



REIMAGINING LIBERATION THROUGH THE PALESTINIAN POPULAR COMMITTEES

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The [significant discursive shift](#) that emerged globally following the 2021 Unity Intifada successfully centered Zionist settler colonialism as the root cause of the Palestinian struggle. This policy brief explores how Palestinians can rethink their liberation struggle by turning to their rich history of popular mobilization. It examines the successes of the Palestinian popular committees that formed in the West Bank and Gaza throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and offers recommendations for how Palestinian civil society today can work to rebuild communities that facilitate the development of a reimagined grassroots liberationist movement.

The First Intifada built on grassroots missions and practices aimed at disengaging from Israeli settler colonialism that had been part of Palestinian society for nearly two decades. Indeed, the [national campaigns](#) that emerged during the Intifada included the boycott of Israeli products and of the Israeli Civil Administration, refusal to pay Israeli taxes, and successful calls for the resignation of hundreds of Palestinian tax collectors and police officers—all tactics practiced throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In the early 1970s, Palestinian volunteer movements formed across the West Bank and Gaza to mitigate the suffering of communities most directly affected by Israel's 1967 military occupation. Before long, these movements grew into regional [networks of volunteers](#) whose activities politicized a generation of youth by bringing different parts of Palestinian society together and developing awareness of the importance of anti-colonial struggle.

The networks also led to the rise of popular committees which responded to Israel's neglect and [de-development](#) in various sectors of Palestinian life. The most ubiquitous popular committees worked at the neighborhood level, and were usually composed of local youth. They mainly provided support to the most vulnerable and increased the [resilience of communities](#) in the face of Israeli attacks, including through coordinating mutual aid, carrying out nightly guard duty to alert of settler and military attacks, and organizing the storage and distribution of food for prolonged curfews.

Networks of [cooperatives and home economy projects](#) also promoted local produce and aimed to reduce the reliance on Israeli goods. Many neighborhoods also undertook backyard farming to increase food security. These committees contributed significantly to the mobilization witnessed among farmers during the First Intifada, ensuring an expanding network of anti-colonial, liberationist Palestinian [farmers and agronomists](#).

Similarly, Palestinians formed [health committees](#) composed of volunteer healthcare professionals who provided medical services in rural areas. Many of these committees adopted a liberationist conceptualization of health, promoting holistic treatment that centered social, political, and economic determinants. The health committees were so fundamental to Palestinian civil society, political groups were compelled to form and promote them.

Indeed, health committees were so successful at [reaching Palestinians at the grassroots level](#), they permeated the Palestinian political spectrum, and between them were providing [60% of primary healthcare](#) and all disability services in the West Bank and Gaza by 1993.

But following the devastating First Intifada, the PLO's adoption of the Oslo framework in 1993, and the subsequent formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, a process of depoliticization replaced the liberationist framework of the committees and cemented a shift in discourse from [liberation to state-building](#). Throughout the 1990s, several popular committees formalized into non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and many committee members, including leftist activists, joined the post-Oslo NGO world, while some popular committees registered as charities and adapted to the neoliberalization of Palestinian civil society.

In addition to the domination of a state-centered discourse, Israel's ongoing destruction and fragmentation of Palestinian communities continues to hinder Palestinians' ability to organize. The [complicity of the PA](#) in perpetuating this status quo also places significant obstacles on Palestinians' ability to mobilize as they did in the 1970s and 1980s. And while examining the successes of the popular committees will not automatically lead to a clear vision for liberation today, they can inform initial goals to facilitate the growth of a reimagined liberation framework among Palestinians.

While challenges and obstacles will remain, Palestinian civil society must:

- Reorient municipal councils' priorities to revive their political and social roles, including ensuring sustainable infrastructure in rapidly-growing towns and cities.
- Strengthen the role of cultural and educational institutions, public libraries, and other public forums to provide spaces through which communities can articulate political needs and demands. Universities should complement this by expanding their engagement with the public.
- Redirect professional services towards addressing the holistic needs of the communities they serve rather than applying neoliberal frameworks in the public sector.
- Promote existing popular movements that have already formed community-based structures, such as in Beita, Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan, Umm al-Fahm, and the Naqab, and that are well-placed to expand their role from reactive organizing to articulating a vision for liberation from their communal bases.