Leadership in a not-quite war zone: an ongoing ethnographic study in Palestine

David Weir
Visiting Professor Edgehill and Hull Universities
Weir53@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is a Presentation of work very much in progress and I am hoping for an exchange of experience and update on research literature not all of it known to me, some suggestions around viable theoretical frameworks for this kind of material and feedback on how we take the analysis from here. It is based on a project within the EU programme to support Palestinian Authority efforts to “modernize and streamline public administration as well as to develop a professional and impartial civil service working within an organizational culture, in which responsiveness to citizens’ needs is the highest guiding principle”.

My brief as a consultant was to “design and develop a programme for the senior management team of the Ministry to function better both as individual managers and as a team responsible for the strategic direction of the Ministry and its activities”. So the focus is on the upper levels of management - Directors General, Deputy Assistant Ministers, Deputy Ministers and indeed the Minister himself.

The generic background to the project is of a Palestine with several evident issues, in particular, of an encapsulated jurisdiction within a state of occupation, of overwhelming poverty, absolute and relative, dependence on foreign financial subsidies, a very uneven modernisation of society, with strong tensions between the mobilisation of both ‘old’ and ‘new’ social actors, resulting in alternating cycles of expectations and overwhelming demoralisation.

Many commentators share Khalidi’s view that Palestinian identity can be characterised as fundamentally fluid and changing, woven from multiple ”narratives” due to individual and family experiences. But that there exists an Identity that has been organically developed due to the challenges of peasants forced from their homes due to Zionist immigrant pressure, but overall that Palestinian nationalism is much more complex than simple anti-Zionist reaction.

This study represents an opportunity for an ethnographic study of a central institution in Palestinian society. The Ministry of National Economy has a central role in societal modernization evidencing a high degree of politicization, very varied experiences and skill sets of leading players as well as the usual suspects in complex public sector organizations in developing countries such as a lack of capability, corruption, lack of resources, traditionalist discourse and complex lines of affiliation in the client population.

There is a strong need for such research because in practice, little is known about the sustainable implementation of legal and other institutional reforms in poor countries. The ‘new institutional economics’ has been essentially prescriptive, with suggestions for improved incentive structures and organizations within classes of contracts (given
monitoring costs and asymmetric information) expected to result in greater institutional efficiency. Issues of implementation have not been addressed. Although the time period of this initial study was brief, it was preceded by intense documentary and verbal briefing and consisted of intense immersion: listening, observation, open-ended interviews with all division heads rapid supportive feedback and re-listening, and the continuous evaluation of field data in light of theoretical ideas and available literature.

Earlier studies had concluded that the key issues of senior management were poor vertical and horizontal communication and organizational relationships. Horizontally, senior management ran their directorates as individual tribes and fiefdoms not communicating with their senior management colleagues and not encouraging their staff to do so either. Vertically, communications, despite the Ministry having good e-mail systems, were also poor and delegation inappropriate leading to both over and under-delegation.

All the DGs in the Ministry were interviewed using an open-ended, non-directive questioning approach or Focussed Interview technique. Co-operation was very good and the interviews were conducted in a very positive and constructive climate. In the collection of data by means of one to one interviews it was promised that while careful note would be taken of all comments and answers, it was understood that all feedback was to be treated as non-attributable and that it would be impossible to identify any specific individual respondent. The major themes emerging from the interview stage were Communication, Teamwork, Leadership and the Political Envelope.

The frameworks of Douglasian Cultural Theory and Etzioni’s organizational compliance types were applied and Handy’s characterization in The Gods of Management was found to be useful. The general “BA”, the organizing principle of the multiple and competing narratives of the Ministry is described as a yearning for System while retaining the benefits of Diwan amid the perceived inevitability of WASTA.