

A SHIFTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: NGOS' CIVIC ACTIVISM AND RESPONSE IN THE GAZA STRIP, 1967—2014

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Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are considered crucial stakeholders in the Gaza Strip, mobilising and empowering society as key drivers of politics and change processes. They deliver actions in the fields of human rights, community development, conflict resolution, sports, women's empowerment and more.

This briefing discusses Palestinian NGOs in the Gaza Strip in their historical perspective; notably their peace and development policies and practices. It examines social, economic and political factors, circumstances and notable changes that have influenced NGO responses to changing circumstances in the region. It also discusses how NGOs participate in shaping the Gaza Strip's social power structure.

The briefing examines the established interests, reactions and responses of NGOs in light of societal needs stemming from multiple consecutive crises in the region. Indeed, there are many challenges facing NGOs in the recent political environment. The briefing also provides insight into their self-accommodation policy after Gaza's breakaway from the West Bank in 2007–2013. Finally, it hints at

challenges facing Gaza-based NGOs following the Israeli assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014, which caused enormous destruction for citizens and the environment. The briefing is based on the author's own research and professional experiences working for Gaza-based NGOs.

The Emergence of Gaza NGOs

Palestinian society started forming not-for-profit organisations or charities, later known as NGOs, during the early years of the 20th century in accordance with Ottoman law. These organisations sought to serve society in the fields of relief, education and development. During the British mandate, before the 1948 establishment of Israel on 78% of historical Palestine, they also delivered services to Arab Palestinian communities (Abu Nahla 2008, 38). On 7 June 1967, Israel occupied the remaining 22% of historical Palestine, areas known today as the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which includes Jerusalem. Although the Israeli military administration exercised military control over the population, it allowed Palestinians to exercise their religious rights. Some national leaders used peaceful mechanisms, of engaging in community work and establishing local NGOs, to reject the Israeli occupation policy of administering their affairs.

In 1969, Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi, a prominent national leftist figure affiliated with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) established the first NGO in the territory of Gaza. The Palestinian Red Crescent for the Gaza Strip was very active in the Gaza Strip, promoting the Palestinian national agenda through the provision of social and health services. It was also opposed to the social agenda of Islamic NGOs led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip in the early 1980s.

The Islamic NGOs, led by Ahmed Yassin, who later became leader of the Islamic Hamas movement, also established a

number of NGOs registered by the civil administration of the Israeli military in 1979. The Islamic NGOs functioned as a social network of schools, sports clubs, kindergartens, women's centres and medical centres serving ordinary Palestinians. This social welfare work was delivered based on the Islamic social change theory of building community bases before bringing about political change (Natil 2012). It also sought to mobilise communities by spreading Islamic values through its own example of providing social and community services. This approach was inherited from its mother organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood Society, which was rooted in Islamic culture, beliefs, ideology and practices. These NGOs also presented a challenge to the political hegemony of the PLO (Roy 2011, 70–75).

Thus, Palestinian NGOs in the Gaza Strip delivered services to ordinary Palestinians, thereby providing an alternative to the Israeli system of services. They delivered diverse social, educational, sport and financial services in response to the growing needs of Palestinian society under Israeli occupation. During this period, the Palestinian national movement had grown, leading to the first intifada (uprising), which began on the eve of 8 December 1987. Palestinian human security and public health deteriorated significantly with the outbreak of the intifada. This was due largely to the high number of conflict-related injuries and the very low capacity of public hospitals run by the Israeli military administration. This encouraged a number of Palestinian NGOs, like the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, to respond. They operated three mobile medical teams in the Gaza Strip with a number of permanent emergency first aid centres in the densely populated areas of Gaza where clashes with the Israeli military were almost daily occurrences (Rigby 1991, 89).

Generally, these NGOs contributed to the survival and development of Palestinian

society in very critical circumstances. They operated 60% of all health care facilities in 1992. They managed 100% of all pre-school services and 100% of all rehabilitation facilities. Between 1984 and 1992, before the Oslo agreement of 13 September 1993, these NGOs also implemented 78% of all new development projects (Barghouthi 2006).

These figures indicate that NGO actions responded to citizens' needs at all levels, while the Israeli military system failed to do so. These actions not only amplified the importance of NGOs' work but also expanded their opportunities to educate diverse populations about their social and political beliefs, values and norms. This was as much about their peaceful resistance to and their social and political ideology towards defeating the occupier and oppressor as it was about their cultural survival. There was a direct and organic link between NGOs' social actions aimed at achieving Palestinian ideological goals and the 'all-strings-attached' philosophy and practice of social and charitable giving.

Shifting Political Environment

In 1994, Palestinian NGOs were confronted with a new political and social environment when the PLO established the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA assumed responsibility for administering the civil and security affairs of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in accordance with the Oslo agreement. Existing NGOs had to change their policies to cooperate with the PA, which inherited social, educational and health delivery services from the Israeli civil administration. Surprisingly, the number of registered NGOs increased dramatically, and they now had an official, dedicated funding stream — allocated funds from international donors — to support the peace process and state-building. However, allocated funds to NGOs dropped drastically after the establishment of the PA. Foreign aid to

NGOs in 1993 amounted to US\$220 million, which plummeted to US\$74 million in 1997, a drop of 66% (Barghouthi 2006).

Despite the drop in funding allocation, NGOs found in this new political environment an opportunity to contribute to social change processes in Gaza. They circulated new values and concepts like democracy, good governance, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, women's empowerment and youth civic engagement. Such values were not a part of NGO operations in Gaza before the Oslo agreement and the PA's establishment. During this period, the relationship between the PA and the NGOs was mainly characterised by uncertainty about the role of NGOs in the new political environment.

The PA established a Ministry for NGOs in the Gaza Strip to respond to the rapid growth and expansion of this sector after the Oslo agreement. In January 2000, the PA enforced a new NGOs law. A number of existing NGOs participated in enriching this new law in cooperation with the Ministry of NGOs. This Ministry was established in July 2000, the year in which the peace process collapsed. The Ministry was dissolved in 2005, having failed to deliver any documented achievements. In contrast, Palestinian NGOs continued operating effectively in the following sectors: democracy, human rights, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, community development, women's empowerment, youth civic engagement and psychological support and counselling, among others.

In October 2000, Palestinian NGOs — and the international community — witnessed the collapse of the PLO–Israel peace process after the failure of Camp David negotiations over the issues of Jerusalem, borders and the return of refugees. The NGOs' purpose of contributing to state-building and peacebuilding was challenged as the level of violence between

Palestinians and Israelis escalated in the OPT. They had no alternative operational plan to face the emergencies arising from the situation because of their dependence on foreign donors and the latter's support of specific projects and programmes.

Nonetheless, NGO responses to humanitarian crises were much more rapid during the second intifada (2000–2004) than the first. They delivered health services, social and psychological support, civic engagement, youth and women's empowerment and capacity-building. They also documented and reported human rights violations at all levels. During this period, NGOs were able to respond to international donor bids and make use of funds allocated to support Palestinian society. These donors still held out hope for a peace process, supported the PA and sought to achieve favourable conditions for future negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The Gaza NGOs played an important role in supporting the efforts of the PA in delivering services to the Palestinian people. Non-governmental organisation funds created jobs for thousands of graduates while engaging them in civic activities.

The second intifada created new conditions and opportunities for civil society on the ground. In particular, Islamic NGOs took advantage of these changes to promote themselves as part of an alternative to the PA. This also increased the political credibility and weight of Hamas, which contributed significantly to its victory in the legislative elections before its June 2007 military takeover in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian Gaza-based NGOs faced a new challenge that badly affected their operations and policies; Hamas used violence and military action against the PA security forces intent on controlling the administration of Gaza Strip security. Until then, PA security forces had been managed and controlled entirely by Fatah (Schanzer 2008, 107). Hamas military forces defeated and then

expelled PA forces, leaving Hamas in full control of the Gaza Strip.

New Accommodation Policy

Hamas's takeover shook up Palestinian society at large as well as impacting on the working environment of NGOs. The PA closed most NGOs affiliated with Hamas on the West Bank. Similarly, in Gaza, Hamas closed down most NGOs associated with the Fatah movement. This hostile environment affected the relationship between NGOs and the local authorities, notably with respect to human rights violations. Non-governmental organisations in the Gaza Strip operated in a state of mistrust and confusion as they started to face new procedures from a Hamas government run by officers with little or no governance experience. According to Amjad Shawa, Director of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO) in Gaza, the government in Gaza was

introducing illegal amendments to the executive regulations of the Law of Associations No. 1 of 2000, giving the Interior Ministry more powers and allowing it to interfere in the affairs of associations, taking advantage of the gaps left by the former Legislative Council in the law which allow for multiple interpretations. (Balousha 2013)

Despite the critique, Hamas government officials have maintained that the 860 registered NGOs working in the Gaza Strip have freedom of operation (Balousha 2013). This new environment allowed Islamic NGOs to increase their cooperation with international Islamic NGOs in support of Hamas governance. Notably, they organised humanitarian initiatives in the Gaza Strip after the Israeli military's Operation *Cast Lead* from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009. The Israeli operation left more than 1,300 people dead, over 5,000 wounded, many displaced, some people trapped in their

homes and some 2,400 buildings destroyed. Gaza's civilians faced dire shortages of food, water, cooking gas, fuel and medical care due to the resulting insecurities, the enforced closure of all of Gaza's borders and alleged serious violations of international humanitarian law. Electricity was limited and in some places sewage was spilling into the streets (Levy 2010, 9).

Many local and international NGOs working in Palestine responded to the population's needs. In March 2009, for instance, the Organisation of the Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund for International Development funded 50 active NGOs from different sectors to deliver services that included psychological support, documentation of human rights violations, food and clothing. Moreover, some Turkish NGOs such as the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), an Islamic NGO, cooperated with international civil society groups and led an international solidarity campaign known as the 'freedom flotilla' to break the Gaza siege. The Israeli navy stopped the boat and killed nine Turkish activists on board on 31 May 2010 (Natil 2013, 180).

During this period, Palestinian NGOs attempted to contribute to the community reconciliation process after Hamas's takeover by organising a series of actions to promote tolerance among the different sectors of society. The social structure of the Gaza Strip was shaken up after the takeover, as some families were split between Hamas and Fatah. A number of NGOs launched long-term and intensive activities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to promote a culture of peace, reconciliation and tolerance. International donors were also interested in the peace and reconciliation agenda. For example, the European Union funded the Society Voice Foundation to run three years of programming aimed to empower youth for reconciliation, tolerance and peace-building in cooperation with at least 50

NGOs. The project sought to build the leadership capacities and knowledge of 300 young leaders aged 18–35 years old from different places in the OPT, from November 2011 to October 2014. Youth were trained to put their newly acquired peace skills and knowledge into actions through media production, summer camp activities, town hall meetings and conferences, these activities all geared to building peace and promoting reconciliation (Society Voice Foundation 2013).

However, very recently, the Gaza NGOs' agenda of peace and development was again interrupted and challenged. This time, it was by a long and devastating cycle of fighting between Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Israel, which lasted for 51 days in the summer of 2014. This has created a new environment of destruction, overloaded with psychological problems. It has left 100,000 Gazans homeless and over 2,100 Gazans dead, the majority of them Palestinian civilians, compared with 76 Israeli fatalities, all soldiers (United Nations 2014). This has created massive new challenges for Gaza NGOs as they struggle to meet citizens' needs and demands transparently and efficiently, not least because resources are sorely lacking after nine years of blockades.

Conclusion

Palestinian NGOs have not only played an essential role in the peaceful national struggle against Israeli occupation, but have also pursued community development, delivered relief assistance and provided monitoring and documentation of human rights violation by different authorities. They have rapidly responded to the needs of the populations by delivering services to all sectors of society during the different humanitarian crises.

These NGOs have been a means of developing Palestinian civil society leadership that is free of Israeli military control. Also, they have provided a place

of freedom for many Palestinian intellectuals and other well-educated people who did not see themselves as organs of the PA or Palestinian political parties.

Non-governmental organisation operations have always been challenged by a number of internal and external circumstances and factors stemming from the Israeli occupation of the OPT, the failure of the peace process, the Palestinian factional divide and the latest Israeli destructive operation against Gaza in the summer of 2014. In such challenging circumstances, Palestinian NGOs need to strengthen their capacities, operations, networks and cooperation to undertake effective actions and campaigns to make the changes they seek a reality in term of politics and development.

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