

The background of the cover is a photograph of a security fence. In the foreground, a woman in a black hijab is seen from the back, looking towards the fence. Behind the fence, a man in a striped shirt is working on the metal structure. A sign is attached to the fence, featuring Hebrew, Arabic, and English text. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. On the left side, there are three overlapping triangles in black, green, and orange.

SHRINKING SPACE *for* **PALESTINIAN** **CIVIL SOCIETY:** **2017–2022 AND** *the* **WAR on GAZA**

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Colophon

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Acronyms

BDC – Belgian Development Cooperation
BDS – Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions
CPJ – Committee to Protect Journalists
CSO – Civil Society Organization
EU – European Union
HWC – Health Work Committees
ICC – International Criminal Court
ICJ – International Court of Justice
INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization
JSF – Joint Strategic Framework (for Palestine)
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA OPT – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Occupied Palestinian territory
OPT – Occupied Palestinian Territory
PA – Palestinian Authority
UN – United Nations
UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
WHO – World Health Organization





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the shrinking operational space for Palestinian civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) from 2017 to 2022, and during the War on Gaza, with a focus on the evolving challenges posed by Israeli policies, donor funding conditions, and internal Palestinian factors. The study specifically explores the experiences of Palestinian CSOs supported by the Belgian Development Cooperation (BDC) as a representation of the broader landscape of Palestinian CSOs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and reviews of organizational reports to comprehensively understand the obstacles these organizations face and inform future policy and advocacy efforts.

The key issue investigated is the extent to which Palestinian CSOs found it increasingly difficult to deliver services between 2017 and 2022, given barriers posed by the Israeli occupation, Palestinian authorities, settler violence, and restrictive donor policies. **All participating CSOs involved in the study reported that their operations had been negatively impacted by Israeli measures**, including land confiscation, movement restrictions, and the baseless labeling of CSOs as terrorist entities, which disrupted funding streams and led to operational shutdowns. Additionally, organizations defending Israel's occupation and control over Palestinian territory, like NGO Monitor, have contributed to damaging CSOs' reputations and convincing donors to withdraw support from them, further tightening the space in which these organizations can function.

This study highlights that donor funding during this period was often insufficient to meet the growing challenges CSOs faced, particularly as many donors avoided politically sensitive topics and regions, instead prioritizing less contentious humanitarian aid initiatives that were less likely to provoke opposition from Israel. The result was that many **Palestinian CSOs felt abandoned by their international partners**, who they believed were unwilling to share the risks associated with working in areas like East Jerusalem and Area C of the occupied West Bank. In some cases, **CSOs were compelled to decline or return funding due to restrictive donor conditions that undermined their operational integrity or ability to resist Israeli policies.**

Furthermore, the War on Gaza, which began in October 2023, significantly altered the dynamics of Palestinian civil society. As the war escalated, CSOs had to shift their focus from development work to emergency relief and humanitarian aid in response to international donors' shifting priorities. The CSOs reported facing additional operational pressures due to funding cuts and pauses, while the costs of providing services continued to rise. Many organizations expressed concerns about the long-term sustainability of their work, particularly as they anticipated further restrictions and funding uncertainties in 2024 and beyond.

The aftermath of the War on Gaza and the shifting dynamics of international aid paints a grim future for many Palestinian CSOs, whose contributions to Palestinian society remain vital. They anticipate increased operational restrictions and a heightened struggle for survival as donors impose additional conditions. **The fallout from the Gaza war is expected to reshape Palestinian civil society, with many organizations fearing closure due to unsustainable conditions.** CSOs emphasized the need for international donors to take a stronger stance in supporting Palestinian rights and to advocate for their governments to help end the violence in Gaza. They argue that the current humanitarian approach is inadequate in addressing the political realities Palestinians face, urging international organizations to frame their partnerships around justice and freedom rather than solely humanitarian aid.

The study underscores the urgent need for continued research and advocacy, particularly as the full impact of the Gaza war will only become evident over the next several years.

RESEARCH DESIGN

From 2017 to 2022, Palestinian CSOs operating in the OPT faced increasing challenges due to the Israeli occupation, restrictions imposed by Palestinian authorities, and shifting donor policies, particularly from the European Union and its Member States. These pressures have significantly undermined the capacity of CSOs to deliver essential humanitarian, development, and human rights services to the affected communities. The growing restrictions negatively impacted the organizations' operational effectiveness and raised concerns about the sustainability of aid interventions in the OPT.

In response to these challenges, the member Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) of the Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) for Palestine of the BDC commissioned a study to assess the capacity of Palestinian CSOs to continue delivering services. The research sought to identify factors that hinder or support their operations and to offer recommendations for policy and advocacy efforts aimed at bolstering the resilience of CSOs in the OPT. The **key question** addressed by this study tackles whether, and to what extent, Palestinian CSOs were finding it increasingly difficult to deliver services between 2017 and 2022. The study examines key issues such as the evolution of funding, staffing changes, shifts in the number of beneficiaries and the types of services provided, and the impact of restrictive measures imposed by Israeli and Palestinian authorities, as well as international donors.

The study's scope was extended to include developments following the outbreak of conflict on October 7, 2023, which has further exacerbated the operational challenges faced by CSOs, particularly in Gaza. By examining the period from 2017 to 2022, and since October 7, 2023, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the growing constraints on Palestinian CSOs and the strategies they have adopted to navigate an increasingly restrictive environment.

To allow for representative conclusions, the study chose to focus on 12 organizations supported by the BDC, each specializing in a distinct area related to human rights and support for Palestinian society.

These fields include prisoner rights, children's rights, women's rights, farmer's rights, healthcare services, the promotion of art and culture, legal aid, agricultural support, and research on freedom and justice. While some CSOs focus on direct service delivery, such as food aid or healthcare, others are research and advocacy-oriented, producing reports and information on the political and human rights situation in the OPT. The sample includes organizations operating across all regions of the OPT.

To evaluate how service delivery by Palestinian CSOs in the OPT has been impacted, the research draws on both existing studies and original research. Developed by Dr. Wildeman and Dr. Tartir, the methodology combined quantitative and qualitative approaches, including surveys distributed to selected CSOs, semi-structured interviews, and a desk review of annual reports.

Out of 12 selected CSOs, 10 completed the research survey between February 21 and March 18, 2024, while 11 participated in interviews conducted between November 18, 2023, and January 11, 2024. One Gaza-based CSO was excluded from data collection due to the ongoing war.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted in person with one or two managers from the participating CSOs and lasted 30 to 60 minutes. Key topics included changes in funding, staffing, and service delivery, as well as the impact of Israeli, Palestinian, and donor pressures on their operations. Interviewees were asked how much time and resources were diverted to address these challenges and shared their strategies for mitigation and their effectiveness. The interviews were structured around open dialogue, allowing participants to share their experiences, reflections, and adaptive strategies in navigating these obstacles. Particular focus was given to developments following the outbreak of the War on Gaza in October 2023. Interviewees assessed how these events had further affected their operations, geographic reach, and their relationships with donors.

The study also sought to answer the following 8 questions:

1

What was the evolution of funding of the selected CSOs from 2017 to 2022 in the context of major socioeconomic and political changes, and changes in donor interests?

2

How did the staff (number, turnover, newly created and/or eliminated positions) evolve in the CSOs from 2017 to 2022, and what were the reasons for joining or leaving the organization?

3

How did the number of beneficiaries served by the CSOs evolve from 2017 to 2022?

4

How did the number of services delivered by the selected CSOs evolve from 2017 to 2022?

5

Are there services that were added and/or no longer delivered by the selected CSOs from 2017 to 2022? Which and why?

6

How and to what extent were the services and results of the selected CSOs affected by restrictive measures? Who were the sources of the restrictions? (e.g., Israeli state and non-state actors, Palestinian authorities, and international donors)

7

How much human resources, time, and other resources were allocated to fighting restrictive measures? How did this evolve from 2017 to 2022?

8

What mitigation measures have been developed by the CSOs to decrease the negative impact of restrictions and barriers imposed on them? Have they been successful?

The data collection process faced significant challenges, particularly as it was conducted during the War on Gaza, reflecting the broader difficulties Palestinian organizations contend with. One of the most significant obstacles was obtaining reports from the CSOs. While some organizations responded promptly after overcoming the initial shock of the war, others took four to six months to provide data, and two CSOs never shared any reports. Of the nine that did, the data collected and published varied significantly in content and quality. Ultimately, the research team was able to map out and analyze data from 75 reports provided by 8 CSOs.

It is important to note that Palestinian CSOs sometimes struggle with reporting and expressing themselves in English, the primary language of donor reporting in the OPT. This is especially true for smaller, grassroots organizations with limited resources to hire staff proficient in written English. CSOs based in regions where English fluency is less common – outside of internationally connected hubs like Ramallah, East Jerusalem, and Bethlehem – face even greater difficulties. Additionally, CSOs may hesitate to share information due to concerns about hostile Israeli and pro-occupation organizations weaponizing their reports against them. These conditions made it challenging to draw generalizable conclusions from the report data. However, the combination of survey responses and in-depth interviews provided sufficient insights to address the research questions effectively.

The difficulty of obtaining reports from CSOs highlights a significant trend: Palestinian civil society has grown increasingly cautious about sharing operational details. This reluctance is driven by fears that such information could be exploited by hostile organizations to undermine the ability of Palestinian CSOs to operate. This pressure, however, hinders their ability to effectively communicate their work and secure funding from international donors, ultimately jeopardizing their operations.

The full impact of the War on Gaza remains uncertain, depending on the conflict's duration and the state of Palestinian society in its aftermath. Repeating this study with the same CSOs once the long-term consequences are clearer will be essential to fully understand the war's fallout and its effects on the sector.

To retain the anonymity – and, therefore, safety – of the participating CSOs and their representatives, only an abridged version of the study delivered has been published.





The POLITICAL AND AID CONTEXT IN THE OPT 2017-2024

I. Prior to October 7, 2023

Political and humanitarian conditions in the OPT have deteriorated markedly in recent years. Gaza, under an Israeli blockade since 2007, suffered major Israeli assaults in 2008, 2012, and 2014, leaving infrastructure severely damaged and services depleted. The region's political and economic instability has been exacerbated by deep intra-Palestinian divisions, with Hamas controlling Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) holding power in parts of the West Bank.¹ Meanwhile, Israeli forces have repeatedly used force against Palestinian protesters, particularly during the Great March of Return in Gaza in 2018, when 214 Palestinians were killed, including 46 children, and over 36,100 injured, nearly 8,800 of which were children.²

The West Bank has also witnessed a sharp increase in violence through Israeli settlement expansion, settler violence, and military incursions. In 2022, the OPT experienced its deadliest year since the end of the Second Intifada, with 220 Palestinian deaths, including 48 children, and 9,500 injured.³ This trend continued in 2023 and 2024, with increased demolitions of Palestinian homes, displacement, and severe movement restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities.

The internal governance of the OPT continued to degrade with the PA under President Mahmoud Abbas ruling by decree, as no national elections have been held since 2006. Despite international aid, Palestinian institutions grappled with a legitimacy crisis, with the PA viewed by many as increasingly authoritarian. At the same time, donor funding — a crucial source of support for Palestinian CSOs — became more conditional. Donor priorities often

aligned with political agendas, resulting in funding constraints on projects related to Palestinian rights, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and resistance to Israeli occupation. This shrinking space for Palestinian CSOs was exacerbated by Israeli crackdowns on organizations, culminating in the 2021 designation of six leading Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organizations.⁴ Subsequently, the Israeli army raided their offices, as well as the Health Work Committees (HWC),⁵ destroyed facilities, harassed and arrested staff, and welded office doors shut.⁶ These actions have been widely condemned by the United Nations (UN) and international human rights organizations, which have called for the designation to be revoked due to a lack of evidence supporting the accusations.⁷ Reviews conducted by nine European states and the European Commission similarly found no evidence substantiating Israel's claims.⁸

II. After October 7, 2023

On October 7, 2023, Hamas breached a 16-year Israeli military blockade on the Gaza Strip, storming multiple Israeli military outposts and attacking adjacent communities. This resulted in 1,139 Israeli deaths, including 695 civilians, and 240 individuals being taken hostage.⁹ Immediately afterwards, the Israeli military launched a large-scale offensive on Gaza. By November 11, 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA OPT), reported at least 43,391 deaths in Gaza, approximately 102,347 injured, over 70,000 housing units destroyed, and 1.9 million people displaced.¹⁰ Most of the population was internally displaced and experiencing acute shortages

of drinking water, food, and medical supplies. Using conservative estimates and a 2022 estimated population of 2,375,259 for the Gaza Strip, the British medical journal *The Lancet* estimated that up to 186,000 deaths – 7.9% of the population – could be attributed to the War on Gaza.¹¹

The War on Gaza has also become one of the deadliest conflicts for journalists, health-care workers, and UN personnel. As of November 11, 2024, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that at least 137 journalists and media workers had been killed, making the War on Gaza the deadliest period for journalists since the CPJ began gathering data in 1992.¹² By October 30, 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) documented 516 attacks on health facilities in the Gaza Strip, rendering 56% of hospitals (20 out of 36) and 58% of primary health care centers (73 out of 126) non-functional.¹³ According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, as of October 2024, more than 1,000 health workers in Gaza had been killed and at least 310 arrested since October 2023.¹⁴ This death toll comprised about 3.5 percent of Gaza's pre-war health workforce of approximately 25,000.¹⁵ By October 30, 2024, at least 322 aid workers, including 233 United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) staff, had been killed, making Gaza the deadliest location ever for the UN.¹⁶

The conflict prompted calls for accountability, with war crimes investigations initiated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against key Israeli and Hamas leaders. In a landmark order, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) warned of a plausible risk that Israel is violating the Genocide Convention in Gaza and mandated several provisional measures. On

November 21, 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant, and a Hamas leader, Ibrahim Al-Masri (better known as Mohammed Deif), for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁷ By early December 2024, a landmark report by Amnesty International concluded that Israeli authorities had committed and were committing genocide against Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip.¹⁸ Despite these efforts, the conflict continues, leaving Gaza in a state of unprecedented devastation.

The West Bank has also been highly affected since the October 7 attacks. The Israeli military established new physical barriers, further restricting internal travel. Even prior to the Gaza conflict, Palestinians in the West Bank faced escalating violence from Israeli forces and settlers. Excluding casualties from the Gaza-Israel hostilities, OCHA OPT reported 549 Palestinian deaths and 13,349 injuries in 2023, and 427 deaths and 2,576 injured in 2024, by October 20.¹⁹ As of October 30, 2024, 11,695 structures had been demolished in the West Bank, displacing 18,874 people since 2009.²⁰ On July 19, 2024, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion stating that Israel's presence in the West Bank is illegal under international law and should be ended as soon as possible.²¹



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FINDINGS

This section examines the key challenges faced by Palestinian CSOs as they contend with a “shrinking space” that is making it increasingly difficult for them to operate freely and effectively. The shrinking space manifests itself in various ways, including restrictions on movement, administrative hurdles, smear campaigns by pro-occupation organizations, and increased conditionality of donor funding. Moreover, the recent War on Gaza has exacerbated these challenges, with widespread destruction of infrastructure and the displacement of staff making it nearly impossible for some organizations to sustain their operations. To adapt, CSOs have been often forced to reallocate resources or scale back activities, striving to survive in this increasingly restrictive environment.

A. Causes of shrinking space for Palestinian CSOs

Surveys and interviews conducted for this study asked respondents to reflect on the nature of shrinking civic space in Palestine, identify the key actors and measures contributing to it during the 2017-2022 period, and describe how the situation has evolved since the War on Gaza.

► **Finding 1: ALL PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORTED EXPERIENCING A “SHRINKING SPACE” IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

During the interviews, representatives of the participating CSOs were asked if their organization’s work, operations, and service delivery had been affected by shrinking space during the surveyed period. **All respondents confirmed that their organization had experienced shrinking space.**

When asked what the concept of “shrinking space” meant to them, interviewees highlighted a range of pressures and constraints from various actors that hinder their ability to operate freely and effectively. These included the **criminalization of Palestinian CSOs by Israeli authorities, smear campaigns by pro-occupation organizations aimed at convincing donors to withdraw funding, politically motivated interference in their work by international donors and increased conditionality of donor funding, and Israeli occupation policies obstructing their work on the ground.**

Most Palestinian CSOs in the study reported that the shrinking space became particularly notable during the surveyed period, although some noted that the shrinking space had been a longstanding issue predating 2017.

► **Finding 2: ALL PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORTED BEING SUBJECTED TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES BY ISRAELI AUTHORITIES IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

According to Palestinian CSOs, the Israeli occupation plays a central role in the shrinking space for CSOs in the OPT, imposing a range of physical, legal, and administrative restrictions that severely hinder their operations. **Israeli policies, such as restrictions on movement through checkpoints, roadblocks, and the separation wall, make it exceedingly difficult for CSOs to reach vulnerable communities,** especially in Gaza, Area C of the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. This obstructs the delivery of essential services and humanitarian aid while isolating CSOs from the populations they aim to serve. Additionally, policies of **land confiscation, destruction of infrastructure, and settler violence** have directly undermined the development efforts of these organizations.

A frequently cited factor contributing to the shrinking civic space is the routine targeting of Palestinian CSOs by Israeli authorities through **unfounded allegations of terrorism, invoking security concerns to justify office raids, asset confiscations, and staff arrests.** According to the participating CSOs, these actions have contributed to the delegitimization of civil society organizations in the eyes of donors and the international community, further shrinking their operational space. For the affected organizations, terrorism accusations and designations have resulted in **increased political pressure by donors and the diversion of operational resources to combat these allegations through international advocacy.**

Israel’s destructive war on Gaza after October 7, 2023, has had a profound impact on the service delivery of Palestinian CSOs. Offices have been damaged or destroyed by the Israeli onslaught, staff members displaced, and access to target populations severely curtailed. One CSO reported that 99% of its 199 Gaza-based employees had been displaced multiple times, with 40% losing their homes and many suffering family losses. Some of their own offices and hubs in Gaza were completely destroyed, and their archives and files remain inaccessible or may have been destroyed. Less than 10% of their Gaza team was functional at the time of the interview, in November 2023, and all 26 developmental projects in Gaza had been suspended. As described earlier in this report, conditions have gotten much worse in Gaza since the interviews were conducted, including the unprecedented targeting of aid and health infrastructure.

The destruction of Gaza has not merely restricted the operating space for Gaza-based CSOs, it has obliterated it; which is why the twelfth CSO that is Gaza-based could not participate in this study.

The **increased movement restrictions** that Israel introduced on the West Bank after October 7, described by one CSO as a “total closure” of the area, have further constrained Palestinian CSOs. These restrictions have hampered their ability to monitor rights violations, engage with communities, and deliver essential services. **80% of CSOs describe increased restrictions on freedom of movement since October 7, 2023.**

► **Finding 3: 30% OF PALESTINIAN CSOs REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES BY PALESTINIAN AUTHORITIES IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

The operational space for CSOs has also been shrinking due to Palestinian authorities, although their role is minor compared to Israeli authorities. In general, there were **mixed experiences** among the CSOs reporting on Palestinian authorities. While some described positive cooperation, others reported repression or limited interactions. There was however a general feeling that the Western-backed, Ramallah-based PA neither effectively represented nor protected CSOs and their interests.

Some CSOs expressed concern about increased scrutiny from the PA following their designation as terrorist organizations by Israel. Others were wary of the PA’s perceived attempts to exert control over CSO funds. One organization expressed concern about proposed changes to the NGO Law that would allow the PA to intervene more directly in their operations and channel CSO funding through PA ministries. Even a CSO with a positive working relationship with the PA reported **operational hurdles caused by the PA, such as bureaucratic delays, paperwork, and issues with infrastructure and banking procedures.**

In Gaza, the challenges differed. One CSO reported having encountered significant challenges with the local authorities in Gaza from 2017 to 2022, being subjected to repeated audits by the Hamas-run Ministry of Interior Affairs, which led to an overwhelming workload.

► **Finding 4: 70% OF PALESTINIAN CSOs REPORTED BEING TARGETED BY SMEAR CAMPAIGNS BY PRO-OCCUPATION NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

A clear pattern emerged from the survey and the interviews, with seventy percent of participants reporting being targeted by **smear campaigns orchestrated by pro-occupation non-governmental organizations.** As such, these organizations were the second most frequently cited contributors to the shrinking of Palestinian civic space, only behind Israeli authorities.

Since the early 2010s, experts have noted the rise of an ecosystem of politically motivated civil society organizations whose primary aim is the defense of Israeli government policies, particularly those that sustain the occupation and control of Palestinian territories.²² Often tied to Israeli government actors, these organizations launch aggressive political and media campaigns targeting Palestinian, Israeli, and international civil society actors that advocate for the rights of Palestinians living under occupation. According to a report by the German Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, the primary strategies used by the pro-occupation CSOs include delegitimizing human rights organizations through **naming and shaming tactics and associating organizations with terrorist groups, as well as lobbying donor countries to cut funding.**²³

According to the participating CSOs, **pro-occupation organizations continued to carry out coordinated smear campaigns throughout the 2017-2022 period.** Respondents described how such organizations use false or exaggerated claims, misinformation, or disinformation to damage their reputations with donors and disrupt their funding streams. These campaigns typically focused on falsely accusing NGOs of supporting terrorism, anti-Semitism, or inciting violence.

One particularly notorious organization engaged in defamation campaigns against Palestinian CSOs is *NGO Monitor*, which a report of the Policy Working Group describes as “spearheading the shrinking space for Israeli and Palestinian human rights NGOs.”²⁴ According to that same report, *NGO Monitor* relies on its close relations to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate meetings with European policymakers and uses baseless claims, faulty research, and outright fabrications to damage the credibility of Palestinian CSOs.²⁵ **Half of the respondents explicitly identified NGO Monitor as a threat to Palestinian civic space.** This finding mirrors the results of a 2020 survey carried out by Belgian CSO 11.11.11, in which Palestinian CSOs ranked *NGO Monitor* as the actor that posed the most danger to their civic space.²⁶

► **Finding 5: PALESTINIAN CSOs SEE THE GROWING POLITICIZATION AND CONDITIONALITY OF DONOR FUNDING AS A MAJOR THREAT TO PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY.**

While not all participating organizations had been directly impacted by funding restrictions from international donors at the time of the study, **Palestinian CSOs unanimously identified the growing politicization and conditionality of donor funding as a significant threat to Palestinian civil society as a whole.** During interviews, there was a common feeling that international donors were prioritizing their own agendas over the interests of Palestinian partners, focusing on implementing programs that did not challenge Israel’s occupation, and sowing division among Palestinian CSOs. Respondents also expressed

frustration over donors' reluctance to share risks with the CSOs and work in Area C of the West Bank. This area, which comprises the majority of the Palestinian land in the West Bank, is being rapidly colonized and ethnically cleansed by Israel.

Several respondents pointed to the 2019 addition of anti-terrorism clauses to EU grant contracts as an example of how donor conditions negatively impact Palestinian civil society. The clause requires grant recipients to undertake the daunting task of vetting all their partners, employees, and beneficiaries to ensure no affiliations with groups or individuals on the list of designated terrorist organizations. According to the participating CSOs, the introduction of the clause caused a **division within Palestinian civil society**, as many organizations rejected the terms.²⁷ At a time when they were struggling over ever-shrinking donor tranches, it became harder for them to find common ground to work together against what they considered to be politicized conditionality being wielded unfairly against them.

Those respondents that opposed the anti-terrorism clause did not expand on their reasoning, but Palestinian CSOs often refuse to sign anti-terrorism clauses due to several key concerns. First, these clauses are viewed as **politically motivated**, often imposed under Israeli pressure, and disproportionately applied against Palestinian civil society, which many see as endorsing a narrative that delegitimizes their work. Additionally, these clauses impose a **heavy administrative burden** typically without extra funding, requiring organizations to vet partners, staff, and beneficiaries, which complicates and stifles their operations. Ethically, CSOs often reject these clauses as external controls that conflict with their mission to support vulnerable communities without political interference. Finally, signing these clauses can **undermine the sovereignty and autonomy** of Palestinian organizations, forcing them to operate under restrictive foreign-imposed conditions. Though it limits the funding they may access, refusing to sign allows them to maintain their independence and stay true to their mandate of serving Palestinian communities effectively.

In the aftermath of October 7, 2023, several European donors announced plans to impose additional conditions on funding for Palestinian CSOs.²⁸ Notably, the EU is expected to introduce an anti-incitement clause in its contracts, requiring Palestinian CSOs to declare that they will not incite hatred.²⁹ This requirement is likely to be seen as an infringement on their freedom of expression and a demonstration of a double standard, given the EU's ongoing political support for the Israeli government, which not only incites against Palestinians but also perpetrates war crimes and subjects them to genocidal violence. One interviewee described how these conditions forced

them to choose between preserving their dignity and ensuring the sustainability of their operations. **It is likely that the introduction of additional conditions will lead more Palestinian CSOs to forgo donor funding**, particularly if they perceive the terms as unethical or inimical to their missions and visions.

B. Impact of shrinking space on Palestinian CSOs

Respondents were asked to what extent the shrinking space had affected their funding, operational resources, service delivery, and the number of beneficiaries served during the 2017-2022 period. Follow-up questions explored how these factors had changed since the War on Gaza.

► **Finding 6: 50% OF PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORT HAVING LOST FUNDING DUE TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN THE 2017-2022 PERIOD, RISING TO 80% AFTER OCTOBER 7, 2023.**

Half of the respondents reported that their organization's funding had been negatively impacted by donor restrictions during the 2017-2022 period, though the nature of these restrictions varied. Some respondents highlighted that **smear campaigns and unfounded terrorist designations had led certain foreign donors to withdraw funding**. Others noted a shift in donor priorities, with **funding increasingly directed toward low-risk humanitarian projects rather than politically sensitive development initiatives**, particularly in regions like Area C of the West Bank. Additionally, some respondents indicated they had lost financial support after refusing to comply with **funding conditions** they perceived as politically motivated and unacceptable.

After October 7, 2023, donor funding to Palestinian civil society became even more precarious, with 80% of participating CSOs reporting a loss of funding. Responding to unfounded concerns about the diversion of funds from Palestinian civil society to armed groups, the European Union and countries such as Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland, launched reviews of their funding to Palestinian CSOs.³⁰ Despite the absence of evidence to substantiate claims of fund diversion, Switzerland ultimately defunded three Palestinian CSOs, while Germany excluded six from future funding.³¹ These decisions were widely condemned by a multinational coalition of 103 civil society organizations, which argued that such measures undermine the protection of human rights during a critical period.³² The escalation of donor restrictions in the wake of the war not only exacerbated funding challenges but also highlighted the growing politicization of aid, further restricting Palestinian CSOs' ability to fulfill their mandates.

► **Finding 7: 70% OF PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORT TO HAVE DIVERTED OPERATIONAL RESOURCES DUE TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

A clear majority of respondents reported having diverted operational resources away from core activities to counter pressure by Israeli authorities, pro-occupation organizations and international donors during the surveyed period. Increased aid conditionality and smear campaigns by right-wing Israeli organizations have forced Palestinian CSOs to undertake extensive due diligence in their operations and reporting, leading to **significant overhead costs**. This has not only impeded their work but also compelled many to exercise extra caution and engage in **self-censorship** in their advocacy and service delivery. **This was particularly relevant for the human rights organizations labeled as terrorist organizations by Israel in 2021.**

Four participating CSOs shared how these pressures have necessitated a dramatic restructuring of their internal operations. One CSO estimated that addressing the EU anti-terrorism clause in 2019 and Israel's terrorist designation consumed over 50% of their operational time, with 40-50% of their staff effort dedicated solely to countering hostile smear campaigns and justifying their right to operate. A second CSO described how smear campaigns diverted their focus from service delivery to defense efforts, disproportionately burdening their small administrative and finance teams. A third CSO highlighted the increased need to engage in international advocacy following their designation as a terrorist organization by Israel. They reported a significant shift to conducting more work in English, which inflated costs and workloads. At times, up to 80% of their operational time was spent on defending not just their work but their very existence. A fourth CSO emphasized how Israel worked hard to pressure international partners and parliamentarians in donor countries to cut support for them, compelling them to invest significant time and effort in advocacy simply to secure their organization's survival—a task they described as a major distraction from their primary mission.

If restrictive measures persist, more CSOs will likely be forced to divert resources away from their core activities, further straining their already limited capacities and impairing their ability to deliver essential services.

► **Finding 8: 30% OF PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORT TO HAVE REDUCED SERVICES DUE TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

► **Finding 9: 40% OF PALESTINIAN CSOS REPORT TO HAVE REDUCED STAFF DUE TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN THE PERIOD 2017-2022.**

At the time of the study, 30-40% of respondents reported that restrictive measures had forced their

organizations to cut services or reduce staff. In all cases, these reductions were directly related to funding decreases. **As financial pressures on Palestinian CSOs intensify, more Palestinian CSOs will likely be forced to reduce activities and staff.**

► **Finding 10: THE WAR ON GAZA HAS PUSHED A MAJORITY OF CSOS TO SHIFT TO EMERGENCY OPERATIONS.**

The War on Gaza has altered operational priorities for many CSOs, shifting their focus from development programming to emergency response efforts. **60% of surveyed CSOs reported introducing new services after October 7, 2023.** These included providing humanitarian aid and emergency relief, assisting Gazans stranded in the West Bank, activating online platforms to provide awareness materials and psychosocial support, editing and sharing video testimonies taken by journalists from Gaza, providing first aid training to regions under regular settler and Israeli army attacks, supporting the unemployed, and raising funds for partners in Gaza. CSOs described how this was driven by a shift in the focus of donors toward humanitarian aid, which had the effect of shrinking the funding options available for other types of vital aid work. A number of developmental CSOs described the shift to humanitarian intervention as challenging and having a negative impact on their regular operations.

C. Adapting to shrinking space

Finally, respondents were asked about the measures they had taken to mitigate the pressures of shrinking space, as well as about their recommendations for the international community to reverse the shrinking of Palestinian civic space.

► **Finding 11: PALESTINIAN CSOS HAVE ADAPTED BY SCALING BACK PROGRAMS, DECENTRALIZING OPERATIONS, AND SEEKING ALTERNATIVE FUNDING.**

Palestinian CSOs had to adopt a variety of strategies to navigate the shrinking operational space caused by political pressure, loss of funding, Israeli measures, and donor restrictions. Many organizations have adjusted by scaling back certain programs that could expose their staff or beneficiaries to risk, particularly those working with vulnerable groups. Public events have often been reduced or halted, and there is an increased focus on ensuring that partners and stakeholders are not endangered by association. This form of self-censorship has become necessary to continue operations under restrictive conditions, as CSOs are forced to evaluate which programs can proceed without attracting further scrutiny or jeopardizing their overall work.

Despite these challenges, many organizations have managed to continue their work thanks to the dedication of their staff and strong relationships with committed donors. Some CSOs have maintained their operations by investing in smaller, highly skilled teams and decentralizing their work. This allows them to continue their services, albeit on a reduced scale, while mitigating the impact of funding cuts and political pressure. For many CSOs, a significant portion of their efforts now goes into defending their right to operate, rather than focusing on delivering critical services.

When asked in the survey whether they had to reallocate human, time, and other organizational resources to combat restrictive measures between 2017 and 2022, four CSOs confirmed they did. Employees often had to juggle multiple projects simultaneously, stretching their capacity. Part of their advocacy efforts shifted toward addressing the shrinking civic space and defending human rights defenders, particularly after the 2021 criminalization of human rights CSOs by Israel. These efforts required substantial time for briefings, responding to donor inquiries, and undergoing numerous audits and reviews, all of which diverted resources away from core activities. Additionally, these organizations had to work intensively to secure alternative funding, succeeding to some extent but only with increased effort in maintaining donor relationships and conducting advocacy to sustain their operations. These adjustments highlight the ongoing strain on CSOs as they strive to balance service delivery with the need to protect their existence under increasingly restrictive conditions.

To adapt to the shrinking space, CSOs are also pursuing new strategies for long-term sustainability. Some are working toward greater self-reliance, aiming to reduce dependence on external donors and especially Western funding in the coming years. They are building new partnerships, especially with donors who remain steadfast in their support of Palestinian civil society, and looking for more support from Global South sources.

► **Finding 12: PALESTINIAN CSOS REQUIRE URGENT CHANGES FROM DONORS, INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS, AND WITHIN THE SECTOR TO SURVIVE THE SHRINKING OPERATIONAL SPACE.**

For Palestinian CSOs to survive and thrive despite the shrinking operational space, urgent changes are needed from donors, international stakeholders, and within the sector itself.

Localization and decolonization must become central to donor strategies. As one CSO put it, international organizations and donors need to move beyond viewing Palestinians as mere project implementers and instead allow them to define their own priorities. Decolonization of funding should, in particular, be an overriding priority. This is a key reason Palestinian CSOs want to shift away from dependency on Western

donors, who often impose restrictive conditions on them, and diversify their funding sources by seeking new partnerships, especially in the Global South.

Moreover, donors need to provide political rather than just humanitarian support, especially for the six CSOs which Israel labeled as terrorist organizations in 2021. As one CSO explained, this designation, combined with the EU's 2019 anti-terrorism clauses, has led to massive operational and funding challenges. It has made it easier for hostile organizations to pressure European donors into cutting off support. Donors must push their own governments to pressure Israel to cease its war on Gaza and adopt clear political stances aligned with UN resolutions and international law. Palestinian CSOs are not merely seeking financial assistance to alleviate the consequences of occupation and colonization; they are calling for political solidarity to address the root causes of the crisis.

The CSOs also expressed feelings of betrayal by international NGOs (INGOs) during the war, criticizing some INGOs for their perceived failure to vocally support Palestinians' right to freedom and self-determination. As one interviewee noted, INGO partners should act as advocates for Palestinian rights in Western capitals, amplifying their voices and pushing for a ceasefire. At a country level, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the EU were singled out by the interviewees as particularly problematic donors. This was not a universal view held against all donors. Some countries—such as Ireland, Spain, Norway, and Belgium—were praised as key allies, with one CSO describing them as true supporters of Palestine. Another CSO stressed the need for INGOs to work with Palestinian civil society in order to establish new common ground, especially in light of the drastically altered context following October 7, 2023.

Another pressing issue is the fragmentation of Palestinian civil society. One CSO highlighted that divisions have deepened, particularly due to donor-imposed conditions like the EU's anti-terrorism clauses, which have fostered competition among CSOs vying for increasingly limited funding. They emphasized the importance of unity, urging organizations to come together and stop competing with each other. In the face of deepening restrictions and increasing pressures, many of the CSOs in this study described how they were taking steps toward greater solidarity by participating in large networks designed to create a united front and provide mutual support. As one interviewee noted, these networks have proven their strength and effectiveness, especially in the wake of the events since October 7, 2023. This need for unity is especially important in addressing the shrinking space post-October 7, 2023, as the War on Gaza has placed even more strain on the sector.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the Consulting Team, the publishing organizations have compiled the following recommendations for policymakers in the EU and its member states.

A. PROVIDE TARGETED FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL SUPPORT TO PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY TO REVERSE THE TREND OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE.

1. The EU and its member states should significantly increase funding for Palestinian civil society organizations, prioritizing Palestinian human rights defenders and advocates for international law and Palestinian rights, as they are most frequently and severely affected by restrictions and attacks.
2. The EU and its member states should provide financial and political support for Palestinian civil society initiatives countering polarization and divisions within Palestinian civil society, such as solidarity networks.
3. The EU and its member states should complement humanitarian aid with significant investments in development and rights-promoting projects, prioritizing areas at immediate risk of further annexation and colonization, including and in particular in Area C and East Jerusalem.
4. The EU and its member states should establish dedicated funding mechanisms, on which Palestinian CSOs can rely whose operations and continuity are threatened due to attacks from Israeli or Palestinian authorities, including resources for legal aid to defend CSOs' rights.
5. The EU and its member states should refrain from politicized, ambiguous, and discriminatory funding conditions in their grant contracts with Palestinian CSOs, in particular expansive incitement clauses undermining freedom of speech – and ensure that funding requirements respect recipients' fundamental freedoms and do not impose undue administrative burdens.
6. The EU and its member states should demonstrate their support for Palestinian civil society by holding regular, high-profile meetings with Palestinian CSOs and by conducting frequent, well-publicized field visits to the

occupied Palestinian territory, involving briefings and tours by Palestinian CSOs.

7. The EU and its member states should support risk reduction strategies of Palestinian CSOs targeted by restrictive measures by Israeli or Palestinian authorities, easing funding conditions where possible.

B. EXPLICITLY OPPOSE AND ACTIVELY COUNTER ANY EFFORTS TO FURTHER RESTRICT AND SHRINK PALESTINIAN CIVIC SPACE.

1. The EU and its member states should develop and implement concrete and robust countermeasures to end Israel's impunity and induce Israel to cease its repeated and systematic violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, which constitute the main threat to Palestinian civil society. These measures should include the suspension of the preferential EU-Israel Association Agreement, a comprehensive arms embargo, and a ban on trade with illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.
2. The EU and its member states should publicly denounce unfounded and politically motivated allegations against Palestinian civil society organizations and consistently refrain from defunding Palestinian NGOs based on such allegations.
3. The EU and its member states should refrain from validating and facilitating politically motivated groups such as NGO Monitor and publicly denounce actions by such groups, which amount to defamation, spread disinformation, and undermine the viability of Palestinian civil society.
4. The EU and its member states should publicly denounce and disincentivize (draft) legislation promoted by the Israeli parliament and/or government, which undermines the viability of Palestinian civil society and the exercise of fundamental freedoms.
5. The EU and its member states should increase their pressure on the Palestinian Authority to refrain from policies and measures undermining the freedoms and resilience of local CSOs.

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