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The Contribution of Palestinian Civil Society Organisations toward Achieving National Reconciliation in Palestine, 2007–2010

Dr. Muhammad Abdallah Abu Matar | February 2013

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Introduction

The path taken by Palestinian Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) , particularly following the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994, represents a unique case in the Arab world and in the greater region. Several factors contribute to this specificity, including the persistence of the Israeli occupation and the escalation of its measures, undermining the very pillars of Palestinian political and social life; the adoption of a containment strategy by the various Palestinian political factions in their dealings with CSOs, thus weakening their independence and their influence in the public sphere; and the general degradation of civic culture in Palestine, which has been undermined by the strength of primordial loyalties and increasing violence and militarization of society.

Above all, the main obstacle facing CSOs is Palestinian division and its many repercussions, which constitute a threat to national political and geographical identity and to the very structure of Palestinian society. These circumstances have led to achievements being wasted; ones that had been won by the Palestinian people throughout its long history of struggle for the preservation of its national and political identity. Hampered by its own disunity, the Palestinian cause has thus been brought back into the regional and international arena, making it dependent on foreign interests and leading to the weakening and fragmentation of the Palestinian stand against occupation. This challenge, in addition to the extreme threat faced by Palestinians, is the main impetus behind the present study on the role of CSOs in achieving Palestinian national reconciliation during the 2007-2010 period.

Since the escalation of internal strife in 2006, efforts to end this discord and its impact on the Palestinian people have become a central priority for Palestinian civil society institutions. The 2007-2010 period therefore witnessed a flurry of initiatives by numerous Palestinian CSOs with the aim of ending this division. Examining the role of these organisations in achieving reconciliation is critical since they represent a vital part of Palestinian civic life and have been historically active in national struggle. Such organisations represent a channel for mobilization and play an important role in building Palestinian society and reinforcing its ability to persevere and develop. Moreover, the values of tolerance, embracing the other, reconciliation, democratic assimilation, forgiveness and national interest are all at the heart of the struggle of CSOs – values that these organisations are working hard to instill in their society.

While these issues also carry a political content, this does not mean they are outside the purview of CSOs, as has been shown throughout history. This was aptly expressed by the Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara, who wrote: “[civil society] has a history that is linked to politics, economics, and ideology, and that has evolved in tandem with the concepts of society and the state. [...] This [civil] society is an intellectual and historical dialectic toward citizenship and democracy”.¹

In the Palestinian case, an analysis of the role of civic organisations in achieving national reconciliation must take into account the fact that these institutions are not neutral, and that they are not insulated against the climate of Palestinian discord. On the contrary, they are sometimes an integral part of the current state of division. As will be shown in the course of this analysis, there are nonetheless a number of CSOs which are aware of the consequences of such divisions and which have shown a willingness to foster change, through the organization of dialogues and meetings involving the different Palestinian political factions, and through their initiatives aimed toward ending the state of division. This brings up questions regarding the limits of these institutions, their influence, and the extent of their ability to pressure the divided factions and to encourage unity.

This study is an attempt to comprehensively examine the contribution of Palestinian Civil Society organizations toward ending Palestinian division and achieving national reconciliation. To this end, a number of methodologies and research tools have been adopted, which include interviews with civic activists and with representatives of civic institutions in Palestine. This analysis is but a modest contribution to the subject of Palestinian CSOs, on which there is a dearth of information.

Palestinian CSOs: Exceptional Circumstances and Their Repercussions

Compared with the mainstream concept of “civil society” and its uses in different historical periods, civil society in the Palestinian context has been characterized by

¹ Azmi Bishara, *Civil Society: A Critical Study*, 6th ed. (in Arabic) (Doha/Beirut: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012), available in English at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/8f16adce-a793-40b3-9fa2-cba4880c4188>

exceptional circumstances in terms of the formation and functions of its institutions.² Palestinian civic institutions have not emerged against the backdrop of an independent political authority and a sovereign state, but rather in conditions of confrontation with an occupying power that did not acknowledge the right of the Palestinian people to create political and social associations.³ The occupation has practiced a number of racist and repressive policies aiming at weakening Palestinian society and hindering its development, including its civic personnel and institutions. This fact has been reflected in the functions and activities of these organisations, and all branches of civil society are affected, including unions, federations, and associations. This is true whether they were created with support from the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and other factions, or the fruit of Palestinian elites who were able to mobilize society and institutionalize civic and voluntary work.⁴

Unsurprisingly, the focus of these institutions became the confrontation with the occupation, while simultaneously attempting to cushion the impact of the occupation's policies on Palestinian society. This has been done through the creation of structures dedicated to the self-protection of the Palestinian people and the reinforcement of their national existence, as well as to the preservation of its sociopolitical identity and cohesiveness, which constitutes a national necessity in the context of a struggle against an occupying power. Furthermore, the social functions and the services provided by these institutions, which have been entirely neglected by the occupying authorities, have often been viewed as the fulfillment of a national duty.⁵ This has naturally led to

² The concept of civil society has passed through several phases and witnessed various usages. In light of the transformations that engulfed the Eastern European countries in the 1980s, the concept was revived in sociological studies in order to refer to the group of voluntary institutions in society that oppose, or limit the interference of, the central political authority and its hegemony over the public space. The existence of such institutions was deemed necessary for the establishment of democratic governments. For further information, see Abd al-Ghaffar Rashad, *On the Concepts of the Civil Society* (Cairo: Center for Studies and Research, 2001), 4; Ibrahim Abrash, "The Definition of the Civil Society," paper presented to the Conference on Civil Society in the Arab Homeland, Marrakech University, 2001.

³ For further information on the exceptional case of the formation of Palestinian civil society institutions, see *The Problematics of Democratic Regression in the Arab Homeland*, (Ramallah: Mowatin [Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy], 1997), 42.

⁴ Ziad Abu Amro, *The Civil Society and Democratic Transformation in Palestine* (Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Center, 1995), 15ff.

⁵ Some argue that civil society and its institutions in Palestine provide evidence that in cases where the state or authority disappears, civic institutions can fill the social and political space, in addition to filling the role of hereditary institutions such as sects and families; see Muhammad Khaled al-Azar, *The*

the preponderance of these institutions' political priorities over their civic work, which has created a likely environment for the politicization of the work of Palestinian civil society institutions.⁶

Palestinian CSOs after the Establishment of the Palestinian National Authority: Role and Obstacles

The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority represented an important development in the history of Palestinian civil society and its institutions. This can be observed on two levels. Firstly, the number of such institutions greatly increased, including unions, federations and other professional institutions; aid and relief organisations active in various fields such as health and agriculture; developmental and research institutions such as research and media centers; and organisations for the defense of human rights.⁷ The territories of the Palestinian Authority witnessed the formation of numerous civic institutions and CSOs throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁸

Secondly, their role expanded. The establishment of the Palestinian National Authority – responsible for managing domestic Palestinian affairs through a number of Ministries, institutions, and security services – spurred CSOs to participate in development tasks in an era of self-rule.⁹ These institutions have contributed toward developing Palestinian society and lessening the intensity of hereditary relations and primordial loyalties, which

Palestinian Political Culture: Democracy and Human Rights (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Human Rights Studies, 1995), 37.

⁶ For further information, see Muhammad Abu Matar, *The Reform of the Palestinian Political System: Between Internal Demands and External Pressures*, Ph.D. Dissertation Series 102 (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2012), 360ff.

⁷ For further information, see Jamil Hilal, *The Palestinian Political System Post-Oslo: an Analytic and Critical Study* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1998), 125.

⁸ The number of charitable organisations and civic associations registered with the Ministry of Interior in Gaza alone reached over 872 in April 2009. Institutions registered with the Ministry of the Economy in Gaza as not-for-profit organisations numbered around 45 institutions, according to the Directorate of Associations in the Palestinian Authority's Interior Ministry.

⁹ Amjad al-Shawwa, former executive director of the civic associations network, said in an interview with the author that despite the difficulties facing CSOs, they have been capable of performing a tangible role in many areas of development, especially in the domains of education and public awareness, the building of human and institutional capital, and the reinforcement of many principles and values that have contributed to promoting civic action in the territories of the Palestinian Authority.

hinder the development of civic values and the process of democratic transition. They have also helped to counterbalance the poor performance of the Palestinian National Authority, in addition to confronting the repression of its security services and their transgressions.¹⁰

A genuine and effective role would allow civic organisations to influence the political and social spheres and provide them with a real presence in terms of framing and institutionalizing the social and civic dynamic, as well as reinforcing the process of democratic transition. However, in spite of the above achievements, key factors have limited the ability of civil society to perform this role. Primary among these hurdles are the following: the increasing politicization of Palestinian civil society organizations , which has been a characteristic of these institutions since their emergence;¹¹ their lack of independence vis-à-vis the National Palestinian Authority, which strives to dominate them and tamper with their activities;¹² their limited financial and economic resources and the instability of funding sources; their lack of a unified vision regarding the role and functions of these institutions;¹³ and the malignant spread of personal ambition, administrative and financial corruption, and the absence of accountability and oversight.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Muhammad Abu Matar, "The Palestinian Authority and the Problematic of Reform," unpublished Masters dissertation (Mohammad V University, Rabat, Morocco, 2005), 136ff.

¹¹ In terms of the level of politicization, civil society institutions can be divided into the following categories: independent and neutral institutions; institutions that are indirectly partisan and politicized, but which act within the national framework; and institutions that are directly partisan and politicized, and which act based on a partisan agenda. This information is based on interviews conducted by the author with Amjad al-Shawwa and with Ayad al-Sarraj, a developmental activist and executive director of the Gaza Center for Psychiatric Health.

¹² Jamil Hilal recounts that the Authority's attempts to dominate civil society institutions have led to a struggle between these institutions and the Authority; this is a confrontation that took a legal character during the debates over the Law of Civic and Charitable Associations, as well as an administrative character when the Authority established the Bureau of National Organisations, which is affiliated with the Authority and acts as an alternative to the network of civic organisations, which had over 62 member institutions as of April 20, 2009. For more details on this struggle, see Jamil Hilal, *The Palestinian Political System Post-Oslo*, 82ff.

¹³ Interviews conducted by the author with Ayad al-Sarraj and Saeed al-Maqadma, executive director of the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution, Gaza.

¹⁴ The Coalition for Transparency and Accountability (AMAN), *Palestinian Civic Organisations and Corruption*, (Ramallah: Aman, 2005), 28-29.

Palestinian CSOs and their Views on Divisions in Palestine

An examination of Palestinian divisions shows that they have passed through three main phases. The first phase saw an escalation of polarization between Fatah (the Movement of Palestinian National Liberation) and Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement), following the second legislative elections in 2006. During this process the Palestinian Authority remained unified while the two factions battled over prerogatives and control.¹⁵ The second phase was one that saw the transition of the conflict shifting from political discourse to one of infighting and militarization. The final phase witnessed the decisive resolution of this conflict, which saw violence and the use of weapons, leading to a split of control over the Palestinian Territories and the duality of the Palestinian Authority.¹⁶

The escalation of Palestinian division prompts an enquiry into the contribution of CSOs in reinforcing values such as tolerance, dialogue, assimilation, national and social loyalty, peace, and the culture of negotiation in resolving conflicts rather than a language of force. Promoting these values is one of the main objectives of civil society organizations, as part of their mission of minimizing the catalysts of disunity and the slide toward conflict. CSOs in Palestine are expected to strive for a social coalition that guarantees national reconciliation given the extent of political competition.¹⁷

A look at the role played by Palestinian civil society organizations indicates that they have failed to bring about stability among the social and political segments of Palestinian society. Palestinian leaders of civic organisations interviewed for this study admit that they shoulder a portion of the responsibility with respect to disunity, due to their shortcomings in promoting those values. The interviews also indicate that many CSOs in Palestine are manipulated as a tool used to increase the state of division.¹⁸

The standpoint of Palestinian organisations with regards to Palestinian disunity is worth analyzing, although one should keep in mind that any judgment on their position should take into account the lack of neutrality among these institutions, and that ultimately

¹⁵ See Tayseer Muhaysin, "The Political Polarization in Palestinian Society," in *The Sustainable Human Development Report in Palestine* (Beirzeit: Beirzeit University, 2009).

¹⁶ For further information, see *ibid.*

¹⁷ Jamil Hilal, *The Palestinian Political System Post-Oslo*, 126.

¹⁸ Interviews conducted by the author with Amjad al-Shawwa and Saeed al-Maqadma.

they cannot be perceived as acting outside the framework of Palestinian discord. This applies to both a positive and a negative sense of the term “lack of neutrality,” as some organisations have participated in reinforcing this state of division or have abstained from challenging it, while others have strived to end it. Within this context, four dominant stances of Palestinian CSOs on Palestinian disunity can be identified.

The first involves organisations that supported the leadership and actions of the battling political factions during the different stages of the discord. This includes institutions that are affiliated with these factions or that follow their political line. Palestinian factions used many of these organisations as tools to heighten the division and to impose political dominance. Typically, some of these organisations adopted a political and media line that mirrored that of their chosen political factions, justifying their practices.¹⁹

The second category includes organisations that were targeted during times of division and punished for their affiliation by opposite sides. This includes assaults on these institutions’ officers, arrests, the closing down of many organisations and the prohibition to resume their activities, the confiscation of property, and so forth. These practices eventually became a daily occurrence. In fact, such measures sometimes impacted institutions with no relation to the battling factions, particularly those that monitored the conduct of these parties.²⁰

In the third category are organisations that were not involved in the saga of disunity and reconciliation, either because they were apprehensive of approaching this sensitive subject or due to their lack of resources and abilities to confront the issue.²¹ This was demonstrated by the abstention of many Palestinian CSOs from participating in activities aimed at abolishing Palestinian division and the promotion of reconciliation. This includes institutions that work in the field of social development, as well as

¹⁹ Interviews conducted by the author with Omar Shaban, Executive Director of the Pal Think Institution, Amjad al-Shawwa, and Saeed al-Maqadma.

²⁰ For further information on the nature of these assaults and practices, see the reports of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights regarding the violations and transgressions committed against civic and local institutions in the West Bank and Gaza, 2007-2008.

²¹ For further information, see the contribution of Talal Awkal to “The Position of the Palestinian Civil Society toward the National Dialogue and its Chances for Success,” seminar organized by the Palestinian Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Refugees, 2008.

institutions with a civic or aid character, and many unions and other professional organisations.²²

The final group involves institutions that were outraged by the fact that political competition and discord had reached such a level of antagonism, leading some of them to take a number of steps toward achieving national reconciliation. This outrage positively manifested itself in efforts to mediate between partisans of the battling factions and to prepare a suitable environment for national dialogue and reconciliation. In this respect, numerous conferences, debates, and seminars were organized by these CSOs with the participation of representatives from different factions.²³ Moreover, some of these institutions presented initiatives aiming to end the state of division, including a number of proposed mechanisms to help resolve the differences between Fatah and Hamas and achieve national reconciliation.

Initiatives Launched by Palestinian Civil Society toward Unity: the Vision and Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution

In addition to the initiatives launched by Palestinian political factions and foreign parties, Palestinian CSOs presented a number of initiatives.²⁴ Generally speaking, these can be categorized into initiatives seeking to remedy the state of division, ones that seek to treat the repercussions of the conflict, ones urging dialogue, and ones that promote a specific vision.²⁵ The most notable of these initiatives include the following:

The private sector and Businessmen's Association Initiative focused on addressing the manifestations of the crisis, especially the duality of the security system, the estimation

²² Interviews conducted by the author with Omar Shaban, Amjad al-Shawwa, and Saeed al-Maqadma.

²³ These include the Network of Civic Organisations, the Pal Think Foundation, the Institute for Development Studies, the Development Studies Program (Beirzeit University), and the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution, the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Studies, the Muwatin Foundation, the AMAN Foundation, and others.

²⁴ The most notable of the initiatives launched by Palestinian political factions and foreign parties are those of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Palestinian prisoners, as well as the Egyptian, Saudi and Yemeni initiatives. Over 15 initiatives were also launched by Palestinian civic and partisan institutions, divided into those made exclusively by CSOs, those presented by the political factions, and shared initiatives. Information based on an interview with Ahmad Yusif, political adviser to the Prime Minister of the Gaza government (which was dismissed by President Mahmoud Abbas).

²⁵ Interviews conducted by the author with Amjad al-Shawwa and Saeed al-Maqadma.

of the losses caused by the conflict and the payment of compensation for those who were affected. The initiative also called for a clear division of security prerogatives between the President of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian government, and for the formation of an apolitical technocratic cabinet.

The initiative of the National Dialogue Group was composed of a number of intellectuals and academics in several local organisations and research centers. This initiative aimed at ending the conflict between Fatah and Hamas and addressing its underlying causes, while laying a solid foundation for national consensus that is based on civic peace, national reconciliation, the right to political participation, the formation of a national unity government, and the rebuilding of the security agencies on a purely professional basis.

An initiative launched by independent figures and civic activists called for the rectification of the security, administrative, and political situation, as the causes behind the escalation of the crisis.²⁶ It also called for the formation of a national unity government to deal with the security and administrative issues.

The Palthink foundation initiative promoted the formation of an agreed-upon transitional government; the reestablishment of the unity of the Authority's institutions; the creation of a plan for the rebuilding of the security services; new presidential and legislative elections; the activation and expansion of the role of the institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation; the formation of a committee of national inquiry to prosecute those responsible for the crimes committed during the events; and the creation of a unified resistance front, in accordance with the National Accord Pact.

The initiative of the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution presented a vision for the resolution of a number of issues, most notably those of security and the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, especially regarding their overlap of prerogatives. The initiative also called for the creation of a Constitutional Court, the adoption of proportional representation in any future Palestinian elections,

²⁶ This initiative was launched by a number of independent figures and a group of CSOs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

and the use of arbitrage in order to explore a legal solution concerning the previous agreements that the PLO signed with Israel.²⁷

An analysis of the above initiatives, in addition to interviews with their representatives, shows that the visions of Palestinian organisations toward the achievement of reconciliation had similar goals, but different motives.

Substantially they all agreed on the necessity to end divisions and to bridge the differences between the parties. They also agreed on the need to employ a language of dialogue and national interest rather than a language of force and partisan interests, and to work toward an environment of trust between the two sides, preparing a suitable ground for dialogue.²⁸

Their motives, however, differed in that certain institutions were driven by national concerns and were frightened by the prospect of political division and its socioeconomic repercussions. Others were motivated by the need to reduce the effects of divisions on the interests of the groups they represent.²⁹ Some feared Hamas' control over Gaza, and the prospect of its ideological domination, which could lead to the imposition of religious codes.³⁰ Other organisations, meanwhile, while still fearful of Hamas' leadership, rejected a return to the former situation and Fatah's hegemony over the institutions of the PA and the PLO.³¹

²⁷ For more information on the content of these initiatives and their details, see Nuhad al-Sheikh Khalil, *The Palestinian Reconciliation Initiatives since the Events of June 2007 and until June 2008*, (Gaza: Bait al-Hikma [Palestinian Institute for Consulting and Conflict Resolution], 2008).

²⁸ See *ibid.*

²⁹ In this regard, Muhammad Mushtaha (executive director of the Palestinian Businessmen's Association) said in an interview with the author that the initiative of the private sector and the Businessmen's Association aimed, beyond the goal of achieving national reconciliation, at preserving the vital interests of the business community and reducing the damages that were suffered by the private sector due to the repercussions on the Palestinian economic situation.

³⁰ For further information, see Nuhad al-Sheikh Khalil, *The Palestinian Reconciliation Initiatives*.

³¹ A difference also existed among these organisations in terms of assigning responsibility for the state of division. Some claimed that Hamas was responsible for the deteriorating Palestinian situation while others accused Fatah. A third group of organisations held that both sides were responsible. This divergence affected the commitments that were requested by these organisations from Fatah and Hamas. Information based on author interviews with Saeed al-Maqadma, Ahmad Yusuf, Muhammad Mushtaha, Amjad al-Shawwa, and Ayad al-Sarraj.

One can wonder whether this variation on the level of their motives affected the nature of the mechanisms proposed by Palestinian civil society organisations to end division. By analyzing these initiatives one finds that some dealt with the discord from a security perspective, thus focusing their propositions on ending the clashes between the security agencies and their overlapping authorities. This was the case with the initiative presented by the private sector and the Businessmen's Association. The initiative of the Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution, on the other hand, stressed the faults in the structure of the Palestinian political system, especially within the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, and in the relationship between the two. The organisation proposed a number of solutions: creating a Constitutional Court in order to end the duality of constitutional powers, with the President on one hand and the government on the other; resorting to arbitration in order to determine the Palestinian legal position vis-à-vis the agreements signed by the PLO with Israel; and providing proposals for the normalization of the problematic relationship between the PLO and the PA.

The initiative proposed by the independent figures and civic activists, as well as that of the National Dialogue Group, were centered on the problem of the conflict between the Fatah and Hamas movements, which they perceived as the main issue at hand. The mechanisms proposed by these two initiatives strove to resolve this dispute, such as making Fatah and Hamas commit to halting all actions which would reinforce division, restoring the situation on the ground to its previous state, forming a national unity government as a first step toward resolving the crisis, and resolving the dispute over security privileges between the two sides. For its part, the Palthink initiative did not focus on a specific issue, but rather sought to offer a number of general proposals.³²

Another question raised by this situation is whether the civil society initiatives were any different from those launched by the Palestinian political factions. While there are many similarities between the initiatives of the civil society institutions the initiatives proposed by the political factions differed due to their focus on the political dimension. A number of their proposals aimed at widening their participation in the political system, and preventing the domination of the political apparatus by either of the two major parties. This was demonstrated through a number of commitments that were demanded in these initiatives, such as asking Hamas to give up its control over Gaza, and demanding that the two sides submit to the judgment of the people through elections based on

³² For more details on the proposed mechanisms, see Nuhad al-Sheikh Khalil, *The Palestinian Reconciliation Initiatives*.

proportional representation, which would allow for a better representation of the factions in question. Moreover, according to some CSOs, these political factions intended to use their initiatives to benefit from the struggle between Fatah and Hamas in order to achieve partisan and political interests and to obtain a wider representation in the institutions of the Palestinian political system.³³

Shortcomings in Proposed Initiatives and Reasons behind Their Failure

Undoubtedly, civil society efforts constituted an important contribution to ending the Palestinian dispute and reinforcing unity in the Palestinian political system and society. However, these initiatives failed to achieve their goals due to a number of shortcomings. Significantly, despite being embraced by Fatah and Hamas, none of these propositions was acted upon, which begs for an analysis of the reasons for this failure.

To start with, CSOs lacked a unified vision of the mechanisms proposed to end the state of division and reach reconciliation. A comprehensive vision toward the main challenges underlying Palestinian division was also absent. In addition, there was a focus on specific issues at the expense of others that were equally important. Mechanisms lacked to face the challenges to the implementation of these initiatives, such as the question of security. More specifically, it was unclear how to unify the security agencies and to resolve the problem of redundant staff, particularly following the Gaza government's creation of alternative security agencies with new members. The same issue applies to the rest of the Ministries and governmental institutions. Another challenge among others was reforming the relationship between the PA and the PLO and re-activating their institutions.

Furthermore, there were contradictions between various proposals, with some initiatives calling for a national unity government and others demanding a technocratic cabinet; some wanted to reject outside interferences and others called for coordination with Egypt and the Arab League.³⁴ In general, these initiatives failed to propose sufficient mechanisms to resolve the social repercussions of the Palestinian division, a necessary

³³ Based on interviews conducted by the author with Saeed al-Maqadma, Ahmad Yusuf, Muhammad Mushtaha, Amjad al-Shawwa, and Ayad al-Sarraj.

³⁴ For further information on these incompatibilities, see the initiative of the National Dialogue Group and the initiative of the independent figures and civic activists.

condition for the achievement of comprehensive national reconciliation.³⁵ Many initiatives proposed solutions, such as conducting elections amidst Palestinian Diasporas and bringing to justice those who committed crimes during the episodes of internal infighting, but failed to present realistic and objective means to make the two sides agree to such arrangements.

Such proposals would have had to include the following: alternative options in case of difficulties in conducting elections in the countries hosting Palestinian refugees; standards for allocating representative seats for the various factions in the National and Central councils; definitions as to what actions can be qualified as crimes and the sentences given to those indicted with such practices, especially if the actions were carried out under orders from military or political leaderships. Finally, the initiatives often postponed challenging issues, transferring them to “committees to be formed,” without discussing the nature, composition, and mandate of these committees, or the value and power of the decisions they would take.

Challenges Faced by the Civil Society Initiatives

In addition to the civil society institutions’ own shortcomings, their initiatives faced numerous hurdles that also constitute causes of their failure to be implemented. One major challenge was the sheer multiplicity of initiatives and lack of coordination between the organisations that launched them. In addition, there was a competitive streak among these institutions with regards to reconciliation. The initiatives were often employed to serve the particular interests and political agendas of some of these institutions.³⁶ This was exacerbated by the bias of some of those institutions toward one of the parties. Moreover, some institutions were unable to create a context of popular support for their initiatives, in order to pressure the struggling powers into dialogue.³⁷ Another challenge was the rise of a “state of accommodation” among the main political forces toward the disunity, enabling them to persist without achieving reconciliation.

³⁵ These mechanisms were absent from all the initiatives, whether those launched by CSOs or those belonging to the political factions.

³⁶ See Saeed al-Maqadma, *The Experience of the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Conflict Resolution as a Civil Society Institution in the Field of National Reconciliation* (Gaza: Palestinian Institute for Consulting and Conflict Resolution / The House of Wisdom for Conflict Resolution and Governance, 2008).

³⁷ Interviews conducted by the author with Omar Shaban, Saeed al-Maqadma, Ahmad Yusuf, Muhammad Mushtaha, Amjad al-Shawwa and Ayad al-Sarraj.

Furthermore, some parties remained steadfast and uncompromising in their positions, with the thought that this would lead them to achieve more of their demands in a deal that might be reached in the future. Finally, CSOs faced the challenge posed by the intervention of foreign parties with the intention to undermine any reconciliation proposal that went against their interests.³⁸

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, some key conclusions can be reached. Firstly, Palestinian CSOs have been unsuccessful in fulfilling their mandates and their civic duty, particularly those that relate to safeguarding democracy. They have also failed in building the basic requirements for the birth of a civic culture. This analysis clearly shows that these institutions lack a unified vision toward reconciliation and have proven unable to play a genuine and effective role in ending the state of division.

Ultimately, the task of achieving reconciliation and addressing its main challenges is beyond the means and resources of these organizations; above all, this task requires the full participation of all Palestinian actors, in addition to civil society organizations.

³⁸ In this regard, Nuha al-Sheikh Khalil states that the US-Israeli veto over internal Palestinian reconciliation was a major barrier to achieving reconciliation and ending the division, while Ali Badwan argues that the reconciliation project was undermined due to the competition among Arab countries over the management of the Palestinian reconciliation dossier, and to steer this reconciliation toward serving their own interests and agendas. See Nuha al-Sheikh Khalil, *The Palestinian Reconciliation Initiatives*; Ali Badwan, "The Recent Turn in the Egyptian Position vis-à-vis Palestinian Reconciliation," *al-Watan*, September 26, 2012.

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