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# Curating Sovereignty in Palestine: Voluntary Grassroots Organizations and Civil Society in the West Bank and East Jerusalem

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## Abstract

This article extends the literature on “NGO-ization” in the Middle East and Global South to examine “voluntary grassroots organizations” (VGOs): groups that operate on a voluntary basis and position themselves outside of the formal NGO sector and foreign aid system. Based on nine months of ethnographic research in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the article examines how VGOs use heritage practices as a two-pronged challenge to the NGO-ization of Palestinian civil society. Whereas NGO-ization depoliticized civil society, VGOs resist depoliticization by mobilizing Palestinians to counter the Israeli occupation. And whereas NGO-ization professionalized civil society, VGOs resist professionalization by building large volunteer bases, emphasizing long-term processes of citizen mobilization rather than short-term outcomes, and remaining grounded in local communities and accountable to local citizens. Their work reflects larger trends around the world in which civic actors turn to informal organizing in an era of growing disenchantment with traditional NGOs.

## Keywords

Palestine – NGOs – civil society

## Introduction

In June of 2018, I met with the founder of a voluntary initiative in the West Bank town of Beit Sahour that leads tours of the greater Bethlehem area and hosts an annual olive harvest. The founder had previously worked in Palestine's non-governmental organization (NGO) sector, and I wanted to hear his perspective on civil society in Palestine and learn about his voluntary initiative. Like other civic actors with whom I spoke during the summers of 2016, 2018, and 2019, the tour operator lamented the depoliticization and professionalization of Palestine's civic space. He explained that the foreign aid that flowed into Palestine after the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords had constructed a large sector of bureaucratic NGOs whose activities reflected the agendas of donor states and failed to mobilize Palestinians around a shared goal of national liberation.

In response to the NGO-ization of Palestinian civil society, the tour operator and several other civic actors in Palestine created what I refer to as "voluntary grassroots organizations" (VGOs): groups that operate on a voluntary basis and position themselves outside of the formal NGO sector and foreign aid system. VGOs engage in a wide variety of activities. They operate organic farms, host weekly group hikes and runs, create visual and performing art, provide charitable relief, and mobilize contemporary popular committees. While their activities are diverse, their aims are similar: to restore cultures of voluntarism and re-politicize Palestine's civic sphere as a space of collective opposition to the Israeli occupation.

Drawing upon nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Palestine's West Bank and East Jerusalem, this article documents the rise of VGOs and analyzes how a subset of heritage-oriented VGOs—including organizations that engage in arts and culture, hiking and running, farming, and political tours—resist the depoliticization and professionalization of Palestine's civic sphere. The article argues that the rise of NGOs depoliticized Palestinian civil society by fragmenting popular resistance to the occupation into distinct issue areas and target populations. This fragmentation weakened civil society as a force of mass opposition. VGOs attempt to re-politicize civil society by mobilizing wide volunteer and member bases around shared interests, with the broader goal of combatting the Israeli occupation.

The article also argues that the proliferation of NGOs professionalized Palestinian civil society by embracing managerialism and neoliberal modes of economic development. VGOs challenge this professionalization by building

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1 This article uses "heritage" in a broad sense of activities aimed at conserving Palestinian land and agriculture, preserving cultural traditions, and celebrating identity.

large volunteer bases, emphasizing long-term processes of citizen mobilization rather than short-term outcomes, and remaining grounded in local communities and accountable to local citizens.

I draw upon Scott's concept of "everyday" forms of resistance<sup>2</sup> and define resistance as everyday activities that intend to undermine the power of an oppressor. As in Scott's conceptualization of everyday resistance, the forms of resistance enacted by VGOs are not easily recognized as such. They assert themselves not in rebellions or protests but rather in voluntary acts that assert symbolic ownership over Palestinian heritage. Resistance then manifests at multiple levels. First, by mobilizing large membership bases who participate in organizations' activities on a voluntary basis, VGOs resist the depoliticization and professionalization of Palestinian civil society. Second, by safeguarding Palestinian heritage, VGOs resist Israeli occupation and encroachment. Departing from Scott, however, the resistance enacted by VGOs is coordinated and expansively collective. Coordination occurs both within VGOs, as individuals join voluntarily to preserve Palestinian heritage, and across VGOs, as these groups consciously form a movement to restore a culture of voluntarism in civil society.

The article contributes to our understanding of the evolving nature of civil society in Palestine's West Bank and East Jerusalem and to wider global trends. Scholars have documented the shift from a pre-Oslo politically mobilized, voluntary civic sphere to a post-Oslo depoliticized, professional NGO sector.<sup>3</sup> This article uncovers the deliberate efforts of VGO members to resist NGO depoliticization and professionalization and revive cultures of politicized mobilization and voluntarism within civil society.

It also speaks to debates about the landscapes and roles of civil society in the Global South. Foreign aid has fueled the rise of de-politicized, managerial NGOs around the world.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in recent decades, social change actors have increasingly mobilized in more loosely structured networks and groups. In

2 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

3 See especially Lori Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights: Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Tariq Dana, "The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shifts," *Middle East Critique* 24, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 191–210; Islah Jad, "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4/5 (2007): 622–29; Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, "The Intifada and the Aid Industry: The Impact of the New Liberal Agenda on the Palestinian NGOs," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and The Middle East* 23 (January 1, 2003): 205–14.

4 See especially David Hulme and Michael Edwards, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996): 961–73; Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash, "NGOization, Foreign Funding, and the Nicaraguan

social movements such as the Arab Spring, formal NGOs were conspicuously absent. In the development arena, a movement to #ShiftThePower to community-based groups is gaining traction. While the case of Palestine is in many ways unique—not least because Palestine remains under military occupation—the evolution of its civil society reflects these global trends.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section draws upon extant literature to analyze the transformation of pre-Oslo civil society to post-Oslo civil society. The next section presents the data and methods that inform the analysis. The following four sections present a two-pronged analysis. The first prong analyzes how NGOs depoliticized civil society and how VGOs challenge depoliticization. The second prong analyzes how NGOs professionalized civil society and how VGOs challenge professionalization. The article concludes by connecting the analysis to global trends.

### The NGO-ization of Palestinian Civil Society

The concept of civil society is complex, and its structures and roles evolve with a state's political, economic, and social norms. Civil society is generally considered to be the civic realm outside of the government and business sectors. It is a “third” sector, independent from the others but overlapping with them due to porous borders.<sup>5</sup> A neo-Tocquevillian strand of scholarship primarily focuses on the formal associations that comprise civil society, including nonprofit organizations, NGOs, voluntary associations, and the like. Such organizations are thought to act as schools of democracy in which citizens adopt habits of citizenship, develop social capital, and hold the state accountable.<sup>6</sup> But civil society can also be understood as a *type* of society, one marked by norms and

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Civil Society,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 25, no. 2 (2014): 487–513; David Suarez and Mary Kay Gugerty, “Funding Civil Society? Bilateral Government Support for Development NGOs,” *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, July 6, 2016; Sarah L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

5 Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 4th ed. (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

6 Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Larry Diamond, “Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1994): 4–18; Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

values of civility, diversity, voluntarism, and civic engagement, in which associations are deeply rooted in local communities.<sup>7</sup>

Palestinian civil society has evolved through conceptually distinct phases. Much of the literature distinguishes between pre-Oslo and post-Oslo civil society, with the former more closely resembling the informal, value-based version of civil society and the latter reflecting—at least in structure—neo-Tocquevilian civil society. Prior to Oslo, Palestinian civil society was comprised of grassroots charitable societies and popular committees that were highly politicized and formed mass-based movements. After Oslo, civil society became increasingly dominated by apolitical, professional NGOs that were bankrolled by Western donors.

As early as the British Mandate, charitable societies provided an array of social welfare services, including medical relief, assistance to the poor, and religious education.<sup>8</sup> While elite-based and reflecting ruling class values,<sup>9</sup> these groups aligned their work with a nationalist agenda and targeted support to those affected by the nationalist struggle.<sup>10</sup> The nationalist focus of civic work continued after 1948, as groups for women, students, teachers, laborers, and health care workers were formed. These groups were closely connected to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and operated on behalf of a nationalist front.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, charitable associations received significant financial backing from the Arab League, which channeled funds to Palestinian civil society through a PLO-Jordanian joint committee. Civic groups during these decades expanded their reach, incorporating substantial segments of the population in politicized forms of service provision.<sup>12</sup> Collective action around service provision and the preservation of cultural heritage was mobilized in

7 Edwards, *Civil Society*; Catherine Herrold, *Delta Democracy: Pathways to Incremental Civic Revolution in Egypt and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

8 Mudar Kassis, "Civil Society Organizations and Transition to Democracy in Palestine," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 12, no. 1 (2001): 35–48.

9 Rema Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics," *Race & Class* 37, no. 2 (October 1, 1995): 51–63.

10 Nathan J. Brown, *Palestinian Politics After the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

11 Brown; Rema Hammami, "Palestinian NGOs Since Oslo: From NGO Politics to Social Movements?," *Middle East Report* 214 (2000): 16–19 + 27 + 48.

12 Dana, "The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society"; Yael Zeira, *The Revolution Within: State Institutions and Unarmed Resistance in Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

service to a national front and became a means to a political end.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the decades leading up to the first *intifada*, Palestinian civil society was highly politicized and rooted in grassroots communities but also maintained strong links to the PLO. The Palestinian people were integrated through civic groups into state building processes.<sup>14</sup>

During the first *intifada*, popular committees affiliated with political factions sprang up across Palestine to provide a wide range of services—again with broader political goals. Popular committees were decentralized, with horizontal structures designed to engage as much of the population as possible in decision making.<sup>15</sup> The committees also aimed to mobilize grievances over the occupation into collective action to preserve, protect, and provide for the broader Palestinian community. Service provision drew attention to the underlying political and power dynamics of occupation that caused socioeconomic problems. In their efforts to overcome these challenges and collectively construct alternative systems of service provision, popular committees were rooted in a politics of *sumud* (steadfastness).<sup>16</sup>

By 1991 and the Madrid Conference, however, the dynamics of Palestinian civil society had begun to shift. Foreign donors, enthusiastic about the idea that a vibrant civil society would undergird peace processes, began to channel funds to existing popular committees and charitable associations and encourage them to become formal NGOs. Foreign aid, however, rarely supports the politicized forms of service provision and mass mobilization that formed the playbook of these organizations' operations. Indeed, most of the funds to Palestinian NGOs required organizations' leaders to be unaligned with political factions. In addition, donors funded NGOs to produce discrete, short-term projects with measurable results. As a result, NGOs gradually filled their staffs with politically unaligned employees<sup>17</sup> and shifted their priorities from mass mobilization to project-making.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, when the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, a transformation of Palestinian civil society—from one focused on mass mobilization around a nationalist agenda to one busied with constructing professional organizations

13 Hammami, "NGOs."

14 Brown, *Palestinian Politics After the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine*.

15 Dana, "The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society."

16 Ibid.

17 Hammami, "NGOs."

18 Islah Jad, *Palestinian Women's Activism: Nationalism, Secularism, Islamism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018); Gizem Zencirci and Catherine E. Herrold, "Project-Think and the Fragmentation and Defragmentation of Civil Society in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2022): 545–65.

that paid staff to carry out projects—was underway. This transformation continued in the decades following Oslo as foreign funds fueled the expansion of Palestine’s NGO sector.<sup>19</sup> Foreign donors channeled funds to NGOs as the Palestinian Authority struggled to govern and as the Israeli occupation became further entrenched. As a result, in many realms—including in cultural heritage, health care, education, poverty relief, and human rights—professionalized NGOs took on state-like roles in designing policies and providing services.<sup>20</sup> By 2016, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law estimated that there were approximately 2,800 NGOs in the West Bank and 800 in Gaza.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than creating a cohesive opposition, contemporary NGOs compete against each other for funding, prestige, and access to political elites.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have argued that the foreign aid for NGOs that propelled the sector’s growth was at least partly responsible for weakening civil society’s role in mobilizing a nationalist struggle.<sup>23</sup> Eager to secure funds from abroad, NGOs built the managerial capacities to apply for, process, and report on Western aid. As these professional organizations mushroomed, they sidelined the mass-movement organizations of the pre-Oslo period. Collective efforts to combat the occupation were increasingly channeled into disparate NGOs, and the technical projects that NGOs undertook failed to tackle the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By implementing a regime of discipline control

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- 19 Foreign donations to Palestinian civil society doubled from \$112 million in 1999 to \$223.6 million in 2006. Mandy Turner, “The Political Economy of Western Aid in the Occupied Palestinian Territory Since 1993,” in *Decolonizing Palestinian Political Economy: De-Development and Beyond*, ed. Mandy Turner and Omar Shweiki (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 20 Chiara De Cesari, “Heritage beyond the Nation-State? Nongovernmental Organizations, Changing Cultural Policies, and the Discourse of Heritage as Development,” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 1 (2020).
- 21 <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/palestine>. Note that these numbers are approximate and that the number changes periodically as some NGOs close due to lack of aid, and new NGOs emerge.
- 22 Amaney A. Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Dana S. El Kurd, “The Legacy of Authoritarian Strategies: Repression and Polarization in the Palestinian Territories,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 10, no. 3 (October 23, 2018): 375–401.
- 23 Lisa Bhungalia, “Managing Violence: Aid, Counterinsurgency, and the Humanitarian Present in Palestine,” *Environment and Planning A* 47, no. 11 (2015): 2308–23; Fouad Gehad Marei et al., “Interventions on the Politics of Governing the ‘Ungovernable,’” *Political Geography*, 2018; Alaa Tartir, “The Limits of Securitized Peace: The EU’s Sponsorship of Palestinian Authoritarianism,” *Middle East Critique*, 2018, 1–17; Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, “Unwilling to Change, Determined to Fail: Donor Aid in Occupied Palestine in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 3 (2014): 431–49; Dana, “The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society.”

from abroad via local NGOs, foreign governments influenced economic development, knowledge production, and poverty alleviation in ways that advanced Western agendas, dismantled local social networks, and prioritized neoliberal economic development over the realization of rights.<sup>24</sup>

But Palestine's civil society continues to evolve. Over the past decade, Palestinian civic actors discontent with the state of the NGO sector began mobilizing collective opposition to the occupation and reconstructing habits of voluntarism in the civic realm.<sup>25</sup> Some formed contemporary popular committees to revive the culture of community organizing that popular committees built in the first *intifada*.<sup>26</sup> These groups of young people conduct site visits to villages throughout the West Bank to meet residents, share stories, help with voluntary projects, and build solidarity across geographical divides. Others constructed loose networks that have official names but no discernible organizing structures.

Still others created what I refer to as voluntary grassroots organizations. VGOs situate themselves outside of the professional NGO sector, reject foreign aid or are highly selective about the small amounts of foreign aid they do accept, and rely primarily or entirely on volunteers rather than paid staff. Most VGOs focus on a particular activity; these include *dabke* dance, running, farming, charitable relief, and the like. Many also, though, engage in crossover activities to support peer VGOs. Most VGOs were created by young adults and their volunteer bases consist primarily of educated Palestinians aged from the twenties through forties. While the number of VGOs in Palestine is unknown, I have identified approximately seventy so far, as shown in Table 1. It is a heritage-oriented subset of these VGOs on which this article focuses.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Sahar Taghdisi-Rad, *The Political Economy of Aid in Palestine: Relief from Conflict or Development Delayed?* (Routledge, 2010); Mona Atia and Catherine Herrold, "Governing Through Patronage: The Rise of NGOs and the Fall of Civil Society in Palestine and Morocco," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29, no. 5 (2018): 1044–54.

25 Nathan J. Brown, "Palestine: The Fire Next Time?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/07/06/palestine-fire-next-time-pub-44948>.

26 Unlike the pre-Oslo popular committees, these contemporary committees are typically not officially affiliated with political factions.

27 It is important to note that while many organizations in Palestine are clearly large, professional NGOs and others are clearly small VGOs, sometimes the line between NGOs and VGOs is blurred. For example, some groups that began as unregistered VGOs subsequently registered as NGOs to apply for funding from Palestinian foundations and select foreign donors. If these organizations continue to rely primarily on volunteers rather than paid staff and are deeply rooted in local communities, I classify them as VGOs.

TABLE 1 VGOs Identified to Date

	Activity category	Activity detail	Geography
1	Community Resource Generation	Raises funds and distributes to Palestinian VGOs and community-based initiatives	Palestine
2	Community Resource Generation	Raises funds and distributes to Palestinian VGOs and community-based initiatives	Palestine
3	Community Resource Generation	Raises funds and distributes to Palestinian VGOs and community-based initiatives	West Bank, Gaza
4	Agriculture	Agriculture cooperative based on environmentally conscious and shared economy principles	Gaza
5	Agriculture	Produces and builds awareness about the Azolla water fern	Gaza
6	Agriculture	Cultivates strawberries and provides job training	Gaza
7	Agriculture	Provides support to, and advocates for, Palestinian farmers	West Bank
8	Agriculture	Farm initiative that spreads awareness about agriculture	West Bank
9	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way	West Bank
10	Agriculture	Student-run agriculture cooperative	West Bank
11	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way	West Bank
12	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way	West Bank
13	Agriculture	Seed bank that protects Palestinian heirloom seeds	West Bank
14	Agriculture	Community supported agriculture initiative	West Bank
15	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way	West Bank
16	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way and educating young people about agriculture	West Bank
17	Agriculture	Small farm providing healthy produce in responsible way	West Bank

TABLE 1 VGOs Identified to Date (*Cont.*)

	Activity category	Activity detail	Geography
18	Arts, Culture, and Media	Experimental Palestinian theater that promotes artistic expression and cultural identity	1948
19	Arts, Culture, and Media	Community archive that documents Palestinian life	Palestine
20	Arts, Culture, and Media	Provides arts education	Gaza
21	Arts, Culture, and Media	Preserves, promotes, and celebrates Palestinian identity through cinema	Gaza
22	Arts, Culture, and Media	Mobile, interactive street theater	Gaza
23	Arts, Culture, and Media	Online youth-led media project	Gaza and West Bank
24	Arts, Culture, and Media	Interactive, touring arts and culture initiative	Jerusalem
25	Arts, Culture, and Media	Provides public art to build social cohesion, preserve local heritage, and reclaim Palestinian belonging	Jerusalem
26	Arts, Culture, and Media	Oral history project that promotes storytelling and offers tours, workshops, and activities for youth	Jerusalem
27	Arts, Culture, and Media	Digital youth media platform that shares stories from Palestinian refugee camps	Palestine
28	Arts, Culture, and Media	Independent digital media platform that publishes content about Palestine and its surroundings	Palestine
29	Arts, Culture, and Media	Hosts a monthly art walk to educate residents and visits about local heritage	West Bank
30	Arts, Culture, and Media	Trains youth in, and performs, dabke dance	West Bank
31	Arts, Culture, and Media	Puts on politically and socially conscious theater productions	West Bank
32	Arts, Culture, and Media	Preserves Palestinian folk dance and folklore to preserve Palestinian national identity	West Bank

33	Arts, Culture, and Media	Transforms “trash” into art and useful products	West Bank
34	Arts, Culture, and Media	Art space that integrates the visual arts, farming, archiving and the production of knowledge and bridges local traditions of self-sufficiency with contemporary art and ecological practices	West Bank
35	Arts, Culture, and Media	Arts and culture group that hosts a monthly open mic session to promote free expression	West Bank
36	Charitable Relief	Volunteer network that supports families in need	Palestine
37	Charitable Relief	Voluntary youth campaign that provides support for people affected by the Coronavirus pandemic	West Bank
38	Charitable Relief	Volunteer network that supports families in need	West Bank
39	Community Organization	Promotes profitable desert tourism that benefits rather than undermines or extracts from the community, provides opportunities for youth and women, and supports the resilience of villages deprived of recognition and rights.	1948 / al Naqab
40	Community Organization	Provides charitable relief to Palestinians in need	West Bank
41	Education	Provides pathways to university education (including loans) for the area’s youth	Jerusalem
42	Educational Tours	Hosts tours and camps to introduce participants to Palestine	East Jerusalem
43	Educational Tours	Tour group that provides educational tours of Palestine	Palestine
44	Educational Tours	Tour group that provides educational tours of Palestine	West Bank
45	Environment	Provides recycling, composting, and waste sorting services	Gaza
46	Health Care	Women-led initiative that provides in-home emergency first aid medical training	Gaza

TABLE 1 VGOs Identified to Date (*Cont.*)

	Activity category	Activity detail	Geography
47	Organizing and Advocacy	Independent youth movement to cultivate community while maintaining and strengthening national identity and historical narratives as Palestinians	1948 / Haifa
48	Organizing and Advocacy	Builds networks among local organizations and leads political tours	East Jerusalem
49	Organizing and Advocacy	Network of farmers, fishermen, and workers that raises awareness about rights and economic justice	Gaza
50	Organizing and Advocacy	Campaign against the compulsory military service imposed on the Palestinian Druze community	Jerusalem, 1948
51	Organizing and Advocacy	Mobilizes Palestinians around a critique of international aid	Palestine
52	Organizing and Advocacy	Organizing platform for university students	West Bank
53	Organizing and Advocacy	Popular committee supporting Bil'in in the struggle against Israeli occupation	West Bank
54	Organizing and Advocacy	Independent youth group that strengthens resilience of Palestinians in marginalized areas	West Bank
55	Organizing and Advocacy	Network of activists that hosts lectures, cultivates community farms, provides summer camps, and leads advocacy campaigns	West Bank
56	Organizing and Advocacy	Nonpartisan popular committee based on organizing principles of the first intifada	West Bank
57	Organizing and Advocacy	Hebron-based grassroots movement dedicated to ending the occupation through nonviolent methods	West Bank
58	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Climbing group that builds awareness of social issues and raises funds for charities in Palestine	Palestine
59	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Running club that builds awareness of movement constraints in Palestine	Palestine
60	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Camping group that introduces youth to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank

61	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Cycling group that spreads culture of cycling and awareness of Palestinian issues	West Bank
62	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Yoga group that conducts outreach and development projects with villages and refugee camps	West Bank
63	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Hiking group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank
64	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Caving group that introduces participants to Palestinian heritage	West Bank
65	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Cycling group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank
66	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Running group that builds community around sports	West Bank
67	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Hiking group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank
68	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Hiking group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank
69	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Cycling group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank
70	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	Hiking group that introduces participants to Palestinian land and heritage	West Bank

### Data and Methods

I gathered data for this article during three summers of ethnographic research in Palestine in 2016, 2018, and 2019. I draw primarily on data from interviews with civic actors in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as participant observation and review of primary sources. So far, I have conducted sixty-five interviews, twenty-one of which are directly quoted in this article. I include a list of the twenty-one VGOs cited in this article in Table 2.<sup>28</sup>

Ethnographic methods allow the researcher to understand on-the-ground practices of meaning making.<sup>29</sup> Ethnography helped me to unpack the

28 Note that VGOs in both tables are anonymized to protect confidentiality and to protect groups from crackdowns by the Israeli Defense Forces or Palestinian Authority.

29 Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 713–28; Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

nuanced effects of NGO-ization on civil society and to recognize how seemingly benign acts like dance, farming, hiking, and running are in fact, through their voluntary design, aimed at re-transforming the form and function of Palestinian civil society.

I identified the population of organizations included in this study through snowball sampling, a method that opened countless doors and introduced me to the social networks within Palestinian civil society. I took several steps to ensure the validity of my interview data, including embedding myself in networks of civil society actors to gather a variety of perspectives, triangulating interviews with participant observation, and taking multiple trips to the field to ensure consistency across time.

While this article focuses on a subset of heritage oriented VGOs, interviews with a variety of VGO members, as well as participant observation, inform my over-arching arguments. The primary danger of analyzing VGOs as a whole, or even as a subset of heritage VGOs, is that distinguishing characteristics of individual VGOs are downplayed. VGOs both within and outside the realm of heritage are diverse in their size, geographic scope, volunteer bases, degrees of formalization, and funding schemes. Yet, despite these differences, VGO members stressed the collaborative nature of their groups and indicated that they believed their organizations are building a movement within Palestinian civil society. VGOs actively seek to *combat* fragmentation through their work, and my decision to analyze VGOs as a relative whole aims to reflect and respect VGO's collective goals.

That said, my analysis is restricted to VGOs operating in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, admittedly detracting from my efforts to avoid reifying the fragmentation that afflicts Palestinian life. In future phases of research, I hope and plan to expand the scope to Gaza and 1948 (historic Palestine). Doing so will necessitate paying close attention to how legal, socioeconomic, political, and geographic contexts affect the structure and roles of VGOs operating in each locale. For now, it is important to note both that VGOs are proliferating in Gaza and 1948 *and* that I do not have the field data necessary to analyze them in this article.

Most interviews were semi-structured and took place in one- to two-hour meetings. Interviewees included staff members and volunteers of NGOs, VGOs, and donor agencies as well as experts on Palestinian civil society. I asked questions about the respondent's organization's goals and activities, the opportunities and challenges facing the respondent's organization, the relationship of the respondent's organization to other groups in civil society, and the respondent's views on civil society in Palestine. Due to the sensitive nature of political mobilization in Palestine, all interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

TABLE 2 List of Cited Interviews

	Interview date	VGO geography	Interview location	VGO activity	Interviewee type
1	June 16, 2016	Palestine	Ramallah	Organizing and Advocacy	VGO
2	June 20, 2016	West Bank	Bethlehem	Organizing and Advocacy	Activist
3	July 19, 2016	East Jerusalem	East Jerusalem	Educational Tours	VGO
4	June 5, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	VGO
5	June 5, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Agriculture	VGO
6	June 8, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Agriculture	VGO
7	June 12, 2018	West Bank	Beit Sahour	Educational Tours	VGO
8	June 13, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Photojournalist	Activist
9	July 1, 2018	West Bank	Beit Sahour	Arts, Culture, and Media	VGO
10	July 1, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Organizing and Advocacy	Activist
11	July 2, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	VGO
12	July 3, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Arts, Culture, and Media	VGO
13	July 5, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Arts, Culture, and Media	VGO
14	July 5, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Arts, Culture, and Media	VGO
15	July 8, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Agriculture	VGO
16	July 9, 2018	West Bank	Jenin	Arts, Culture, and Media	VGO
17	July 11, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Organizing and Advocacy	VGO
18	July 15, 2018	West Bank	Ramallah	Organizing and Advocacy	NGO
19	May 23, 2019	West Bank	Ramallah	Outdoor and Sporting Activities	VGO
20	May 31, 2019	West Bank	Ramallah	Charitable Relief	VGO
21	November 5, 2020	West Bank	Virtual	Agriculture	VGO

I also observed and participated in organizations' activities. I attended arts and culture performances, harvested produce at community farms, went on hiking and running excursions, and participated in political tours. In addition, I attended NGO conferences, monitored organizations' websites and social media pages, and read organizations' annual reports and press releases.

I coded interviews and field notes thematically. Prominent themes included voluntarism, capitalism, foreign aid, community resources, informality, professionalism, human rights, national liberation, occupation and colonialism, fragmentation, accountability, and public ownership. I analyzed the data abductively, moving back and forth between data and the literature to develop a "dialogue" between evidence and theory.<sup>30</sup>

### NGOs and the Depoliticization of Palestinian Civil Society

Foreign aid to Palestine depoliticized civil society by encouraging NGOs to build their work around narrowly focused, short-term, politically neutral projects. "There is a paradox between the micro and macro levels," explained the director of a VGO that campaigns against the deleterious effects of international aid. "At the micro level every donor and NGO says they have a successful project. At the macro level things become harder. Aid skips the important stage of ending the occupation. Small topics are very important, but we need the big picture."<sup>31</sup>

NGOs' tendency to focus on distinct topics and populations not only splintered a nationalist agenda; it also pitted different populations against each other. "NGOs create separate fights," said a member of a loosely networked VGO. "For example, women's equality. But this separates women from others."<sup>32</sup> The agendas of foreign donors ultimately created a hierarchy of issues and populations, with some receiving funding and others being left out. Aid, thus, both dismantled the nationalist struggle and created social cleavages within a society that was already divided geographically.

Aid also entrenched the post-Oslo status quo that aligned with Western interests. "Western agendas are Orientalist. They think they know what is best for the people, for example Western style democracy. The West won't fund groups that are rebellious, revolutionary, and think about how to change the

30 C. C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

31 Interview, June 16, 2016.

32 Interview, July 11, 2018.

status quo. Instead, they ameliorate the status quo. They make it easier to live under occupation, not free from occupation,” argued an activist who mobilized Palestinians around biodiversity and ecological issues.<sup>33</sup> Others referred to aid as “hushing money,” designed to coax Palestinian NGOs into complicity. “Aid is perceived by many people to not advance Palestinian rights. Instead, it is considered to be ‘hushing money,’ to maintain the status quo rather than solve the situation.”<sup>34</sup>

NGOs also tame their rhetoric and display political neutrality to appease foreign donors. Rather than speaking with one voice in support of a national agenda, NGOs stick to their issue areas while distancing themselves from more radical acts of resistance. This self-censorship in the name of appeasing donors further alienates NGOs from society at large and further depoliticizes the civic sphere.

Examining the effects of foreign aid on democracy promotion, political scientist Sarah Bush argued that democracy assistance rarely confronts dictators in meaningful ways because it funds “tame” projects that fail to energize and mobilize local citizens to demand change.<sup>35</sup> Complicit in the taming of democracy assistance are the local NGOs who receive democracy promotion grants. While these organizations are typically led and staffed by activists who truly do want to bring about democracy, organizational survival requires the activists to conduct the types of activities that attract funding. These include narrowly focused, highly technical projects. They do not include programs designed to mobilize people for change. While in Palestine the issue is not “democracy” per se but rather national liberation, the depoliticizing effects of foreign aid are manifested in similar ways through the complicity of NGO grantees. Foreign aid thus transformed Palestinian civil society from a highly politicized arena to one in which apolitical projects are the norm.

### NGOs’ Resistance to Depoliticization

NGOs resist the depoliticization of civil society by mobilizing wide volunteer and member bases around broad goals of resistance, solidarity, and freedom. While NGOs typically do focus on specific activities, they link these activities to an overriding goal of re-politicizing the civic sphere. In the realm of

33 Interview, June 20, 2016.

34 Interview, June 16, 2016.

35 Sarah Sunn Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

agriculture, VGOs frame their work around food sovereignty. VGO members explained that Israeli producers monopolize the food sold in central markets and grocery store chains. As Palestinians become dependent on Israeli imports and abandon local produce, Palestinian crops and farming techniques gradually disappear. By supporting Palestinian farmers and preserving Palestinian crops, VGOs combat Israel's control over Palestine's food production. As one agriculture VGO member argued, "You cannot separate food justice from social and political justice...Food sovereignty is at [the] core of autonomy. We cannot have sovereignty, agency, and voice if we cannot control our food. In Palestine, we live in [a] ghetto surrounded by [a] wall. We depend on our prison guard for food. The Israeli military controls how much water we get, if we drink or not, and what we eat—and they're not interested in our good health."<sup>36</sup>

Farming also serves as an act of resistance by reconnecting people to Palestinian land—land that is hotly contested with Israel. "What is peaceful resistance?" one agriculture VGO member mused. "Bringing people to the land and loving what they do."<sup>37</sup> Farming the land lays claim to it, despite the obstacles to maintaining local agriculture. One agriculture VGO member described why their VGO's community farm could only operate in winter months. "The community farm is currently stopped for the summer because there is no water. The farm is in Area C [(under Israeli control)] so water cannot be piped in. In the winter there is enough water from the rain."<sup>38</sup> Persevering despite these obstacles in tending the land, growing local crops, and boycotting food imports from Israel are decidedly political acts of resistance.

Arts and culture VGOs use heritage and cultural traditions as modes of resistance and liberation. Dance organizations, for example, deploy traditional dance to showcase Palestinian identity. "The general context [in which we work] is the occupation. The settler colonial project is devastating. We are reviving different elements of our presence here. We are carrying forward our traditions to reinforce our existence here," explained one cultural VGO member.<sup>39</sup> Other arts and culture VGO members reinforced the importance of connecting to historical cultural roots as a way of resisting settler colonialism and political occupation. "We are folk inspired. Our dance comes from our roots. This would be part of colonization if we separated from our roots," said one.<sup>40</sup> This VGO member further explained, "The icons, music, and traditional dress

<sup>36</sup> Interview, November 5, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, June 8, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, July 8, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, July 9, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, July 5, 2018.

we use reveals our political identity. It shows what Palestine is for us. The songs have words like martyr and freedom. This is about political liberation.”

Arts and culture VGOs hold many of their performances in public spaces to diffuse cultural traditions in the community and to claim the public space for free expression. Noting that the occupation circumscribes all aspects of Palestinians’ freedom, VGO members believe that by expressing themselves in public, Palestinians are reclaiming feelings of freedom. They also feel that cultural performances in the public realm stimulate collective action. “We don’t have a vision as a people,” lamented a member of a VGO focused on dance. She went on, “Before Oslo, the Palestinian Liberation Organization led movements [on] the streets. They had a duty to liberate Palestine. There was a common goal and organic volunteering.”<sup>41</sup> Members of arts and culture VGOs strive to revive feelings of solidarity around a common vision for Palestine, one that celebrates Palestine’s history and accentuates the perspectives of the current generation of youth.

Finally, hiking, running, and tour groups engage in political resistance by claiming the land and a right to movement across Palestine. A member of a hiking VGO explained, “Our slogan is, ‘walking the land, you own it.’ If we don’t walk it [the Israelis] will own it.”<sup>42</sup> The hikes are both symbolic and educational as they teach youth about Palestine’s landscape and history. “Kids learn about Palestine from books,” the VGO member said. “They don’t know what movements or villages mean. After hiking, we have a map in our minds...We need to know Palestine this way, so we do things for it.”

Running VGO members similarly claim the land while running. They structure runs to emphasize a right to movement and connection across divided territories. “We see the right to movement as a basic human right. By running, we want to spread the word that Palestinians lack this basic right,” said one running group member.<sup>43</sup> The member described arriving at closed checkpoints and waiting for hours to cross. The group refused to turn back because crossing constituted a political act of claiming the right to movement across boundaries.

In Palestine, a wide variety of acts can be framed as resistance to the occupation, and in that respect VGOs’ work could be seen as unremarkable. But VGOs resist more than Israel’s military occupation. They also resist the depoliticizing influence of NGOs in civil society. VGO members see themselves as building a movement that reconnects people around shared political goals. A

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, July 5, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, June 5, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, July 2, 2019.

member of a running and hiking group explained, “We connect divided cities. Also, we do hikes, we enjoy sharing food, stories, getting to know each other. We became unstoppable as a community. We are building a movement; it’s not about running.”<sup>44</sup> Whether hiking, farming, creating arts and culture, heritage oriented VGOs use their freedom from the fragmenting and distracting effects of aid and NGO bureaucratization to re-politicize civil society.

### NGOs and the Professionalization of Palestinian Civil Society

NGO-ization also professionalized Palestine’s civic sphere. Foreign aid is delivered in ways that are designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery but instead create a sector of managerial organizations that 1) pay some of the highest salaries in Palestine, 2) produce short-term projects with measurable outputs, and 3) depend upon foreign donors for their financial sustainability—all of which is seen by local actors as having birthed an elite class of NGO workers, distorted habits of voluntarism, replaced broad-based mobilization with short-term project making, and created memberless organizations that enjoy limited public support.

NGOs offer high salaries and provide perks for highly trained staff members. “A normal salary for a Palestinian is 1,500 New Israeli Shekels per month [(approximately \$450 U.S. dollars)]. A salary for an NGO employee is \$1,000 U.S. dollars per month and includes benefits and better treatment and a social [identification card],” said a member of a VGO that promotes conservation of resources through upcycling rubbish.<sup>45</sup> NGO staff members also earn social respect and are viewed as part of an elite professional class. “There is a social gap between government workers, private sector workers, and NGO workers and everyone else. If you mention the NGO where you work people are impressed,” explained one VGO member.<sup>46</sup>

NGOs are insular spaces, open only to professionals who converse in the language of international development. “NGOs create a space for the rich to interact,” said a recent university graduate. “The poor won’t be there. The liberal atmosphere [of NGOs] is controlled. It is tied to a certain class with financial and cultural capital.”<sup>47</sup> These organizations are perceived as being out of touch with the priorities of everyday people and unable to mobilize people around

44 Interview, May 23, 2019.

45 Interview, July 1, 2018.

46 Interview, July 1, 2018.

47 Interview, July 1, 2018.

their causes. “NGOs [say their] goals are to create a new social movement...A social movement of what? For whom? Whose goals? Everything in NGOs is business style...The people don’t trust [NGOs].”<sup>48</sup> The professionalization of NGOs in Palestine thus shifted ownership over Palestine’s civic sphere from the population at large to a small group of highly educated professionals who align their organizations with the foreign patrons that financially sustain them.

The culture of volunteering in Palestine was also impacted by this shift. Prior to Oslo, volunteering was widespread, informal, and organic. NGO-ization transformed volunteering into an enterprise that profits the volunteer. Today, youth who volunteer for NGOs typically receive pocket money, travel reimbursements, meals at fancy hotels, and lines on their resumé. These benefits are perceived as driving most volunteering in Palestine today. “Why do people volunteer in NGOs? It can lead to a job. You volunteer to become close to a manager...People become ‘professional volunteers’ who try to gain something from the benefits of the NGO.”<sup>49</sup>

Interlocutors contrasted this form of volunteering with the values-based style of volunteering that was widespread prior to Oslo. “The old practice of volunteering supported the *intifada*,” said one VGO founder. “It was political, economic, and social volunteering. People helped to rebuild homes after demolitions. Everyone donated what they could...It was based on values of resistance. The new volunteering is based on techniques and methods. You need to understand the priorities of the volunteer. If I volunteer, NGOs will discover me.”<sup>50</sup>

The rise of NGOs further professionalized civil society by promoting project-based work that yields measurable outputs. The foreign aid that sustains NGOs typically does not provide the type of general operating support that allows organizations to freely pursue long-term, mission-oriented objectives. Instead, it funds discreet short-term projects that produce measurable outputs. “Aid is project-based,” explained the director of an East Jerusalem VGO that provides political tours and maps. “There is a supermarket of projects and organizations must see which fit best with their work. Also, [projects] last from three months to at most one year.”<sup>51</sup> Organizations busy themselves applying and reapplying for this short-term support.

Grant applications require NGO staff members to frame their work in managerial terms. “There is a really annoying part of an aid application called a

48 Interview, July 15, 2018.

49 Interview, July 1, 2018.

50 Interview, May 31, 2019.

51 Interview, July 19, 2016.

log frame,” the VGO leader cited above continued. “Applicants must list activities, indicators of success, measurement, results, and offer to provide photos and press releases of activities.”<sup>52</sup> Describing the application process as a “total waste of time, money, and effort,” this VGO leader echoed what others also indicated are burdensome bureaucratic processes involved in applying for grant funds. Reporting requirements are also onerous. Organizations must use quantitative output measures to demonstrate project “success.” But as NGO leaders explained, quantifiable outputs—such as the number of children who attended school, the number of reports published, the number of patients treated at a health clinic—are poor indicators of long-term social impact.

Finally, NGO-ization altered civic groups’ accountability. As professional NGOs increasingly relied upon foreign assistance to survive, they became accountable to, and dependent upon, their donors. An addiction to foreign aid—one that was likened to a “heroin” addiction—left NGOs dangerously dependent upon foreign donors with notoriously fickle priorities for their survival.<sup>53</sup> Noting the shift in organizations’ focus from supporting communities to surviving, a member of a VGO that provides tours said, “No NGO will have a legacy. They change activities based on donor money. For example, a huge number of charities exist to feed the poor, but they cease to exist when food is no longer the priority.”<sup>54</sup> Interlocutors connected this shift in accountability to NGOs’ impotence in combatting the occupation. “We started to focus on bringing in money. We shifted the struggle to the bank account. Beneficiaries became beggars. When what you do becomes money collection it shifts attention away from the struggle.”<sup>55</sup>

NGO professionalization is not unique to Palestine. Research shows that across the Global South, formerly loosely networked, broadly mobilized civil societies were in recent decades supplanted by formal sectors of managerial NGOs that are better aligned with foreign aid providers than with local citizens.<sup>56</sup> Palestine provides a particularly stark example of this global trend

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52 Interview, July 19, 2016.

53 Interview, June 13, 2018.

54 Interview, June 12, 2018.

55 Interview, June 12, 2018.

56 Hulme and Edwards, “Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations”; Khaldoun AbouAssi, “Get Money Get Involved? NGOs’ Reactions to Donor Funding and Their Potential Involvement in the Public Policy Processes,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 25, no. 4 (2014): 968–90; Chahim and Prakash, “NGOization, Foreign Funding, and the Nicaraguan Civil Society”; Suarez and Gugerty, “Funding Civil Society?”; Atia and Herrold, “Governing Through Patronage: The Rise of NGOs and the Fall of Civil Society in Palestine and Morocco.”

because aid plays an outsized role in propping up the local NGO sector. Whereas many other NGO sectors rely partly on government agencies, private foundations, and individuals for financial support, these patrons are in short supply in Palestine. Until recently, there seemed to be no clear alternative to professional NGOs for Palestinians seeking institutionalized vehicles through which to work for change. But the rise of VGOs in the past decade has created one promising possibility.

### VGOs' Resistance to Professionalization

VGOs resist the professionalization of civil society by structuring themselves as voluntary organizations and refusing international aid. Through this approach, they aim to 1) revive a culture of voluntarism in civil society, 2) pursue long-term work that is directly aimed at combatting the occupation, and 3) develop accountability to large member bases that they hope will allow them to be sustainable over the long term.

VGOs maintain large, diverse volunteer bases and employ few or no paid staff to restore a culture of voluntarism in civil society. "We reject the mainstream [NGOs]," explained the member of a hiking VGO. "We want to save ourselves. We [are] all volunteers, we have no benefits, we work for good health, mental health, and positive energy."<sup>57</sup> Many VGOs maintain hundreds of volunteer members and build connections between volunteers from different towns and cities to spread the culture of volunteering. Hiking and running groups, for example, attract volunteers from throughout the West Bank by beginning weekly hikes in different cities and villages and hiring vans to transport participants to the hiking site. Running VGOs spawned branches in various cities, uniting for large runs but conducting more regular runs within each branch's city.

VGO members conspicuously frame their voluntary status as resistance to the NGO-ization of civil society brought about by the Oslo Accords. "We and others were able to keep natural volunteering because we read the political changes well. We didn't succumb to Oslo. We didn't build buildings because they can be bombed and destroyed," said an arts and culture VGO member.<sup>58</sup> Instead of being lured by aid to build buildings and hire staff, this VGO cultivated a large volunteer base that has been loyal over the long term. The VGO member went on to say, "The turnover rate of volunteers is around ten years,

<sup>57</sup> Interview, June 5, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Interview, July 5, 2018.

which is long. We have organic growth. Since day one we never got sucked into the funding trend. Funding is fickle, it goes away.”

VGOs also reject the project orientation of NGOs. Rather than structuring their work around short-term projects that could deliver measurable outputs, VGOs engage in long-term organizing work and consider the process of mobilizing volunteers around shared interests and goals to be more important than delivering tangible products or services. “We are building community organizing. We need a base. We need to get out of the donor-controlled box of typical projects,” said a member of an agriculture VGO.<sup>59</sup> When asked about their groups’ outcomes, VGO members demurred. They stressed that the process of mobilizing people and drawing upon local resources is more important than producing a concrete outcome. “Our music and dance are free,” explained an arts and culture VGO member. “We want it in the community. It has messages. It will someday become folklore. One of our current productions tells the story of a prison. The lyrics, music, and choreography are from different prisoners. There is collective creative and production. This slows the process but enriches the people working on it. The process is more important than the outcome.”<sup>60</sup>

To understand the transformative potential of their mobilizing processes, VGOs experiment with creative measurement tools. Often, they tell stories. Rather than tailoring stories to funders, VGO members share their stories with their members and the wider public. “On the website, it should be for stories, not metrics,” declared a member of a hiking VGO. “We are not keeping track of numbers; we just live the experience. After every hike we post reflections about the hike on our Facebook page.”<sup>61</sup>

VGOs also resist the upward accountability brought about by NGO-ization. They value their independence from foreign donors and embed themselves in local communities. “We feel that we can do things by ourselves,” said a member of a VGO that incorporates both farming and arts and culture into its activities. “We don’t have to wait for an NGO to help make a garden. In Palestine today people are always waiting for an NGO, and we have become dependent. We try to show people you don’t need to wait. We try to connect people to this proactive initiative.”<sup>62</sup> She mused that while formal NGOs might cultivate the land more efficiently than the VGO, the VGO nonetheless showed that the work could be done as effectively by everyday Palestinians.

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59 Interview, June 5, 2018.

60 Interview, July 5, 2018.

61 Interview, June 5, 2018.

62 Interview, July 11, 2018.

On hikes, VGO members spend time in villages to which they walk, talking with residents and doing voluntary projects. “For voluntary works,” explained one hiking VGO member, “we pick olives, do wheat collection, help build houses, and clean out water holes. We take care of local needs.”<sup>63</sup> This group also spends significant time listening to village elders tell stories about their village’s history. This storytelling and listening process builds bridges between disconnected populations in the West Bank and introduces hikers to historical cultures and practices of resistance. “Every hike we see local people from the village. We sit with old people and hear their stories. We see ancient places and learn about old wars. Old people say what happened. People who were involved in the resistance.”<sup>64</sup>

By training staff in managerial aspects of economic development, Palestinian NGOs cultivate an elite class of professionals. By resisting the managerial habits of NGOs and nurturing volunteers who commit over the long term to working together for change, VGOs seek to cultivate citizens and re-activate civil society as a space owned by those citizens. VGOs’ efforts remind us that the forms and functions of civil society are not static. Through collective agency, everyday people far from the rarefied circles of NGOs and foreign aid agencies can alter the nature of their civic spheres.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed the ways in which VGOs in Palestine challenge the depoliticization and professionalization of civil society brought about by NGO-ization. Contrasting VGOs with their NGO counterparts, the article argues that VGOs constitute an important stage of the evolution of civil society in Palestine. Whereas in the decades leading up to and including the first *intifada* Palestinian civil society was grounded in grassroots-based mass movements, foreign aid after Oslo led to the growth of a sector of managerial NGOs that were disconnected from local citizens. The proliferation of VGOs represents an attempt by civic actors to shift the nature of civil society back to one that is citizen-oriented, citizen-driven, and citizen-owned.

The long-term impacts and sustainability of Palestinian VGOs are uncertain. Many VGO members recognize the challenges of operating on an entirely voluntary basis. Local philanthropic organizations that send small grants to VGOs offer potentially critical sources of support for organizations that need

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63 Interview, June 5, 2018.

64 Interview, June 5, 2018.

modest funds to pay for everyday expenses. But while VGOs' member bases are impressively sizable and relatively diverse, their founders, leaders, and most active members tend to be highly educated young people who are solidly middle class. Whether VGOs can grow large enough to significantly influence Palestine's trajectory—while still retaining their voluntary, inclusive nature—remains to be seen.<sup>65</sup>

Regardless, the rise of VGOs in Palestine reflects a more global trend of civic actors experimenting with new organizational forms through which to mobilize citizens for change.<sup>66</sup> Disenchanted with the professionalization of NGOs and the top-down nature of foreign aid, youth are increasingly turning to voluntary groups like the ones featured in this article as they try to shift the power over democracy and development to everyday citizens. The organizational forms, processes, and impacts of these groups open important lines of inquiry about the evolution of citizen-led vehicles of change. At the same time, we must recognize that many NGOs *do* wage important campaigns countering state hegemony. While I, reflecting the points of view of my interlocutors, have harshly assessed NGOs in this article, as scholars we should resist uncritically adopting an anti-NGO-ization discourse.

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65 A point also made by Brown, "Palestine."

66 Herrold, *Delta Democracy: Pathways to Incremental Civic Revolution in Egypt and Beyond*.

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