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**A VISION OF INDEPENDENCE**

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# A Vision for Independence<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The existential challenges of the Palestinians have compelled them to focus on their most urgent needs. Most noteworthy has been the drive to obtain recognition of basic human, political, property and economic rights according to the UN Charter and all the accepted norms of international law and behaviour.

Palestinian identity, Palestinian security, Palestinian social and economic well being, Palestinian culture, Palestinian sovereignty and Palestinian self-determination have been constantly violated for almost 100 years. Palestinians have now reached a point where some -- only some -- of their most basic rights have been recognised.

As a result, their priorities have expanded beyond the most immediate. This Forum provides a good opportunity to discuss the development of a vision for independence. My talk will address three issues of immediate and strategic importance to the realisation of such a vision.

Over and above their extraordinary and unique problems, Palestinians also have to face the same challenges as other nations. Most outstanding is the scientific and technological revolution of the past 50 years which has transformed the world. Every aspect of social, economic and institutional life has been affected. Dramatic changes of cultural, political and legal systems have been some of the results of this revolution. The future of Palestine is directly related to its ability to respond effectively to these challenges.

The extent to which Palestinians have sought education throughout the past half century has been remarkable. They are now amongst the highly educated in the Arab world. They are thus equipped to embark on a creative and productive course of action capable of transforming Palestine into a post-industrial state.

## 1. Stabilising PNA Operations: A Virtual Government

The recent destruction of PNA facilities and the resulting interruption of government services have undermined developmental efforts at all levels.<sup>2</sup> The First Issue that I wish to present concerns measures which the PNA could adopt to maintain functionality during periods of repression and disruption.

Here I would propose that the PNA put in place a **Virtual Government**, similar to the management systems established by major western institutions and companies. These virtual systems have been designed to enable organisations to continue to function in the event of catastrophic attacks on their headquarters.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented to the Consultative Meeting on the Socio-Economic Rehabilitation and Development of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, UNESCWA, Beirut 29-30 July 2003

<sup>2</sup> The destruction of civilian and private property by the occupying power has been widely reported in the media.

Such a **Virtual Government** would be capable of supporting Palestinian communities under most conditions. The process would also be associated with the decentralisation of the PNA to reduce its vulnerability to wanton destruction. Government departments would thus be distributed in different geographical locations; and their operations would be integrated via Information Communication Technology (ICT).

Decentralisation is consistent with current Palestinian policies towards municipal government. The establishment of post-graduate programmes at Palestinian universities to undertake research and educate municipal managers would support acceleration of change in this direction.

During the past several years, the PNA has sought to incorporate ICT in its operations. The establishment of a **Virtual Government** would accelerate the realisation of these ICT programmes. The combination of decentralisation and virtual government calls for an ICT-literate bureaucracy. This is manifestly possible, given the youth of the population and the large number of universities in the country.

The development of such a **Virtual Government** would rationalise and streamline operations of the PNA, allowing it to focus on core activities and to make its services more accessible.

## **2. A Convention for National Integration**

The fragmentation of Palestinian society has been the inevitable outcome of the tragic upheavals of the past half-century. There are serious restrictions on communication between and amongst the millions of Palestinians whether under occupation or incarceration, whether in refugee camps, in villages, towns, or cities, whether inside or outside Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

This fragmentation has resulted in low rates of social integration and mobility. Another consequence has been disjointed public debates on political, cultural and socio-economic issues. Thus the Second Issue is to create the means to re-establish comprehensive communications between and amongst Palestinians.

I propose the creation of a **Convention for National Integration** which would consist of delegates from all Palestinian communities, irrespective of geographical location. This comprehensive body would enable the 10 million Palestinians (expected to reach 20 million by the year 2020) to participate in the process of generating a national vision.

Many of the constraints imposed on the movement of Palestinians throughout the region have to be terminated to encourage serious communication between them. Over the past few years, efforts have been deployed to utilise the Internet in some refugee camps to alleviate asphyxiating living conditions. Although the

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<sup>3</sup> The extent of incarceration and restrictions on mobility is highlighted by the inability of the UNESCWA officer to visit Gaza in order to prepare a report on the current conditions.

results have been positive, they are insufficient to eliminate the concentration camp environment. The Internet, the fax and the telephone are undoubtedly helpful as supplements to personal contact, but they are no substitute.

The experiences and acquired characteristics of the various Palestinian communities worldwide would be subjects for research and discussion at the **Convention for National Integration**, and could contribute positively to social awareness and mutual understanding.

The Convention would be an ongoing activity. One of the multi-fold purposes of the **Convention for National Integration** would be to involve as many Palestinians as possible and to encourage them to participate in the debate.

The **Convention for National Integration** would require an independent and well-funded Secretariat to support diversified programmes to explore, research, discuss, exchange and publish. Palestinian universities and NGOs would be involved extensively in these activities.

Re-establishing normal communications between and amongst Palestinians cannot be divorced from their free and unhindered access to the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup> Improved communications with the Arab countries and with the international community are thus equally important. By the very nature of their involvement in the **Convention for National Integration**, Palestinians in the Diaspora would provide the link with the Arab and international communities. This is especially important in the case of Palestinian-Arab relations which have been undermined by the occupation.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. The Challenges of Science and Technology**

Palestine suffers from a critically high level of unemployment. This can only be overcome by the termination of occupation and by a positive response to the challenges of contemporary technological advances.

The Third Issue is thus concerned with the transformation of Palestinian institutions and economy to enable them to cope with the processes of dematerialisation. This is an urgent and long-term core activity in all nations. Many Third World countries have failed to emerge from the weaknesses of their colonial past because they did not address this challenge.

The new world economy is based on massive and organised innovation and creativity. The political culture in industrial countries is performance-oriented. Patronage and monopolies are relics of the past, and enemies of progress.

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<sup>4</sup> An important opportunity for the Occupied Territories to develop international contacts was offered immediately after the Oslo Agreement in 1993: some 500 European municipalities offered to twin with Palestinian municipalities. At the time, I tried to promote such a programme with little success. The advantages of such twinning on the cultural, economic and social levels are self-evident, and I hope that it will be possible to reactivate successfully such a programme extended to include Arab cities.

<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the UNESCWA field study undertaken in preparation for this Forum.

Changes in the political economy have to be driven by national consensus. This underlines the importance of the proposed **Convention for National Integration**. Policies to promote competitiveness, innovation, quality, standards, transparent procedures and practices need to have broad public understanding and acceptance.

I would propose that immediate measures by the private and public sectors be adopted along several sectoral and institutional lines:

- (1) to enable Small and Medium Enterprises, educational institutions, municipalities and others to become sources of invention and innovation.
- (2) to establish an environment that encourages entrepreneurship. Great advances have been made during the past few years in "industrialising" the production of entrepreneurs. The PNA could explore these various models and encourage the implantation of one or more models.
- (3) to introduce legal and financial systems that support innovation and entrepreneurship.

In conclusion, a satisfactory future can only begin with an end to occupation and perpetual repression. Once this is achieved, it will become possible to respond to the other challenges confronting Palestinians.

For any vision for independence to be acceptable and realistic, all Palestinians, at home and in the Diaspora, have to be included. The establishment of a **Virtual Government** would enable the PNA to maintain a leadership role in the difficult days ahead. The proposed **Convention for National Integration** would enable the Diaspora to contribute towards a creative, interactive transnational society and to facilitate the transition to a modern dematerialised economy.

I believe that the pursuit of the three issues that I have discussed would be effective instruments for the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state that is a creative, productive and self-supporting member of the Arab and community of nations.