

# Civic Sense in Palestine



By Michael S. Sansur

*“Mature people, at their best, are people who are committed to the common good that reaches beyond private interests, transcends sectarian commitments, and offers human solidarity.” Walter Brueggemann*

Driving to Ramallah from Bethlehem and back is an experience like no other. The old days of driving through Jerusalem to get to Ramallah are long gone, and a snaking, rutted, and ramp-studded road through Wadi Nar (the Kidron Valley) is now the norm for us West Bankers. The road could have been scenic, winding through an ancient landscape, but any hopes for the aesthetic are quickly dashed once you unavoidably notice the mounds of garbage and landfill that litter the sides of the road and even the fields beyond. To make matters worse, the driver of the vehicle in front of you marks his territory by disposing of a can of juice from his car window before overtaking the car in front of him at a dangerous curve in an attempt to reach the “container” checkpoint ahead of the rest should there be a backlog. Then you reach the east end of Ezariya (Bethany) and you negotiate your way through cars driving on the wrong side of the road to avoid the traffic jam from the other direction and, all the while, the garbage and the litter and the smoke emanating from burnt-out garbage containers, mixing with the smoke of kebab grilled in the open, gets worse. Finally you join the Jerusalem–Jericho road and suddenly everybody is driving carefully, within the speed limit, stopping where they should and minding to keep within the solid white line for fear of the Israeli police who might be lurking intermittently along the way. And the drive and scenery may well be pleasant until you reach much-dreaded Qalandiya and Kufur Aqab ahead. The dust, the smoke, the garbage and the filth, the careless erratic driving, the intolerance and the egoism with the occasional road rage are all there in one almost surreal Kafkaesque scene.

Why and how have we come down to this? Some people argue that the places described are not under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, and the Israelis who control these areas couldn't care less. There is, perhaps, a measure of truth in this, but one cannot ignore the fact that the increasing number of people driving through and living there are all Palestinians. And the cities controlled by the Palestinians, though less polluted and slightly better organized, are really not that much more civilized. Garbage is still being burnt in containers in many neighborhoods, street trees and public property continue to be vandalized in all our towns and cities, people continue to litter in public, spit marks are still found on pavements, some men continue to urinate against a wall in full public view, graffiti, occasionally vulgar, is rampant, and traffic and driving are as bad as ever. Is it because of the lack of public conveniences? Too few garbage bins? Narrow streets? An ever-increasing population and vehicles? Frustration and a sense of hopelessness? Municipalities? The Palestinian Authority? The Israeli



We are all born with the potential to be caring and to learn to live with each other. Steadfastness under occupation is about maintaining good practices, social values and ethics, solidarity and community. Instead, in Palestine today there is an obvious deterioration in social norms, especially those concerning the environment, and what appears to be a surge of opportunistic behavior.

Occupation? Perhaps all of the above to some degree, but the fact remains that we do not care much for civic sense. Civic sense or social ethics among Palestinians in Palestine has become a low priority and, for many people, even a nuisance.



Civic sense is not just about keeping the roads, streets, and public property clean. It is also very much about maintaining decorum in public places; it has to do with law-abiding and respect for people and places. We are becoming less tolerant of each other and of other backgrounds and cultures, and we are forgetting our social norms and responsibilities that once helped life to run more smoothly in this country. We have become less polite to each other and less considerate of others. It's as if we do not care for anyone anymore, and we have become engrossed in frantically pursuing our own personal goals.

Our cities have grown, but being civilized is much more than just living in cities and having computers in our homes and smart phones in our



Children should be taught to be sensitive to each other, to the environment, and increasingly to animals. They should be taught to keep their surroundings clean and tidy, to learn to appreciate cleanliness, to be eco-socially responsible, and to basically love the land. They should be encouraged to mix with people from different backgrounds and to learn to respect and appreciate diversity.

pockets. How can we be civilized when we are not at peace with neighbors and peers? How can we be civilized when we are not ready to live in a community? This is obvious in cities that have in recent years seen an influx of people from villages, as in the case of Ramallah and Bethlehem. Many of these people are yet to learn or are yet to be assisted in learning the rules of conduct to fit in as they reside in their new neighborhoods.

No one is born civilized. No one is born well mannered. But we are all born with the potential to be caring and not callous persons. At the same time, no one is born with deceitful and opportunistic behavioral traits. We all have the potential to learn to live without disturbing others whether at home, at school, at work, on the



We are losing our sense of civic and social responsibility and surrendering to a culture of increasing avarice.

streets, or attending an event. So how do we become good citizens? Is it by improving infrastructure and imposing more laws and rules? But no one catches or punishes people for civic offenses in this country. Even if we do get caught, a simple phone call to an official, if you are a person with influence, will solve the problem, otherwise your entire clan might storm the police station.

While strict financial penalties and short jail terms are inevitably important for abusers, the use of various media outlets for educating and reminding the public about their civic responsibility is more important. Moreover, both government and non-government should be involved in sustained and methodical campaigns. The best solution to tackle this issue, however, is to focus on our younger generation. At schools and even in our universities,

Photo by Muhammad Awad.



We should hold ourselves accountable for the conditions that we create that have a negative impact on our lives and in the communities in which we live.



Unity and engaged participation are what makes a citizen civilized.



Our environment has been entrusted to us; let us not betray this trust.

we need to inculcate civic sense within our children through lessons, projects, and community service, while, at the same time, focusing on the parents and teaching them proper parenting and socialization skills.

As Palestinians we have always prided ourselves on being among the best educated peoples in the Middle East. But if education does really make a difference, why has social behavior deteriorated, and why do some countries with more basic levels of education display far higher standards of social behavior? Although religious and moral education is an integral part of our curriculum, there is still a difference between moral education and civic sense, social etiquette, and community living. Our education does not necessarily change mind-sets and behaviors; it is more focused on memorizing and developing particular skills, the least of which are the much-needed social skills. Loyalties, empathy,

and identity are more restricted to family and clan and close circles, or one's political party or one's particular brand of religion, as opposed to the common good or even genuine faith.

With proper education and parenting as well as proper role models, we help our children to work for the common good and for a better world; to be more understanding, more tolerant of others, and more respectful, humane, and honest, with a sense of responsibility to wider circles of people. This is how we might put our children in their rightful place; as stewards of the community and the environment in a civilized society. This is our moral obligation as a steadfast people under relentless occupation and colonization.

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Formal education that does not produce civic-minded and critically engaged citizens will not assure higher standards of social behavior.