



CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

PALESTINE

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

The already challenging situation in Palestine continues to be exacerbated by the ongoing onslaught in the context of Israel's forceful occupation of Palestine and the 16-year siege of Gaza. Since 7 October 2023, when Hamas forces launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, which was followed by a devastating and brutal military offensive by Israel that has since ensued in Gaza, more than [1,200](#) Israelis and foreign nationals in Israel have been killed and more than [28,000](#) Palestinians in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, have been killed, with at least 67,600 injuries to Palestinians being reported as of February 2024.

Consequently, Gaza is now in the throes of a massive humanitarian catastrophe. By February 2024, an alarming 75% of its population—approximately 1.7 million people—had been [forcibly displaced](#) from their homes. The World Health Organisation has issued a dire alert, highlighting that the population is starving to death.

This brief aims to illuminate the state of civic freedom in Palestine, particularly within the context of Israel's ongoing brutal military campaign that has resulted in a massive humanitarian and human rights crisis in Gaza. The analysis reveals the intricate civic space dynamics in the region amidst this military bombardment, while demonstrating the varied roles of different actors; local and international, state and non-state, both overtly and tacitly.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Palestine](#) as “**Repressed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED
REPRESSED
OBSTRUCTED
NARROWED
OPEN

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

FINANCIAL FREEZES IMPERIL UNRWA'S EXISTENCE AMID MASSIVE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

On 26 January 2024, it was reported that the Israeli government had [provided](#) information to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), alleging that some of the agency's staff members were involved in the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack. Although the agency immediately ended the contracts of those suspected and launched an investigation into the allegations, demonstrating its commitment to addressing these serious allegations, Israel and several other donor states have taken adverse steps that threaten the existence of this crucial agency and its ability to continue to deliver on its mandate – the much-needed humanitarian assistance in Gaza. At least [eighteen](#) countries, including the US, Germany, Canada, Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, Finland and Italy [suspended](#) their funding to UNRWA, in what has been seen as an unjustified conflation of the agency with staff members who may have been involved in criminal activities, and despite a [lack of clarity](#) on the evidence they used to justify these suspensions. Now, in the midst of one of the [worst](#) humanitarian and food crises in recent global history, and with no less than two million people relying on UNRWA for their survival, the largest relief organisation in Gaza is on the brink of collapse, in what the United Nations has said could lead to the eventual [crumbling](#) of the humanitarian system in Palestine.

While recognising the gravity of these accusations and the necessity for comprehensive investigations, civil society has [pointed out](#) that slashing aid to the most essential humanitarian agency in the region during a large-scale military onslaught, which has decimated significant infrastructure and left Gaza's civilian population on the brink of famine, is unjustifiable. Additionally, with the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) recent [ruling](#) ordering Israel to enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza, the suspension of funds by donor states stands in stark contrast to ICJ's stance on humanitarian aid.

Yet, while certain donor states have chosen a most far-reaching approach, others have exercised [caution](#) before reaching damning conclusions. This underscores the existence of alternative paths for donors to navigate amidst the challenging humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Acknowledging the substantial humanitarian need, Ireland, Norway and Spain have pledged to sustain their support. Portugal and Spain declared additional aid. The Norwegian government released a statement differentiating between UNRWA and any staff members who might have engaged in wrongdoing. In a very welcome move, after a month long funding suspension, the European Union Commission - the third-largest donor to UNRWA, [announced](#) on 2 March 2024 that it would reinstate funding to UNRWA and increase emergency support to Palestinians by 68 million euros [through](#) international partners like the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [said](#):

"We stand by the Palestinian people in Gaza and elsewhere in the region. Innocent Palestinians should not have to pay the price for the crimes of terrorist group Hamas. They face terrible conditions putting their lives at risk because of lack of access to sufficient food and other basic needs."

[Several aid agencies issued](#) a joint statement urging donor states to reaffirm support for the vital work that UNRWA and its partners do and reverse these funding suspensions, uphold their duties towards the Palestinian people and scale up humanitarian assistance for civilians in dire need in Gaza and the region.

Notably, the UNRWA has in the past faced serious [opposition](#) from the Israeli government which has long campaigned for its closure, and which has also blamed the agency for the recent ICJ ruling against Israel. Civil society has [noted](#) that:

"At this crucial time, the funding suspension constitutes collective punishment of the Palestinians... this measure is inseparable from the Israeli occupying state's [decades-long](#) effort to abolish UNRWA, as the latter represents the essence of its occupation of Palestine and serves as a permanent reminder of it."

SUSPENSION OF CSO FUNDING CASTS SHADOW ON VITAL HUMAN RIGHTS EFFORTS

In a similar vein, since the 7 October 2023 attack, several European states including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, and the European Commission have also [suspended](#) or reviewed funding to Palestinian and Israeli civil society organisations amidst unsubstantiated allegations of rerouting of funds to terrorist groups, and amidst vilification and labelling of civil society documentation of violations by Israel as anti-semitism. Civil society has [warned](#) that these unjustified measures implicitly support and perpetuate Israel's baseless accusations of Palestinian NGOs being linked to terrorism.

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) [halted](#) funding worth millions of dollars to six Palestinian and five Israeli civil society organisations, while Sweden [indicated](#) that it will no longer provide future funding to actors who do not condemn Hamas, a directive which has raised concern over its infringement of the freedom of expression by equating a lack of condemnation with support, in what civil society has noted may be seen as tacitly requiring civil society organisations to adhere to the political positions of certain donor states.

While recognising the vital significance of accountability and transparency in development assistance, civil society groups have [raised concerns](#) about the timing and rationale behind these measures, which have escalated in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 attack by the Hamas group, and which have been taken on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations.

The cutting of funding to Palestinian human rights organisations exacerbates an already dire situation, adding unnecessary strain to their vital work in an already challenging context. As [UN reports have demonstrated](#) on several occasions, Palestinian CSOs have been working under “increasingly restricted civic space through a strategy of delegitimising and silencing civil society. This includes criminalising Palestinian civil society organisations and their members by labelling them as “terrorists”, pressuring and threatening institutions that give a platform for civil society discourse, actively lobbying donors, and implementing measures intended to cut sources of funding and support.”

It is vital to acknowledge the significant and crucial role played by civil society actors in Palestine and Israel in documenting human rights violations across both countries, and the important contribution they make to international human rights actors and mechanisms seeking to address violations in the region.

BLOCKING OF AID FRUSTRATES OPERATIONS OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS

Humanitarian organisations seeking to provide much needed assistance to the civilian population in Gaza have been facing significant challenges to their operations.

Between 1 January 2024 and 12 February 2024, humanitarian organisations [scheduled](#) 77 missions to provide aid and conduct assessments in areas north of Wadi Gaza. Among these, Israeli authorities facilitated 12, partially facilitated three, impeded 14, denied access to 39, while nine were postponed by the agencies. Most of the missions which were facilitated were those dealing with food distribution, while those seeking access to support critical hospitals and facilities offering water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) services remained consistently denied.

On 16 February 2024, it was [reported](#) that Israel had halted a delivery of United Nations food assistance destined to sustain over a million Gazans for a month. Three days earlier, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich announced that he had instructed the interception of 1,049 containers designated for distribution by the UN.

Israeli citizens have also been gathering to block aid trucks from reaching Gaza. On 6 February 2024, they [gathered](#) to stop at least 130 humanitarian aid trucks from entering Gaza. This was one of several gatherings being held by Israeli citizens at the Karem Abu Salem crossing to block the delivery of humanitarian aid to Palestine. The Israelis lay in the streets and set up tents to prevent trucks from proceeding into Gaza. Located at the border with Egypt, the Karem Abu Salem crossing is a significant entry point for humanitarian aid to Gaza, as it serves as the inspection point for aid trucks heading into Gaza.

The restrictions to humanitarian aid into Gaza bear grave ramifications for millions of Palestinians. As Israel resorts to starvation as a tactic of war, the population is [starving](#) to death with no less than 75% of Gaza's population, consisting of around 1.7 million people, being displaced from their homes as of February 2024.

HUMANITARIAN WORKERS – THE BRAVE HRDS RISKING IT ALL AT THE FRONT LINE

“Still, aid workers, under enormous pressure and with no safety guarantees, are doing their best to deliver inside Gaza”. – UN Secretary General

On 15 January 2024, the UN Secretary General in his remarks at a press stakeout [announced](#) that at least 152 UN staff members had been killed in Gaza since 7 October 2023, the [highest](#) number of UN aid workers to have been killed in any single conflict in the organisation's history. By 15 February 2024, the number of UN staff members killed had [risen](#) to 158. Other humanitarian aid organisations including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have severally [reported](#) the [killing](#) of their members and staff in the course of the ongoing military bombardment.

CSO BUILDINGS AND INFRASTRUCTURE FACE ATTACKS AND DESTRUCTION

As the military onslaught continues, the offices of CSOs face indiscriminate and sometimes deliberate destruction.

On 12 February 2024, Médecins du Monde (MdM) [condemned](#) the destruction of its offices in Gaza city a few days previously, which they describe as deliberate. No staff members were inside when the building was demolished. MdM did not receive any warning about the attack, even though its offices were clearly identified as those of a humanitarian agency, and the address of the building had been shared with the Israeli authorities responsible for coordination with NGOs, as per procedure. The office's destruction came after soldiers entered the premises, forced out the family of an MdM member who were seeking refuge inside, and later destroyed it.

Besides deliberate attacks, the indiscriminate destruction of infrastructure by the military bombardment has also significantly affected CSO operations in Gaza. On 19th January 2024, an Israeli air strike [caused](#) significant damage to the building hosting EuroMed Rights' member, the Medical Aid for Palestine (MAP), and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Gaza. The strike came alarmingly close to killing a member of MAP and an emergency medical team from the IRC. The strike injured several staff members from both organisations, requiring the withdrawal of six members of the medical team from Gaza.

Similarly, as of 15 January 2024, there had been a minimum of [232 incidents](#) affecting UNRWA facilities and individuals within them since 7 October 2023. A total of 66 UNRWA sites had been directly struck, with 69 different installations sustaining damage from strikes on nearby objects. The number of incidents affecting UNRWA facilities had [risen](#) to 321 by 15 February 2024.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

JOURNALISTS KILLED, INJURED, ASSAULTED AND ARRESTED IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Since the ongoing brutal onslaught on Palestine by Israel began in October 2023, journalists and media workers have borne much of the brunt as many continue to pay the ultimate price because of their brave work that puts them at the front line of the military bombardment.

MADA [documented](#) a total of 90 violations against journalists and media freedoms during December 2023, most of which were committed by the Israeli Occupation Forces. By 13 February 2024, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [documented](#) that at least 85 journalists and media workers had been killed since 7 October 2023. 16 journalists were reported injured, 4 journalists were reported missing and 25 journalists had been arrested. According to CPJ, several journalists have also reported being [assaulted](#) using tear gas, live and rubber bullets, targeted with arbitrary searches and confiscation of their equipment while doing their work.

INTERNET AND COMMUNICATION SHUTDOWNS HINDER ACCESS TO CRUCIAL INFORMATION

Recurring telecommunications blackouts in the Gaza strip continue to jeopardise the safety of civilians, journalists and aid workers by inhibiting access to critical information, while also undermining humanitarian aid operations.

According to Euro-Med Monitor, Israel has [shut off](#) the Internet and communications from the Gaza Strip at least ten times since 7 October 2023, with the majority of these incidents happening concurrently with or before a planned escalation in military attacks. The infrastructure supporting these networks has been left destroyed.

Euro-Med Monitor has also documented that Israel has been particularly targeting civilians trying to pick up communications and internet signals in besieged areas where serious human rights violations are occurring. This hinders press coverage of the violations and makes it difficult for residents to report them. On 22nd January 2024, a group of journalists was targeted by Israeli aircraft while attempting to obtain internet services in the Tal Al-Zaatar area of Jabalia. A young man, Muhammad Al-Ghoula, was killed, and the journalist Imad Ghabboun was injured during the attack.

On 16 February 2024, UNOCHA [noted](#) that the recurring telecommunications blackouts in the Gaza Strip continue to limit people's access to life saving information, and hinder various humanitarian efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT:

- Immediately agree to a ceasefire.
- Ensure that humanitarian organisations are able to undertake their operations without undue restrictions to movement and delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza.
- Ensure and guarantee the protection of humanitarian aid workers, their facilities and those of civil society organisations in Gaza.
- Refrain from the use of excessive force, physical violence and detention of journalists reporting on the military bombardment in Gaza.
- Security officials who have used excessive force towards journalists and media workers must be immediately and effectively investigated and held accountable.
- Stop the obstruction of telecommunications services in Gaza.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Call on the US, the EU and relevant European countries to reassess their decisions to suspend funding for UNRWA to ensure that vital humanitarian help continues.
- Call on relevant European countries to reassess their decisions to suspend funding for Palestinian and Israeli NGOs.
- Call for urgent and immediate action to address fundamental rights violations in Gaza.
- Hold both parties to the ongoing military bombardment accountable for their human rights violations.