

Civil Society Organizations and Transition to Democracy in Palestine¹

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This paper examines, through three surveys and some interview data, the dynamics of contemporary Palestinian civil society organizations (CSOs) from the angle of their role in the process of democratization. The paper analyses the emergence, nature, and structures of CSOs in Palestine, and emphasizes the role of the public in democratization. In particular it assesses both the positive and negative facets of CSOs' work from the perspective of their possible role in democratization. It is concluded that CSOs play a positive but limited role in the democratization of Palestinian society.

KEY WORDS: civil society organizations; Palestine; democratization.

Research on Arab civil society organizations (CSOs) became vital in view of the transitions that many Arab countries are undergoing toward democratization (Harik, 1996, p. 276) and that CSOs play a role in the processes of bringing about and fostering these transitions (Gilbraith, 1996). The case of Palestinian CSOs is of special importance, given the relatively advanced scope of these CSOs' work and the relatively high amount of international funding they are receiving under the assumption that the liberalizational role they are expected to play is vital for the peace process (Carapico, 2000, pp. 12, 13), for affecting the political system of the emerging Palestinian State, and thus, creating a durable peace (Ibrahim, 1993, p. 305).

In examining the role of Palestinian civil society in democratization, this research adopts the opinion that it plays the role of a catalyst in democratization. As

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the process of democratization is connected to the nature of the political regime, democratization cannot be achieved by the mere intervention of civil society alone but requires effective political forces—the most prominent of which are the political party and the public.

Palestinians (of the Palestinian territories) live under a combination of occupation and a new national authority, which has not been granted sovereignty. The population of this territory—that is defined as the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip (WBG)—is about 2.9 million (according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics). The territories are geographically separate and constitute a dependant economy (in relation to Israel). The GNP per capita in WBG is \$1,650 with a high poverty rate due to high price levels. WBG is placed in the “low income” group together with countries such as Ghana, Nicaragua, or Vietnam (*West Bank and Gaza Update*, April 2000, pp. 3–4).

In the Arab World in general, CSOs emerged initially either as charitable organizations or family associations and service organizations (Bibi, 1995, p. 26). Their nature, however, has undergone transformation because of the need to fight colonialism, the emergence of national movements, and the birth of the new Arab states (Ibrahim, 1997, p. 16). This fact should be underlined in the Palestinian case, where CSOs faced the challenges of development under the extreme conditions imposed by occupation.

In general, CSOs include most nongovernmental organizations that tend to represent the interests of certain groups of the population and do not seek executive power; therefore this definition excludes political parties (Al-Qaray, 1996, p. 52). And in the Palestinian context it is also taken to exclude any organizations that are not based on the voluntary participation of their members, like organizations of a religious or family nature—organizations that Al-Jabiri refers to as “natural” organizations (1994, pp. 116, 117), or Al-Azm refers to as “traditional” organizations (1997, p. 46). This definition is dictated by the nature of Palestinian society that is a traditional rural society with predominant paternalist values (Muslih, 1993, pp. 259, 260), where both clan and religion play a central role in the social structure and social dynamics.

“Democratization” is easier to define, it is a process of gradual change in the political system with the inclination to increasing the role of individuals and groups in the decision-making process through representation and empowerment. The process of democratization is often linked to the decentralization of the state, the granting of liberties, and the adoption of a pluralistic political system; empowering civil institutions to carry out tasks that were traditionally placed upon the shoulders of the state; and, widening and deepening the process of individual and group participation in decision-making.

Changes that take place in the structure of a social system toward deepening its civility are invariably reflected in the political system, and support democratization and vice versa. And the more that civil society is institutionalized, the greater

its ability to have an effect upon the political system and curb the hegemony of political authority. The extent to which civil society is institutionalized is a central factor in expressing its potential to participate in democratization processes. Institutionalization renders the role of institutions of civil society more effective, and renders attack upon them far more difficult.

The process of institutionalization requires effort, time, and money, which makes it a very slow process that is vulnerable to turbulence within the political system. Therefore, the relationship between the institutionalization of the state and that of civil society does not always lead to immediate changes in the structure of society in compliance with those in the political system.

A number of factors affect the role of CSOs in advancing democratization. In the Palestinian case there are several considerations that are of paramount importance in offering obstacles to this process, namely: the impact of the Israeli occupation and the nature of Israeli politics; the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and its limited advances in building democratic political life; the fact that the Islamic opposition in the Palestinian arena does not consider democracy as one of its priorities; the obliteration of leftist Palestinian organizations; the deteriorating economic situation; and, the patriarchal nature of eastern society, whereby the individual is not seen as the main societal unit.

In examining the role of Palestinian CSOs in the process of transition to democracy there is a need to discuss the relation between CSOs and the public. For, the effectiveness of CSOs' role in democratization is linked to the scope of their activity concerning the promotion of civic values and allowing people to participate in national issues in addition to providing a platform for public debate. Here, however, there are a number of serious constraints on the exercise of voluntary action, due to facts such as resistance to the occupation, the nature of the PNA and its role, the specific conditions related to the interim period, and the building of a political system. These factors have worked to undermine the social base of CSOs and, hence, their potential role in promoting democratization. Add to this the lack of independence which comes as a result of foreign funding (Said, 1999) and the degeneration of the subjective incentive for voluntary work. In view of this the prospects do not seem bright.

SURVEYING PALESTINIAN CSOs

To consider these issues in greater depth I turn to consider three surveys conducted by the Center for Palestine Research and Studies and some personal interview material. The first survey—Survey I, which was conducted in November 1997—comprised a sample of 1,324 adults (above 18 years of age) from WBG. This survey used multistage cluster sampling, with probability proportional to population size in location (this method results in an, average for all questions, error margin of $\pm 3\%$).

Survey II and Survey III were conducted in the form of a set of additional questions (an annex) in a questionnaire that was initially designed for the purpose of evaluating CSOs' work on policies and legislations in Palestine. Survey II was conducted in December 1997 and Survey III in July 1998. Both Survey II and Survey III were conducted on an identical sample of 291 CSOs that were chosen according to the simple random sample method through a framework for sampling prepared by the Center for Palestine Research and Studies, which included 1,200 organizations (the rate of possible error in this survey is $\pm 5\%$). Organizations surveyed included trade unions, clubs, associations, nonprofit development organizations, and research centers. Universities and mass media were dealt with through personal interviews.

From their outset, in the 1920s, Palestinian CSOs had the form of charitable organizations, which were mainly interested in medical relief, assisting the poor, and providing religious education. Since the Israeli occupation of WBG in 1967, the nature of these organizations' work has changed toward positive participation and expansion of the nature and scope of membership. They have directed their activity toward cooperative work of a civic nature and away from charitable work. Thus, provision of financial relief does not constitute the most important part of these institutions' work in general. One example is that traditional women's organizations changed the aid criteria from "needy families" to "families of martyrs or political prisoners" in a gesture of political involvement. Fighting the occupation was the common denominator for all organizations. This constituted, in most cases, a condition for Arab and local funding (including funding from the PLO) which predominated before the Intifada (Giacaman, 1998).

According to Survey II, and validated in Survey III, the greater part of these organizations were established during the occupation: 76% were established after the 1967 occupation. The period of the Intifada, 1987–1993, witnessed the greatest growth in the establishment of nongovernmental organizations—as 30% of these organizations were established then. The rate of establishment of CSOs per year reached 11.8 between 1988 and 1993, in comparison with 2.5 organizations a year during the period 1923–1987, and 9.3 organizations in the period 1994–1996.

The nature of these organizations' work is generally "traditional," and almost half of these are cultural or sports clubs; women's organizations constitute 11%; and human rights organizations, which are very active within the political field, constitute 7%. They express the objective need to defend human rights, which have been widely violated by the Israeli Authority. It does not seem that the Palestinians are in any less need of these organizations after the establishment of the National Authority as the occupation has persisted and because the National Authority does not cater to these rights either. Developmental institutions form 5% of the total number of institutions. The underdevelopment resulting from the occupation's practices was the major incentive for their establishment. As for the trade unions, they represent 2.7%. The institutions concerned with child-care, research, care of the disabled, care of the elderly and other institutions make up the rest.

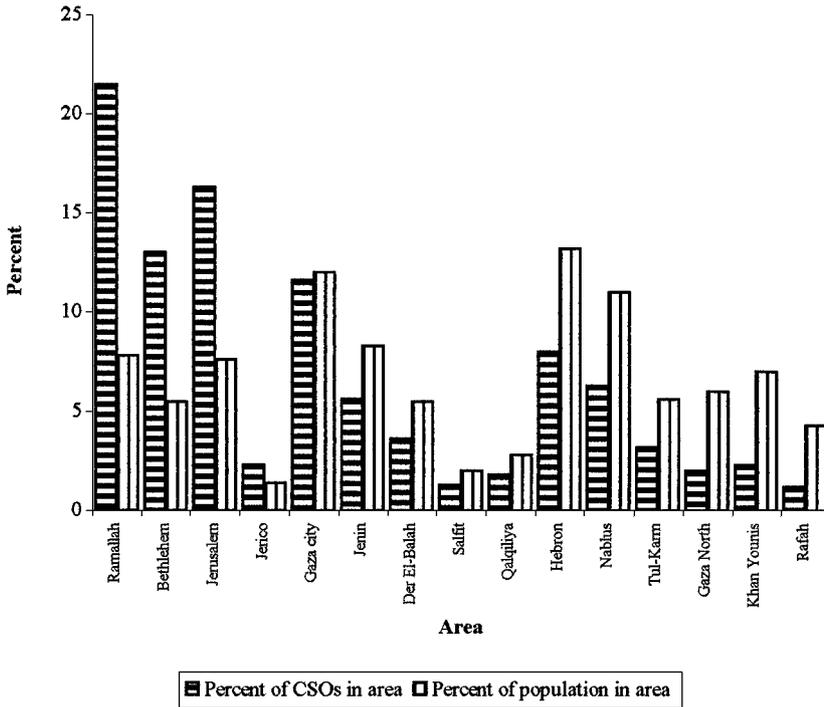


Fig. 1. Regional distribution of CSOs in relation to population distribution.

CSOs are concentrated in the central region of the West Bank, as it is considered the most “liberal” area; 79% of CSOs are located within the West Bank, whereas 21% are in Gaza. Figure 1 reveals the regional distribution of CSOs in comparison to distribution of population.

It is important to mention that there is a great deal of intertwining between the Palestinian CSOs and other societal institutions as a result of the emergence of a number of CSOs from the political factions. These factions also controlled all the unions in the 80s, in addition to the cooperative societies. The factions also had strong effect on the universities and other educational institutions which are now in decline. As for their role in the media, the Palestinian Authority has taken their place and the newspapers and magazines of the opposition are few and so narrowly distributed that one cannot speak of their role (major newspapers have a distribution of under 50,000 copies).

The relation between civil society and the Authority is a competitive one in general, especially because the more important role that institutions of civil society can play within the transition to democracy lies in its capacity to limit the state’s hegemony. However, the fact that the institutions of civil society were

established before the National Authority and the transformation of one of the largest institutions, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—which could have previously been categorized as a CSO⁵—into the Authority, has resulted in a state of vicious competition between the two sides. [It should be noted that some CSOs have been established by the Authority itself (Carapico, 2000)]. In light of the continuing occupation, however, it is difficult for either of the two parties to carry their divisions too far.

CSOs have played a compensatory role, which imposed itself in a practical sense in place of the occupation authorities. This is partially the cause behind the establishment and widening of the work of CSOs during the Intifada. Naturally the resultant need for an alternative to the authority of the occupier was provided by the coalition of CSOs, in which the PLO played a major role. This situation created “competition between allies.” When asked, in Survey III, if they see their organization as a competitor with the Authority, 20% of CSOs’ representatives answered positively whereas 69% declared that there is no competition whatsoever.

All in all, there are a number of accusations between the civil organizations and the Authority’s institutions. These accusations range from allegations of the Authority’s inefficiency and interference in the affairs of civil organizations, to exchanges over accusations of squandering money. Competition over donor monies has been the source of some recent clashes (Hammami, 2000, pp. 17–20).

Turning to the question of the institutionalization of Palestinian civil society, it emerges that it is highly institutionalized. Several indicators of this fact can be illustrated. First, the number of CSOs in Palestine exceeds 1,200 (Hammami, 2000, p. 16), to which 12 universities, 4 university colleges, 12 vocational centers, and over 100 newspapers and magazines should be added. This means that there is around one CSO for approximately every 2,000 people. In comparison with the Arab world, this average is close to the number found in Egypt which has developed CSOs comparatively better than any other Arab country (Barghouti, 1998, p. 70).

Second, according to Survey II, the average number of founders of each organization reached 12.7 and the average number of employees in each institution reached 8.8. Third, though the responses of the surveyed organizations concerning the number and size of their activities and the size of the participating public are incredibly exaggerated,⁶ one can conclude that each organization holds at least 15 annual activities on average in which at least 100 people take part. This means that, on an average, annually, each Palestinian adult participates in at least one activity organized by a CSO.

Nonetheless, the success of any effort toward achieving change in the political system in the direction of democracy depends on public concern in democratization

⁵Prior to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the PLO was supportive of the behavior of various CSOs.

⁶One institution for example, declared that 80,000 individuals participated in its activities in the space of 1 year (1997).

and the ability of CSOs to attract public involvement. And here, though in general, one can certainly say that the Palestinians are concerned with the process of transition to democracy, it is not at all clear how democratization will be advanced if the readiness amongst Palestinians to join and work in CSOs remains an inactivated potential; according to Survey I the proportion of those who are committed to civil organizations is 23% of the adult population.

Survey I found that individuals concerned with the transition to democracy tend to come from middle-income and well-educated backgrounds, and are between the ages of 23 and 48, and are more likely to be men than women. Thus, CSOs tend to attract people whose social backgrounds are closer to the political elite than that of the general population. A brief glance at the political orientation of the members of CSOs shows that they are generally supporters of the “nationalist” trend. The percentage of members of CSOs of this type is above the general average, and they are below the general average within groups with an Islamic orientation. Leftists have the highest rate of affiliation to CSOs (see Fig. 2). The explanation behind this picture is that the left showed the greatest interest in the new wave, after 1987, of establishing civil society institutions.

Futhermore, although there are positive signs of institutionalization, there are problems with regard to sustainability. Sustainability is connected to two basic factors in civil society’s functions—funding and voluntary work—and it seems that Palestinian civil organizations suffer from a lack of both. According to Survey II, in the case of the ceasing of foreign funding, CSOs were expected to be

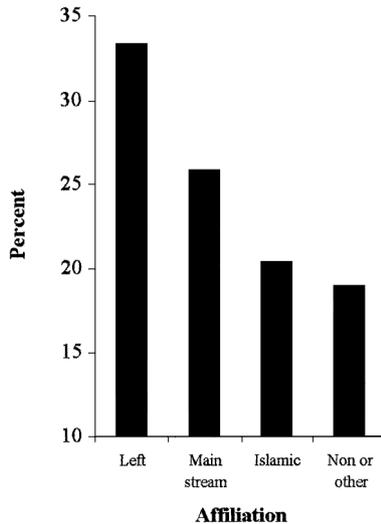


Fig. 2. CSO membership in relation to political affiliation.

able to continue their work for only 2 years on average, and 37% declared they could continue for 1 year only. Universities and the media were not included in the survey sample, but their financial situation is extremely bad—so much so that universities have recently resorted to requesting that they be placed as an item on the National Authority's budget. This has occurred as a result of the changing funding priorities of the European Union which was the main supporter of universities in the recent past.

In terms of voluntary work 84% of the CSOs sampled in Survey II declared that they attempted to rally the voluntary support of the public, and 82% declared that they were successful. In all cases, however, according to personal impressions and calculations, voluntary work, in the best scenario, covers only 5% of the work actually needed.

PALESTINIAN CSOs AND DEMOCRATIZATION

When it comes to CSOs' concern with political issues, 50% of the representatives of CSOs believe that the role they play concerning the process of transition to democracy within the country is considered of primary import, whereas 35% consider this role secondary. As for the rest, they expressed the opinion that there was originally no such role. Some 58% declared that they had activities directed toward encouraging individuals to play a larger and more effective role in the political life of the country.

Public confidence is necessary for the work of CSOs in the political arena. Public confidence is also necessary to develop the habits of voluntary work which constitutes a necessary condition for the civility of a society and a main mechanism for advancing the transition to democracy (Rose, 1996, p. 251 ff).

The results of Survey I indicate that 23% of all adults are members of CSOs and that 75% of them believe that there is a strong and active movement that encourages democracy in the country. There is a degree of confidence in CSOs; however, this confidence is not fully sufficient for the support of these institutions in their direct effect upon the political system. This is because only 8% of the public are convinced that CSOs are the appropriate framework through which to influence the political system.

All in all, people do expect CSOs to play a role in democratization and the existence of a degree of trust in these organizations to pursue this role cannot be denied; there is public conviction that there is a need for rudimentary reforms, and as Fig. 3 shows, respondents in Survey I place much higher importance on issues of unemployment, the rule of law, and human rights than on the establishment of opposition parties.

There are several factors that can help CSOs to gain people's confidence and advance the democratization of Palestinian society. These include building on

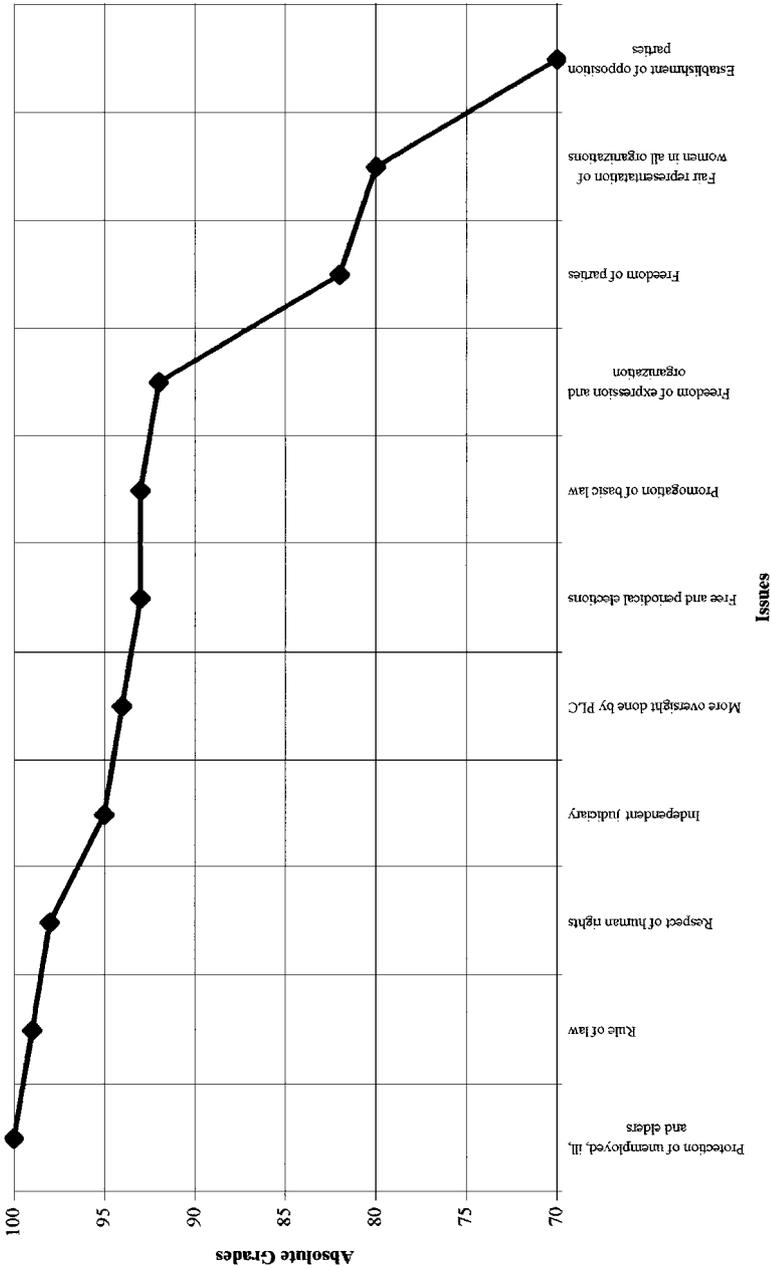


Fig. 3. Perception of most important issue.

the positive role played by academics in the political process during the Intifada and the peace process in Madrid and Washington; a growing acceptance of civil society as a body that is able to carry out political tasks of a general nature; and, the confidence in the nationalist intentions of CSOs, despite the “western” foreign funding they receive (Survey I found that 61.5% of CSOs believed that foreign funding had a very positive effect, whereas 38.5% believed that the effect was negative or very negative).

Against this, it is clear that foreign funding does prove constraining with regard to the setting of a local agenda. The respondents in Survey I were asked about their priorities concerning CSOs’ work. Upon evaluation of the answers, a list of priorities appeared with health and child care services as top priorities, followed by human and citizens’ rights, dissemination of awareness and civic culture, media/journalism, agricultural services, scientific research, protection of the environment, reform, women’s rights, and sports. By comparison, as Fig. 4 reveals (in which the respondents first priority was assigned an absolute value in comparison to the other priorities), foreign donors to CSOs between the years 1995 and 1998 directed their activities primarily toward education, health, development, and the issues of the retarded, women, and children (Hanafi, 1999). However, the main problem resulting from the role of foreign funding does not lie in the fact that donors’ priorities are contrary to those of the public as they perceive it, but that donors’ priorities are not subjected to public consideration.

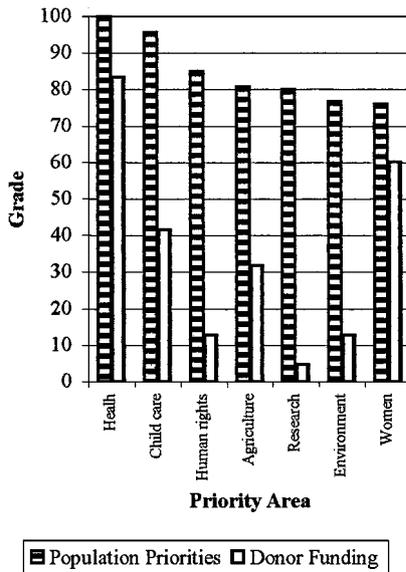


Fig. 4. Comparison between respondent priorities and donation distribution.

Central to the process of democratization is the promotion of civic culture; the consolidation of a set of values that promote civility, deepen the feeling of citizenship, promote egalitarian values and a sense of responsibility that stimulates participation. In this respect, Palestinian CSOs spend a good deal of effort on promoting civic culture through various activities such as awareness programs, seminars, workshops, publications and dialogue with the Authority’s employees, and advocacy. It is very hard to measure the impact of these activities, but there are certain indirect indicators through which one might doubt the ability of CSOs to produce measurable change in the feelings of Palestinians regarding their ability to participate in political life. For example, opinion polls conducted by the Center for Palestine Research and Studies have indicated that people do not feel that they are able to criticize the Authority without fear. In three different polls carried out in December 1996, September 1997, and March 1998 only between 35 and 37% of respondents expressed a feeling of being able to criticize the Authority.

Together with governmental and foreign bodies, CSOs have made serious efforts to enhance the rule of law. Over \$100,000,000 was spent in this sector in the period from August 1997 till February 1999 (*Rule of Law Development in the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, 1999, p. 11). Yet the public is not satisfied with the judiciary. Upon asking the respondents in Survey I about their first and second choice for the party from whom they would seek refuge in case they felt persecuted, it became clear that the first priority amongst six choices was given to the family or tribe (see Table I). Another tendency is people’s inclination to resort to the executive authority more than the judiciary. Lawyers—who are the natural party for those who want to revert to justice—are ranked very low in the table. Although CSOs cannot be blamed for this situation—an indicator of their efforts is that Human Rights organizations are well placed in Table I—it does demonstrate a lack of some basic aspects of a civic culture. An indicator of their effort is that civil society representatives (human rights institutions) are ranked third in Table I.

Another indicator of the existence of a civic culture is the degree of equality between men and women. Here, Palestinian society does not fare well. It is evident from the results of Survey I that women’s issues lie near the bottom of the scale of social priorities (see Fig. 3). Despite the efforts of CSOs in this area, the

Table I. People’s Choices Concerning the Parties They Resort to When Feeling Persecuted

Rank	Party	First choice (%)	Second choice (%)	Score
1.	Family and tribe	38.1	17.4	31.2
2.	Police	29.4	31.3	30.0
3.	Human rights institutions	9.1	7.9	8.7
4.	Influential acquaintances	7.5	10.5	8.5
	No one	6.7	8.1	7.1
5.	A lawyer	3.0	14.6	6.9
	Others	3.4	5.0	3.9
6.	Other security forces	2.7	5.2	3.5

prevailing societal standpoint concerning women's issues clearly limits tangible change.

In sum, CSOs have much to work on in terms of promoting a civic culture in Palestine. It must also be said that in terms of setting an example of democratic life, Palestinian CSOs are not that successful. More than a quarter of CSOs declared that they do not hold a conference to elect their leadership (Kassis *et al.*, 1999b, p. 35). And according to 21 CSO representatives who attended a Palestinian CSO network meeting in June 1998 to discuss the relation between CSOs and society, the public is alienated from CSOs' decision-making procedures. CSO representatives explained that one likely reason for this is that they receive high salaries in comparison with the income levels within the country.

More positive is CSOs' ability to play a role in democratization through preparing present and future political leadership. There is no doubt that Palestinian CSOs have succeeded in doing this to a great extent, and certainly at the level of the Legislative Council (Hilal, 1997, pp. 120–123). And despite the shortcomings with regard to internal democratic practice, CSOs are more democratic than are tribal institutions and some institutions of the National Authority. For example, the number of women amongst those employed in the post of director and above in the ministries is 14%, at a time when the percentage of women who hold the post of director and above in CSOs is 26% (Kassis *et al.*, 1999a, p. 92).

An important platform for democrats, including those who represent civil society, is the media. There are a number of newspapers and magazines in the country; however, most are affiliated to the Authority and have been utilized by the Authority as a major means for criticizing CSOs. There are also a number of radio and television stations, but the right to broadcast at national level is held by the television and radio corporation that is owned by the Authority. Although there is no direct censorship, the National Authority has taken, since its initiation, preemptory measures against newspapers, stations, and journalists, and this has resulted in a high degree of "self censorship" amongst some journalists.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, CSOs in Palestine play a focal and positive, but limited role in the process of democratization. CSOs have managed to develop, grow, and institutionalize in harsh political conditions. CSOs have contributed through their high preoccupation with the nature of the political system and their direct interest in democratization; they have been able to attract the main forces that stand traditionally behind democratization; and, they have successfully prepared political leadership.

In other fields, CSOs' work, despite their best efforts, does not seem to be as successful. This applies to such areas as the promotion of civic values and the competitive relationship of CSOs with the executive authority. In some cases the

shortcomings of CSOs can be related to the broader nature of Palestinian society, such as the weak influence of women's organizations. In other cases the lack of a stable political system is a major factor constraining the impact of CSOs—examples include the lack of a dependable judiciary and the lack of a free press. It is also fair to say that CSOs have failed to mirror international civic norms with regard to internal democracy, voluntarism, sustainability, responsiveness to the public, and putting more effort into obtaining local funding so as to help make them more accountable to their local constituencies (An-Na'im, 2000, p. 23).

Despite these limitations, in looking to the future, the important point to make is that the activities of civil society organizations in Palestine are undoubtedly contributing to the promotion of democratic principles of pluralism.

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