The recently published book, “The Emergence of a New Palestinian Globalized Elite – Donors, International Organizations and Local NGO’s” is an important and seminal contribution to research on the NGO phenomenon written by two Palestinian sociologists, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar. The two co-authors graciously request their readers to consider their work as the product a wider collective effort. Accordingly, the authors express their gratitude to a list of prominent Palestinian intellectuals for their suggestions and advice regarding the book. (Sadly enough, we still do not have anything similar on the Israeli NGO scene).

The contents of the book are presented in the form of sociological research and supply the reader with an abundance of data and important analyses. However, the authors do not always succeed in meeting the analytical challenges involved in the study, nor have they always been careful to explain the basis of many of their conclusions. We shall return to these questions later on in our review.

A Severe and Significant Retreat

The authors, to their credit, begin their discussion with the frank and forthright determination to the effect that the Palestinian NGO’s are in a state of retreat. We learn that in the past, the NGO’s played an important, and one might say a central role in organizing the foundations of the first Intifada. Generally speaking, the NGO’s, back then, integrated themselves into the public and popular struggle and earned wide respect for their role. This was not the state of affairs in the second Intifada. This time, there was considerable alienation between the various NGO’s on one side and between all the different wings of the resistance movement. Of course, there were objective difficulties. Chief among these was the militarized character of the second Intifada, which created obstacles to the participation and the contribution by the NGO’s. But there was also serious failure on their part. By and large, there is a sense that the NGO’s hesitated to fulfill their tasks as links in the Palestinian national movement. It seems that they desisted in fulfilling this role lest their activity be considered as the kind of political action ruled out by their financial backers, their donors. The first rule for NGO’s, by their very nature, is that politics are considered to be out of bounds.

Even if we understand the ‘reasonableness’ of the restriction on any kind of political activity, it is clear that conformance to this restraint is particularly difficult, if not impossible, for the leadership of the local NGO’s. When during one of the IDF re-occupation campaigns, the Israeli army invaded Palestinian held territory and overwhelmed the work of the Palestinian NGO’s in virtual tidal wave of violence, the donor organizations did not see any need for expressing their solidarity since the problems were basically political. And from their point of view, the donor organizations were justified, as it were. When the international donor organizations were asked to voice opposition to the IDF invasion and the destruction of NGO projects, they replied with readiness to supply emergency aid of food and medical equipment but no more. It appears that the NGO’s actually accepted the rules of the
game according to which they must refrain from giving full and open support of the Palestinian national struggle.

The Conceptual Framework

The authors acted wisely by beginning their complex project with an impressive analysis, built around the best critical inputs of the movement against globalization. After all, the appearance of NGO’s in Palestine is part of a world-wide phenomenon. The role of the World Bank and other institutions allayed with it is a basic fact that cannot be ignored. The authors quote the English economist, Susan George, who explains that the World Bank has its own criteria for acceptable and successful governance. All assistance, of course, is granted subservient to what the Bank considers effective and reliable governments. The emphasis is, of course, on efficiency. But there is a serious problem with this formulation. Even though the subject matter under discussion is essentially political, the question of governance appears as non-political, as a technical and administrative matter. Thus, the technical and administrative argumentation is really a smokescreen, behind which various capitalist elements in the “North” become the guardians of varied and different areas of life in the countries of the “South” through various non-governmental formations.

The authors do attempt to present different views on the development of the North-South relations. There is even a citation from Anthony Giddens, the theoretician of the “Third Way, and an enthusiastic supporter of globalization. But they reveal their real sympathies by prefacing a fascinating theoretical survey with this citation from Foucault: The most urgent political task in a society such as ours is to critique the activity of institutions which wish to appear independent and neutral and to expose to all the political violence that is secretly operative within them. But there is a hard question. After having chosen a ultra-radical thinker as most relevant to their study, will they reach conclusions matching his approach? Isn't this one of those cases where a promise was made only to be disregarded? It does seem so.

Things Happening on the Ground

There are no comprehensive and exact statistics regarding the no-governmental organizations in the area under the control of the Palestinian Authority. But there is some data. The estimate is that there are some 300 non-governmental organizations operating in the area. During the years 1995-1998 they received contributions of approximately 100 million dollars per year. There are some 150 main donors supporting the local NGO's. The main areas to benefit from funding are education (25%), health (20%). The balance of the funds was directed to agriculture, culture and social welfare, human rights, ecology and research. There is an understandable drop in funding for the NGO's as the Palestinian Authority grows and expands its scope of operations.

After their initial analysis regarding the decline in the influence of the NGO's during the second Intifada, and after the elaboration of the theoretical framework for analyzing reality, the authors proceed to conduct a rather empirical oriented examination of the way things work on the ground. They attempt, by examining a number of central examples, such as the work of the NGO's regarding women, health
and human rights, to examine the complex relations between the donors and the organizations. For this purpose, they ask who sets the agenda and who evaluates the degree of success of the various projects in the NGO's operations.

At any given moment, the relations between the organizations and their donors resemble a tug of war. Research demonstrates various levels of success by the organizations in these battles. It appears that here again, in this arena, professionalism is the name of the game. It seems that the emergence of the new elite, the elite mentioned in the book's title – is based on the development of a broadening strata of workers in the NGO's who earn large incomes and who know how to work the social (and even the cocktail) circuit in the various international forums. There is nothing surprising in this. Egalitarian concepts, such as modesty and frugality with roots in the left are not in fashion and the need for professionalism produces … professionals.

On the Ground: Women's Organizations

The findings of the research regarding women's organizations are quite surprising. The traditional women's groups in Palestine were based on a number of strong charity organizations with deep roots in the public, in general, and in the villages, in particular. The NGO's that appeared in this area reflected the approach and the emphases of the modern women's movement in the West. The modern approach concentrated on matters of gender such as family planning and suitable representation in public bodies. The research shows a serious retreat in the standing of the charitable organizations in the era of the NGO's. The charitable organizations concentrated on basic necessities such as food, education for children and basic health needs. They were active among the masses and maintained democratic bodies such as General Assemblies and the like. The NGO's, on the other hand, did not involve themselves with the solution of basic needs. They did not strike roots in the general population and did not conduct any democratic frameworks. It turns out that the agenda set by the donors meets the needs of middle-class women. Of course, there is no reason to disparage the struggle by women for political and gender equality, but it is a pity that progress on this front comes at the expense of links with the urban poor and village women.

On the Ground: Laying the Foundations of Public Health by the NGO's and What Next?

The Palestinian Health NGO's are models of initiative and devotion. By hard work, the NGO's built up networks of clinics and additional health services built on great volunteer effort. It is not accidental that precisely in this area, there is tension and friction with the Palestinian Authority. No one could have expected from the NGO's that they develop a national health insurance system. This is, of course, the task of the Palestinian Authority. But the division between the actual service supplier and between the governmental insurer is the source of endless troubles. With all due respect and admiration for the achievements of the NGO's, the responsibility for the public's health falls, in the final analysis, on the state authority. The handling of this contradiction is no easy matter.

The researchers praise the independent stature of the Palestinian human rights NGO's in the sensitive area of standing up to their donors. The donors wanted to restrict
activity to the individual level, to individual rights. Such rights are important and were not neglected by the NGO's which dealt with human rights. But it was necessary to take a professional and conceptual position that reflected the reality of denial of collective rights, as in the case of the Palestinians under occupation. It was not easy to stand up against the big donors such as Amnesty and others with the demand that they not evade taking up a position regarding the continuing and repeated Israeli violations of Palestinian rights, individual and collective. The NGO's earned respect and honor when they took a clear position against the execution of collaborators, one of the thorniest of issues in a public under occupation.

The book deals with a long list of problems, and with the efforts of the NGO's to meet their challenges. Unfortunately, I am able to relate here only to a few of the subjects, mainly to those that appear of interest to the general reader.

In Summary

The most vital subject, in our eyes, is the influence of the NGO phenomenon, whether positive or negative, on the left and its struggles. The more we examine the Palestinian experience in depth, it is a source for deep concern. Much can be learned from a single, small citation – No. 11 on Page 27: “It is important to note that the rise of neo-liberalism appears together with the disappearance of what was considered the area of politics, and this is reflected in the disappearance of concepts such as "left", "socialism", "revolution". Simultaneously, there appeared an increased emphasis on the role of the non-governmental organizations and the creation of a "civil society" in the developing countries in the framework of cooperation for development and reception of aid.

It is most significant interesting that the NGO's that succeeded in working at the base were established during the first Intifada by parties of the left. There is every reason to believe that the political experience, the moral values and the collectivist approach of the left made a vital contribution to the success of the first Palestinian NGO's.