



**Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute**

**Round Table (3)**

**Merging Municipalities :Rationale and Limitations of  
the Resolution**

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## **Merging Municipalities :Rationale and Limitations of the Resolution**

During November, 2010, the Council of Ministers passed a total of five decisions, the first of which calls for dissolving the project committees into communities of less than 1,000 individuals and merging them with nearby local councils. The other ministerial decisions are related to merging a number of local councils and establishing four new local councils: Marj Bin Amer Municipality (comprising of ten communities) the United Municipality (four communities) in Jenin; Kafriyat Municipality (seven communities) in Tulkarem; and the AL-Yassiria Municipality (five communities) in Hebron.

The dissolving and merger decisions ignited intense debate between supporters and opponents, with each party possessing a sound rationale to support its argument. In order to initiate a constructive dialogue between both parties and come up with practical suggestions to maximize the gains of the decision, MAS Institute held a meeting that brought together different public and private parties and local bodies opposing the decision. To commence the meeting the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Local Government, Mr. Mazen Ghneim, provided a brief rundown of the Ministry's visions and objectives for the merger plan. The debate then focused on the dimensions and effects of the resolution, with notable contributions made by economist Dr. Nasr Abdel Karim; journalist Khalil Shaheen; and spatial planning expert Khalil Najm.

### **Application method and timing**

The local council mergers are part of the vision of the Ministry of Local Government which is comprised of three phases:

- ❖ Phase I, which the Ministry has pursued since the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, seeks to associate local communities in the appropriate frameworks. This phase attempts to remedy thirty years of negligence under the Israeli occupation.
- ❖ In Phase II, the PNA has been aggregating the local councils within joint services and regional councils in order to more efficiently coordinate work and joint projects in adjacent communities.
- ❖ The failure to achieve the objectives of the joint councils seems to be one of the reasons that led the Ministry of Local Government to the completion of phase III, which consists of the merger.

The Ministry wanted the merging process to be democratic and with broad participation of all stakeholders. However, in the case that all efforts to achieve voluntary integration were exhausted, the merger needs to be made compulsory under special legislation enacted for this purpose. Before the implementation of the merger decisions, the Ministry (mid 2009) prepared a guide for the integration of local authorities. The guide was meant to be a reference for councils subject to merger.

### **The Ministry's Argument**

The merger will improve the services provided to citizens. These services will enhance the steadfastness of citizens on land that is threatened by confiscation and exploitation for the benefit of settlements and the segregation wall. The Ministry's position is grounded in its past experience that the multiplicity of local councils has weakened their ability to withstand systematic Israeli threats. The Ministry desires to structure communities within a framework in order to achieve the best possible decentralization, implementation of community development projects, and improvement of services. In addition, the Ministry believes this will allow for tasks to be performed more effectively and efficiently, lower the costs of projects, resources to be fully capitalized, and the enhancement of administrative capacity.

### **The Opponents' Argument**

Objections to the merger are focused on the mechanism of decision-making and the lack of involvement of the citizens and local authorities that are directly affected. Critics argue that there is an absence of vision and the clear mechanisms needed to implement the Ministry's decision. Objectors to the merger also emphasize the failure of the plan to address the problem of adequately representing the communities and localities that are to be integrated into the existing and new local councils, as well as the plan's failure to find solutions to the unbalanced financial positions of the merged councils. It has also been argued that this plan is a detriment to the merged communities' culture and heritage.

Opponents to the plan argue that outreach efforts were not sufficient. They believe that awareness raising efforts are needed so as to obtain the consent of the local councils and involve citizens in the decision-making process in order to adequately implement the decision. Critics to the merger also believe that the current legal framework governing the relationship between the Ministry and the local bodies, as well as the broad powers granted to the Ministry of Local Government, are detrimental to the application of the principle of decentralization in government that the Ministry seeks to achieve through the merger.

### **Effects and Implications of the Merger**

It is not easy to measure the results and the impacts of the merger on local councils in the short term since evaluating the effects of the merger is very much related to developments on the ground, and the time frame. The following are the most important conclusions of the roundtable meeting that was held to assess the impact of the merger:

- ✧ Integration leads to the more efficient exploitation of resources through the re-distribution of service projects, which reduces the space used for a particular activity through joint projects.
- ✧ Results hinge on the contribution of the merger to the value of the services provided by the new local authority. This is associated with the availability of the additional financial resources of the merged councils, generated through improved collection and an enhanced level of aid.
- ✧ Cultural and heritage aspects should not be overlooked. Planners should ensure that the identity and cultural heritage of villages merged are not dissolved within the new council.
- ✧ Special attention should be made to the current debt of the merged bodies. Which party would bear the debt of the merged bodies? What is the role of citizens in paying their liabilities to the new council? What will the Ministry's role be in dealing with the debt?

### **Summary**

The efficacy of the policy of integration can be evaluated through:

- ✧ Assessing the ability of stakeholders to strengthen the benefits expected from the merger.
- ✧ Capitalizing on the experience of other countries in this area.
- ✧ Taking into consideration the gradation factor in the application of new policies, so as to identify weaknesses and imbalances resulting from the application in order to avoid them in subsequent phases.
- ✧ The Ministry should take into consideration the facts and constraints brought about by the geographical and political reality on the ground.
- ✧ The need to develop appropriate mechanisms to deal with the consequences of the integration policy and the negative effects that may result from its application.