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The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shifts

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ABSTRACT   *This article examines the systemic process of structural transformation that engulfed multiple levels, structures and functions of Palestinian civil society in the early 1990s, whereby a large segment of the pre-Oslo mass-based movements were transformed into discrete groups of foreign-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs). More specifically, the article explores three interrelated factors that influenced the general trajectory of civil society's structural transformation and shows how these factors are fundamental to understanding the transformation of Palestinian civil society and what went wrong in the process. These factors are: (1) ideological neoliberal globalization; (2) political, especially the Oslo process; and (3) financial, especially the conditionality of international donors. Moreover, the article comparatively identifies four opposing dimensions: the organizational agenda, relations with the grassroots, the status of politics and the production of knowledge. Collectively, they lie at the core of the structural transformation and reveal contradictory functions and roles between past and present civil society versions.*

KEY WORDS: *Civil society; de-politicization; mass-based movements; neoliberalism; NGOs; Palestine*

The concept of 'civil society' entered Palestinian parlance in the early 1990s, roughly after it was incorporated as an integral phenomenon of globalization. Although the initial use of the concept referred to a set of organizations, associations and movements of longstanding existence and active presence in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), its entry was accompanied by a systemic increase in the level of externally-driven professionalization of the locally established societal formations. Being an imported buzzword, the entry of civil society discourse initially sparked controversial debates within Palestinian academic and intellectual circles. These debates primarily aimed at questioning the validity of the term civil society to the complex characteristics of the local context. Major controversies arose around the peculiar theoretical status and historical experience of local civil society, which had evolved and developed within a highly peculiar context characterized by a profoundly unstable political environment and a rapidly shifting socioeconomic configuration. In particular, questions pertaining to the extent of relevancy of the state/society dichotomy, the historic absence of a Palestinian state, the impact of successive colonial domination and military occupation, and the resulting territorial, demographic and societal fragmentation, all have highlighted uncommon characteristics

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not shared with other civil societies whether in a democratic system or in an authoritarian context.

The Arab sociologist Altaher Labib describes the above peculiarity as a 'contemporary Arab exceptionalism.'[1] Against this backdrop, these debates brought to light two opposing perspectives. The first perspective, and specifically due to the above-mentioned questions, disapproved the applicability of the term 'civil society' in the Palestinian setting and claimed that because of the historical overlap between the various societal formations and the political community, it would be accurate to categorize these organizations as part of 'political society.'[2] The second perspective, while acknowledging the highly peculiar theoretical status of Palestinian civil society, has recognized its existence in Palestine, while stressing its historically different roots and development.[3] Nevertheless, and regardless of the competing and ideologically-driven interpretations in the civil society debate, if at its essence, 'civil society is our species' response to the basic human need to come together in pursuit of common goals,'[4] then Palestinian civil society as a sphere, structure and functions has been rooted throughout different historical stages of the twentieth century. However, the lack of political stability and the shifting socioeconomic structure has shaped the nature of local civil society and has led to numerous developments that radically have altered its characteristics, contents and functions.

The objective of this article is to shed light on two distinct phases and versions of civil society development separated by a systemic process of structural transformation that engulfed multiple levels, structures and functions of civil society in the early 1990s. The first civil society version, which emerged in the pre-Oslo decades of the 1970s and 1980s, was deeply rooted in the national liberation movement, and particularly was represented by a group of mass-based organizations, such as women movements, labor unions, students' blocs, cultural centers and cooperatives. The second version, which dominated the post-Oslo era, has featured an increasing professionalization toward a non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) sector. The article begins by examining the impact of three interrelated factors that contributed to the moulding of civil society's structural transformation and therefore are directly in charge of dislodging the pre-Oslo forms of popular organizations in favor of a circumscribed version of civil society largely dominated by professional NGOs. These factors are: (1) ideological and predicated on neoliberal globalization; (2) political, and informed by the political requirements of the Oslo process; and (3) financial; and based on the role of the international aid industry. The

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[1] Al Taher Labeeb (1992) *Almujta'a Almadani fi al Watan al'arabi wa Dawroh fi Tahqeeq al Demoqratiyya* [Civil Society in the Arab World and its Role in Achieving Democracy] (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies), p. 103.

[2] See, for example, A. Bishara (1995) Ay Mujtama'a madani??!!, [Which Civil Society??!!], in: Ziad Abu Amr (ed.) *Al Mujtama'a al madani wa al Tahawol al democrati Fi Filastin* [Civil Society and Democratic Transition in Palestinian Society] (Ramallah: Muwatin).

[3] See, for example, A. Amr (ed.) (1995) *Al Mujtama'a Al Madani wa Al Tahawol Al Democrati Fi Filastin*; G. Giacaman (1995) Al Mujtama'a Al Madani wa Al Sulta [Civil Society and the Authority], in: M. Budieri et al. (1995) *Series on Palestinian Democracy: Critical Papers* (Ramallah: Muwatin); and I. Abrash (2001) Al Mujtama'a Almadani Alfilastini min Althwra ela Ta'asees AlDawla [Palestinian Civil Society from Revolution to State-building]. Available at http://www.wafainfo.ps/atemplate.aspx?id=3827, accessed March 2, 2013.

[4] I. Srinath (2011) Bridging the Gaps: Citizens, Organisations and Dissociation, Civil Society Index Summery Report: 2008–2011, p. 4 (Johannesburg: CIVICUS).

second section discusses, in a comparative sense, four opposing dimensions of the structural transformation and exposes manifold contradictions between past and present versions of civil society. These dimensions are the organizational agenda, relations with the grassroots, the status of politics, and the production of knowledge.

Factors of the Structural Transformation

It is worth noting that civil society's exposure to a profound restructuring is far from being exclusive to the Palestinian case. According to critical observations, analogous and simultaneous processes occurred on a large-scale in post-colonial societies where popular forms of civil society experienced a severe decline in favor of the rapid increase of foreign-funded professional NGOs.[5] Although the structural transformation of Palestinian civil society seems to share striking similarities with other civil societies in the south, what distinguishes it is that it was transformed in a context subjected to a persistent Israeli military occupation and colonization. Therefore, Palestine should be seen as an important case study because, while it has a significant history of mass-based civil society that operated at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle, its current foreign-funded NGOs have harmonized their functionality with the imposed political *status quo*. This section identifies three major factors that contributed to shaping the general trajectory of Palestinian civil society structural transformation.

Ideological Factor: Neoliberal Globalization

The acceleration of neoliberal globalization following the end of the US-USSR Cold War coincided with the global revival of civil society after decades of marginalization. The significance of this revival has been reflected in the flexibility of the concept of civil society to surpass strict academic circles to be rather a policy instrument that various western governments and international agencies have incorporated into their agendas. Consequently, a particular form of civil society has acquired a new set of characteristics represented in an unprecedented mandate to administer a wide assortment of development projects in conjunction with the rapid erosion of state developmental capacity, unambiguously as engineered by the 'Washington Consensus.' B. Beckman has pointed out that 'the "liberation of civil society" from the suffocating grip of the state has become the hegemonic ideological project of our time.'[6] In essence, constructing such a 'hegemonic ideological project' primarily is grounded in the neoliberal perception that human talent best is achieved through a minimal state, where power is disseminated throughout the market, and in which civil society fills the gaps left by the state retreat in favor of the market expansion.

In practice, the ascendency of globalized civil society is defined by the proliferation of NGOs and their central role in a number of externally driven processes. In this regard,

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[5] See, for example, K. Maithreyi (2003) Challenges before Women's Movements in a Changing Context, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(43), pp. 36–45; D. Chahim & A. Prakash (2013) NGOization, Foreign Funding, and the Nicaraguan Civil Society, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, pp. 1–27; and R. Jalali (2013) Financing Empowerment? How Foreign Aid to Southern Ngos and Social Movements Undermines Grass-Roots Mobilization, *Sociology Compass*, 7(1), pp. 55–73.

[6] B. Beckman (1993) The Liberation of Civil Society: Neo-Liberal Ideology and Political Theory, *Review of African Political Economy*, 58, p. 20.

NGOs are viewed as more cost-effective, innovative, participatory and flexible than governments' bureaucracies. This enthusiasm for NGOs is linked to the neoliberal discontent regarding the top-down, state-centric, and homogenizing approach to development, which, since the 1950s, had valued the state as the only legitimate driver of the developmental process. The restructuring of the state role in the development process has left a wider space for NGOs and has contributed to the multiplication of their areas of specialization and broadened their geographies of intervention. The global south has been the principal target of the NGOs' intervention. Thus, it now is commonplace to see NGOs integrally engaged in multilayered processes pertaining to the duality of economic liberalization and the promotion of liberal democracy in both those countries experiencing politico-economic transition and those experimenting with the post-conflict liberal peace paradigm of peacebuilding and state-building.

Accordingly, NGOs are viewed as effective instruments that, in many ways, function as 'Trojan Horses for global neoliberalism.'[7] D. Craig and D. Porter suggest that, while NGOs have been incorporated into the 'neoliberal box,' it has become increasingly difficult for them to think outside this box, since it has incorporated much of the discourse around rights, empowerment and social justice.[8] 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.

Neoliberalism has found its way to the oPt since the outset of the Oslo process and the subsequent establishment of the PA which, since then, faithfully has been echoing donors' recommendations on neoliberal institution building and good governance schema.[9] The neoliberal effect profoundly has penetrated the very fabric of Palestinian civil society, thus impacting a large segment of local organizations through waves of 'NGOization.' Western donors and development agencies' effort to build a civil society through a particular focus on NGOs has been significant to the overall production of broad-based consent to the neoliberal paradigm. In this regard, NGOs served to transmit integral neoliberal values such as individual choice, consumption, responsibility and competition.[10] Such values not only are necessary to aid construction of the neoliberal system in the oPt, but also to inflict an effective 'displacement of a political mode of action, in the form of mobilization, by a civic mode of action, promoting new subjectivities and a new reflexivity on social norms.'[11]

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[7] T. Wallace (2003) NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism? *Socialist Register*, 40, pp. 202–219.

[8] D. Craig & D. Porter (2006) *Development Beyond Neoliberalism? Governance, Poverty Reduction and Political Economy* (London: Routledge).

[9] R. Khalidi & S. Samour (2011) Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 40(2), pp. 6–25.

[10] S. Merz (2012) 'Missionaries of the new era': Neoliberalism and NGOs in Palestine, *Race & Class*, 54(1), pp. 50–66.

[11] S. Hanafi & L. Tabar, *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, Organizations and local NGOs* (Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies/Muwatin, 2005), p. 30.

Political Factor: The Oslo Process

The signing of the Oslo Accord between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government in 1993 marks a critical juncture in the modern history of the Palestinian national struggle for liberation and self-determination. One of the most salient political implications of the Oslo process is that structurally it has altered the very nature and manifold structures of the Palestinian national liberation movement, which, for decades, led a fierce anti-colonial struggle. Now it embraces an official strategy of state-building based on the two-state formula. Such a strategic shift paved the way for Western peacebuilding to take place in the oPt, thus allowing new patterns of external intervention effectively to influence internal Palestinian affairs through projecting 'a variety of social and economic objectives and instrumentalities, underpinned by substantial commitments of financial support.'[12] The Oslo peacebuilding paradigm represents a complex case due to the fact that it has been devised in a reality governed by the ongoing Israeli occupation.[13]

Consequently, the shift from the phase of the national liberation struggle to the phase of a Western-guided peacebuilding process invariably implicated multi-layered processes of political, economic, social and institutional reconfigurations that typically can be perceived in post-conflict settings. Like in nearly every peacebuilding operation, much of these reconfigurations have targeted two levels. First, state-building has become embodied in the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Although the PA initially was established as an institutional branch subordinate to the PLO, it gradually has replaced it as the most central reference of Palestinian representation and politics. Further, the formation of the PA meant the encapsulation of the wider PLO forces and its political pluralism into a narrowly defined institutional structure, limited and besieged in its geography, and governed by an exclusionary political trend. Second, the local civil society has been restructured to carry out predefined tasks in service of the 'peace process.' The Oslo process, therefore, enforced a conditional political framework to which local civil society ought to refer for redefining their relations and interactions with the political dynamic on the ground. Thus, a large number of local organizations had to readapt to the perquisites of the Oslo political equation by replacing major political assignments previously associated with the dynamics of anti-colonial struggle with ostensibly apolitical approaches based on the politics of peacebuilding.

Financial Factor: Donors' Intervention

Foreign aid to the oPt has been driven by the support to the Oslo process, 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.[14] It was in this context that Palestinian civil society underwent a systemic process of structural transformation during the 1990s. In particular, the situation that donors found in Palestine was one of a weakened national liberation movement which

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[12] R. Brynen (2000) *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank*, pp. 6–7 (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace).

[13] M. Turner (2012) Completing the Circle: Peacebuilding as Colonial Practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, *International Peacekeeping*, 19(4), pp. 492–507.

[14] A. Le More (2008) *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo: Political Guilt, Wasted Money* (London: Routledge).

increasingly was withdrawing from overt political activism, which, in turn, facilitated the inclusion of Palestinian NGOs in the mainstream discourse on civil society that was fashionable at the time. While donor conditional funding played a role in influencing the 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 the Palestinian civil society landscape.

In the 1990s, external funding to Palestinian NGOs underwent both qualitative and quantitative shifts. Firstly, external financial resources to Palestinian were, until the end of the 1980s, a regional matter more than a Western/international one.[15] 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; by the mid-1990s it had become the main source of funding for the Palestinian NGOs. Secondly, while it has been said that Western funding to local NGOs can be traced back before the 1990s, it had come 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 since then have become 'by far . . . the most important donors for Palestinian NGOs in terms of funding made available annually and of their massive presence.'[16]

At the quantitative level, by the early 1990s Palestinian NGOs received approximately $170 to $240 million per year.[17] 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 on the other hand, these figures changed again and peaked in 2000. From 2000 to 2008, external aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip increased by over 600 percent to $3.25 billion per year, and external aid to Palestinian NGOs increased by over 500 percent, from $48 million in 1999 to $257 million in 2008.[18]

Dimensions of the Structural Transformation

This section explores and assesses the four arenas impacted by the three factors outlined above. These arenas expose four contradictory dimensions between the pre-Oslo mass-based civil society, and the post-Oslo NGO-led civil society. The four arenas are: the shift in organizational agenda, the role of the grassroots, the status of politics, and the production of knowledge.

National Agenda versus Globalized Agenda

The structural transformation entailed a substantial shift in the organizational agenda, which has been mirrored in the general characteristics of civil society, its discourse,

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[15] B. Challand (2009) *Palestinian Civil Society: Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and Exclude* (London: Routlege).

[16] Ibid, p. 87.

[17] R. Brynen (2000) *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank*, p. 187 (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace).

[18] J. De Voir & A. Tartir (2009) Tracking External Donor Funding to Palestinian Non Governmental Organizations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip 1999–2008 (Ramallah: Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute–MAS).

worldview, functions, representation and modes of intervention. Crucially, this shift meant a gradual abandonment of the national agenda that predominated during most of the pre-Oslo, mass-based movements' activities and programmes, and movement toward embracing a globally informed agenda expressed in new perceptions and discourses. Whereas the earlier pre-Oslo period refers to a set of principles, discourses, practices and objectives predicated on overall Palestinian identity and the national liberation project, the post-Oslo 'globalized agenda' refers to the changing pattern of agenda setting that has resulted from the re-adaption of Palestinian NGOs to the ideological, political and financial requirements introduced by the criteria of civil society restructuring, the Oslo process and the international aid.

The national agenda exemplified a unifying umbrella under which mass based-movements and other civil society actors functioned closely and collectively with political factions and social constituents. Although the formation of mass-based-led civil society was informed by a general national consensus over the imperative of establishing a solid institutional infrastructure in the oPt, the driving impulse behind this approach was not homogenous in terms of political strategy and ultimate objective. This fundamentally was a result of two competing national sub-agendas within the factional circles of the PLO. First, there was a pragmatic political trend guided by the logic of 'statehood.' This trend sought a territorial compromise in search of statehood, and was led by the mainstream Fateh movement, which sought in the creation of local organizations a possible institutional nucleus for a future autonomy, or a Palestinian state. The second sub-agenda was carried out by political groups of radical leaning, comprised of leftist and nationalist factions adhering to a 'liberationist' strategy that envisioned in the formation of social organizations a key factor in strengthening the popular dimension of resistance against the Israeli occupation for the ultimate goal of liberating the land of Palestine.[19]

However, the PLO political factions' efforts to establish an institutional infrastructure were not merely external initiatives. Researchers documented that a range of inside initiatives of social organizing were taking place by a politicized younger generation opposing the outright political and financial dependency on the external national forces.[20] In either case, however, the oPt served as a staging ground for the promotion and consolidation of a mass-based civil society capable of representing various social sectors and framing their needs and aspirations through mobilization and collective actions. The national agenda embraced by civil society was translated into action on the ground through a set of innovative mechanisms combining political with socioeconomic dimensions as a defining feature of the organizations' *modus operandi*. Three principal mechanisms were deployed to serve simultaneously political and socioeconomic purposes:

(1) A politicized form of service provision essential to support local communities' steadfastness. For example, the issue of poverty was not treated as an independent phenomenon, but as a direct result of the Israeli occupation's policies. At the

[19] For further explanation about statehood vs. Liberationist strategies see, for example, S. Tamari (1988) What the Uprising Means, *Middle East Report*, 152, pp. 24–30.

[20] See, for example, D. McDowall (1990) *Palestine and Israel: The Uprising and Beyond*, p. 110 (Berkeley, University of California Press); and S. Tamari (1991) The Palestinian National Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising, in: R. Brynen (ed.) *Echoes of the Intifada: Regional Repercussions of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 17–18 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).

same time, providing services to the poorer strata of the population was not presented as passive humanitarian relief but incorporated crucial political dimensions that addressed the root cause of socioeconomic grievances. This was particularly effective in promoting the sense of solidarity and collective empowerment.

(2) Public awareness of political, social and economic issues and in reviving cultural heritage, which was also of great significance to the process of collective empowerment. Raising public awareness included specific training to address internal social problems, health issues and methods of economic survival, with specialized committees (agriculture, health, and women's empowerment) providing technical assistance to their constituencies.

(3) Popular mobilization that served to transform people's grievances into concrete collective action in the course of the national liberation struggle.

Following the Oslo accords and the pouring of Western aid to civil society actors in the oPt, a profound reconfiguration of the institutional structure accompanied by a redefinition of organizational and functional agendas have been a benchmark of the transformative trajectory of civil society. In the first stance, the Oslo process meant the reframing of the oPt in line with the neoliberal design of 'post conflict' reconstruction and its related processes of state-building and civil society promotion. Such an externally predefined context has paved the way for international donors' normative powers to play a key role in remoulding the contents, structures and functions of civil society in a manner corresponding with the political conditions of the Oslo framework and the technical requirements for a functioning civil society in the context of peacebuilding. Consequently, donors' intervention has pushed local organizations to undertake a radical revision of the way they envision and articulate the national agenda. The shift toward NGOization implied acquiring a greater degree of institutional professionalism intended to qualify these organizations to occupy an intermediary position between the global dynamic and the local context. This invariably led local organizations to embrace a globally endorsed agenda mainly designed for identifying domestic problems and development requirements in compliance with standards set by the international development industry.

The practical aspect of the shift toward a globalized agenda stems from donors' emphasis on developing the organizations' administrative capabilities and fostering the managerial approach through extensive capacity building projects. While the local NGO community constitutes a principal target for donors' capacity building projects that would contribute to increasing the organizations' attractiveness for further funding, the NGOs' real capacity to produce reliable plans based on domestic priorities has been deeply eroded. This pattern of agenda setting invariably implies that local organizations have acquired an intermediary position through which dosages of transnational ideas and perceptions uncritically are injected into the local context. As Benoit Challand points out, this places local civil society organizations in situations of heteronomy where they do not contribute to establishing norms, values, institutions or even a language that responds to the aspirations of the local population.[21]

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[21] Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, p. 20.

Unsurprisingly the institutionalization of this agenda pattern has co-opted a substantial segment of local civil society organizations and exposed them to a heavy reliance on donor-driven agendas, which in turn, seriously have undermined Palestinian civil society's independence, pluralism and autonomy. This is particularly evident in the proliferation of internationally sponsored workshops, conferences, training and projects concerned with transmitting liberal-oriented values through activities such as civic education, democracy promotion, good governance, citizenship, community participation, conflict resolution, non-violence, peace-promotion and liberal women advocacy, among others. Such activities often are advertised and held with visible logos in the background indicating the sponsoring funding agency, e.g., USAID, the European Union, and the Ford Foundation, among others, which illustrates the heavy reliance of these NGOs on international donors for their legitimacy.

Furthermore, the disengagement between Palestinian NGOs and the national agenda is evident in the changing discursive framework. Historically, terms that were prominent in the Palestinian anti-colonial discourse such as 'resistance', 'steadfastness', 'mobilization' and 'popular' have been replaced with fashionable buzzwords such as 'empowerment', 'participation', 'stakeholders' and 'gender.' This suggests a crucial shift in the way these organizations relate to the society and the national cause. While the old body of terms often was bound to an expression of a collective cause and was formulated to underpin the sense of collective identity and solidarity, the NGOs' buzzwords hint at the individualization of the collective social formation through transforming it into fragmented sectors increasingly detached from the wider structural context and largely guided by the logic of competition and self-interest.

Collectivism versus Elitism

One of the most striking dimensions of Palestinian civil society's structural transformation has been the dramatic decline of the decentralized grassroots activism and its replacement with a hierarchal structure narrowly defined by a growing elitist tendency. This transformation marks a shift in power relations from 'power to' constituencies at the grassroots level to 'power over' them by the new elite.[22] For example, before Oslo, the primary motive behind the formation of a wide range of mass-based movements was to transform the passivity of societal dispersion into a collective participatory dynamic *vis-à-vis* the Israeli colonial regime. During the 1970s, the power of traditional elites (tribal leaders and landowners) gradually was dislodged by the emerging young, politicized and educated middle-class leaders affiliated with the national liberation movement, and who then marginalized the role of traditional charitable societies by establishing sophisticated networks of popular movements and committees. This development corresponded to a shift from passive resistance to collective activism, which attempted to cope with the hardship imposed by the military occupation. Organizing popular resistance and collective activism succeeded in the process to construct organic links with the grassroots and to address socioeconomic problems.

Three distinctive features were of great significance to the progressive outlook of the organizations' collective experience with the grassroots. The first feature was the organizational structure, which was characterized by decentralization, high horizontal

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[22] I. Jad (2004) The NGO-isation of Arab Women's Movements, *IDS Bulletin*, 35(4), pp. 34–42.

flexibility and extensive outreach mechanisms that allowed civil society organizations to incorporate a substantial segment of the population and activate their organizational membership. Second was the ability of these organizations to engage members systemically in genuine shared decision-making processes that allowed members to acquire leadership skills. Furthermore, this process proved essential to enhancing the participatory democratic dynamic of the organization as decisions reflected the collective will of the involved members rather than a 'top-down' enforcement of the leaders' perceptions. Third, collective action primarily was driven by a voluntary spirit to serve the public good and interest, which was crucial to the overall collective action.

The effectiveness of organizational collectivism had peaked and materialized during the first intifada. The eruption of the intifada soon was followed by the engagement of women movements, labor unions, students' blocs and professional groups, which decisively transformed the spontaneity of its initial phase into a sustained organizational action. Joost Hiltermann observed,

> What is remarkable in that the entire population could be mobilized simultaneously, and that a support structure needed to sustain the uprising's momentum came into being and functioned efficiently, with a leadership that was promptly accepted as legitimate by the population, in less than a month.[23]

However, this pattern of collective organizing began to erode in the early 1990s, and the mass-based movements were no longer influential actors in the post-Oslo context. Two fundamental processes occurred at both the individual and organizational levels, and these were conducive to fostering the elitist tendency within the NGOs' landscape and consequently led to a dramatic detachment between the organizations and their social constituents.

NGOs' elitism at the individual level refers to the formation and implantation of a new elite linked to the NGOs' industry. This elite is supported and sustained by economic, political and social incentives of international donors. At the economic level, NGOs became an attractive source of income where high salary and other economic privileges are secured. Politically, NGOs' leaders and professionals are engaged in manifold relationships with local and international politicians, foreign diplomats, parliamentarians, and officials of UN and international agencies. Furthermore, NGOs' leaders often are invited to participate in international events with frequent appearance on various media outlets. Lastly, these NGOs' leaders socially are privileged due to their professional position in society, which offers them prestigious social traits, and they commonly are perceived as Palestinian civil society elite.

NGOs' elite can be divided into two groups. The first is comprised of middle-class actors who were educated in local universities and found new opportunities for their upward mobility through the channels of the political parties.[24] In other words, they

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[23] J. R. Hiltermann (1993) *Behind the Intifada: Labour and Women Movements in the Occupied Territories*, p. 173 (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[24] S. Hanafi & L. Tabar (2004) Donor Assistance, Rent-seeking and Elite Formation, in: M. H. Khan, G. Giacaman & G. Amundsen (eds) *State Formation in Palestine. Viability and Governance during a Social Transformation*, p. 224 (London: Routledge Curzon).

typically represent an extension of political and social activists who led a wide range of mass-based movements and grassroots organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, and most were affiliated with leftist factions. The second group of NGOs' elite mostly is comprised of Palestinian returnees who were allowed to return to the oPt after the establishment of the PA. This elite group is comprised largely of secular urban professionals with highly specialized Western educational backgrounds. They are well informed about the dynamics of the 'aid industry' and development discourse and actively are engaged in an extensive network of overseas contacts. NGOs constitute a highly desirable and lucrative workplace, especially in the context of an underpaid public sector, dominated by a system of patron-client relationships.[25]

Sustaining NGOs' elitism is the upward concentration of power in hands of individuals, usually those leading and directing NGOs. With the heavy involvement of donors in this anti-democratic arrangement, many local NGOs largely are seen as one-man shows whereby the names of their leaders have become a defining feature of each organization's reputation. This situation has sparked harsh accusations about NGOs' leaders behaving 'like heads of tribes with almost unlimited power.'[26] Paradoxically, however, certain large NGOs whose activities are associated with programmes of democracy promotion and good governance have become a stronghold of certain elites who persistently have maintained control over the executive power since the foundation of their respective NGOs. This persistence reveals not only the process of overwhelming personalization of NGOs, but also the extent to which key donor actors, with whom these NGOs leaders have close affinity, consciously are contributing to the empowerment of certain NGOs' elites. The contradictions between the rhetoric of democracy promotion and the anti-democratic practices bring into question issues of NGOs' integrity and credibility, and therefore contribute to the public's increasing distrust of local NGOs. According to a 2011 FAFO poll, about 59 percent of respondents said they distrust Palestinian NGOs.[27]

At the organizational level, the neoliberal institutional rearrangement as a fundamental pillar of the structural transformation has prompted certain perceptions and criteria that thoroughly restructured the social relations between the local organizations and the social base. The ascendency of an elitist trend within civil society, characterized by an ideological closeness to, and financial dependence on, global actors not only has contributed to a rapid detachment between NGOs and the grassroots but also has redefined the mode of interaction in a manner governed by market logic. A major sign of this penetration stems from the identification of social constituency as 'target groups,' 'clients,' 'stakeholders' or 'beneficiaries' which has become a key reference of NGOs' pronounced perception of the populations. Behind such identification lies standardized processes entailing proposal writings, fundraising, socioeconomic assessments, tables and

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[25] A. A. Jamal (2009) *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[26] S. Abdel Shafi (2004) *Civil Society and Political Elites in Palestine and the Role of International Donors: A Palestinian View*, EuroMeSCo Working Paper, 33, p. 5. Available at http://www.euromesco.net/euromesco/media/paper33_final.pdf

[27] Å. A. Tiltnes, J. Pedersen, S. Sønsterudbråten & J. Liu (2011) Palestinian Opinions about Governance, Institutions and Political Leaders: Synthesis of Results of Fafo's Opinion Polls in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 2005–2011, FAFO-paper. Available at http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/10130/10130.pdf, accessed 3 August 3, 2013.

statistics, reporting and evaluation, all of which regularly surpass any real engagement of the population in influencing decision-making or setting priorities. This exclusionary process has resulted in a systemic de-politicization, de-mobilization and de-radicalization of the masses at large, thereby transforming the originally constructed cohesiveness of the Palestinian popular base into fragmented groups comprising powerless subjects situated at the receiving end of services and values.

Given the fact that Palestinian NGOs found exclusive reference in the global aid industry and its hegemonic model of neoliberal development, related discourses of participation and empowerment have become part of the key operational methodology for engineering social change. Although once progressive notions that implied forms of collective action to challenge the *status quo*, the terms empowerment and participation virtually have been encapsulated in the Western logic of liberal individualism, which inherently disregards the structure of oppression and reduces human progress to an individualized dimension rationalizing individuals' choices and personal potency to access resources and compete for economic gains. Far from being deployed for emancipatory objectives, the power of individualization naturalizes the exclusionary politics of the system, and, while fostering fragmentary tendencies in society, it eventually serves the existing power structure by leaving the *status quo* unchallenged.

Politics versus Anti-Politics

The structural transformation exposes contradictory political roles and outcomes between past and present versions of civil society in Palestine. It also reveals a fundamental discrepancy in the way these actors relate to politics, interpret political reality, interact with the dynamics of political change, or respond to the political *status quo*. In terms of politics, the structural transformation has meant the dislocation of crucial political components that underpinned the very foundation of the pre-Oslo mass-based movements. Contrastingly, it has equipped NGOs with a set of technicalities and managerial mechanisms that mask the root cause of socioeconomic problems and obstruct the role of politics in social change.

The colonial reality existing in the oPt, and its corresponding economic exploitation and persistent denial of Palestinian political rights and self-determination, offered a fertile environment for popular anti-colonial action to take place. Most importantly, given that the imposed colonial reality constitutes the antithesis of Palestinian emancipation, this has contributed, in a dialectical sense, to the formation of a modern Palestinian identity, which naturally underwent intensive politicization and embraced a revolutionary political route.[28] Against this background, the formation of mass-based movements should be understood as primarily motivated by the political rationale that drives national liberation movements to carry out various forms of resistance to the imposed colonial reality.

The variety of techniques deployed by civil society actors to support the popular steadfastness such as implementing models of alternative development, revival of cultural heritage and methods of economic survival and self-sufficiency under the hard conditions of the occupation constituted only parts of a wider political strategy, commonly known as

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[28] R. Khalidi (2010) *Palestinian Identity: Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press).

sumud. This *sumud* politics fundamentally departed from reference to the Palestinian identity as a major source for connecting Palestinians in the oPt to the rest of Palestinians in exile, and it emphasized the safeguarding of the homeland, the preservation of national identity and cultural heritage and the collective anti-colonial struggle. The politics of *sumud* began to crystallize in the early 1970s, and was developed throughout the 1980s. The understanding of *sumud* was shaped by the changing political circumstances associated with the PLO's outside situation and its echoes on inside politics. Thus, *sumud* became a key conception rooted in the Palestinian political experience under Israeli occupation during the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s.

The crystallization of political consciousness in a greatly structured manner would not have been possible without the crucial role that mass-based movements played. In particular, these movements served the process of politicization through being representative platforms for political and cultural expressions. In addition, they stimulated mass participation in political activities and the incorporation of new social forces, particularly the more disadvantaged sectors of society into Palestinian political life.[29] Importantly,

> the acceleratory dynamic of the first intifada was nurtured by the participation of substantial segments of diverse social sectors as a direct outcome of the politicizing activity of mass-based movements. For example, the political role of Palestinian women repeatedly has been acknowledged. According to Eileen Kuttab 'the women's movement provided the backbone of the resistance in 1987 during the intifada, when, together with other mass-based organizations, they acted as the local authority and offered their support to sustain the community's steadfastness in crisis.'[30]

As the Oslo process unfolded, the NGOization of civil society and the subsequent severance between NGOs and political parties and social constituents marked the early signs of de-politicization. While the post-Oslo misguided depiction of the oPt as a 'post-conflict' zone paved the way for the promotion of a procedural version of civil society, donor-imposed organizational and political conditionality have had a decisive impact on creating the chasm between the civil and the political, leaving the first administered by the NGOs. From donors' perspective, Palestinian NGOs should not be affiliated politically and nor are they expected to become involved in any form of anti-colonial politics. Instead, their desired function is to perform certain predefined roles related to service provision and social engineering directed to enhance a top-down social transformation as a means to a political end: To further stabilize the 'peace process.' Consequently, Palestinian civil society has broken radically with the conventional anti-colonial politics that were so prominent in the period prior to the Oslo process.

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[29] See, for example, L. Taraki (1990) The Development of Political Consciousness among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, 1967–1987, in: J. R. Nassar & R. Heacock (eds) *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, pp. 53–71 (New York: Greenwood Press).

[30] E. Kuttab (2008) Palestinian Women's Organizations: Global Cooption and Local Contradiction, *Cultural Dynamics*, 20(2), p. 103.

Since 1993, Palestinian NGOs have moved away from being a strategic politicizing machine to embracing apolitical approaches and self-identification as 'neutral', 'independent' and 'non-partisan,' particularly concerning issues of an evident political nature, which inevitably necessitate political articulation and engagement. The previously political socialization and mobilization of the grassroots had been replaced with foreign-funded projects of excessive technical character, known for their short-term measurable outcomes that persistently fail to contribute to any progressive change in the political and social processes. The prevalence of an inward orientation toward capacity building, fundraising, transparency, communication skills, and technical modes of intervention, coupled with the rise of the NGOs' technocratic elite, are all-defining features of the de-politicized nature of the NGOs. This coheres with the apolitical logic of neoliberal institutional reconfiguration and mode of governance, which tend to minimize the interaction between the political realm and the socioeconomic order.

Further, the de-politicization of Palestinian civil society has triggered a 'trickle-down' effect, which has impacted the development of the masses' political consciousness and therefore crippled the progress of society's political life. Once seen as the most actively politically engaged masses in the region, Palestinian society has experienced a dramatic deterioration in its political consciousness and engagement. Although this development can be attributed to a number of de-politicizing factors related to the Oslo process, the most important factor has been the NGOizaton of civil society, which has led to a severe interruption of vital channels of political socialization and mobilization. A prominent example of the NGOs de-politicizing activity is related to the advocacy paradigm, which began to gain substantial visibility and influence in the early 1990s, mainly as a by-product of convergence between the Oslo process and neoliberal globalization.[31] In particular, since donors came to regard the continuation of the masses' political de-mobilization as a precondition for stability and peace, and in order to secure governability under the PA, the promotion of NGOs' advocacy activities became a convenient substitute for the mass political mobilization. Within the advocacy framework, many feminist-oriented NGOs focusing on women's rights and gender awareness emerged in the early 1990s, which brought a fundamental transformation of the women's mass organizations that had constituted the backbone of the national movement during the 1970s and 1980s. As Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab argue, 'mass activism that marked the women's movement's experience in the intifada [was] largely . . . replaced by an NGO model of lobbying, advocacy and workshop style educational and development activities.'[32] This change was in line with the donors' good governance, democracy and gender mainstreaming schemes in which women's organizations are promoted to participate in civil society building by articulating a specific group interest.

The de-politicization of Palestinian civil society and subsequent decline of the society's political engagement is equivalent to disempowerment. It should be stressed that de-politicization carries within it the seeds of a new political project. De-politicization does not necessarily entail the complete absence of politics. Rather, it is about downplaying politics without articulating it, thus paving the way for a systemic re-politicization.

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[31] Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*.

[32] P. Johnson & E. Kuttab (2001) Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada, *Feminist Review*, 69, p. 25.

Anti-colonial Knowledge versus Neo-colonial Knowledge

By comparing the shifting patterns of Palestinian civil society's contribution to knowledge production, there appears to be an especially radical cleavage between the pre-Oslo self-conscious, anti-colonial knowledge production and the present consumption and marketing of Eurocentric perceptions on politics, culture and society, thus invalidating knowledge systems rooted in anti-colonial national liberation and disenfranchising them. For example, the Palestinian national movement had utilized local organizations to circulate a body of knowledge informed by the national agenda aiming to create a holistic consciousness based on principles of anti-colonial resistance and self-determination. Civil society represented a fertile terrain for the construction of an anti-colonial order of ideas and values that served to develop a counter-hegemonic force to that of the Israeli colonial domination. In the first place, civil society actors centered the production of knowledge on an indigenous field that entailed emphasis on the originality of the local culture and values as a cornerstone for the affirmation of national identity. Lisa Taraki documents that, concurrent with the founding of mass-based movements, there emerged a range of cultural and literary forums consisting of associations of writers, artists and journalists, political and literary journals, theatre groups, music ensembles and national folklore revival initiatives.[33] The early years of the 1970s witnessed a remarkable expansion of these forums, which served as popular platforms involving academics, intellectuals and writers, and were distinctly political in nature. Palestinian local newspapers and periodicals reflected a diversity of political tendencies, and played an important role in shaping public opinion, despite the imposed censorship by the Israeli occupation authorities.

Further, for the purpose of stimulating resistance, the production of knowledge recalled past anti-colonial experiences, which witnessed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a series of popular revolts against both British colonial rule and the Zionist movement in Palestine. Yet the circulation of knowledge placed revolutionary experiences of other colonized nations as a central reference to associate Palestinian resistance to the wider spectrum of anti-colonial movements in the world. For example, revolutionary experiences such as that of Algeria, South Africa and Vietnam, among others, repeatedly were narrated. The anti-colonial knowledge was underpinned by a set of emancipatory ideological orientations widespread throughout the Arab world and Third World countries, and which typically implied the articulation of revolutionary ideas (e.g., Palestinian nationalism, pan-Arabism, Marxism and socialism).

Such approaches to knowledge production laid the basis for resisting the colonization of the Palestinian consciousness. Historically, the colonization of consciousness constituted a pillar for the imposition of the colonial cultural order on the colonized subjects and served to normalize the colonial reality, stigmatize and denigrate local identity and therefore maintain hegemony and control over the indigenous population.[34] In the Palestinian context, civil society actors recognized the imperative of projecting and disseminating anti-colonial knowledge expressed through myriad forms of resistance practices to the Israeli colonial regime. This activity, in turn, played a defining role in shaping the revolutionary character of civil society and society at large. Although such a process

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[33] L. Taraki, *The Development of Political Consciousness*, p. 64.

[34] See, for example, E. Said (1994) *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books); and B. Ashcroft, G. Gareth & H. Tiffin (1998) *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge).

seemingly had produced relatively homogenous thoughts and objectives, it actually reflected a real diversity secured by the political and ideological pluralism of the national movement.

However, the striking changes in civil society's structure have shaken the entire system of anti-colonial knowledge production. With the increasing presence of NGOs, the process of knowledge production has shifted dramatically to favor a standardized body of knowledge usually diffused in post-conflict situations and directly connected to the (neo-) liberal paradigm of state-building and civil society promotion. The new forms of knowledge are predicated on neo-colonial notions of 'cultural modernization,' which aim at transforming social structures and relations for the purpose of hegemony and control. Consequently, today Palestinian NGOs are instrumental in transmitting, consuming and marketing knowledge in accordance with a Eurocentric worldview, which has substituted for the old unequivocal anti-colonial system of ideas. For example, the knowledge produced, circulated and promoted on civil society itself aims at re-conceptualizing the civil society domain within the Western paradigm of (neo-) liberal institutionalism. In addition, the quality and quantity of themes, publications, conferences and seminars tend to alter local perspectives and provide both the donor community and development agencies with detailed information about the local context. Donors' perceptions influence the general orientation of knowledge production or directly interfere to determine certain details throughout the process.

The Eurocentric form of knowledge production is focused on harmonizing the local understanding of how civil society ought to function with the prevailing globalized trend. The promotion of the Western notion of civil society has facilitated the effects of globalization to penetrate the very fabric of Palestinian civil society, consistently reinforcing re-theorization, re-articulation and re-framing of meanings, structures and functions favoring the waves of NGOization and professionalization. To be sure, the course of civil society's structural transformation during the 1990s was accompanied by a concentrated epistemological and academic effort for revising the meaning of civil society in relation to global trends and validating its applicability in the Palestinian setting.[35] For this purpose, various activities devoted to fostering the Western epistemological framing of civil society have marked the subjection of local civil society to external reformulation.

The most prominent type of NGOs specialized in the field of knowledge production are the so-called 'research centers,' which bear a major resemblance to Western 'think tanks.' These centers proliferated in the early 1990s. They are heavily dependent on foreign funding to produce a plethora of research publications, policy papers and brochures, as well as regularly to organize seminars and conferences. Research centers' spatial distribution shows particular concentration in urban areas where governmental institutions and donors' agencies are based, particularly in Ramallah and Jerusalem. Their numbers vary, with the Palestinian Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) counting 19,[36]

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[35] The 1990s witnessed intensive organizations of donors-promoted conferences, seminars and publications aimed to redefine the meaning of civil society in the Palestinian context. This included topics such as the role of civil society in democratization, civic education, state-building and peacebuilding, among others. For further details, see Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*.

[36] M. Al-Maliki, H. Ladadweh & Y. Shalabi (2007) *Mapping Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip* (Ramallah: MAS).

Benoit Challand estimating about 29,[37] and Sari Hanafi listing 42 research centers in the oPt.[38]

Critics of this phenomenon hint at the suspicious involvement of research centers in serving foreign agendas, because 'most of the themes dealt with by such research centers very often cover predominantly external actors' interests in the region.'[39] Similarly, Khalil Nakhleh contends that research centers' dependency on foreign aid is problematic because they heavily incorporate donors' agendas, ideas and perceptions in their research activities and studies.[40] Research centers function as conduits through which Western donors' cultural and social designs are transmitted locally. Thus, they are likely to be perceived as subcontractors to neo-colonial knowledge since they hardly contribute to the production of original knowledge based on the peculiarity of local culture and knowledge.

Although research centers offer relatively affluent facilities for researchers, including bibliographical references, accessible resources and technology, this research industry tends to turn out policy studies, reports, newsletters and other publications that predominantly are requested by donors. According to Majdi Al-Maliki,

> Some funding agencies interfere in the details of the research activities that they fund, and impose specific methods of research that researchers have to apply in their study. These agencies determine the deadline of research projects in addition to imposing the participation of foreign experts who, in most cases, are ignorant of the details of the phenomenon under study within the Palestinian context. The researcher is thus subjected to methodological and theoretical restrictions and finds himself/herself in a situation similar to that of a machine which simply produces according to *a priori*-controlled guidelines without having the liberty to influence the research process.[41]

Research activities usually are managed and conducted by selected figures from the academic circles that intellectually are identified with the mainstream development industry. Yet, this reveals the extent to which a certain segment of Palestinian academics and intellectuals are actively involved in the propagation of donors' discourses on culture and society without serious questioning of the consequences of disseminating such incompatible forms of knowledge. Further, this mode of research production has no 'trickle-down' effect. Rather, it has created a sort of fragmentation within the Palestinian research circle, as it has led to a sort of monopoly over this industry. Challand reports that it 'is often the same group of four or five individuals writing most of the reports.'[42] This

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[38] S. Hanafi (2009) Donor Community and the Market of Research Production Framing and de Framing the Social Sciences. Paper presented at the conference of the Council of National Associations, March 23–25, 2009; Taipei, Taiwan.

[38] S. Hanafi (2009) Donor Community and the Market of Research Production Framing and de Framing the Social Sciences. Paper presented at the conference of the Council of National Associations, March 23–25, 2009; Taipei, Taiwan.

[39] Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, p. 109.

[40] K. Nakhleh (2011) *Globalized Palestine: The National Sell-out of a Homeland* (Ewing Township, NJ: The Red Sea Press).

[41] M. Al-Maliki (2011) Researching in an Unsuitable Environment: The Palestinian Case, in: R. Heacock & E. Conte (eds) *Critical Research in the Social Sciences: A Transdisciplinary East-West Handbook*, p. 208 (Ramallah and Vienna: The Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies).

[42] Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, p. 121.

striking example has become a regular exercise in the oPt and it systemically undermines the development of new researchers and recent graduates to pursue better opportunities and skills.

Conclusion

While the Israeli colonial reality continues unabated, Palestinian civil society has abandoned critical characters and tasks associated with its historical anti-colonial struggle in favor of foreign-dictated and financed professional NGOs. 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 co-optation of a substantial part of the Palestinian elite in search of new forms of legitimization, resulted in an NGO sector whose agenda increasingly has been detached from its local constituencies and from the local context and has converged toward a discourse that is formulated and knowledge that is produced in the international arena rather than at the local level. After all, this has resulted in a perilous impasse to the development and continuity of the democratic, inclusive and open-access popular organizations that formed inseparable social and political forces in the pre-Oslo national liberation struggle.

After 20-plus years of a futile 'peace process,' the incapacity or 'unwillingness' of local organizations to challenge the *status quo* portrays the extent to which the forces behind the process of structural transformation effectively have managed to abort Palestinian civil society from its potential to inflict a profound political and social change. Inevitably, therefore, the site of NGOs-led civil society in Palestine has become another pillar for reinforcing the political *status quo*. Today, global actors recognize the reality of Palestinian civil society as a site of professional NGOs comprising an engine for development and providing invaluable support for the peace process. 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 predominantly is characterized by an elitist tendency, a neoliberal orientation, and de-politicized structures regulated by the political conditions of the Oslo process as part of a wider project of re-politicizing the Palestinian scene. The irrelevancy of such a circumscribed form of NGOs-led civil society in the Palestinian context contributes to the dialectical relationship between furthering the institutionalization of the colonial structure, and the continuation of political, economic, and social disenfranchisement of the Palestinian population. However, despite the persistent attempt to narrow down and co-opt Palestinian civil society through its NGOization, there still remain heterogeneous organizations in terms of political and ideological orientations, although currently their role is marginal and not visible, and these may constitute a kernel of hope that a more critical model of civil society—as a site of contestation, opposition, resistance and change—can re-emerge.

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