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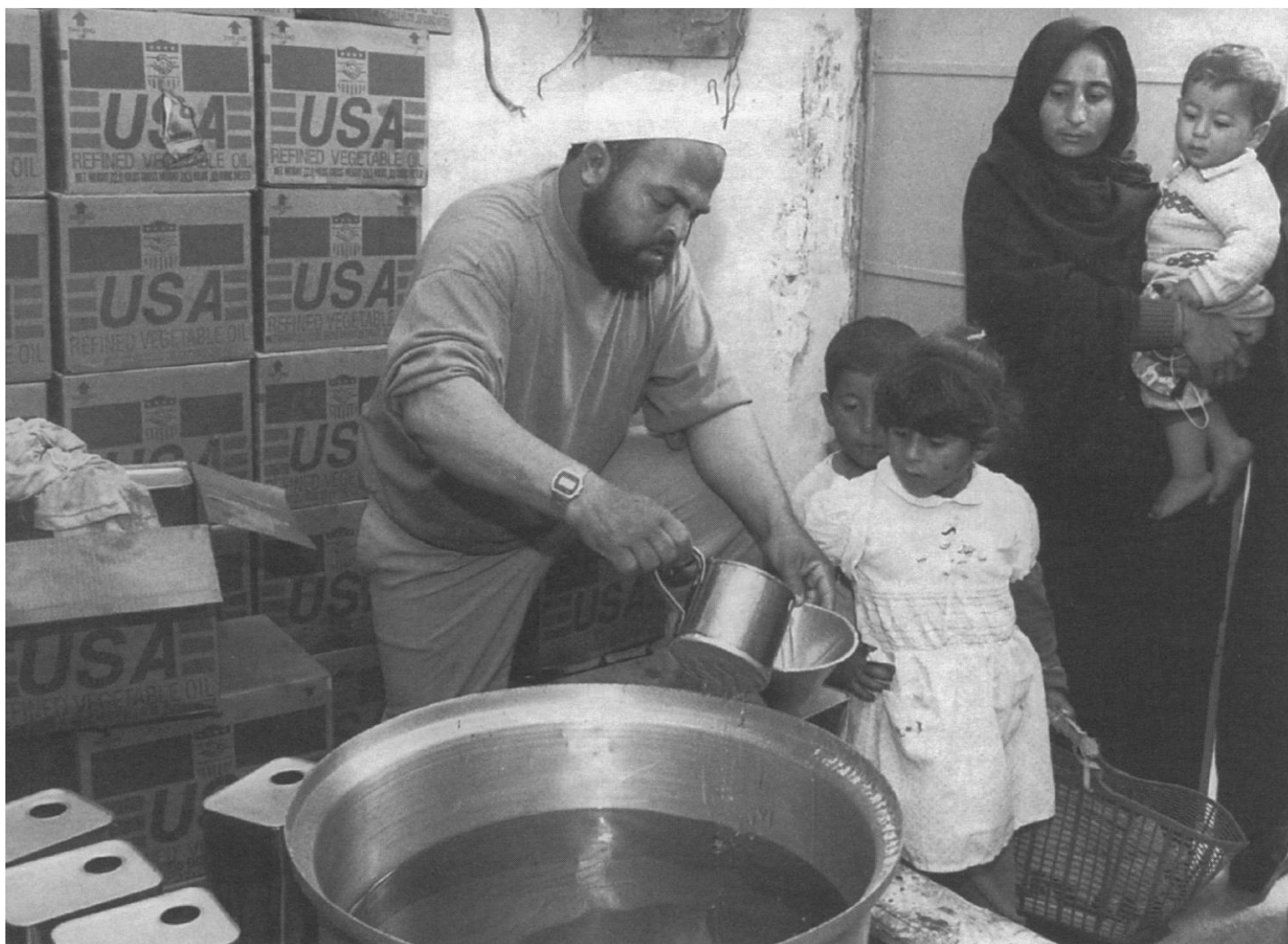


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Distributing American food provided through the Catholic Relief Services, Gaza City.

Sean Sprague/Panos Pictures

NGOs, INGOs, GO-NGOs and DO-NGOs

Making Sense of Non-Governmental Organizations

Sheila Carapico

This issue of *Middle East Report* takes a critical look at “NGOs”—non-governmental organizations—in and beyond the Arab world. The topic is both trendy and controversial. Although they may see themselves as marginal actors, charities, advocacy groups and a range of other civic associations in the Middle East have also become agents of political, economic and social change, influencing the allocation of scarce resources in their own societies and the images national regimes project abroad. In recent years, NGOs have been depicted as saviors of failed economies in some circles while reviled as stooges of Western imperialism in others.

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Instead of replicating this polarized debate between a developmentalist view of NGOs as agents of liberalization and the Orientalist stereotype of Arab society as either passive or violent but incapable of civic behavior, the contributors to this issue interrogate the concept of an NGO (and its variants such as GO-NGO, DO-NGO, qua-NGO and INGO) and the efflorescence of NGO activity in the Middle East over the past decade. In doing so, they explore disjunctures between Orientalist and developmentalist thinking about these activities. Issues of corporatism and rent-seeking surrounding the complex triangulated relationship among NGOs, governments and various international development agencies are also closely scrutinized, as are the class biases implicit in the mission of many NGOs, both foreign and domestic.

More and More NGOs

The exponential growth in the number, scope and activities of NGOs in the 1990s seems to have been driven by a rather extraordinary confluence of wide-ranging—even seemingly divergent—domestic and international trends. Among the domestic factors that seem to correlate with the growing prominence of NGOs are:

- *Political policies*, especially national governments' suppression or co-optation of oppositional political parties, syndicates, cooperatives, municipalities and other alternative channels for civic energies; the relatively greater license given to religious, charitable, social, cultural and business associations; and governmental budget cuts in essential social services despite serious deterioration of existing services and population growth.
- *Social trends*, notably the effects of urbanization and education, on the one hand, and anomie and detachment from "roots," on the other; the intellectual and political aspirations of millions of university graduates; the even higher ambitions of many hundreds of holders of European or American degrees; and the cosmopolitanization of human rights, environmental and feminist concerns, particularly among urban élites. In addition, international development agencies and Western advocacy groups have encouraged NGOs to play a greater role in many parts of Africa and Asia, including the Middle East. Among the relevant trends in the international arena are the following:
- *Economics*. Whereas traditionally international development aid agencies (such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Union and bilateral donors) extended grants and loans only to national governments, in recent years they have developed programs to transfer commodities, consultants and credits to NGOs. Towards this end, Social Funds for Development have been established by the World Bank and other donors to ameliorate the admittedly deleterious effects of structural adjustment on vulnerable groups in poor countries by giving small loans to women's groups, farmers associations, municipal leagues and the like. These policies are consistent with the privatization orthodoxy of macroeconomic reforms advocated by the IMF and other global bankers, especially regarding public services: so, for example, pre- and post-natal care should be provided through NGOs, not governments.
- *Politics*. Here several separate trends also converge. First, peace-process-related funds from the US, Canada and European donors, as well as international voluntary associations, are available to support a wide range of civic education projects in Egypt, Jordan and, especially, Palestine. Second, neo-democratization theory as applied to post-Communist polities, where international funds have been available for think-tanks, business lobbies, interest groups and other NGOs, has come to the Middle East as well. Third, the inclusion of NGOs in

international conferences on human rights, environmental and feminist concerns has raised consciousness of these issues among Arab, Iranian and Turkish élites and has stimulated NGO formation and animation. Finally, whereas Christian charities have long supported Middle Eastern churches, in the past two decades the flow of funds from Islamic sources to needy Muslim groups has increased dramatically.

How Do We Talk About NGOs?

Orientalism versus Developmentalism

Activists, observers and policy makers sometimes debate whether contemporary Arab NGOs represent a sharp disjuncture with the past or an evolution from pre-existing community institutions, migrant networks and social movements. Although voluntary associations figured prominently in studies of modernization in Africa in the 1960s, until recently scholars and journalists took little note of Arab participatory organizations. Even today, some community and charitable associations in the Muslim Middle East may be depicted as mere expressions of extended family loyalties, whereas other groups connected to Hamas or Hizbullah are represented as terrorist fronts, yet those with bylaws and letterheads are frequently dismissed as inauthentic occidental imports.

A certain element of Orientalist myopia may have prevented anthropologists, sociologists and economists from seeing the non-governmental sector as anything but an extension of "the three P's": patrimonialism, patriarchy and primordialism. The conventional assertion that Islam recognizes no separation of "church and state" (an inversion of American political values in lieu of an empirical or descriptive statement) prevented many scholars from recognizing the historic independence of foundations, academies, guilds, welfare societies and other precursors of NGOs; and caused most of them to overlook the political and financial reasons why some Muslim scholars in the employment of the throne insisted that those Islamic institutions belonged to the monarchy. Also, whereas Africanists included among voluntary associations affiliations rooted in churches, Sufi brotherhoods, or "re-tribalized" identities, Arabists characterized community ("*baladi*" or "*ahli*") associations, including migrants' organizations, as ascriptive, not voluntary, affiliations. Until the late 1980s, there were few if any significant scholarly studies or journalistic accounts of what we now call NGOs in the Arab/Muslim Middle East.

In the 1990s, however, consistent with the trends identified above, both the number of NGOs and the attention devoted to them increased exponentially. Surveys commissioned by international funding agencies have identified thousands of NGOs. NGO directories have been published in English for Gaza, the West Bank, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen to help visitors locate potentially credit- or project-worthy groups. The genre is distinctive. The 1999 United Nations directory for the West Bank, issued by the Office of the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories, for in-

stance, provides the name, address, phone and fax numbers, officers, background and activities of each of four hundred NGOs in ten cities and towns in English and Arabic. This ambitious survey, beyond the resources of individual reporters or researchers, provides a service to both the organizations themselves and the consultants and enthusiasts who come to visit. It also represents an instance of what James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, calls a legibility project, in which utilitarian facts are standardized, aggregated and published in documentary form. The creation of a classificatory grid simplifies data for ease of management, discarding or collapsing otherwise relevant information for the sake of a consistent representation. The directory offers a sort of geometric order, as seen from above and beyond, a map of the otherwise messy mix of associations and organizations in the Occupied Territories.

Just as Orientalist scholarship is characterized by the list of transliterations, development policy reports are unreadable without the list of abbreviations. In reports commissioned by organizations like USAID, CIDA, DANIDA, UNDP and CARE, groups and even concepts are often referred to by letters or neologisms rather than words. Overseas development assistance is ODA, a logical framework is a log-frame, and a request for proposal is an RFP. The broad category of NGOs can be further subdivided into private voluntary organizations, PVOs; small-scale popular organizations (POs); community-based organizations (CBOs); and international NGOs (INGOs). In the Occupied Territories an umbrella forum called PNGO brings together Palestinian NGOs and INGOs. Many donors particularly seek out AWNGOs serving Arab women. INGO experts and activists also realize that “non-governmental” is often a matter of degree and that classifying something as an NGO can contain an element of reification. Recognizing that regimes may try to co-opt donor assistance to NGOs by creating NGOs, and that donor assistance itself may prompt the formation of institutions specifically to secure external funding, they have coined expressions like GO-NGO (government-organized NGO), DO-NGO (donor-organized NGO), and quasi-NGO (pronounced “quango.”)

The NGO approach to assisted development is liberal in every sense of the word. The needs of the poor and marginalized groups are addressed in terms of providing a “safety net” while encouraging “self-help” at the “grass-roots” level. The extent to which this represents a liberal as opposed to conservative perspective on the Anglo-American political spectrum is reflected in discussions of “democratizing development” through local, national and international NGOs. The notion of development through non-governmental organizations is also consistent with neo-liberal or global-liberal private sector solutions to social problems, and more generally with the privatization of social services, institutions and investments. Women, landless peasants and marginal classes are encouraged to organize as interest groups, practice family planning, join the formal economy and invest in the global marketplace. Social problems like

female unemployment are attributed to attitudes and lifestyles, not political or economic constraints, so solutions are to be found in individual voluntary behavior.

Corporatism and Rent-Seeking

In an era of privatization and democratization, international policy makers hypothesize that NGOs can articulate political liberalism, complement private sector initiatives and extend a social safety net to supplement or replace government services. Hoping that foreign mentoring will enable NGOs to foster liberalization and reform without generating social unrest, bilateral and multilateral assistance agencies and INGOs design projects to strengthen think-tanks, human rights organizations, chambers of commerce, environmentalist societies, women’s associations and community centers. Often, even a trickle of hard currency to non-governmental groups raises the stakes in their struggles for autonomy from national regimes.

There is a hard-currency market suited to implementation of this agenda, and savvy bilingual intellectuals in Cairo, Ramallah, Tunis and elsewhere have learned how to work the system. Some devise NGO names that can be rendered into a trilateral English or perhaps French abbreviation, sometimes devising clever monikers with bilingual meaning in Arabic and English. Some associations locate their offices for the convenience of international visitors, not local constituencies. In Jerusalem, for example, several Palestinian NGO headquarters are clustered near the World Bank complex, far from the Arab quarter. Other groups seek other benefactors; Yemeni and Egyptian Islamists, for instance, have founded branches of charities or publications headquartered in wealthy Gulf countries in order to qualify for donations. It is well known that Western and Gulf sources, respectively, underwrite selected separate women’s groups based on ideological criteria. Indeed, some activists decline subsidies from either Western or Arab sources entirely, pointing to a new kind of dependency: NGO rent-seeking. These critics call attention to the class dimensions of criteria for qualifying for international loans, grants, or programs—such as preferences for those who speak English, understand spreadsheets, or dress in appropriate business attire.

Funds-hungry third world governments also know that defining institutions as PVOs, CBOs, or NGOs helps attract dollars. Arab regimes continually angle to contain and co-opt all kinds of independent groups, all the more so when they enjoy access to scarce foreign funds. In many countries, and much of the NGO literature, an association is defined as “non-governmental” if it meets the NGO registration criteria of government ministries and/or international development agencies. Egypt’s notoriously restrictive Law No. 153 of 1999, emulated by the Palestinian Authority and the Yemeni government, strangles Egypt’s huge but tightly controlled voluntary sector, estimated to include over 16,000 registered organizations.

Unlike past and present independent social movements and political groups in the Arab world, many registered NGOs are actually GO- or DO-NGOs.

In This Issue

A confluence of internal and international trends, social, economic and political, have contributed to the NGO phenomena in the 1990s, whereby some preexisting institutions and movements have been reincarnated as NGOs, and other NGOs reflecting contemporary trans-national concerns have emerged. Foreign funds and contact with INGOs or the United Nations are often a mixed blessing for those concerned with meaningful social change. Such connections may offer NGOs financial viability and a modicum of protection from national authorities, but may also demand political and organizational conformity, raise popular suspicions of foreign manipulation, or exacerbate political and legal hassles with governments.

Despite the indisputable influence of foreign funders over domestic groups, it is clear that Middle Eastern NGOs are not merely or even primarily the product of exogenous, Western influences. Rather, civic activism through NGOs is a way of responding to contemporary socioeconomic circumstances. The resurfacing of a significant "third sector" between the government bureaucracy and private companies represents some redistribution of wealth, investment and services; some renegotiation of the terms of engagement between central and autonomous institutions; and an outlet for popular and elite energies and aspirations. Along with other elements of civil society that operate through the press, educational institutions, legal practice, or religious institutions, NGOs have helped call attention to important issues such as human rights abuses, family violence, environmental degradation and the deterioration of public works and welfare mechanisms.

By the same token, NGOs are hardly a quick, cheap, or easy fix for underlying problems facing many Middle Eastern societies today. Philanthropy from the rich and voluntarism from the poor cannot undo the root causes of water shortages, political repression and growing inequality. Nor are these crises merely aberrations in an otherwise smoothly functioning social order: they may require radical solutions. Indeed, to the extent that people really take matters into their own hands and attempt to affect the distribution of scarce resources in society, there is bound to be genuine political struggle. The articles in this issue seek to bring these controversies into sharper focus.■