

The other face of Palestinian resistance

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ALTHOUGH TO many people in the West the Palestine Liberation Organisation means little more than occasional reports of military operations against the Israelis or the triumphant figure of Yasser Arafat speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, the past decade has witnessed the growth of a range of welfare and social services. In effect the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement acted as a catalyst for the re-creation of a Palestinian society, offering a nation in exile all the facilities expected of an established national government.

Soon after the armed resistance in the mid-1960's, it became obvious to the Palestinian leaders that a military war could not be waged without back-up facilities. Wounded resistance fighters needed medical and surgical treatment; the families of commandos killed in combat required aid; the success of the Palestinian movement called for a greater number of educated Palestinians to create the infra-structure of a Palestinian society; young Palestinians living in the camps needed education; families living on United Nations welfare needed work to lead a more dignified life.

The problems were tremendous: outside Palestine the success of any development in social services depended on the co-operation of host Arab governments, while inside the occupied territories an underground government had to operate against the efforts of the Israeli military authorities to crush the resistance movement. On both sides of the ceasefire lines the PLO needed funds for hospitals and equipment, and a range of qualified doctors, surgeons, nurses, teachers and administrators.

It was against this background that the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) was founded in the

late 1960's. In Muslim countries the Red Crescent provides the services and facilities of the Red Cross in the Christian world. In 1969 the Palestinian Red Crescent was given responsibility by the PLO to provide medical facilities for all Palestinians, civilians and combatants alike. The free facilities offered by the PRCS for the Palestinians were quickly in demand from other Arabs. The Palestinian Red Crescent responded by opening its doors to any person in need of medical treatment.

Skilled doctors return

Skilled Palestinian doctors and surgeons returned to the Middle East as the Red Crescent offered them an opportunity to use their skills in the service of their people. They were joined by nurses and technicians to provide the manpower for an increasing number of well equipped hospitals and clinics established in refugee camps of 20,000 inhabitants or more.

Some of the best facilities were established in Jordan, though most were destroyed during the bloody conflict between the Palestinians and the Jordanians in the Black September war. The Palestinian Red Crescent was faced with thousands of injured Palestinians from the refugee camps shelled during the fighting. Many died as the hospitals were bombarded by mortars and tanks.

Likewise, in the Lebanon, the Palestinian Red Crescent has been under severe strain during recent years dealing with Lebanese and Palestinian injuries. On the hills overlooking Beirut the Al Quds (Jerusalem) Hospital became one of the emergency centres operated jointly by the PRCS and the Lebanese Red Crescent. During the 1975 clashes the hospital was shelled by Phalangist forces. Within eight hours of the hospital's destruction an underground hospital of 100 beds was established—with room for a further 400 beds. Two operating

theatres were included. Between April and November 1975 the PRCS treated 5,200 cases of all nationalities. In addition, the Palestinian Red Crescent opened training centres in which 620 students, housewives and workers were given first-aid and medical training. In the hospitals volunteers helped with cooking, cleaning, washing, and also brought beds from their homes.

The Palestinian Red Crescent now operates five major hospitals and four emergency centres, in addition to a number of small clinics. The Al Jalil Hospital deals with internal diseases and surgical services. Its 40 beds are divided equally between male and female patients. The Al Quds Hospital provides surgical, ophthalmic and ENT facilities and provides 60 beds. At the Haifa Hospital in Lebanon, facilities deal with paraplegia and internal diseases, as well as research laboratories. In-patient treatment is available for 20 female and 30 male patients. In occupied Gaza, the Palestine Red Crescent operates an underground hospital with 20 beds. Facilities under military occupation are limited, but surgery is provided during emergencies. At the Tel-el-Zaater refugee camp in the Lebanon the PRCS hospital was equipped with an operating theatre, two clinics, and 30 beds for in-patients. Near Sidon on the Mediterranean coast a new hospital in memory of Mahmud al Hamshari, the PLO representative assassinated by Israeli intelligence agents in Paris, opened with a 50 bed capacity, to be later increased to 100 beds. The hospital has the latest surgical, diagnostic and treatment equipment. Much of the funds were provided by French supporters of the Palestinian people, where Hamshari's widow, Marie Claude, still lives.

Expanding services

Other services operated by the Palestinian Red Crescent include: two mobile field hospitals, 70

clinics, 10 dental clinics, 5 recuperation centres, one physiotherapy centre, a graduate first aid school, a social public health school, a school for graduating assistants, a nursing school, a documentary centre for the affairs of prisoners and detainees, a first aid training centre, and a convalescent home.

As impressive as the achievements of the Palestinian Red Crescent are the society's projects for the future. The most important project is a proposed frozen blood bank. During emergencies in Jordan and the Lebanon, serious problems arose because of the lack of storage facilities for donated blood. The projected bank will freeze blood for periods of 5-10 years, and will be able to store 1,000 units.

An ENT centre and dental clinic is now being created in premises set among flower gardens and lawns. The centre will also house a laboratory, an X-ray unit, a treatment room, operating theatre, Maxillo patient centre, an autoclave and reception room.

Already in operation is the PRCS's Emergency and First Aid Centre. A team of doctors and nurses are on permanent stand-by, ready to deal with any emergency. Past bombing of Palestinian refugee camps by the Israeli Air Force caused a high toll among the civilian population. In preparation for future raids, the Centre is self-sufficient in benzene, gas, electricity, light, water, medicine and food.

Occupied territories

As part of its operations in occupied territories, the Palestinian Red Crescent maintains a Library, in which are recorded the names, numbers, charges and sentences of every Palestinian prisoner held in Israeli jails. The Society keeps records of all the kinds of torture and ill-treatment to which prisoners are subjected, to monitor infringements of the Geneva Conventions. Amnesty International, the

International Red Cross, and various agencies of the United Nations have, in the past, issued reports of Israel's violations of the Geneva Conventions.

When the International Red Cross reports that one of the prisoners needs an immediate operation, the PRCS gives the Red Cross the financial aid necessary to perform the operation. The Palestinian Red Crescent also provides aid to the families of Palestinian prisoners.

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society represents the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Public Affairs within the Palestinians' exile administrations. It needs a large budget and depends mostly on its own efforts and the efforts of the Palestinians and Arabs for self-sufficiency.

As part of its activities to raise funds, the PRCS has established handicraft workshops in the refugee camps. This has an additional purpose—to provide work for destitute refugees and to provide them with a regular income from sales. The workshops manufacture chairs, couches, blankets, sheets, towels, masks, uniforms and tables.



Palestinian orphans at a PLO school



Medical care at a Palestine Red Crescent Clinic

One traditional Palestinian art is embroidery. In the refugee camps the art has been encouraged, with the beautiful Palestinian national costumes finding a ready market not only in the capitals of the Arab world, but also in Europe and North America.

Inside the occupied territories the number of

Palestinian prisoners is often high. Many families suffer severe deprivation, and the Israelis forbid aid being provided by neighbours and friends. Consequently, in order to support themselves, families embroider dresses, which the PRCS exhibits in charity bazaars, where the garments may be bought. The PRCS's Permanent Exhibition of Palestinian Folklore contains an impressive display of handicrafts from carpets to wooden sculptures, and richly embroidered materials. The exhibition provides work for nearly 8,000 Palestinians, 3,000 of whom live under Israeli occupation.

For resistance fighters injured in clashes with Israeli forces, or civilians seriously injured in Israeli bombing raids, the Palestinian Red Crescent offers a wide choice of training facilities. As a result of a study conducted in 1973 into the social and medical conditions of the Palestinian exiles in Lebanon, a rehabilitation programme has been implemented. Courses range from radio and television technical studies, to teaching sewing to women, as well as embroidery and languages. The PRCS also advises families on child care procedures.

Social problems

As the Palestinian resistance movement grew in strength a number of social and economic problems faced the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. How could the economic status of the refugees be improved? How could Palestinian manpower be trained in the skills which would be in demand when a state was created on liberated Palestinian territory? On the answers to these questions rested the dignity of a people deprived of their livelihood in their villages and towns back in Palestine.

Many Palestinians were returning to the Middle East to offer their services to the resistance move-

ment as doctors, journalists, administrators, political planners, diplomats, designers and printers, teachers, and legal experts. Yet this left unresolved the problem of the unskilled Palestinians living on UNRWA handouts in the refugee camps. Many Palestinians from the camps learned their skills and moved on to find work in the Arab countries. By sending money back to their families in the camps this partly solved an economic problem, but the issue of the dignity brought by being self-sufficient was not resolved.

In January 1970 the Samed Foundation was created by the Palestine Liberation Organisation. It had two prime purposes: firstly to provide a means of achieving a better and dignified life for the families of Palestinian martyrs—commandos killed in action against the enemy. It also aimed at creating a 'revolutionary' economy.

On the fundamental level, the Samed Foundation was intended to provide the nucleus for the future public sector on the liberated lands of Palestine.

Living standards

The Foundation is intended to provide Palestinians with 'a valid means of living' and to establish an improved level of vocational and scientific training. Within each refugee camp the activities of the Samed Foundation were planned to establish production units to meet the needs of the inhabitants. For Palestinians living under Israeli occupation the Foundation planned to strengthen their self-reliance through the creation of agricultural and industrial projects, as well as the initiation of light industry. As a consequence, hoped the Foundation's directors, the Palestinian labour force could be absorbed, and prevented from working for the Israeli settlers, and their families.

Asked whether the Samed Foundation was

intended to provide the nucleus of the Palestinian public sector, the Foundation's head, Abu Ala, commented recently: 'Since the Samed Foundation is the property of the people, it is considered as the public sector of the Palestinian Revolution, and the nucleus of the future public sector on liberated lands of Palestine.'

The Samed Foundation has initiated a variety of activities, including industrial and agricultural projects as well as cinematic and photographic production. There also exists a division for art production. Production units exist in all the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, and others have been established in Syria. In other Arab countries the Palestinians have been loaned land for agricultural projects, which in turn provide an income for both the workers and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Workshops have been established for the manufacturers of men's, women's and children's clothing, as well as uniforms for Palestinian commando forces. Embroidery workshops absorb a large part of the Samed's workforce. Palestinian national costumes are distributed and sold through a network of international outlets. This operation was boosted in response to efforts by Israeli entrepreneurs to market Palestinian costumes as Israeli handicraft.

Workers' committees

Workers employed by the Samed Foundation enjoy free medical facilities and social security. Every workshop has its own Revolutionary Committee whose task is to study the problems of the workers and to organise their work. These committees are elected by the workers in each workshop. Employment for non-Palestinians is also provided when they are in need of work.

The long conflict which has been waged in the Lebanon since early in 1975 has brought severe financial problems for the Palestinians. Those who had secured work outside the camps have been unable to earn a regular income. Faced with the problem of increasing unemployment amongst the Palestinian community, Yasser Arafat met with Samed directors to discuss measures to ease the problem. The Palestinian leader ordered Samed production units to be expanded to absorb the unemployed workforce.

For the future, the Samed Foundation plans to absorb the highest possible number of Palestinian workers who, even in normal circumstances, suffer from many hardships, being without the social and medical security provided for other Arab workers.

Abu Ala points out: 'Samed not only helps Palestinian workers to solve their financial problems; it also helps them to develop their character and social understanding. In every workshop, the Revolutionary Committee conducts a literacy campaign. Moreover, a weekly political seminar is held to inform the workers of the latest political developments, and a monthly newspaper is published, constituting a platform for the voice of Palestinian workers, in which all workers are urged to participate.'

Samed has been responsible for the production of a film on the theme of 'Habitat' for the Habitat Conference in Canada. The colour production was undertaken in association with the Government of Pakistan. In addition, a series of 26 half hour films is planned to provide an in-depth review of the Palestine question from 1890 to the present day.

The Samed Foundation and the Palestinian Red Crescent have also acted to provide skilled advisors to a number of developing countries. Doctors and teachers replaced Israeli technicians in a number of African states in the wake of Israel's expulsion.

In Somalia the Samed Foundation has provided a team of advisors to assist with development projects.

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