

The Role of Israeli and Palestinian Civil Society in the Reconstruction of Gaza

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A. Introduction

The reconstruction of Gaza is an extremely complex task. The extensive and profound destruction requires a comprehensive, long-term reconstruction effort that demands significant resources and partnership among the local community, Israel, regional states, and the international community.

Bold policy decisions are required to link the reconstruction process with an Israeli–Palestinian and regional peace process, thereby providing a sustainable framework for reconstruction. Cooperation between political leadership and the business sector is necessary to restore economic life in Gaza and the surrounding region. Significant involvement of Israeli, Palestinian, and global civil society is also essential.

Civil society is a critical component for the success—and under current conditions, even the initiation—of a sustainable reconstruction effort. It fills gaps left by political processes when political considerations lead to suboptimal decisions. It also compensates for limitations in the business sector when profit motives prevent necessary investments or divert resources inefficiently. Civil society fills a moral gap as well, and possesses substantial resources and assets to do so.

This document focuses on the roles of Israeli and Palestinian civil society (in Gaza and the West Bank) at the present moment, in promoting the necessary transition from war to reconstruction within the framework of an Israeli–Palestinian–regional peace process. It outlines the characteristics of the civil society arena, guiding principles for action in the immediate and medium term, and proposes several concrete steps forward.

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B. Civil Society Activity During the War

During the war, civil society demonstrated significant power. Civil society in Western countries played a major role in pressuring their governments to change policies and intensify efforts to end the war. Global civil society also supported, funded, and implemented humanitarian efforts. Israeli and Palestinian civil societies also played important roles.

Israeli civil society played a decisive role in shaping public discourse. Civil society organizations highlighted the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, helped place humanitarian issues at the center of public debate, defended the work of international aid organizations, emphasized their importance, promoted the idea that agreements save lives and enhance security, and placed the issue of hostage return and the value of life at the center of Israeli consensus.

They provided information, criticized Israeli policy, proposed alternatives, and in some cases set the public agenda—especially regarding hostages. Their main tools included protests, demonstrations, and presence in media and public spaces.

Additionally, Israeli civil society organizations engaged in humanitarian efforts. Despite restrictions on direct aid from Israelis to Gaza, organizations contributed indirectly through fundraising campaigns, coordination via third parties, and bureaucratic support for foreign organizations.

Israeli civil society organizations also operated in policy and intellectual spheres—developing relevant knowledge for humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, and promoting ideas for rebuilding Gaza physically as well as socially and politically. Legal efforts included petitions to courts on issues ranging from freedom of movement and medical care to press access in Gaza, though with limited success.

During the war, Palestinian civil society focused primarily on humanitarian support for Gaza's population. This included direct aid delivery from the West Bank, fundraising (including from the diaspora), and collaboration with international (and sometimes Israeli) humanitarian organizations. Palestinian civil society also worked to mobilize global public support, engage international aid organizations, human rights groups, and foreign governments to end the war and increase humanitarian support through funding, food, knowledge, and medical services.

C. Guiding Principles for Civil Society Contribution to Sustainable Reconstruction

A review of the activity of civil society organizations during the war, as well as the general characteristics of civil society organizations, points to a number of main fields of action in which Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations should operate. They should participate directly in the provision of humanitarian aid; develop and provide relevant knowledge in the various fields of humanitarian assistance,

construction, development, policy, etc.; work to shape public discourse within their respective societies so that it is based on support for the reconstruction of Gaza within the framework of a political process, and demands that the political echelon act in that direction; and serve as a space of connections among the various stakeholders—to connect the societies themselves, different professionals, the private and governmental sectors, and international and local institutions. The following are the guiding principles and central tasks for the activity of civil society organizations in this field of action:

- **Israeli-Palestinian cooperation** – Cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations for the benefit of reconstruction efforts in Gaza entails multidimensional gains. First of all, such cooperation enables Israelis to operate in Gaza with greater legitimacy. Second, such cooperation strengthens the activity itself, as the participants can mobilize greater resources from their direct communities and from Jewish and Palestinian communities around the world, from their knowledge, and from the assets at their disposal. Such cooperation supports the building of relations of trust between the peoples, which are a necessary condition for future peaceful life, arouses optimism, and thereby more readily enables the mobilization of resources and support from external actors. This whole set of reasons supports the conclusion that, insofar as it is possible for Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations to act together for the reconstruction of Gaza within the framework of a political process, so much the better.
- **Preserving the voice, ownership, and sovereignty of the local society in Gaza** – Even within the framework of the work of civil society organizations, it is important to preserve the guiding principle that grants the local community, the people of Gaza, substantial place and weight in shaping the activity, in determining priorities, in carrying out the assessment of prospects and feasibility, in designing and choosing the appropriate tools, in identifying the relevant populations, in selecting the correct geographic location, and in the other considerations and aspects of the planned activity.
- **The reconstruction of Gaza as a security issue** – Civil society organizations must understand, internalize, and communicate outward that the reconstruction of Gaza within the framework of a broad political process is, first and foremost, a security issue. Primary physical-existential security has become the key question through which both Israelis and Palestinians examine various political issues. In this case, the point is not to expand the concept of security so that it includes aspects of human security, but rather to understand—and to make use of that understanding—that this is a physical, existential, national security question. This is the key to mobilizing both societies—Israeli and Palestinian—for the necessary and moral act of reconstruction.
- **Linking Gaza and the West Bank** – One of the tasks of civil society is to demand of policy-makers, and to turn the linkage of Gaza and the West Bank into a task that international actors place before their eyes when they plan and implement their steps for the reconstruction of Gaza. Beyond activity vis-à-vis policy-makers, civil society can also contribute to creating and strengthening this connection,

through joint work with organizations from the West Bank and from the Strip, and through activity to promote and support the movement of people, capital, goods, and knowledge between the West Bank and the Strip. Civil society organizations are another platform for creating this connection, realizing it, strengthening it, and maintaining it.

- **Harnessing the transformations in Israeli and Palestinian civil society for reconstruction and peace efforts** – During the war, many significant and effective resources were directed toward ending the war and securing the release of the hostages. Israeli and Palestinian civil society became a field that attracted civic energy and public activity. In Israel, dozens of new organizations were established, unprecedented resources were allocated, and thousands of activities took place, especially in support of ending the war and securing the release of the hostages. Now, insofar as possible, before this energy is directed elsewhere, and before the civic structures that arose dissipate, there is room to make an effort and direct them toward continued action for the reconstruction of Gaza and the political process. With the end of the war, Israeli organizations are undergoing a process of replanning their activity, and new organizations are emerging. Some of these organizations, such as the “Families of the Hostages” organization or activists from the “Gaza Envelope,” hold significant symbolic capital in Israeli society. These organizations can join the other organizations already operating in this arena. International, Israeli, and Palestinian civil society organizations should help advance that transformation, those changes, and that adaptation.
- **The asset value of Palestinian society in Israel** – Palestinian society in Israel is a significant resource in the activity of civil society. It has many resources at its disposal, including relevant knowledge and access; it possesses a high motivation to act; it enjoys greater legitimacy to operate among Palestinian society; and it holds direct channels of communication across societies. Action should be taken to promote cooperation between civil society and Palestinian society in Israel, to make use of one another, and to build spaces of cooperation.
- **Israeli experience in humanitarian response** – Civil society in Israel has professional knowledge and significant accumulated experience in the fields of humanitarian aid and post-disaster reconstruction, acquired over years of activity in crisis-stricken areas around the world. Israeli organizations have developed expertise in working under emergency conditions, in cooperation with international systems, and in coordination with global aid mechanisms. This capacity—including an understanding of the professional language and the international frameworks—can constitute a significant asset in the effort to reconstruct Gaza. In addition, civil society in Israel also has a unique ability to mobilize involvement and resources from Jewish diaspora communities, thereby contributing to strengthening the humanitarian response and building long-term international partnerships.
- **Creating a shared inter-organizational language** – Translation is important in the activity of civil society. There is a linguistic obstacle not only between Arabic, English, and Hebrew, but also between the civic language and the language of formal and business organizations, and also among different civil society

organizations with different characters and identities—aid organizations, peace organizations, and human rights organizations. A basic agreed system of concepts should be created in the context of the effort to reconstruct Gaza and the political process, which will assist joint action and coordination and increase the overall effectiveness of the efforts.

- **The range of capacities in civil society in light of the need for multidimensional reconstruction** – The reconstruction efforts in Gaza do not include only a physical effort to restore vital infrastructure, housing, businesses, etc.; they also include a range of social, psychological, educational, and other aspects. Civil society in Israel and Palestine includes many varied organizations that possess knowledge, skills, and resources across the broad range of fields required for reconstruction. The extensive knowledge that exists in civil society organizations in these fields should be utilized, made accessible to the formal levels, and the work of organizations—which is often directed inward into Israeli/Palestinian society—should be connected to the reconstruction efforts in Gaza.

D. Proposals for concrete steps that can be advanced

- **Organizing a conference for civil society organizations in Israel** under the title: “Gaza Reconstruction – An Israeli Interest”.
- **Preparing specific project portfolios** for the actions required for the reconstruction of Gaza – civil society organizations that possess access and relevant knowledge should prepare specific plans for projects, practical steps, and required actions in Gaza, and promote these ideas among those who can implement them – other civil society organizations, international institutions, international aid organizations, the international mechanism of the Trump plan, business entities, the local community in Gaza, etc.
- **Mapping the relevant organizations within the Gaza Strip** with which there is potential for cooperation. Likewise, mapping the various challenges and the different alternatives for dealing with them.
- **Establishing a shared database** for civil society organizations operating for the reconstruction of Gaza.
- **Mutual opening of doors** – civil society organizations should assist one another in creating connections, access to policymakers, access to relevant resources, etc. A concrete example is access to the CMCC headquarters in Kiryat Gat, and inviting organizations that wish to bring their ideas to the table to make use of organizations for whom the door to the headquarters is already open.
- **Connecting the emerging civil society in the western Negev to the issue of security** – joint action aimed at undermining the idea that a wall/fence constitutes security, and promoting the approach that sees peace as security, and the reconstruction of Gaza as a step toward advancing security for the western Negev.

- **Connecting international governments and foundations to initiate, promote, and support cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian organizations** – a significant step for governments and international foundations interested in promoting peace and the reconstruction of Gaza is to support the funding of Israeli–Palestinian cooperation, to provide a platform and organizational framework for such cooperation, to assist in creating connections and accompaniment, and to provide bureaucratic support in overcoming various barriers.
- **Crowdfunding reconstruction initiatives** – concrete crowdfunding initiatives, which have already emerged from Palestinian society in Israel, have succeeded in mobilizing public support, both in financial resources and in emotional connection and a sense of belonging among the population that wishes to take part in reconstruction, and this serves as an accessible means for it. It would be appropriate to continue such initiatives, led by Palestinian civil society in Israel, but also by others, and especially through Jewish–Palestinian partnership.