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Split apart | March 2016

Palestinian civil society in its own words on the impact of the separation policy and the potential should the policy be reversed



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Introduction

Israel has restricted travel between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank for more than a quarter of a century. Increasing restrictions were initially said to be the result of security considerations, but looking back, in 2016, it's clear that many of the restrictions result more from Israel's minimalist approach to its obligations toward the 1.8 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip than from its obligation to protect the security of Israeli citizens. The separation policy, whose goal is to isolate or distinguish between residents of Gaza and those of the West Bank, has taken an immense toll on Palestinian society and caused both short- and long-term damage. By contrast, the benefits to Israeli security are hard to identify.

Though Israel retains substantive means of control over Gaza, it categorically denies that this control renders it responsible for normal civilian life in Gaza. It controls Gaza's sea, land and air borders, the population registry, bears significant influence on planning and infrastructure, including communications networks and electromagnetic space, inside the Strip. It restricts the goods Gaza residents may sell outside the Strip and prohibits certain goods from entering Gaza. Importantly, it also prevents travel to and from Gaza, barring in mostly exceptional and often just humanitarian circumstances.

Businesspeople purchasing goods in Israel and medical patients in need of care that is unavailable in Gaza make up the vast majority of those permitted to travel from Gaza for designated and limited periods of time. Thousands of families who are split between Gaza and the West Bank cannot meet. Gaza residents are not allowed to study in the West Bank and they can rarely go there to partner with colleagues, network with professional contacts, or enroll in professional development courses.

The separation policy impacts the lives of Palestinian residents of the occupied Palestinian territory in various ways. We recently reported on how it harms the *Palestinian economy*, mostly, though not exclusively, *in Gaza*. We also addressed how the policy *tears apart families* that are split between the different parts of the Palestinian territory. In this report, we look at how the policy impacts civil society organizations, presenting the impressions and analysis of civil society organizations themselves following a series of focus groups and interviews in the Gaza Strip. While some minor changes in access policy have recently resulted in increases in travel from Gaza, the changes exclude civil society organizations (CSOs), whose work is critical for normal life in the Palestinian territory.

This report is based on meetings with representatives of 32 organizations from five sectors: women's organizations, human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations which provide

physical and mental health services, organizations for people with disabilities, and development organizations. The participants spoke about personal and professional challenges resulting from travel restrictions, the ensuing fragmentation in Palestinian society, as well as how restrictions impact their ability to bring about the social change they pursue in their work.

Civil society organizations in Palestine, like everywhere, work towards achieving social change in a variety of fields. Specific to Palestine, they also work to reunite a fractured society, split geographically by Israel and politically due to the internal factional divide. The role civil society plays is all the more important in situations of conflict and in the absence of a singular, stable, and established government. When the basic needs of the population are not provided for by the establishment, civil society mobilizes to compensate. Travel restrictions not only infringe on the human rights of Gaza residents as individuals, but also on the social fabric and the ability of Palestinian society as a whole to meet its needs. Restrictions result in de-development and ultimately contribute to a perpetuation of the conflict.

Representatives of the organizations we spoke with expressed that Israel does not acknowledge the humanitarian significance of their work and that, in the designation of access criteria, does not view the work of their organizations as legitimate.

The split between Gaza and the West Bank fragments Palestinian society and creates different needs – cultural, social, and professional – in the two areas, which then render the work of the organizations even more difficult and disparate. The need to meet to exchange information, network and build coalitions is obvious. The report reviews the adverse impact of lack of access to new technologies and expertise, as well as donors. The report also shows how these obstacles have failed to dampen the deep commitment shared by the representatives of the dozens of organizations we met to their cause, but rather just frustrate and impede further progress. While it is not clear what interests are served by travel restrictions, the harm they cause is evident.

In the following pages, we document the price Palestinians pay for the separation between Gaza and the West Bank. We also provide information on the impressive range of work of Palestinian civil society and its vast potential, which we hope can be a catalyst to imperative changes to policy that allow these organizations to do their work. Thousands of people devote themselves each day to the valiant effort of improving quality of life in a place that abounds in factors thwarting and impeding that goal. Our goal in releasing this study is to once again reinforce the call to allow freedom of movement based on an understanding of the principles of universal, fundamental rights; that is, freedom of movement that will benefit, as this report demonstrates, all residents of the region.

Sectors covered



Women's organizations

Work to promote and protect women's rights and provide services to women in various spheres: welfare, employment, health, professional development and legal representation. These organizations work to increase women's participation in public life and advance policy changes and legislative changes in family law and gender equality in Palestinian law. The focus group included six of the leading organizations in the Gaza Strip. An in-depth interview with a feminist activist in the Gaza Strip who runs one of the organizations was also conducted.



Humanitarian organizations

Provide physical and mental health services and welfare services to Gaza's general population. These organizations run medical centers, provide preventative medical services and run awareness-raising campaigns. Some of the organizations focus on services to persons with disabilities, including help acquiring any necessary equipment, integration into the job market and promoting sports and special education for persons with disabilities. The focus group included eight organizations from this field.



Cultural and art organizations

Work to promote, train and support artists and support Palestinian art and culture in the Gaza Strip. As part of their activities, these organizations produce art and cultural events and hold workshops. The organizations also help strengthen ties between Palestinian artists and artists abroad, fundraise for art productions and work with the various authorities to build long-term plans for supporting the arts. The focus group included six organizations, and an in-depth interview was conducted with an activist in the field.



Development organizations

Focus on providing capacity building in professional skills, help with integration into the job market and support to small businesses. The organizations run professional training workshops, provide people with job interview training and give loans and grants to entrepreneurs. These organizations usually focus on women and youth, two populations with high rates of unemployment in the Gaza Strip. The focus group included seven organizations and an in-depth interview with a staff member of one organization in the field was conducted.



Human rights organizations

These organizations document and challenge human rights violations perpetrated by Israel, such as alleged violations of the right to life and freedom of movement. Along with campaigns to promote human rights and other public advocacy work, these organizations also address violations committed by the Palestinian authorities, such as torture and the violation of the right to assembly. They take legal action and report to various United Nations bodies, the European Union and other international bodies. In-depth interviews with representatives of two major human rights organizations in the Gaza Strip were conducted.

Civil society working in isolation

Restrictions on movement between Gaza and the West Bank have undermined the work of civil society organizations in Gaza in a variety of ways. Staff members are unable to attend conferences or professional development workshops in the West Bank or abroad, missing out on training that is essential for organizational development and improvement of the services they provide to their beneficiaries. For example, organizations working in the health sector have missed crucial training in operating new equipment and human rights and feminist organizations have been unable to attend integral courses provided on engaging international legal mechanisms.



Hassan Shaaban Ziyadah

Position: Director of the community center run by the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme.

Age: 52

Marital status: Married + 4

Ziyadah has worked at the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme since 1991. He has a BA in psychology from an-Najah University in Nablus. Despite travel restrictions, he has managed to travel to Jordan and Germany for professional training in mental health.

"The need for mental health services in Gaza is immense", Ziyadah says. "The mental health of Gaza residents has become a chronic problem because of the social and economic reality, which continues to deteriorate. The long conflict and the wars have resulted in a marked increase in the number of people who have mental health issues".

According to Ziyadah, one of the major reasons for this is "a reality of war every two years", which compounds old traumas with new ones. "Mental health workers are part of society", says Ziyadah, "And they go through what the rest of the people go through, suffer the same traumas, the same experiences. This requires a lot of attention, mental health support and monitoring for mental health workers, so they can carry on providing mental health services to others. That's one of the services we provide in the organization. This is why it's so important for mental health staff to travel from Gaza and get support and training outside, and also why it's important for outside experts to enter Gaza".

Ziyadah speaks from personal experience. In 2014, his home was bombed, "My mother, three of my brothers, my sister-in-law and my nephew were killed", he says. "The sense of loss was extremely difficult. I myself needed training and support from the experts in the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme".

The organizations' inability to travel has resulted in under-representation of their beneficiaries' needs and perspectives in both national and international fora. Travel restrictions imposed by Israel are applied more readily against young people, thought of as a high security risk group, which has undermined the development of a new generation to serve as leaders of civil society. Women's organizations in particular emphasized that the young men and women of the feminist movement in Gaza do not know activists from the West Bank.

Dr. Husam El-Nounou, director of international relations and resource development at the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme: "Before [the year] 2000, professionals and advisors from Israel and the West Bank would come to us to lead training sessions in topics related to our work. Today, that does not happen. We try to make up for this through communication devices like telephone and Skype, but they are not very effective".

Dr. Ghassan Zakout, physician and clinics director with the Palestinian Medical Relief Society: "The organization's team used to travel weekly to work meetings and strategic planning sessions with the West Bank branch. Today, only the senior managers meet twice a year and the rest of the time, communication is conducted via Skype. The organization runs a college in the West Bank which teaches community health; students from Gaza used to go study there. However, that option has not existed for a long time, and there is no alternative program in Gaza".

Organizations in Gaza are trying to find alternatives. Many are trying to develop their skills by taking self-taught courses on the internet. They also invest in employees who do manage to exit for training courses abroad so that they will pass on their knowledge to staff members who cannot travel. This is not an adequate solution, but under the current difficult circumstances, it is the best they can do.

Reem Fareinah, director of Aisha Association for Woman and Child Protection: "In one instance, some of the members of the international organization that funds our project participated in a workshop instead of the representatives of our team. Afterwards, the members of the international organization tried to convey the substance and methods they had learned. Of course, there is a huge difference between participating in a training session, which involves practical experience and being taught directly, and learning through an intermediary. These people have not acquired all the tools and their experience will remain limited and their expertise only partially developed".

Gaza-West Bank cooperation under the separation policy

Participants attested that since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, their ability to attend work meetings with

members of other branches of their organizations or their colleagues and partners in the West Bank has been greatly reduced. Nor are they permitted to host their colleagues and partners in the Gaza Strip. After Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, Israel prohibited Gaza residents from leaving the territory other than in exceptional humanitarian cases. Relations and joint work between organizations suffered a blow and in many cases were terminated outright.

Naturally, the impact of this is particularly harsh for organizations with branches in both areas of the Palestinian territory that conduct joint projects. For example, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee operates a center in Ramallah and a branch in Gaza. Most of the organization's projects are implemented in both the West Bank and Gaza, and only a small portion are devoted exclusively to one area. Advocacy work and training are undertaken jointly. Since heavier restrictions on

travel were imposed, the link between the center and its branch is conducted mainly by video conferencing, which is limiting and problematic. The staff works jointly on the organization's reports using e-mail, without meeting one another and without being able to discuss the work face-to-face. As a result, the members of the committee do not know each other or all the members of the board, and effectiveness is seriously undermined.

The policy of separation, says Muhammad Sharif, who is in charge of the Community Development Program run by Ma'an Development Center created economic and social gaps between Gaza and the West Bank. "The resources aren't the same, the people are in different situations. Their ways of coping are not the same, and the reality is not the same in the two parts".

The organization Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children tried to work with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Bethlehem al-Arabiya based in the West Bank, on a German-funded joint project for training instructors to work with people who have disabilities, with the aim of integrating them into the workforce. During the planning stage, members of Atfaluna attempted to travel to the West Bank to meet their partners from Bethlehem. When this was not possible, the members of the West Bank NGO tried to enter Gaza, and they too were denied permission by Israel. The Gaza project was then put on hold, and pursued in the West Bank only. Work did begin in Gaza subsequently, but it is done separately.

The Save Youth Future Society noted: "We had a project financed by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on the subject of health awareness in schools. The donor wanted to run the project at the level of the entire Palestinian territory, i.e. Gaza and the West Bank. Because of the separation, we were obliged to carry out the project separately. We could not plan it together or consult effectively with one another. We could overcome the political rift if we could consult and plan together".

Despite the closure and its limitations, some groups continue to work together, like the Palestinian feminist movement in Gaza and the West Bank, which strives to operate in unison. Together they issue reports, run campaigns and hold conferences. The same is true of Palestinian human rights organizations, which have established a network in the West Bank and Gaza, one of whose aims is to emphasize that Gaza and the West Bank are two parts of the same territory. The activities of the organizations are directed towards the entire Palestinian population despite the difficulties presented by the separation policy.

Rafah - an inadequate, and now obsolete, alternative

Again pointing to the deep resolve to meet, we learned in focus group discussions that when Rafah Crossing operated more



Musa Qadum

Position: Volleyball and soccer coach with an NGO dedicated to persons with disabilities, in charge of special training

Age: 35

Marital status: Married + 4

"There's almost no freedom of movement in Gaza", says Qadum. "The situation in Gaza reinforces people's desire to give up". He has a BA in physical education from Sana'a University in Yemen. His professional life revolves around sports.

Before 2013, when Rafah Crossing was open more regularly, Qadum traveled with the Palestinian athletics team to take part in an international tournament in Tunisia. He also exited through Rafah to take part in a blind soccer tournament in Egypt. In mid-2013, Egypt began restricting travel through the crossing, and Qadum has not been able to travel since. As a result, he lost a scholarship in physical rehabilitation he was given by an institute in Germany. "My dream", he says, "is a degree in physical education majoring in athletics and parasports". He would like to see better representation of Palestinians from Gaza in international tournaments.

"For me, people with disabilities offer a lesson in willpower. When an athlete with a visual impairment, for instance, aims the ball, he provides a model for the importance of achieving one's goals despite obstacles and barriers. I have learned so much from them. They teach me hope, love, giving. They are a source of power".

regularly and absent the ability to make the short trip between Gaza and the West Bank, organizations were prepared to make the exhausting and expensive journey to Jordan or Egypt in order to meet in person. However, this option too has been denied to them with the near complete shutdown of Rafah Crossing.

The lack of ability to meet in a shared space impacts the work of organizations whose goal is to achieve change across Palestine, for example, those seeking to advance legislative change on women's equality or those submitting reports to UN committees on the state of human rights in the Palestinian territory as a whole.

Some of the organizations in Gaza carry out projects requiring the physical presence of staff and members in the West Bank or abroad. Muhammad Awad al-Arabi, head of the board of directors of the Peace Sport Club for Persons with Disability: "Even though we are members of the Palestine Paralympic

Committee, we have been unable to attend competitions for the past three years – ever since Rafah was closed. Israel does not allow [travel either]. We are meant to represent Palestine in regional, international and Olympic competitions, but we are unable to leave Gaza. In the last competition, the Palestinian team was made up of athletes from the West Bank only".

Mohammad Ziara, chairman of the board of directors of Alkarama Center for Culture Development added: "Our folk arts troupe was invited to appear in the West Bank, but from among its 12 members, only two of the musicians received permits. We had hoped to participate in a choral festival for 12 to 18-year-olds in Lebanon, but we were not allowed to leave Gaza. We sent Palestinian children from the West Bank and the Palestinian diaspora in Egypt. A year later, they didn't even allow children from the West Bank to go; only children from Egypt represented Palestine".

Partnerships with donors and supporters

The ability to meet with donors and for donors to monitor the implementation of the projects they fund are basic conditions for building trust and increasing the likelihood that donors will continue to support the activities of civil society organizations in the future. Access restrictions have undermined the relationship between donors and CSOs and caused a decline in the volume of donations to the Gaza Strip. The difficulty in raising money has caused local organizations to on the one hand, give up projects they hoped to advance and on the other, agree to take on projects that initiated by their donors. In other words, they have less independence and flexibility.

Naim Kabaja, director of Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children: "A donor who contributes one million dollars a year will not go on supporting our activity if we haven't been able to meet him for 10 years and he hasn't been able to come and see our work in the field".

Exclusive to Gaza

The unique circumstances in which Gaza residents live – prolonged closure, rounds of grave and destructive hostilities and the humanitarian emergencies these have caused – require expertise in coping with situations of extreme crisis and documentation and analysis of human rights violations. Human rights organizations in the Gaza Strip face myriad challenges that stem from movement restrictions. They routinely miss opportunities to attend meetings and conferences in the West Bank and abroad and are prevented from representing clients from the West Bank or representing their clients in Israeli courtrooms, to name a few.



Hanneyeh Krizem

Position: Lawyer at the Center for Women's Legal Research and Consulting in Gaza for the past six years

Age: 31

Marital status: Married + 2

Hanneyeh Krizem, LL.B., is considered one of the senior lawyers at the center, which provides legal aid and representation in cases of violence against women, inheritance rights, divorce and personal status. Though Krizem has represented dozens of women, she has never left Gaza or received training anywhere else. She has never dared to submit an application for an exit permit. She says Israel's criteria is so strict and arbitrary, that she could not meet them to begin with. An application to travel to the West Bank will soon be filed on her behalf, for the purpose of visiting and training at a Palestinian women's shelter there. This is part of a joint project by the center, the United Nations and the government of Japan. Krizem is interested in learning how to establish a similar center for Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip.

"I believe in the feminist movement in Gaza and the West Bank and in its power", Krizem says, "They haven't given up. They haven't despaired, despite all the obstacles and challenges". Krizem speaks of her hope for professional stability and stability in Gaza in general. It is particularly important for her to keep working to stop violence and crime against women. "Guaranteeing security for women is the first step toward a non-violent society", she says.

"If not for the closure, we could initiate dozens of events and successful campaigns. We could provide legal advice and assistance to West Bank residents", says Khalil Shaheen, head of the Economic and Social Rights Unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. "The closure is the reason our work is restricted to Gaza. Some of the Palestinian human rights organizations work only in Gaza or only in the West Bank, which is an internalization of the reality created by Israeli policy".

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights has been trying for months to offer its employees a course in report-writing. They are waiting for a foreign trainer who is supposed to provide the instruction. However, since he is unable to obtain a permit to enter, there is concern that the organization will be forced to give up on the entire endeavor. Staff at the center also say they are trying to run a program to protect labor rights, including the provision of pensions and provident funds of Gaza residents who worked in Israel; however, they cannot implement this program either. Attempts on the part of the organization to deal with issues linked to the functioning of the Palestinian Authority have also been halted because of difficulty getting to the West Bank. "The closure prevented an organization like ours from developing in a natural and sound way", according

to Samir Zaqut, research director at Al Mezan.

Many participants spoke about a kind of "chilling effect" that the restrictions on movement have had on civil society organizations in Gaza. The years of prohibitions and the exhausting bureaucracy of obtaining permits and crossing through Erez have the effect of diminishing expectations, hopes, and faith in the possibility to change, initiate and create. Given all this, the extensive activity of civil society and those who participated in this research attests to a near-miraculous level of resolve.

Most of the participants in the meetings and interviews were unfamiliar with the regulations of the Israeli authorities and the specific criteria for allowing Gaza residents to travel to the West Bank or abroad. Usually, applications are submitted through international organizations on the assumption that the chances of receiving a positive answer are better that way. However, not all applications may be filed through international organizations and it is difficult to monitor the progress of the application when it is made through an intermediary body.

Muhammad Ziara, Chairman of the Board of Alkarama Center for Culture Development: "You submit an application for an exit permit and you don't know why you were turned down or you don't receive any reply at all. No one bothers to update you about what has happened with your request until the date you wanted it for goes by. It is very frustrating and has a negative effect on motivation".

Virtual communication as a partial solution

Communication between organizations in Gaza and the West Bank is conducted by telephone, video conferencing, e-mail or computer programs like Skype. However, these are insufficient. The sporadic electricity supply in Gaza and technological limitations make it impossible to conduct in-depth work meetings, which are necessary for complex and long-range planning.

Hazem Baluosha, founder and member of the Palestinian Institute for Communication and Development: "Skype is very tiring. You can only concentrate for seven minutes. Furthermore, these kinds of conversations work when they are one-on-one but imagine five people [in Gaza] speaking with five people in the West Bank and holding a 'lively' conversation".

Zeinab Ghonimi, director of the Center for Women's Legal Research and Consulting: "Even when we tried to hold video conferences we ran into trouble and problems. Once, when we came to the office of the Union of Palestinian Civil Society Organizations in Gaza, we ran into problems with communication and we had to go to the offices of other



Jamileh a-Tawil

Position: Owner of a bridal gown store in Gaza

Age: 53

Marital status: Married + 10

A-Tawil has sold clothes and food she makes since 1995. She has sold in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jerusalem and Egypt. Until 2006, she traveled through Rafah to sell her goods in Egypt. She has not been able to leave Gaza since, and for a time stopped working. In 2010, she received loans and grants from Faten Palestine for Credit and Development in order to open the bridal gown shop.

"The economic situation in Gaza is very tough", says a-Tawil. "I haven't had a single customer come in over the past two weeks". She longs for freedom of movement so she could sell in the West Bank or Egypt again. "If that happens, it'll be more profitable of course, and I'll also be able to work in the local market, in Gaza. I dream that things will stabilize in Gaza and that people will be able to live in dignity".

organizations or the offices of our donors. It disrupts work”.

Director Khalil al-Muzein, head of Lama Film for Cinema Production, explains that Skype is not suitable for every purpose: “For example, you can’t teach someone how to operate a camera using Skype. You have to hold it, to become familiar with it, to work with it and to physically demonstrate how it really works”.

In the arts, virtual communication certainly cannot be a viable alternative to face-to-face contact. Participants talked about having participated in Palestinian national competitions in song, musical instruments, film and more through video conferencing. “In the West Bank there are stages and theaters. Artists from the Arab world go to the West Bank... [and] meet with their peers in the same field. Artists, directors and producers from the West Bank can meet with great artists from the outside world”, one of the participants said. “We don’t have the opportunity to meet Arab artists, and, of course, we would like singers to come here and perform. There are works which we would like to send to the West Bank; we would also like to appear there ourselves and also in the world at large”.

Missed opportunities

Representatives of the organizations cited that on more than one occasion, they have been unable to carry out projects because they could not leave Gaza to meet experts or partner organizations in the West Bank or beyond. This is in addition to the difficulties they face in bringing in experts and partners to Gaza. Members of various organizations pointed out that they have adapted themselves to think in terms of the conditions created by the closure, that their plans and dreams are constrained because they know there is no chance that they will be fully implemented. Therefore, the planning and the type of projects they come up with do not reflect their real aspirations or their full capabilities. “All our thoughts are locked up between borders”, said Andaleeb Adwan, a feminist, activist and director of the Community Media Center.

Ibrahim Najjar, director of the Edward Said National Music Conservatory in Gaza: “We had to stop instruction on certain musical instruments because there are no qualified teachers in Gaza and we were unable to bring in new teachers from outside the Strip. When one teacher returned to Russia we tried to bring in others from the West Bank or abroad to replace her. There were some who were willing to teach voluntarily. But we were unsuccessful in bringing them in and were forced to tell the students we would not be able to continue”.

Haneen Wishah, public relations coordinator with the Union of Health Work Committees in Gaza: “We had a joint project with al-Mutalaa Hospital in the West Bank, and for three years we were

unable to overcome the difficulties we faced because of travel restrictions. Finally, we decided that this would be the last year of the project”.

Our interlocutors explained that the limited steps to ease movement implemented after Operation Protective Edge do not apply to them. Medical patients and businesspeople, who constitute the bulk of those eligible for travel permits, are just a small percentage of those who would need to travel to and from the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, they said, it is easier to obtain an exit permit from Gaza to the West Bank than vice versa. There is almost no entry for members of civil society from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip.

Khalil Shaheen, head of the Economic and Social Rights Unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights: “Staff members of human rights organizations and civil society organizations should be issued long-term permits just like businesspeople. We have to regularly attend important meetings in the West Bank as part of our work, and this work has significant consequences for our society and its advancement. The Israeli criteria are unacceptable and the regulations are unfair. It is an exhausting and time-consuming bureaucratic matter”.

Changing priorities

The restrictions imposed by Israel on the entry and exit of goods, in addition to the restrictions on movement of people and recurrent rounds of fighting, have generated social and economic changes which have also impacted the work of the organizations. The accounts given indicate that exceedingly difficult living conditions in Gaza have triggered changes in the priorities and needs of its residents and that CSOs must adapt accordingly.

Andaleeb Adwan, director of the Community Media Center: “Society in Gaza has suffered through conflict and closure for many years now and this has made people dependent on humanitarian aid. The daily concerns of the people are about bringing home enough cooking oil, water and gas. How can one discuss, in a society like this, other kinds of rights, such as the right of a woman who is separated from her husband to obtain custody of her children, or her right to see her children who live with their father in the West Bank? After the ceasefire in 2014, women’s organizations had to distribute humanitarian aid vouchers to residents and were busy distributing basic goods. This is not supposed to be the work of women’s organizations. [This distracts from the] aim to advance women’s rights, combat violence against women and apply pressure on international organizations to take action against Israel in order to lift the closure and restrictions on freedom of movement, which primarily hurt the women and youth of Gaza”.

Muna al-Alami, Gaza regional director of Faten Palestine for Credit and Development: “At first, we worked only with women. The aim was to finance women’s projects and businesses. We wanted to encourage women to leave the home and join public life and the job market. Today, the situation is no longer the same; there is a high rate of unemployment, a difficult economic situation and no job opportunities because Gaza is closed and many of the men are unemployed. Therefore, women have gone back to staying at home and the men come to us and receive funding in order to work”.

Samir Zaqut, research director at Al Mezan: “The priorities of human rights organizations have changed: We are witness to infringements on human rights and liberties of Palestinians, both by Israel and the Palestinian authorities in Gaza and the West Bank and we find ourselves once again working against arbitrary arrests and excessive violence against prisoners”.



Ismail Dawoud

Position: Oud instructor at the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in Gaza

Age: 36

Marital status: Married + 1

“We could have brought together Palestinian children from the region through music, and sang the same song and played the same Arabic music. It’s remarkable to feel the music that beats in the hearts of children”, says Dawoud, who has an MA in music from the Higher Institute of Music in Tunisia.

Dawoud managed to travel from Gaza twice for his work. In the summer of 2013, he was one of the teachers who accompanied conservatory students from Gaza to a music camp in the West Bank, thanks to Gisha’s help. The second time, he went for choir management training held as part of the Sea and Liberty festival in the West Bank. He conducted the Snunu (Arabic for “swallows”) Choir, made up of Palestinian children from Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem and abroad. The Gaza children were not able to travel for the event and participated in choir rehearsals through conference calls.

“I long for a time when Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem are united, when a Palestinian is able to travel from south to north without restrictions and conditions, and when people in Palestine are rid of the occupation, the injustices of the siege, the war, the destruction”, Dawoud told Gisha. He hopes to complete his PhD in music in the next two years if he manages to obtain a travel permit.

Many of the participants noted that society in Gaza is becoming more closed and more religious, perhaps more chauvinistic. This is to be expected, they say, from a society whose members are not exposed to different ideas and an alternative life style, whose youth cannot choose between different world views. The youth will be more open and liberal when Gaza is open, many of them said, and when it is possible to leave Gaza or live a decent life. The organization staff members admit that in several of their activities, they have succumbed to accepted social codes in Gaza today by separating men and women, girls and boys, when they screen movies or hold workshops.

Personal lives and professional lives

Access restrictions have additional consequences for personal and professional life. Humanitarian and feminist organizations said that caregivers have a hard time, both personally and professionally, caring for the people who need their services soon after they themselves have had to work through a personal loss of their own or through times when their own lives are in danger. They do not have opportunities to recuperate and receive professional and psychological help outside Gaza. Almost all the organizations that took part in this study – whether in focus groups or in-depth interviews – said that the people who are professionally capable of providing treatment in Gaza are themselves in need of treatment, especially following the latest round of hostilities.

Members of the Edward Said National Conservatory for Music raised another complex issue they face – what to do when applications made by children are denied: “It is difficult to tell a child that the application submitted in his name was not answered or was rejected”, one of the staff members confided. “When we submitted applications on behalf of children, the children asked us incessantly if we had received answers, hoping their applications would be granted and, of course, couldn’t wait for the day they would leave Gaza. And when the applications were denied or not answered until the last minute, it caused confusion, stress and emotional difficulties for the children. This was also true of the people responsible for them and of their teachers. Of course staff members also lose out on opportunities to gain experience. We often had cases where applications had been made for 14 instructors and teachers and only six of them were approved. How can anyone function under these conditions?”

The lack of employment opportunities in a closed off and isolated Gaza and the inability to seek employment in the West Bank impacts civil society organizations and prevents young people from entering the sector. Those in the field can develop

their skills for years but the opportunities to find senior, challenging positions are limited. Staff members remain in the same organization for years, often in the same job, as opposed to their peers in the West Bank, where there are more organizations and the labor market offers them a wider range of opportunities for change and advancement.

The staff members of Gaza civil society organizations who participated in this study have an impressive range of abilities and expertise that derive in part from the unique challenges they face. These challenges give rise to a particular kind of creativity and innovation, for which they are known and appreciated by civil society organizations in Jerusalem, the West Bank and beyond.



Photo: Eduardo Soteras Jalil

Methodology

This study is based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with representatives of civil society in the Gaza Strip. Thirty-two organizations were consulted, grouped into five sectors: women's organizations; cultural organizations; human rights organizations; humanitarian organizations that provide physical and mental health services, particularly to persons with disabilities; and development organizations. This is the accepted division within the civil society organization network in the Gaza Strip. We held focus groups for four of these categories. Each focus group discussion lasted about three hours and referred to the effect various elements of the closure and separation policy have had on the work of the organizations. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of organizations in the fields of art and culture, development and women's organizations, as well as representatives from two leading human rights organizations in Gaza – a sector for which we did not have a focus group due to the small number of organizations and logistical complications.

We used the help of researcher and focus group leader Iyad Krunz, an expert with extensive knowledge in the field of civil society organizations in Gaza. We recorded and transcribed the discussions in full. This report is based on these transcripts.

Internal Palestinian rift

The Palestinian political rift, and the existence of two parallel governments in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank impact the organizations to a great extent, particularly organizations that seek to advance widespread social change and legislative initiatives. Many organizations explained that the closure has managed to further reinforce and entrench the internal rift. The closure prevents Palestinian institutions from performing their functions as a single entity, forcing each to operate only in its immediate area. The Gaza legislative council is not the same institution as the one in the West Bank and has different rules and regulations. For instance, organizations that tried to advance legislation to guarantee medical insurance for persons with disabilities were sent from one government to the other. Attempts made by women's organizations to advance legislative changes on women's inheritance rights, women's divorce rights and custody rights have failed as a result. A situation in which one parent is in the West Bank and the other in the Gaza Strip presents further difficulties.

Andaleeb Adwan noted that women's organizations fared better in their joint work when they were able to travel from the Gaza Strip and meet to discuss professional matters. Though the rift was apparent at that time too, they did feel that they were able to effect change, and more than this, that they were working together.

Many of the participants identified another difficulty, specific to organizations working in the Gaza Strip, which is apprehension on the part of donors to provide funds due to concern funding would benefit the Hamas regime, which leads many international organizations to implement their projects in Gaza rather than rely on implementation through local organizations.

Many participants stressed that access restrictions and the separation between Gaza and the West Bank have caused deep rifts between the two populations, reduced the sense of unity and given rise to mutual stereotyping. They felt that this has then further reduced the possibility of ending the split and achieving true unity between Gaza and the West Bank.

The organizations have also said that the rift has compelled them to do extra work and invest extra resources. The rift itself also raised additional issues the organizations have had to address. The work environment under the shadow of the rift is unstable and taxing. When organizations in the West Bank and Gaza work in partnership, a sudden change in procedures in only one part of the oPt affects one party of the partnership and forces the entire project to reorganize to meet the constraints.



May 2015. The red carpet at the Karama Human Rights Film Festival, Shujaiyeh, Gaza.

Conclusion

This report focused on the impact of the closure and separation policy on the work of civil society organizations in the Gaza Strip. It also indicated the extent of the work carried out by the organizations, which encompasses a very wide variety of fields, from medical diagnostics to raising awareness of the needs of people with disabilities and providing them with educational and occupational services, to efforts to empower women and provide them with legal representation, to support for young entrepreneurs and musical instruction and the development of artistic talent.

The separation policy makes it difficult for organizations to coordinate activities to deal with the complex issues facing Palestinian society. Organizations can't readily send staff to workshops and courses in order to improve their professional skills and be trained on technological innovations. Organizations and their beneficiaries miss opportunities to participate in competitions and conferences in the West Bank or abroad. This impacts the motivation of young people, women, athletes and artists and limits their ability to develop and fulfill their ambitions. Restrictions on movement, like the restrictions on the entry of foreigners to Gaza, make it more difficult to raise money and establish long-term connections which might facilitate consistent and strategic programming.

Beyond these direct effects, representatives of the organizations say the separation policy and closure have caused far-reaching societal changes and changes in Gaza residents' priorities, which have strongly impacted their work. The shortage of electricity and potable water, high levels of unemployment and deteriorated health services have pushed to the sidelines

important issues such as gender equality, art and human rights values – the core issues of the organizations' work.

From focus group discussions, we learned that the harm to the work of civil society, and, as a result, the lack of progress on issues they try to advance result in the erosion of the ties that bind Palestinian society in Gaza and the West Bank. This has caused fissures in the concept of a shared future and in the ability to find answers to present and future challenges. Civil society organizations are operating under difficult conditions and are making heroic efforts to build an independent, healthy, creative, and compassionate society capable of providing for all the needs of its members. Placing unnecessary obstacles in their path violates the rights to which all people are entitled.

Recommendations

- Israel must cancel the separation policy and allow travel between Gaza and the West Bank, subject to individual security checks. Absent imminent solutions to the conflict and the internal Palestinian rift, this presents the only viable chance for improving the Palestinian economy and advancing well-being in Palestinian society, both key to a more stable future in the region.
- Israel must recognize the legitimate needs of civil society organizations to travel across the Palestinian territory and abroad and grant travel permits accordingly.

As an Israeli organization, Gisha does not advocate directly before Palestinian authorities, however, we note that the ongoing factional split exacerbates the fragmentation of the Palestinian territory created by the separation policy. The factional split and the separation policy, as noted in the report, undermine the work of Palestinian civil society organizations.

Women's organizations		المنظمات النسائية	ארגוני נשים
1	Center for Women's Legal Research and Consulting – Gaza – CWLRC	מركز الأبحاث والاستشارات القانونية للمرأة-قطاع غزة	המרכז למחקר וייעוץ משפטי לאישה - עזה
2	The Society of Women Graduates in Gaza Strip	جمعية الخريجات الجامعيات بقطاع غزة	איגוד הנשים האקדמאיות ברצועת עזה
3	Union of Health Work Committees	اتحاد لجان العمل الصحي	איחוד ועדות עבודות הבריאות
4	Women's Affairs Center - Gaza	مركز شؤون المرأة - غزة	המרכז לענייני נשים - עזה
5	Aisha Association for Woman and Child Protection	جمعية عايشة لحماية المرأة والطفل	עמותת עאישא להגנת האישה והילד
6	Women's Affairs Technical Committee	طاقم شؤون المرأة- قطاع غزة	הוועדה לענייני נשים
7	Community Media Center - Gaza	مركز الإعلام المجتمعي-غزة	הארגון לתקשורת חברתית - עזה
Cultural and art organizations		المؤسسات الثقافية والفنية	ארגוני תרבות ואמנות
8	The Center for Contemporary Art	محترف شبابيك للفن المعاصر	מרכז שבאביק לאמנות עכשווית
9	General Union of Cultural Center	الاتحاد العام للمراكز الثقافية	האיחוד הכללי לארגוני תרבות
10	General Union for Palestinian Writers	الاتحاد العام للكتاب والادباء الفلسطينيين	האיחוד הכללי לסופרים הפלסטינים
11	Alkarama Center for Culture Development	هيئة مجمع كرامة للثقافة والتنمية	מרכז אלכראמה לתרבות ולפיתוח
12	Lama Film for Cinema Production	لما فيلم للإنتاج السينمائي	לאמא פילם להפקה קולנועית
13	The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music	معهد إدوارد سعيد الوطني للموسيقى	הקונסרבטוריון הלאומי על שם אדוארד סעיד
14	Gaza Center Association for Culture and Arts	جمعية مركز غزة للثقافة والفنون	עמותת מרכז עזה לתרבות ואמנות
Development organizations		منظمات التنمية	ארגוני פיתוח
15	Tamer Institute for Community Education	مؤسسة تامر للتعليم المجتمعي	ארגון תאמר לחינוך קהילתי
16	Save Youth Future Society	جمعية انقاذ المستقبل الشبابي	העמותה להצלת עתיד הצעירים
17	The Small Enterprise Center (SEC)	جمعية مركز المؤسسات الصغيرة	ארגון המרכז לעסקים הקטנים
18	United Palestine Appeal - UPA	النداء الفلسطيني الموحد	הקול הפלסטיני המאוחד
19	Ma'an Development Center	مركز العمل التنموي مآ	מען - המרכז לפיתוח
20	Palestine Education for Employment	المؤسسة الفلسطينية للتعليم من أجل التوظيف	פלסטינייה - השכלה למען העסקה
21	The Palestinian Institute for Communication and Development	المعهد الفلسطيني للاتصال والتنمية	המכון הפלסטיני לתקשורת ופיתוח
22	Palestinian for Credit and Development - Faten	الفلسطينية اقرض والتنمية - فاتن	פאתן - הארגון הפלסטיני לפיתוח והלוואות
Humanitarian organizations*		المنظمات الإنسانية	ארגונים הומניטריים
23	Disabilities Representative Persons Network – Gaza Strip	شبكة الأجسام الممثلة للإعاقة - قطاع غزة	רשת נציגי הארגונים לבעלי צרכים מיוחדים - רצועת עזה
24	Society of Physically Handicapped People - Gaza Strip	جمعية المعاقين حركيًا- قطاع غزة	העמותה לבעלי מוגבלויות תנועה - רצועת עזה
25	Gaza Community Mental Health Program	برنامج غزة للصحة النفسية	תוכנית עזה לבריאות הנפש
26	Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children	جمعية أطفالنا للسمع	עמותת אטפאלונא לילדים חירשים
27	Peace Sport Club for Persons with Disability	نادي السلام الرياضي للأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة	מועדון הספורט שלום לבעלי צרכים מיוחדים
28	Beloved Palestine Foundation	مؤسسة فلسطين الحبيبة	ארגון פלסטין אלחביבה
29	Palestinian Medical Relief Society	جمعية الإغاثة الطبية الفلسطينية	העמותה הפלסטינית לסיוע רפואי
30	El-Wafa Charitable Society	جمعية الوفاء الخيرية	עמותת אל-וופא לצדקה
Human rights organizations		منظمات حقوق الإنسان	ארגוני זכויות אדם
31	Al Mezan Center for Human Rights	مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان	מרכז אלמיזאן לזכויות אדם
32	Palestinian Centre for Human Rights	المركز الفلسطيني لحقوق الإنسان	המרכז הפלסטיני לזכויות אדם

*Provide medical and psychological services (particularly for those with special needs)

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گيشا gisha

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