



Ittijah-the Union of Arab Community Based Associations  
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## **Analysis: Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East 14-16 December 2007**

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkLaPFzPADQ>

### **Introduction**

On 6 October 2007, on the eve of the meeting of the International Steering Committee of the Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East, members of the committee were surprised to see an Israeli group consisting of members of 'Kadima' Party and the 'Peres Center for Peace' at the Spanish Foreign Ministry. The presence of the group was coordinated with the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Zionist lobby in Spain, and the so-called 'Caza Sfarad', or the Jewish house. In addition, there was a former Palestinian Authority minister. Members of the group were known as initiators and supporters of the "Geneva Initiative" and before it the Oslo accords.

It soon transpired that the group was there to participate in the meeting of the International Steering Committee of the forum, which comprises networks of Palestinian civil society organizations in the OPT and in Israel and in the Diaspora, Arab nongovernmental organizations, Spanish and European organizations, and Israeli organizations that oppose Zionism and publicly support the Palestinian people's right to repatriation and self-determination. It also transpired that the group was invited by parties at the Spanish Foreign Ministry upon guidance from the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Foreign Ministry of the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinian, Arab, and Spanish attendees immediately discussed the matter before the meeting of the International Steering Committee and decided to reject, in principle, any governmental interference in the independence of the civil society and to reject normalization and the attempt to turn the forum, which was prepared to be a massive demonstration to support peoples' rights and the struggle for liberation, into a forum for Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab dialogue. Members of the committee held an urgent meeting with the representative of the Spanish Foreign

Ministry and insisted on their position until the Ministry backtracked on its attempt to impose and dictate the Israeli Zionist participation and to interfere in the affairs and contents of the forum.

Our position was based on the meeting that was held on 21 June 2007, when the International Steering Committee and the Spanish organizers agreed that participation in the forum by any party was conditional upon that party approving the forum's constituent statement and its political principles. This was adopted during the preparations for the forum. The forum's methodology and activities and the identity of the speakers were determined accordingly.

We were alert to the attempts by the Israeli Foreign Ministry and its satellite Israeli organizations, especially 'the Peres Center for Peace', to "hijack the forum" and control it, and in case of failure to sabotage it and work behind and in front of the scenes to obstruct it.

Over about two weeks before the forum, the Zionist lobby made intensive efforts in that regard. Members of the lobby took advantage of their influence, especially on the Spanish Foreign Ministry and municipalities near Madrid that offered sponsorship and organized local activities on the fringe of the forum, activities that were not part of the forum. They were engaged in disinformation campaign, trying to portray the parallel activities as if they were part of the forum. Israeli employees and activists (not Spaniards) contacted Palestinian individuals and groups at home in an attempt to get them involved in the cultural and artistic activities that they dominated.

The Israeli and Spanish foreign ministries tried to impose the participation of a 47-member Israeli delegation from organizations close to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the 'Peres Center for Peace', the Geneva Initiative, and members of Kadima and the Labor Party, in the forum, not only in the parallel activities that were not linked to the forum. The Spanish Foreign Ministry asked that this delegation be credited as the official Israeli delegation, saying that "the delegation formed by the Alternative Information Center, AIC" a member of the International Steering Committee, represents only the "radicals" and the "anti-Zionists". The Spanish Foreign Ministry, on behalf of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, also asked that the delegation be allowed to participate in the forum's activities and platforms. That was in flagrant conflict with the decisions of the Spanish civil society, which organized the forum, and with the decisions of the International Steering Committee and the principle of the independence of the civil society. Contacts were immediately held, and it was decided to reject the Israeli and governmental dictates no matter what the price and to ensure the unity of the Spanish organizers and the Palestinian, Arab, and international parties participating in the Steering Committee. The Spanish organizers, in coordination with the International Steering Committee, issued a relevant statement stressing that participation was confined to the parties that ratified the forum's constituent statement.

### **How to manage the crisis?**

Since the start of the initial preparations for the forum, the Palestinian position on the level of nongovernmental work was united and harmonious. That was an

achievement in itself because a unified Palestinian position is the basis of a unified Arab and international position when it comes to Palestine and the Palestinian cause.

It is only fair to say that the Spanish civil society organizations, thanks to their interaction with the Palestinian organizations, adopted a comfortable position that was reflected on the makeup of the International Steering Committee and on the essence of the forum's constituent statement, which stressed support for rights and the struggle to attain them and acknowledged the legitimacy of the struggle and resistance to remove historical injustice and its repercussions. The statement also adopted the inclination that the objective of the forum is not to hold dialogue, but to support rights and struggle. It determined that the forum is not a framework for normalization with Israel, and it indeed called for punishing and boycotting Israel.

As the time passed, the magnitude of the official governmental interference became clear. The structure and funding of the forum and the funding of the organizing establishments, in general, allowed such interference. All this happened on the Spanish stage, without the involvement of the International Steering Committee. The Spanish Foreign Ministry was blackmailed by the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Zionist lobby in Spain. Regrettably, this blackmail was complemented and harmonized with the position of the Foreign Ministry of the Palestinian Authority, which sought, through its direct contacts with the Spanish Foreign Ministry, to harm the Palestinian nongovernmental participation and its political nature.

Before the date of the forum, the Palestinian nongovernmental organizations were put to a difficult test, but they passed it with distinction. As a result of the politically active situation in Madrid, there was disparity in the Palestinian position on **how to manage the battle**. Some saw that disparity as a Palestinian split or a divisive conduct, but if one looks at the essence of the matter he will see that the Palestinian position was **essentially united in opposing the governmental Israeli and Spanish dictates and in rejecting the Israeli participation and asserting the need to boycott it and not accept it even if that resulted in the cancellation of the forum. Also, the position was coordinated around the clock between those who were in Madrid and those who said in advance that they would not even travel to Madrid.**

We stressed that the experience of the Palestinian civil work makes us highly self-confident, especially as we enjoy a rich experience in organizing Palestinian and international conferences and forums and the ability to confront and prevent conferences that seek to harm the Palestinian principles and rights or to dictate governmental positions.

On the evening of 12 December; that is, on the eve of the conference, and as the delegations were heading to Madrid, the network of Palestinian nongovernmental organizations in the West Bank and Gaza and the Anti-Apartheid Campaign announced their boycott of the forum and sought to get the Palestinian delegations and some Arab delegations to follow suit at the last moment and without prior coordination over this step. The Lebanese delegation responded. Some small Palestinian groups from the West Bank attended. The Union of Arab Community Based Associations in the 1948 Palestine decided to go ahead with its decision to travel to Madrid and manage the battle from there. The representatives of the Palestinian community in Spain and Palestinian youth groups from the Diaspora as well as the Egyptian delegation, a Tunisian delegation, and two delegations from

Iraq -- from home and abroad -- also came to Madrid. Ittijah's position was based on the conviction that the Palestinian group has all the cards of the game in the forum and that it must struggle on site so that the forum would stick to its objectives through the unanimity of the Arab groups, especially since we, as part of the international committee, control the contents of the forum and that all of us, along with our Spanish allies, drafted the reference charter and the final statement, identified the speakers, approved the self-managed workshops, and determined the attendees.

We also bore in mind that we had an additional responsibility toward the Arab delegations and the Spanish participation and that it was important to achieve coordination and solidarity and unify the Palestinian, Arab, and Spanish voice against the Spanish government's responsiveness to Israel's dictates. We decided that withdrawal or boycott needed to be collective and organized, as there was unanimity over the principles and the red lines that could not be crossed.

We recalled the experience of the Durban conference, when the Palestinian group, as part of the unified regional Arab group, stood against the governments of the world and the United Nations and defeated Israel and Zionism and condemned them as racist, colonialist, and apartheid systems.

Spanish Organization (ACSUR LAS SEGOVIAS), which is allied with the Palestinian organizations, urged travel to Madrid to manage the battle together against the governmental dictates.

### **From where the crisis to be managed?**

A unified Palestinian position is necessary and essential in all the activities within the forum. It is essential for the regional Arab group, the Spanish organizers, and the international delegations. This underscores our responsibility toward the others, friends and allies. This is a role that only the Palestinians can play. Only the Palestinians, who have no state, take a leading position in any international conference or event on the level of civil society.

We believe the difference in the viewpoints as to how and where to manage the battle was a secondary matter because all organizations held the same essence despite the technical difference.

Going to Madrid or not going to Madrid did not reflect a political position in itself, but participation in a conference under governmental dictates or with Israeli participation is a conduct that entails a political position, as everyone agrees.

In fact, during the local preparatory meetings and the pre-Palestinian consultations, Israel's efforts to change the essence of the forum were expected and clear. The position of the PA Foreign Ministry, which disputed the credibility of the independent Palestinian networks, made things more difficult.

Ittijah played a pivotal role in the management of the battle on the site of the forum, whether in formulating the position or in coordinating and unifying the general Palestinian stand and the regional Arab and international stand and leading all

delegations toward a united position supportive of the principles on which the forum was based and the independence of the civil society. We closely followed the developments from the site of the event until the Steering Committee canceled the workshops of the forum and turned it into a protest gathering opposing the Spanish governmental interference and the Israeli dictates. We set two objectives in our discussions with the organizers and the International Committee: **Ensuring the unity of the Palestinian, Arab, and Spanish position and defending the independence of the civil society and preventing any attempt by governments to break its unity no matter what the price.** This was achieved.

An evaluation of what happened in Madrid makes us confident that if we were absent and if the battle was not managed firmly and with coordination with the other parties, it would be possible to deviate the forum from its course and allow the Zionist establishments to participate. It would also be possible to distort the position of the victim and embarrass the Arab delegations and distort their positions.

### **Back to the Beginnings**

The idea of the Madrid Forum for a Just Peace, which was initiated by a coalition of Spanish nongovernmental and developmental organizations within the Madrid Social Forum, was based on two main components: The first was the Spanish government's effort to hold an international conference (Madrid 2). That would have entailed recognition of the failure of the course that followed the first Madrid conference at the early nineties and the subsequent Oslo course. That effort focused on the essence of the conflict and on the international legitimacy and the international law. The second was the influential role of the Spanish civil society. The Spanish organizations and coalitions are among the most influential civil society organizations on the country's decision-making centers.

The Spanish civil society took the initiative to organize the forum for just peace, having the issues of Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon at its center. It stressed that the forum would essentially support peoples' rights and activate the international movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people in particular.

The Spanish civil society organizers also set up an international steering committee from Arab and international networks.

When the Spanish government's effort began to make impact and create momentum, the US Administration, in coordination with Israel, called for the Annapolis conference, which conflicted with the spirit of the Madrid conference. The callers for the Madrid conference soon backtracked, and the European Union decided to adopt the Annapolis conference and work within it through the International Quartet. It retreated from Madrid 2. That was also the position of the Spanish government, which followed this position with a series of retreats that harmed the Spanish civil society and its credibility and were a main factor in the subsequent repercussions up to the cancellation of the forum.

The conduct of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Zionist organizations was not surprising. What was surprising, however, was the extent of the leniency of the Spanish Foreign Ministry. Everyone working on the international stage realizes that

Europe has for years been a main arena of action for the Zionist Israeli lobby. That was one of the lessons the Israelis learned from their political defeat in the international anti-racism conference in Durban in 2001. After Israel ensured the absolute support of the EU and the governments of its countries, the confrontation arena turned to the civil society, the nongovernmental organizations, the social and popular movements, and the media. This confrontation gets more intense globally as part of the US Administration's classification of the world into two axes, an "extremist" camp and a "moderate" camp. Regionally, for example, the confrontation will not be against Israel and its racist colonialist project, but among the Palestinians themselves, or among the Arabs, or between the Arabs and Iran, and so on.

Moderation and extremism are measured against the position toward Israel, not the position toward the international legitimacy or human rights, for example. This is meant to protect Israel regardless of the crimes that characterize its history and nature.

The Annapolis conference later came to underline the American, European, and Israeli effort to create international alignment across regions, countries, and peoples to ensure the hegemony of the dominants and occupiers in Palestine and Iraq and the weakness of the people under hegemony or the countries that oppose the American-Israeli hegemony.

But Annapolis made the Madrid forum more important because the forum, with its constituent charter and axes, would be the first collective international demonstration against Annapolis' approach and spirit. The forum's constituent document underlines resistance against the American-Israeli hegemony and the right of peoples in Palestine and Iraq to resist and get rid of the occupation. It stresses the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland and property, and it considers Israel a racist colonialist system. It holds the international community responsible for the failure to force Israel to respect the international law. It calls for punishing and boycotting Israel, for respecting the Palestinian democratic option, and for the release of the prisoners and detainees. It calls for ending the occupation of Iraq and for Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. It underlines Lebanon's sovereignty and calls for an end to the Israeli occupation of the Golan. It warns against an Israeli aggression on Syria or Iran. It stresses that the civil society refuses to be used as a tool for normalization. In other words, the Madrid forum, in all its components, sought to bring to the fore everything that the Annapolis conference sought to alienate; namely, the voice of the peoples in Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon, and to support their struggle.

In order to ensure all this, participation in the forum was open to every group that approved the constituent charter and the abovementioned principles. The international committee and the Spanish organizers were in charge of the forum's content, program, and speakers, and the final statement drafting committee. This was agreed in a meeting held on 21 June 2007.

## Lessons and conclusions

- There are signs of changes in the international governmental approach to the civil society.
- There is an effort to create "civil society" affiliated to governments and foreign or local policies.
- There is an exposed and public governmental effort to impose conditions on financing and funding.
- There is an international effort to besiege the independent Palestinian civil society, silence its national political voice, prevent it from interacting internationally, and cooperate with other individual nongovernmental Palestinian organizations or frameworks that adopt positions harmonious with the internationally dominant positions as alternatives to the independent Palestinian networks.
- There is an activation and organization of the Zionist lobby in Europe.
- The Zionist lobby targets the civil society on the international level after it guaranteed the support of governments.
- The Palestinian civil society organizations in the homeland and the Diaspora play a pivotal role on the Palestinian, regional Arab, and international levels.
- The united position of the organized Palestinian civil society in the homeland and the Diaspora is a basic condition for any achievement or international activity.
- The united position of the organized, anti-normalization Arab civil society is central, and must be dealt with as a strategic dimension of the Palestinian civil work.
- The independent civil society still wields great influence, and it needs organization, coordination, and unification of efforts.
- Efforts must be made to develop internal Palestinian dialogue over the issues of funding and international work to prevent the domination of governmental international parties on some of the Palestinian civil society.
- It is important for the Palestinian civil society to coordinate its coming plans with its partners and ensure a relationship based on joint, mutual, and equitable partnership and integration of roles.
- The international agenda at present, and apparently in the future, links political financing to the effort to create a new axial alignment and a confrontation between the axis of "moderation" and the axis of "extremism". The aim is to divide the Palestinian civil society in particular and the Arab and international civil society in general.
- The conditional political funding seeks to push the Palestinian civil society in particular and the Arab civil society in general toward normalization with Israel.
- It is important to underline the anti-normalization Arab and Palestinian position and the international boycott of Israel in its security and civil establishments.
- It is important to engage in organized Palestinian and Arab work to protect the establishments and prevent isolating them individually and harming their positions.
- The unity of the Palestinian cause must be asserted as a condition for any Palestinian or international activity on the Palestinian question.

- There is need to develop the discourse of Palestinian justice, rights, legitimacy, and mutual solidarity against the "peace demonstration" that the forces and supporters of the Israeli aggression claim to champion.
- There is need to expose the Israeli organizations that pretend to be part of the civil society when their delegations are formed by the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

### **Future Challenges**

In effect, the civil society succeeded in maintaining its unity and preventing its infiltration by governments as a result of the Israeli blackmail. But it paid a heavy price in return; namely, giving up an international forum that was supposed to constitute a massive international demonstration of solidarity with the occupied peoples, their struggle, and their just causes. The forum was also supposed to be leverage for international solidarity. On the Palestinian level, the forum was practically to be the biggest international event that would launch the activities of the 60th anniversary of *al-Nakbah* (catastrophe) and a campaign in support of the right of Return and the right to self-determination.

So practically the attempts to obstruct the forum in its original content succeeded. This would encourage Israel -- its Foreign Ministry -- and the Jewish lobby and Zionist organizations to continue this work and draw the necessary lessons. This is in line with the US Administration's international effort to isolate all those who oppose its plans and the Israeli aggression. What happened might also encourage some governments to harm the independence of the civil society.

But what happened also deters governments as it tells them that the civil society is not a tool in their hands, and that it struggles for its independence and the independence of its agenda and discourse, that it challenges governments, that it resists the attempts to infiltrate it or dominate it by governments, and that it remains the basis of solidarity among peoples.

### **The Israeli lesson**

Just as the civil society learns lessons, draws conclusions, and prepares its future steps, governments, including the Israeli government in coordination and cooperation with the world Zionist organizations and their allies, also prepare for the future. It should be noted that the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Zionist lobby have been trying, at least for one year, to impose hegemony on the UN anti-racism conference (Durban II), scheduled to take place in 2009. One of their means is to transfer the conference from South Africa to New York. It must also be admitted that while the Zionist organizations have been showing high state of readiness and preparedness, the victims of the Zionist racism and colonialism on the Palestinian, Arab, and international levels have not yet kept pace.

### **The Problems of Funding**

We must also admit that while international funding is necessary, it turns into a curse if it is linked to conditions harming the independence of the civil society associations and the rights of the oppressed nations. Civil society organizations

need to see and realize this and to say "no" when necessary. They should know that the international governmental parties need the civil society to accept their funding because for governments funding is political investment, not charity work in any way. Civil society organizations need to be firmer on the issue of funding and its objectives. Here, the organizations' relationship with their societies becomes basic and self financing. Furthermore, financing by the national Palestinian and Arab bourgeois becomes more urgent to support the steadfastness and independent voice of the Arab civil society, with the Palestinian civil society at its center due to the centrality of the Palestinian question.

### **Solidarity Movements**

Solidarity movements -- popular movements and political, trade, developmental, and Human Rights organizations -- play an important and basic role in supporting the rights of the Palestinian people. They constituted and will continue to constitute a strategic supporter of the Palestinian people. But the solidarity movements do not differentiate between one Palestinian and another when they express their solidarity. They demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian people and their just cause, not with this Palestinian against that Palestinian. Any Palestinian split over the general position or over the position on a certain issue greatly harms this solidarity. When someone expresses solidarity with the Palestinian people, he does not do the Palestinian people a favor; rather, he carries out a human duty that depends on and complements the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation, which is a model of peoples' struggle in general. It will not be in the interest of the solidarity movements or in the interest of the Palestinian people that these movements interfere in internal Palestinian differences.

The foreign effort to weaken the terms of reference of the Palestinian civil society and its collective frameworks, and the international attempts by certain governments to deal with a certain Palestinian team "the moderate team" against another Palestinian team "the extremist team" under the slogan of "peace" are, therefore, extremely dangerous because they might also fragment and divide the solidarity movements themselves. This requires that the discourse of the solidarity movements and the partnerships with them be strengthened so that their agendas may include and focus on issues directly related to the core of the conflict, such as supporting the boycott of Israel, supporting the Palestinian and Arab struggle against normalization, and exposing the Israeli social organizations, the overwhelming majority of which support the policy of the Israeli and American aggression in the region. In other words, they need to confront Israel as a state and a system reflecting a racist, colonialist, and aggressive entity, to oppose the American hegemony in the region, and not to deal with any issue outside the general context of the conflict in the region.

It is also important to strengthen the growing approach where the people of the world deal with the Palestinian issue, in all its components, as one issue, and to overcome the state of de-fragmentation in the approach toward it. This is very important to develop the discourse that calls for the attainment of rights on the bases of justice and the rights of nations, not on the bases of the balances of power and hegemony.

The 60th anniversary of *Al-Nakbah* and its accumulating repercussions provide an opportunity to test this approach and launch solidarity movements and campaigns to uphold Palestinian rights and provide the bases of justice.

### **The Regional Arab Dimension of the Palestinian Work**

In practice, there is retreat in Palestinian-Arab interaction. We will not discuss the reasons for this in this paper, but we stress that the Arab dimension must not be absent and the Palestinians must not alienate this Arab dimension. The Arab activity gets stronger with unified Palestinian action, and Palestinian action gets stronger through the Arab dimension. Crystallizing a firm Arab bloc on the level of the civil society would have an impact that goes beyond the border of the civil society establishments' work; it would have impact on the local and international levels.

In the anti-racism conference held in Durban in 2001, the formula that proved powerful and through which all of us worked was the establishment of an Arab bloc with the Palestinian question at its center. That bloc opposed normalization with Israel and sought to isolate Israel on the international level. It interacted with the other international groups and blocs. But the comprehensive, coordinated, and unified Arab civil society bloc is now absent from the international stage and the World Social Forum. Meanwhile, new establishments were created in the past years, specifically the Euro-Med establishments and the Euro-Med Non-Governmental Platform. The absence of an Arab bloc and collective Arab action upsets the balances of power in these forums, and this is likely to lead to political flaws and retreat in the more central issue -- the Palestinian issue -- at the expense of the Palestinians and in Israel's favor.

### **It will not be unlikely for the Israeli establishment to take certain steps in this regard, including:**

- Passing laws that heighten political monitoring of the Arab associations at home by the Foreign Ministry to influence the policies of both the associations and the financiers.
- Pursuing and attempting to de-legitimize the Arab associations that advocate Palestinian, Arab, and international interaction.
- Increasing the pressure on the EU and other governments to act in ways that serve Israel's interests.
- Consolidating the use of pro-Israel American and international Jewish funding in the policy of attracting and buying out people and weakening Palestinian establishments opposed to their policies.
- Influencing the international conferences and forums and their organizers and financiers.
- Pushing for a permanent split in the Palestinian position.
- Using the international conferences for normalization with Israel.
- Distributing roles between the State and the Zionist Israeli civil society organizations in the international forum.

### **On the Local Level-Palestine 1948: Participation in Collective Ittijah Delegations**

- Ittijah should play a pivotal role in ensuring this Palestinian unity at home and the Diaspora, as well as Arab unity, and in establishing alliances and advancing the international activity.
- Based on experience, there is need to stress that there is a reference for every collective delegation. Every participant in this delegation will have what is agreed upon as his reference. Since our delegation is organized by the Union of Associations and has the Union of Associations as its reference, it is the right of every member association to participate in the delegation based on the relevant participation criteria. But every participating association has the responsibility of committing itself to the reference. There should be no room for individual decisions or for reliance on other references outside the reference on the basis of which the delegation was organized.
- Within the strategic relationships among the collective Palestinian civil society frameworks and their central role, the importance of strengthening the role of the unions and networks must be stressed. This includes respect for the reference of every union, network, or alliance as the basis of consolidating coordination, cooperation, and integration of roles.

#### **Immediate Demands and Steps:**

- Underscoring and supporting the Spanish organizers' demand that civil society organizations set up a Spanish investigation commission into the events and the interferences into the forum for just peace.
- Underlining the demand that the Spanish Foreign Ministry allows and provides the resources for the reconvening of the forum based on the original formula and framework.
- Holding a collective meeting with Spain's Ambassador in Tel Aviv to protest what happened and emphasize the above two demands.
- Holding a series of assessment meetings with the network of the nongovernmental organizations in the West Bank and Gaza and the Anti-Wall Campaign, and evaluating the Palestinian action within the coordination committee of the Palestinian civil society that emanated from the de-fragmentation conference that was held in Cyprus in October 2007.
- Establishing a coordinated, harmonious, sustainable, and highly prepared Arab bloc for international action.

*Note: This paper was discussed in an assessment meeting organized by the Union of Arab Community Based Associations, Ittijah, in Shafa Amr on 28*

*December 2007. The meeting was attended by the associations that participated as the Palestine 1948 delegation to Madrid forum.*