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Poland and Palestine – contemporary relations

Abstract: Contemporary relations between Poland and Palestine are currently developing and increasing year after year, by implementing regular steps, intensive plans, clear policies and signing many bilateral agreements in numerous fields bringing benefits to both sides. Poland and Palestine want to strengthen relations to achieve partnership goals, by holding focused meetings between official organisations from the two parties. The real beginning for starting these meetings refers to 9th of February, 2009 when Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and Foreign Minister of the Palestinian National Authority Riad Al-Malki signed a three-year framework agreement on developing cooperation between the MFAs of the Republic of Poland and of the Palestinian National Authority. The signing of this agreement allowed the opening of a new period for more cooperation and connection between the two sides and will continue to develop this relationship under a consistent policy.

Key words: Palestinian National Authority, Republic of Poland, international relations

On 23 September 2011, Mahmoud Abbas on behalf of the Palestinian National Authority (pol. *Palestyńska Władza Narodowa*) applied for the UN membership for Palestine. This effort has been blocked by the Security Council. However, one year later, on 29 November 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/67/L.28 concerning the status of Palestine. In the decision – adopted by 138 votes in favour, with 9 against and 41 abstentions – it was stated that Palestine would be regarded as a “non-member state observer” (*Resolution*, 2012, Para. 2). Consequently, the status of Palestine has changed from an “observer entity” to an observer “state”. Such a decision has caused many legal and political consequences among which the most crucial and controversial was the question of Palestinian statehood.

Among the UN member states which decided to abstain was Poland. This study does not tackle the question of Palestinian statehood, but presents contemporary relations between Poland and Palestine. The aim is to analyze different forms of cooperation and Polish humanitarian and development aid in order to prove that the bilateral relations intensify year after

year by putting regular steps, intensive plans, clear policy and numerous agreements to bring benefits to both sides, however they are limited to social and cultural issues.

Genesis of bilateral cooperation

After 1989, for many years the Middle East was rarely mentioned in the official Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs. The region was in a margin of Poland's foreign policy. Since the 1990s, membership of the *North Atlantic Alliance* and of the European Union was treated as a priority, together with development of friendly relations with the United States and neighbouring countries. After 2001, significance was given to international co-operation aimed at combating terrorism and ensuring security in the region and globally. The necessity to increase commitment in the Middle East was the result of the accession to the European Union and implementation of EU foreign and development policy. In the official strategy towards non-European developing countries of November 2004, the need for intensifying cooperation was indicated as "interdependence – political and economic – with the Union's neighbourhood is already a reality" (*Wider*, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, the Middle East region was defined as strategic. The need for stabilization and modernization was stressed and the willingness to provide support through the European Union for freedom and stability in the Middle East. An "important aim is to support attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stabilization of the Middle East and the Gulf region" (*Strategia*, 2004, p. 33). As to the Palestinian Authority, it was decided that Polish initiatives would concentrate mostly on humanitarian and development aid.

In January 2005 Representation of the Republic of Poland to the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah was established. Until 1994 the Embassy in Tunisia maintained working contacts with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (although first official contacts date back to the mid-70s and diplomatic relations were established in 1988). Starting in 2 April 1997 a diplomatic representative of the Embassy in Tel Aviv was the liaison to the Palestinian Authority. The Representation was tasked with strengthening bilateral relations by improving contacts mostly between parliamentary groups and ministries of culture, universities and non-governmental organizations.

On 9 February 2009 the then Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski and Foreign Minister of the Palestinian National Au-

thority Riad Al-Malki signed a three-year *Framework agreement on development cooperation* (pol. *Ramowe porozumienie o współpracy rozwojowej*) between the MFAs of the Republic of Poland and of the Palestinian National Authority (*Autonomia*, 2014). It is necessary to point that the agreement was not an official inter-state treaty but a ministerial document. The guiding principles of cooperation were defined as respect for democracy, international law, human rights, sovereignty and equality between peoples and states are the between the two parties (*Framework*, 2009). The importance of links between the Palestinian and the Polish nations were mentioned, as well as their common historical and cultural values. As Polish authorities decided to provide assistance for economic and social development, in the agreement different forms of cooperation were stipulated, among others: technical aid, financial support for development and humanitarian projects approved in official Palestinian strategic plans, as well as scholarships and financial support for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). For that reason, it can be concluded that the agreement allowed a new period to be open for more cooperation and connection between the two sides and this relation is going to improve under a policy of organized systematic year by year.

It is also important to indicate that both parties of the 2009 *Framework agreement* reaffirmed “their commitment to achieve a just, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, consistent with the terms of reference of the Madrid Conference and its principles, including land for peace, and based on the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and the Road Map, as well as commitment to a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, built upon the two-State solution, based on the 1967 borders and grounded in international legitimacy” (ibidem). In this context, it is worth to mention the analysis of Lena Kolarska-Bobińska and M. Mughrabi of 2007. Both Authors were trying to analyze Poland’s policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and they reached an agreement to many important points regarding this topic. Firstly, “under communism, Poland led a pro-Arab policy. Since 1989, however, it is conducting a policy of *equal distance*” (Kalarska-Bobińska, Mughrabi, 2007, p. 14). Nevertheless, it must be said that Poland is trying seriously to achieve the peace process between Israel and Palestine through holding dialogues and negotiations that to achieve justice and international legitimacy. According to the official position, Poland supports the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, especially the right to self-governance and

the establishment of Palestinian state what is regarded as a key element for stability in the region. Future Palestinian state should be sovereign, viable and capable of peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries in the region (ibidem; more: *Stanowisko*, 2007). Consequently, Poland opposes unilateral actions because the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict according to the Polish perspective is only through dialogues between the two sides.

Fields of cooperation and assistance

As it was stated above, under the 2009 *Framework agreement* it was possible to intensify cooperation between Poland and the Palestinian Authority, especially Polish humanitarian and development assistance. Every year Poland donates over \$140,000. For this reason, it was and is possible to finance several different social initiatives aimed at development and meeting social needs.

Funds are distributed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a manner of annual competitions (*Small Grants*, 2014). First instance decisions are taken within the Representation of the Republic of Poland to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Projects chosen for the final selection are evaluated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As to the requirements, it is necessary to notice that applications can be submitted only by organizations which are legally registered as Palestinian or international non-governmental organizations, catholic missions or other religious organizations or as entities of local or central government administration. Usually, projects covering the period of 6–7 months are accepted and the maximum budget cannot extend 35,000 EUR (ibidem).

In 2008, Polish development aid was aimed at three sectors: (1) education; (2) healthcare; and (3) increased access to potable water (*Actions*, 2008).

As a result, three projects were co-financed with over 1 million PLN. The first one was “Civil Palestine”, a joint undertaking of the *Tischner European University* and the *Palestinian Vision* partner organization. The project was aimed at activating youth, making creative use of youth potential, and implementing civil initiatives. It culminated in the organization of a Polish Day in Ramallah, which included a Polish-Palestinian friendship tournament in men and women fencing, and a festival in Bethlehem presenting the implemented activities. Another project was entitled “Improv-

ing Water Supply for Three Palestinian Schools in Bethlehem District, 2008.” That project was run by the *Polish Humanitarian Organization Foundation* and was aimed at improving sanitary conditions and access to potable water in selected schools. In cooperation with the Environmental Education Centre – a local organization – the project implemented trainings and workshops for pupils, staff, parents and representatives of local communities, devoted to environmental protection, agriculture, water economy and usage and maintenance of water purification stations. The third project financed in 2008 was “Developing Entrepreneurship among Women – Small Animals, Big Value: Rearing of Animals and Production of Dairy Products by Women in the Palestinian Autonomy.” The project was run by the *Polish Humanitarian Organization Foundation* project aimed at developing a dairy production cooperative operated by impoverished women from rural areas around Hebron. Apart from professional consultations and trainings, the initiative consisted of the purchase of professional dairy processing equipment, which enabled mass production. During the term of the project, its beneficiaries were helped by staff from the local partner, the Palestinian organization Shorouq. Additional aid was provided to the Palestinian Authority by transferring funds towards multilateral initiatives: the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan Trust Fund PRDP-TF and UNRWA (ibidem).

In 2009, eight projects were implemented with partial financing of over 866,000 PLN. The projects fell within four main areas of assistance: (1) social support; (2) access to potable water; (3) developing rural areas and local communities; (4) developing human resources (*Actions*, 2009).

Among the most important was the project “Fencers for Palestine”. It was implemented by the Tischner European University in cooperation with the Palestinian Fencing Federation (PFF). The aim was to raise the qualifications of Palestinian fencers and fencing instructors, with whom the University has been cooperating since 2007. In the framework of the project, a Polish coach was in charge of the Palestinian national team, a sports camp was organized in Jordan, and equipment was purchased for sports clubs. One important element of this project was the popularization of fencing by organizing tournaments. In 2010, a documentary film entitled “Fencers for Palestine” (directed by Urszula Laskowska and Mateusz Mularski) was produced. The movie depicts the project’s implementation in the Al-Amari refugee camp in Ramallah, West Bank. The second project was “Inaugurating Drama Classes in Schools and Youth Clubs in East Jerusalem.” The project was implemented by the Representative Office of

Poland in Ramallah in districts in East Jerusalem inhabited by Palestinian communities, which are extremely affected by their economic, cultural and social isolation from other areas inhabited by Palestinians (the West Bank and Gaza Strip). The aim of the project was to create youth drama groups to facilitate the process of self-identification and constitute a form of group therapy. The project's initiator and main implementing party was the Sanabel Theatre. Another project was implemented "Repair and Installation of Window Protection Systems in Wadi Al Hassin" by the Representative Office of Poland in Ramallah. The aim was to install window protection systems in several dozen houses in the Hebron area inhabited by Palestinians who were victims of acts of vandalism perpetrated by radical Israeli settlers. In response to Palestinian needs, the National Border Guard Headquarters implemented a project aimed at supporting Palestinian law enforcement agencies in preparing and implementing modern methods for building a national border protection system. The project was implemented "Trainings to Aid the Modernization of the Palestinian Autonomy's Border Guard," by providing additional aid for the Palestinian National Authority (over 1 million PLN) in response to the appeal made by UNRWA (*ibidem*).

In 2010, over 1.34 million PLN was channeled into the co-financing of aid projects for the Palestinian National Authority. The following projects were implemented:

- Polish Centre for International Aid: "On the Milky Way to South Hebron: Linking Small Goat and Sheep Farmers from Bedouin Communities and the Local Dairy Production Cooperative in the Massafer Yatta, Hebron District, West Bank;"
- Together Polska Foundation: "Youth Media Centre";
- Polish Humanitarian Organization: "Development of Human Resources Through Social Activation of Children and Youth from Hebron District – Extra-Curricular Activities;"
- Representative Office of Poland, Ramallah: "Promoting Cultural Diversity in Jerusalem by Supporting Activities Depicting Palestinian Culture," "Implementation and Purchase of Sports Equipment for the Qadura Fitness Park in Ramallah" and "Implementing, Equipping and Staffing of the Day-Care Room in the Bethlehem Children's Home;"
- International Cooperation Offices of the National Border Guard Headquarters: "Trainings to Aid the Modernization of the Palestinian Autonomy's Border Guard" (*Actions*, 2010).

As it was decided in the Polish development cooperation program for 2011, “public administration bodies, NGOs, public higher education institutions, research institutes, the Polish Academy of Sciences and its organizational entities could apply for financing towards projects to aid the Palestinian Autonomy” (*Actions*, 2011). Applications within four main thematic areas were taken into consideration. The first area was about supporting good governance, in particular raising skills among public sector workers. The second was aimed at developing the rural and agricultural sectors, in particular by raising the level of quality of local products, water management, rural governance and support for the local community. The next area concentrated on supporting youth development and education, and finally the last area was aimed at trainings of border guards in order to provide sufficient border management. Consequently, in 2011, three main projects were financed with the total amount of 800,000 PLN.

The first project financed in 2011 was a project of development of agricultural areas through the renovation of agricultural water tanks in southern Hebron district; project operated by the Polish Humanitarian Action. The goal of the project was to improve Hebron inhabitants’ access to water for household and agricultural purposes. In the framework of the project – with the help of local inhabitants – 20 water tanks for rainwater collection and storage were renovated. The users were also trained in water tank maintenance and hygiene, as well as in effective ways of collecting water.

“On the milky way to South Hebron II” was a project concerning strengthening the cooperation network between Bedouin sheep farmers in Masafer Yatta and the local dairy production cooperative in Hebron district in West Bank. That project was operated by the Polish Center for International Aid Foundation. The project was a continuation of the Foundation’s actions implemented in the West Bank in previous years. The aim was to expand the local market for dairy products and raise dairy quality. Sheep farmers participated in trainings devoted to modern technologies. Forty-eight farms were modernized to include new equipment (*ibidem*).

Another project involved training in support of modernization of PNA border services. This project was operated by the International Cooperation Bureau of the National Border Guard Headquarters. Measures under this project were focused on strengthening the PNA’s border protection system and boosting the level of border security by training border officials. Training methods to be applied at future workshops were also developed as part of the project.

In 2011, the Office of the Representative of Poland to the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah – in cooperation with local organizations – provided assistance of 500,000 PLN to implement small grant projects which included finishing, equipping and staffing the day care room of an orphanage in East Jerusalem. The goal of the last of the mentioned projects was to create a safe education and recreation room on the unused top floor of the orphanage. As a result, 21 children – as well as those who will live at the orphanage over the following years, will have the ability to study and play in a room equipped with the necessary instruments (desks, computers) and learning materials (ibidem). Another project was focusing on activating youth in East Jerusalem by organizing an anti-drug campaign. The project consisted of trainings for youth leaders selected from the local population. During the workshops, leaders received knowledge and organizational skills that they will use to increase local awareness of the problem of drug abuse among children, adolescents and adults living in the camp. The third project was about creating jobs by building water tanks in Aboud village. The project has contributed to facilitating the local community's access to water through the construction of 5 water tanks for collecting and storing rainwater. Ten local inhabitants were employed to build the tanks and local youths participated in awareness-raising activities dealing with effective and economical water use (ibidem).

In 2012, according to provisions of the *Development Cooperation Plan*, it was decided to provide financial support for projects falling within one of three main thematic areas. Those were: (1) education; (2) water supply and sanitation; (3) small and medium enterprises and job creation (*Actions*, 2012). Eight projects were implemented as a result of financial support, including five projects co-financed by the Representative Office of the Republic of Poland in Ramallah. Those were designed among others: to improve water and sanitary conditions for nine homesteads in the Jenin District (implemented in cooperation with Caritas Jerusalem); to level out educational opportunities for young people from difficult backgrounds in Eastern Jerusalem (implemented in cooperation with Spafford's Children Centre in Jerusalem); to improve the health of school pupils by giving them access to clean water thanks to solar energy was implemented in cooperation with the Palestinian Solar & Sustainable Energy Society; and to widen educational opportunities for girls in the Al Amarii Camp by providing equipment to the Fencing Club (ibidem). That project was a continuation of earlier support for a fencing club provided under Polish Aid 2007–2009, entitled “Fencers for Palestine”, which consisted of do-

nating professional fencing equipment to clubs. The project was implemented by the Polish diplomatic representation in Ramallah.

In 2013, six projects were implemented with the full or partial support of the Representation of the Republic of Poland to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. One of the most interesting was a project aimed at increasing food security by constructing greenhouses in Az Zubeidat village in Jericho District. Prevention of drinking contaminated water was the objective of another project financed and implemented in 2013. Financial support was directed at rehabilitation of the water-sanitation network in Ramallah. Providing water for agricultural purposes was the aim of the fourth project of 2013. The project realized in Ein Areek village and made it possible to build new channels to carry water. The area of education was covered by two projects. The first was aimed at creating equal educational opportunities for children in an orphanage in East Jerusalem. The orphanage run by Polish nuns, was supplied with traditional and electronic educational materials such as computers, a projector and interactive world maps. Promoting youth employment was the goal of another project financed in 2013, first directly connected with the Polish private sector. Technical assistance and mentorship of Polish experts were provided through the project. The last project implemented in 2013 was aimed at improving maternal and neonatal health services in the Bethlehem district.

In 2014 priority was given to projects covering one of the three areas mentioned in the *Development Cooperation Plan*: (1) education, especially improving access to education and providing equal educational opportunities; (2) water and sanitation; (3) small and medium enterprises and job creation (*Bilateral*, 2014).

When analyzing Polish commitment to humanitarian aid and development assistance to the Palestinian Authority, it is necessary to focus on another initiative taken as a result of the Poland's foreign policy priorities until 2016 approved in March 2012. The promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as commitment to co-operation for development were regarded as foundations of international cooperation. Consequently, within the *Solidarity Fund PL* (until February 2013 known as the *Polish Foundation for International Cooperation for Development "Knowing How"*) Polish experiences of transformation are disseminated and democratic transformations in third countries are supported. The Foundation is financed by the State Treasury and subordinated to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (*Statute*, 2014, Pars. 3, 8.2), therefore it implements tasks indi-

cated by the Minister and works towards the implementation of tasks considered to be the priorities of Poland's foreign policy. What is interesting, however, is the fact that activities of the Foundation are focused on supporting the states covered by the Eastern Partnership, countries of Central Asia and Myanmar (Burma) and Tunisia. Palestinian Authority was not mentioned.

Not only direct financial support is guaranteed. Poland agreed to provide scholarships to Palestinian students annually. What is more, at the Diplomatic Academy of Polish Foreign Ministry in Warsaw diplomatic trainings are provided. In May 1997 a twinning agreement was signed between Nablus city and Poznań, and in 2004 an official twinning agreement was signed between Bethlehem city and Częstochowa. One must bear in mind, however, that such agreements are not treaties between subjects of international law, but local arrangements. Therefore, they cannot be regarded as signs of inter-state cooperation.

Conclusions

Bilateral relations and future cooperation between Poland and the Palestinian National Authority are discussed during official ministerial meetings which take place on regular basis. The last such meeting was organized in 2012 when Riad Al-Malki visited Warsaw. However, the main question which should be asked is: do these meetings give a real chance for intensified political and economic dialogue?

Although relations are regarded as friendly, mutual trust is indicated and declarations of deepened cooperation can be heard from both parties, signs of real cooperation are limited only to humanitarian aid and development assistance. The agreements signed and official, regular meetings of the two parties are numerous but they aim to develop the Palestinian infrastructure, improve education and healthcare sectors. Mostly, these include water, agriculture, tourism and the youth sector, which have significantly supported the construction phase of the Palestinian people and strengthened the steadfastness of the Palestinian citizen on his land in addition to better exploitate and control its destiny. It is clear through these projects signed between the two sides that the Polish-Palestinian relations witness developing and continuing increase in large benefits for both parties which reflects the keenness of the two sides and their interest in.

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Polska i Palestyna – współczesne relacje

Streszczenie

Współczesne relacje łączące Polskę i Palestynę rozwijają się z każdym rokiem poprzez podejmowanie konsekwentnych działań, realizację intensywnych planów, jasnej polityki i licznych umów dwustronnych podpisywanych w różnych dziedzinach z korzyścią dla obu stron. Intencją Polski i Palestyny jest umacnianie relacji w celu realizacji partnerskich celów w drodze celowych spotkań organizowanych przez oficjalne przedstawicielstwa obu stron. Początek dało im spotkanie Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych Radosława Sikorskiego i Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych Autonomii Palestyńskiej Riada Al-Malki'ego, którzy w dniu 9 lutego 2009 r. podpisali trzyletnią umowę ramową w sprawie współpracy Ministerstw Spraw Zagranicznych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i Autonomii Palestyńskiej. Stanowiło to rozpoczęcie nowego okresu, charakteryzującego się intensyfikacją współpracy i związków pomiędzy obu stronami i pozwoliło na dalszy rozwój wzajemnych stosunków w ramach systematycznie realizowanej polityki.

Słowa kluczowe: Autonomia Palestyńska, Rzeczpospolita Polska, stosunki międzynarodowe