INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND THE EFFECTS ON PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND THE EFFECTS ON PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The development of civil societies has been a centerpiece of Western governments’ democratization efforts abroad since the mid-1980s and a focus of its involvement in the Middle East and North Africa for the past decade. Civil society support is typically viewed not only as an extremely cost effective means of furthering foreign policy objectives, but also as a morally unassailable activity. In recent years, donors and international NGOs have showcased their success in implementing programs that create “vibrant” civil societies. The actual results of their work, however, are not so clear. This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship critiquing a particular subset of international assistance—civic education programming—by using the ethnographic method to explicate the immobilizing effect that such programs can have on local communities. Through textual analysis and fieldwork in Palestine, I investigate how the presence of a robust aid regime influences Palestinians’ choices about how to survive economically, advance socially and, ultimately, to mobilize politically.
Preface

It’s 8:00 in the morning and I’m leaving the white stone apartment I rent in the old quarter of Ramallah to begin my daily uphill climb to the city center. As I exit the gate, the first image to greet me is a large yellow sign hanging on an adjacent building that reads: “For Rent – NGOs Only.” I continue my short walk to the lot where I board a minivan that runs between Ramallah and the village of Birzeit, where I work a small Palestinian nongovernmental organization, Nuhoud for Rural Development. I developed the habit of leaving much earlier than my office hours required in order to avoid the uphill climb during increasingly hot summer mornings, but also because I find it easier to pay attention to my surroundings when the streets are empty. It is always in these early morning walks that I notice things that will be covered by bustling crowds and moving cars after 10:00. I walk leisurely, pausing occasionally to study one of the posters that are plastered on the white stone walls of nearly every building I pass. They vary in color, size, and content; some commemorate the untimely deaths of Palestinian youth, many are political, and others advertise upcoming film festivals or concerts. Of the latter category, most bear the conspicuous logo of an international aid organization.

When I reach the top of the hill, I stop to purchase a newspaper to share with my officemate, Issa. On the short bus ride to Birzeit, I generally read the front page and skim the rest for announcements posted by international organizations. On any given day, there are at least two or three solicitations for proposals on a new development project and an advertisement announcing a new training aimed at “building civil society.” Today, I find a quarter page ad with information on an upcoming human rights training sponsored by a German NGO.
By the time I arrive at work, it is 9:30 am. I should take a seat at my desk and finish the “project success stories” I have been translating all week, but I stall in an effort to avoid Issa’s cigarette smoke and the scorching July sun, both of which linger over my desk. Selma, the bright young woman who had recently become the organization’s Acting Director is, as usual, concentrating on her computer screen. Most hours of the day, I can glance over to see her pecking out English words into Google Translate as she crafts emails to potential European donors. After I’ve finished my work for the day, I usually sit beside Selma and assist her for the remainder of the afternoon. We chat easily while I edit and revise her messages, which usually promise potential funders that Nuhoud is an ideal Palestinian partner organization because of its deep connections to the “grassroots.” We tell them how quickly Nuhoud can mobilize its cadres of trained, eager volunteers to help remedy whatever problem it was in Palestinian society that most concerns them. This line is repeated no matter the project under discussion. On a typical day at the office, this is how we pass our time.

But I soon realize that today is not a typical day. The energy in the room is frantic, and when Selma explains that approval for a long delayed project has finally been granted, I understand why. An entrepreneurship training project with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had received long awaited approval after being delayed for months because of issues with USAID’s complicated security vetting requirements. Nuhoud had been asked to cease all activities indefinitely, but now that they had received a green light, they were expected to finish project implementation by the end of the year despite Ramadan being only a few days away. Selma quickly explained the deadlines, noting that we would have to alter the
office’s Ramadan hours in order to finish the project’s preparations. After several lazy weeks, it seems that our days just became hectic.

I am too busy digesting the news and asking questions to notice the unfamiliar face sitting in the desk adjacent to mine. Selma introduces me to Nassira, a twenty-one year old graduate of Bethlehem University who is being described as the Project Coordinator for the USAID project. Her title confounds me, since I had been hired to coordinate the USAID project when it finally began. There is little time to ask questions, though, because Selma has already called Mohammed, our stand-by taxi driver (and the cousin of another staff member), and he is blowing the horn of his car.

The trip that Selma, Nassira, and I took that day would become typical of our workdays for the next two months. Each morning, we would pile into Mohammed’s cab and drive between the West Bank towns of Jericho, ‘Anata, al-Bireh, and Biddu. At every stop, we met youth clubs and chambers of commerce eager to host or assist in our trainings. We negotiated discounted lunches with shop owners who assured us that we were getting a better deal than the last group. We marketed the trainings to young participants, who invariably demanded certificates of completion and reimbursements for transportation costs. No matter where we go or with whom we meet, I had the feeling that I was the only person new to this process.

This particular outing lasted most of the day, and we arrive back at the office just in time to catch everyone else leaving. I take the bus back to Ramallah with Issa. Sometime in June, the police had begun to enforce seatbelt usage in response to a Palestinian Authority (PA) campaign that was funded by the European Union (EU). I was secretly glad that minibus drivers were now
routinely yelling, “Buckle up!” once the van was loaded; the combination of deep ravines, narrow roads, and lead feet had reinvigorated my spiritual life. Issa, however, derided the seatbelt initiative as yet another waste of foreign money. Along all major roads, signs featuring the blue and yellow signature of the EU remind people to buckle up. Alongside the sinuous Ramallah-Birzeit road, huge billboards are placed every hundred feet or so. Some advertise the seatbelt campaign, others highlight USAID’s work with local youth: “Step by step we’re rebuilding and developing.” The sight of these billboards sparks a familiar conversation. “The U.S. and EU,” Issa says, “just laugh at us [Palestinians].” He believed that American and European donors knew that there would never be actual development in Palestine as long as the occupation persisted, yet they continued to pour money into useless initiatives, choosing programs based on “what Israel accepts, not what Palestinians need.” For him, these billboards are simply roadside reminders that he lives under occupation.

Once our bus reaches its designated parking lot in the center of Ramallah, I board another minibus to the village of al-ʿAzariya (also known as Bethany) in East Jerusalem to have dinner with a family that I had befriended years before during my first extended stay in Palestine. Sami and Hadeel are a young couple in their early thirties with six children. They are intensely curious and love to travel, but have little opportunity to leave the confines of the village where they were both born. In exchange for constant advice and occasional translation assistance, I answered endless questions on American culture—something they knew of primarily from the satellite television they had successfully routed to their home at no charge. They had helped me
navigate Palestine when I could barely speak Arabic, and over the years I had come to know most of their sprawling extended family.

On cool nights, all the aunts, uncles, and cousins would gather in the open courtyard, and while the children ran around chasing cats and each other, the adults would engage in discussions that tended to last until midnight. Couches, a few armchairs, and cheap plastic chairs were pushed together to form something resembling a circle that was loosely gender segregated. I generally tried to situate myself in the middle, with men on one side and the ladies on the other. This was a lesson I had learned by watching Sami’s wife, Hadeel, as she glided easily in and out of the women’s discussions on navigating prayer times and checkpoints in Jerusalem to the men’s talk of the local municipal elections. Conversation flowed smoothly with just the occasional pause to refuse the fruit tray that was being passed around for the second and third time. On this particular evening, my conversational two-timing was proving difficult. We were all laughing at Hadeel’s aunt, who had just declared that she intended to make ‘umra twice in her life—once, and first, to America in order to “shop and have a good time.” Then she would make the religious journey one final time as an old woman who needed to “get right with God” because she’d had such a good time.

While I was trying to hang onto every word of the ladies’ discussion, I was also being pulled into a conversation on American foreign policy (which is certainly among the most common topics of conversation in Palestine). But this particular discussion ended with Sami’s uncle comparing U.S. foreign assistance to a drug addiction—Palestinians, he believed, had been

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1 The ‘umra is a pilgrimage to Mecca that can be undertaken any time of the year. Unlike the hajj, it is not compulsory.
given large doses in the beginning so that they would be forever hooked. Those large doses, he argued, ensured that the addiction could now be sustained with just a shot every now and then. Sami nodded in agreement, and pointed out the difference in aid and genuine development: “The Japanese factory they’re building in Jericho—now that’s development.” As he saw it, the Americans have no interest in building factories in Palestine because, “The U.S. simply wants to make sure that Palestinians have enough money to buy Israeli products.”

Each day from morning to night, I found hints of the profound and far reaching influence of foreign assistance in Palestinian society. Spontaneous conversations like this exchange between Sami and his uncle were near daily occurrences and proved invaluable to my research. I arrived in the field with a predetermined research agenda that prescribed whom I should interview and what organizations I should get to know, but these constant references to various aspects of development helped me redefine my focus, and in many cases, encouraged me to reevaluate the questions I had been asking. Before I began my fieldwork, I had assumed that most of my research notes would come from my job and the formal interviews I planned to conduct, but I found myself constantly jotting down notes from these impromptu conversations. First-time visitors to Jerusalem muse that you can “just feel” the tension; I believe that in much the same way, an observant visitor to Ramallah can just feel the aid money.
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AMIDEAST – America-Mideast Educational Training Services, Inc.
ANERA – American Near East Refugee Aid
ATC – Anti-Terrorism Certification
CBO – Community Based Organization
INGO – International Nongovernmental Organization
IRI – International Republican Institute
MENA – Middle East and North Africa
NDI – National Democratic Institute
NGO – Nongovernmental organization
PA – Palestinian Authority
PASSIA – Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs
PLO – Palestine Liberation Organization
PNGO – Palestinian nongovernmental organization
PVO – Private Voluntary Organization
RFA – Request for Applications
TOT – Train the Trainers
UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USAID – U.S. Agency for International Development
USG – United States Government
VWC – Volunteer Work Committee
YDRC – Youth Development Resource Center
NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

I have generally followed the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, excepting a few cases where names or terms have become commonly used in English.
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I also owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of Nuhoud, who never tired of answering questions that must have sometimes seemed trivial, if not naïve. Their sincere dedication to the betterment of their homeland is a source of hope and inspiration. It is to them that this research is dedicated.

The names of all persons and organizations mentioned in this project have been changed, despite permission from most to go on the record. While this research is largely based on a combination of critical textual analysis and fieldwork carried out from June to December 2009, it is also influenced by subsequent work at an international consulting firm that advises a major U.S. donor organization. That experience has given me extremely useful insight into the donor side of the foreign assistance process and has caused me to reevaluate some key assumptions underlying my research questions. It has not, however, tempered what is essentially a critique of the aid regime and its often negative, if inadvertent, consequences for the societies in which it operates.

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Introduction

The subject of international development assistance in Palestine has been researched by a number of scholars, including many notable Palestinian intellectuals. Most of these studies have analyzed the economic and political consequences that occur when massive amounts of foreign aid meet continued military occupation. However, none have used the ethnographic method to explore the lasting effects of this phenomenon on Palestinian communities’ internal dynamics. The particular brand of foreign assistance under investigation in this research is aimed directly at “the grassroots.” Direct intervention calls for direct observation. Ethnography is the ideal vehicle for examining daily life, which is where we can, I believe, best understand how the local meets the global. It is also the most effective research method available to understand the gradual evolution of norms, to recognize on a personal level how policies and processes affect behavior. In this way, it is possible to see not only how things are, but how they came to be. This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship critiquing the political impact of a particular subset of the international assistance—civic education programming—by explicating the immobilizing effect that civil society programming can have on its “beneficiaries.” Through textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, I will investigate how the presence of a robust aid regime influences people’s choices about how to survive economically, advance socially and, ultimately, to mobilize politically.

Research for this thesis was conducted primarily in East Jerusalem and the West Bank; the exclusion of the Gaza Strip is regrettable but ultimately unavoidable due to a strict Israeli closure policy that severely limits the ability of humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations
to work in Gaza. In any case, by most measures it is the West Bank, and particularly the cities of Ramallah and al-Bireh, that are the central theatres for international intervention in the form of aid. Estimates of the number of NGOs active in the West Bank and Gaza range from 1,000-1,500.² Many, if not the majority, of those organizations have their headquarters in Ramallah. For these reasons, Ramallah seemed to be an obvious choice as my temporary home. From June to December 2009, I lived in the city of Ramallah but commuted regularly to the northern town of Birzeit to work at a Palestinian nongovernmental organization (PNGO). This experience, a volunteer internship with a PNGO that depends heavily on U.S. grants to fund its activities and pay its staff, was vital to my research. I chose to work at this particular organization because it is typical of the time and place under examination in this research. It is one of many organizations that sprang up in response to the massive influx of funding that marked the Oslo aid bonanza, but is now struggling to survive financially as Western aid is reoriented to budgetary support for the Palestinian Authority and humanitarian projects.³ Nuhoud is also typical because it, like many Palestinian NGOs, is now struggling to balance its economic needs with national aspirations.

In addition to the daily experience of working with a local organization struggling to represent Palestine’s rural grassroots to an international audience, I conducted over thirty formal interviews with participants who represented various sectors and positions within the “development regime.” Formal interviews lasted anywhere from half an hour to an entire

afternoon, and were generally conducted in colloquial Palestinian Arabic. Though I was based in Ramallah, my research frequently took me to several different towns and villages throughout the West Bank and, to a lesser extent, East Jerusalem. I worked in and visited Ni’lin, Kufr Zebad, Nablus, Bethlehem, Ramallah, East Jerusalem, Jericho, ’Azariya, Hebron, Biddu, al-Bireh, Abu Dis, and ’Anata. Within weeks, I realized that virtually no space, physical or imagined, has been untouched by some aspect of foreign aid.

This research project focuses primarily on one specific component of the aid regime: civic education programs. These programs come in a variety of forms. Many state their political objectives clearly, while others pursue civic education through the supposedly neutral space of the market, with youth entrepreneurship programs the increasingly favored vehicle for Western engagement with MENA youth. This research focuses in particular on programs implemented through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and two of its largest implementers, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). I chose these organizations because of their large and early presence in the West Bank and Gaza and because they are some of the most prominent implementers of U.S. government civic education programs. These three funding organizations are by no means the only relevant arms of the aid regime in Palestine. Aid to Palestine also includes regional actors, such as the Arab League, the Arab-Gulf Fund, and local charities; bilateral agencies such as the European Commission; multi-lateral organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the European Commission; and international NGOs (INGOs) such as Oxfam, Save the Children and others. However, the American donors, due to the U.S. political position and the sheer
magnitude of its aid to Palestine, has unparalleled power to set the aid agenda. As the director of one local NGO explained, “USAID decides what sectors are important. First it was democracy, then health … in every sector, Americans come with huge funding, and small NGOs explode.” This study is an anthropological investigation of how these small NGOs are navigating the demands of the global aid apparatus and what the influx of funds means for the community at large.

Methodology & Organization

Using the case of Palestine, this thesis will add to a body of knowledge that is gradually making sense of the most common method for intervention in a “transnational” era where the international is thrust upon the local: foreign assistance. While the analysis presented here will focus solely on the Palestinian experience, this topic has wide-ranging importance. The 1990s were a monumental decade for the development regime. As the Iron Curtain fell, thousands of NGOs rose up in a response to Western governments’ efforts to fund peacebuilding and democratization efforts abroad. These efforts, broadly categorized as “democracy assistance,” became a significant component of America’s foreign policy and defense strategies. Through civic education programs, the U.S. has led the charge in using development assistance

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4 The U.S., according to USAID, is the leading contributor of bilateral aid to Palestinians. USAID, Middle East, West Bank/Gaza, [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/middle_east/countries/wbgaza/](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/middle_east/countries/wbgaza/).

5 The global aid apparatus is defined here as the constellation of donor governments, multilateral agencies, contracting NGOs, recipient organizations, and professional consultants that has emerged as a result of the post-Cold War democratization project.

6 Sidney Tarrow defines “transnationalization” as a global system marked by increased “horizontal density of relations across states, governmental officials and nonstate actors; increasing vertical links among the subnational, national and international levels; an enhanced formal and informal structure that invites transnational activism and facilitates the formation of networks of nonstate, state, and international actors.” Sidney Tarrow, The New Transnational Activism. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.
(sometimes called democracy assistance) as a tool of “soft power” to spread democracy abroad. This thesis questions the efficacy of these civic education programs by highlighting the unintended repercussions for local societies. However, to understand the Palestinian context and the significance of this case for other societies, we must first consider the evolving nature of foreign assistance and some of the issues that have been raised as aid is increasingly aimed directly at the grassroots.

The Aid Regime

Foreign aid has always been an inherently political enterprise. However, the end of the Cold War sparked an intense proliferation of bilateral programs promoting democratization and neo-liberal economic standards. And while scholars and practitioners have long interrogated the efficacy of these programs, the events of September 11th led to an even more intense interdigitation of the humanitarian assistance and security agendas. The U.S. has led the charge in these efforts, but other wealthy countries and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank have also played a significant role. While the consolidation of today’s aid regime is largely a result of Western countries’ policy agendas, domestic factors in recipient countries have also played an important role. As Sheila Carapico has pointed out, local governments often put pressure on political parties but leave cultural, social, and religious organizations greater space to operate. The most savvy of these local NGOs are able to garner international support for their activities, which opens the gates for the flow of international funds and “expertise.”
The uneven effects of comingling foreign policy and foreign assistance have been explored in several notable works. Recently, Dambisa Moyo indicted the aid regime for its negative economic consequences by persuasively arguing that foreign assistance disincentivizes local development and accountability in several African countries.\(^7\) Writing about the role of foreign assistance in the Rwandan genocide, Peter Uvin concluded that violence in Rwanda was not only ignored by the NGOs working in that country, but that the development regime actually helped to create the conditions within which massive violence became possible by perpetuating a state of inequity and exacerbating social tensions.\(^8\) From these instances and other prominent conflict societies, it is clear that foreign assistance is an increasingly prominent actor in the theatre of conflict even if it is championed as the midwife to peace. The opening chapter of Mary Anderson’s \textit{Do No Harm} has been widely quoted, but its relevance to this discussion warrants reiteration:

\begin{quote}
When international assistance is given in the context of a violent conflict, it becomes part of that context and thus also of the conflict. Although aid agencies often seek to be neutral or nonpartisan towards the winners and losers of a war, the impact of their aid is not neutral regarding whether the conflict worsens or abates.\(^9\)
\end{quote}

\(^7\) Dambisa Moyo, \textit{Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa}. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009).


\(^9\) Mary Andersen, \textit{Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War}. (Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
As the portion of Western aid directed toward conflict and post-conflict societies has increased, so too have the scholarly examinations of aid’s impact on indigenous efforts to secure political and economic justice. James Ferguson, in an early but enduring criticism of international intervention in conflict, identified INGOs as “anti-politics machines” that inevitably generate political outcomes.\textsuperscript{10} More recently, social movement theorist William DeMars has written about the unintended political consequences or “wildcard” effects of INGOs’ interventions.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, Clifford Bob compares the efforts of domestic dissident groups to gain the recognition and support of an international NGO to a market, where the INGO has needs (to maintain its integrity, spend its fiscal budget, etc.) and chooses recipients not based on the worthiness of their causes, but rather on their alignment with the INGOs stated values and programming priorities.\textsuperscript{12} Each of these works offers important macro-level insights into the relationship that INGOs often have with their local beneficiary organizations or coalitions.

This study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive or authoritative account of the history of the development regime in Palestine or elsewhere. I have limited the scope of textual analysis to include only U.S. government (USG) donors and the largest private organizations that implement projects on their behalf. This focus is a consequence of increased accessibility to these organizations, as well as recognition that Americans have long been the global vanguard of development. Since President Truman first proclaimed the economic conditions in non-Western

\textsuperscript{10} James Ferguson, \textit{The Anti-Politics Machine, Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho}. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).


countries a “threat to both them and to more prosperous areas” and called for a “program of development based on democratic fair-dealing,” the United States, along with Europe, has made development a core element of its interactions with the rest of the world. This investigation begins with an exegesis of texts produced by the U.S. bilateral agency and the nongovernmental organizations that implement programs on its behalf. The resulting analysis will create a framework for understanding the conceptual and practical approaches these organizations take when working abroad.

The focal point of the thesis, however, is six months of field research where I observed the process of contestation that results in any attempt to construct a dominant cultural consensus, a consensus the civic education programs aim to build. Though I may at times contest the picture offered by the donor, the intent of this study is neither to indict the organizations under inquiry nor to prescribe a way of doing development better. Moreover, this is not commentary on the intentions or interests of the thousands of people who work in the service of the development regime. I do, however, want to emphasize that they are an integral component of the development apparatus. They contribute to the production of a knowledge that is inherently reflective of their particular contexts, and that knowledge unquestionably affects the design and implementation of the programs that serve as their primary venue of interaction with so-called “target populations.”

13 Harry S. Truman, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.
While I may challenge the concept of development throughout this research, my primary goal is to understand what development *does* and, to a lesser extent, how it does it. As Foucault has shown and his contemporaries have reiterated time and again, discourse is more than an abstract conceptual device. It is an apparatus, an agent of activity, and it *does* something that often has very real consequences for the actors involved. Thus, whether the development project in question fails or meets the objectives built into its design is largely irrelevant. As Ferguson has cogently argued, the rate of success is not the most crucial element of development because even those that are deemed dismal failures have important social consequences.\(^{14}\)

Through a combination of textual analysis and fieldwork, this research will demonstrate that the development interventions of wealthy countries have reverberations throughout their local host communities that, more often than not, lead to a population less likely to mobilize politically. Chapter 1 will lay the groundwork for understanding the international political economy that has spurred unprecedented numbers of nongovernmental organizations in Palestine and throughout the rest of the world. It will explore some of the most relevant analyses of NGOs’ capacity to positively effect greater social mobilization. Then, by analyzing program reports from some of the largest and most influential U.S. donor organizations, I will offer insight into the discursive practices that contribute to the depoliticization of Palestinian nongovernmental organizations and, eventually, large segments of society. This is a necessary step in the service of the broader goal of this project: explicating how the global development apparatus is shaping social realities. In Chapter 2, I will detail my work with a local Palestinian

\(^{14}\) Ferguson, 275.
NGO (PNGO) that is attempting to navigate the changing social landscape. As I explore the organization’s efforts to secure funding, implement projects, and represent its “constituents,” the influence of Western donors on all facets of the local organization’s decision-making process will be evident. Chapter 3 will broaden the picture beyond this case study to examine how the aggregate impact of a ubiquitous foreign aid presence has negatively impacted some Palestinians’ ability to mobilize politically. It will demonstrate how the political neutralization project has been carried out in the most inconspicuous of ways. Students prioritize particular fields of study over others, young professionals eschew the study of Arabic language or Palestinian history in favor of majors in NGO management, the time-honored tradition of volunteerism takes on a new meaning, and everywhere expectations are on the rise even as the political reality is in decline. Throughout, I will argue that foreign assistance—even that which claims to be participatory—is more often a deterrent to genuine community mobilization. I will show how the mechanism of aid can negatively alter community relations by widening the gap between the grassroots and the elite. Together, these examples will illuminate how civic education programming in Palestine is working against its stated objectives and helping to create a weaker, more apathetic society.
Chapter 1: Building “Vibrant” Societies

The development of civil societies has been a centerpiece of Western democratization efforts abroad since at least the mid-1980s. This particular type of “democracy assistance” is underwritten by a belief that Western-style democracy is the best and most stable form of government, and active civil societies are integral to its creation and maintenance. Civil society support tends to be viewed as a morally unassailable activity, as well as an extremely cost effective means of furthering foreign policy objectives. Compared to institutional reforms and comprehensive electoral monitoring, “empowering” the civil sphere to act in its own defense against oppressive governments is relatively inexpensive and makes for excellent public outreach material. In recent years, donors and international NGOs have showcased their success in implementing programs that “forge partnerships that help Arab governments, civil societies, and citizens combat corruption, bolster democratic institutions, mitigate the appeal of extremism, and contribute to long-term development.”[15] The actual results of their work, however, are not always so clear. In fact, there is strong evidence that democracy assistance through civic education is not so much empowering civil society as wreaking havoc on it.

Nowhere are the U.S. government’s civic education efforts more pronounced than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This research will show how civic education programming in the MENA region is often predicated on a definition that narrowly defines civil

society as a set of voluntary associations that seek to influence or challenge state power. This restrictive definition tends to exclude large segments of society while conferring legitimacy on relatively small organizations that may or may not have genuine grassroots support. I will use the Palestinian case, which is illustrative both for its rich history of civic activism as well as its contemporary abundance of internationally funded civic education programs, to demonstrate the inherently divisive nature of U.S. funded civic programming. The Palestinian case is unique for its statelessness, and yet it is precisely that statelessness which makes Palestine an excellent lens through which to view the impact of democratization assistance on society’s ability to mobilize toward political objectives. Palestinian civil society has had one overarching goal for the past sixty years: to end the Israeli military occupation. This research project will explore how Western donors’ conceptualizations of civil society in Palestine have undermined their stated goal of energizing Palestinian society and instead contributed to its fragmentation and decline. That aid has altered Palestinian social landscape is readily apparent to even casual observers, but precisely how and why this occurred remains a subject worthy of inquiry. Scholars and reflective development practitioners have generally focused on donors’ agenda setting practices, the state of perpetual dependency in which most local organizations exist, and the primacy of donor politics over local concerns to explain the aggregate impact on Palestinian society. I consider these factors, but I hone in on the donors’ conceptualizations of the role of civil society as a clue to their underlying objectives and as a primary determinant of the overall societal impact. I will begin this chapter by briefly reviewing the Palestinian history of civic activism, which includes a rich tradition of voluntary associations and community organization. The
historical importance of voluntarism will be discussed at length and used as an example of the changes that development assistance has wrought. I will present textual analysis of donors’ publications to demonstrate how their conceptualizations of target populations were inherently incapable of attaining the stated objective of strengthening civil society. Finally, I will show how three of the most prominent U.S. NGOs working in civic education completely neglected to acknowledge this social history and instead manipulated the Palestinian historical narrative in an effort to create space for their own activism in the Post-Oslo era.

**International Aid & Palestinian Civil Society**

Palestinian society has had a long and complex relationship with international assistance, officially beginning in 1950, with the creation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). UNRWA had a mandate to provide social services to Palestinian refugees who were displaced when Israel was founded in 1948, and it became a central intermediary of aid to the Palestinian refugee population. The U.S. was one of many contributing countries, but it did not give direct aid for infrastructure or humanitarian projects until 1975. During this period, most U.S. aid to Palestinians flowed through USAID, which doled out funds to established American Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) such as ANERA, Catholic Relief Services, AMIDEAST, and other independent contractors who all played an important role in providing
humanitarian assistance.\textsuperscript{16} From the 1978 Camp David Accords to the outbreak of the first Intifada, foreign assistance to Palestinians outside of UNRWA came from Diaspora Palestinians, Islamic charities and foundations, and Pan-Arab organizations. These contributions were collectively known as \textit{sumud} (steadfastness) funds and were intended to help Palestinians remain on their land. By the 1970s, Palestinians had already achieved a vibrant civil society that was adept at providing essential services. Longstanding charitable organizations, religious institutions, trade unions, emerging networks of student organizations, agricultural relief committees, and voluntary organizations marked the civil sphere. However, by the late 70s these organizations were becoming absorbed into various political factions, most of which were united under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO was the main conduit of international assistance and it divided up these contributions among its various factions, who utilized them as part of the national movement.\textsuperscript{17} Arab donors remained a vital source of aid until the first Gulf war began. After the war ended, Arab funding decreased and Western funds to Palestine started to gradually increase. The history of the voluntary organizations is particularly instructive as we consider the impact that contemporary development programs have had on Palestinian civil society.

\textsuperscript{16} Khalil Nakhleh, \textit{The Myth of Palestinian Development: Political Aid and Sustainable Deceit}. (Jerusalem: PASSIA, 2004).
A History of Voluntarism

The belief that voluntarism plays an integral role in the service of the Palestinian national project has been existent since the earliest national stirrings. However, large-scale community service projects were not a central force propelled by Palestinian youth until the 1970s. In November 2009, I sat down with Elias, one of the men who helped spearhead the voluntarism effort of this time. The following account is the history of the voluntarism movement as he presented it to me.

In 1971, a group of young teachers and professors associated with Birzeit University decided to do something tangible for their communities. They approached the municipalities of al-Bireh and Ramallah to ask how they might be of service to the community, and that impromptu meeting morphed into weekly gatherings that eventually grew to twenty and then a few hundred people. There was no official leadership and no institutionalized framework, but it soon became known that a group of able-bodied young Palestinians met on Thursdays to discuss the work plan for Friday and Saturday. Representatives from villages throughout the West Bank began to attend the Thursday meetings to explain the need in their communities. The Voluntary Work Committees soon spread from al-Bireh and Ramallah to several West Bank locales. They operated without official leadership or strategic action plans, but worked with the common goal of increased Palestinian self-reliance. After the first year, all work was conducted outside of the two original municipalities and the volunteer corps had worked in tens of villages. They worked on whatever task the community requested and, as Elias emphasized, they “served only when asked.” They plowed agricultural lands, picked olives, repaired homes and irrigation systems,
painted schools, and cleaned streets. Almost all of their activities supported community sustainability, but many were also explicitly political. For example, each VWC has its own guard unit, which was tasked with guarding plots of land from Israeli military or settler aggression. During this period, voluntarism was a means of actively confronting Israeli authorities and the threat to the occupation was soon noticed. The Israeli authorities began to jail VWC activists, and a few were even deported.  

These crackdowns led the core group to institutionalize the “Community Work Program” ( bernamij ʿamal it-taʿawni) at Birzeit University in Ramallah. Together, the group decided that a formal affiliation with Birzeit could help deflect Israeli attempts to control volunteers’ movements. Furthermore, the marriage of the VWCs and a local university was seen as a natural means of connecting students’ academic life to their communities, future careers, and the nationalist project. As initially envisioned, students would be required to work 120 hours in the community. The mandatory service hours would help young Palestinians identify their individual talents while encouraging them to utilize them in support of the national project. The Dean of Students for Birzeit during the commencement of the program noted that no one worked only the minimum requirement; he dared me to find the records, firm in his belief that if they still existed they would reflect a norm of upwards of 1,000 hours for each student. He explained how “alive” the university was in those days, how it operated “as a hub for ideas and action. [Birzeit University] was spread out and didn't have any boundaries. … It was the Mecca of youth back then … now malls are.”  

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The voluntary work committees continued to operate alongside the university programs, but in the early 1980s they were also institutionalized into the various political factions. By 1982, the Higher Committee of Coordinating Work was established and controlled by the Communist party. The spontaneous weekend trips that had carried on with remarkable consistency for over a decade were suddenly politicized. Other parties then formed their own volunteer committees and held internal elections to choose the leadership that would guide the committee’s activities. The Higher Committee for Voluntarism later became the General Committee of Youth.19 Growing in tandem with the Voluntary Work Committees, which remained a predominantly youth-led venture were a number of voluntary professional associations and unions. These included the medical relief committee, the agricultural relief committee, human rights organizations, and multiple cultural institutions. By the 1980s, most of these grassroots organizations were affiliated with a political faction but were united under the PLO, which divided its funds among them. The PLO was not the only source of external funding, however, particularly for organizations affiliated with the Left such as the Communist Party. These organizations, unaffiliated with the PLO, successfully solicited funds from sympathetic European donors. By the late 1980s, these associations appeared to have lost much of the energy and purpose that had marked their early years. Yet despite their politicized nature, they were able to unite under the Unified Leadership of the Intifada and their coordinated efforts underpinned a sustained campaign of civil resistance known as the first Intifada.

19 The Higher Council, established in 1980, sought to organize and regulate the activities of the VWCs.
The Intifada began as a largely non-violent movement and was characterized by general strikes, tax strikes, noncooperation, civil disobedience and symbolic protest. The mass movement was significant in many ways, but perhaps its most important achievement was the altering of public opinion both within Israel and internationally. The Israeli peace camp was emboldened to action, and for the first time it seemed that international opinion might be turning in the Palestinians’ favor. The United Nations passed multiple resolutions condemning excessive violence against Palestinians by the Israelis, the Arab League lent increased financial support, and even Western public opinion began to shift in favor of greater political rights for Palestinians. Most importantly, the Palestinians earned the right to speak for themselves without the Arab League or Jordanian government as a proxy.

During this period, mu’assasat ahlīyya (indigenous organizations) rallied together to generate local income that helped bridge the unemployment gap created when Israel closed its borders to Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza. Together they began to focus on “productive” activities with a view toward economic self-sufficiency. These organizations helped form a social safety net that underpinned the civil insurrection of the Intifada. Their collective power as a political force has been widely acknowledged. Hammami and Tamari write that civil society during these years “shifted the political balance to internal forces inside the Occupied Territories and enhanced the role of the civil society and its mass organization. It engaged a large sector of Jewish society in soul-searching and brought them to embrace the goal

20 Nakhleh, 37.
of decolonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It also redirected the PLO leadership’s strategic thinking in favor of a two-state solution based on Security Council Resolution 242 and the partition plan.” Kimmerling and Migdal describe the success of civil society in more detail, noting that, “Economically, they became increasingly self sufficient in a number of fields, such as dairy farming—by buying cows from Israelis they managed to satisfy 80 percent of their dairy needs—and animal husbandry.” These associations evidence the vitality and resourcefulness of Palestinian civil society in the years before and during the first uprising and will serve as a reference point in the next section as I describe donors’ skewed perceptions of the capacity of Palestinian civil society.

Civil Society after Oslo

When the Oslo Declaration of Principles was signed in 1993, the nature and scale of foreign aid to Palestinians fundamentally changed. Just one month later, 42 donor nations pledged 2.4 billion dollars with the stated goal “to build the capacity of the Palestinian population to organize and manage their own political, economic, and social affairs.” However, in addition to jumpstarting the economy of a promised Palestinian state, this tremendous outpouring of funds was also expected to ensure that Palestinians saw concrete improvements in their daily lives so that resistance to the Accords would be minimized. The paradox, we now know, is that as aid increased, economic and social indicators incontrovertibly

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23 Le More, 2.
declined and the promise of peace went unfulfilled. But the myth of what was then known as the “peace dividend” quickly faded in light of steadily declining economic opportunity and political freedom. Meanwhile, important social changes were occurring.

Among the most noticeable changes has been a gradual neutralization of a once thriving civil society, a phenomenon noted by Palestinians and international observers alike. Palestinian academicians in particular have been exactingly critical of the role played by internationally funded NGOs, whose numbers have skyrocketed in response to the influx of donor funds. Rema Hammami has proposed that donor funds to these organizations caused their “retrenchment from popular constituency” and consequently hindered mass mobilization during the second Intifada. Similarly, Islah Jad, writing on the transformation in Palestinian women’s NGOs, has argued that mid-90s donor funding helped diminish the mobilizing potential of women’s organizations. Despite most donors’ claims to pursue a participatory approach that “empowers” local actors, the Palestinian case presents strong evidence that international aid, whether direct or filtered through local organizations, rarely actually achieves wider grassroots participation in the political sphere.

To deal with the influx of resources wrought by the peace process, many new Palestinian NGOs were created and older civic organizations restructured themselves in order to appeal to foreign donors. Within a few short years, there were hundreds of new organizations, while many of the associations and unions that had long played a pivotal role in Palestinian society had

26 Islah Jad, “The Demobilization of Women’s Movements: The Case of Palestine.” Women’s Studies Institute, Birzeit University, January 1, 2009.
suddenly become professional organizations with a decidedly external focus. This widespread process of “NGOisation”\(^\text{27}\) is one of the most visible outcomes of the Oslo peace process. Officially, these programs served as a conduit for civic education initiatives that aimed to increase the vitality of Palestinian civil society. Yet, by the dawn of the second Intifada in 2000, it was clear that many Palestinian NGOs became influenced by the practices and discourse of their funding institutions to such an extent that they had ceased to be a mobilizing force in the community and had a minimal role in the nationalist project.\(^\text{28}\) Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar have argued that this transformation happened because these PNGOs increasingly became part of an imagined global community that shared their professionalism and globalized outlook but, as a result, were less involved in the Palestinian national project. To the extent that these externally-funded organizations served Palestinian society, it was more often as a provider of humanitarian aid or a new job sector for an English-speaking professional class. Hanafi and Tabar together address the implications of this transformation for Palestinian society, using the second Intifada to emphasize the extent to which NGOs have moved away from mass mobilization.\(^\text{29}\) In drawing a direct connection between the language of these organizations and the findings of Hammami, Hanafi and Tabar, this study presupposes what Fairclough called a relationship between discursive knowledge and social practice in which the ideology that pervades the discourse constitutes the social and shapes power relations.\(^\text{30}\) This remainder of this chapter will build on

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the works of these authors by analyzing the conceptual framework of three American donors implementing civic education programs as ascertained from their programming priorities and language usage. By examining the discourse of the three largest U.S. government institutions working on the post-Oslo democratization project—United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute\textsuperscript{31} (NDI), and the International Republican Institute\textsuperscript{32} (IRI)—it is possible to determine the underlying goals of civic education projects in the West Bank and Gaza. As analysis of documents produced by these three prominent organizations will demonstrate, civic education programming more often than not manipulated the historical narrative and created false problematics in order to legitimize donors’ “expert” intervention.

**Manipulating the Historical Narrative**

In an effort to justify their presence, the three U.S. organizations routinely denied the efficacy of existing Palestinian civil organizations, preferring instead to represent Palestinian society as a civil tabula rasa. Manipulation of the Palestinian narrative was a common feature of reports assessing the progress of programming. By decontextualizing events or omitting circumstantial facts, many of the authors succeeded in portraying Palestinians as a democratically inexperienced and naturally violent people. For example, in a 1994 USAID project report, the authors highlighted the violent aspects of the Intifada in five of the six

\textsuperscript{31} The U.S. government created NDI with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy. Many of its Board Members are prominent figures in the Democratic Party.

\textsuperscript{32} IRI is loosely connected to the Republican Party; like NDI, it is largely funded by grants from the National Endowment for Democracy.
instances where the movement was mentioned. By doing so, they severely misrepresent the actual level of violence, which paled in comparison to daily demonstrations, general strikes, boycotts, the development of alternative institutions, and hundreds of other ways people collectively rose up against Israeli occupation. A more effective social analysis would have investigated the expansion of what constituted resistance strategies, as well as the broadening of who was allowed to resist. As one informant explained, “Everyone was involved. I was a six-year old girl and knew that I couldn’t leave the house without wearing at least two t-shirts because you needed one to give to whomever the Israelis might be chasing.” These reports consistently neglect to recognize the social cohesion and collective action that this informant describes, which largely characterized the Intifada. A review of the documents and literature available on donors’ websites reveals virtually no acknowledgment of Palestinians’ previous experiences with social organization before and during the first Intifada.

Although its programs were not aimed at building civil society where none had previously existed, the International Republican Institute took a similar approach to its involvement in post-Oslo Palestine. In 1997, the IRI Annual Report counted among its annual successes providing information to “new [Palestinian] legislators who never before had to consider constituents’ opinions.” Making such a bold statement says less about the legislators (who had previously not existed as a national legislative council) than it does about the constituents. The authors of the report imply that at no time in their history have Palestinians

been able to successfully impact their leaders’ decision-making process. While they had no state, and thus technically no national government, the charge that Palestinians had not previously influenced their leaders can certainly be debunked by the experiences of the Intifada when the local leadership successfully altered the PLO’s strategy.35

None of the aforementioned documents mentions the long Palestinian history of voluntary associations and political participation that had long sustained a democratic tradition. Instead, they emphasize the presence of violence without contextualizing it in the structure of military occupation, in order to justify the need to “build” a civil society.36 Without a story that assumes primordial dysfunction in a population, there can be no basis for what Arturo Escobar calls “the problematization”37 of an issue, which is a necessary step in the development process wherein deficiencies are “discovered” and the corollary intervention becomes a space for management and control. In the Palestinian case, identifying those perceived inadequacies is convenient justification for the internal reorientation of civil society efforts toward activities more amenable to the American (and thus Israeli) political agendas. The issues facing Palestinians are reduced to fundamental deficits, which are presented as the result of an inherently violent nature and backwards social and political systems. Most of these reports conspicuously fail to mention the nature of the wider military occupation that has ruled Palestinians for over half a century. The creation of these deficits serves to distract NGOs from

35 Kimmerling and Migdal, 304.
37 Speaking about the problematization of poverty in the post-WWII era, Escobar writes, “The transformation of the poor into the assisted has profound consequences. This “modernization” of poverty signified not only the rupture of vernacular relations but also the settling in place of new mechanisms of control.” Arturo Escobar, Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 22.
external politics by refocusing their attention on the task of adopting behavior appropriate for their new role as players in an international (read: civilized) world.

Most of the documents I reviewed begin by problematizing Palestinian civil society and pointing to areas where their respective organizations can “empower” its most marginalized elements. A few reports attempted to show that this supposed transfer of agency was initiated because Palestinians themselves requested American intervention. For example, in 1994 the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) undertook programs aimed at “building” a Palestinian civil society. In the final report of a 1996-1998 NDI program, the introduction begins with this claim: “Palestinian citizens and the civic organizations that represent them expressed interest in learning about the principles of a democratic society.”

The program initiated supposedly as a response to this call for help is designed to teach these citizens —through the NGOs that represent them—how to hold their government accountable. NDI claims that this program, the Civic Forum Institute, is “the largest nonpartisan grassroots network” in the West Bank and Gaza and that, through the dissemination of newsletters and handouts, it “enabled” citizens to “hold their government accountable,” to “organize civic activity to address local problems,” and to “exercise their political will for the first time.”

The final report submitted to USAID, who funded the program, recognized that Palestinians had substantial resources to contribute to a democratic transition because they had “extensive

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39 Ibid: 3
40 Ibid: 5
familiarity with democratic systems in Israel and in some of the countries where many Palestinians have lived.\footnote{United State Agency for International Development, “Final Report: In Support of Palestinian Democracy,” USAID Grant Agreement No. HNE-0007-0-00-4062-00. October 1, 1994 to December 31, 1996: 7.} By claiming to have created the most effective grassroots organization in Palestine, the organization is denying the legitimacy of existing civil society and stripping it of agency. Moreover, it is ignoring a long tradition of grassroots political activism from the local community level to university campuses to the national liberation project that manifested in the first Intifada. Similarly, a 1994 USAID project proposals proclaims that, “Democracy and governance issues lie at the heart of the Palestinian development problem.”\footnote{West Bank and Gaza: Democratic Understanding and Development Project: 2.}

The historical and contemporary impact of occupation is not mentioned at all, and instead the text insinuates that the primary cause of the current malaise is Palestinians’ inability to behave in a manner conducive to law, order, and prosperity.

With occupation a non-factor, the crux of the Palestinian development problem becomes Palestinian behavior. By problematizing the NGOs’ managerial style, the experts attempted to create a model of civic behavior that gave value to efficiency, professionalism, and eventually competition. Once this recognition takes place, USAID can retrain civil society institutions to play a more “effective” role in the advancement of Palestinian society—as internally focused organizations working to ensure accountability and transparency within themselves and from the Palestinian Authority. Inherent in this effort was a dichotomization of the civil and political spheres in which the proper role of civil society was to work in a clearly demarcated civil sphere by serving to ensure domestic transparency and accountability by the nascent Palestinian national
government. USAID sought to teach these NGOs how to run accountable and responsible institutions, thereby “maintaining the social order.” Whose “social order” is not yet specified, but its characteristics become clear as these institutions promote the notion that if a people desire prosperity and freedom, there is a singularly acceptable way to structure society, to govern, and to dissent. By trivializing or altogether ignoring structural political and economic issues caused and prolonged by military occupation, these reports create a dichotomy between the internal civic sphere and the external political sphere. The goal is to embed within these NGOs a sense a civil obligation that has little to do with broader goals of national cohesion or liberation, but instead focuses on issues of internal transparency and provides correctives to the “natural” deficits in Palestinian society. And, as we will see in Chapter 3, an approach that conceptually ignores the existence of a colonial struggle has helped to promote an atmosphere that encourages individual gain over collective liberation.

A textual analysis reveals an agenda driven by a modernizing approach that employs Western benchmarks to prove Palestinian shortcomings. The modernization agenda is never explicitly articulated, but rather is presented as an innocuous skill set that would make civil society more efficient and thus more effective. This ostensible neutrality created the space for organizations like NDI, IRI, and USAID to identify deficits plaguing Palestinian civil society and propose plans for their redress. Those plans, a redirection of efforts away from other

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43 Democratic Understanding and Development Project: 10.
44 Timothy Mitchell, Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 210. Mitchell writes that “The discourse of international development constitutes itself in this way as an expertise and intelligence that stands completely apart from the country and the people it describes.” It is only by
activities and toward the promotion of “good governance” and “democracy skills,” was a means of channeling the energies of the NGOs toward perfecting what were considered universal standards of behavior and away from active resistance. According to Hammami and others, the political ramifications of these programs became clear during the second Intifada as NGOs largely sat on the sidelines, immobilized by the cognitive dissonance of their obligations to their donor base and to the national struggle.

The U.S. institutions examined in this study each attempted to distance themselves from the larger political context and presented their work in the region as apolitical and neutral. Their diagnosis of the problems facing civil society stemmed from their construction of a social narrative that was ahistorical, apolitical, and culturally backward. They came not as arms of the American political apparatus but rather as technocrats possessing both the expertise to identify the primary issues facing Palestinian civil society as well as the means of addressing those problems in a systematic, modern way. As we will soon see, the impact of their work was anything but neutral. In the next chapter, I will explore the practical effects of this discursive approach for one local Palestinian NGO.

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framing development programs in this way that “experts” can conceptually ignore external factors and pursue their own political agendas.
Chapter 2: Participatory Development and the [im]Mobilization of Civil Society

Participatory Development

In each of the projects documented in Chapter 1—as well as the projects undertaken by my host organization, Nuhoud—the concept of participatory development was a key characteristic of the donors’ rhetorical framework. Indeed, these days nearly every major governmental or private donor purports to adhere to at least some degree of participatory development to demonstrate that its interventions abroad are empowering and energizing civil societies. In many of the projects reviewed in Chapter 1, the implementing organization highlighted the local community’s role in project decision-making by claiming a deep connection with the “grassroots.” That connection should not be taken at face value. Laura Macdonald’s work is helpful to gauge whether the levels of participation and collaboration so often suggested by these organizations and others are an accurate measure of the community’s actual involvement in and control over its own “development.” Macdonald identifies three basic levels of participation: instrumental, co-optation, and limited. Instrumental participation indicates that local involvement is necessary only insofar as it contributes to project efficiency. The co-optation of local leadership generally occurs in order to confer upon the project a sense of legitimacy while maintaining control over its direction and outcome. The most common level is limited participation, where state agencies or established elite groups function as the sole points of contact. According to Macdonald, genuinely participatory approaches indicate that there has been “a transfer of power to the local population” because “anything else is manipulative or
This litmus test of power is a helpful guide to interpreting and analyzing the fieldwork component of this research. Six months working with a local Palestinian NGO (PNGO) revealed the subtly pernicious effects that are often consequences of development programs ostensibly aimed at empowering civil society. Though donors intend to create and strengthen civil society, in the experience of this PNGO, donor restrictions contribute to strained relationships among the organization’s staff as well as between the PNGO and the local beneficiaries of its projects. Corruption and paternalism is fostered and exacerbated, and rather than unite to achieve common objectives, individuals and community groups rival one another to secure access to aid resources. Through each of the interactions described in this chapter and later in Chapter 3, I strive to highlight the locality of power. In most cases, the projects mentioned here ostensibly aimed to empower entire communities through the local organizations that function as their proxies. Yet, through my work with Nuhoud and conversations with the staff of multiple local Palestinian organizations, I have concluded that NGOs rarely succeed in empowering communities. In fact, in many cases, they actually contribute to their decline.

**Empowering Civil Society: the Case of Nuhoud**

Nuhoud for Community and Rural Development was founded to provide relief to rural areas, primarily in the northern West Bank, through agricultural rehabilitation and income generation projects. Agricultural rehabilitation in the Palestinian context serves an expressly

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political purpose: preparing fallow or forbidden land near the Israeli separation barrier for productive use by Palestinian farmers sustains the farmers’ economic survival and disproves Israeli claims that the land is uninhabited or unused. This land is often agricultural land owned by Palestinians, but deemed off limits by the Israeli military. When Palestinians attempt to enter to tend their crops, they do so understanding that they could face punishment by the military authorities if caught. In Nuhoud’s early years, most projects were aligned with the organization’s agricultural emphasis and directly articulated as a contribution to national goals. However, in recent years the organization’s mission statement has expanded to be a virtual catchall for most any type of development project. Like many local NGOs, Nuhoud is struggling to survive financially in light of recently curtailed funding opportunities. Despite over a decade of discourse promoting Palestinian democracy, Western donors sharply limited their aid expenditures after the Islamist movement, Hamas, was democratically elected to a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Considering the limited funds available and fierce competition from other PNGOs, Nuhoud often submits proposals for projects that are well outside of its original mandate and the staff’s skill set. Since the most lucrative projects tend to be from American organizations such as USAID, the activities of the organization are often completely reoriented depending on the current trend in donor preferences.

I began my fieldwork with Nuhoud hoping to understand better how donors’ conceptual frameworks are affecting local community dynamics in the short-term and impacting civil society’s ability to mobilize across a broad range of goals in the long-term. Through my work with Nuhoud, it became increasingly evident to me that the problem lies not with USAID and its
particular approaches. Rather, it is the entire concept of development, with its normative claims, modular responses, and inherent contradictions, which so clearly leaves its mark on recipient societies. This chapter will detail the implementation of a USAID-sponsored “business incubation” project that occupied the majority of Nuhoud’s time and effort during my tenure.

To begin mapping the power dynamics that flow through the aid process, I wanted to understand the local perspective on how projects are conceived, funded, and implemented. I set out to understand Nuhoud’s funding process by conducting interviews with colleagues, reviewing past and current proposals, and attending information sessions hosted by donor organizations. Through these activities, I concluded that for small, financially vulnerable organizations struggling to stay afloat, the wishes of the donor are paramount.

The search for funding

When I first asked Nuhoud’s Acting Director, Selma, to explain how Nuhoud developed proposals for new projects, she told me that to generate ideas for new activities, Nuhoud staffers hold town-hall style meetings in villages where the organization has a presence. To have a presence in a village typically meant that a staff member or past participant had family members there. Through a series of meetings attended by local leaders and community members, the Nuhoud staff would use its technical expertise to shape the communities’ ideas into proposals for new projects. Throughout the process, the evolving proposal would be sent to representatives of the communities for continued input. Then, Nuhoud would shop the projects around looking for a donor agency or organization that had an interest in working in the particular areas Nuhoud’s
constituents proposed. While this may have been the organization’s ideal process, in the six months that I was affiliated with Nuhoud, we did not host a single town-hall meeting. From my observations, the typical process for securing funding was much different and decidedly donor-driven. As will become evident throughout this chapter, the staff of Nuhoud spent a fair share of its time searching for potential donors and partner organizations. Some donors, however, came to them. That was typically the case with American funding organizations like USAID. With few exceptions, small organizations like Nuhoud learn of new funding opportunities through newspaper announcements or emails generated from a listserv managed by the U.S. Embassy, international NGOs, and donor organizations. Then announcements go out and, in the case of USAID, an informational meeting is held at the Grand Park hotel in Ramallah, which has come to be known as USAID’s unofficial Ramallah headquarters. The entire process can be completed in less than two weeks.

During my time with Nuhoud, I attended two of these informational meetings. The first was to introduce new funding opportunities through a program titled *Netham - Rule of Law, Justice and Enforcement.*\(^4\) There were perhaps thirty representatives from a variety of organizations in attendance. Most were young, and the majority seemed to speak fairly fluent English. A Palestinian USAID staffer gave the presentation of the program, speaking in English and occasionally clarifying or elaborating a missed point in Arabic. An attractive Palestinian

\(^{46}\) According to USAID, the “Netham” program is “a 4-year, $13,746,000 USAID-funded program which began in September 2005. It is implemented by DPK Consulting, a division of ARD, Inc. The overarching goals of the program are: 1) to strengthen the capacity of the Palestinian Authority (PA) justice sector institutions, particularly the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), to administer the rule of law; and 2) to increase public confidence in and awareness of the justice sector, including public outreach and citizen participation.” [http://www.usaid.gov/wbg/FS_DGO_7.html](http://www.usaid.gov/wbg/FS_DGO_7.html)
woman who looked to be in her twenties assisted him. She was fashionably dressed and spoke perfect English, giving me the impression that she had spent some time abroad. The assistant gave each attendee an application packet that included the official call for applications (complete with program themes and a detailed list of “suggested” activities.” When the session concluded, Selma approached the assistant to ask her opinion on a program idea she had been developing with women in her community. It addressed legal issues faced by rural Palestinian women, and Selma felt that it would fit easily into the broad topic of rule of law. I watched as Selma began explaining how hundreds of rural women become stuck in engagements that they initially accepted but soon regretted. She told of her personal experience with this issue and began to outline a program that would help women learn what elements of Islamic law were supportive of their rights to cancel or postpone an engagement. The USAID staffer interjected to tell us that we could only propose topics in civil law. Anything related to Islamic law, she said, would not be considered.

On the way back to our Birzeit office, Selma spoke in hushed voice so that our cab driver could not hear. She explained how she had once been engaged for a few weeks before she learned that her fiancé had a history of anger management issues and alcohol abuse. She wanted to break off the engagement and her parents were supportive, but they had no idea what their rights were. As Selma began researching her options, she discovered several other young women who were in similar situations. As she rehashed her personal experience, she became visibly angry with the USAID staffer. The young woman was unveiled, better dressed, and appeared better economically situated. Citing her supposed social status as an urban elite, Selma
dismissed her as someone else who did not “get it.” When I asked what Nuhoud’s backup proposal would be, Selma sighed and replied, “Shu n’aamel?” (What can we do?); we’ll do as they ask.”

The USAID representative’s response to Selma’s proposal had led the Nuhoud staff to conclude that it had better adhere closely to the list of suggested activities if it hoped to submit a competitive application. By this point, it was becoming clear to me that the organization’s “constituents” would not to be heavily involved in the proposal process, but I was still surprised to realize just how removed the project design phase was from community considerations. The entire process—from the request for applications (RFA) to the deadline for submission of the Grant Summary (in which a program is outlined) is completed in only two weeks. This left little time for the official community needs assessment process that Nuhoud and most other local NGOs purport to conduct. The comprehensive needs assessment that Selma outlined consists of identifying the “target” population and defining the general sector of the activity. In theory, the organization would then spend several weeks or months defining the scope of the issue as it relates to that particular activity. This involves a series of meetings with members of the community and thorough research into the issue area. PNGO intend for these sorts of assessments to be inclusive processes whereby the local community is equally involved (if not at the helm) in shaping the program. Such processes are integral to the PNGOs’ claim to act as a legitimate representative of the grassroots to the donor.

Conducting a sufficiently participatory and comprehensive assessment would take weeks and significant organizational resources. What actually occurs is a far more exclusive and
rushed process. For example, a few days after the USAID meeting, I joined three Nuhoud staff members at an overnight conference in Beit Sahour, sponsored by American and European donors in conjunction with a Bethlehem based PNGO, on the effectiveness of Palestinian youth in the political process. These kinds of conferences were widespread and invitations are generally sent to PNGO staffs, the presumed leaders of their communities. After a day of discussion but no actionable results, the Nuhoud staff gathered in the hotel lobby to consider ideas for the Netham proposal. Maher, the organization’s former director and current “Special Advisor” joined us as we discussed what type of proposal would be most appealing to USAID. Since he had recently been hired to work for the Palestinian Authority, he was legally prohibited from running the daily activities of the organization. However, he often took a very active role in his position as “Senior Advisor.” Though he could not officially function as the director, Maher was still clearly the leader. I took a very passive role, listening while the others pondered what in-nas (the people) needed most. Maher kept returning to the idea of a “rule of law awareness campaign.” I wanted to avoid promoting specific ideas, but I also did not understand what he meant so I asked him to clarify. I finally pointed out that I had no idea what he meant, and the donor likely wouldn’t either. He and the others continued to bandy about ideas, each a bit broader than the last. Finally, I mentioned a recent newspaper article about the humiliating treatment of young men at checkpoints (who were reportedly being forced to sing demeaning songs for the entertainment of Israeli soldiers) and suggested that we explore what legal resources were available to assist Palestinians at checkpoints. While everyone agreed that it was an issue worthy of attention, Maher said that proposals focused on Israel never received funding.
After two more hours of fruitless discussion, Maher started making phone calls to other well-heeled Palestinians in Bethlehem to ask what kind of program the rural masses needed. He ultimately decided that we would conduct an $88,000 rule of law awareness campaign. The target budget was chosen because it fell right under the maximum allowable amount, and the topic was a clearly a response (though perhaps not a clear response) to the donor’s list suggested activities.

With the proposal due in less than a week, there was scarcely time to conduct an official needs assessment. When I pointed out that we had not consulted with anyone from the communities where we proposed to work, Maher assured me that we would eventually. The important thing, he said, was to get the proposal submitted before the deadline. He would go home that night and draft it before passing it to me for English revisions. I was relieved to be the editor and not the author, because I still had no idea what form a rule of law campaign might take. Within a few days, Maher had drafted the proposal, sent it to Selma for content suggestions, and finally passed it to me for English editing. As I read the proposal, I found myself secretly hoping that it would not be funded. I had been involved in the internal discussions and still could not understand how the proposed campaign had any practical benefit. I also knew that the targets identified were optimistic guesses at best and were guided by donor pressure to demonstrate quantity, not quality in the proposal. The project as articulated would “train over 500 youth and another 200 persons from the general public.” The Nuhoud staff would use a previously developed “Respect for Rule of Law Awareness Program Resource Guide” to reach these beneficiaries. All told, “over 10,000 people” would be affected by the
program, which could later be incorporated into “classroom teaching material, after-school programs, and extracurricular activities for university, youth, and the public.” The program purported to utilize participatory and interactive teaching techniques in order to introduce the basic concepts and importance of rule of law to project beneficiaries. Several phrases were lifted directly from the USAID application materials and recycled intentionally. This made for a document full of development jargon, bereft of ideas, and far removed from the needs of the communities where it would be implemented. To this day, I do not understand precisely what we had hoped to achieve, other than to secure USAID financial support. While I was working with Nuhoud, we repeated this process once more for another USAID grant. The proposals we submitted were unsuccessful each time, due partially, I believe, to the organization’s desire to speak in the language of the donor but not quite knowing how to make it relevant to the communities they served. Had they been granted the power to design a response to a community needs as they understood them, they would have conducted a thorough community needs assessment as described by Selma at the opening of this section. However, fearing depleted funds and not knowing what opportunities were on the horizon led the staff to conclude that any project was better than none at all, so it churned out proposals for topics that were far outside of its staff’s expertise and the communities’ needs. In even the most flexible of Macdonald’s definitions of “participatory” projects, reviewed at the start of this chapter, the power in this funding and proposal creation process was heavily skewed toward the donor. The entire process reflected the donor’s needs and timelines and ignored local realities. The time constraints associated with proposal submission ensured that the donor’s agenda was followed. I believe
that had this project been funded, the organization would never have had any genuine ownership of the program because of the manner in which it was created. Nuhoud submitted a proposal based not on what they understood the community’s needs to be, but rather on what they believed the donor’s preferences were.

While the search for funding drained much of Nuhoud’s resources and time, the organization’s primary focus was the sole project it was implementing from May to December 2009. The project, officially titled “Youth Entrepreneurship Business Incubation Centers,” was centered on a series of trainings in four West Bank villages: ‘Anata, al-Bireh, Biddu, and Jericho. I was the Assistant Project Coordinator for this project, and helped oversee the trainings from beginning to end.

Civic Education through Entrepreneurship

What I observed during four weeks of training was further evidence of programming that actually created internal divisions and fostered mistrust between the local NGO and its constituents. Currently, two of the most popular vehicles for civic education abroad are social media activism and entrepreneurship. In both arenas, US aid agencies have attempted to pass off their conventional wisdom as expertise. Using the business incubation trainings as a reference point, this section will demonstrate how international “expertise” is leveraged locally and will discuss the implications for community dynamics. I will also explore a related issue that potentially affects the outcome of every U.S.-funded project in the West Bank or Gaza: security vetting. Through these two issues, we can begin to understand the complications that arise when
the local NGO tries to position itself as an interlocutor between the grassroots and the donor. The following account highlights the challenges that small organizations face as they attempt to secure the continued trust and sponsorship of large donors while maintaining office morale. These episodes are presented in order to provide a snapshot of the negotiations and compromises that must be made to remain a competitive player in the NGO game.

The idea that business entrepreneurs make model citizens is increasingly gaining traction in development circles. One reason for its popularity is that entrepreneurship, like education, is seen as a benign activity. Even state governments who are skeptical of government development initiatives tend to welcome programs that support these two particular sectors. For Western donors, they can be gateways to what they consider to be closed societies. As will become evident through Nuhoud’s experience, programs that utilize entrepreneurship as a tool to create an active and engaged citizen can sometimes have just the opposite effect.

The project that occupied Nuhoud’s attention during my tenure was a USAID-funded “business incubation” initiative that aimed to promote a spirit of entrepreneurship among Palestinian youth. While the funding was from USAID, the grant was administered through a Palestinian organization, Ruwwad, which had been set up by USAID to serve as a clearinghouse for American government youth initiatives in the West Bank. With this project, Nuhoud was to

47 Ruwwad was launched in 2005 by USAID and serves as its flagship youth program in the West Bank and Gaza. According to its mission statement, Ruwwad “carries the vision of providing Palestinian youth between the ages of 14 and 30, including those in marginalized areas, with opportunities to explore their potential and contribute to social and community development in the West Bank and Gaza. It is Ruwwad’s belief that Palestinian youth are already empowered, carrying within themselves creative capacities for change; therefore, the program’s role is to provide platforms for youth to incubate their ideas and dreams and launch them into reality in their communities.” “Ruwwad: A Palestinian Youth Initiative, accessed November 14, 2010, [http://www.ruwwad.org/](http://www.ruwwad.org/).
gather a diverse group of youth from three different municipalities and teach them the fundamentals of starting a business in one week or less. The idea, as Selma explained to me, was that by learning the fundamentals of business entrepreneurship, they would also become more able social entrepreneurs and more responsible and productive citizens. I assumed this would be a fairly technical training that would teach the basics of subjects like accounting and proposal development. At the end of the project, the authors of the best business proposal would be given startup resources and office space. The project was designed and approved by USAID long before the Nuhoud staff met with any of the potential participants. The only people contacted in advance were the directors of village youth organizations, to whom the task of participant recruitment fell. These youth organizations, many of which are now known as Youth Development Resource Centers (YDRCs), were once simply “youth clubs.” Such clubs have a longstanding presence in most villages and are staffed largely by volunteers, who are often local youth. They have historically provided youth-oriented services ranging from sports to computer labs to career counseling. As Western donors increasingly focus their attention on the MENA region’s growing youth population, Palestine’s YDRCs are being tapped to serve as interlocutors and recipients of international aid.

In the early stages of implementation, the Nuhoud staff began making frequent visits to the YDRCs. A series of negotiations began in the initial round of meetings with all four local representatives. When the YDRC meetings were near Ramallah, Maher would join us. In the YDRC board members’ negotiations with Nuhoud, the board members tried to represent the youths’ concerns but often they were faced with an inflexible contract, which Nuhoud and
Ruwwad/USAID had previously negotiated. One of the most oft-repeated questions concerned reimbursement for participants’ transportation costs to and from the trainings. The second most common inquiry concerned the actual content of the trainings and the specific expertise of the trainers. Maher could speak only vaguely to the last question because at that point, we had not yet hired the project’s trainers. These were legitimate questions; especially considering that Nuhoud’s small staff of six did not include any successful entrepreneurs. Maher would also quell these concerns by assuring the board members that we worked with only the most highly qualified trainers. Eager for the activity and associated funding, they generally accepted even when their terms were not met.

Though we were presenting the training program to the YDRCs as a polished, technically advanced professional development opportunity, behind the scenes the Nuhoud staff was scrambling to pull everything together and encountering several obstacles along the way. Even setting the actual training schedule presented several issues. First, we were bound by the terms of the project contract to complete the training within four months. Unfortunately, Ramadan would fall right in the middle of our planned activities, and everyone involved knew that for those four weeks minimal work could be expected of trainers or participants. To resolve our scheduling issues, we hastily identified the project’s trainers, choosing for the most part people who had experience training, but not a history of entrepreneurship. We gathered the trainers together intending to discuss the project’s timeframe. Instead, an unexpected hour-long salary negotiation ensued.
Five of the ten trainers met at the Nuhoud office one Saturday morning. It became apparent early on that only one of the four “core” trainers had particular knowledge of business development, and that was from taking a workshop on the subject. The others considered themselves “professional” trainers. Their professional status was rooted in previous experience leading American and European workshops, and was now a qualification they used to justify the salary increase they immediately proposed. Nuhoud’s initial plan had been to hire ten trainers, five with experience and five younger people who had an interest in learning to lead such workshops. All of the trainers, regardless of prior experience, would be required to participate in a thirty-hour “training of trainers” session (a term commonly known in development circles in the shorthand “T-O-T”). According to the approved budget, each of the ten trainers would receive USD $40 per hour. Only one of the younger trainers was present, and he remained silent while the others made a case that under no circumstances should they be paid the same as someone who was not professionally trained to train. To deflect the mounting opposition, Maher produced the budget and told them that there was simply no possibility for re-negotiation with Ruwwad or USAID. This was not just a tactic; he had previously attempted to adjust the budget to account for transportation costs and was told that it was final. A few more minutes of back and forth discussion passed before it was finally agreed that the younger trainers, only one of whom was represented in the discussions, would receive $20 and the “professional” trainers would earn $60 per hour.
Vetting the Community

Generally, frustration that arose between the PNGO and the constituent was directly related to a donor demand that either or both parties did not fully understand or consent to. For example, just one week before we were set to begin our project, one of the local youth clubs elected a new advisory board. The new board convened and voted on the schedule of upcoming activities. A majority of members was supportive of the project but refused to sign what has become known as the “A-T-C” or anti-terrorism certification. This refusal meant that the organization and its young members could not participate in the workshops, and Nuhoud had to find a last-minute replacement. The board’s refusal launched a debate among Nuhoud staff members about the document. They had all signed, but Selma did so clarifying that it was “on behalf of the organization, not myself.” Nassira agreed, adding that she only signed believing that “it’s just an attempt to pressure local organizations into doing exactly what the U.S. and Israel want, but it doesn’t really mean anything.” One thing that it did mean was that we had to find a replacement youth club that had either already been vetted by USAID within the past year or else we would have to convince a new one to undergo the vetting process. In addition to the problem of how to replace the missing youth club, we were encountering scheduling issues related to the USAID vetting process.

PNGOs go to extreme lengths to avoid the USAID vetting process, because it is a laborious process that requires the organization to collect and submit the IDs and names of every individual involved in the project. To most participants, this is tantamount to submitting their personal information to the Israeli intelligence. The local NGO is then forced to defend the
policy and attempt to explain it when they typically have no more information that the constituent. If the recipients still refuse to sign, and thus effectively opt to drop out of the project, the local NGO must look for replacements in order to maintain their current funding levels. This search can start the process all over again, and is a primary reason behind months-long delays that plague many projects. Once new beneficiaries are identified, completing the full vetting typically delays project activities for weeks or even months. Having been the recipients of USAID funds several times in the past, Nuhoud fully appreciated the difficulty associated with vetting procedures and did its best to minimize the impact on project outcomes. That typically meant reworking the entire programming schedule. For example, we trained for five days and no more because anything over five days required vetting. Daily trainings did not go a second over six hours because had they, we would have to do vetting. Despite taking these precautions, Nuhoud twice had to reorganize its training program because of the vetting process. The first instance was replacing the youth club that refused to sign; the second resulted from an honest mistake, but one that threatened Nuhoud’s reputation in one of its constituent communities.

It was not until the week of the trainings that we realized the mistake had been made. Nassira had been in touch with a local youth club in Jericho whose name was very similar, but not identical, to the name Nuhoud had submitted for clearance. Once the mistake was realized, we were faced with the awkward situation of explaining to that club and its young participants that they could not officially participate in the program because their club had not been vetted and doing so retroactively would postpone the trainings by months. We then approached the
new club (whose name we had cleared with USAID) and briefly outlined the project. We then asked if they could host the workshops with just a few weeks’ notice. They readily agreed, but Nuhoud still had to deal with the youth from the other club who vocally expressed their disappointment that they could not attend the workshop. We ultimately compromised by allowing a few of the youth who were particularly interested in the trainings to attend in an “unofficial” capacity, but the entire predicament was awkward for the organization and tainted its relationships with both local youth clubs.

After months of intensive preparation and negotiation, the trainings finally began in late September 2009. I had witnessed all the behind-the-scenes preparation, and my expectations for the trainings were low. The project as Nuhoud relayed it to the youth clubs would help young entrepreneurs refine existing business plans and then provide startup funds to the most successful proposals, but I had not seen any evidence that such a rigorous training course existed. From my observations in the trainings and interviews with the young participants, it seems that their expectations were also low. On the first day of each session, participants were asked to write their expectations on an index card that they would tape to the wall of the small rooms where we were working. The most oft-repeated goal was “to get to know people,” followed by “to have fun,” “to have a new experience,” and then, finally, “to learn how to do business projects.” In my interviews with participants, I learned that very few (perhaps three or four out of fifty) actually had a business project in mind. The trainings more closely resembled a weeklong summer camp that included icebreaker games and motivational slide shows than an intensive entrepreneurship workshop. There was no actual business training, with the exception of two
brief hypothetical exercises. In one, participants were asked to imagine that they were a fictional character named Khaled, who was a high school dropout with a business plan. They were divided into groups for ten minutes and then reported back what they would do if they were in Khaled’s position. The first group to speak said that they would “find an NGO to help.”

On the second day of the al-Bireh training, two of the participants walked out. When I spoke with them later, they told me that they signed up for the trainings hoping to learn something tangible but what was being offered was nothing they had not covered in their business courses at Birzeit University. What transpired in these trainings was similar to other trainings happening throughout the West Bank. Nearly everyone I met under the age of thirty had participated in a training sponsored by the U.S. or a European country. In Chapter 3, I will explore this issue in depth. For now, we turn to the internal office dynamics that were evolving throughout the implementation of the Business Incubation project.

**Internal Office Dynamics**

Almost as soon as the trainings began, I started to notice a palpable tension in the Nuhoud office. During the six-month implementation of the Business Incubation project, I saw firsthand how working with demanding donors and skeptical beneficiaries wears on an organization’s morale. Existing tensions tend to be exacerbated, and new fissures develop. Nuhoud’s problems started with Issa’s relegation to a half-time employee, a change that, as Maher explained, was necessary due to budgetary issues. Yet within a week of Issa receiving the news of his demotion, Nassira had been hired as a full-time employee. Per the USAID terms,
a temporary “external consultant” had to be hired to oversee the entrepreneurship trainings. The position as I understood from the contract necessitated the hire of a temporary consultant who had unique experience as an entrepreneur. Theoretically, the ideal candidate would have specific technical skills but practically it was difficult to find someone who could do the work on such short notice and in the timeframe required. While I waited at the bus stop with Issa one afternoon, he explained that the contract requirements necessitated a new hire but the timeframe made it nearly impossible to find a qualified entrepreneur. When Nuhoud’s part-time accountant suggested that his fiancé was spending her summer bored and could use the income, Maher decided she had experience enough. Nassira had just graduated from Bethlehem University with a degree in Communications, and I wondered what relevant experience she could possibly have. Over the course of several weeks, I began to see that Nassira had many positive qualities. Business savvy, however, was not among them. The hiring of Nassira was one of many cases where donor policies directly contributed to an atmosphere of distrust and a corrosion of employee morale—exactly the opposite of its stated purpose.

Some of the demands made by Ruwwad, the USAID contracting organization, seemed absurd to the PNGO employees who were tasked with their implementation. Nevertheless, the threat (whether real or perceived) of discontinued funding or losing potential future funding keeps the staff vigilant about fulfilling even the most superficial donor requests. In and of themselves, these requests are not harmful and most are logical. The absurdity, however, arises when the fear of funding loss catapults the donor to-do list far ahead of actual programming. There were episodes when nearly an entire day of work would be lost due to disputes that had
little or no import in the grand scheme of things. For example, I walked in the Nuhoud office
one morning to find everyone fuming because of a slight oversight regarding the USAID logo. Ruwwad had just received a copy of the application that Nuhoud planned to distribute
throughout the four municipalities hosting the project and had immediately noticed that it was
missing the USAID logo. Hundreds of poster-sized advertisements and brochures had been
printed with the logo, but this application, which likely would not reach more than one hundred
people, must also be testament to goodwill of the American people. Immediately a blame game
ensued. Selma fielded angry calls from Maher, while Mehdi and Riham argued with each other
about who was to blame for the forgotten logo.

Other episodes were far less tense if equally absurd, such as the time we left a meeting
with the Biddu youth club and had driven a mile down the road before we realized that we had
neglected to take photos. As most PNGO staffers know, a golden rule of USAID projects is that
every action must be documented and quantified. We turned the car around, rushed up several
flights of stairs and caught the students just as they were leaving. The remarkable thing was that
none of them protested as we directed their movements during a series of “action” shots.

Representing the “Constituents”

“Sometimes people ask what the sources of funding are. They’re fellahin (farmers), but they are
pretty savvy about NGOs and funding.” – Mehdi, Nuhoud employee

As I detailed in the first section of this chapter, the quest for funding dominates the daily
activities of Nuhoud staffers. If they are not struggling to type an email response in English,
they are busy giving potential donors tours highlighting the plight of Palestinian peasants. These

tours are generally sparked by a happenstance introduction to a staff member of a Western donor
organization. In the hopes of securing funding from an American or European organization, we
would hire a taxi for a day and make rounds to former Nuhoud-sponsored projects. One
morning, I walked into the office and was instructed to skip my morning tea because we were
escorting a representative from a large European NGO on a tour of Nuhoud’s rural employment


generation projects. Maher had a connection to that NGO’s office and had a verbal agreement
that we could get funding if we managed to impress this representative.

However, before we could begin to talk specifics, the European donor’s local office
wanted to confirm that Nuhoud’s past programs were fruitful. With less than a day’s notice, we
loaded into Mohammed’s taxi and started dialing the home numbers of former beneficiaries to
ask if we might stop in for a visit. Selma breezed through her cell phone contact list, starting
each call with, “Ma’lesh ... (I’m sorry ...).” In each call, she apologized for being out of touch
and explained that work had kept her busy. From the tenor of the conversation and the detailed
questions, I understood that her relationships with most of these people were more personal than
professional. She asked each person on the other end of the line if we could stop by,
emphasizing that we were traveling with a European representative and there was a good chance
we could secure new funding opportunities. One by one, Selma called the beneficiaries of
former Nuhoud programs, each time apologizing for the short notice. If our hosts minded the
intrusion, they made an impressive effort to hide the dismay. We drove north to a cluster of
villages near Selma’s home. In the first village, Abu Gush, we met with two women who had
been given startup funds to raise chickens. We refused their repeated invitations to coffee, opting to drive past the women’s homes directly to the chicken house. They each hopped in their cars, with husbands and a couple of children in tow. As we greeted the women and their families, I noticed someone had thought to grab a bottle of soda and a few glasses. The women pressed Selma to come inside to discuss business, but she dutifully refused and told them that they were the first of several stops. “But you’ve driven all this way just to see the chickens?” the women pressed Selma. As they continued in vain, the two children handed out glasses of soda. It took us less than ten minutes to view the hundreds of chickens in the chicken house and ask a few questions about profitability, then we were off to the next stop.

In the next village we visited Um Saleh, who had been the recipient of five sewing machines for her seamstress business. Funding Um Saleh had been a difficult decision for Selma, who was her neighbor. The U.S. project dictated that Nuhoud provide micro grants in a variety of fields, and one included sewing in an effort to reach women. Selma knew of only one small seamstress business in her village, and had to choose between giving the machines to the director to hire new people or to one of the workers so that she could start her own business. Nuhoud decided that the donor would look more favorably on a project that allowed them to claim responsibility for starting a new business, so they funded Um Saleh, who quit her job and is now competing with her former employer. That employer, also a neighbor of Selma, still calls Nuhoud to complain that they helped ruin her business. This was the first of many divisions that were created in one small community as residents clamored for their share of the aid pie.
Um Saleh was a middle-aged widow who lived in a modest, but well maintained home. She managed to pour us juice and arrange fruit on a tray before anyone had a chance to refuse. After Um Saleh had presented everyone with tea and fruit, she began to describe how her business worked. She had only one point of contact, an Arab-Israeli wasīt, or middleman, who delivered to her cheap materials pre-cut into patterns. She and her four employees (one of whom was her teenage son) assembled the pieces of material at a price far below what the Israeli company could find on the market. The middleman paid her once the newly assembled clothes had been successfully delivered to the contracting factory owner. Then she would wait for another order, which might come in two days or two weeks. She explained that she had no contract and no recourse if the wasīt opted to pay her less than their agreed-upon wage. Which, she said, happened more often than not. But if she raised complaints, he would simply take his business elsewhere. As she talked, the European representative was initially engaged in her conversation but his questions revealed a superficial knowledge of the Palestinian context. For example, he continued to insist that the seamstress should “just trade” with other countries, seemingly ignorant of the numerous physical and legal barriers that prevented her from doing so. His actions also revealed a certain level of cultural insensitivity. For example, he managed to keep Um Saleh in a state of confusion because he continued to refer to Nuhoud as “Yuhud.” “How has Yuhud helped you?” he pressed. Yuhud is the Arabic word for “Jews,” and Um Saleh didn’t have a ready answer. Throughout our brief conversation with Um Saleh, the European interrupted her answers to his questions in order to answer or even make a call from his cell phone. These abrupt pauses increased the sense of performance that pervaded the episode. The
moment he left the room, Um Saleh turned to Selma and asked how she thought it was going. She also asked about the levels of funding available and whether or not we know what the European was looking for.

Our final stop that day was to visit a family of fifteen to whom Nuhoud had given four goats. The goats were now providing enough cheese for the family’s consumption with a modest surplus that was sold to the neighbors. That family was Selma’s father, mother, and eleven siblings, but this information was whispered to me as we exited the car and I understood it was to be kept from the European representative. Selma’s father greeted us outside and insisted that we come in to taste the cheese produced by his goats. We were seated in stiff chairs in the formal reception room where family photos adorned sparse walls. After Selma’s father finished explaining how one could distinguish his goat cheese from lesser quality versions, Selma and I excused ourselves and joined her mother and sisters in the kitchen for a brief visit. “How’s it going?” her mother inquired. When Selma replied with “Insha’allah (we’ll see),” I understood that the question was not a general inquiry, but rather about the prospect of funding. On the long drive back to Birzeit, we talked about how well that family had husbanded the income earned from the few goats Nuhoud had purchased, never once letting on to the European that it was Selma’s family we were discussing.

These spontaneous visits to the homes of beneficiaries were frequent occurrences, and each time I detected a certain sense of performance that always brought to mind James Scott’s
theory of “hidden transcripts.” Scott’s analysis of the power struggle that exists between the dominant and weak is a fitting lens through which to view the roles many Palestinians readily assumed in these encounters. According to Scott, “the public performance of the subordinate will out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful.” The lack of resistance when we refused our hosts’ hospitality, the emphasis on hardship—these were all components of the public transcript. Selma whispering the identity of her father and mother in the backseat of the car and Um Saleh’s hushed questions about how much funding would be available and who else in the community was in the running were part of the hidden transcript that invariably exists when a Western donor is present.

Every time we stormed another home, refusing tea and making apologies, I was struck by how ready our hosts were to receive us. They may have protested when we refused their hospitality, but not nearly as much as I had come to expect when I prevented Palestinian hosts from fulfilling their duties to guests. It was almost as if they were ready to receive us and knew what they could and could not expect from the encounter. There was a rehearsed feeling whenever we were invited into a private space, past the room designated for entertaining and to the bedrooms where the lady of the house might point out that multiple children slept in the same small space. As we dutifully toured the houses and vegetable gardens, the prospective donors that accompanied us often took notes. It felt as if we were taking a snapshot of the person, to be used later as we saw fit. In each of these encounters, the hosts expressed hope that he or she might receive further assistance. Many pointed out their individual virtue and even some

49 Scott, 2.
carefully chosen vices. Um Saleh, for example, was fond of saying “I’m just too honest.” Her insistence that by representing her situation truthfully she was actually doing herself a disservice was intimation that her neighbors were not as truthful. Recounting a recent visit by “the UNDP or somebody like that,” she told me that she did not get the project, which was being implemented by the local Popular Committee, because other people had lied on their applications and she had not. I asked Selma about the process, and she echoed Um Saleh’s feelings that the process was not open and fair. “The committee lied about my father’s salary and said he and my brother worked in Israel, making each 500 NIS per week. It’s not true. Some people that didn’t have any need at all got it.” A few weeks later, I had an opportunity to speak to Selma’s father about the incident. He, too, felt that committee members cheated him. He told me that they tried to cover by blaming the computer. “They told us all, ‘the computer chose, not us.’ But how can that be? There was one family who got funding and they only have one child, a baby, and they both work.”

**Individual and Community Empowerment**

This chapter has attempted to look below the surface and consider the effects of aid on power relations between the donor and the PNGO, as well as within tightly knit communities. Nuhoud toured Western aid workers around the West Bank to demonstrate the success of their past programs in order to secure future funding. However, the most visible effect of funding was the creation of internal community divisions. In many cases, existing nepotism and paternalism is only exacerbated. Individual community members have no cause to look for ways to
cooperate with each other; instead, they mirror the rivalry of PNGOs in their search for funding. From Um Saleh to the chicken farmers to Selma’s father, I found considerable evidence that the community has come to expect that a small group of well-connected individuals will serve as interlocutors, providing information and access to resources to the rest. These visits called into question the meaning of “empowerment,” which was the most popular way of describing what Nuhoud aimed to accomplish through its income-generating projects. It is also the most commonly stated objective of democracy assistance and civic education programming writ large.

In an economic sense, empowerment indicates that the object is rendered ready to pursue activities asserting his or her economic liberalization. In theory, such economic empowerment is the objective of entrepreneurship trainings like the Business Incubation project offered by Nuhoud via USAID. There is no evidence that these trainings actually contributed to a single participant’s economic empowerment. Instead, most participants agreed that the primary result of the training was an expanded network of contacts with their peers.
Chapter 3: Toward a Community of Individuals

“It used to be that whatever we did was for our country, but with all of the donor funding that has all changed.” – Zahra, PNGO Director

My work with Nuhoud raised important questions about the social, economic, and political impacts of the international aid regime, specifically civic education programming, on Palestinian communities. To understand the effects of the aid regime beyond Nuhoud’s particular experience, I interviewed over thirty people who had personally encountered international assistance whether as NGO employees, contract workers, or program participants. Their experiences were varied, but certain themes resurfaced in nearly all of these conversations. This chapter offers a broader perspective on three of the key consequences of civic education programming that emerged during these conversations: increased economic dependency, declining voluntarism, and political apathy. Together, the Nuhoud case study and these interviews present a macro analysis of how foreign assistance has exacerbated and created fissures in Palestinian society that are likely to hinder large scale mobilization. I begin by examining the economic consequences wrought by the post-Oslo inundation of foreign assistance and concomitant NGO explosion. Using the Nuhoud experience as a reference point, I will show how limited economic opportunities outside of the burgeoning aid regime guarantee that this economic sector will remain central to the livelihoods of many Palestinians for the foreseeable future. I will then investigate the changing role of voluntarism and its relationship to the aid regime. The third and final section will address what I believe to be the aid regime’s contribution to a decline in political involvement and a growing sense of apathy. Together, these
cases will illuminate the changing dynamics of Palestinian civil society and show how programs that aim to empower the civic sphere, once multiplied, have contributed to a more individualist society. I turn now to the economic conditions that are both cause and consequence of the aid cycle.

**Aid and the Economy**

“*The government is overcrowded, the private sector is exploitation, and starting out on your own is very difficult. All that’s left is NGOs.*” – Mehdi, PNGO worker

For Palestinians like my colleague Mehdi, there are limited employment options outside of the aid industry. Twenty years ago, few would have expected this to be the case. This section is an exploration of the unintended social consequences of entrepreneurship programs that donors advocated since the Oslo Accords were signed. These programs are typically focused on youth employment and are underwritten by policy makers’ concerns about the so-called “youth bulge,” which most view as a potential harbinger of widespread social unrest in the MENA region.\(^{50}\) Civic education through entrepreneurship is an ascendant trend in development circles, but there are few, if any, attempts to critically analyze the socio-economic impacts of these programs on their participants. The issues presented in this section do not routinely emerge from most macro analyses of the post-Oslo Palestinian economy, but I would argue that their collective impact has begun to profoundly affect Palestinian society and its economic prospects and, therefore, are worthy of serious investigation.

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\(^{50}\) Some of the earliest and most prolific analyses of youth demographics in the MENA region come from the Middle East Youth Initiative, a joint project of the Wolfensohn Center for Development at the Brookings Institute and the Dubai School of Government. For more information, see [www.shababinclusion.org/](http://www.shababinclusion.org/).
Any discussion of the contemporary economic situation should begin with a mention of the optimism that marked the Palestinian economy in the early 1990s. The primary purpose of the 2.3 billion dollars pledged in international assistance after the Oslo Accords was to provide a “peace dividend” of economic security to parallel Oslo’s presumed political reconstruction. For months after the agreement was signed, optimism remained high and investment poured in to the West Bank and, to a lesser extent, Gaza. The prospects for economic growth seemed so strong that a large number of Diaspora Palestinians living abroad moved home to partake in a boom that would soon prove short lived. When the Oslo boom was in full swing, it took most everyone and everything with it. Aid agencies that had once refused to build infrastructure, fearing that they would contribute to a status quo of military occupation, suddenly were eager to have a share in the building bonanza. Nevertheless, there were several restrictions prohibiting investment in electricity, roads, agriculture, and some large-scale water projects. Thus, strategically, donors refrained from making significant contributions to Palestinian productive capacity. And while they refused Israeli pleas to work in many projects that would physically institutionalize a policy of fragmentation, the focus on multiple, and often conflicting, projects throughout the West Bank and Gaza worked to reinforce the Israeli policy of economic isolation.

Within a year of the Accords, all economic indicators were falling. Thousands of workers were no longer allowed into Israel, and the unemployment rate inched upward. Higher unemployment led to higher incidences of poverty, lower levels of investment, and a falling GDP that did not stabilize until 1998. Several scholars and observers pin ultimate blame for the

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51 Nahkleh, 30.
catastrophic economic situation on the flawed structure of the Oslo Accords.\textsuperscript{52} Most recently, Anne Le More concludes that donors used aid as a “fig leaf” to disguise a politically and economically stagnant peace process.\textsuperscript{53}

Writing in 2008, Le More faults the donor regime for espousing Israeli policies even as it claimed to be working toward Palestinian economic independence. According to Le More, donor countries’ refusal to engage in serious opposition to Israel’s closure policies contributed to a reorientation of aid monies into short-term humanitarian projects. Le More estimates that a full half of all donor contributions from 1994 to 1996 came in the form of short-term support, either as direct budgetary assistance to the Palestinian Authority or low-paid temporary employment projects like the ones offered through Nuhoud. Neither mechanism provided long-term benefits for economic stability. They did, however, help lay the groundwork for the creation of a new Palestinian elite.

\textbf{The Emergence of a Petit Bourgeois}

The leaders of a new “civil society” have joined the ranks of privilege. Admission to this elite club, according to one informant, is fairly standardized: “Money comes very easily for people that have the right tools—the ability to speak English, to write proposals, dressing in formal business attire and basically having the appearance of being higher class.” Palestinians who fit this description have more varied employment opportunities, primarily through the NGO sector. They also enjoy heightened personal clout, which is visible in Selma’s newfound

\textsuperscript{52} See, for example, Rex Brynen, \textit{A Very Political Economy}. (United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC: 2000.)
\textsuperscript{53} Le More, 173.
prominence in her small village. Selma, however, is still at the lower end of the ladder working her way up. To understand the personal and professional opportunities that exist when one is well spoken and savvy, we can look to Nuhoud’s director, Maher. But as I noted in Chapter two, the rise of both of these figures relative to their communities (Selma) and colleagues (Maher) created intense tension and even distrust. Despite the employment opportunities offered by the development sector, some observers have noted a change in Palestinians’ behaviors. According to Rema Hamammi, the youth employed in this sector perpetuate a depoliticized environment and tend to “treat the grassroots in a patronizing and condescending manner, perceiving them as social groups in need of instruction rather than constituencies from which they take their direction and legitimacy.” Exacerbating the perceived tensions is the military occupation’s systematic fragmentation of the West Bank and Gaza, which has limited Palestinians’ freedom of movement, but inequitably so. The members of a new “VIP class,” who include high-level government officials and the employees of the most influential NGOs, can often traverse checkpoints closed to most other Palestinians. Privileges such as these, which publically distinguish the staff of certain NGOs from the masses, help to fuel widespread assumptions about the corrupt nature of the aid industry.

Ironically the NGO sector, which so often promotes anti-corruption in the public sector as a central theme, is typically viewed as equally corrupt. The way my friend Abed sees it, NGOs are far from being beacons of professionalism and transparency: “It’s funny when they talk about

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54 Hammami, NGO Politics to Social Movements.
corruption, because the most corrupt organizations are all funded by USAID. I decided to work here [at a local university] because even the foreigners are corrupt. But an organization that is .org is almost always more corrupt than an .edu. The NGOs are all dakkakīn.” In Palestine, certain internationally-funded NGOs are referred to as dakkakīn, or one-stop shops that have sprung up to service donors’ demands for local implementers. Despite being almost uniformly disparaged in conversation and media, these so-called dakkakīn retain substantial powers of persuasion in society. They attract some of Palestine’s brightest young graduates and most committed activists and remain an important vehicle for social mobility. The reasons for this magnetic power are manifold, but chief among them is unquestionably the lucrative nature of even temporary appointments. The nature of NGO work—which for most organizations is project-based and susceptible to changes in donor preferences and policies—is necessarily unstable, but salaries are well above what an educated young graduate could make in most other sectors.

Much of the criticism comes from the wage differentials that distinguish NGO work from any other job one can hold in the West Bank or Gaza. A PA minister makes approximately 8,000NIS, which is a decent salary generally earned after years of service in the public or private sector. Conversely, a young graduate fluent in English and adept at proposal writing can land a position as a junior project officer with USAID and earn an equivalent or higher monthly income immediately upon graduation. From interview data, I could discern a rough pattern in people’s perceptions about financial opportunity at various organizations. Most believed that USAID and EU projects paid the highest wages. They are followed by other NGOs, then UNRWA, and,
finally, the Palestinian Authority. Most of the people I interviewed gave fairly consistent
guesses about the monthly earnings of director or employee of any given NGO or PNGO. The
broad consensus was that the American organizations, and USAID in particular, offered the most
lucrative positions. One informant told me that her husband, a Vice President of Birzeit
University, earns just slightly more than would a new graduate working in a well-funded NGO.
She believed that the average NGO director is paid between $3,000 and $4,000 per month. At
face value, these are surprising figures. It was obvious that many view the NGO sector, and not
private enterprise, as the most lucrative business venture available in the Palestinian economy.
When I compared informants’ guesses to publicly available data on USG-funded programs in
Palestine, I learned just how accurate the perception is.

Management-level workers who speak fluent English and were educated in the U.S.
usually do not have trouble obtaining extremely lucrative contracts with USG projects. A
consultant with substantial experiences (or at least an impressive CV) can easily request $500 per
day, and will not necessarily be asked to work a forty-hour week. These consultants are
generally hired on a short-term basis and will not necessarily work the equivalent of a full-time
job. However, if they are savvy and well connected, the earning potential for contractors is in
the six figures. This far exceeds the guesses that most interviewees gave when asked about NGO
salaries. In his research on American military aid to Egypt, Timothy Mitchell argues that
massive influx of funds into a relatively impoverished society singlehandedly created a rentier
middle class in Egypt.\textsuperscript{56} All indicators point to a similar phenomenon in Palestine. Iman, a

\textsuperscript{56} Mitchell, 242.
middle-aged NGO worker and friend, was fond of pointing out the evolution in tastes and consumption habits that she had witnessed over the last two decades, which she believed were particularly visible in Ramallah. In her mind, the highly paid “globalized elite” traveled frequently and often returned with expensive new purchases. What were once luxury items suddenly seemed indispensable. The consumption patterns of these highly paid bureaucrats and NGO technocrats become the standard that the rest struggle to emulate. Levels of relative deprivation, then, become exacerbated.

**Preventing and Abetting Corruption**

In the previous section, one informant declared “even the foreigners are corrupt.” Abed’s sentiments were widely echoed among interviewees and in informal conversations with friends and colleagues. Most believed that some level of corruption was expected and even condoned in most NGOs. Palestinian NGOs’ dishonesty was commonly attributed to donors’ onerous and seemingly arbitrary budgetary restrictions. Most local organizations found U.S. government regulations unwieldy and counter intuitive. As my Nuhoud colleague Issa saw it, donor policies often left local organizations with no choice but to operate dishonestly. Restrictions prohibiting the purchase of computers and other basic equipment have led to a general policy of “renting” by obtaining two receipts—one is for rented equipment and is given to the donor. The other shows that the equipment was actually purchased, and is the property of the organization.

Despite an acknowledgement that corruption exists in local organizations, there is a general perception that USAID is the worst offender. As one informant saw it, “their [USAID’s]
staff take a portion of every project and what’s left is filtered through favored NGOs and their leaders, with crumbs left to actually implement the project.” Another informant challenged me to try to decipher of the billions of dollars that have been pledged “exactly how much actually reaches Palestine.” The figure, she believed, would be surprisingly small because “it’s all shared with the American Chief of Party of USAID.” Whether this claim can be substantiated or not, it is significant because it represents a common perception and highlights yet another contradiction inherent in the aid regime.

**An Artificial Industry**

One of the great paradoxes of the aid regime is that it is helping to create an entire generation of Palestinians who are less inclined to search for business opportunities or think innovatively because they know where and how to earn a decent income. This is despite—and because of—the types of entrepreneurship programs that Nuhoud and other PNGOs implement every day. Nuhoud’s business incubation project was typical in its mission: inculcate in young Palestinians a spirit of entrepreneurship so that they may become more productive citizens. To be sure, the funds provided by Nuhoud to multiple families throughout several West Bank villages helped them survive economically. With Nuhoud funds, a gifted honeybee farmer was able to double his monthly salary and two new businesswomen turned a small profit raising chickens. Um Saleh was able to open her own business, however volatile the working conditions. Yet, what was the broader result of this well-meaning organization’s intervention in these small villages? To answer this question, it is useful to consider Mitchell’s analysis of
private sector programs in Egypt. Writing on a USAID project that was created to decentralize control of Egypt economic resources, Mitchell found that the primary program beneficiaries were local government officials and those with strong political connections to the state. This program, despite its attempts to encourage “democracy and pluralism” simply reinforced the state’s control over the new resources as well as the old. Something similar, albeit on a smaller scale, unfolded in Nuhoud’s work with local communities. As we saw in the constant questions Selma fielded about new funding opportunities, Nuhoud, though it has little relative power in the broader scheme of things, became a central source of funds for a small group of villages. And through her position as Acting Director of a local NGO, Selma increased her status in her own community but did so at a cost to her relationships with neighbors and friends. The locals, for their part, were supposedly taught individuality and economic independence through these entrepreneurship projects. However, in reality, they became less motivated to seek work outside of the aid regime and thus concentrated their efforts on appealing to potential donors.

During my interviews, informants would occasionally note one of the positive consequences of continued donor aid: it provides job opportunities for wealthy, educated Palestinians who might otherwise be tempted to seek work abroad. As one person told me, “Donor funding, although it’s a new kind of occupation, has kept people here. It’s like an alternative sector, a fake industry that puts people to work.” However, the jobs created by this fake industry come at a high price. The booming aid industry has begun to alter the intellectual and professional pursuits of bright young Palestinians. Interview evidence suggests that more

57 Ibid, 233.
and more Palestinian students are abandoning the humanities in favor of technical degrees in NGO management and English translation. Almost all of the recent or current graduates I interviewed had chosen their field of study based on available opportunities in the NGO sector. One conversation in particular revealed to me the extent to which this industry, despite being “fake” and unstable, has attracted Palestine’s best talent. Hassan, who is a talented agricultural engineer from a family that has been farming land in southern Hebron for over a hundred years, exemplifies this. I was often a guest at Hassan’s home and had come to expect frequent interruptions in our conversations whenever I visited. Neighbors and friends often called his cell phone to request advice on managing diseases or pests in their vineyards, gardens, and orchards. I accompanied him on several of these visits, and it was immediately obvious to me the important role he played in this community, as well as the pleasure he took in his work. That’s why I was shocked the day I received an email message from Hassan asking me to meet him to discuss the possibilities of “studying NGOs.” He had recently won a Ford Foundation fellowship to pursue a Master’s degree in plant pathology, but a friend had convinced him that, in Palestine, an advanced degree would not be as lucrative as NGO work could be.

Hassan’s willingness to abandon a career he loved and considered to be a service to the community exemplifies one of the least investigated but most pernicious repercussions of the aid regime: the reorientation of the ambitions of Palestine’s youth. Their activities, their studies, and their ambitions have been realigned to be on par with their global peers. The sheer number of NGOs and foreign assistance projects has created a substitute economy that offers lucrative employment for new graduates who speak the right language (English), have the right skills
(grant-writing), and dress the correct way (professionally). For many of these students, the focus is inward and decisions are weighed with primary consideration to future career prospects. One of the areas where this gradual change is becoming most obvious is in the evolving nature of Palestinian voluntarism.

**Declining Voluntarism**

A spirit of voluntarism underwrote the mobilization efforts of the 1970s and 80s, but has since been transformed by political factions and, most detrimentally, NGO activities. What was once a form of resistance imbued with clear social responsibilities and motivated by devotion to the nationalist cause has increasingly become a vehicle for upward mobilization. In this section, I will show how the very concept of voluntarism has taken on drastically different meanings for a new generation of Palestinians.

When the Community Work Program became a part of Birzeit University’s graduation requirements, other universities soon followed suit. Today, most major Palestinian universities have instituted service-learning programs. The specifics of the program differ among institutions, but generally students must complete between 80 and 120 volunteer hours in order to graduate. Most schools have pre-arranged sub-programs that they have coordinated with local organizations or institutions. At Birzeit, for example, students can opt to fulfill their hours by cleaning or painting the university grounds, helping with the annual olive harvest, reading to the blind, or helping patients navigate government hospitals. These activities are all “safe” in the sense that they risk very little or no contact with Israeli authorities or soldiers. The consequence, of course, is that they do not tend to forge a personal connection with the community nor the
national project. And while all universities have such programs, there is no longer much coordination between them. This isolated and institutionalized approach is a marked departure from the mass participation of the 1970s and late 1980s. It is difficult to measure something as intangible as a spirit of voluntarism, but a few anecdotes will serve to illustrate what is widely perceived as generational apathy. Take Asmaa, for example, who has served as the volunteer coordinator for a local university for the past ten years. During that time, she has noticed a shift in students’ views toward community service and political action: “We now have a culture of taking, not giving. The economic situation also affects it. There are two stages in volunteering, the 1970s and the 2000s. There is a generational gap. The 70s was the generation of activism, political activity … but that’s all past.” Amin, the volunteer coordinator at a second university echoed Asmaa’s sentiments, but went a step further to explain why students seem less engaged. Referencing the razing of parts of his campus during the second Intifada, he says that “When the campus was destroyed the first time, we immediately organized a reconstruction effort. The second time, though, people voted not to rebuild because they made an association—campus built, campus destroyed. If you don’t build, there’s nothing to destroy.”

The occupation has managed to create a dichotomy between the public and the private. At the level of individual families, including the extending family, there is a strong sense of responsibility for the protection and welfare of kin. The elderly rarely live alone, and when they do family members routinely visit to bring groceries or drink tea. As Amin explained, people unfailingly serve their families, “but they don’t see much point in doing more than that.” The family has remained within the realm of the private. It is a secure institution that offers the most
protection from the consequences of the occupation. Because there is some security in family, there are clear incentives to serve it. The public, however, is clearly vulnerable to the forces of occupation.

Attitudes toward voluntary work have significantly changed, partly due to the fact that large NGOs and INGOs are now willing to pay for work that was once done for free. Now most would-be volunteers consider the immediate gain of such work before participating. The UN Volunteer Program was an attractive receptacle for many young volunteers because it paid very highly and offered the prestige of working with the UN. The reported stipend for some volunteers was USD $800. Now, many youth are not willing to work without some material gain. One concerned mother described how she had to trick her young daughter into volunteering in order to “keep her from playing on Facebook all summer.” She tried in vain to interest her in volunteer work and eventually asked a friend at a local NGO to pay the daughter money that she would give the friend. Only when the child found out that there was a paid position did she consent.

Similar problems consistently arise among university students. Of course, there are students who take the community work requirements very seriously, meeting or even exceeding their requisite hours. Many, however, see little value in the program and have no qualms in faking their volunteer hours. I once accompanied a friend to An-Najah University to visit her brother, who was a senior there. We had lunch together and then my friend signed a form certifying that her brother had worked 100 volunteer hours with her organization; he hadn’t. Several recent graduates admitted to double counting logged hours or talking the coordinator into
counting activities that were never documented. Another campus volunteer coordinator reported that lately farmers have sent home groups of students who are sent to help pick olives because they seem to “come to hang out and eat msakhkhān.” There is strong evidence that this apathy has carried over to political events.

**Political disengagement**

In the first chapter of this thesis, I examined the discourse that permeates civic education programming in Palestine. Through a critical discourse analysis of donor publications, I showed how prominent USG-funded NGOs manipulated the Palestinian historical narrative and disguised their own work as apolitical and neutral. This conceptual approach, I believe, was inherently at odds with stated goals of strengthening civil society and promoting genuine political pluralism. In this final section, I will briefly discuss the direct linkages between political processes and the aid regime.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was routinely confronted with the paradoxes of American aid in the face of a declining political situation. For many Palestinians, the connection is clear. In my first week in the field, I had the opportunity to explain my research project to a journalist with whom I had recently become acquainted. He half-jokingly told me that I could go home because everyone already knew what the impact of America aid had been. “As American aid has increased, every development indicator has decreased. Ask regular people if the Americans do anything, and they’ll tell you that they [USAID] work in the brain washing field.” Most
interviewees had a similar take on USAID’s overarching political objectives, and tended to express particular concern about the cooptation of local leadership.

There have been multiple attempts to impose leadership on Palestinians through the auspices of civil society organizations. Most people tend to view NGOs as the safe space where politics happen under a cloak of legitimate, even innocuous, work. This, however, has never been the case for NGO activities in Palestine. Money is power, and the promise of funding has undue influence on Palestinian leadership at all levels of society. Sometimes this happens because American funders choose to support individuals instead of organizations. There have been many instances of donor funding following a chosen individual as he or she begins a new organization. The director of a PNGO working in women’s issues readily admitted that it was because she had a good working relationship with people at the National Endowment for Democracy that she was able to leave her position at one recognized PNGO to launch another. This same person, however, expressed frustration at the practice. “I was once at a conference in Washington, D.C. and a guy from IRI was on the same panel as me. In conversation, he remarked, “We made Mustafa Barghouthi.” She continued, ticking off names of people that had been launched into leadership positions with the support of an American organization.

“Qaddoura Faris is another example. He was an ex-prisoner and then PLC member. They encouraged him to start an organization, which they would support. It’s clear that they think they can impose leaders on us.”
Hopelessness and the Search for an Alternative

If the next generation of Palestinians is the one that has grown up inundated with foreign assistance, what does this mean for the potential for collective action on a mass scale? The youth of the first Intifada were empowered; it was they who took control of their political situation into their own hands and fought to change it. It is difficult to envision this generation taking that initiative, not because they do not desire action but because they feel that the effort is in vain. It is as if these past twenty years of being acted upon have eroded Palestinians’ desire to act for themselves. When I first met Yassir, a young human rights lawyer in search of a way to serve his community, he told me how he believed that a non-violent resistance movement could liberate Palestine. That was a few years ago. When I spoke with him on the matter in 2009, he confessed that he was tired and discouraged. “I used to go to demonstrations every week,” he told me. “But not now. No one is resisting now … I guess because we’re tired.” I pressed him on the issue, asking under what circumstances would he be willing to take the risk of resistance. He told me that now there was the family—a young wife and a baby on the way—that he had to think about. He stopped himself mid-sentence, and said, “Actually, even if I had had a family during the first Intifada, I still would have participated.”

Yassir raised a point that constantly emerged in interviews and informal conversations with friends and colleagues: hopelessness. It is not within the scope of this research project to thoroughly interrogate what it means when a loss of hope meets heightened expectations. Yet, a sense of fatigue emerged so often in my interactions with Palestinians that it must be noted. Selma summed up the sentiment expressed by many of the people I interviewed when she said,
“As a people we are exhausted. Very, very exhausted. So we’re at a stage where we need to go back to building ourselves. We need to strengthen our culture together, to rebuild our people. After that the choices for resistance will come.” The question, then, is whether or not this can be accomplished by civil society as defined and dominated by NGOs. Selma doesn’t think so. “You want political progress? Cancel Oslo and everything that came along with it, including the aid. Then there will once again be resistance.”

Despite the pessimism espoused by Yassir, Selma, and others, there are examples of local Palestinian organizations and NGOs that have managed to leverage international support while maintaining control over their own agendas. The Grassroots Campaign against the Apartheid Wall and the Dalia Association are two notable examples. Recognizing the decline in the ability of grassroots community groups to effect change locally or nationally, the Dalia Association was founded. Its director told me that she founded Dalia as she began to notice “distortions” in the NGO sector: “People were spending money to write in English, bringing consultants from abroad—strange things—because they’re dependent on foreign aid. There were several ethical and practical issues emerging.” Officially registered as an NGO, Dalia has attempted to carve its own path for generating funds. It does not accept bilateral aid money, and instead focuses its fundraising efforts on Palestinian Diaspora abroad in an effort to strengthen their connection to and involvement in the national project.

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The Grassroots Campaign against the Apartheid Wall has also seen success in its efforts to raise awareness and spur action locally and globally to end construction of the Israeli separation barrier that cuts through the West Bank. The Campaign began in 2002, when the Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network (PENGON) started receiving reports from villagers who reported that the Israelis were planning to build a fence that would destroy huge swaths of privately owned land. Villagers throughout the West Bank were being served military notices with increasing frequency, but no one understood what was happening or how to stop it. In April 2002, PENGON went to investigate. They learned that what the “security fence” was actually an eight-meter cement wall snaking through land far inside the Green Line, but its exact path and purpose remained unclear. Based on the confiscation orders from affected villages, PENGON published the first map of the so-called fence in March 2003 and formed the campaign to collect information and mobilize villagers in opposition to the wall. According to one campaign member, early efforts were focused on understanding the scope of the problem and creating an archive of material, both for the education of local communities and as a resource for potential international activists. The campaign took their concerns about what they believed to be a pending economic and political crisis to international bodies and to the Palestinian Authority, which refused to give significant attention to what seemed to be a routine Israeli offense. Initial efforts to secure support from any of the hundreds of NGOs working in Palestine also failed. They turned then to the United Nations, offering a meticulous archive of information and relentlessly pressuring the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to investigate. When the ICJ

issued a June 2004 statement declaring the wall illegal, the discourse on the nature of Israel’s separation barrier shifted entirely. Suddenly, the Palestinian Authority began to talk about the wall and to devote resources to address the issue. PA leaders began speaking out publicly against the wall, and subsequently created a special legislative committee tasked with researching and addressing the issue. Large international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued statements condemning the wall for its implications for Palestinians’ access to basic human rights, urging the Israeli government to reverse course. A Palestinian grassroots organization had once again overcome domestic and international constraints to mobilize support and alter the political debate. Throughout the process, the need to carefully balance international support at the risk of losing control of the campaign remains of tremendous concern to the Stop the Wall campaign and its affiliated popular village committees. One committee explained how the campaign had managed to utilize international support to bolster Palestinian political mobilization: “We should look for people to be with us, not us with them. We want international support, not leadership.”
Conclusion

Donors often take it as an article of faith that NGOs are positive change agents, but scholars and development observers have increasingly sought to interrogate this basic assumption, upon which the bourgeoning aid regime rests. Yet even as the scholarship continues to indicate that NGOs and foreign assistance are not unequivocally positive entrants into local societies, Western governments and multilateral institutions are slow to recognize the pernicious effect their programming can have on societies abroad. The U.S. government and others operate under the assumption that routing funds to civil society is an effective and efficient means of “empowering” local actors and encouraging political pluralism. The Palestinian case is a prime example that the equation is not so simple. The research presented here suggests that an influx of aid is more likely to immobilize civil society than to empower it.

This research has attempted to highlight, first and foremost, the contradictions that are inherent in the aid regime. Analysis of program reports from some of the largest and most influential U.S. donor organizations offered insight into the discursive practices that contribute to the depoliticization of Palestinian nongovernmental organizations. By ignoring or manipulating local historical narratives, INGOs positioned themselves as neutral, objective “experts” with little stake in the outcome of a project. In reality, they were making implicit causal claims about the problems they address and those claims influence their approach and the outcome. Using the experience of a local PNGO, Nuhoud, I showed how the relationship between local organizations and international donors is rarely, if ever, genuinely participatory as the donors claim. In the case of Nuhoud, INGOs and international funding helped provide new means of creating and
manipulating power locally, but never actually allowed power to flow from the donor to the recipient. Through Nuhoud’s efforts to secure funding, implement projects, and represent its “constituents,” the influence of Western donors in all facets of the local organization’s decision-making process became exceedingly clear. Finally, I investigated the aggregate impact of a ubiquitous foreign aid presence on Palestinians’ ability to mobilize politically. Political neutralization has occurred in subtle, but significant, ways. Students prioritize particular fields of study over others; young professionals eschew the study of Arabic language or Palestinian history in favor of majors in NGO management; the time-honored tradition of volunteerism takes on a new meaning; and everywhere, expectations are on the rise even as the political reality is in decline. Throughout, I argued that foreign assistance—even that which claims to be participatory—is more often a deterrent to genuine community mobilization. Ultimately, this research illuminates how civic education programming in Palestine is working against its stated objectives, helping to create a weaker, more apathetic society even as it sells the promise of progress.

Though donors often measure the vibrancy of civil society by counting the number of NGOs in a society, a more accurate indicator would assess that society’s ability to address social concerns and mobilize for political change. For many local Palestinian organizations under the influence of international donors, this capacity has been diminished since the signing of the Oslo Accords and the subsequent arrival of the aid regime. Yet, despite enormous international and domestic pressures, organizations such as the Stop the Wall campaign and the Dalia Association are finding ways to utilize international resources in support of broad social, economic, and
political goals. However, their success is not due to civic education programming or democracy assistance. In fact, it is by openly eschewing the norms of the contemporary aid regime that the long tradition of Palestinian community mobilization remains alive.
Bibliography


