

Palestine and the Common Good

The Role of Municipalities



By Hazem Kawasmi

In Palestine, the word public or common is very confusing due to the specific situation of the Palestinian communities who live under two political systems: a national authority and a military occupation. Given that Palestinians cannot remember a time when they were in total control of their daily lives and the public sphere, it is not easy for them to have a sense of ownership for public spaces or for the goods installed or built in the streets by the occupying forces. For example, people don't litter in their own gardens; most of the littering is done in the streets or in public gardens. Paradoxically, and based on their psychological conclusions from childhood, Palestinians feel that public goods are occupation goods even though those goods serve the Palestinian community.

In addition, violence is an issue that is associated with Palestinian childhood and everyday life. When the energy of Palestinians, especially children and youth, does not target the occupation forces through various forms of resistance, this energy – in the form of violence and aggression – is turned towards harming or destroying the public goods. If this energy in the heart and soul of the Palestinian child or youth is not channeled constructively, it will explode. Thus, it is not surprising that Palestinian children may see public property as an enemy that should be destroyed. This is clearly seen in East Jerusalem where young people aim their anger at the bus-station kiosks as they wait for their buses to take them to school.

Sadly, since its establishment in 1994, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has not done much to educate the new generation

and to affirm that public goods are Palestinian goods that should be protected and taken care of. Until now, even after more than 20 years of PNA rule, it is normal to see negative public behavior in the streets, such as littering, doing harm to trees, or destroying traffic lights. This is a daily behavior that is evident in every Palestinian city. For many reasons, most significantly the population's lack of trust in the Palestinian Authority, public goods are not understood to be the fruit of taxpayers' contributions.

After all these past failures and neglect, it is clearer than ever that Palestinian municipalities must do something about protecting public goods through proper communication and involvement of the Palestinian community. This, of course, can be done on two levels: First, by educating the new generations on the need to protect public goods, explaining that these goods are *their* goods, invested in with their own

It is in the interest of all Palestinian citizens and municipalities to protect public property through such measures as education and legal action that aims to prevent damage and cover the cost of repairs to damaged goods

the responsibility of the municipalities, together with other public institutions, to change people's negative behavior towards public goods. They will never change alone without serious, systematic interventions. In addition, municipalities have to do their work and act proactively. To solve the problem of



Collecting waste in Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Photo courtesy of Khan Younis Municipality.

money to serve them. Second, by municipalities creating laws to protect public property and enforcing these laws through the imposition of financial penalties for any and all violations. It is

littering, for example, litter bins need to be available (in sufficient quantities), accessible, and visible. They should be placed in key locations – along the most congested pedestrian pathways and in



To burn waste reduces bulk but is harmful for society. Photo courtesy of Abasan Municipality.

places where people litter the most.

Last year, I was invited to give a lecture in Beitula Municipality in the southern West Bank, and I asked the municipality to invite Friday-prayer preachers from various Beitula mosques, in addition to teachers and key local leaders in the community. The reason for my request, which was granted, was to explain to these influential people, who speak every week with all constituents of the community, the need to raise awareness concerning the urgency of protecting and maintaining the public goods of Beitula Municipality.

Many municipalities surrender to the violence of the youth and do not fix the damaged public goods, whether they be streetlights or public benches or even traffic lights, mainly either because they are fed up with having to continuously fix these public goods, or because they find it costly to repeatedly repair them. This is why the Municipal Development and Lending Fund has recently requested that all municipalities include a specific item in their municipal budgets for the operation and maintenance of public

goods, and that they train their staff on how to carry this out.

Furthermore, the complaint system in municipalities has to be developed in such a way as to take into consideration issues such as transparency, accountability, and efficient responsiveness. Today, if a citizen complains to a municipality about a broken lamp in a lamppost near his/her house, it is not expected that the municipality would come to fix the lamp the same day, the day after, or even a week or a month later. This means that the complaint system does not yet work on the local level in Palestine despite all the efforts invested in this regard and all the progress made during the past few years due to the persistent attention from the government and the Municipal Development and Lending Fund. It is still too early to say that citizens' complaints are taken seriously by the municipalities and the elected mayors. The municipalities must find a way to maintain the public goods. There is no room for surrender or hopelessness, or any justification for not keeping the city clean and in good

shape. Although municipalities are accountable to their citizens on this issue, they should not carry this burden alone. Municipalities must use every available helpful resource to share this responsibility, such as the media, schools and universities, NGOs and their programs, international projects and their complementary programs, etc.

Fines should be routinely issued when a citizen damages public property, and the damage should be repaired in a timely fashion. The municipality ought to be creative in inviting voluntary efforts to clean streets or cemeteries and graveyards, paint pavements, or plant trees. Palestinian communities love voluntary work, but it needs inspiration and encouragement from a leader, such as the mayor, in order to get people involved.

Litter, apart from being aesthetically unappealing, has direct financial, environmental, and health consequences. In the Gaza Strip, throwing litter and plastic into the sea has a direct environmental impact. In the West Bank, the impact is on the



Approximately 67 percent of the West Bank population benefits from solid waste collection services. However, spaces between the borders of municipalities are not covered at all, and garbage is found everywhere, especially on the sides of the streets. Burning solid waste materials in city bins is harmful to the environment, especially in densely populated areas where people risk breathing poisoned smoke.

mountains, the forests, and the public gardens. Some argue that littering is a pure commons dilemma and arises simply from an unfavorable cost-benefit analysis. Because putting litter in a bin is costly in time and effort, unless one is highly civic-minded, the cost will exceed the benefit and people will choose to litter.

Organic waste collection. Photo courtesy of Qalqiliya Municipality.





Municipalities and local government units are normally in a better situation to deal with the problem of littering and preserving public goods than leaving it only to the national level, since approaching the problems from a local, territorialized perspective could be more helpful. When land is divided into small, distinct segments, people are more likely to feel responsible for it. At the same time, public institutions such as municipalities or public companies can better perform their roles – collect litter, manage its disposal, or implement and enforce fines – if the spaces they're responsible for are of a manageable size. This goes with the new strategy of the Palestinian government towards more decentralization and increased empowerment of local government units. The theme for the coming period could be "Going Local." Even under military occupation, Palestinians want to live a decent life in clean cities. The struggle for freedom and independence is a political obligation that should not negate or be engaged in at the expense of other obligations in Palestinian public life.

Finally, it is true that Palestinians face a distinct problem in dealing with public goods, and any adequate solution will take time to be implemented. There is no magic formula for a prompt solution.

The problem was inherited decades ago and influences many aspects of daily life, including psychological traits, behavioral patterns, and attitudes. However, due to the relatively small Palestinian population and limited geographical space that we live in, the hope to tackle such an important issue is present if we embark on practical actions from today. An endeavor such as this requires awareness, strong will, and leadership. Protecting public property has not yet attracted enough attention by the Palestinian media and NGOs. What is needed is the launch of a widespread national campaign to create momentum and ownership by the community, and to make the public goods part of our social and national values.

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