

Executive Summary

Discrimination Combating Mechanisms: Freedom of Religion and Belief in Palestine

The study was conducted by 40 youth in Palestine who are participating in the regional Musawat project, which focuses on countering discrimination based on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. During the research, the youth were supported by the Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy (PCPD). The research focusses on the status of FoRB in Palestine as well as other related Freedoms, including Freedom of Expression. A questionnaire of 50 questions designed by the youth forms the core of the research. It was completed over 850 times.

The research shows a **clear gender-based discrimination against women** when looking at the status of Freedom of Religion and Belief as well as other Freedoms. The **level of freedoms enjoyed by women is lower than men** in almost all the topics that were researched.

Furthermore, **70% percent** of respondents in the large survey agree with the statement that **harassment based on the ideology and political position exists**, including harassment on **social media**.

While most respondents stated that they enjoy a **high level of freedom to select their belief and religious rites**, there are instances of **discrimination based on religion, especially in terms of employment**.

Context

The study is based on the assumption that implementing all forms of public freedoms in Palestine is problematized. The struggle to implement public freedoms obstructs the development process, and additionally undermines the struggle of the Palestinian people who have been living under Israeli occupation for decades. While the study is focused on FoRB, other freedoms are also included as they are seen as highly interrelated. While the report is relevant for Palestine as a whole, the survey and focus groups have been conducted in the West Bank only.

Objective and Relevance

The main objective of this study is to look into the current status of multiple freedoms in the Palestinian society, including freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, and press freedom. In addition, the study aims at identifying gender-based discrimination in the Palestinian society.

Freedoms play an essential and prominent role in societies. They serve as tools to advance social and economic development, in addition to the impact they have on education and economies. Furthermore, freedoms play a role in identifying and utilizing the capacities of individuals in order to advance the society and eventually achieve stability.

Musawat

The Musawat Project, funded by the Human Rights Fund of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹ is a regional project aiming at countering discrimination based on Freedom of Religion and Belief in Iraq,

Lebanon and Palestine. The project is designed and implemented by PAX and various partners in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, including PCPD who supported the youth in conducting this research. Four “pillars” of discrimination related to FoRB have been identified, which all relate and strengthen each other: 1. Discrimination on a social level. 2. Discrimination on a political/authoritarian level. 3. Online discrimination. 4. Policy discrimination. In addition to various regional activities in order to strengthen the exchange,

Main Recommendations:

- To adjust **Palestinian legislation and laws**, in order for them to align with the international declarations, agreements, and conventions that Palestine has signed.
- To **invest in social media**, which can serve as a platform for youth to post their opinions and contribute to building a civil and democratic Palestinian State, which can **embrace all citizens on the ground of citizenship** and loyalty to Palestine despite of sex, religion and opinion.
- To **activate the role of women and women’s organizations/institutions** to play their role in defending public freedoms and working to **eliminate all forms of discrimination against women**.

¹ The information presented in this report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs who funds this project.

Executive Summary

Discrimination Combating Mechanisms: Freedom of Religion and Belief in Palestine

Methodology

In the course of the study, the following methods were used by the youth:

1. Organizing focus group discussions

The study targeted a specific target group, mainly in areas where the 40 youth conducting the study are located. It took in consideration gender and age differences, educational background, and political and religious affiliations. This would ensure having highly credible outcomes and would diminish the margin of misjudgments. Taking into account age differences helps to determine the mindset of each group, avoid discrimination and help in being objective.

2. Circulating a questionnaire addressing the above-mentioned freedoms

The questionnaire included 50 questions covering all the objectives of the study and included all target groups. It was circulated and considered the age differences and political and religious affiliation of the participants.

3. Conducting literature review on freedoms

The study relied on a series of studies and literature that dealt with the topic of freedoms, in order to constitute the various parts of the questionnaire to reveal similarities and differences in comparison to those studies. Among those studies are: The Freedom of Religion and Belief, a study issued by the Center for Human Rights of the University of Minnesota, 2006; a report entitled The Reality of Public Freedoms in Palestine, issued by the Law Center at Birzeit University in 2004, in addition to a research by Rani Al-Sarjani entitled Freedom of Belief in Islam, published

in 2011 in Al-Fikr Yemeni newspaper, in addition to a group of other sources.

Freedom of Religion

Religion plays a significant role in specifying the scope of conflict and characteristics of a society. This requires particular attention and eliminating any feature that would limit the freedom of religion.

Questionnaire results show that there is a high level of freedom of religion in terms of the freedom to select your religion and practice your religious rituals. 81% of the questionnaire participants said they were not subjected to harassments based on religion. Also, 91% indicated that they experience interfaith harmony and that they do not get harassed based on their religious affiliation, apart from cases when religion is being embraced by some groups that use religion for political or personal interests.

On the practice of religious rites, 59% indicated that they feel comfortable practicing their religious rites at the workplace, and 75% felt free to practice their religious rites on their time off. This indicates that practicing religious rites at workplaces may encounter difficulties or pressures not religiously related, as much as they have to do with labor regulations and economic circumstances. In general, employers believe that practicing religious rites at work affects work productivity and is considered a waste of time. Therefore, some organizations occasionally resort to adding extra praying time to the working hours, which means extending the working day.

As for the question on the freedom to practice religious rites, 75% said they did not feel compelled to practice religious rites. By law, there is nothing in Palestine that forces any individual to practice specific rites, and it is up to the individual's choice. However, there are instances in which the authority or society intervenes

in the performance of rites. For example, the Authority prosecutes those who do not fast during the month of Ramadan, while members of society, like religious leaders, stigmatize those who do not perform or adhere to the rites.

On the existence of harassment or discrimination on religious grounds, 18% replied that such discrimination exists. However, the answers varied between Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, with regard to the relationship between individuals, 48%, indicated that the relationship is based on mutual respect regardless whether they are religiously committed or not. In order to raise this percentage, cultural and educational patterns should be changed. Last, 73% of the participants respect people who practice their religious rites and do not interfere in these practices, as it is seen as an individual choice that is someone's personal business.

Freedom of Expression

It can be said that the freedom of the individual is fairly satisfactory. However, it is low among females. We believe that the main reason behind this is societal constraints and not any other constraints, as we live in a society governed by a masculine mentality. Especially in rural settings that restricts the movement and freedom of women.

There are significant societal restrictions imposed on women. Most of them are banned by their families to participate in activities conducted outside their governorates. This has several reasons, among which the societal constraints on women exceed the constraints imposed on men more than twice. In some cases, the parents are concerned about crossing the Israeli military checkpoints erected between the

governorates. Finally, there is the economic factor, as commuting requires money. Thus, those women who are not working and do not earn income are prohibited from participating by their parents.

Nearly half of the participants, among both sexes, expressed their inability to share their thoughts. This is usually due to a number of diverse reasons, some are societal, such as customs and traditions, others are religious, where religion restricts the implementation of many practices that are considered contradictory to it. Other reasons are political ones related to the iron fist adopted by regimes towards ideologies and policies that undermine their own.

Two thirds of participants expressed that they accept the thought of others. This is an encouraging percentage. Furthermore, nearly 60 percent of participants condemn attempts to impose political ideology and beliefs on others and influence their beliefs, which is an encouraging rate. The percentage of females who condemn attempts to impose political ideology and beliefs on others was higher than the male percentage. While two thirds condemn the imposition of political ideologies and opinions on others, the other one third sees this imposition as a necessity. This is somewhat disturbing, indicating a lack of respect for the ideas of others and an attempt to control in order to impose the individual's ideologies and way of thinking on the rest of the society.

Unfortunately, questionnaire results show that 70 percent of the participants agree that harassment in relation to an individual's ideology and political position exists. This is a truly alarming percentage. 40 percent indicated that they were harassed because of their political background, and 33 percent were

harassed based on their ideological background. This is a clear indication that the political factional education needs to be reviewed as it is based on intolerance and negating others. Therefore, it would be difficult to change unless we work on changing the culture of the society.

Press Freedom

The questionnaire addressed the freedom of publication on social media and other forums through a series of targeted questions. This indicates the extent to which public freedoms are prevalent in Palestine and the level of people's satisfaction with the freedoms.

Half of the participants answered that they do not feel that there are restrictions imposed when they want to post their opinions on social media. This indicator is fairly satisfactory. However, if we would like to raise this percentage, lifting the restrictions imposed by the state or the regime, as well as the occupation on the freedom of publication for individuals are important. This is a right guaranteed to all members of society. The occupier perceives the freedom of expression as a threat to its existence due to the unjust policies it imposes on the Palestinian people. This freedom mobilizes the countries of the world to stand with the Palestinian people and support them in realizing legitimate rights.

Regarding the question on the extent of fear and anxiety they feel when posting about the Israeli occupation, half of the participants expressed fear to post about the Israeli occupation. This means that the occupation is a major part in controlling the freedom of opinion and publication. The occupier sees freedom of thought as a threat to its existence, and therefore



feeds the propensity for resistance against the occupation.

From time to time, the Palestinian Authority (PA) also commits several violations against its citizens. These violations range from being involved in corruption issues to practicing the dictatorial mentality. The PA sees that freedom of expression could instigate people's lack of confidence in the authority and would shake the authority's foundation. As for the question about fear of harassment by the PA, one third of participants indicated this sentiment. This means that the PA comes second after the occupation in restricting freedom of opinion and writing.

In fact, the Israeli occupation, the PA, and the clergy sometimes constitute a strong barrier between individuals and their ability to promote their ideas due to the persecution to which individuals are subjected. Whether by the occupation, the Authority, or because of the people's perception that is based on inherited religious or social perspectives. The fear rate among women appears to be much higher due to existing gender injustice, in addition to the long dated social restrictions imposed by society upon women.

Conclusion

Most of the participants stated that they enjoy a high level of freedom to choose and practice their belief and religious rites. Nevertheless, some pointed out that there are manifestations of discrimination based on religion in the field of work and employment.

With regard to the freedom of thought and political affiliation, most participants reported that they enjoyed a fair amount of freedom of expression and

publicly posting their opinions. However, some stated that they were harassed when revealed their opinion and were prosecuted for positing their opinion on social media and other forums. The questionnaire found that 41 percent confirmed having a space to express their ideas, while a small percentage indicated that freedom of expression and political affiliation are suppressed. This is a crosscutting result with the results from the focus group debates. On the other hand, discussions in the focus groups regarding the freedom of expression revealed that there is a high percentage of freedoms in this regard, which was confirmed by the results of the questionnaire, where it showed that 51% indicated that citizens enjoyed the freedom to post their ideas. This is promising despite some impediments and suppression exercised by the competent authorities in relation to this aspect.

Regarding gender-based discrimination, discussions of participants in focus groups indicated that there was a clear discrimination practiced against women living in a patriarchal society that attempts to limit their freedom. This is clearly echoed in the questionnaire, which revealed that 69% sees that this is the case in the Palestinian society.

Recommendations

- ◆ To achieve an adequate degree of all forms of freedoms, religion and the state should be separated. The state must not intervene in certain rituals and the state must refrain from wearing the religious gown to satisfy the majority.
- ◆ To revive Parliamentary life by allowing the individual to run and vote and diminishing the state's infringement on people's rights and freedoms.
- ◆ To align Palestinian legislations and laws with the international declarations, agreements, and conventions that Palestine has signed.
- ◆ To make a qualitative shift in the concepts and methods of education, equip teachers with the values required to achieve the development process, and move away from indoctrination processes that cannot create a creative process in society.
- ◆ To activate the role of women's institutions and organizations. They should play an active role in defending public freedoms and working to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.
- ◆ To call upon the media to embrace issues of public freedoms and combat and eliminate discrimination; to refer to the monopoly of the state media that aims at serving its policies and objectives; to give the opportunity to individuals, groups and parties to express their opinions through the State media; and to investigate the news objectively without focusing on the news that serve the point of view of the regime.
- ◆ To pursue restrictions on capital to diminish its power and influence on society and diminish its exploitation and discrimination towards citizens whether men or women.
- ◆ To undertake field work addressing issues of tolerance and acceptance of others in order to increase awareness about the others.
- ◆ To invest in social media to serve as a platform for youth to post their opinions and contribute to building a civil and democratic Palestinian State that can embrace all citizens on the ground of citizenship and loyalty to Palestine despite of sex, religion and opinion.