

From Damascus gate to the Web

The Spaces of Civil Society in Jerusalem

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Abstract

According to the *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2008*¹ realized by the Israeli *Central Bureau of Statistic*, Jerusalem covers an area of 653 km². The population amounts to 889, 300 inhabitants with an average age of 23,3. It is the biggest and the poorest city in Israel. The Palestinian population amount to 269, 900 inhabitants, representing nearly one third of total population. Jerusalem is a divided city in which every districts has developed a self-organized life. A cultural integration and a shared identity is consequently hard to build. The Municipality and the State of Israel have implemented economical, demographical and social policies that have reshaped the city and incremented the gap between Palestinian and Israeli people. With no physical barriers in the city, a geography of fear has drawn the spaces of Jerusalem and it has managed to keep and promote the status of segregation of its inhabitants.

Jerusalem is together with the right to return of Palestinian refugees, water's exploitation and the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Occupied Territory, one of the core issues in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Its *status*, to be discuss only in a final negotiate, doesn't provide solutions to the on-going problems. As a consequence, promoting a dialogue *in* the city and *for* the city, has become a central issue not in the official and traditional center of power, but in the spaces beside them. Civil society has proved to be one of the most important subjects. It is assumed as a

¹ http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnatonenew_site.htm

space-actor whose activities promoted by associations, organizations and social movements are aimed at widening the borders of direct democracy and raising new questions. It offers a meta-political criticism of the current situation. The interest in civil society is due to the idea that the political discourse it's not merely a product of the traditional decision centers. In Jerusalem there are alternative places from where there is an attempt to influence the political development of the area: they show opinions that stand out of the national way of thinking, both in Israel and in Palestine.

Civil society behaves according to the context in which it operates and according to the challenges that it is facing: in 1982 *Peace Now* organized a demonstration to convene a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the events in *Sabra and Shatila* refugee camps: 400.000 people jointed the event. During the Israeli military occupation of the Occupied Territories, lots of Palestinian grass-root organizations had provided the population with basic and non-basic services, fulfilling the lack of a Palestinian state. Both Israeli and Palestinian civil societies have developed their own path in relation to their national history, but the conflict has shaped their evolution till nowadays.

Civil society is lively and dynamic in Jerusalem. In the Israeli context, the *Amutot Law*² regulates the legal status of civil society bodies and activities. In 2005, there were 32.000 *amuta*³ in the whole Israeli territory. The field research, conducted through qualitative interviews, has identified different kinds of organizations working in Jerusalem that can be classified as: associations with a declared political guidance, associations for human rights, and social-intervention associations. There is a certain kind of interchange among the experiences so that it's better to speak of a spectrum and not of a strict classification. Despite the difference in strategy,

² Amutot Law:

<http://www.geocities.com/savepalestinenow/israellaws/fulltext/amutotlaw.htm>

³ Amutot (plur: amuta): charitable organization or non-governmental organization (Hebrew)

most of them focuses on information as a tool to provide consciousness in the Israeli public and to report violations against Palestinian people.

As for Palestinian civil society, the landscape is more complex. To work in Jerusalem the organizations should follow the *Amutot law*, but saying that “*An amuta shall not be registered if any of its objects negates the existence or democratic character of the State of Israel [...]*”⁴ it limits their recognition in the Israeli state. The Palestinian law *n. 1 on Charitable Association and Community Organizations*⁵ that has legal force and effect in the Palestinian Authority territories, can't be applied in Jerusalem, as it was established in the Oslo agreements. The legal framework in which Palestinian civil society works is ambiguous and the restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities on civil activities make its concrete presence in the city difficult. Among the experiences found in Jerusalem, there are not associations with a declared political guidance, while there are human rights associations and numerous social associations. Despite that, Palestinian civil society turns out to be much more politicized even in the experiences that are not directly related to the political field as youth's associations or women's associations.

One of the main issues that civil society faces in a long-term conflict is the promotion of coexistence between rival subjects. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Oslo process gave importance to the matter for the first time. The *Annex VI to the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip*⁶ established coexistence's principles and development, and introduced the concept of *people to people*. The peace process' failure caused the collapse of coexistence programs as well. Nowadays, while there is quite no relevant bi-national interchange, the issue of coexistence has still relevance in Jerusalem. The promoter-subjects have different

⁴ Amutot Law, par.1, art. 3 (Establishment)

⁵ Law n. 1 on Charitable association and community organizations:
<http://www.courts.gov.ps/pdf/Law%20on%20Charitable%20Associations%20and%20Civil%20Society%20Organization>

⁶ Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 1995:
<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/THE+ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN+INTERIM+AGREEMENT.htm>

approaches: organizations specifically involved in promoting coexistence, research institutes and centers, professional institutes, or cultural institutions. The activity's place, the linguistic policy and the choice of the people to address are the basis around which coexistence projects should be built. Palestinian people has developed a negative opinion on the matter, that can be explained with a no deep evaluation of those basis by the promoter-subjects. Coexistence is perceived as an attempt to normalize the relationship between Israelis and Palestinian and not as a tool to promote dialogue.

Carry on with a space analysis related to civil society, the Web can't be undervalued because of its inner capability to overcome physical barriers and to link people coming from different contexts. Virtual communication has far-reaching consequences even in conflict situation but it can lead to different results, as the analysis of two case studies has shown. *Facebook* reveals the popularity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: groups as "*Palestine is not a country, delist it from Facebook as one*" or "*Israel is not a country*" have a large amount of participants. At the same time, they show an oversimplification of the issue and a radicalization of both the language and the opinions gathered around superficial statements. *Mepeace*⁷, a "*community of peacemakers interacting, informing and inspiring Middle East peace*" reveals a more structured and respectful communication. The participants have opinions closer to each other and this can be seen as the reason why the discussion is more tolerant and respectful.

The research's results have shown that civil society, despite its lively and dynamic presence, hardly manage to realize what it aims to. First of all, the conflict turns cyclically from an endemic situation to an open war that prevents civil society from establishing long-term perspective projects. The whole society faces constantly the eruption of an emergence situation, as the recent *Cast Leads* operation has shown, that put aside issues as relevant as those of the contingent moment but that don't gain the same attention in the local and international public opinion. Furthermore, it enforces

⁷ <http://www.mepeace.org/>

antagonistic feelings and influences social behaviors that can't be undervalued in a prolonged conflict. Coexistence is not easy to carry out in such a context.

Concerning the individual and collective level, Jerusalem lacks a recognized equality of its inhabitants, precondition to any coexistence program. Although this could happen in some specific cases, there is not a legal framework that supports such an attempt. Coexistence program failure is not to be ascribed to social reasons (despite they are indeed present in the most radical sector of the population), but to political reasons. The labels of *occupier* and *occupied* occur in every relationship between Palestinian and Israelis. The lack of balance between the interlocutors makes coexistence project useless.

Concerning the associative level, Palestinian civil society has no more a reference point in Jerusalem. After the Open House's closure⁸ and due to the restrictions imposed by the Israeli Authorities to civil activities inside the city, there has been a shift, both physical and of identification to Ramallah where there is more freedom to express national requests. Obstacles to freedom of movement prevent a mutual exchange of experience. With no full Israeli citizenship and neither full Palestinian one, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem are isolated from both the societies.

In Jerusalem there is another way of thinking and telling the conflict. There is an alternative narrative in which the Israeli ceases to be the Zionist entity and the Palestinian the terrorist. But it still hasn't gained sufficient space to become a new symbol for Jerusalem, a city in which symbols convey more meanings than any other tools. Listening to these voices that stand out from the official level, give the opportunity to better understand what the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means.

⁸ Open House: Olp head-office in the occupied Jerusalem. It was closed by the Israeli Authorities in August 2001, after the death of its leader Faisal Hussein