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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphanie Anna Loddo. Palestinian Transnational Actors and the Construction of the Homeland. The Making of World Society: Transnational Practices and Global Structures, Nov 2005, Bielefeld, Germany. hal-00363820v3

**HAL Id: hal-00363820**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00363820v3>**

Submitted on 11 May 2014

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## **Palestinian transnational actors and the construction of the homeland**

**Paper presented at the conference:**

**The Making of World Society: Transnational Practices and Global Structures”,  
University of Bielefeld, Germany, 24-25 Nov. 2005**

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This essay is drawn from wider research on Palestinian transnational spaces in the UK<sup>1</sup>, and based on observations during activities organised by these groups and an analysis of general publications, newsletters, pamphlets and various resources available on websites. I refer to transnational social spaces or fields as sets of social and symbolic ties, networks, organisations, spanning borders of several nation-states, where members are involved in regular and high density contacts ( Basch et al. 1994; Portes 1996; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec 1999; Faist 2000).

Transnational studies have drawn significant attention of scholars and policy makers as migration phenomena on a global scale have become overwhelming in both academic and political concerns. Some researchers have paid sustained attention to the conceptual tools needed in the analysis of such issues. Faist has undertaken an effort to theorise transnational relations by defining structural properties of transnational social formations (Faist 2000). Vertovec advocates in depth comparative studies within transnational social fields such as persons and commodities in circulation, social ties, money and information flows (Vertovec 1999 : 456). Several others have made sustained efforts in drawing up analytical frameworks and typologies of transnational activities ( Portes 1996, 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998).

Drawing on an important body of theoretical and empirical studies, in depth analysis of transnational social spaces might contribute to transnational studies both in engaging

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<sup>1</sup> This doctoral research in Social Anthropology deals with the construction of transnational social and cultural relations among Palestinians in the UK. The ethnography carried out from April 2004 to February 2006 has been based on interviews and observations among Palestinian and pro-Palestinian advocacy groups, individuals, social and political networks.

theoretical discussion of the concepts and providing a detailed description of the extent and dynamics of the networks as well as the logics of which they are constituted<sup>2</sup>. In that respect, scholars have paid little attention to Palestinian transnational communities in Europe. A great deal of research has focused on strictly refugee issues with a strong focus on processes of cultural reproduction and resistance to assimilation illustrated by case studies on the reconstruction/reinforcement of Palestinian identity in the refugee camps (Destremau 1994; Farah 1997; Jaber 1997). Few researchers have concentrated either on the dynamic aspects of identity construction in an exilic context, or on the transnational aspects of Palestinian social organisation in relation to the production of cultural meaning and identity. Although some scholars have shown a growing interest in these issues, namely in migratory strategies (Doraï 2003), and transnational networks among Palestinian entrepreneurs (Hanafi 1997), there is a need to interrogate the nature of the ties and representations Palestinians sustain in relation to their homeland and to the larger transnational community.

This essay deals with transnationality in relation to nation-state building and diaspora. It describes new forms of diaspora politics that relate a national project to a wider global agenda (ie human right, anti-war). After introducing the situation of Palestinians in the UK, I will situate the present study in the historical context of the formation of transnational practices among these communities. I will then focus on grassroots solidarity networks engaged in development projects in Palestine, and underline the relation between human rights and development in activists discourses and goals, first to stress on the situation on the ground (more a crisis recovery than a post-conflict zone), and second to assert the relevance of universalism in the construction of political alliances between national and global activists. I will mainly focus on two campaigns - BIG and Stop the Wall Campaigns - that involve actors in the UK, Palestine and worldwide, to illustrate new developments in grassroots politics in relation to Palestine, since these practices epitomise the interaction between local and global processes in the formation of transnational politics. Finally, this will enable me to examine the relationship between transnational politics, nation-state building and local political practices in pro-Palestinian advocacy, underlying the possible role of these actions in reshaping social contexts, both in the UK and in Palestine.

### **Formation and geographical distribution of the diaspora**

Following the creation of the State of Israel, two-thirds of the Palestinian population was made homeless and dispersed throughout the neighbouring countries. It is estimated that

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<sup>2</sup> For pathbreaking work in this direction see: Glick Schiller and Fouron 1990, 1998, 1999, 2001; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Basch et al. 1994.

there were more than seven millions Palestinian refugees and displaced persons in the world at the beginning of 2003. This estimation includes Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 and registered for assistance with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 but not registered for assistance, Palestinian refugees displaced for the first time in 1967, 1948 internally displaced Palestinians and 1967 internally displaced Palestinians<sup>3</sup>.

According to recent estimates, there are around 186 000 Palestinians living in Europe and 20 000 currently residing in the UK (Shiblak 2005). After the first wave of Palestinian civil servants or students who migrated in the fifties, the majority of Palestinians in Britain have been professionals and students who arrived since the sixties and the seventies from the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon as a consequence of the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the civil war in Lebanon, that led to worsened Palestinians' legal, social and economic conditions both in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Arab host countries.

### **The making of Palestinian transnational spaces in the UK**

For fifty-eight years, Palestinians have built their political structures and strategies in a liberation movement in exile that has been represented since the sixties by the PLO and allied community organisations. The Palestinian diaspora in Europe is highly educated and its technical and professional expertise can benefit the home country in its nation-building process and economical development. However, as outlined in a recent report by The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2004: 11), the weak level of connection and coordination between communities in the diaspora hinders these potentials. One of the outcomes of the Oslo peace process has resulted in a major change in Palestinian politics and the national movement, shifting political leadership and decision-making from exile to the homeland, with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza. This has led to the weakening of PLO institutions and their capacity to unite and network communities in the diaspora. Consequently, there is a lack of institutionalised structures that could organise members in the diaspora and coordinate efforts in the construction of the homeland; initiatives are isolated and their impact is difficult to evaluate.

This lack of organisation has been observed in the context of Britain where Palestinians are characterised by a weak political participation towards the homeland and a lack of community organisation (Loddo 2006). In contrast with other diasporas who migrated

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<sup>3</sup> Due to a lack of a comprehensive registration system, the absence of a common definition of a Palestinian refugee, and the invisibility of some refugees, figures vary depending on sources. These estimations are drawn from BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights: <http://www.badil.org/Refugees/facts&figures.htm>, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

in a limited period of time, Palestinians are in an ongoing conflict that has led the diaspora to extend for many generations since 1948. These migrations patterns are in that respect similar to other diasporas such as the Sri Lankan, Afghani and Somali (ESCWA op.cit.:3). As a consequence of warfare and political turmoil in Palestine and in Arab host countries where a majority of the diaspora took refuge, Palestinians have kept moving from Palestine and across borders of various host countries for nearly sixty years, where they have been exposed to various social and political contexts and were granted different civil and legal status that limited greatly their ability to move and to connect to other dispersed communities.

As a consequence of these migration patterns, Palestinians in the UK are very diverse in terms of social class, cultural background, civil and legal status, place of origin and political and religious leaning. These differences have hindered initiatives of creating Palestinian community organisations. Shiblak evokes the fact that they are scattered and that “in a multicultural society like the UK, there is a lack of community experience among Arabs”. He outlines as well the islamisation of Arab movements in the last years as an additional dividing factor among communities<sup>4</sup>. Some Palestinian groups exist in the British public sphere although they often fail in unifying community members around a common agenda. Palestinian groups are under-represented in pro-Palestinian activism in the UK, and community-based organisations have a limited impact on the diaspora politics. They rarely succeed getting visibility in the media or reaching a wider audience than the Palestinian communities themselves. Their members do not necessarily have the political culture of constructing alliances outside the community and their political praxis tends toward communalism. Community associations such as the Association of Palestinian Communities in the UK, based in London, as well as organisations such as Al Awda and Palestinian Return Centre are working towards the preservation of Palestinian national identity and the recognition of Palestinian national rights of self-determination and the right of return. They organise cultural events, talks and demonstrations that seek to tighten links among Palestinians in the UK and raise awareness in the British society about the Palestinian struggle. Al Awda and Palestinian Return Centre have a more explicit political agenda and lobby the media and the government on the issue of right of return of Palestinian refugees.

On a broader scale, Palestinian activism (ie activism in relation to Palestine) covers a wide range of organisations at the local and national level which are part of a broader international solidarity network, including Palestinian, Israeli, and British organisations such as student groups, trade-unions, religious, welfare associations and peace groups. The

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<sup>4</sup>Interview with Abbas Shiblak on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2005, London.

participation of Palestinians of the diaspora in sustained projects in Palestine is part of wider initiatives coordinated by these charities, advocacy groups and religious societies.

### **Transnational politics and global grassroots movements**

The post-Oslo period has seen the development of NGOs in Palestine while international donors and international NGOs oriented their programs to a post-conflict resolution perspective (Hanafi and Tabar 2005: 19). The failure of diplomatic efforts in bringing the occupation to an end and the increasingly deteriorating situation of the Palestinian economy and institutions since the second Intifada have pointed to the irrelevance of such an agenda in a context of worsened conflict. Local NGOs as well as community associations had to change their strategies from a reconstruction and development agenda to a national struggle in a context of emergency and humanitarian crisis. This situation has had a profound impact on the way Palestinian communities in diaspora and more broadly support groups oriented their actions towards Palestine. As facts and figures presented in the following discussion demonstrate, the issue of development in the Occupied Palestinian Territories cannot be dealt with seriously without adopting a humanitarian and conflict resolution perspective, and this position has been widely adopted by support groups in their actions in Palestine. This has happened in a context of an emerging global grassroots movement, mainly oriented towards an alter-globalisation agenda. Those developments are revealing structural forces that shape the participation of the diaspora in local and global politics and its relation to national history, global political movements and local opportunities in the host country.

There has been a long tradition of international advocacy activities among Palestinian organisations. However, we are witnessing the emergence of new kinds of grassroots initiatives to engage advocacy for Palestine within a wider global social movement. A growing awareness of the relationship between globalisation and conflicts in the Middle East is quite a new development in Palestinian grassroots politics as illustrated by recent international meetings and networking efforts between advocates for Palestine and alternative globalisation movements, especially anti war groups<sup>5</sup>. This analysis has reached the realm of pro-Palestinian groups and diverse global movements alike. As an outcome of an increasing concern in respect to war and occupation in the Middle East and in reaction to the U.S. 'war on terror', various groups of activists, ranging from trade-unionists to students, peace groups or human rights activists have added the Palestinian struggle to their agenda. Additionally,

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<sup>5</sup> See Alternative Information Centre 2004, that surveys the current efforts of Palestinian advocates in getting involved in alternative globalisation networks.

Palestinian advocacy groups have felt the necessity to develop grassroots international solidarity as a channel for a better representation of Palestinian voices, and to push for political measures at the European and international level, at a time when institutions and diplomatic efforts have failed. Hence political advocacy for Palestine has become increasingly reliant on the capacity of the global civil society to influence political change, through dialogue or pressure on international institutions and governments.

### **Development and civil resistance**

In the context of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, issues of development are intertwined with civil resistance as long as humanitarian crisis and social and economical needs are dependent on Israeli policies towards Palestinians. Practices of military occupation in Palestinian territories (curfews, road blocks, military incursions and sieges, house demolitions, land grabbing, etc) are translated into the destruction of Palestinian economy, institutions, access to health, and education (UNDP 2005), which severely impedes the process of Palestinian nation-building. According to the UNDP the effects of occupation have been devastating in terms of economic, social and human cost. Since the outbreak of the second Intifada, Palestinian society is facing high levels of unemployment and poverty. Today more than fifty-six per cent of Palestinian households have lost at least half of their income. More than one and a half million Palestinians depend on food aid, provided by UNRWA and the World Food Program (UNDP 2005). A recent report by the European Union indicates that the “GNI per capita (which includes workers remittances from abroad) fell by around twenty-six per cent in 2002, and poverty levels increased dramatically, with those living on less than US\$ 2 per day tripling to sixty per cent of the population since the beginning of the Intifada” (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 11-12). The World Bank estimates that an economic collapse has been avoided partly due to the high level of donor assistance (World Bank 2003: 3).

Acknowledging the consequences of the devastating effects of occupation on Palestinian social and economical development, advocating for Palestine and its national construction has become more than ever entangled with working in support of development projects. According to many pro-Palestinian grassroots activists political analysis, defending human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories implies the recognition of the impact of occupation on the development of Palestinian society, and accordingly efforts are made to provide support in local community based development projects as part of their political agenda.

The initiatives that will be presented here have both scopes. They illustrate how grassroots political campaigns at a transnational level encompass greater cooperation and solidarity with Palestinians, enabling development projects and empowering civil societies as actors of political change. Through these examples, I wish to especially highlight how the issues of human rights and development are articulated in the discourse of those solidarity movements and the way this discourse is implemented on the ground.

### **Political campaigns**

UK based pro-Palestinian organisations are part of wider networks of local and global organisations including British organisations such as Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), Palestinian grassroots organisations (such as APCUK, Palestinian Return Centre, Al Awda), Jewish groups (such as Jews for Justice for Palestinians), student groups, Muslim associations (such as Friends of Al Aqsa), trade-unions (such as UNISON, NAFTHE). PSC, the main advocacy group in the UK, has established links with those kinds of organisations in the UK and in the world with a special focus on student and trade-unions, showing concern for education issues and workers rights. These campaigns for Palestine adopt the discourse of human rights, referring to international laws and the 4th Geneva convention, and the refusal of the State of Israel to abide by them in its policies towards Palestinians. The international humanitarian laws mentioned by activists in relation to the Palestinian people include the 4th Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict and occupation and UN resolutions related to Palestine:

- the General Assembly Resolution 194 on the right of return of Palestinian refugees,
- the Security Council Resolution 242, on Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine in 1967,
- the Security Council Resolution 446 on the illegal establishment of settlements on Territories occupied in 1967,
- and the General Assembly Resolution 3236 on the Palestinian right to self determination.

The embeddedness of advocacy for Palestine in human rights discourse has widened the possibilities of connecting various grassroots movements involved in peace and anti-war activism on the issue of Palestine, while strengthening the cohesion of a wide network around shared values and common goals, beyond political divergences. Indeed all these organisations do not necessarily have the same agenda and do not endorse the same analysis of the situation but they nevertheless cooperate on the issues of human rights and participate in humanitarian and development initiatives in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. They aim at creating



international solidarity networks with Palestine based on democratic and non-violent actions. Their political practices are oriented towards the main common goals of:

- Raising awareness in the civil society and the media about the situation of occupation and on the issue of violation of human rights
- advocating for Palestinian national rights
- Lobbying the government and parliament for the application of international law and for the application of sanctions against Israel
- Creating cultural, professional or political links and developing solidarity with Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

More specifically, I will analyse how those demands are applied in the political praxis of non violent direct actions, looking at two specific campaigns: the BIG Campaign and the Stop The Wall Campaign.

### **The BIG Campaign**

“We undertook this campaign on the understanding that we need to work on both boycott and sanctions and at different levels: the grassroots; civil institutions and organisations; the British parliamentary and the European levels”<sup>6</sup>.

The BIG Campaign was launched in July 2001 by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in the UK, along with a similar boycott appeal from within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It is largely inspired by the boycott campaigns that were launched against South Africa during the Apartheid regime. This analogy inspires the activists in their actions and provides their discourse with a moral legitimacy in integrating this struggle in a wider struggle against oppression. In a statement about the campaign, PSC anchors its initiative in an acknowledgment of “Israel’s refusal to abide by UN resolutions, international law and the 4th Geneva convention”. It aims at organising supporters to “boycott Israeli goods and services, to persuade business to stop trading with Israel and to campaign for an end to European Union and British government trade agreements with Israel”<sup>7</sup>.

First, the campaign acknowledges the impact of Israeli occupation on Palestinian social and economical life. Preventing free movement of people and goods, destruction and confiscation of Palestinian property, preventing access to schools, universities, work, health

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<sup>6</sup> Betty Hunter (General Secretary of Palestine Solidarity Campaign, UK). 2004. *The Boycott Israeli Goods Campaign*, presented at Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles. An International Conference on Palestine. SOAS, London, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2004, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Statement in Palestine Solidarity Campaign website : [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org), accessed 2 October 2005.

services, infrastructures and natural resources, are among the practices that seriously undermine any perspective of reconstruction and development in Palestinian society.

Second, the economical implications of the EU-Israel Association Agreement that came into force in June 2000 have dramatic effects on the Palestinian economy itself. The Israeli violations of the Agreement's provisions on trade marginalize the Palestinian economy by excluding from the Agreement goods produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and labelling the ones produced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or in Israeli settlements as originating in the State of Israel. Through the suspension of the European and national trade agreements and the use of economical sanctions, the campaign aims at urging Israel to alleviate the effects of occupation policies on Palestinian economical development and to respect international humanitarian laws. Subsequently, efforts could be made to implement the EU-Palestinian Liberation Organisation Association Agreement that has been obstructed so far by Israel.

The campaign has built a network locally with British and Palestinian organisations, and with Palestinian NGOs, research centres and Israeli and international peace groups. In July 2005, the campaign widened when a Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign was endorsed by Palestinian organisations, trade-unions and international coalitions in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in the diaspora, representing all kinds of political forces in the Palestinian and Israeli civil societies<sup>8</sup>. This international coalition works on lobbying members of Parliament and governments both at local and European level, to put an end to UK investment in Israel, and reach the suspension of British and EU trade agreements with Israel. At the same time campaigns and protests organised locally aim at raising awareness among the civil society and encourage joining the campaign. The call for sanctions, boycott and divestment covers the sectors of economy, sports and culture. It calls for a boycott of Israeli products and tourism, stressing on an ethical consumer attitude. The campaign appeals to citizens' and consumers' moral responsibility and promotes alternative consumer practices. Among others, Jews for Justice For Palestinians proposes to support the Palestinian economy in promoting Zeytoun, a Palestinian fair-trade organisation selling olive oil, and local handicraft, and advertises alternative tourism in Palestine. Since the launch of the campaign, the regular lobbying of parliament is organised by PSC. Individuals are encouraged to contact and solicit an appointment with their local and European MPs and raise the questions of sanctions against Israel. The campaign website provides relevant documents, fact

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<sup>8</sup> Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel Until it Complies with International Law and Universal Principles of Human Rights, at the UN civil society conference in support of Middle East Peace held in Paris 9 July 2005.

sheets, posters, and advice for individuals or groups willing to raise awareness or lobby. People are encouraged to organise at a grassroots level and join the coalition.

These are a few examples of the political actors' empowerment mechanisms promoted by this campaign, and this contributes to shape new modes of relationships between civil society movements, citizens and political institutions.

### **The Stop the Wall Campaign**

The Stop the Wall Campaign was launched in 2002 by the Palestinian Environment NGOs Network (PENGON). It was founded in 2000 to defend Palestinian environment in a situation of increased conflict and subsequent damage caused to the environment and Palestinian agriculture. According to the Palestinian Agriculture Department, damages due to Israeli military interventions include “uprooting trees, burning productive and forest trees, and demolishing agricultural wells, in addition to equipment and buildings. Moreover Israeli settlers have prohibited farmers from going to their farms and therefore huge quantities of crops have been damaged. In addition military roadblocks were set up on the entrance of the Palestinians cities and villages, limiting the movement of trucks and vehicles that transport agricultural products” (Agricultural Information Department 2002: 4)

The campaign shares similarities with the BIG Campaign as it also originates from a local grassroots initiative that developed into a global campaign based on transnational solidarity. However, it emphasises its local mission in unifying communities nationally in their struggle and supporting them politically and economically to protect their land against destruction and confiscation<sup>9</sup>.

This initiative could be seen as an evolution in the local political involvement of NGOs, and in the relationships between NGOs and popular movement. A recent study on Palestinian NGOs and their agenda since the second Intifada argues that these organisations have been unable to “articulate between their own professional and development requirements and Palestinian national aspirations for independence as framed by the overarching national agenda.” (Hanafi and Tabar, op.cit.: 14-15).

Further, the authors state:

“While the PNGO Network plays a major role in organizing international popular protection (under the form of international civil missions), they were not able to work with these missions toward a strategy of non-violent resistance” (ibid.:16)

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<sup>9</sup> Stop The wall Campaign mission, <http://stopthewall.org/downloads/pdf/book/aboutthecampaign.pdf>, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

PENGON's campaign mission, however, stresses on the two aspects of the struggle: as a support for the communities affected by the wall, which implies support and cooperation with local communities, and second as a national struggle considering that the wall is part of the Israeli occupation policies:

“The Apartheid Wall Campaign sees its role as dual, as both a national effort and as a voice for and by the communities affected by the building of the Wall. The national effort is based on the knowledge that the Wall is an integral and large scale part of Israel's plans to confiscate and annex Palestinian lands, isolate Palestinian communities, and deny any prospects for survival in their villages and homes. The Wall is therefore not only the negation of Palestinian national aspirations and right to self-determination, but also a tool in the creeping “transfer” of the population and the realization of the Zionist/Israeli expansionist plans”<sup>10</sup>.

In its campaign goals, The Stop the Wall Campaign states clearly its support to the Palestinian national aspirations, although no detail is given on the rights involved:

“These calls are firmly grounded in the context of the struggle against Israeli Colonization, Apartheid and Occupation, and for Palestinian rights and self-determination. None of the above demands can be compromised in the Campaign's work”<sup>11</sup>.

The acknowledgment of the relation between development and national struggle in Palestine can be found in the message conveyed by the Palestinian delegates at the World summit on sustainable development, held in Johannesburg in 2002: “There is no sustainable development under occupation”, stressing on the importance of connecting the Palestinian struggle for self-determination to issues of development (PENGON 2002: 17). The campaign also achieved the involvement of solidarity groups worldwide, stressing the links between this struggle and the global struggle against oppression and occupation. It names specifically the anti-globalisation movement:

“In addition, the Campaign sees its mission as similar to various national and international struggles worldwide that revolve around national, cultural, economic, social, and indigenous rights, including anti-globalisation”<sup>12</sup>.

### **Cooperation and solidarity initiatives**

In parallel to being part of the global campaigns that have been described, the political commitment of these solidarity network implies showing solidarity and providing assistance to Palestinians in their really local needs. The initiatives are based on exchange and a concern of raising awareness, indicated by the emphasis put on sending and receiving delegations, and the implication in many volunteering programs, in summer camps, international civilian

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpt of PENGON campaign mission, [www.pengon.org/wall/about.pdf](http://www.pengon.org/wall/about.pdf), accessed 10th September 2006.

<sup>11</sup> <http://stopthewall.org/news/print1.shtml>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from PENGON campaign mission, op.cit.

witnesses actions. Both organisations and activists acknowledge the needs in vital aspects of Palestinian society such as economy, human rights, education and health and these are the sectors in which contributions are made by the different local British groups through fundraising or cooperative actions. Initiatives generally originate from individuals or links established between local groups in the UK and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories such as trade-unions or student societies. These organisations support local community based projects through fundraising and volunteering in house constructions, harvests and tree planting, or teaching activities. Since the Second Intifada grassroots mobilisation has followed the successive Israeli incursions in the Palestinian Territories and the subsequent humanitarian disaster as witnessed in Jenin or in the Gaza Strip. Many fundraising events such as parties, peace walks, concerts or raffles have been organised by Palestinian and British-based organisations to provide financial aid to local populations through local associations and committees in refugee camps. Such initiatives attest those solidarity networks' capacity to mobilize popular support rapidly and to connect to local communities in Palestine in situations of humanitarian emergency.

The Right to Education Campaign that was launched at Birzeit University is an example of a global solidarity network that combines international advocacy with local development. It presents both local and transnational aspects in its structure and organisation. Solidarity networks are created mainly through translocal relations between academics, students, universities, organisations and unions. These groups and individuals are interconnected transnationally through the Right to Education Campaign that disseminates information and conveys local needs to transnational partners mainly through its website, newsletter and mailing list<sup>13</sup>. The campaign aims at drawing attention to the denial of educational rights in Palestine and creating international support and cooperation in education. Thus the campaign encourages local initiatives such as raising awareness on campus, organising academic exchange through a specific department, sending delegations to Palestine and the UK, lobbying the British government and Ministry of Education on the issue of the right to education, and raising the issue at the national unions<sup>14</sup>.

Accordingly, solidarity groups have mushroomed in the UK and worldwide such as Friends of Palestine, Oxford Ramallah Friendship Association and more recently the Oxford Birzeit Group, composed of concerned academics, students and activists. Apart from their advocacy activities, they are involved in building academic cooperation and twinning with Palestinian educational institutions. These groups can work on links previously forged by

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<sup>13</sup> <http://right2edu.birzeit.edu/>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Suggestions addressed by Helen Murray, Right to Education Campaign Coordinator, to the student group Friends of Palestine Manchester, July 2004.

other groups, solidarity and cooperation ties mainly based on twinning and academic exchange organised at an informal level. Similar initiatives have been observed in Liverpool with the twinning of the Student Union and Birzeit, Manchester with the twinning of two departments with Palestinian universities.

The increased implication of grassroots associations in the UK in forging academic links with Palestine reflects the great importance Palestinians give to education in a context of civil resistance and in the prospects of nation-building. These projects have been launched recently and more ethnography needs to be done in the following years in order to measure their success.

### **Towards a transnational construction of the homeland?**

The grassroots political practices presented in this essay highlight three main phenomena:

- the emergence of transnational political spaces in relation to Palestine that encompass a broad-based solidarity network of various political actors such as trade-unionists, antiwar activists, students, Jewish and Muslim groups,
- the rise of new forms of Palestinian activism and a national struggle anchored in global activism, alter-globalisation movements, and based on an increased grassroots participation,
- the evidence of forms of civil society political participation through direct non-violent actions, towards political representatives at the national and international level, other grassroots organisations locally or globally, phenomenon which is facilitated by the use of the Internet.

While it is premature to measure the political and social impact of the boycott, sanctions and divestment campaign, the Stop the Wall Campaign has so far set up the tools to unify political actors around common goals and practices. By creating via its website a body of texts and a comprehensive database on the Wall and providing materials for activists to organise campaigns locally, dissemination of the information is facilitated at a global scale. Other organisations or campaigns such as the BIG Campaign develop similar strategies.

The grassroots initiatives described in this essay suggest mechanisms of civil society empowerment through local and global political participation. These campaigns engage in their structures and political praxis new forms of political relations, encouraging individual and grassroots direct action, such as lobbying the parliament and the government, or adopting ethical consumer practices. By doing so, they express their acknowledgment of the limits of institutional politics, the limits of the capacities of governments and international

organisations to guarantee the implementation of international laws in a situation of military occupation.

In integrating the Palestinian struggle firstly in a global network of solidarity, and secondly in an alter-globalisation agenda, new transnational relations are created that will affect political practices in the diaspora and Palestine. This is an ongoing process that has to be observed in the following months and years. More research will have to document how the integration of Palestinian grassroots activism in global networks affects the way Palestinian articulate their national discourse, views of international relations and relations with their homeland. These issues not only have to be analysed in terms of strategy but as well regarding common set of shared values, world visions and political analysis among Palestinians and alter-globalisation activists, in order to confront their respective visions and document possible changes in Palestinian identity politics and transnational relations.

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