



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Baseline Snapshot

Palestine

2025

Contextual Note

This paper examines the enabling environment for civil society in Palestine, covering both Gaza and the West Bank. Some conditions in Gaza and the West Bank differ significantly in terms of governance, security, access, and the operating space for civil society – given the difficult context of war in Gaza and occupation in the West Bank. These differences, together with ongoing instability and access constraints, affect the availability and comparability of information and should be taken into account when reading this paper.

At the time of drafting, the situation in Gaza was evolving rapidly and as such the paper places particular emphasis on the role of Israeli forces, given its practical control over much of Gaza and its far-reaching influence over political, security, and humanitarian conditions affecting civil society across the occupied Palestinian territory. This focus should not be interpreted as negating the roles or responsibilities of other actors, but rather reflects the paper's analytical scope and the structural realities shaping the enabling environment for civil society in this context.

Context

Palestine comprises the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with a [population](#) of approximately 5.6 million people in the West Bank and Gaza. The region has long been affected by the ongoing Israeli occupation and attacks, which profoundly impacts the daily lives of Palestinians, limits development, and restricts civil and political freedoms. The crisis worsened amid the ongoing [genocidal war](#) waged by Israel on the Gaza Strip, the [increasing violence by settlers](#) in the West Bank, and continuous military incursions into Palestinian areas.

Since October 2023, Gaza has been subject to genocidal war by Israeli forces. According to the [UN Commission of Inquiry](#), Israeli authorities committed four of the five genocidal acts under the 1948 Genocide Convention between October 2023 and 2025. Civil society premises have been destroyed, [humanitarian conditions](#) have deteriorated, and the ability of organisations to operate, document abuses, and provide essential services has been [severely constrained](#).

In the West Bank, the Israeli occupation continues to impose significant [restrictions](#) on civil society. Organisations face harassment, persecution, arrests, and forced closures. Numerous international bodies and legal authorities have [characterised](#) Israel's long-standing control, settlement expansion, and civilian presence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as inconsistent with international law, including in a 2024 advisory [opinion](#) by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). These conditions undermine the effectiveness, independence, and sustainability of civil society organisations across the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Additionally, Israel has [increasingly withheld](#) and deducted Palestinian tax revenues (clearance funds) that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. This is a practice Palestinian officials describe as effectively 'piracy' of these funds, leading to further deterioration of the Palestinian economy. These factors have deepened the weakening of the Palestinian Authority, [eroded](#) the rule of law, committed numerous violations, disrupted civil peace, and reshaped national priorities.

Despite the challenges, CSOs have not hesitated to continue their work during the war, despite the extremely difficult conditions. Following the [ceasefire](#) on 29 September 2025, which has

not fully held, as Palestinian casualties continue daily in Gaza, these organisations now have somewhat greater scope to operate. However, significant concerns remain due to the additional restrictions that the Israeli occupation has imposed on civil society in the aftermath of the ceasefire. For example, 37 international NGOs working in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem were officially [notified](#) that their registrations would expire by 31 December 2025 under new Israeli measures requiring detailed disclosures, forcing them to cease operations if they cannot comply — a development that will severely impede humanitarian action delivered in partnership with Palestinian civil society organisations.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Article 19 of the amended [Palestinian Basic Law](#) provides for fundamental freedoms of opinion, expression and assembly. Freedom of association is explicitly provided for in Article 26(2), while Article 26(4) guarantees the right to freedom of assembly. However, in practice, there are no specific laws that provide for the enjoyment of these rights, but instead focus on limiting them.

Among the legal restrictions currently in force in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is the Decree [Law No. \(7\) of 2021, which amends Law No. \(1\) of 2000](#) concerning charitable and civic associations. This amendment [limits](#) the right to assemble and organise, as well as the ability to carry out activities independently from ministries and the executive authority, effectively turning civil institutions into branches affiliated with government ministries. Also, [Law No. 12 of 1998 on Public Assemblies](#) still govern the right to hold public assemblies, including the requirement to obtain prior permission from the police, sign a commitment to respect the law, and prohibiting illegal actions and incitement.

In addition, the Israeli authorities have treated civil society actors as a threat, implementing [measures and policies](#) that severely restrict their work, including arbitrary arrests, physical and psychological abuse, targeted killings, and administrative detention. For instance, [RSF report](#), notes that almost 200 reporters were killed in Gaza by the Israeli army over the first 18 months of war, at least 42 of whom were likely killed due to their work. Among them was Palestinian journalist Yahya Sobeih, [killed](#) in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City on 7 May 2025 while reporting. In the West Bank, journalists have been victims of abuses by both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli occupying forces. For instance, a prominent activist, Awda Al-Hathaleen, was [shot dead](#) by an Israeli settler on 28 July 2025. [Israeli pressure](#) has intensified since 7 October 2023, with increased [recorded cases](#) in arrests of reporters and obstructions to their work.

Regarding [administrative detention](#), Israeli authorities have [detained](#) Palestinians without charge or trial under administrative detention. As of June 2025, over 10,000 Palestinians [were held in Israeli prisons](#), with 3,600 of them under administrative detention. This practice has been widely [criticised](#) by human rights organisations for violating international law and due process rights.

Another Israeli [practice](#) that has also negatively affected the Palestinian civil society environment is the shelling of relief distribution centers, which resulted in injuries and deaths among civilians and also impact the work on civil society actors. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [reported](#) in August 2025 that since the beginning of that month, it had documented 11 incidents of attacks on Palestinians while they were working to provide protection for convoys in northern and central Gaza. These

incidents resulted in the deaths of at least 46 Palestinians, most of whom were security personnel accompanying aid and supply convoys.

In parallel, concerns have also been raised regarding the conduct of Palestinian authorities. [The Independent Commission for Human Rights](#) (Office of the Ombudsman) received 233 complaints from Palestinian citizens who reported being subjected to torture and ill-treatment by Palestinian security personnel. According to the Commission's monitoring, these acts were carried out against detainees with the aim of retaliating against them and punishing them for their political opinions and positions.

According to a [survey](#) in April 2025, involving 47 local and international civil society organisations, 95% of these organisations reported being forced to reduce or suspend their services in Gaza since the resumption of Israeli bombardment. Nada Al-Nashif, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has also [pointed out](#) that most civil society organisations in Gaza have lost their physical infrastructure, with their staff either dead, injured, or detained, while others have fled seeking security. These are huge blows to civil society's enjoyment of freedom of association

In the West Bank, [Israeli practices](#) such as settlement expansion and restrictions on freedom of movement and expression have severely hindered the ability of civil society organisations to access targeted areas. These actions have effectively restricted civil space, preventing participation, obstructing gatherings, and leading to a de facto geographic division imposed by Israel as the occupying power in the occupied Palestinian territories. This constrained environment has been further exacerbated by international decisions that undermine Palestinian civil society.

There is a further concern to freedom of expression from other third countries. In September 2025, the U.S. administration [imposed sanctions](#) on three Palestinian human rights organisations: Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza, and "Al-Haq" organisation – Defending Human Rights. This arbitrary decision has been [viewed](#) by civil society actors as an attempt to silence human rights voices that work on monitoring and documenting the Israeli occupation's crimes against our Palestinian people, seeking to hold it accountable and bring it to justice according to international law.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

The [Charitable Associations and Civil Society Organisations Law No. 1 of 2000](#) serves as the legal framework regulating civil society work in Palestine. It was established to organise the operation of associations and civic institutions in terms of registration and licensing requirements, funding mechanisms, financial and administrative oversight, and regulatory relationships with the government. Under the Law, registration of CSOs with the Ministry of Interior is mandatory for legal operation. Article 1 –affirms that Palestinians have the right to freely engage in social, cultural, professional, and scientific activities, including the right to establish and operate associations and non-governmental organisations in accordance with the provisions of this law. Furthermore, [Article 26 of the Amended Basic Law of 2003](#) provides that Palestinians shall have the right to participate in political life, both individually

and collectively. They shall have the following rights in particular: to form and establish unions, associations, societies, clubs and popular institutions in accordance with the law.

The Charitable Associations and Civil Society Organisations Law No. 1 of 2000 gives the Ministry broad oversight powers. Article 6 authorises monitoring of financial and administrative activities, while Articles 10–11 require prior approval from the Ministry for any amendments to the bylaws or changes in the board of directors. Article 13, especially following Decree-Law No. 7 of 2021, imposes [additional requirements](#) such as for annual work plans, detailed activity and financial reports, and submission of audited accounts. These provisions effectively limit CSOs' independence, as they link operational and programmatic decisions to Ministry approval, and place a significant administrative burden on civil society actors. The Ministry of Interior is responsible for registering civil society organisations, applying a unified procedure across both the West Bank and Gaza. In response, civil society organisations such as the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (Aman) have [called](#) for the repeal of the decree-law, urging political parties and civil society actors to assume responsibility for defending public freedoms.

The Palestinian Authority has continued implementing security clearance procedures to obtain prior approval from Palestinian security agencies before registering associations. This constitutes a violation of the Charitable Associations and Civil Society Organisations Law. For example, in 2023, the PA, [refused](#) to renew the registration of Palestinian legal organisation in March: "Lawyers for Justice", and without valid registration, it was not be able to access its bank accounts and faced possibility of its offices shuttered and staff arrested. However, following sustained pressure and advocacy by international human rights organisations, the Palestinian Authority eventually agreed to renew the organisation's registration in 2025.

Under Palestinian law, the authorities possess the power to dissolve civil society organisations (CSOs), though the grounds and fairness of this authority are highly contested by human rights actors. Articles 12–14 of the Charitable Associations and Civil Society Organisations Law No. 1 of 2000 grant the competent ministry, typically the Ministry of Interior, the ability to suspend or seek court approval to dissolve a CSO if it violates the law, engages in activities outside its stated objectives, misuses funds, fails to comply with reporting requirements, or undertakes acts deemed to threaten public order or national security. Decree-Law No. 7 of 2021 reinforces this oversight, allowing the ministry to request dissolution if a CSO's activities are considered contrary to public policy or national security.

Moreover, Independent Commission for Human Rights' [annual report](#) of 2025 documented numerous violations related to the right to form and operate associations, including restrictions on the registration process, freezing of bank accounts without legal justification, and lack of transparency in informing organisations about such actions.

Adding to these challenges, Israel [announced](#) in March 2025 new visa and registration rules for international aid organisations operating in the Palestinian territories. These measures grant officials broad authority to reject NGO registrations based on criteria such as whether the organisation or its employees have called for a boycott of Israel, denied Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state, or have supported legal actions against Israeli citizens in international courts.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Civil society organisations in Palestine face serious obstacles in [receiving funding](#). They must get official approval from the Palestinian Monetary Authority before receiving any foreign funding. This rule comes from a 2016 Cabinet decision meant to ensure transparency and prevent misuse of funds. In practice, however, these regulations have sometimes led to frozen bank accounts and delayed projects.

In addition, CSOs suffered from the [reduction](#) of USAID funding directed to Palestinian organisations – which has impacted vital and development services in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In 2025, USAID had around US\$ 446 million [earmarked](#) for Gaza partner organisations, of which US\$ 383 million was cleared after a waiver following the foreign aid freeze introduced by Executive Order 14169. Still, about US\$ 40 million was cut, especially from direct cash assistance. Many NGOs have [reported](#) that although contracts or grants were approved, the promised payments have not been delivered, delaying or scaling back critical services.

Moreover, on 4 September 2025, the United States [imposed sanctions](#) on three prominent Palestinian human rights organisations — Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), and Al-Haq: Law in the Service of Man. The decision came as a result of the organisations' engagements with the International Criminal Court regarding investigations of alleged war crimes by Israel in Gaza. This move marked a serious escalation in external political pressure on Palestinian civil society, undermining its ability to operate freely and access international funding.

Other international restrictions include Switzerland's October 2023 [suspension of funds](#) to 11 NGOs (6 Palestinian and 5 Israeli) pending review of compliance with its Code of Conduct and anti-discrimination rules, highlighted ongoing concerns with funding of CSOs. Collectively, these measures — legal, financial, and political — have created a highly constrained and precarious enabling environment for Palestinian civil society, limiting their operational capacity, access to funding, and ability to advocate for human rights and humanitarian needs.

In addition, Israel as the occupying power, [imposes funding](#) restrictions on CSOs particularly those operating in occupied Jerusalem. This creates a significant obstacle, as these organisations rely primarily on donor funding. As a result, 55 NGOs operating in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories have [called](#) for urgent action from the international community against new Israeli registration rules for international NGOs. Based on vague, broad, politicized, and open-ended criteria, these rules appear designed to assert control over independent humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding operations, silence advocacy grounded in international humanitarian and human rights law, and further entrench Israeli control and the de facto annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories.

Consequently, it can be said that obtaining funding, whether domestic or international, is not easy due to the restrictions imposed on civil society organisations by the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli occupation, and some donors.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Palestine has no law on the right to access information. The [absence](#) of such a law has been one of the most prominent obstacles for transparency. An information law is considered essential and a fundamental component of participation in public policy-making and accountability. Furthermore, there is a lack of any officially adopted and published public policy that would regulate the relationship between civil society and official authorities within the framework of partnership in public policy-making.

On 19 November 2025, President Mahmoud Abbas issued [Decree-Law No. \(23\) of 2025](#) concerning the election of local council bodies, annulling the previous Law No. (10) of 2005,

and introducing a new requirement obliging every election candidate to sign a declaration committing to the programme of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), its international obligations, and the decisions of international legitimacy. Civil and human rights organisations have condemned this requirement as a fundamental violation of the right to political participation guaranteed under international law, all of which protect freedom, democracy, political pluralism, and the right to participate in political life. Signatory institutions have called on the government to retract this requirement immediately, warning that it may further marginalise civil society and erode citizens' confidence in the electoral process.

The 19th Palestinian government (came into power in 2024-) has adopted a policy of openness by publishing all government activities and agreements signed with local and international partners, which helps enhance legitimacy. Citizens participate in the policy and legislative process through the current government's introduction of the Legislative Platform, which has enabled civil society to provide feedback and engage in the drafting of laws. Through this platform, civil society organisations, citizens, the public, and other relevant stakeholders are allowed to submit comments on draft legislation. This initiative aligns with the Justice Sector Strategy to promote the values of justice and the rule of law, and to incorporate public opinions and ideas into the policymaking and legislative process before final approval, in accordance with legal procedures.

In addition, the 19th Palestinian government has taken steps to enhance civil society participation in public policy-making, such as to review the Cybercrime Law. This includes the creation of the 'Tashree' platform, which allows civil society organisations to provide input and participate in drafting legislation. Several government statements have emphasised the importance of civil society engagement, openness towards it, recognizing it as a key partner for the government, and ensuring transparency, particularly in the areas of reform and development, in order to serve the public interest.

However, as pointed out in reports by the AMAN Coalition, the participation of civil society organisations in public policymaking in Palestine is often symbolic or superficial and does not amount to meaningful influence over decision-making. Although formal mechanisms exist for civil society to express opinions, their ability to shape policies or hold authorities accountable for implementation remains limited, due to the absence of a supportive political and legislative environment and the dominance of government control over final decisions.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Since 2021, and particularly after the escalation of violence in Gaza since October 2023, Israeli authorities have increasingly portrayed Palestinian civil society organisations and humanitarian actors as "security threats". For instance, Defense Ministry in 2021 listed six Palestinian NGOs as "terrorist organisations," and said in a statement that these groups were "controlled" by senior members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Israel alleged that the groups use humanitarian funding from European governments "as a central source for the financing of the PFLP's activity."

This securitization has been used over the past years to justify raids, detentions, funding restrictions, and public delegitimization campaigns targeting NGOs and aid workers. For example, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a major Palestinian legal group for prisoners and detainees along with five other charitable entities across the Middle East,

Africa and Europe, accusing them of supporting Palestinian armed factions and militant groups, including Hamas' military wing, under the pretense of humanitarian aid in Gaza in June 2025.

The political discourse surrounding civil society in Palestine is marked by divergence and complexity. Some political leaders perceive civil society organisations as instruments of oversight and accountability, but sometimes viewing them as constraints on governmental authority or as entities competing for funding and influence. From the perspective of civil society organisations, campaigns launched by these institutions, addressing various issues aimed at improving the civil space environment—play a significant role in highlighting ongoing crises. In the West Bank, these efforts focus on advocating for the adoption of a law guaranteeing the right to access information and [amending the Cybercrime Law](#). In the Gaza Strip, [they emphasize the need](#) to establish a humanitarian framework for the provision and distribution of aid and to coordinate these efforts with international partners in a way that serves the national interest.

As part of the government's efforts to open up to civil society, Palestinian Vice President Hussein Al-Sheikh [met](#) with directors and board members of civil society organisations and institutions to discuss the main challenges facing the Palestinian cause. He emphasised the role of these organisations in nation-building and as partners to state institutions, stressing the need to continue unifying goals and visions between official and non-governmental institutions.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Civil society in Palestine faces significant challenges accessing and freely sharing digital information due to multiple restrictions. The Palestinian Authority's Cybercrime Law (Decree-Law No. 16 of 2017) enables website [blocking and prosecution](#) of activists based on vague charges like "incitement". The law has frequently been [challenged](#) by civil society for its vague and overly broad provisions, which allow authorities to penalize expression online for supposedly "threatening national unity" or "public order." Civil society actors, including journalists and human rights defenders, [have faced legal threats](#) or charges under this law for online dissent or critical post.

Israeli authorities impose infrastructure limitations, such as restricting Palestinians to outdated internet networks and causing frequent internet outages, especially in Gaza. Additionally, major social media platforms often censor or restrict Palestinian content, limiting freedom of expression online. According to the Monthly Palestinian Digital Rights [Report](#) issued by the Arab Center for Social Media Development (7amleh) in July 2025, a total of 322 violations, including 45 cases of account suspension and restriction, 287 instances involving violent and harmful content and behavior in the digital space, and two cases in the digital economic platforms. These violations included the deletion of posts and accounts, restricted access (shadow banning), blocking of live broadcasts, and the closure of media and institutional pages. The report further explains that these policies are not limited to restricting journalists and activists, but also target the accounts of human rights and media organisations, thereby hindering their work in documenting violations and conveying the truth to the international community. It has been [warned](#) that these practices represent a systematic targeting of Palestinian digital rights and aim to weaken civil society's ability to use the digital space as a tool for documentation, advocacy, and human rights pressure.

These violations occur within a highly [restrictive environment](#), where the Israeli occupation has over the years imposed increasing limitations on the telecommunications infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, controlling internet access and frequencies. This allows for both direct and indirect censorship of Palestinian content. Also, [The "Facebook Law"](#) (Draft Law on Prevention of Incitement on Social Media Platforms, 2021) seeks to make social media companies remove content considered to incite violence or undermine state security, using vague terms open to broad interpretation. This law is seen as a direct and grave [threat](#) to the rights to freedom of opinion and expression for Palestinians and others in the digital space, and an additional "legal" restriction to the already multiple limitations imposed on Palestinian voices and advocacy for the Palestinian cause regarding Palestinian content on social media platforms.

Challenges and Opportunities

Several ongoing challenges can be identified regarding the Palestinian civil space and its complexities. Chief among these is the escalation and continuation of violations by Israel, as the occupying power in the Palestinian territories, including attacks on civil society organisations through closure orders, arrests, and prosecutions under the pretext of incitement or threat. Additionally, some funding agencies for Palestinian civil society organisations align their practices with the requirements imposed by Israel in administering the occupied Palestinian territories, which significantly contributes to the restriction of international funding.

The continued efforts of the Palestinian Authority in its reform program represent an opportunity to sustain and develop the Palestinian civil space. This includes promoting accountability for Israel, as the occupying power, for its mismanagement of the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly in imposing numerous restrictions and intervening in funding (including imposing conditionalities), which significantly constrains the work of civil society organisations in the occupied Palestinian territories.

It is recommended to increase local and international pressure to enact laws that would strengthen the environment and operational space for civil society organisations in Palestine. Specifically, this includes repealing the amendments to Law No. (1) of 2000 concerning charitable associations and civil society institutions, and establishing guidelines or regulations that clarify the boundaries and powers of civil society in a way that serves the interests of both the state and citizens. Additionally, enacting complementary laws—such as the right to access data, amending the Cybercrime Law, and adopting legislation to protect personal data, creates supportive legal environment for civil society.

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