

The politics of Palestinian refugee participation

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Palestinian refugees should be allowed to choose and decide, based on informed opinions, whether or not they wish to return to their homes. This is their legal and moral right. Is it also their right to participate in discussions about their future? If so, how should they participate?

Since the PLO signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, and even more so since the death of Yasser Arafat – their historic protector – in November 2004, many refugees feel vulnerable. They wonder if there is room within the Oslo framework – which recognises the right of Israel to exist while relegating the refugee issue to final status negotiations – to exercise their right of return. They fear the Palestinian Authority (PA) could give up refugee rights in exchange for a Palestinian state, limiting refugees' return only to the boundaries of a truncated Palestinian state.

Concerned by the implications of Oslo, refugee activists began to build a grassroots popular movement. Over the last decade, numerous gatherings in locations across the globe have produced sophisticated demands and recommendations with the aim of increasing refugees' participation in discussions relating to their present and future. Refugees want to participate because they believe only refugees themselves can be trusted not to compromise on – or to sign away – the right of return.

Despite calls by Palestinian intellectuals, public figures and legislators for a more central role for refugees, the views of common refugees were not solicited during negotiations with Israel. Nobody has proposed a comprehensive strategy for refugee participation. Neither international organisations, educational institutions, Palestinian political parties, UNRWA nor host countries have given refugees in Palestine or in the diaspora the information they need to evaluate political developments. No

mechanisms have been established to involve refugees in political processes.

Many refugee advocates insist that a future Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement should guarantee both the principle and the implementation of the right of return, after which refugees will be supplied with adequate information to choose among such options as voluntary repatriation, local integration or third country resettlement. Many of these advocates argue that discussing refugees' choices prior to securing their rights in an agreement might undermine realisation of refugees' rights. They maintain that the right of return is not negotiable, so 'involving' refugees prior to securing their rights is unnecessary and potentially harmful.

Innovative initiative to listen to refugees

'Time for Them to Speak and for Us to Listen' was a project implemented over 15 months in 2004-2005. It provided Palestinian refugees with impartial information about issues related to the right of return and sought to document refugees' voices about the information presented to them and to discuss the role they want to play in addressing their plight. The project involved extensive community preparation, nurtured an understanding of participatory processes and built local research capacity. Education sessions were run by trained refugees and an educational booklet was prepared and distributed. The study's findings and analysis were shared with refugee representatives, activists and experts.

When given the chance to express their informed opinions, Palestinian refugees expressed their strong desire to participate in exploring solutions to their plight. Most participants insisted that refugees' views are the most meaningful information upon which decisions about their future should be made. They saw participation as a way to raise awareness of their suffering and needs, and as a way to make refugees voices heard in the decision-making process.

Participatory processes are time consuming, difficult to implement in conflict situations and inherently politically charged. We faced significant challenges to the credibility of the project, the implementing organisation and the funders, despite the fact that all field staff were Palestinian and many were refugees. Members of the Popular Committee in the Qalandia refugee camp – non-elected leaders of various political factions – insisted that we need not solicit opinions from a random sample of refugees. Some refugee leaders in Qalandia were so suspicious of the project's objectives that, after many months of community meetings, they decided not to participate. In their opinion, the right of return is sacred and should not under any circumstances be subject to any studies or discussions with refugees. They disapproved of our insistence on involving ordinary refugees and not only political leaders. The common refugee, they argued, is not sophisticated enough to resist manipulation and should not be given information that might reduce their expectations. They want refugees educated about their right of return but without emphasis on their right to choose whether to return.

Refugees in nearby Jalazon camp did agree to participate. Research findings and the process were enlightening. The study exposed a profound lack of factual knowledge, especially among youth and female participants. They were able to articulate

complex analyses that acknowledge the difficulties of implementing the right of return but could not cite details about relevant international resolutions. They did not know the specific positions of Palestinian, Israeli and international parties on the right of return. Most were unaware that they have both the legal right to compensation and the right of return. This calls into question the benefit of opinion polls and other quantitative research that asks refugees' opinions without finding out if refugees understand the meaning of such terms as 'repatriation', 'compensation' and 'international law'.

Participants stressed that any agreement that negates refugees' right of return will be rejected: while it may bring about a sort of 'peace', it will not end the conflict. They want to be part of discussions and decision making, not simply to choose among options formulated on their behalf. They emphasised the legitimacy of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, including refugees, but also said it was not adequately representing the opinions of refugees – either in the West Bank, Gaza or the diaspora. They were highly critical of the lack of consultation with refugees and lack of transparency in the negotiation process. They criticised the absence of democratic mechanisms to enable them to elect their leaders. They suggested that elections be held to select a trustworthy body of refugee representatives who would become the focal point within the PLO for any negotiations on refugee issues. They insisted on their right to nominate less corrupt and more competent negotiators, and emphasised the importance of involving ordinary refugees, not just intellectuals and leaders.

Based on our experiences in Qalandia and Jalazon camps it is evident that



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mechanisms allowing refugees voices to be heard in the political process are sorely needed. The global trend towards beneficiary participation and leadership in humanitarian contexts is insufficient – refugees deserve also to participate in the political processes that determine their fate. At the end of our initiative, study participants indicated they wanted more. They called for more participatory awareness-raising campaigns for all Palestinians, better organisation within the refugee community, active and open dialogue with the Palestinian leadership, a more active role for the PA Department of Refugee Affairs and meetings between refugees and experts in international law.

We are aware that refugees were expressing their views at a specific historical moment: Arafat had just died and the PA was controlled by Fatah. Would their positions be different today after the election of a Hamas-dominated parliament? Would their positions be different if they were presented with actual options to be implemented in the context of establishment a recognised Palestinian state? Does a group-

level agreement on refugee options undermine refugees' individual rights under international law? How might participation itself transform the refugee community? How might refugee participation affect the democratic nature of a future Palestinian state? We hope that future participatory research will explore these issues.

'Time for Them to Speak and for Us to Listen' was implemented by a team of researchers at the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development (Panorama) www.panoramacenter.org It was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Middle East Expert and Advisory Services Fund, which is managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa and financially supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and IDRC, in cooperation with Foreign Affairs Canada. Juliette Abu-Iyun was project director and Nora Lester Murad a researcher/ editor. To obtain the complete report, email: jabuiyun@yahoo.com or NoraLesterMurad@gmail.com