



The New Palestinian Globalized Elite

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The Palestine NGO delegation at a 2004 meeting of the UN's Division for Palestinian Rights.
Source: www.un.org

The outbreak of the Intifada in September 2000 presented a direct challenge to Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their counterparts among donor and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to intervene and respond to the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as to act as a witness to Israel's massive military offensive against the Palestinian population and to support the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.¹ In making this call, the Palestinian uprising, as a period of direct anti-colonial struggle, unequivocally exposed the manifold contradictions that have underpinned the growth of NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza,² and revealed the tensions in their relationships with the donors.³

The Intifada exposes a disconnection between NGOs and popular movements in Palestine. It reveals Palestinian NGO activists as unable to navigate between their own professional and development requirements and Palestinian national aspirations for independence, as framed

by the overarching national agenda. This raises further questions: how does one conceptualize and explain the relationship between NGOs, international NGOs (INGOs) and donors? What are the overriding structural relations between them? And how have they been shaped by historically contingent factors?

This study looks at the paradoxes illuminated during the uprising, as well as during the transition period that began with the Oslo Accords. Based on empirical research and interviews conducted prior to and after the outbreak of the second Intifada, we examine the relationship between Palestinian NGOs, INGOs and donors, as determined by the processes within Palestinian society, as well as by mechanisms and structural relations within the aid community.

We begin by analyzing the uprising in order to unravel and define the problematic role of NGOs in Palestine.

The Limited Role of NGOs in the Intifada

During the ten years following the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, Israel's exercise of control over Palestinians not only deepened, but metamorphosed into an apartheid regime of checkpoints, a permit system, settler by-pass roads, and settlements encircling and besieging Palestinian cantons of 'territoriality'.⁴ By late 2003 there were 83 separate 'bantustans' in the West Bank and Gaza from which travel to and from was only possible for those Palestinians with permits. This was all carried out as money flowed into the occupied Palestinian territories, ostensibly for laying the groundwork of statehood.

Now, as the Palestinian uprising enters its fifth year, a sense of crisis is evident. Not only has Israel's siege on Palestinian towns, its repeated military invasions and its reoccupation of the West Bank exacted a heavy humanitarian, social and economic toll, but there is growing disquiet and confusion over what the uprising has accomplished. Questions are being raised in closed circles about the capacity of the Intifada to realize Palestinian political aspirations, especially given the great divergence in tactics and strategies espoused by different factions and the difficulties of harmonizing societal energies and marshalling them to achieve a common goal. In addition, there is the colonial strategy of the Sharon government and its use of armed provocations, particularly its assassinations of Palestinian leaders, not only intended to escalate the conflict, but also meant to create internal havoc within Palestinian politics.

There are three separate challenges facing Palestinian society today: the challenge to the leadership of the Intifada, the challenge of articulating development together with anti-colonial struggle, and the challenge to international organizations to act as witness. Serious consideration of each will elucidate the disjunctures and antagonisms within the NGO sphere that bear on the current crisis, as well as illustrate the overarching issues framing NGO, INGO and donor relations in Palestine.

Leadership of the Intifada

Firstly, from the outset, the Intifada has been weakened by the absence of a unified leadership, a consequence of - among other things - the decision of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to shun the command role in order to avoid the international repercussions of asserting formal leadership over the uprising.⁵ This has resulted in a central paradox. While Palestinian NGOs have undertaken very successful forms of professional action, such as providing medical services and issuing reliable reports on Palestinian casualties and damage caused by Israeli military operations and other human rights violations, they have not developed a synergy with the political forces (whether the political parties, Islamic and National Committee for the Intifada or unions) or with the population. Therefore, while NGOs have used their international recognition for advocacy and to make available strategic information about the Israeli attacks, locally they have contributed little to harnessing society's energies during a period of national struggle; ultimately their impact on the direction (or lack thereof) of the uprising has been minimal.⁶ While the PNGO Network (an umbrella group of organizations) plays a major role in organizing international popular protection in the form of international civil missions, they were not able to work with these missions toward a strategy of non-violent resistance.

This raises a number of questions. Why have NGOs not taken a more active leadership role during this Intifada compared to the first uprising, by mobilizing popular classes and organizing collective resistance efforts? Why, for instance, have Palestinian non-governmental organizations not given more vocal support for the local and regional boycott of Israeli goods? Similarly, why have these organizations not attempted to strengthen community initiatives and encourage popular committees to sustain the socio-economic steadfastness of the population as was done during the first Intifada? How have Palestinian NGOs possibly contributed to disengaging from the grassroots since the uprising began? Two examples serve to illustrate the complex issues and processes that are bound up within these questions.

As mentioned, since the beginning of the Intifada, NGOs have generally been absent from the popular demonstrations taking place in the West Bank and Gaza. After a long hiatus, the NGOs did act to mobilize the population, for example, after Israeli forces closed the road leading to Birzeit University. Many organizations used their email lists and took out advertisements in the local newspapers to generate demonstrations from Ramallah to the new Surda checkpoint that was blocking the road leading to Birzeit. Still, the NGO actors often emphasized the importance of being apolitical and maintaining a 'neutral' position on a national political question in the middle of an anti-colonial nationalist struggle. At issue here is the way numerous NGO leaders confuse the 'political' with the 'national' and recoil from the national agenda under the pretext of refusing to engage in 'politicized' activities.

This baffling observation only becomes intelligible when one recognizes that the aid industry constitutes what Foucault has called a 'regime of truth.' The Palestinian

case reveals the banality of aid systems and their 'conceptual maps' that envision the social field as neatly divided up into political and civil societies, embedded within the public sphere - an assumption, we would argue, in need of questioning. Retreating from the challenge of imposing their own conceptual map, Palestinian NGOs have internalized the conceptual vision that conflates the 'national' and the 'political.' The Intifada reveals the absurdity of this vision, given the social reality of the occupied territories, by illustrating how internalizing that vision places the majority of NGOs in a contradictory and potentially antagonistic relationship to the Palestinian national struggle against the Israeli occupation.⁷

While the majority of the NGOs are careful to demonstrate their political neutrality, these same organizations exhibit increased internal politicization in their alliance building, and individualization of power and charismatic authority. For instance, the communiqué released on 7 October, 2000, entitled "Unifying the Efforts for Ending the Occupation and Realizing Independence: All efforts for Supporting the Popular Intifada for the Independence," was circulated for signature among NGOs and political parties. The petition, however, requested the endorsement of individual leaders rather than organizations. This reinforces the argument that these leaders do not view the NGOs as institutions which should take a leadership role in national issues.

An additional example elucidates further contradictions. On 19 June, 2002, a petition was published in *al-Quds*, a daily Palestinian newspaper, signed by academics, public figures and many prominent NGO leaders. The signatories launched a critique of suicide bombings and called for a reconsideration of operations that target civilians: "We think that these bombings do not contribute towards achieving our national project which calls for freedom and independence. On the contrary, they strengthen the enemies of peace on the Israeli side and give Israel's aggressive government under Sharon the excuse to continue harsh war against our people."

Released in the direct aftermath of the Israeli invasion in April during which Israeli forces re-occupied the West Bank, the petition was intended to spark an internal debate on the Palestinian resistance, and whether inconsistencies existed in the means and aims of the Intifada. However, any debate quickly subsided. The credibility of the petition was questioned and the initiative was critiqued on a number of counts, but in general it was read as an affront to those who have sacrificed for the resistance. In this regard, the petition met with reproaches and disapprobation.⁸ One of the reasons for this, as Azmi Bishara, a philosopher and member of the Israeli parliament, has argued is that in moments of intense national crisis such as this one, it is not enough to merely critique resistance practices; it is incumbent upon activists, intellectuals and political forces to also promote alternatives.⁹

By criticizing armed resistance without a sustained strategic analysis of the occupation upon which to firmly advance a viable practical and theoretical alternative mode of resistance, the NGO activists and intellectuals who signed the petition left themselves open to counteraction and de-legitimation. In contrast to the first Intifada, when

activists, intellectuals and community leaders were embedded within the popular struggle and bound up in a mass-based national movement, the incident of the petition reveals much about the location of Palestinian NGOs today within the social and political fields. These actors are *spectators* in the Intifada, unable to make the necessary linkages and *articulate* between their own aspirations for Palestinian freedom and independence, the objectives of their organizations that promote democracy and social justice, and the overarching national agenda and strategies of the Intifada. As such, it also exposes the NGOs as isolated and lacking an organic base in society. This isolation is not necessarily only the responsibility of the NGOs, but can also be ascribed to the early militarization of the Intifada and Israel's reaction, both which marginalized individuals and institutions and robbed non-military action of its subversive potential.

These observations cannot be separated from the overall transformation of Palestinian non-governmental organizations beginning in the early 1990s, concomitant with their entry into the 'aid industry'. The Oslo process, which allowed for the creation of the Palestinian National Authority and the commencement of 'state-building' supported by the intervention of donor countries and their peace-building initiatives, also consolidated a space for the growth of Palestinian NGOs and civic institutions. Paradoxically, however, the consolidation of this space was accompanied by a dis-embedding of local organizations from within the society and their base in popular movements. Moreover, this ongoing consolidation process is marred by fractures and disjunctures, as the 'national' agenda has been re-conceptualized and conflated with 'politics', and hence redefined by both local and international NGOs actors as too politicized for 'civic' organizations.

Defining 'Development' in the Midst of an Anti-Colonial Struggle

The second major challenge facing Palestinian society today concerns the task of defining development in the midst of a national uprising. The immediate post-Oslo 'interim period' before final status negotiations was not acknowledged by many donors and international organizations to be the *beginning* of a process of decolonization. The situation in the Palestinian Territories was already classified by the donors and INGOs as a *post*-conflict area rather than a conflict zone.

This characterization has a tremendous impact on donor aid, at both the conceptual and procedural levels. At the first level, the vision of post-conflict assistance becomes linear, when in fact conflict is invariably cyclical. On the procedural level, donor agencies and international organizations take on the role of a 'neutral' mediator, a role which ignores the root causes of the conflict and its colonial nature.

Aid invariably follows the modality of colonial control; thus within Palestine, as a new site of 'peace-building,' the international order is superimposed over the colonial order. As Brynen explains, new peace-building efforts have been devised which not

only entail regularly established patterns of diplomacy and military peacekeeping, “but also a variety of social and economic objectives and instrumentalities, underpinned by substantial commitments of financial support”.¹⁰

The problem that results in practice is that the peace-building assistance, which buttresses a wide range of interventions including the start-up costs of the Palestinian National Authority, infrastructure projects and a range of social and economic initiatives, is based on the assumption that the conflict is ending, when as we have witnessed in Palestine, the conflict has actually renewed. This assumption shapes the nature of NGO programs and projects. These developmental projects lack any emergency plan in the event of the accentuation of the national conflict. As a result the majority of the NGOs have been shown incapable of articulating their civic goals alongside their political objectives.

It is quite clear that the Intifada shattered the veneer of the Oslo process and the euphoria of donor projects that portrayed Palestinian political, social, and economic development as linear processes, while masking actual transformations and the Israeli practices that have obstructed Palestinian development options and political independence. In contrast to these linear projections, during the Oslo Interim period, Israeli settlement increased in size by sixty-five percent¹¹ and Israel’s mechanisms of control expanded.

With the outbreak of the Intifada, Palestinian governmental, nongovernmental and international development agencies have been grappling with the task of responding to the growing humanitarian crisis, the potential for economic collapse, the physical destruction caused by Israeli military operations and the siege imposed by the occupation power. According to a recent World Bank report, the GDP per capita shrank by 50 percent and as a result 60 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line. The overall losses that the Palestinian economy has endured has been estimated at \$5.4 million per day.¹²

Confronted with a significant influx of emergency assistance,¹³ Palestinian NGOs have also faced an additional challenge: the need to maintain a space from which to define Palestinian development needs and develop strategies for the medium term, while retaining a focus on the dialectic relationship between socio-economic development and resistance.

The lessons of the Oslo period have not gone unheeded. Palestinians now look upon aid somewhat more warily, realizing the way donor assistance can undercut and prefigure local development strategies, options and vision, often according to donors’ practical and political agendas. For Palestinians the immediate concern is one of priorities, and the issue is as follows: should donor emergency projects simply be channelled into short-term efforts, such as food aid, that alleviate the immediate humanitarian suffering but are equally inspired by Israel’s anti-insurgency war? Or can aid support more proactive strategies, linking socio-economic development to forms

of resistance, such as creating new enabling governmental structures, or promoting alternative forms of grassroots community empowerment? Just as important from the Palestinian perspective is the 'voice' of the donors. Are donors going to bear the financial costs of Israeli military campaigns, as well as the humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people, without addressing the root causes?

Palestinian organizations such as the Development Studies Program (DSP) at Birzeit University have been theorizing alternative development strategies that re-conceptualize the relationship between socio-economic development and national resistance. A recent study commissioned by DSP envisions the creation of new linkages between the PNA, NGOs and the grassroots in order to facilitate a strategy of resource mobilization that addresses the basic needs of the population, while empowering the grassroots through collective action.

But a brief survey of Palestinian attempts to apply such innovative strategies exposes the tensions underwriting the relationship between NGOs and donor agencies, as well as underscoring some of the limits of 'partnership'. For instance, in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion and reoccupation of the West Bank in April 2002, donors and aid agencies were focusing on the massive physical destruction and damage to infrastructure. Palestinian NGOs, aware of the human suffering, responded by urging the donors to recognize the humanitarian consequences of the Israeli invasion. The NGOs not only wanted the donors to recognize the grave human rights violations committed by Israel, but also to acknowledge the moral and legal responsibilities of the occupying power, as defined in the Fourth Geneva Convention.

NGO activists expressed the view that if the donors focused attention on the root causes of the humanitarian crisis, namely the assault by the occupation forces, this would support the calls by the Palestinian leadership for international observers. On the other hand, the NGOs hoped the donors would support broader multi-levelled development strategies to empower the Palestinian people in their resistance to the occupation. Yet, as a woman's activist and health practitioner explained, many donors were very quick to 'co-opt' the humanitarian argument and reduce it in both scope and intent to a narrow focus on "food aid".

Exemplifying this trend, shortly after the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank, an international humanitarian organization released a report on malnutrition in the Palestinian Territories. While the report identified a serious problem facing the Palestinian population, it failed to discuss the causes. USAID, UNRWA and other donor agencies began delivering food aid for the Palestinian population, and the root causes of malnutrition - that is, Israel's occupation, closures and curfews - were not treated.

These examples illustrate the antagonism and conflict that arises when donors possess a set of interests contrary to that of Palestinian NGOs. The Intifada, as an occurrence of renewed conflict, is precisely an event that reveals the limits of donor support.

Faced with a Palestinian struggle for their collective national rights, aid agencies have opted for the dispensing of controversial food aid instead of offering any meaningful support for the rights of the Palestinian people, thus invariably leaving the root causes of the crisis in place (and serving to prolong the presence of the aid industry itself). In this situation the uprising has laid bare the interests and agendas that underwrite donor-NGO relations; a conflict of interests represents one of the central dynamics that underpin the relationship between NGO, INGO and donors.

The Role of the Witness in the International Arena

The current Intifada also represents a unique moment for observing the moral-political actions of the international NGOs, humanitarian organizations and donors during a quasi-war period and their interaction with Palestinian NGOs, especially given both parties' retreat from questions of nation, politics and occupation during the peace process. We find different forms of humanitarian actions in the Palestinian Territories: passive intervention (International Committee of the Red Cross, United Nations Relief and Works Agency), humanitarian action which combines intervention with the duty of witness (Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam, etc.), and finally the new form of activism which incorporates public 'protection'¹⁴ of the population under occupation (civil missions, Ta'ayush, PHR-Israel, etc.).

The Intifada has unmasked the INGOs inability to act as effective witnesses in periods of crisis and war. In comparison with the solidarity model of the first Intifada, local and international organizations have been slow to develop a synergy. In this Intifada, few of the INGOs operating in the Palestinian territories are acting as solidarity groups; the majority resemble the model of the professionalized INGO. The issue here, however, is not that all INGOs should function as solidarity groups, but rather the manner in which they articulate their roles. For example, some Italian health INGOs are highly professionalized and thus receive tenders from the European Commission for health projects. But when it comes to being a witness to the human crisis in Palestine, these organizations fail to document what is occurring or to report on behalf of local NGOs to their political leaders and media in their own country. Even international organizations such as MSF, which is known for emphasizing the role of witness, suggest a position of neutrality concerning the current conflict (see www.msf.org).

Conceptual Issues

A central premise of this study is that there is a restructuring of knowledge and practices and a new process of elite formation underway in the Palestinian NGO sector today.¹⁵ As such, our aim is to shed light on the agenda-setting process between donors and their local recipients by investigating the relationships between donors, INGOs and Palestinian NGOs, illuminating the significance of networking, and exploring the

encounters between global trends and the local society. It is also essential to chronicle the emergence of what will be termed a 'globalized Palestinian elite', composed of an important segment of NGO leaders, and the local leaders of international NGOs.

This new elite is being constructed through the increased entry of Palestinian organizations into the aid industry. Largely composed of new urban middle class activists that emerged in the 1970-80s as participants in the popular movement of the first Intifada, we suggest that they can be increasingly characterized as a *globalized elite* due to their connectivity to international NGOs, actors and agendas.

Much has been written on the way salaried positions in the NGO sector attract skilled and educated individuals, often to the detriment of the public sector. The notion of 'elite' used here, however, is much broader and includes the way in which the rise of a new social formation disrupts the embeddedness of local organizations within local social networks, concomitant with the rise of the neo-liberal paradigm which transforms the relationship between the individual and social institutions. These changes not only have a direct bearing on collective action, but also reconfigure the ways subordinate classes are incorporated into emerging state-society relations. These transformations are intrinsically linked to three complex processes. First, there was a fundamental shift in the political economy of aid to Palestinian NGOs in the early 1990s as a result of the Oslo process. Internationally, this moment coincided with a significant transformation in the sources of aid: solidarity-based support between northern and southern NGOs withered and was replaced by bilateral and multilateral relations between southern NGOs (SNGOs) and European NGOs as well as North American governments and development agencies. Regionally and locally, this period coincided with the 1991 Gulf war and the onset of the Madrid peace talks, through which Palestine's geo-political status was reconfigured and the West Bank and Gaza Strip recast as a site of 'peace-making'. These developments must be understood as part and parcel of the Arab world's integration into a unipolar world system. Globalization, which is both a process and a project, is the harbinger of this system.¹⁶

The shift in the political economy of aid to NGOs in Palestine created new internal forms of social and political capital, as well as new forms of exclusion. It is essential to recognize that the availability of new forms of bilateral and multilateral assistance to NGOs induced a state of competition between Palestinian organizations. This resulted in a struggle for organizational survival between the urban middle class activists in the NGOs and the traditional elite in the charitable societies and grassroots leadership within the committees. Western donor funding introduced new criteria of funding and new conditions for dispersing aid. This established a hierarchy among organizations in terms of access to funding, and invariably it was the charitable societies and popular committees that lost out and were subsequently marginalized. Therefore, just as there was a reduction in the overall availability of funding, there was also a concentration of funds within a few professional organizations.¹⁷

This observation alerts us to new disruptions which accompany neo-liberalism and

its focus on ‘empowering’ individuals to fend for themselves in the face of reduced government services and increased economic ability within social life. It is precisely this logic that underpins the historical shift among activists within the Palestinian NGO sphere from their role as the nexus of the popular movement of the first Intifada, to their role today in espousing the importance of advocacy (advocating internally in favour of new systems of education, health, etc., and advocating internationally in light of occupation), workshops and training programs. As Qassoum argued, the advocacy approach arrived globally to “put an end to mass social movements, dismantle the ‘triad affinity’ between the intellectual, the masses and the progressive and revolutionary ideas. In other words, exporting and applying advocacy at the global scale aims at demobilization, de-radicalization, de-politicization in order to maintain the emerging global neo-liberal order”.¹⁸

Globalization, Aid and Transformations of the Social Field of Action

Globalization is deeply intertwined with, if not embodying, a new phase in Western ‘modernity’. In contrast to the generalized view that describes neo-liberalism in an abstract manner as a retreat of the state and an expanse of the market, neo-liberalism has been explained in some quarters as a new political rationality of rule that corresponds to the deepening of the capitalist system. In this argument, while neo-liberalism appears to represent a ‘degovernmentalization of the state,’ it is not necessarily a ‘degovernmentalization of government’.¹⁹ A range of techniques are deployed within the neo-liberal model which produce ‘governmental/disciplinary’ entities within the social field. While separate and distinct from the state, these techniques are tied to the state and shaped through a particular economic model of action.²⁰ Thus neo-liberalism can be viewed as a modern way of organizing power that governs by shaping possibilities for action.

At the same time, the development of civil society has also been attributed to processes of modernization, to structural differentiation within the life-world, as well as to processes of differentiation within the economy and the modern bureaucratic administration.²¹ Along with Habermas, Arato and Cohen identify the functional role of civil society as linked to communicative action and facilitating a new reflexivity of social norms and values within a democratic society, both of which are facilitated by and respond to certain processes of social change and economic transformation.

Studying the aid industry in the Palestinian Territories, therefore, is part of a more complex assessment of the spread of institutional forms that accompany the process of globalization, which is being accepted by many without question. Palestinian society, like other non-Western societies, has undergone two distinct processes in this regard: first, the disembedding of social relations from the local context, such that the interaction and restructuring of relations occurs across an indefinite span of time/space.²² The second process is the re-embedding of social relations with international organizations, financial institutions and European and North American governments.

Within these relations, the neo-liberal model and its reordering of *arrangements within* and *relations between* state-society-market constitute a new reference for the organization of social and political life in non-Western societies.

The aid industry is the conduit through which this new institutional arrangement arrives locally and affects NGOs.²³ As we will argue here, there are two forms of rupture accompanying this process, a process which will ultimately disrupt the local field of action.²⁴

There are those such as Giddens who suggest modern institutions are being extended and spread through globalizing processes in universalizing fashion.²⁵ However, this view obscures more than it explains. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari theorize the expansion of capitalism as operating through a double movement: a decoding and deterritorialization of indigenous institutions as well as cultural and legal systems, followed by an artificial reterritorialization that disables these systems and institutes all sorts of “residual and artificial, imaginary or symbolic territorialities” (1984). It is precisely this double movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization which we observe in the Palestinian NGO sector. In this regard, it is central to recognize, as the French sociologist Alain Touraine suggests, that one of the features of late capitalist modernity is ‘disassociation’; this refers to a state in which social, political and economic structures no longer cohere together but are fractured by forms of disconnectivity, as old life forms have been disabled but have yet to be replaced by new institutions and social norms. Disassociation not only impedes social cohesion but it induces fragmentation.

One of the overarching objectives of this work is to map the alterations in the institutions and practices that structure political and social life in a non-Western context and to examine the transformations that occur in a field of action. In this manner, we accept Scott’s basic premise that postcolonial inquiry, insofar as it focuses on the formation of a colonial subject and thus on ‘decolonizing representation,’ has reached the limit of its use in addressing questions of the present.²⁶ Following Scott’s lead, we will attempt to redirect thinking about neo-colonialism towards an inquiry into encounters with the *conceptual* and *institutional* dimensions of modernity. Scott understands the transfer of institutional and political rationalities to the non-Western context in a colonial encounter as a process in which modern power becomes inscribed in the social terrain of the local society, *transforming and reorganizing a field of action*.²⁷ A Foucauldian view of power guides this conception, which recognizes power as, “an action which influences another action by determining a field of possibility for it”.²⁸

For example, in the context of colonialism, as the structures of the project of political sovereignty were set in place, a new legal system, a judiciary, and an economic field with property rights led to the transformation of the overall rules of the game of action. Two movements sequentially underlie such an alteration of a field of action; the establishment of new structures that reorganize a social space, in turn *disable* old

life forms and *oblige* new forms to come into being.²⁹

One can observe a similar process at work in the Palestinian context. Among the changes that have occurred in the organizations that formed part of the liberation movement, one observes a displacement of a political mode of action, in the form of mobilization through a civic mode of action, which promotes new subjectivities and a new reflexivity on social norms. Following a process of professionalization and institutionalization in relation to their increased entry into development cooperation, Palestinian NGOs have taken on new practices in the form of civic education training programs, as well as awareness-raising activities. This type of activity is linked to a notion of the 'public' and is meant to facilitate reflection on social and political norms. One observes new knowledge claims in the form of statistics and surveys produced by local research centres, which assert the efficacy of this type of action in producing effects in the body-politic, and hence legitimize it over old modes of action.

Elite Formation and Emerging Trends in Palestine

There are two trends discernable in the Palestinian NGO sector today that reveal the future trajectory of these organizations. As we will illustrate, Palestinian NGOs have reached the point in their historical transformation where they are in a position to reconstitute their relationship with the local population. Some organizations have even moved towards forming a new type of relationship with the grassroots. Overall, however, Palestinian NGOs remain distant from the notion of strategic accountability outlined above. Secondly, in regard to the role of NGOs in contributing to change, the current intifada reveals that many Palestinian NGOs are focusing on a short-term role, such as relief action. A long-term vision on how to promote change in society remains undeveloped. An investigation of each of these trends is in order.

Starting with the first trend, it is apparent that Palestinian NGOs have arrived at a stage in which their detachment from the local society is being timidly acknowledged, and ways to re-establish relations with the population are being considered. Some interesting examples can be observed among the women's organizations. For example, the Palestinian Working Women's Society (PWWS) has initiated what it calls the 'Chain of Solidarity and Compassion.' This is an interesting project that the PWWS set up without the help of donors or international organizations. Moreover, the purpose of the project is to move away from reliance on aid, encouraging voluntary initiatives and broader social solidarity. As the organization explains, "The idea is to revive the notion of cooperation and societal participation based on solidarity among all society sectors. This is done by rebuilding the bridges in the Palestinian society between classes and stressing the dependence on local resources instead of foreign aid".³⁰ The Chain project rests on two premises: individuals should donate money to the less fortunate or to social development projects, and the people that receive support should compensate by providing voluntary assistance contributing to community development projects. In this respect, the project endeavours to link voluntarism to

giving to broader forms of social solidarity. Since the current uprising began, the Chain of Solidarity and Compassion has been revived after falling dormant, and those that can afford it have used the Chain as a means to provide assistance to others during this intifada.

Other examples from women's NGOs provide a clearer picture of the possible changes underway in the NGO sector. For one, the Palestinian Working Women's Society has shown signs of cultivating a new type of relationship with women at the grassroots level. A project officer at the PWWS confided in us about her efforts to extend beyond the framework set down by the training programs funded by the donors and offered by her organization. For the past five years, she has been going into remote rural areas to provide gender training classes. Yet as she described, her relationship with the rural women is not confined to the isolated duration of the training session. Rather, she uses the sessions to cultivate networks and form lasting relations with the women. Moreover, she insists that she has gained 78 volunteers over the years and maintains informal contact with the women. A network has been formed in which she refers them to organizations that can help with issues they may face in the village and they volunteer and extend their support for PWWS initiatives. This is an interesting and important example of how PNGO actors possess room to manoeuvre and can find new ways to relate to the population that extend beyond the project framework.

The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) provides another interesting example of the choices Palestinian NGOs are making today. This organization exemplifies the professionalized centres established at the end of the first intifada, as the national movement declined and the women's movement entered into a new phase where it established a separate space for itself in society. The WCLAC provides legal aid for women, as well as emergency support for abused women, and carries out awareness raising and advocacy work. When asked about its relationship with women, a representative stated: "The service part brings us into contact with women on an irregular basis. Some women stay with us for three years. But mainly we see them when they are in trouble, as we operate on emergency basis."⁶⁴ This suggests that the organization's relationship with the population has fallen into the *development professional-client* dichotomy.

Yet an NGO is not static and its relationship to the grassroots is subject to change. A recent initiative indicates the centre may be espousing a greater outreach approach. In October 1998, the organization set up a 'women's dialogue tent' in Samou', a village near Hebron. There are no formal support mechanisms (like a community centre) for women in the village. In this setting, the tent is meant to facilitate a space for women to discuss issues and access counselling on a range of topics including incest and abuse. As some point out, the initiative is itself contrary to donor funding priorities, "Some aid agencies look with scorn on women's counselling because it provides no measurable 'outputs.' Here in Samou' the tent seems to be serving the role of a social safety valve to relieve the pressure that was spilling in from the streets."⁶³ Similar to the challenge that the project officer at the PWWS faces, the tent's services

operate according to a rigid structure, with formal counselling sessions set up that last for a limited period of time. Similar to the PWS employee, the social worker that runs the Samou tent defines the success of the initiative as best measured by whether the members continue to work together after the sessions are over. Moreover, she describes something similar to a social network that develops out of the formal sessions. Informal contacts between the women are established, and the women's own independent activities - such as one woman's effort to set up a kindergarten - feed into one another, with the women drawing on each other's resources, contacts and skills. When possible, the organizers of the tent refer women to organizations that can help with their activities, such as the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC), which offers jam-making classes in Samou'.

Both of these examples are indicative of the position of Palestinian NGOs today; these organizations are presented with the option of reconstructing and consolidating a new type of relationship with the population. Both examples are encouraging and suggest that the importance of voluntary work and the benefits of social capital are possibly re-emerging as themes under consideration in the NGO sector. Yet the most important issue remains: what type of relationship will be built with the grassroots? Will the population be given a stake in the NGO? Many options remain open including membership and accountability structures. These examples also indicate, however, that a broader debate about forging new accountability mechanisms has yet to surface among the Palestinian NGOs.

An Emerging Globalized Elite

With the increased availability of development assistance to Palestinian NGOs and the decreased availability of Arab and other forms of funding, not only has there been a new hierarchy established among organizations, according to donor funding criteria, but there is also a new heightened state of competition. Within this competition, the new NGO elite has overturned the old elite (including the voluntary charitable societies or, in some cases, the rural elite) through a process of vying for organizational continuance. In the Palestinian context, the new NGO globalized elite reflects the broader process out of which it has emerged, including the overarching national context of the peace process and the foreign assistance provided to support the transition to a post-conflict order. Before characterizing this elite a few observations are in order.

A comparison of some Palestinian NGOs' discourse and practices is quite revealing. In analyzing their discourse, a kind of dogma or profession of faith can be observed. This 'profession of faith' is usually framed in dichotomous terms, black versus white, more importantly 'global' versus 'local'. These dichotomies do not reflect beliefs of the NGO actors per se, rather the actors move within these categorizations and manipulate then according to the context. For instance, many Palestinian NGO actors often speak of a 'national agenda' which guides their developmental approach, yet they rarely

address those who can speak in the name of national interests, nor do they view this agenda with an eye for pluralism.

More revealing, in local discourses many NGOs demonize one donor, USAID, in particular. This suggests that they select donors according to the perceived national agenda. Our interlocutors often portrayed USAID as the enemy of the Palestinian people. Why did they choose USAID? Most probably they view USAID as the US government, which often takes positions supporting Israel. However, we were surprised to find that, despite their own declarations, five of these actors had actually applied for funds from USAID. Some of them received grants and others did not.

Finally, at times Palestinian NGOs talk about the local agenda, when in fact they are much closer to the global agenda in two respects: first, in setting priorities within each sector (for instance, giving an excessive importance to family planning or gender policies at the expense of a comprehensive approach to health provision) and second, in terms of approaches that emphasize the individual over the community, training for capacity building, and participatory approaches.

All of this is meant to indicate that the globalized elite is not simply an easily identified group: sometimes concepts such as 'global' and 'local' become markers used by the actors interchangeably, depending on the context.

Turning to the features of this emerging globalized elite, four major characteristics can be drawn out. Firstly, as we have already identified, these are actors that are *informed by global agendas* and may be closely aligned with internationally-endorsed development paradigms. They move within the space occupied by donors and INGOs, attending global conferences and forming their own relations with international organizations. In no way does a globalized elite mean a global elite; its ties, however, are with global actors. Participating in global events does not necessarily mean contributing to global decision-making. However, the global elite offers a new legitimacy to the local elite. For instance, the new discourse of the women's movement concerning the United Nations' "Beijing Declaration" is used as argumentation against some Islamist interpretations, and social conservatism.

The second feature is particular to the Palestinian context: this elite is distinguished by its position on the peace process. The elite *supports* the peace process or at least believes in the importance of giving this process and the PNA sufficient time before reconsidering violent resistance against the Israeli occupation. In this regard, this elite is different from the Islamist elite. The focus of donor funding has been on Jerusalem and the large Palestinian cities. This has led to the creation of an urban elite.

Finally, it is a *professionalized* elite: Palestinian NGO actors are no longer the pure activists of the first Intifada. They are either former activists with a technical bend or they are technocrats who do not have a connection with the national movement. The absorption of donor ideas and norms has had implications not only for methods but

also for personnel. In this respect, it is clear that there is a predominance of English-speaking graduates, and finance skills are becoming increasingly important. Some Palestinian NGOs ask for English as a native tongue when soliciting applications for positions such as fundraiser or proposal writer. This not only privileges the non-Palestinian or foreign-born, but it also sheds light on the fundraising process. This process is no longer about local individuals in local organizations interacting with partner INGOs, but is rather viewed as a relationship between professional bodies. Here professional skills refer to the capacity of the NGO applicants to meet the reporting needs of the international partner.

Without making a judgment about this elite, it is clear that its emergence within the context of national liberation and a certain cultural milieu presents some paradoxes that these actors should be aware of.

To begin, one can ask: is this elite necessarily democratic? This question has two aspects, the first seeks to differentiate between civil society and democracy-building. A cursory look at the literature of development agencies and international NGOs shows that it is very clear that often these two objectives have been confused. Theoretically, civil society is analogous to Habermas' public sphere: it is a context in which a plurality of trends and different social and political actors debate their ideas. In this sense, while civil society is an indispensable tool for democracy, it is not democracy itself. But this cannot be simply reduced to a problem in which a 'Western' concept is projected onto the Third World. For even in many Western contexts, civil society does not always produce democratic behaviour from the dominant elite; instead intolerance, racism and xenophobia arise. Rather, the issue at hand is one of confusing, or equating, civil society-building with democracy-building, when in fact these two objectives are not exactly co-terminus. Democracy-building extends beyond civil society and requires broader structures and a redistribution of power among social actors. The confusion between these two goals has an impact on NGO projects and activities and also on the character of the new elite.

More importantly, the second aspect of forging a democratic elite concerns the internal practices of the NGO actors. We suggest that the donors do not pay sufficient attention to local NGOs' internal governance. Often, our conversations show, they are satisfied with a certified audit. There is not enough attention paid to the function of the board, or the general functioning of the NGO. Moreover, little consideration is given to the 'personalization' of NGOs, many of whom are referred to and known by the name of their directors more than by the organization's own name. If there is a change in the director of an NGO, one might speak of a sort of coup d'état. In this respect, the donors do not promote a democratic elite.

Finally, it is fair to ask whether closeness to the donor community means distance from the constituency. The idea of a globalized elite does not logically entail that the local organization will undergo a process of separation from the grassroots. If the donors require local NGOs to be accountable to them through various reporting

mechanisms, this does not automatically cause NGOs to become less accountable to their constituency and the grassroots. There are, in fact, many complex factors that impact this relationship. Beyond any external influences, in the Palestinian case, it is evident that there is a trend among many Palestinian NGOs towards elitism; this seems to be related to factors within the local context more than to the donors. For instance, many local NGOs often pay insufficient attention to their connections with the public, and many disseminate information sometimes only in English. Two donors declared to us that they asked local NGOs to translate some material into Arabic and they received the answer that this was not necessary!

These paradoxes lead into another important issue, the role of *interests* in explaining the formation of the globalized elite. In a sociological sense, interests often underpin group identity. For example, class analysis differentiates between groups according to their position in the modes of production, and theoretically it is assumed that each group will have its own particular set of interests. Yet, just as class analysis has been proven to operate with rigid assumptions which do not capture the fluidity and flux of identity and interests, we recognize that the interests that underlie the actions of the globalized elite can take various forms. For instance, there is the motivation of the leaders of the women's movement to pursue a women's social agenda, which coincides with internationally-endorsed agendas for women's empowerment. Or there are personal interests involved: some prominent NGO political activists marginalize the political party, and use the NGO as a platform to enter the social and political arena. Finally, the market-like competition that has taken over the NGO sector also induces other interests among NGO actors, especially the interest to secure organizational sustainability. All of this suggests that the concept of a globalized elite is not a constant category. Subsumed within are localized, fluid interests.

Overall, then, there is a polarization between NGO formations, especially between the elite and the peripheral NGO actors, and which suggests there is a self-perpetuating logic at work which maintains the differentiation between the two groups. Across the range of NGO formations one finds class differences (in terms of actors in leadership roles), different administrative capacities, varying levels of involvement in global conferences and differing reliance on diaspora and local donations.

In terms of locating the globalized elite within the national landscape, as former Minister of the NGOs Hassan Asfour declared in 1999, the Palestinian NGOs that rely exclusively on Western donors for funding account for about 20 percent of all organizations. In a similar respect, the globalized elite does not comprise all leaders of Palestinian NGOs. The Palestinian NGOs belonging to the Islamist trend rely significantly on local and diaspora funds, while popular organizations as well as some of the pro-Fatah organizations receive support from the PNA and a small portion of Western funding. However, the 20 percent of Palestinian NGOs that can be said to constitute a globalized elite include some of the most important organizations. One cannot, for instance, discount the significance of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, which provides about 30 percent of health services in the West

Bank. Further still, this globalized elite is comprised primarily of leftist activists, especially those from the People's Party (formerly the Communist Party). Moreover, as we have already argued, the donors have supported the creation of mega-NGOs, some of which have acquired a monopoly in certain fields (Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees in agriculture, Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees in health, and Bisan in training). In fact, these processes of NGO creation correspond to the momentum associated with a huge unflux of funds, such as seen after the establishment of the PNA and the peace process.

Finally, it is more accurate to view the globalized elite as a sector of actors with different context-dependent positions, rather than as a single category. Nonetheless, at least two different positions can be identified: some of the local NGOs perceive and interiorize the donor agenda as a global agenda, a natural and self-evident agenda. This agenda is viewed by them as appropriate to the international and national changes brought about by the peace process and the formation of the Palestinian national state. Thus, the recipient NGOs receive this agenda in good faith, and even defend it. Some NGO actors, on the other hand, accept projects without rigorously questioning the politics of donor policies or critically assessing the ideological implications of the project.

Endnotes

¹ This essay is excerpted and modified from the recently published book by the authors, *The Emergence of Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, International Organizations and Local NGOs* (Ramallah: Institute of Jerusalem Studies and Muwatin, 2005).

² The process of intifada is an attempt to overturn the existing order and to create a new order, but because this process cannot be completely controlled, it therefore reflects both crisis and potential as complex forces and inherent contradictions come into play (De Certeau, 1998: 4).

³ There are more than 230 foreign donors actively assisting Palestinian NGOs today; the majority does so through established local contacts in Palestine. Most donors represent Western governments and Northern and international organizations. However, there are a few Arab and Islamic donor organizations that are very active.

⁴ Mansour, Camille, 2001.

⁵ Rabbani, Mouin. "The Costs of Chaos in Palestine." *Middle East Report*, Fall, No. 224, 2002.

⁶ NGOs have tried to create a space for a national

debate on the Intifada. Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, was a pioneer in initiating debates on the Intifada. It sponsored a large conference attended by about 600 people, with representatives from the PNA present. However, this and similar public forums have yet to channel societal energies in any particular direction. In terms of the next step and how to go beyond the conference mode of action, as well as how to raise issues in a systematic and strategic fashion in order to impact on the national agenda, little follow up has been pursued.

⁷ One cannot ignore the role of bilateral donor agencies during the Interim period in promoting the conflation of national and political agendas in a contrived fashion in order to neutralize the opposition and leftist forces known to occupy the NGO sphere.

⁸ Allen, Lori, 2002.

⁹ Bishara, Azmi, 2002, 596.

¹⁰ Brynen, Rex, 6-7.

¹¹ Mansour.

¹² World Bank Report, 3 March 2003.

¹³ Since the Intifada began, the majority of donor assistance has been redirected into budget support

for the Palestinian Authority and emergency relief. The World Bank estimates that by mid-2001, Arab League donors have been contributing US\$45 million per month in budget support, while the European Union has been providing US\$9 million per month (World Bank, 2002). In this report the World Bank report outlines that disbursement on growth-oriented infrastructure and capacity-building projects have dropped from US\$400 million in 1999 to US\$175 million in 2001. In effect, long-term investment has been sacrificed for short-term survival.

¹⁴ During the second Intifada a growing number of individuals from European and North American countries have come to “visit” Palestine to demonstrate solidarity and call for protection of the Palestinian people; in a period of 18 months around 4000 persons have come for an average sojourn of 10 days to 2 weeks, while 10,000 “internationals” have been denied entry to Israel at Lod airport, and 800 of them have experienced detention. At the same time, the Ta’ayush movement composed of Israelis and Palestinians from Israel, emerged as a protest movement working to protect the Palestinians from occupation practices.

¹⁵ The conceptual section has been considerably reduced for this article. The reader should consult the book for the original discussion.

¹⁶ Globalization as a *process* is typically understood as new sets of relations that are restructuring the international order, in particular the reordering of the global economy and the redistribution of power between states, international organizations and capital (Ould-Mey, 1996; Auroi, 1992). However, the process of globalization is buttressed by a historically specific *project*, a new process of modernization, centered around increased differentiation and rationalization in the economic sphere, which displaces the institutional and social forms of the industrial society (Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens, and Lash Scott (1994) *Reflexive Modernization Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*: 2-6). The result is the ushering in of a new neo-liberal order.

¹⁷ Clark and Balaj summarize these two processes in noting that since the Gulf war, the charitable societies’ external support has been halved, and the committees have lost even more funding. Furthermore, they note, “in spite of the large number of NGOs it is estimated that 30-40 of them receive up to 70 percent or 80 of total NGO funding” (Clark and Balaj, 1994: 3). In other

words, while there has been an overall contraction in funding to the NGO sphere, a large number of organizations have been marginalized with a minority acquiring a large share of the funding.

¹⁸ Qassoum, Mufid, 51.

¹⁹ A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose, 11.

²⁰ Burchell, Graham, 27-29.

²¹ Arato, Andrew and Jean Cohen.

²² Hanafi, Sari.

²³ This is reflected in the new norms of political and economic management evident in the World Bank and new Western donor agendas, defined by the twin poles of liberal democracy and the capitalist economy which form the new horizon in which development is envisioned. (Jefferies, 1993; Nunnenkramp, 1995; Robinson, 1994; Young and Williams, 1994).

²⁴ It is central to note that the rise of neo-liberalism has coincided with a collapse of what constitutes the political, reflected in the loss of the conceptual purchase of concepts such as the ‘left,’ ‘socialism’ and ‘revolution’. At the same time there has been increased emphasis on the role of non-governmental organizations and building ‘civil society’ in developing countries within aid and development cooperation.

²⁵ Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens, and Lash Scott (1994) *Reflexive Modernization Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*: 57

²⁶ Scott, David, 12-15.

²⁷ Idem: 15-16.

²⁸ Al-Amoudi, Ismael, 18.

²⁹ Scott, 1999: 26.

³⁰ PWS document.

³¹ “The Limits of Empowerment,” Palestinian Civil Society Under Siege (5) From Small Families to Small Business: Empowering Women, On the Record, Electronic Link to Civil Society in Palestine, Vol. 15, No. 5, June 21, 2001. Email listserver provided by Grassroots International.

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