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ITTIJAH: THE UNION OF ARAB COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS

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Ittijah, Union of Arab Community Based Associations
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1. Introduction

Ittijah was founded in 1995 in response to a clear and widely felt need for increased cooperation and exchange between Palestinian Arab organizations in Israel. At the time of its founding, Ittijah had 8 members, all of them legally registered associations under Israeli law. Today, the number of members has risen significantly, to 65. Ittijah is recognized as the only network working to empower the Palestinian civil society sector in Israel. Our mission is to enhance our members' institutional and organizational abilities and co-ordinate their activities and strategies.

The increase in membership demonstrates Ittijah's capacity to deliver benefit to and foster trust amongst its members. Member organizations work in diverse fields including education, advocacy, development, human rights, women's and youth issues and child development. A full list of member organizations and profiles can be seen on our website www.ittijah.org

Membership growth is considered to be an important factor by Ittijah for two reasons: first, a rising membership in Ittijah of existing Palestinian associations in Israel increases the efficiency of the civil society sector in agreement with our founding mission; and second, a rising number of newly founded associations increases activism and support among the Palestinian minority in Israel. Ittijah encourages and supports both the foundation and official registration of new associations, and their entry to Ittijah. However, as we have progressed in our work, we have upgraded the requirements for membership in Ittijah, resulting in a slower membership growth compared to the earlier years.

Ittijah also works in partnership with international development charities including Christian Aid, (UK), Responding to Conflict (UK) and Habitat International (USA) and is a committee member of Euro Med Civil Forum, Naples, 2003

Ittijah is in the process of rethinking its long-term financial situation and strategies. We believe that as a network we should be supported partially by our community and member associations as well as by regional Arab resources. We hope to diversify our funding sources in the coming years and become more dependent on our community for support.

2. Capacity Building for Ittijah Members

Ittijah has successfully established structures and facilities to provide ongoing capacity building for the Palestinian civil society sector in Israel. As an umbrella organization, Ittijah is able to serve as the contact organization for regional and international training and capacity building organizations. Ittijah has proved to be an efficient and trusted partner in organizing training workshops and capacity building programs, and has been increasingly approached by capacity building organizations and programs, who typically prefer to work with networks and umbrella organizations rather than with single associations. Thanks to its strong ties with its member associations, Ittijah is also aware of local capacity building needs, and has itself taken the initiative to approach training and capacity building organizations and to invite them to provide services for Palestinian associations in Israel.

In addition, Ittijah implements training and education programs on its own, both through collective workshops and individual counseling. Ittijah's aim is to become increasingly independent from external sources in fields that can be covered by Ittijah's staff and members on their own. A core project for this purpose is the "Training of Trainers," started in 1998 in cooperation with the Bisan Center for Research and Development (Ramallah, West Bank). The goal of the program is to educate and equip the staff and board of Ittijah's member associations, who have valuable skills and experiences to share with other members, in teaching and training methods.

In 2001/02 Ittijah conducted an extensive survey: *Assessment Training Needs for Ittijah's Member Organizations* (report issued in February 2003). Through this needs assessment survey, Ittijah defined 22 areas in which member associations are in need of training or education, and further identified persons inside Ittijah and its member associations who would be able to provide training in these fields. Ittijah gives priority to the fields established in the survey in its current and future capacity building efforts.

In 2003 Ittijah delivered training programs in the following fields:

- Strengthening Policy and Practice: Practical Strategies for Agencies Working in Areas of Tension and Conflict (Amman, Dec. 2003); in cooperation with Responding to Conflict (Birmingham, UK)
- Principles of Accountability - Behavior & Management Skills for Board of Directors (Nazareth, Aug. 2003); in cooperation with Bunian II – Good Governance of NGOs & Participation in Public Policies (Amman, Jordan)
- Practical Tools to Assess and Act Against Right of Adequate Housing Violations (Haifa, July 2003) in cooperation with Habitat International Coalition: Housing and Land Rights Network (Cairo, Egypt)

Ittijah also produces publications for the benefit of the local community and its member association. In 2003 it produced the training guide *MS Internet Explorer 5.0. & MS Outlook*.

3. International work

Ittijah has succeeded in achieving increased recognition for the Palestinian citizens of Israel and their social, political and economic needs at the international level. We have witnessed increased interest within the region and worldwide, represented by an increase in solidarity movements and international organizations working in this area, an increase in academic research devoted to this area, an increased interest in publications, increased recognition in the international media, and a growing interest of international youth in volunteering for Palestinian associations in Israel.

In 2003 Ittijah advocated, built and sustained relationships and international networking through:

- Participation in the World Social Forum, Porto Allegre, Jan. 2003
- Participation in the NGO Platform of the Euro-Med Civil Forum and Steering Committee member for the ninth Euro-Med Civil Forum, Naples, Nov. 2003
- Participation in the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
- Reception of international delegations, solidarity movements and researchers, and the organization of tours and site visits
- Maintenance of the website www.ittijah.org in English and Arabic, including updated profiles of Ittijah's member associations and a bi-weekly newsletter
- Press Releases to the Arabic, Hebrew and international media, and advertisements in the Israeli and international press
- Cooperation with diplomatic missions in Israel, such as the participation of representatives from ten embassies at Ittijah's study day "The Occupation Wall in the West Bank: Political, Social, Economic, and Legal Effects", Shefa Amr, April 2003

Ittijah has also succeeded in establishing connections with the Palestinian Diaspora and with solidarity groups worldwide. These ties assist us in the promotion of key issues of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and are also a resource for practical assistance, since many of our international contacts provide voluntary services or refer volunteers from abroad. Thanks to Ittijah's invitation and coordination, many members of the Palestinian Diaspora and international solidarity groups have had the opportunity to visit Israel and participate in guided tours to learn about Palestinian citizens of Israel. Representatives of Ittijah and member associations also organize or participate in lecture tours and speak at conferences in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Ittijah has established sustainable international partnerships with:

- Palestine en Marche, Lyon
- ATTAC France
- The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- France Palestine Friendship Committee

- APRODEV (Association of World Council of Churches related Development Organizations in Europe)
- Al-Quds Málaga – Asociación Al-Quds de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Mundo Árabe

Ittijah publishes Arabic and English reports to inform the international community about Palestinians in Israel and the role and work of Palestinian non-governmental organizations. Ittijah's main Arabic publications from 2003 include: *The Horizon of Palestinian Community Work: Collective Thoughts* (July 2003) and *Cairo Conference Evaluation Report* (July 2003).

4. Local and regional networking

As the umbrella organization of Arab community based associations in Israel, it is naturally Ittijah's aim to foster networking between Palestinian non-governmental organizations. Networking enhances the capacities of local organizations, strengthens their individual and collective voices and credibility, and results in greater efficiency in working.

We foster networking on two levels: locally among our membership, and regionally with our partners in the West Bank and Gaza, and in Lebanon. These two levels are interconnected as the building of effective networks on a regional level – particular sub-networks focused on specific target groups or issues – first requires the enabling of our own membership to cooperate and unify their decisions and their voice.

Since 2001, a local network between ten member associations working primarily on youth issues has been operating. The Youth Program has so far resulted in several meetings between participating NGOs, and a pilot training program for Arab youth. An Executive Follow-Up Committee has been established, which designed a long-term project of seven workshops in the field of youth leadership and education about political issues. The successes of the Youth Program include increased cooperation between Palestinian associations working in the same field, increased capacity and efficiency, and enlarged international recognition of the cause, including acknowledgement in policies of governmental and private funding sources. Ittijah plans to build a similar network for women's associations, but has yet to implement this project due to a lack of funding.

Attendance at national conferences is a second major tool to sustain relationships and foster common standpoints and strategies. In 2003 Ittijah organized three conferences:—The Occupation Wall in the West Bank: Political, Social, Economic, and Legal Effects (Shefa Amr, April 2003); The Impact of Political Circumstances on Support for Palestinian NGOs in Israel (Shefa Amr, May 2003); Arabs in the Jewish State (Jerusalem, June 2003).

A third tool for local and regional advocacy and networking is the production of Arabic publications as well as the maintenance and development of Ittijah's website. Ittijah's main Arabic publications from 2003 are: *The Horizon of Palestinian Community Work: Collective Thoughts* (July 2003) and *Cairo Conference Evaluation Report* (July 2003).

Initial steps in establishing regional networks between Palestinian associations in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon were taken in 2000 at the Cyprus Conference. Ittijah, the Palestinian Non-governmental Organizations Network in the West Bank and Gaza (PNGO), and the Collective Forum for Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon met for the first time at this conference which was sponsored by Ittijah. They discussed issues including the indivisible nature of the Palestinian people, efforts to impose divisions between them, and clearly set out the role of three networks in fostering, advocating and strengthening Palestinian civil society in communication and cooperation with each other. The conference's declaration clearly noted for the first time, the historical role Palestinian civil society institutions play in each area: historical 1948 Palestine, the 1967 Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and among the

large Palestinian refugee populations in Lebanon. Ittijah has since maintained and enlarged its cooperation with both networks, with priority to the PNGO, with whom we have established strong cooperation in terms of emergency work and preparedness.

In 2003 Ittijah gained further recognition on the regional level and became a member of the reference group of the Bunian Capacity Building Arab Regional Network (Amman). Ittijah also succeeded in attaining the cooperation of this network in order to offer two main workshops for its members on good governance and training of trainers. Ittijah succeeded in establishing links and cooperation with the General Union of Charity Organizations in Jordan and signed with it a contract of cooperation for Ittijah and its members.

Ittijah became a member of the Shabka, the regional Arab network of NGOs based in Cairo, which works in the whole region. The granting of membership could have been problematic as Shabka is reluctant to work with Israeli citizens, but in recognition of Ittijah's role, Ittijah was accepted as a member and has become the contact for the Palestinian community in Israel and Shabka.

Ittijah played a very strong role in establishing the NGOs Platform to the Euro-Med Civil Forum and Ittijah is a co-founder and member of the Follow-up Group (the board of this platform) that is working within the frame of the Barcelona process. Through this position Ittijah takes a leading role in a dominant institution.

Ittijah works on this Platform for national consultations in Israel and attended the meeting in Nov 2003 in Naples. Ittijah played a role in the Arab regional level and planned together the cooperation for the Civil Forum and the World Social Forum and Ittijah is part of the efforts to establish the Arab Regional Social Forum.

5. Protection of the Palestinian Community in Israel

Ittijah and its members have taken a very strong position to protect the Palestinian community in Israel and has established as coalition called the Committee for the Defense of Freedoms, to confront political persecution and harassment against Palestinian political movements and attacks against Palestinian organizations in Israel, which includes organizations such as the Islamic Movement, the Abnaa al Balad movement and Ansar al Sajeen.

The police in 2003 targeted two Ittijah members, Adalah and Ansar al Sajeen, and equipment belonging to Adalah was confiscated. Ittijah took a very strong position and brought these issues before the Registrar of NGOs. It also assisted these NGOs in getting certificates of NGO registration certificates of good governance. Ittijah also brought these issues before the Ministry of Interior affairs.

Several registered NGOs received direct help from Ittijah as the representative body of NGOs, which also appealed on their behalf to the NGO Registrar to be granted the certificate of NGO registration. Ittijah also confronted the Registrar's attempts in the last year to establish a coordinating body with other Arab NGOs and excluding Ittijah despite the fact that by law Ittijah is the only representative body. Ittijah has therefore worked on two levels with the Registrar – one is by solving technical problems and at the same time one is confronting political interference by the Registrar.

In its mission to solve problems of NGOs, collectively and individually, Ittijah has also continued in its policy of dialogue with embassies as well as with funding agencies to deal with the policies with an international dimension as well as getting recognition to consider the needs of Palestinian NGOs in Israel.

6. Organizational and institutional support of member associations

Ittijah aided and provided guidance to 32 member associations directly, NGOs and especially CBOs, in writing proposals and letters in English, and registration with the Registrar of NGOs. Ittijah succeeded in securing small funding for six organizations from a variety of sources.

7. Local Public Relations Work

Ittijah held a conference on the 'Wall' from a political and legal perspective incorporating visions from both sides of the Green Line. The conference outcomes have become a reference for NGOs and governmental bodies.

Ittijah's local public relations work seeks to strengthen the position and the image of Ittijah and Palestinian NGOs and to strengthen relationships with the community. The activities of member NGOs are promoted through the website which was redesigned in 2003, online newsletter and through the sharing of information between NGOs and the promotion of their issues with the local media. Meetings are held with the representative bodies of the Palestinian community in Israel to formulate relationships, Ittijah also publishes press releases and positions papers and hosts local and international volunteers and participates in national or community activities.

Ittijah held a field tour with Pax Christie, which subsequently submitted a report to the UN on the field tour outcomes. Ittijah took part in arranging, facilitating and enriching the report. The Euro-Med human rights network has investigated freedom of association as well as the funding policies and political conditionality towards Palestinian NGOs. We also held a tour with the Aprovev Agencies to arrange a plan of action. We worked with Habitat International on capacity building and advocacy and reporting. We worked with the UN Special Rapporteur on the violations of the human rights under occupation.

We hosted 14 delegations and field tours of international solidarity movements, which came to meet Palestinians in Israel and in the OPTs. Ittijah succeeded in working in English, French and Italian and in using international links with media to serve NGOs and promote their activities. Ittijah also took part in organizing and initiating solidarity groups in France. Ittijah also took part in a field tour of lectures in France with PNGO and the Forum for P NGOs in Lebanon. Ittijah began links and cooperation with the Palestinian and Arab communities in Europe as part of long term strategies of cooperation.

8. Emergency work

When Ittijah's was founded in 1995, we did not expect that emergencies would become one of our central fields. With the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, the political situation in Israel and Palestine has changed dramatically. Naturally, solidarity between the Palestinian people on both sides of the Green Line has been given even higher priority for Ittijah and our member associations in times of crisis – police violence in October 2000, Israeli invasions into the West Bank in April 2002, and the American/British war on Iraq in March 2003 – has formed an important tenet of our work. As the umbrella organizations of Palestinian civil society in Israel, and as the partner of the umbrella organizations in the Occupied Territories, our efforts concentrate on the protection of non-governmental organizations against attacks and obstructions by the Israeli government. Together with our partners in the West Bank and Gaza and also in Lebanon, we have built a very efficient and responsive emergency structure that we also maintain in times of non-emergency. Fields of work include: political lobbying, legal counseling, political prisoners, political protest, humanitarian aid, medical aid, international public relations, documentation and translation, communication to the Occupied Territories, maintenance of an emergency hotline, psychological emergency aid, local volunteers, communication facilities, and emergency offices.

At the same time, we have witnessed increased hostility and obstructions against our own member associations in Israel. Member associations have witnessed direct police attacks as an instrument of hindrance of political work, detention of staff and confiscation of equipment and materials; increased travel restrictions and denial of visas for volunteers that has seriously endangered ongoing projects; and systematic difficulties to obtain or maintain legal status as a registered non-profit organization. Ittijah's emergency work inside Israel concentrates on political lobbying, political protest, national and international public relations, and solidarity fundraising campaigns.

One additional component of emergency work is that Ittijah provides space for hosting relevant organizations and volunteers from the Palestinian community. In 2000, 2002 and spring 2003, we hosted the National Union of Arab Students, Al-Awda voluntary group, Haifa humanitarian relief public committee, and many volunteers who wanted to be involved on organizing contingency work. This effort will continue in the future as an effective emergency infrastructure, while it also has the added value of strengthening links with the community, and organizing the culture of giving.

At the end of 2002 and by spring of 2003 Ittijah had already learnt the lessons from the emergency work during the Israeli re-invasion to West Bank cities. During the preparations for the war against Iraq, Ittijah, in cooperation with PNGO, prepared itself to confront the challenges and the potential consequences of the war on the situation in the West Bank and Gaza.

Ittijah believes that a very important model of emergency work has been developed by Ittijah, PNGO, YMCA, Christian Aid, ICCO and other international development agencies.

The main challenge was to be prepared to meet escalations that may or may not occur. The other challenge was how to sustain such a system without creating panic within the community.

A division of work undertaken between the partners, as well Ittijah use the space of freedom which enjoys comparing to PNGO. Information bulletins and leaflets were prepared and distributed to most of the houses in the West Bank and Gaza and a communication system has been built. As Palestinians in Israel were not allowed to visit Gaza, we arranged deal on behalf pf PNGO-Gaza and provided them with 50 cellular phones.

Locally Ittijah coordinated the work of all Palestinian NGOs in Israel as well of all Palestinians in Israel. Ittijah was authorized by the Follow-Up Committee for Palestinian Masses Affairs, to coordinate and unify the initiatives of different groups. Ittijah also published lists of contacts, emergency hotlines for medical and food relief, as well organized groups of volunteers all around the country to do the work, Ittijah offices as well other NGOs became stores for supplies contributed by the community.

In Addition to the work with Palestinian NGOs, Ittijah also coordinated the work with Israeli groups, such as Physicians for Human Rights, Bat –Shaloum, Taayoush and others.

Advertisements have been published in the Arabic Newspapers as well in Israeli media, for communication and contact details as well as tasks to be done.

Ittijah also informed the foreign embassies regarding our preparations and asked them to be aware of the risks. Ittijah also communicated with the international Red Cross and met with them in order to be ready in case of need.

In fact, the expectations in advance were that Israeli leadership would be able to use the war in Iraq, in order to transfer Palestinian communities. In the other side we also were aware of the possibility of weapons of mass destruction being used, while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are not protected at all. Fortunately, neither of these things happened, while the main task became how to sustain the emergency system until being sure the risk is over.

We believe that the relationships based on trust and shared values, as well on cooperation and partnership and division of work and sharing experience, in addition to credibility within the community, are very important components of the success. Success in this case measured by how we are ready and prepared to meet both expected and un-expected challenges and protecting life of people.

9. Key Relationships

In the first years after its establishment, Ittijah had strong ties with Palestinian capacity building centers in the West Bank, particularly with the Bisan Center for Research and Development in Ramallah; and with Shatil, the capacity building center of the New Israel Fund. Today, further institutional development has enabled Ittijah to be more independent from these resources. Instead, Ittijah decided to maintain stronger ties with Palestinian networks and umbrella organizations of its own kind, and thus cooperates with associations in the occupied territories mainly via the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO). Relations between Ittijah, the Bisan Center and Shatil have significantly decreased today. The outbreak of the second Intifada added to these circumstances, since the border between the occupied territories and Israel is very difficult and at times even impossible to negotiate for our Palestinian partners, and due to the restrictions we are unable to rely on Bisan Center staff as tutors of our workshops inside Israel. Since Ittijah, the Bisan Center and Shatil work on similar but clearly distinguished sectors, we do not face an overlap in activities.

Rather than cooperating with singular Palestinian associations in the occupied Palestinian Territories, the Arab world and the Diaspora, Ittijah has decided to approach and maintain relationships with umbrella organizations. Ittijah was one co-founder of a network between the three Palestinian umbrella organizations in the region: Ittijah – Union of Arab Community Based Associations in Israel; the Palestinian NGO Network in the West Bank and Gaza; and the Collective Forum for Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon. This cooperation was established at the Cyprus Conference in 2000, the first meeting of the three networks, and has since then been maintained. Joint activities include: advocacy & conferences, emergency work, and sub-networking between member associations.

Ittijah is a member of the NGO Platform of the Euro-Med Forums. As such, Ittijah represents the three Palestinian umbrella organizations in the region in the Steering Committee for the 9th Euro-Med Civil Forum in Naples in November 2003.

Relationships with Israeli authorities

We are currently witnessing an escalating policy from the Israeli state towards its Palestinian population. In many aspects, we are a community at risk. This was demonstrated in October 2000, when 13 Palestinian citizens of Israel were killed by Israeli police and Israeli mobs, and in April 2002 during the Israeli military's re-occupation of West Bank towns. Currently, one of the most endangered populations inside Israel is the Bedouin in the Negev: and Bedouin farmers have been victims of the poisoning of their crops and other severe violations of their rights and daily lives. We see the need to protect Palestinian citizens and associations from state-based aggression and violence of this extremist kind.

As an umbrella organization, our main concern is the systematic aggression against Palestinian civil society institutions. For two years, the civil society sector has faced harassment by political and public institutions, particularly the media. These institutions have engaged in activities and discourses, which de-legitimize and criminalize political, social and humanitarian activism by and for the Palestinian people in Israel and in the occupied territories. Accusations of money

laundering and prohibitions on transferring humanitarian support to the occupied territories are endangering the freedom of Palestinians citizens of Israel to maintain bonds and solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Humanitarian aid has been labeled as support of terrorism. Non-governmental organizations – including the Islamic Movement and its humanitarian organizations, Ansar al Sajeen – Friends of Political Prisoners and its Director Munir Mansour, and the Balad Cultural Association and its Director Mohammed Kanani (both of the latter are member associations and board members of Ittijah) have faced attacks against people and property: arrests, detention, banning from leaving the country, raids, confiscation of equipment and documents. All of this has been accompanied by distortions and smear campaigns from the local media, and has been a serious endangerment for the continuation of these organizations' important work. The case of the leaders of the Islamic Movement is still before the Israeli courts. If they will be sentenced, there is a great danger that any humanitarian aid to the West Bank may in effect be declared as illegal.

Ittijah is obliged to protect its institutions and itself. In the present climate, emergency preparedness (such as contingency plans for networking with the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network in the West Bank and Gaza during the American-British war on Iraq) has to be sustained and developed. One step in this direction is the cooperation with Responding To Conflict – UK, a collaboration in order to train organizations in appropriate methods of response in situations of conflict and crisis.

The current economic crisis in Israel and the response to it by the Israeli government – including major cutbacks in the welfare system and in support for non-governmental institutions – constitutes an additional challenge for the Palestinian population of Israel and for NGOs. Cutbacks in the welfare system (unemployment benefits, child allowances, etc.) hit the Palestinians in Israel much harder, as government statistics indicate that Arab individuals and Arab communities rank lowest in all key socio-economic indicators, and thus are more dramatically impacted by social welfare cuts. Recent figures from the National Insurance Institute show that 50% of Palestinian children of Israel live under the poverty line, and that the 25 towns with the highest unemployment rate are Palestinian localities - despite the fact that many Palestinian women are not part of the work force and do not appear in the statistics. Child allowances have been cut mainly from the third child upwards, thus disproportionately impacting the Arab population's traditionally larger families more than most groups inside the Jewish society. All these new challenges are an addition to an already discriminatory welfare system, in which many benefits are dependent on prior military service at the individual level, on location at the community level (Israel declares certain areas to be of "national priority", namely developmental towns, areas close to the borders, and settlements in the occupied territories. Arab communities are almost entirely excluded from national priority areas and programs). The Palestinian citizens of Israel are thus collectively endangered by poverty and discrimination. Several NGOs that previously supported the needy in the West Bank and in Gaza are now taking care of the Palestinian community inside Israel. Families who used to make donations to the occupied territories are now themselves in need of support.

The governmental support to non-governmental organizations has also dramatically decreased in all fields. Taking into consideration that Palestinian NGOs and community based associations receive only 2.5% of governmental financing provided to non-governmental institutions (even

though Palestinians form about one-fifth of the Israeli population), and that this formerly weak support has now decreased even more, one can understand that the situation has become devastating for Palestinian NGOs. Today, many NGOs are in danger of closing down because they cannot cover their running costs. Crucial potential and service to local communities is in danger of being lost. Ittijah and its member associations will have to deal with the consequences of these policies.

In addition to the economic threat, the Palestinian uprising since October 2000 and the Israeli response to it provided a serious disturbance to our relations with our partners in the West Bank and Gaza. Meetings are still held but have been more difficult and risky to plan, and joint meetings on the Israeli side are almost impossible. This happens at a time when networking and solidarity are particularly crucial.

We do not see a party or political group to turn to and ask for support at the present time. Relations with the government and political decision-makers are much more difficult than in the past. Lobbying in the Knesset is nearly impossible in the current atmosphere. Still, we feel that we have to develop a strategy to cut at the roots of the crisis we are facing, in addition to a defensive strategy of response and protection. Here, we particularly see the need to develop our work with the Israeli media.

Relationships with Arab political movements

Ittijah has not yet developed a joint policy and approach towards the Arab political parties and Members of Knesset. This is due to the fact that such cooperation is extremely controversial for our members, as opinions diverge from favoring total boycott of the Israeli political system to favoring involvement and change "from within the system". In addition, there is of course a broad spectrum of Palestinian political parties and activists in our society. Naturally, non-governmental organizations tend in very diverse directions, and unification on these issues is not favorable.

Still, we are obligated to evaluate and define our relations with the political sector. We are aware of the advantages of closer cooperation with Arab political decision-makers in Israel, and we know that such cooperation can be helpful in efforts to gain recognition and influence with international governmental institutions. We began the process of exploring possibilities in this respect in 2002 with a workshop on relations with other societal sectors, including political parties, the Arab Higher Follow Up Committee, municipal governments, and the private sector. Results of this workshop are published in *The Horizon of Palestinian Community Work: Collective Thoughts* (July 2003). We will proceed with activities and discussions along these lines.

Relations to funding agencies

Like most organizations within the local and international NGO communities, Ittijah and the vast majority of its members rely on contributions from donor agencies to sustain their important work. Certainly, maintaining positive relations between donors and grantees has always been a proverbial tightrope, dependent upon mutual good will and the willingness of both parties to respectfully interact and constructively dialogue with one another concerning issues of

independence, reasonable conditionalities, and appropriate methods and modes of interaction. From its inception, Ittijah has been committed to transparency, participatory decision-making and good governance, and meaningful dialogue with all parties interested in supporting Palestinian NGOs in Israel.

Nevertheless, Ittijah has become increasingly concerned about newly implemented, polarizing, and politically motivated pressures on NGOs – in particular on Arab and Palestinian organizations, and on many of the agencies that support them – in the emergent national and international paradigm.

Two events have had a strong influence on policies of funding agencies towards Palestinian NGOs in Israel: locally, the World Conference Against Racism in December 2001, after which Ittijah paid a high price for its role as the collective political voice of Palestinian civil society organizations in Israel; and internationally, the terrorist attack in New York on September 11th 2001. In the aftermath of these events, political interference of some funding agencies has increased. We are challenged by crucial questions such as: Who does, in fact, set our agenda? To what degree is our agenda really independent, and to what degree is it dictated? How shall we deal with a situation in which standards valid for the treatment of other civil society organizations are null and void for us because of our status as Arab and Palestinian representatives of civil society in Israel?

In December 2002, one month after the Cairo Conference: "An End to Borders: Arab Civil Society Organizations Take Up the Challenge," sponsored by the European Union, Ittijah received a letter from the Ambassador of the European Commission's Delegation to Israel. The Ambassador stated that since the conference had included elements that were not in accordance with the goal of normalization between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the European Union would consider this a breach of contract, and would not transfer the outstanding amount of the grant. Ittijah was attacked as a "voice against peace." Palestinian NGOs believe in *just* peace, and reserve the right to meet, cooperate and network with Arab and Palestinian NGOs outside Israel on the basis of their own political agenda. Even though we were able to prove that we did not break the contract (the proposal submitted to the European Union spoke explicitly about avoiding the issue of "normalization" in order to defend the NGOs credibility inside their own community), we are highly alarmed by this new challenge of funding agencies setting the "appropriate" terms for local agendas.

We believe that some funding agencies are attempting to limit our role as civil society organizations to issues of nominal equality. We shall be prevented from dealing with the essence and the needs for collective rights. We shall be limited to citizenship, unable to deal with ourselves as a people. We have witnessed a new policy among funding agencies that distinguish between "radical" and "moderate" elements of the Palestinian civil society, ascribing the term "radical" to everyone who does not agree with their political objectives, and imposing a boycott on this group. The aim is to avoid dealing with the Israeli violation of our collective rights, and limiting our struggle to questions of citizenship. We are not willing to compromise with such agencies: we are not bribable.

We are speaking mainly about US-based funding agencies, which are influenced by pro-Israeli lobbying groups. We are also speaking about Israeli funding agencies. After the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001, we witnessed for the first time ever an investigation of Palestinian NGOs – members of Ittijah – conducted by a funding agency (The New Israel Fund) concerning their joining in the “Cairo Declaration,” a preparatory paper of Arab civil society organizations for the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre that dealt with discrimination and racism in the Arab countries and in Israel. We believe that in this case, the funding agency overstepped its bounds. We do not accept such intervention. We again feel that normal rules are often not valid for us as Palestinian NGOs, since we cannot believe that any other civil society actor in Israel or for that matter worldwide would be subject to such inquiries.

We are also speaking about the European Union. We see a tendency in the EU toward non-interference into Israel’s “internal issues”. We find it alarming that many aspects of violation of collective rights of Palestinians in Israel is considered to be “internal.”

A separate issue and additional challenge in relation with donors is the exceedingly large size of grants from selected NGOs or programs in the European Union. We find access to such resources positive in many respects, but we have learned from the experiences of NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza that competition for and receipt of such large and concentrated grants by some organizations can create a situation of gaps inside the civil society, and may allow individual NGOs to gain disproportionate power and political influence, even outclassing (and often taking some of the functional roles) of political parties. This holds the potential to create tensions inside the civil society that will obstruct our work and will not help our community.

Since 2001, following the World Conference against Racism in Durban and the events of September 11 2001, Ittijah, as a collective union of NGOs, has had to confront serious external pressures comprising a total change in funding policies, including the introduction of new funding conditions and political conditionality stipulations on funding. As a network, Ittijah must protect itself, and especially its members and Palestinian civil society in general from such pressures. Ittijah currently has 65 member organizations with 14 new organizations applying for membership this year.

During 2001 two major donors stopped funding Ittijah, which in our analysis was a political decision intended to change the essence of the voice of collective civil society and to violate the independent voice of a Palestinian civil society that is committed to international human rights values and covenants. Ittijah is working to change local and international funding policies, with a particular focus on overseas funding organizations. The main budget line currently available for Palestinian NGOs in Israel is that of human rights, as our issues are considered to be internal Israeli issues, and the Palestinian community in Israel as part of the rich Israeli nation. Development funding, which would help us keep our independent voice, is therefore unavailable and human rights work in Israel is subject to immense political interference due to its political nature.

Confronting the Law Against Foreign Funding

A law proposing the restriction and control of funding from foreign countries for Israeli NGO's and individuals was passed at a preliminary reading of the legislation at the Knesset in December 2003. This law, entitled "the law for preventing governmental foreign funding to NGOs" was initiated by MK's from the Ehud Leumi Party, an ultra right wing party the 'national unity party', which is part of the Cabinet. This gives authority to the NGO Register to ban funds for organizations which seek to change a position or public opinion in Israeli society

Ittijah took this anti-democratic initiative very seriously. Although initially targeted against the Israeli left wing, we expect that such a law were passed, it would be implemented mainly against Palestinian NGOs in Israel.

Ittijah's goal was to block this law and to prevent it from being passed which would give the Registrar of NGOs together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the authority to prevent any governmental foreign funding to NGOs. The NGOs would have to receive permission in advance to receive foreign funding and the suggested law defined 'governmental funding' as that which includes private funding and agencies who get more than 25% of their budget from governments.

Ittijah noted the internal lack of consensus about this law in government and used this to lobby from the inside. The Minister of Justice who opposed the law in its current state while he emphasized the need for transparency.

Ittijah strategy was to prevent the passing of the law and to avoid the shifting of the debate surrounding the law to between Arabs and Jews

Ittijah also did a lot of work through the silent track of raising this issue with European embassies as the suggested law violates the association agreement.

Simultaneously Ittijah coordinated with its member NGOs as well with Israeli NGOs on the behind the scenes lobbying work.

11. Ittijah's External Evaluation

Over 2002 - 2003, Ittijah has carried out an external evaluation to clarify and identify our weaknesses and strengths and the impact of Ittijah on our members, non-members and the Palestinian community in general. We look forward to receiving the results of this in 2004 and using them in our forthcoming work. We see this as an important element of Ittijah's institutional development.