



Empowering Civil Society Organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

Tamkeen 





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Funded by the United States Agency for International Development, the Civil Society and Democracy Strengthening project is a five-year effort to strengthen Palestinian civil society organizations and elevate their role in public discourse. Known as Tamkeen — “empowerment” in Arabic — the project works with civil society groups to promote more accountable, democratic governance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Here is a glimpse into some of the project’s many successes. These are only a small sample of the dozens of activities implemented by Tamkeen and the more than 70 civil society organizations it supports.



Strengthening the Voice of Civil Society Organizations

“This training is giving us new tools to advocate for the full realization of the rights of women as citizens, helping to ensure their participation in the decision-making process.”

– A participant from the Women’s Affairs Technical Committee in Gaza on advocacy training provided by Tamkeen.

Through training, civil society organizations are improving their ability to voice the needs of their constituents and to influence government policies. Tamkeen provides comprehensive training in advocacy techniques in partnership with the U.S.-based Advocacy Institute. The program is filling “an urgent need for Palestinian expertise in the field of advocacy — a legitimate and effective means for organizations to reach out to decision makers,” says Tamkeen Chief of Party Mohammad Almbaid.

Training in advocacy is only one of the many capacity-building initiatives led by Tamkeen. The project is also helping create a network

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of leading Palestinian training providers and university extension programs to promote better training standards modeled after international best practices. Other initiatives include capacity-building programs in communications and media relations, information technology, grant proposal writing, financial and administrative management, performance monitoring, and organizational needs assessments.



“I was uncertain about the notion of democracy and civil society. At the university, at home, and in the street, I heard contradictory opinions. My thoughts and preconceptions about democracy and civil society would not have changed without this training.”

– A Gaza university student on a Tamkeen-funded training program run by Wattan, the Palestinian Institute for Community Research and Training.

Changing Attitudes

Wattan, the Palestinian Institute for Community Research and Training, is working with university students in Gaza to challenge prevailing attitudes about democratic systems of government. Through an intensive course, the students learned to prioritize community problems and to organize advocacy campaigns to address these issues. In one campaign, they identified the need to pave a road in a poor area of town, built a case for the work, and successfully lobbied government officials on behalf of local residents.

Many Tamkeen-funded activities target high school and university students, a key constituency in any emerging democracy. Led by Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations, these initiatives are exposing students to effective ways of advocating change within a

democratic system. In the West Bank, for example, the Bisan Center for Research and Development trained a group of 70 teenagers on how to gauge community needs, research a problem, and propose solutions to decision makers. Several international organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund, used the group's recommendations to target resources in the area.



Combining Services with Democracy and Governance

*“When I help children
to improve themselves
and allow them to
communicate their
needs to their families
or teachers, isn’t this
democracy?”*

– A project coordinator at the Jabaliya Rehabilitation Center, a Tamkeen grantee in a Gaza refugee camp.

In 2003, hundreds of Palestinians gathered in front of the Legislative Council to call for improved services to the disabled. Led by the Jabaliya Rehabilitation Center, the protest raised awareness about the need to better integrate the disabled into mainstream society. As an outcome of this effort, several policemen enrolled in sign-language courses so they could better serve the hearing-impaired.

Based in one of Gaza’s densest refugee camps, the Jabaliya Rehabilitation Center provides a wide range of services to the deaf and hearing-impaired, including hearing tests and vocational training. With support from Tamkeen, the center has formed a group of citizens

to advocate for the rights of the hearing-impaired in the area.

Many Tamkeen-funded activities combine services to marginalized groups with civic education. As they receive services that help meet their immediate needs, these groups are introduced to democratic concepts such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the voting process. This approach is particularly effective because people “are more receptive to democracy and governance activities when these are tied to tangible benefits,” according to an independent review of the project.







“When I encountered problems, I used to get confused and stay silent, fearing that others would undermine what I said. Now I have self confidence; I can face and try to solve any problem without fear. I have a voice now.”

– A young mother who participated in a Tamkeen-funded initiative led by Al-Lod Charitable Society in Nablus.

Empowering Marginalized Groups

Through a program called Guide Mothers, Al-Lod Charitable Society has educated more than 350 young mothers in Nablus on social, psychological, and health topics, while empowering them to serve as advocates for women’s needs. The mothers share their knowledge with their peers through home visits and voice their concerns to decision makers. Most recently, they met with Legislative Council member Dalal Salameh to discuss children and women’s rights issues.

“We gathered a large group of women who rarely leave their homes and made new leaders out of them,” said Al-Lod Project Manager Amjad Al-Asmar. “These women speak to their neighbors about what they have learned and, in this way, our target group is expanding exponentially.”

The Guide Mothers program is one of several Tamkeen-funded activities targeting women from marginalized communities. Other projects work with youths, teaching them marketable skills along with democratic concepts. For example, the YMCA in Jericho is incorporating civic education into all of its vocational programs. Such efforts are mobilizing the most vulnerable segments of society into effective voices of change. As the spouse of one Guide Mothers participant said of his wife: “Not only has she learned about issues related to maternal and child health, nutrition, and child development, she has also learned how to fight for her rights.”



“When we first found out we were going to ‘play’ democracy, we didn’t know we would actually get to create our own political parties and elect our own representatives.”

– A seventh-grade student in a youth parliament created by the Culture and Free Thought Association, a Tamkeen grantee in southern Gaza.

Experiencing Democracy at an Early Age

In the midst of conflict, the Culture and Free Thought Association brought together more than 300 middle school students to create a youth parliament in southern Gaza. The students set up political parties — with names like “Freedom of Expression,” “Equality,” and “Participation” — and mounted election campaigns for their representatives.

Led by its elected speaker, a young woman from Rafah, the parliament tackled a number of issues, including a proposed Palestinian law on children’s rights, and made recommendations to Palestinian Legislative Council representatives. Though there were misconceptions about democracy and elections at the start of the program, one student

reported: “Later, when we elected members and a speaker of parliament, our views changed.”

For many students, this was their first experience in the practice of democracy — one that they will take into adulthood. Several Tamkeen-funded efforts in other sectors also include the election of student representatives. For example, an organization in southern Gaza mobilized elementary school students around local environmental problems. As a first step, the students elected environmental committees at each participating school, and an umbrella committee with representatives from several schools. Committee members participated in environmental activities, giving the students a hands-on opportunity to play an active role in their community.



Why is Tamkeen Needed?

Palestinians have one of the most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East, with some 1,200 organizations bringing people together to effect change. These groups have traditionally provided a range of basic services usually under the purview of government — from healthcare to shelter and food, taking on an even wider role in the past decade to articulate the needs of their constituents and promote democratic reforms.

Like similar entities around the world, Palestinian civil society groups rely on external support. In advanced economies, much of this support comes from individuals and businesses. But dire economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza have

underscored the need for international funding.

Funded by the United States Agency for International Development, Tamkeen helps Palestinian civil society organizations survive, grow, and educate vast numbers of Palestinians — particularly marginalized groups like youths, women, and the poor — on the election process, the rule of law, and other aspects of democratic political systems.

As the nexus between citizens and government, civil society organizations are the bedrock of a future democratic state. When civil society flourishes, so too do prospects for peace and prosperity for future generations.

Tamkeen in Brief

Launched in September 2000, Tamkeen is a five-year, \$33-million project funded by the United States Agency for International Development. Approximately \$16 million of all Tamkeen funding goes to Palestinian civil society organizations in the form of grants. As of the end of 2003, the project had awarded about \$10 million in grants to more than 70 organizations throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

As part of a broad effort to help Palestinians develop better, more accountable governance structures, Tamkeen focuses on strengthening the role of civil society organizations in public decision making and government oversight. The ultimate goal of

the project is to empower civil society groups to articulate citizen interests, participate in public discourse, and disseminate information on public issues.

Tamkeen is managed by Chemonics International, a leading international development consulting firm, and its partners: U.S.-based non-profit organizations AMIDEAST and CARE International, and Palestinian consulting firm Massar Associates. With two main offices in Ramallah and Gaza City, the project also has satellite offices in Bethlehem, Nablus, and Khan Younis, ensuring wide geographic coverage across the West Bank and Gaza.

All grant-funded activities are designed by civil society organizations, with help from Tamkeen, and approved by the project's Grants Committee. Grant opportunities are widely advertised and applications go through a rigorous screening process based on transparent and objective criteria.

West Bank Office

Al-Rimawi Building
2nd floor
Irsal Street
Ramallah, West Bank
Tel: 02 298 8212/3/4/5
Fax: 02 298 8216

Gaza Office

Al-Sourani Building
3rd floor
Behind Al-Karmel School
Rimal, Gaza
Tel: 08 284 0170/2
Fax: 08 284 0070

E-mail: info@tamkeen.org
Website: <http://www.tamkeen.org>

Photos by: Steve Sabella, Gina Benevento, Walid Batrawi
Design: PALITRA Graphic Design; Print: Studio Alpha





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