms to express what would be regarded, in English, as the same word. This speaks to the richness of Arabic categories and definitions of existing forms of political participation and civic involvement. Moreover, people would sometimes utilize references to Arab-Islamic political history in order to define the nature of their relationships to their representatives. For example, there is a consistent reference to the PLO as the fundamental *marji'ya* to which all Palestinians refer. Depending on the context of the meeting and the speaker's argument, we have translated this as reference point, sole authority, authority, or legitimate authority.

We have tried to maintain a hint of the colour of the original Arabic by maintaining some of the phrasing structure, local sayings, and injunctions (such as *insha'Allah*), although much of this has been sacrificed to both clarity and readability. This is a great pity as much of the vigour, elegance, subtlety, and expressiveness of the speakers has been lost in the English translation. However we decided that it would be far better to make sure their voices are as clear in the translation as they are in the original form.

Terms are transliterated as closely as possible according to the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) system, although some differences are still present, particularly for local dialects. In addition, proper names and definitions that already have a more recognizable English transliteration have been used instead.

Finally, we have kept to using the Arabic term of al Shatat for the Palestinian dispersion, as the English term Diaspora does not adequately capture the complex nature and status of this condition.