

Opening Speech

Ghassan Khatib

Director of the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center

The topic as it is clear to every one deals with the financial situation of the Palestinian Authority on one year, the first year of the tenth government.

With us as main speakers we have Dr. Samir Abu Eishah – minister of Planning and also Acting Finance Minister, Dr. Rafiq Hussein – from the Presidency Office and Dr. Naser Abdul Kareem – from Birzeit University

I hope this symposium will be in the form of discussion and opinions more than a lecture style. The aim is to discuss in a way that will lead to removing the ambiguity on certain topics and to exchange opinions and information because the past period was dominated by allegations that we can do without them when all the parties concerned and all the stakeholders are present and when there are experts who are capable of holding an objective discussion as we are accustomed in such symposium. We start by presenting an intervention prepared by the JMCC that will inspire questions and topics that we inspire to focus on in this symposium.

And here we say that financial concern dominated official and popular situation in Palestine last year which was the first year of the tenth government period. The government was held responsible by some parties for this crisis that led to irregularity of salary payments and total shortage in ministry expenditures, in addition to a comprehensive strike by PNA employees.

The financial performance and reform were among the most important tools used in the recent elections, statements made by members of the current government assuming powers were full of serious and condensed criticism to the financial performance of the pervious government and governments.

The previous governments were accused of draining the treasury, raising the wage bill to more than necessary and that only ten percent of the senior officials received the greatest majority of the total salary bill, as well as many other statements.

This symposium aims to raise an open and frank discussion among various officials and concerned people with the participants from the elite thinkers, public opinion and civil society leaders and government officials.

Quite unusual that the financial issue this time is not restricted to the ministry of finance because the presidency for well-known and understood reasons is also involved, therefore it should take part of responsibility because it should take part in reviewing the financial performance during last year.

The topic that concerns various political and academic elite most is what we hear about the absence or retreat of financial performance transparency. Neither the ministry of finance nor the presidency provides regular information to enable the concerned people to follow up the revenues and the expenditure in conformity with regulations.

Many also inquire why electronic pages stopped providing reports and necessary information which are necessary for accountability. The absence of this accountability and transparency forms in fact a big defect in the basis of good governance.

As for the accountability and the calls for the PLC - the body mandated by the basic law - to hold all the governance accountable on behalf of the people, the report of the

Treasury committee highlighted a number of criticism and questions addressed to the government regarding the financial performance.

And here we repeat some of these questions to put them into a frank discussion that can contribute to achieve the public interest:

Why hasn't the government submitted the quarterly yearly report requested in general budget and financial law?

Why hasn't the government submitted the general budget draft law of 2007? And how such a legal can be justified?

And on what basis the government has spent and received money?

Finally the report inquires why did the unified account system stop? Which was considered one of the most important reform achievement at the time.

On the other hand last year witnessed an ambiguity which we hope can be removed today regarding the external assistance for the authority, is it true that Arab and international assistance has increased in comparison with last year, and if yes, why then are we talking about a continuous international siege and the need for a government to end the siege?

Aren't you afraid that forming the new government might in light of the talking about the continuation of the siege may lead to decline in the external assistance to the previous levels? And what is extent of coordination in this regard between the government and the presidency and why researchers find it difficult to rely on regular information sources pertaining to assistance?

And what is the fate of the amounts of money that where brought in through Rafah Passage Way, and how these amounts are calculated in the public treasury and why the PLC budget committee raises doubts on the figures presented by the government recently.

The most difficult questions, however is related to the wage bill and increase the volume of employment following the reported news saying that 30,000 new employees were appointed in the security and civil agencies last year.

These are the questions that we hope to discuss seriously and openly in this symposium so that the audience with us today can witness all positions and information and analysis presented which we also hope to clarify the picture to the masses that should practice accountability. We will listen to some short introductions that aim to open the discussion and I really hope that most of the period of this symposium will be given to exchange of opinions and discussion.

And for the sake of starting this discussion, I call on Dr. Naser Abdul karim Professor at Birzeit University to make his intervention on this topic and after that we will ask Dr Samir Abu Eisheh to present his remarks on these and other topics as he likes and then we will listen to Dr. Rafiq El Husseini, and we hope that each of the speakers, main speakers will speak for ten minutes that we will give sufficient time for everyone to take part in the open and frank discussion on these topics.