

Palestinian Civic Structures workshop with community associations, in Cyprus, November 2004".

Since the death of our leader President Yassir Arafat we find ourselves at a huge crossroads. More than ever we need to unite and hold on to our values, our rights, and our democracy against the agendas of the Israelis and the Americans - who are not interested in true Palestinian democracy, nor in a strong Palestinian national movement. This is our task, and we must focus on it, and look to ourselves to build the foundations we truly need. In this way we can remain true to the legacy that President Arafat left for us - his battle over the last few years to keep our rights and unity is now ours to continue. After the election for the Presidency of the Palestinian Authority Britain will be hosting a conference that is meant to reform it, and our institutions, to be "more democratic". Indeed, since the launch of the "Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East", there has been an Israeli led and US-supported agenda for reforming the Palestinian body politic and its institutions. The declared assumption behind the reforms is that Palestinian political life is undemocratic, tribal, and financially and politically corrupt (although President Arafat was the only democratically elected leader in the Arab world), and that Palestinian society possesses no healthy civic and associational culture (excepting the plethora of single issue Non Governmental Organisations, sponsored almost entirely by the West, and making up their definition of "civil society"). Sadly, the real agenda of Israel and America is to eliminate democratic life - both are openly hostile to democratic decision-making by Palestinians whose leaders they can not then control. They couldn't control President Arafat, so they tried to destroy him. But the legacy he left us is clear: the Palestinian people are a democratic people, and our struggle for our independence means that the voices of the people must be heard wherever we are. It is not simply the PA that is the source of our legitimacy, it is the PLO, who represents us everywhere, both inside and outside occupied Palestine. Thus it is our responsibility in the communities outside to strengthen those links to the PLO in order that we strengthen our representatives, and their ability to truly represent us, against the terrible forces lined up against them. It is not the Palestinians who are refusing democracy and representation. They who are struggling to hold on to it by any means they can. Instead, it is the American administration and the Israeli government who are seeking to create institutions that would be undemocratic, and we must do all we can to keep our unity against this fragmentation imposed upon us by the Americans and Israelis, especially at the forthcoming London Conference initiated by Tony Blair. It is important that we educate the British Prime Minister and his experts and officials just who the Palestinians are, what our basic rights are, our democratic tradition, party structure, and most of all, our constituencies - both inside and outside the occupied Palestinian territories, and our sole legitimate representative, the PLO. Palestinians always have been deeply pluralistic and associational. It may have weakened in some places, due to the wars and the fragmentation brought upon us, but it has certainly not disappeared. In Lebanon, for example, where the conditions of the refugees are appalling, in breach of every international law on the basic treatment of refugees, there remains a steady commitment by singular people working tirelessly in popular associations across a wide range of activities. Palestinian refugees are banned from more than seventy professions by the Lebanese government, most are unemployed and live in terrible conditions, a huge population now outside the camps in the slums of Sidon. Yet they organ-

ise, and are active, and stay connected as much as they can. This spring and summer the Civitas project (whose purpose is to reconnect the people outside and raise their voices) ran some workshops at various refugee camps, some in Jordan and Lebanon, and others in the occupied West Bank. At one of them in Palestine, Deheishe refugee camp outside Bethlehem, we sat one evening with a large number of political activists and community leaders while I outlined the mobilisation steps of the civic needs-assessment exercise that will take place outside Palestine during the coming year for our common project to strengthen our national institutions and participate as a people in them, wherever we are. Looking and listening to all the people from these myriad associations who struggle daily to get to meetings under curfew, through the checkpoints, who suffer constant arrests by the military authorities and yet still organise local activities, raise funds for those in prison and their families, run the local Youth Activity Centres for teenagers, provide badly needed emergency services, and who meet night after night to hammer out common platforms and plan common strategies of resistance - here, obviously, the very civil society that the donors are so keen to identify and want to flourish. Utterly ignored. As one major donor representative in Palestine confessed to me recently: "the international donor community are really deeply ignorant as to who the Palestinians actually are, where they came from, their political past and heritage in the national movement, what kinds of political associations and affiliations which currently make them into a political society and has held them together". The most important thing all Palestinians can

do for our common future is give back our own history, that of the Palestine national movement, to the younger generation of Palestinian activists who don't know enough about it. We can take pride in these periods where leaders served their people, represented their voices, and pushed forward their needs and rights. The fact that we can look to ourselves, to our own past, that we need borrow from no-one's history, is crucial for creating a common platform for our democratic future. Ours has more than enough popular and democratic traditions from which we can draw upon in order to move forward. ■



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رابطة الرجالية الفلسطينية في المملكة المتحدة

تتقدم من الاخ

عبد القادر القواسمي وآل القواسمي

الكرام في فلسطين والمهجر بأحر التعازي

بوفاة والده المغفور له بإذن الله

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