June 18, 2017. MAS convened on Wednesday in its offices in Ramallah, a roundtable discussion on “Current state and opportunities for economic cooperation between Palestinians across the Green Line”, with participants from public, private and civil society sectors. Raja Khalidi, Research Coordinator at MAS, has prepared and presented a paper for the discussion. The main comments were provided by Mr. Ali Abu Srour, Director General of Tourism Professions at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Dr. Ayman Yousef, Professor of Political Sciences and International Relations at the Arab American University of Jenin, Mr. Mahmoud Kayal, General Manager of Weqaya Company, and Mr. Ma’n Sawafta, Director of Tubas Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture.

Khalidi opened the roundtable, highlighting the significance of the theme of the meeting for economic, political and social reasons. In presenting the background paper, Khalidi said that despite the Israeli restrictions to the Palestinian economy, trade and economic relations between the Palestinians across the Green Line, especially in the main cities in the northern West Bank,
are steadily growing. He reviewed the evolution of Palestinian-Palestinian relations across the Green Line, noting that the occupation had transformed the major cities in the northern West Bank, such as Nablus, from central commercial centers to isolated areas within a fragmented economy. However, he said, these relations have recently seen some recovery, since 1948 Palestinians from Israel started to choose the major cities in the West Bank for economic activities such as shopping, individual and group tourism, receiving higher education services, dental services in West Bank medical facilities, as well as investing in various areas, purchase of real estate, and provision of professional services, such as legal and accounting services. He said 1948 Palestinians shopping activities in the West Bank include family items and wholesale purchases of different products with competitive prices compared to prices in the Israeli market. Khalidi cited some survey sources which estimated the volume of trade between the two sides of the Green Line at USD 310 million in 2013. He said around 27 percent of Palestinian households from Israel visited the West Bank at least once a month for tourism and shopping purposes. Khalidi proposed methods for enhancing and developing these relations. “It is important for the public and private sectors to improve and expand their services, including the provision of banking facilities to shoppers, launching awareness campaigns and stimulating joint and individual investments and other measures and programs that encourage trade and economic cooperation,” he said.

The first speaker, Abu Srour, said it was important to expand the tourism base to include the Palestinian rural areas. This, he said, requires a bigger role by the government. All partners are invited to carry out outreach campaigns and find solutions to legal problems arising from the fact that the PA judicial system has no jurisdiction over the 1948 Palestinians, he said. Abu Srour called on traders to comply with the standardized prices and provide high quality services to Palestinian visitors from Israel.

Sawafta said the Palestinians, wherever they are, have one national identity, which can be embodied in economic and social activities. He highlighted some obstacles to such relations. “There are some major legal problems related to settling financial claims resulting from bad checks. This problem has drained a lot of money from the Palestinian farmers. There is also the problem of closing the Bisan Crossing to Israel, which makes farmers incur gross losses,” he said.
Sawafta called the PA to give incentives to 1948 investors and strengthen agricultural trade with them. “The Palestinian government can develop agricultural policies that facilitate and regulate trade between the West Bank and the Palestinians in Israel,” he said.

In his remarks, Yousef said the Palestinian-Palestinian economic relations can be considered as a local economic alternative in lieu of an absent national economic strategy. “Therefore, it is important to invest in the Palestinian identity and conduct studies on the needs of the Palestinian market inside and outside the Green Line. This would allow building an information bank to help formulate economic and educational policies for 1948 Palestinians.” Yousef called on all official and non-official parties to set up a joint operation room in order to help streamline trade and business procedures. “Also needed is holding workshops and educational seminars as well as conducting studies on the business sector for the 1948 Palestinians,” he concluded.

According to Kayal (a Palestinian entrepreneur from Israel), the topic should be addressed within a strategic framework that transcends the mere trade processes. “The efforts should weigh a comprehensive survey and a detailed study of the strengths of the Palestinians in Israel, with mechanisms for tapping their resources. “The Palestinians in Israel cannot manage without the West Bank, which is for them a gate to the Arab region,” he said. Kayal called for the institutionalization of relations and the capitalization of commercial transactions and documenting them in official records so as to ensure the rights on both sides of the Green Line. “It is also important to increase marketing campaigns targeting the 1948 Palestinians, who retain strong purchasing power,” he said.

The ensuing in-depth discussion produced recommendations and suggestions to enhance cooperation, trade and business traffic. Specific recommendations focused on a set of policies: launching awareness and education campaigns; controlling prices; and providing investment and marketing incentives, all within a national strategy designed and implemented by all parties, but with one supervisory body that can lead and oversee the development of this strategy. This should be accompanied by detailed surveys and studies on trade and business relations between Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line.