

CHAPTER 7

Disconnecting Civil Society from Its Historical Extension: NGOs and Neoliberalism in Palestine

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In the early 1990s, Palestinian civil society underwent a systemic process of structural transformation embracing neoliberal values and discourses and transmitting them to the local context. Such a paradigm shift has produced contradictions between civil society's past and present roles, agendas, discourses, worldview, vocabularies, politics, and relations with external forces and internal constituencies. This study highlights crucial dimensions of the structural transformation and argues that Palestinian civil society has been exposed to a systemic reinstitutionalization and professional NGOization informed by neoliberal principles. The study of Palestinian civil society encounters a complex set of overlapping problems, which produce several dilemmas at both the theoretical and practical levels. The Palestinian context is largely unique due to a certain peculiar factors relating to the existing colonial structure, absence of basic elements of the state, a highly sensitive and changeable political, economic, and social environment due to its direct exposure to global and regional changes, and the heavy involvement of external actors. Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are caught in the complex interplay between their role as development actors and their conceived political role in support of the "peace process." Furthermore, their position may be precarious since their activities are heavily funded indirectly or directly by multilateral and bilateral donors, whose agenda is deeply interlocked with their geopolitical interests in the region. This chapter offers an account of the structural transformation that engulfed Palestinian civil society in the early 1990s,

and identifies crucial dimensions to help differentiate between past and present versions of civil society versions.

Thus, the present chapter is divided into four sections. The first section critically explores the history and different conceptualizations of civil society and the way it was narrowed down to focus on NGOs as prominent actors in civil society realm. The second section looks at the early formation and structured groups of Palestinian civil society under the last years of the Ottoman Empire up until the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Section three focuses on the period after the occupation until the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993, where civil society was a source of contestation against the Israeli occupation as it was seen as an integral part of the national liberation movement. Section four analyzes the process of NGOization and professionalization of local organizations in relation to the new political context and the shift in the political economy introduced by the Oslo process and international donors. In addition, section four seeks to examine the multiple implications of such a paradigm shift on the organizations' agendas, their relation with the social constituency, politics, and the production of knowledge.

THE INTERPLAY OF CIVIL SOCIETY, NGOS, AND NEOLIBERALISM

"Civil society means many things to many different people"; such a statement has become a key introduction phrase in several studies to point to the inherent complexity and persistent ambiguity of the meaning of civil society. As every fashionable concept in the field of social sciences, the idea of civil society received significant attention in the last couple of decades, not only in the academic scholarship but also by various governmental, think tanks, donors, and UN agencies. Although there is now a wealth of theoretical and empirical research on civil society, this has not enhanced our understanding of a specific meaning nor provided us with a precise and widely accepted definition of civil society. Katherine Fierlbeck admits that civil society is "impossible to locate or define with any clarity or consistence; it lacks a thorough and insightful account of power relations; it does not distinguish between its normative and analytical functions."¹ In fact, the plenty of inharmonious definitions hint at prejudice reflecting contested ideological backgrounds, theoretical biases, social positions, class consciousness, and political perspectives, among other. Hence, the concept of civil society should be comprehended as a source of never-ending controversy, grounded in ideologically driven interpretations, which primarily seek to shape political systems and capture understanding with a specific formation of social order.

Part of this persistent ambiguity might be associated with the historical roots of contemporary civil society, dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries' European political thought and intellectual tradition. In a sense,

while civil society has originally evolved around the specificity of the European historical experience, it has become nowadays in the mainstream thought a widely accepted universal phenomenon vitally accompanying any democratic change/transition and “genuine” development. The resurgence of civil society in the last couple of decades has been inaugurated by Huntington’s “third wave of democratization,”² which has been taken up by Western officials and policy makers who strategized a particular form of civil society to perform a wide range of processes in the Global South. Thereafter, civil society became a frequent subject of a systemic top-down promotion. Contemporary civil society is, to a large extent, a predefined construct that is subject to global forces which primarily institutionalize transnational politico-cultural practices. Civil society operating in conformity with the Western liberal model has increasingly become a conventional wisdom in the consciousness of various actors in the Global South.

Beyond what appears to be a narrowly defined and globally promoted version of civil society, contemporary debates highlight diverse and, to a large extent, highly opposing perspectives on what civil society is, and how it ought to function. Theoretically, the most competing versions of civil society can be divided into two main strands. The first is the liberal strand that has its roots in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. Here, civil society is seen as the sphere of pluralism and associational life where common interests can be pursued, and citizens can protect themselves from both the despotic state and the “tyranny of the majority.” In this view a dynamic civil society is the fundamental ingredient for democratic politics because it acts as a “transmission belt between the individual and the state”³ ensuring a channel to protect people’s interests. Liberals conceive civil society as an inter-mediatory entity between the private sphere and the state, a free space guaranteed by an institutionalized legal order where citizens are encouraged to express their interests and ideas and actively engage in various political, social, cultural, and economic activities, as such civil society not only restricts state power but also legitimates state authority when that authority is based on the rule of law.⁴

The second strand is represented by the Gramscian paradigm, which sees civil society as an arena of struggle and contestation, segmented along lines of class and other forms of social identity,⁵ where hegemony and power relations are legitimated and reproduced, but which can also offer the possibility for counterhegemonic formations. In Marx’s view, civil society is intrinsically linked to the development of a capitalist mode of production and is fully realized only alongside the existence of the bourgeoisie; as such the state and civil society are not separate spheres but are coterminous,⁶ and both are a mere reflection of the economic superstructure. Gramsci builds on this conceptualization, but allows a greater degree of autonomy to civil society as the sphere of “voluntary acceptance,” where the dominant class asserts and consolidates its hegemony through

a variety of civic institutions.⁷ Yet what civil society meant for Gramsci was a space where counterhegemonic forces could produce emancipatory action to challenge the hegemonic formation of the capitalist state. This account of civil society has been significant reference to major alternative and critical schools and inspired numerous social and political movements seeking to break down the ruling-class hegemony.

What we are witnessing, however, is that capitalist globalization has inevitably favored the liberal version of civil society and paved the way for its quantitative and qualitative expansion at the global scale to consolidate the global neoliberal project. Being centered on the primacy of neoliberal globalization, this particular form of civil society has acquired a new set of characteristics represented in civil society's acquisition of an unprecedented assignment to administer a wide assortment of development projects in a manner that has gone in conjunction with the erosion of state capacity to oversee the development process. This form of civil society is distinctively engaged in complex interaction with multiple globalized actors such as multilateral development agencies, international financial institutions, international organizations, intergovernmental organizations, and the global "aid industry."

In fact, the role of globalized actors in supporting the creation and development of this particular model of civil society allow them to determine what is considered as acceptable in order to enter the arena. As Howell argues, donors define civil society as "an arena of formal and modern associations, distinct not only from a venal, inefficient state but also from an amorphous array of informal and primordial associations."⁸ This inevitably creates new lines of division (traditional/modern, formal/informal, civil/uncivil), which are made available to a renegotiation on the part of local elites who use new cleavages to reassert their power by legitimating it through the adherence to a transnational hegemonic discourse. It is clear how the increasing availability of funding in the global market for civil society promotion is likely to foster these processes. As an inevitable consequence, civil society promotion becomes also a process of exclusion of actors who do not respond to the dominant paradigm that it is meant to legitimize. There is now a widespread consensus among the critiques of the "New Policy Agenda"⁹ that "the neutral guise of civil society discourse and its deceptive appearance of plurality and inclusion serve to mask subterranean political agendas and render ideological hegemonies almost invisible."¹⁰

Neoliberal civil society has also been promoted as a realm that offers incentives for citizenship to be fostered through participatory processes. However, these avenues for the exercise of citizenship have gone through a process of differentiation between what Cornwall refers to as "created spaces" and "invited spaces," where the former are the result of political and social struggle and the latter refers to formal channels offered for participation in the decision making process. Those invited spaces can become not only a locus of control where distinction takes place between

who is invited and who is not; but can also become the means to fragment society and widen the gap between elites and the grassroots constituencies, since the language spoken is one which is externally imposed. Often those who are “invited” learn to speak the language of donors rather than functioning as a “transmission belt” for grassroots demands.¹¹ Based on Cornwall’s conceptual distinction, these “invited spaces” are increasingly occupied by NGOs, which are often seen as the “quintessence” of civil society to the extent that the very existence and dynamism of civil society has been equated with the number of such organizations.

The burgeoning literature on NGOs over the past 20 years went side by side with the renewed interest in civil society. However, a precise definition of NGOs remains problematic and equally ambiguous to that of civil society. In fact, the flexibility of the term constitutes a source of confusion as definitions range between narrowing the NGOs domain to include solely nonprofit organizations that are characterized by professionalism and recruit permanent paid staff with high skills and fund-raising capabilities,¹² and the inclusion of every organization within civil society (professional associations, grassroots organizations, community-based associations, trade unions, and the like).¹³ In order to avoid such a lack of clarity, this study will highlight key characteristics that differentiate NGOs from other forms of civil society actors (whether progressive, traditional, or religious). In this regard, the term NGO is not synonymous to trade unions, grassroots organizations, social movements, community-based organizations, charitable societies, or cooperatives. Here, I consider the following key characteristics to the special nature and structure of NGOs:

- NGOs are highly professional, recruit specialized staff, with expertise in the field and high managerial skills (not grassroots based, not membership oriented, rarely voluntary based except its openness to professional volunteers and interns who might be paid as well).
- NGOs have a certain degree of bureaucratized hierarchical structure, composed of board of trustees, directors, secretaries, offices, and sub-offices with complex managerial and financial procedures.
- Medium to large budget mostly donated by international organizations, international financial agencies, governmental agencies, development agencies, multilateral and bilateral donors, and regional organizations.
- NGOs operate domestically, nationally, or transnationally and largely engage in a complex set of networks and contacts around the globe, most notably the relationship between North–South NGOs, usually called in the organizational arena as “partnership.”
- Local NGOs are often established independently on national territories, but have an international umbrella organization, which draws its operational, structural, and principal framework.
- NGOs are heterogeneous in terms of their functional differences and areas of concern. Thus NGOs might operate within the broader context of development, humanitarian relief, human rights, environmental issues, advocacy, democracy promotion, and research and data collection. Furthermore, a single

NGO might carry out two or more projects in different fields and sectors simultaneously.

The rise of NGOs as prominent actors became gradually obvious in the 1980s, but the end of the Cold War constituted a decisive moment for their quantitative and qualitative mushrooming at the global scale. It is estimated that during the 1990s, registered international NGOs increased by one-third, from 10,292 to 13,206 and their memberships increased from 155,000 to 263,000 over the same period.¹⁴ Such a massive proliferation has encouraged proponents to go as far as to declare that “the role of NGOs in the twenty-first century will be as significant as the role of the nation-state in the twentieth.”¹⁵ Initially, this enthusiasm toward NGOs was linked to neoliberals’ discontent regarding top-down, state-centric, and homogenizing approach to development, which had seen, since the 1950s, the state as the only legitimate driver of the developmental process. The restructuring of the state role in the development process has left wider space for NGOs and has contributed to the multiplication of their areas of specialization and broadened their geographies of intervention.

The enthusiastic body of literature on NGOs has been extensively produced to acknowledge their involvement in “almost every aspect of human need and endeavour.”¹⁶ The World Bank considers them as “the missing middle between citizens and the state.”¹⁷ NGOs are believed to pluralize the institutional arena by increasing the number of civic actors involved in decision making.¹⁸ At the same time, they are said to be in close connection to the grassroots and therefore to reach the marginalized and disadvantaged, conveying their interests and widening the possibility for citizen participation.¹⁹ In this sense, they are regarded as agents of social change and bottom-up democracy. Concerning development, several scholars see in NGOs cost-effective service providers, more efficient, transparent, and innovative than governments.²⁰ NGOs are conceived as pioneering actors in mitigating conflict, peace-building operations, and integral mechanism in post-conflict recovery.²¹ Furthermore, it has been argued that NGOs are healthy to the economy by providing trainings and improving individual’s skills to qualify them to compete in the market, in addition to creating microcredit projects that support small-scale commercial activities and empower marginalized communities.²²

Conversely, such findings have been questioned in other studies, which concluded that the claims mentioned earlier are not necessarily accurate. For example, Edwards and Hulme found that there is no solid evidence that NGOs are more cost effective than other sectors including governmental agencies.²³ Riddell and Robinson provide a detailed assessment of the contribution that NGOs make to rural poverty alleviation in four countries (Bangladesh, India, Zimbabwe, and Uganda).²⁴ Their finding suggest that many projects failed to reach the very poorest, most were costly to implement, few of the projects demonstrated an ability to continue once

external funding was withdrawn, and that most NGOs fail to learn from one another and promote innovation because they often compete with one another for donor funds. Carroll points to the internal bureaucratic, hierarchical, and inflexible structure of many NGOs, which impede grassroots development.²⁵ Finally, NGOs are increasingly dependent on foreign aid, which made them more accountable to their donors than local recipients and decreased their internal legitimacy.²⁶

While the aforementioned critiques are mostly concerned with technical shortcomings, others situate their understanding of NGOs in the broader global context with a particular focus on the dynamic of power relations and the changing mode of global capitalism. According to Harvey, primary collective means of action under neoliberalism are defined and articulated through nonelected (and in many instances elite-led) advocacy groups for various kinds of rights. NGOs have grown and proliferated under neoliberalism, giving rise to the illusion that opposition mobilized outside of the state apparatus is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation.²⁷ Kaldor argues that “markets plus elections became the ideological formula of the 1990s. NGOs came to be seen as an important mechanism for implementing this agenda.”²⁸ Tambo noted that NGOs behave like the state in attending public projects, like the market in generating finance, and when the interface between development NGOs and rural communities is based on state or market agendas, rather than those of the people themselves, they are likely to facilitate new forms of imperialism.²⁹ Robinson sheds light on civil society in the neoliberal age and its relation to “democracy promotion,” and argues that “the United States and local elites thoroughly penetrate civil society, and from therein, assure control over popular mobilization and mass movements.”³⁰ Crucially, past agendas of social movements emphasized collective mobilization of the poor and organized their struggles along class lines. This *modus operandi* has been replaced with mitigating activities of advocacy and service provision that do not pose serious threats to the hegemonic classes. This also implicates that NGOs could penetrate social and revolutionary movements and redefine their structures and moderate their goals. As Petras points out, the failure of revolutionary movements in Latin America is attributed to the success of the NGOs in displacing and destroying the organized Leftist movements and co-opting their intellectual strategists and organizational leaders.³¹

There is a widespread consensus among these critiques that the increasing flow of bilateral and multilateral funding limits the capacity of NGOs to pursue any agenda aiming at real bottom-up social change.³² Hulme and Edwards consider the possibility that this increased availability of official funds has made NGOs “too close to the powerful and too far from the powerless.”³³ Therefore, they envisage the possibility that NGOs have somehow given up their radical potential, and have increasingly redefined their way of working in order to comply with donor requirements,

rather than finding innovative ways to combine their new role in development and their capacity to articulate people's demand by maintaining organic links with their social base and context.

This is reflected by two processes. On the one hand, new NGOs are created, driven by an increasing supply of funding for the "flavor of the month" endorsed by a global consensus, be it democracy promotion, peace-building, human rights, or sustainable development. On the other hand, older, more radical NGOs, caught in the dilemma between irrelevance and co-optation, were driven toward de-radicalization, professionalization, and inclusion into formal modes of action.³⁴ This means that once NGOs gained increasing visibility in mainstream development theory and practice, they moved away from the radical discourse of empowerment and social change from which they were born, and became involved in a process of gradual incorporation into the dominant paradigm. As argued by Craig and Porter, while NGOs have been incorporated in the "neoliberal box," it has become increasingly difficult for them to think outside this box, since it has incorporated much of the radical discourses around rights, empowerment, and social justice.³⁵ In this process of incorporation, these words have been detached from their original meaning and turned into appealing catchphrases, thus losing their transformative potential and serving instead as tools to give rhetorical legitimacy to the dominant paradigm. Therefore, if NGOs are incorporated through financial dependence on, and ideological acceptance into, a globalized neoliberal paradigm that defines their role regardless of the specific context in which they operate, they lose the ability to be an arena of broad social empowerment and to reflect the plurality of realities on the local ground. At best, they serve to empower local elites of professionals and technocrats who are close to the global actors, further reinforcing the exclusion of disadvantaged and marginalized sectors of society.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PALESTINE (1909–1967)

The early formation of societal organizations and structured groups emerged in the late Ottoman Palestine. This had been an outcome of profound reform and modernization of the empire's institutional structure, mode of governance, judiciary, and administration. The Ottoman Law on Associations of 1909 ensured the right of association subject to certain procedures. This law was directly inspired by the French Law on Associations of 1901, and adopted a notification system for the incorporation of associations.³⁶ Though the 1909 law is conceived as a restrictive one by legal analysis, it is relatively tolerant when compared to the later laws set by the successive ruling powers in Palestine. The early phase of Palestinian civil society was dominated by a traditional outlook reflecting the social structure of Palestinian society, as most of these associations were merely

based on charitable activities and led by urban elite, “notable” families and religious figures.

The British mandate, which lasted for over 20 years (1922–1948) brought more restrictive measures to Palestinian life. The 1909 Ottoman law was still valid, with further restraining amendments added by the British authorities. These laws were used in a selective fashion whereby Palestinian associational life was under constant pressures by the British authorities, while the Zionist movement was advancing the institutionalization of its project in Palestine. However, the British policies went hand by hand with the rising political awareness and national consciousness, which generated a growing resistance against both the Zionist project and British colonialism.³⁷ Associational life in Palestine during the British colonial phase continued to be traditional in nature, but the growing awareness of the Zionist project and the direct complicity of British forces contributed to the politicization of these organizations and introduced new progressive forms of social organizations such as women groups, trade unions, and political parties.³⁸ These organizations and movements played vital roles in service provision, the promotion of political awareness and the mobilization of communities, which culminated during the 1936 revolt against the British colonial presence and the longest strike ever in the history of the region, lasting for six months. Nevertheless, the emerging progressive side of the Palestinian associational life at the time was seriously obstructed by British colonial techniques of promoting familial rivalry and political disunity.³⁹

The end of the British mandate and the establishment of Israel in 1948 enforced a devastating reality on the ground. Over 78 percent of mandatory Palestine came under the control of the newly declared state of Israel, and about 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted and expelled out of their homeland to become refugees in surrounding countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and to a lesser extent Iraq and Egypt), with additional waves of refugees settled in various refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁴⁰ The remaining parts of Palestine were geographically and politically fragmented whereby the West Bank was formally annexed to Jordan and the Gaza Strip became under the administrative control of Egypt. The associational life that existed in the pre-1948 war era did not survive the *Nakba*, and was turned into ruins.

The fragmentation of land and population struck the entire Palestinian society, harmfully impacting the Palestinian social fabric, to the present day. In particular, the West Bank and Gaza Strip incorporation into different political realities, different institutional settings, states’ ideology, and the disparity of interaction with the hosting central governments as well as the lack of interaction between the West Bank and Gaza Strip caused considerable differences in the social structure and dissimilar patterns of political development.

The Egyptian administration suppressed the emergence of a distinct Palestinian political body representative of Gazans’ political aspiration. However, heavy control over the Gaza Strip notwithstanding, the ruling

Nasserite trend also recognized a distinct Palestinian identity and acknowledged the centrality of the Palestinian cause from the perspective of pan-Arabism. The case in the West Bank was greatly different. The Jordanian kingdom officially annexed the West Bank and treated it as part of Jordan, giving the West Bank's inhabitants citizenship. Unlike the Egyptians in Gaza, Jordanian policies toward the Palestinians of the West Bank aimed to deny the formation of a distinct Palestinian identity and to prevent a national movement from evolving.⁴¹

Under these different political circumstances and legal frameworks, a variation of two versions of civil societies characterized by weakness, fragmentation, and coercive control by the authorities were the main feature of associational life in Palestine. According to Sara Roy

Associational life in Gaza, unlike the West Bank, was very confined. The area's agrarian economy, for example, effectively precluded the emergence of a large labor union movement. The rural and relatively isolated nature of the Gaza region and the traditional nature of its inhabitants similarly inhibited the development of social organizations capable of providing services beyond the narrow confines of family or clan. . . . In addition, the Egyptian authorities allowed the pre-Nakba lawyers union to function after it imposed constraints and limitations on its structure, membership and operations. In the late 1950s, the Egyptian authorities permitted the establishment of one political party called the Palestinian National Union (PNU), which also founded several branches in the Gaza Strip. By the beginning of the 1960s, a Palestinian Legislative Council was established with various limitations, including the appointment of half of its members by the Egyptian authorities.⁴²

The West Bank experienced a wealthier associational life only in a quantitative sense. Palestinians were allowed only to join Jordanian political parties and express their political aspiration narrowly from the lens of loyalty to the monarchy. The Jordanian authorities suppressed every form of expression of a distinct national identity, as such, and the inhabitants of the West Bank resorted to underground political activism. The Jordanian establishment carried out policies antagonistic to the pan-Arabism ideology that gained popular momentum in large parts of the Arab world. As a result, Jordan allied itself with the traditional elite (religious, tribal leaders, and land owners) in the West Bank, and empowered their social positions to deter the growing nationalist forces. The Jordanian regime thus exploited the societal sphere in order to counter other political ideologies and establish a wider hegemonic structure over the West Bank. The forms of permitted social organization were traditional elite-led, apolitical in nature, and charitable in practice with strong ties with the Jordanian establishment. However, since King Hussein of Jordan declared the process of disengagement with the West Bank in 1988, Jordanian influence inside the West Bank has largely decreased.

PRE-OSLO PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

After 20 years of Palestinian reliance on Arab states' military and diplomatic capabilities to overcome the Israeli colonial project and restore their rights, the striking Arab defeat of the 1967 war and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza have strengthened the nationalist trend within the Palestinian political spectrum that advocated a greater political and military role of the Palestinians at the forefront of the liberation struggle. This paved the way for the Palestinians to take the initiative and organize themselves in collective and pluralistic organizational structures emphasizing Palestinian national identity and independent representation of all Palestinian political and ideological forces. Edward Said noted that Palestinians ultimately realized that they "had to arrive at their vision of their own future on their own."⁴³ This realization was expressed through the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

The formation of the PLO was a by-product of "politics of exile,"⁴⁴ which rapidly extended to influence the Palestinian presence inside the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and in the diaspora. Being founded, supported, and led by secular, educated urban middle class, rural political activists, and refugees, the PLO launched a revolutionary restructuring of the Palestinian political landscape, replacing the traditional elite typically formed by urban notable families and rural landowners with the emerging young middle class. The process of "counter-elite" formation was coincided with other factors that led to a class restructuring in Palestinian society. First, Israeli policies of constructing a settler-colonial regime over confiscated lands have weakened the power structure of the traditional elite who depended on land ownership to acquire political power, and because of the consequent deterioration of the agricultural sector, a large segment of Palestinian peasantry forces were transformed to cheap labor in the Israeli marketplace. Second, the expansion of Palestinian universities and the increasing enrolment of young generations from refugee camps and rural areas have had supplied the Palestinian society with new waves of young and politicized professionals who later became essential components of the educated middle class.⁴⁵ Third, the proletarianization of Palestinian peasantry forces, coupled with the embracement of modern ideologies have led to raising social and class consciousness and better understanding of issues of gender and class struggle within the underlying Palestinian nationalist framework.⁴⁶

This profound social transformation was reflected in civil society. Until the mid-1970s, the landscape of the voluntary sector was mainly occupied by the traditional charitable societies. Since the 1970s, however, various Palestinian factions adopted a new strategy of mass mobilization and grassroots activism as a form of political struggle against the occupation, which primarily sought to directly engage Palestinian people living under the Israeli occupation. As a response to the PLO strategy, a new wave of

modern organizational structure began to emerge in the OPT, characterized by the ascendancy of a series of diversified grassroots organizations. Trade unions, women movements, student unions, grassroots networks, culture centers, voluntary committees, and professional clubs gradually appeared throughout the 1970s and 1980s and expanded their influence in various localities. By and large, these sophisticated networks of organizations operated as proxy of factional politics. Consequently, the political characterization of Palestinian civil society was strongly manifested through the ideological orientation as well as the political affiliation of organizations, members, and constituencies. In this peculiar environment, these politicized organizations constituted a key factor in advancing the form of "institutional resistance," which was "actually far more successful than even its own designers envisioned . . . By the late 1970s, it had established the complete political hegemony of Palestinian nationalism and the PLO as the single articulator of Palestinian aspirations."⁴⁷

The Palestine Communist Party (PCP) and the leftist factions within the PLO, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), were fundamental in this process. The women's and worker's movements were the first that started to provide services while organizing people for national resistance.⁴⁸ Subsequently, mass organizations developed in other fields, such as health and agriculture.⁴⁹ Soon, Fatah followed the strategy of leftist organizations in order to reproduce what was seen as a successful mode of mobilization. This system was organized through a network of popular committees, decentralized, open and democratic structures, which ensured broad-based participation of the people. These provided the organizational structure that sustained the First Intifada at least for its first two years.⁵⁰

The mass-mobilization strategy was dictated by strategic needs. These mass organizations proved to be a successful model of collective social action in the context of anticolonial struggle. This network of mass movement and grassroots activism engaged in promoting radical local discourses of development aimed at deep social change, establishing an alternative system of service provision to that of the Israeli occupier, while combining these activities with mobilization strategies and therefore engaging a broad portion of the population and promoting consciousness-raising. The more progressive organizations concerned with social issues played a crucial role in empowering traditionally silenced voices such as women and youth. Domestic forms of grassroots development initiatives were carried out for the sake of self-help and self-sufficiency as a tool to challenge the imposed economic dependency on Israel. Educational, cultural, and artistic initiatives were conducted often throughout the OPT as a way to reserve the indigenous cultural identity.

As civil society dynamism posed a serious challenge to the Israeli mode of control, the Israeli military authorities carried out a campaign of harsh repression against the organizations' leadership in the OPT

as the occupation encroached on the “national institutions” and targeted the political leadership, the national movement had two options: either to confine itself to clandestine work but sacrifice a growing mass base, or to evolve alternative, open, structures that would be more difficult to destroy. Furthermore, the movement realized that as long as popular mobilization was restricted to purely political action, the mass base of any structure created would remain circumscribed; efforts had to be directed to addressing the concrete needs of different sectors of society within the framework of mass organization.⁵¹

However, in the late stage of the First Intifada these movements began to encounter a series of setbacks that forced them to go through a process of transformation. The first indicator of such a transformation was apparent with these organizations gradually losing connection with their grassroots base and the considerable decline of their mobilization capacity. This was due to a set of intertwining factors that took place at the local and international levels. First, grassroots movements proliferated reflecting their factionalization, and each one became increasingly formalized and reliant on professional personnel. This reflected also the growing importance of foreign funding channeled through international left-leaning NGOs, which fostered competition. Thus, as a result of the entry of international aid, a systemic process of structural transformation has engulfed multiple structures and functions of Palestinian civil society with an increasing embracement of donors’ conditionality and standards of professionalization and NGOization. Second, as a result of Israeli repression of all forms of popular organizations in the late 1988, the mass of the population withdrew from the frontline of the uprising, which became increasingly militarized. Third, the collapse of the Soviet Union weakened the capacity of the leftist parties to mobilize popular support, and drove many activists away from overtly political activity. Finally, the budgetary crisis of the PLO caused by the Gulf War led the professional development centers, which became the “sole political base for the intellectuals and activists from the left parties”⁵² to seek an increasing share of their financial resources from Western funding to survive.

POST-OSLO PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

There are a number of overlapping factors that contributed to the reshaping of Palestinian society, politics, and economy during the years of the Oslo process, and played a critical role in the structural transformation of civil society realm. In the first place, the entry of international institutionalized the dependency of the Palestinian institutional setting, state-building process and the entire survival of the society upon the global “aid industry.” In this regard, Palestinian political space has been enormously narrowed by the power of external flows of aid, which typically comes with dictated forms of packages and practices to be adopted by the

target institutions and groups, which in the Palestinian case, are all associated with the specific requirements of the “peace process.” Furthermore, the political economic aspects of the Oslo Accord and the subsequent agreements were formulated upon neoliberal tenets, which subjected the trajectory of state building and the development of the OPT to the heavy interference of international financial institutions and other international development agencies. Such a multidimensional intervention has apparently transformed the OPT into a “laboratory of technologies of control,”⁵³ where a range of technologies of governance, social engineering, economic development, and modes of social control are implemented and advanced by the highest-level practitioners, donors’ agencies, and international financial institutions.

With the beginning of the Oslo interim agreement the international donor community pledged \$2.4 billion for the reconstruction of OPT as part of its effort to promote the “peace process.” Additional contributions raised the total pledged to \$3.4 billion.⁵⁴ Since then, foreign aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been driven by support to the Oslo process. Le More argues that the international community approach was “premised upon an unsophisticated but common assumption about linear progress between peace, security and development,”⁵⁵ whereby injection of aid for the promotion of economic prosperity, an efficient state apparatus and a democratic civil society favorable to the peace process would be likely to yield successful outcomes. Brynen points out that multilateral efforts to support transition from conflict have introduced new techniques of social control including “a variety of social and economic objectives and instrumentalities, underpinned by substantial commitments of financial support.”⁵⁶

It was in this context in which Palestinian civil society underwent a systemic process of structural transformation during the 1990s. The situation that donors found in Palestine when they began to channel funds to support the Oslo process and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, was one of a weakened national liberation movement which was increasingly withdrawing from overtly political activism. This facilitated the inclusion of Palestinian NGOs in the mainstream discourse on civil society that was fashionable at the time, which in turn pushed even further a process of marginalization from the social base. While donor conditionalities attached to funding played a role in influencing local agenda setting, it was competition over funding and the kinds of organizational restructuring that it implicitly required in terms of professionalization that brought a fundamental change in Palestinian civil society landscape.

In the 1990s, external funding to Palestinian NGOs underwent both qualitative and quantitative shifts. First, external financial resources to Palestinian were “until the end of the 1980s, a regional matter more than a Western/international one.”⁵⁷ These regional financial sources included the PLO, the Jordanian-Palestinian Joint Committee, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and the Islamic Development Bank. During the final years of the First Intifada, this distribution gradually

changed, and Western involvement increased, and by the mid-1990s it had become the main source of funding for the Palestinian NGOs. Second, while it has been said that Western funding to local NGOs can be traced back before the 1990s, from leftist-oriented international solidarity groups and foreign consulates, with the onset of the Oslo process there was a “governmentalization” of funding and an increasing involvement of multilateral and bilateral development agencies, which have since then become “by far [. . .] the most important donors for Palestinian NGOs in terms of funding made available annually and of their massive presence.”⁵⁸

At the quantitative level, by the early 1990s Palestinian NGOs received approximately \$170 to \$240 million per year.⁵⁹ Though, in the initial period after Oslo, these figures underwent a steep decline, due to the Gulf War on the one hand, and, more importantly, to the diversion of funding toward the PA, the figures changed again and peaked in the 2000s. According to Palestine Economic Policy Institute (MAS), between 1999 and 2008, external aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip increased by over 600 percent to \$3.25 billion per year. During the same time period, external aid to Palestinian NGOs increased by over 500 percent from \$48 million in 1999 to \$257 million in 2008.⁶⁰

MAS indicates that organizations engaged in rights-based activities received the highest proportion of external aid (30%), followed by NGOs engaged in the social services (26%), economic sector (22%), education (14%), and charity and relief (9%). These findings also illustrate that Palestinian NGOs are engaged in development activities on a nearly 2:1 basis to relief, changing only slightly during the Second Intifada.⁶¹ Concerning the measurement of Palestinian NGOs dependency on external fund, the report concludes that external aid comprises over 60 percent of the GNI of the West Bank and Gaza. For Palestinian NGOs, the dependency is even more pronounced with around 78 percent of NGO revenues come from external aid. The increase in aid dependence has occurred alongside a decrease in NGO funding from the local community in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁶²

The increased dependence of NGOs on official funding meant their gradual inclusion in the aid industry and consequently a redefinition of their role in Palestinian society. The new pattern is reflected in shifts in the activities and composition of local NGOs during the 1990s. Despite the fact that many NGOs were created in the Oslo years, the overall number has declined, and more than one-third of the NGOs active in 2001 were created after 1994.⁶³ After the establishment of the PA, many NGOs were created in response to the new funding opportunities, especially advocacy NGOs in the areas of human rights, democracy, and peace-building. However, many others disappeared either because they were merged into the new structures of the PA or because of their failure to meet donor requirements for funding. Moreover, existing NGOs, and among those the oldest ones that had taken part in the movement for national liberation in the 1980s, adjusted their agenda to comply with donor concerns, as they

were pushed into a range of activities more narrowly defined by donors agenda and into competitive relationships over funding, both among each other and vis-à-vis the PA.

Several researchers have observed this process through the example of human rights organizations that, under financial pressure of their donors, changed their mandate from reporting Israeli violations to focusing on the violations by the PA.⁶⁴ Similarly, Abu Sada analyzed the annual reports of the PARC, the biggest local NGO working in the agricultural sector, and found that after the establishment of the PA, it redefined its vocabulary and priorities in order to present itself as a legitimate development partner.⁶⁵ In particular, such analysis implied emphasis on how the NGO shifted from an agenda focused on rural development to an agenda that included themes reflecting the concerns of the international donors, such as participation, gender and environment, and development of a democratic civil society.

In brief, the change in the political economy of aid and the construction of new spaces for NGOs, defined by a globalized discourse on civil society and its role in development, coupled with the weakness of the Palestinian national movement, and the cooptation of parts of Palestinian elite in search of new forms of legitimization, resulted in an NGO sector whose agenda was increasingly detached from its local constituencies and from the local context, and converged toward a discourse formulated in the international arena rather than at the local level. The growing importance of the relationships with donors, at the expenses of those with the social base, can also be noted in the spatial distribution of the NGOs headquarters in Palestine. Challand notes that there is an overrepresentation in the urban areas of Jerusalem and Ramallah compared to minor centers and rural areas, and that many NGOs moved their offices in the main urban centers to gain visibility.⁶⁶ Similarly Carapico notes that in Jerusalem the bulk of NGOs headquarters are clustered around the World Bank complex, far from the Arab quarters.⁶⁷

Moreover, not only the spatial distribution but also the creation of new forms of social identities contributed to the growing divorce between the NGOs and their social base. The spaces offered to NGOs in the context of aid to Palestine served as a new source of legitimacy for marginalized leftist activists who saw in the NGOs a better avenue of action than other forms of social and political activism. NGOs also became a desirable and lucrative workplace for an emerging class of young educated professionals especially in the context of an underpaid public sector. Thus, as put by Hammami,

the entrance of waves of young professionals into NGO sector has further depoliticised it, resulting in an even greater divorce from a popular social base. The new professionals tend to treat the grassroots in a patronizing and condescending manner, perceiving them as social groups in need of instruction, rather than as constituencies from which they take direction and legitimacy.⁶⁸

Overall, donors' discourse on civil society has introduced new forms of social fragmentation in the Palestinian society. Managing the relationship with donors required a great degree of formalization of the internal structure and a professionalization of the staff in order to meet donor requirements. Hanafi and Tabar argue that it contributed to the creation of a local "globalized elite," which appropriated this new system of knowledge acquiring both material power through the rent distribution of the aid system, and new forms of symbolic power and legitimacy derived from their adherence to a globally endorsed discourse and from their relationships with global actors.⁶⁹ Moreover, they reassert the professionalized nature of these elite, who "were no longer the activists of the first Intifada, [but] either former activists with technical knowledge or technocrats who never had a connection with the national movement."⁷⁰ Accordingly, there is an inverse relationship between the success of organizations in terms of financial support from Western aid and their capacity to be close, mobilize, and convey the needs of their constituencies. This detachment from a broad social base has been highlighted by the very limited role that NGOs had in the Second Intifada of 2000, where NGOs explicitly distanced themselves from the uprising and failed to constitute a point of reference for the masses and the marginalized.

At the core of this transformation lies the organizations' agenda, which drastically shifted from the pre-Oslo national agenda to an imported globalized agenda. The globalized agenda embraced by Palestinian NGOs has effectively been formulated by the global reconceptualization of civil society, which has been systemically homogenized and promoted by international donors. This has resulted in the gradual exclusion of indigenous expression of local needs and interests, which has been replaced with a limited version of civil society characterized by professionalized, bureaucratized, technocratic, and elitist NGOs actors. The exposure of Palestinian civil society to international donors' profound penetration did not only enforce financial dependency and subtle political agenda upon local organizations, but also culturally and ideologically redefined the local understanding of how civil society ought to function in the local context. As a consequence, the internationally promoted NGOs' agenda began to prioritize "globalized" solutions, and thus the local context became subordinated to external demands. This in turn led to the decontextualization of the socioeconomic processes, including issues of development, poverty, unemployment, participation, and women rights, which became analyzed and treated through the lens of international standards surpassing domestic peculiarities.

Further, post-Oslo civil society crucially meant a growing apolitical trend. Given that these organization were previously seen as fundamental carriers of political ideas, strategies, and agendas at the grassroots level, the apolitical approach they adopted has had a "trickle down" effect; that is, a systemic depoliticization of the masses' consciousness. This was

consolidated by international donors' dislike of political affiliation, a matter that accelerated the process of the political divorce of NGOs from political parties. The new NGOs became predefined by the prerequisites of the "peace process" and the state-building setting, which required pacifying the Palestinian public's mindset. As international donors' agendas are inherently political, one can argue that depoliticization in this sense stems from the dominance and application of a decontextualized political program, which ignores the historical and political context, and which invariably produces a re-politicized outcome. Thus, depoliticization does not mean the complete absence of politics, but rather the reshaping of perceptions toward political preferences that serve those in power. One can also conclude that donors' implicit conditionality of prohibiting NGOs from being presented in terms of political factionalism marks an attempt to cut off Palestinian civil society from its historical extension, and to ensure the exclusion of past ideological orientations and political activities particularly at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically explored the dramatic shift from an indignously defined mass-based civil society to globally designed and promoted NGOs. It is argued that Palestinian civil society has undergone an extensive structural transformation articulated through systemic processes of "NGOization" and professionalization, which eventually caused a historical discontinuity with the pre-Oslo civil society.

There has been a systematic process of inclusion and exclusion promoted and applied by the aid industry. Palestinian NGOs' dependency on foreign aid represents a perilous concession of the supposedly autonomous status of civil society. Eventually the concession is embodied in a civil society system that is predominantly characterized by an elitist tendency and a neoliberal orientation, and a structure based on the conditions of the Oslo process. NGOs-led civil society in Palestine has become another pillar for reinforcing the political *status quo*. And yet despite this attempt to narrow down and co-opt Palestinian civil society, there still remain heterogeneous organizations in terms of political and ideological orientations—and these may constitute a kernel of hope that a more critical model of civil society can reemerge.

NOTES

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Neoliberalism or neo-liberalism is the 20th-century resurgence of 19th-century ideas associated with economic liberalism and free-market capitalism.:7 It is generally associated with policies of economic liberalization, including privatization, deregulation, globalization, free trade, austerity and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the The analysis here compares neoliberalism with its historical predecessors. Neoliberalism is not just economics: it is a social and moral philosophy, in some aspects qualitatively different from liberalism. Last changes 02 December 2005. You may republish and reproduce the content of this webpage, for non-commercial and academic purposes.