



**A Spectrum of Light in the  
Middle East**

February-March, 2004

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### **About The Prism Group**

The Prism Group continues to focus on human rights issues in the Middle East. It is pleasing to note that several topics that we brought to attention of opinion leaders in our various reports are now surfacing in the general public debate.

### **The Rights of Palestinians – A Different Approach**

In the past few weeks there have been reports of increasing tension within the Palestinian Authority (PA). Demands for financial, political and social reform have been met with resistance from the old guard, who continue to reap the rewards of the Intifada. Meanwhile, it is the average Palestinian who is left behind. Below are five different kinds of denigration, often ignored by the western media.

#### *a) Financial Mismanagement*

It was recently reported that Chairman Arafat hastily exited from a meeting, where Prime Minister Mohammed Querei had remarked that the European Union has joined demands that PA police salaries must be paid by bank deposit rather than in cash. It seems that the Palestinian leader may eventually compromise here, thus limiting the amount of money that can be skimmed off to pay for other expenses.

In the words of Mr. Christopher Patten, the European Commissioner for External Affairs, "EU Direct Budgetary Assistance.... serve to finance the PA public expenditures in general..." As it is donor money which makes up the bulk of payments to the PA police, the EU must be very relieved that at least some of its contributions can be better accounted for at last.

While the EU sends approximately 20 million euros to the PA and sister organizations every month to support education and other social needs, a recent BBC investigation stated that the PA is using some of the money to pay members of a Palestinian militant organization, which has been responsible for carrying out homicide attacks. According to the newspaper "Scotland on Sunday", Feb. 29th, The World Bank has now issued an ultimatum to the PA: Put an end to rampant corruption or lose hundreds of millions of pounds of vital foreign aid. The Bank's top official in the region, Nigel Roberts, confirmed that the Palestinians were receiving the largest amount of money per capita in the history of foreign aid.

#### *b) Deliberate Social Deprivation by "Friends"*

On February 27, 2004, Reuters reported that people living in PA controlled areas are becoming increasingly critical of their leaders. This supports previous comments from the AP, late last year, that the Arab world is manipulating the Palestinian cause to the detriment of the people themselves. Reported again in the "LA Times", on January 4, the article states that most Arab countries have denied citizenship, jobs and education to anyone claiming Palestinian ancestry. The article quotes 35-year-old Mohmoud Zahar: "We can't own a house, land or get a loan from the bank, despite the fact that I was born here (in Egypt) and have no idea what is Palestine". A Cairo-based Palestinian writer, speaking in the same article says: "The language of the (Arab) governments and media is in one direction and the real practices on the ground are totally the opposite."

Hisham Youssef, spokesman for the 22-nation Arab League, acknowledged that Palestinians live 'in very bad conditions,' but he said the policy is meant 'to preserve their Palestinian identity'. "If every Palestinian who sought refuge in a certain country was integrated and accommodated into that country, there won't be any reason for them to return to Palestine," AP reported.

Jordan would be a clear exception to this pan-Arab policy, where Palestinians are granted full citizenship and rights. As a result, except the 13% living in UNRWA camps, Palestinians are being progressively integrated into Jordanian society without international welfare subsidies.

#### *c) Denial of Basic Political Rights*

Late in January 2004, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy organized a two-day conference. The PISD is calling for the implementation of political and economic reforms in the PA, criticizing how the PA was handling negotiations with Israel. Some members lashed out at corruption and demanded major reforms in Fatah and the PA. Speakers included legislators, university teachers, political analysts, human rights activists and even Fatah leaders.

#### *d) Coping with the Israeli Army*

In Israel, a military tribunal has found an army officer guilty of negligence in the October 2002, as a result of which a Palestinian teenager died. According to Reuters, a statement from the military spokesman's office explaining the decision blamed the officer in the death of Ali Zaid, 16, of Nizlat Zaid, a village near the West Bank city of Jenin. It said that the officer, identified by the Israeli media as a captain, had fired at a wall to disperse stone-throwing demonstrators and that the bullet went through a window, hitting Zaid. He later died of his injuries. The court found "clear negligence," in the officer's behavior, the statement said.

#### *e) A Breakdown of Society*

On Feb. 28/04, the BBC reported that the Mayor of Nablus has resigned in protest at a rise in lawlessness. "Ghassan Shakaa accused the Palestinian Authority of failing to take action to stem rising violence in the city".

Mr Shakaa, who is considered an ally of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, complained he was frustrated at watching Nablus descend into chaos. Shakaa said that his resignation was a "warning bell" to the PA because they are not doing anything for the city. In Nablus, the police have become ineffective and the streets are not safe from the increasing strength of local gangs.

Shakaa's remarks may have been a harbinger. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, Reuters reported from Gaza that gunmen had killed "a prominent adviser to Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. According to witnesses, unknown assailants gunned down Khalil al-

Zebin, 59, a veteran journalist who advised Arafat on human rights and media issues.

Palestinian journalists have recently staged protests demanding that the Palestinian Authority investigate a recent series of attacks against them in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

It is clear that Palestinian suffering is not merely a result of Israeli action, as is so often crudely and simplistically reported in the media. The Palestinians deserve a democratic leadership, which will be responsive to the needs of its electorate and outline the way to reform.

### **Freedom of the Press**

Attitudes toward the press seem to have taken a turn for the better in Egypt, reports the BBC News, Feb. 23, 2004. President Mubarak has been quoted as saying that he will rescind the law that allows journalists to be imprisoned for libel, defamation or insults.

In a speech to participants at a journalists' conference, which was read by the Information Minister, the Egyptian president reiterated his support of press freedom but also criticized foreign demands for reforms in the Middle East. Egypt, along with other Arab countries, is under increasing pressure from the US to take steps to improve their human rights records.

### **Women's Rights in the Middle East**

Emboldened by the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi women are pushing for political freedoms many of them have never enjoyed. Women, secular and religious, from all ethnic groups, are running for office and demanding a fair share of representation in a country, where they make up 60 percent of the population.

Yet new religious activism in Iraq has aggravated traditional attitudes about women's roles. The 18-member committee drafting the new constitution does not include any women. The council recently passed a nonbinding resolution calling for Shariah, or Islamic law, to govern family issues, which will damage the rights of Iraqi women.

This tale of events fits in with recent academic research. Forty years ago, write professors Phyllis Chesler and Donna Hughes in *FrontPageMagazine.com* (Feb. 24), American women launched a liberation movement for freedom and equality. "Today, women's economic and social participation is considered a standard requirement for a nation's healthy democratic development."

However, according to these eminent professors, today Islamic fundamentalism threatens women all over the world. "Wherever they have gained power, Islamists have denied women their essential humanity and dignity." They cite the exponential growth of the global sex trade as an example.

In another article on the same subject, Professor Hughes says: "A measure of Islamic fundamentalists' success in controlling society is the depth and totality with which they suppress the freedom and rights of women. In Iran for 25 years, the ruling mullahs have enforced humiliating and sadistic rules and punishments on women and girls. Joining a global trend, the fundamentalists have added another way to dehumanize women and girls: buying and selling them for prostitution. According to the head of the Tehran province judiciary, traffickers target girls between 13 and 17, although there are reports of some girls as young as 8 and 10, being sent to Arab countries.

**The Prism Group Website:**

Please visit our site and help direct others to the existing fact sheets. If you have ideas for fact sheets that you believe we should investigate and compile, please write to us at: [info@theprismgroup.org](mailto:info@theprismgroup.org).

Our web site is [www.theprismgroup.org](http://www.theprismgroup.org).

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