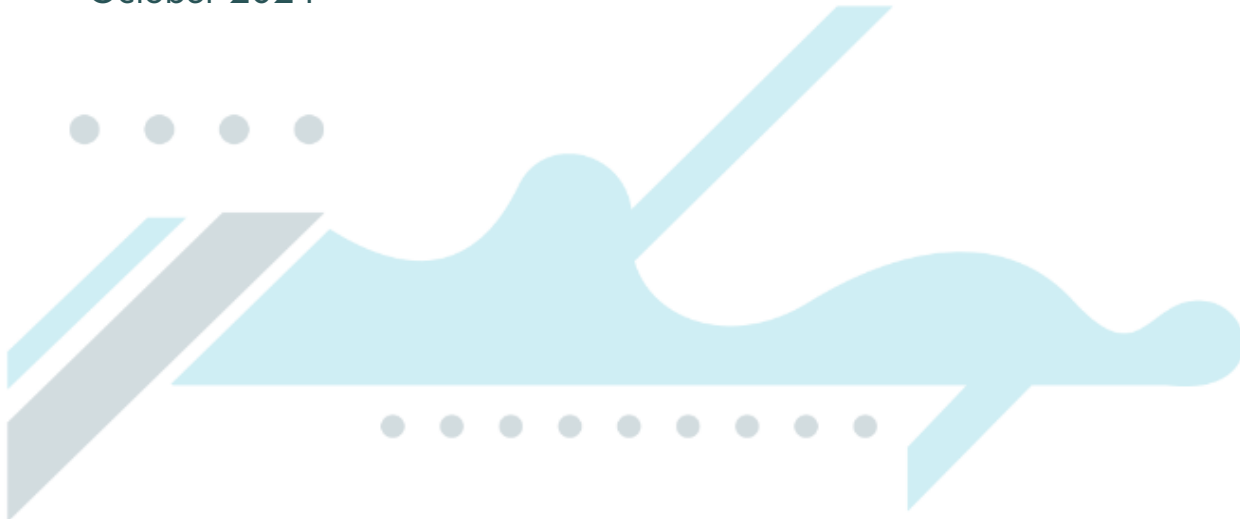


MAJALAT II

POSITION PAPER

ON HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIC SPACE, & INTERNATIONAL LAW IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN: TOWARDS A NEW PACT FOR THE REGION

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*“The **events** unfolding in our **southern neighbourhood** are of **historic proportions**. They reflect a profound transformation process and will have lasting consequences not only for the people and countries of the region but also for the rest of the world and the EU in particular. The changes now underway carry the hope of a better life for the people of the region and for greater respect of **human rights, pluralism, rule of law and social justice – universal values that we all share**.”*

*Movement towards full democracy is never an easy path - there are risks and uncertainties associated with these transitions. While acknowledging the difficulties **the EU has to take the clear and strategic option of supporting the quest for the principles and values that it cherishes**. For these reasons **the EU must not be a passive spectator**. It needs to support wholeheartedly the wish of the people in our neighbourhood to enjoy the same freedoms that we take as our right.”*

-2011 Joint Communication: A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean

I. CONTEXT

A decade after the Arab popular uprisings of 2011, the expected democratic transitions in the North Africa and Middle East (MENA) countries remain elusive. Thirteen years on, the region struggles with rising poverty, sectarian violence, a worsening climate crisis, and political instability, while authoritarian rule is widespread, marked by a quasi-systematic repression of freedoms, particularly those of association, expression and peaceful assembly. According to the [2023 CIVICUS Monitor report](#), civic space in the EU's Southern Neighborhood remains deeply restricted, with Egypt and Syria classified as "closed," Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, and Palestine as "repressed," and Israel, Lebanon, and Morocco as "obstructed."

This should be of greater concern to European governments, as a vibrant and autonomous civil society in the Mediterranean region is in their interest and crucial for long-term stability. However, European foreign policy towards the region has led to bilateral agreements that sustain authoritarian regimes through funding and minimal conditionality, at the expense of human rights, rule of law and good governance. The dominant "stability paradigm" within the EU assumes that the authoritarian regimes can provide stability, but this assumption is deeply flawed. These regimes are inherently part of the problem as they not only lack accountability, checks and balances, but also engage in corruption and human rights violations. They have consistently blocked any democratic reform and progressive human rights agenda to safeguard their interests and survival, intensifying domestic repression in the process. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has prioritized securing alternative energy sources from the MENA region, increasing the leverage of these regimes and further contributing to the erosion of human rights in the region.

The challenges facing the region have intensified since October 7th, 2023. Nearly a year into the ongoing genocide in Gaza and severe humanitarian and human right crises, the subsequent political and funding decisions by certain EU Member States and officials have exacerbated tensions and challenges for civil society in the region. The lack of a coordinated and firm EU response to demand a ceasefire, humanitarian aid and ensure accountability for all crime perpetrators has further strained relations between the EU and civil society and has significantly damaged the EU's credibility in the region. Additionally, the increased scrutiny and conditionality of funding for independent human rights organizations—particularly those expressing solidarity with Palestinian rights— have had severe consequences.

Today, civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) in the Southern Neighborhood find themselves increasingly isolated, under-resourced, and subject to growing attacks and restrictions not only from their own governments, but also indirectly through EU policy. Repeated human rights violations and a lack of accountability frequently lead to societal breakdown, yet the European Union seems misguided in its reliance on authoritarians to guarantee stability and security in its Southern Neighborhood. As demands for freedoms and justice continue to grow across the Arab world, the EU risks once again failing to recognize the profound societal changes unfolding in the region.

II. A NEW PACT FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) has consistently prioritised short-term stability, migration control, and security—particularly in relation to terrorism—over human rights and the rule of law in the Southern Neighborhood. This approach has left the EU ill-prepared to address the significant challenges that have emerged in the MENA region over the past two decades.

On 18 July, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Thursday [announced](#) the creation of a separate portfolio for the Mediterranean signaling increased attention to the region in her next term. Additionally, she unveiled plans for a comprehensive EU-Middle East Strategy, with a focus on "the day after" the war in Gaza. The announcement of a **new Pact for the Mediterranean** focused on "*investment and partnerships, economic stability, job creation, energy, security, migration, and other areas of mutual interest, respecting our values and principles*", presents a key opportunity for the EU to reassess its engagement with the region.

As the EU prepares for a new European Parliament and Commission, and programming cycle, there is an urgent need to realign its commitments, priorities, and approach to cooperation with the Southern Neighborhood, grounded in a coherent and principled commitment to universal values and international law. The EU's renewed efforts should be responsive to the needs and demands of civil society and human rights defenders, not just a procedural exercise. The EU must recognize and engage with the resilient civil society actors in MENA who continue to stand against human rights violations despite great challenges.

This policy paper from Majalat II aims to provide food for thought and key policy recommendations about how the EU institutions and Member should support and promote a more enabling environment for civil society in the Southern Neighborhood for a truly thriving Euro-Mediterranean region.

III. DEFINITIONS AND EU COMMITMENTS FOR AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

An enabling space for civil society and human rights defenders is one that is conducive to the exercise and enjoyment of rights and activities. The conditions necessary for such environment include¹:

- ✓ Conducive legal, institutional and administrative frameworks. These facilitate the registration and operation of civil society organizations and protect fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and peaceful demonstration.
- ✓ Access to justice and prevention of human rights violations.
- ✓ Access to protection mechanisms for human rights defenders at risk.
- ✓ State-led actions towards a conducive environment, that is protecting, supporting and resourcing civil society.
- ✓ Safe access to decision-makers and international bodies.
- ✓ Respect and support from non-state actors to human rights defenders.
- ✓ Access to funding. The funding must be adequate to the needs, flexible and unconditional.
- ✓ Strong and independent human rights civil society².

An enabling environment encompasses legal, social and political dimensions. While the primary responsibility for creating such an environment lies with the State, it requires the engagement of all sectors of society.

However, across the Southern Neighborhood – and beyond- this space is rapidly shrinking due to widespread and well-documented practices that undermine civil society, including legal restrictions, prosecutions and judicial harassment, arbitrary detention, travel bans, asset freezes, the rise of government-affiliated NGOs (GoNGOs), pressure on independent journalism, public defamation campaigns and both online and offline surveillance.

HRDs and CSOs are a vital component of human rights implementation and monitoring, at the sub-national, national, regional and international levels. The EU has considered them as “*natural and indispensable allies*”³ in promoting human rights, democracy and in protecting the values and rights enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights⁴.

¹ Protection International, [Towards a safe and enabling environment for the right to defend human rights](#), 2024, p.6

² In its [COM\(2012\) 492](#), the EU defines Civil Society as “*all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent organisations, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic.*”

³ European Commission (2022), [A thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU 2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), p. 3

⁴ The European Union has consistently reiterated its commitment to supporting civil society, human rights groups, and defenders beyond its borders, in accordance with both EU and international law. This commitment is articulated in numerous policy documents, communications, resolutions, directives, and guidelines. Key examples include: [2011 Joint Communication A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood](#), [2012 Communication Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe’s engagement with civil society in external relations](#) [Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security](#) (2016), [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) (2020-2024), [Council conclusions on EU priorities in UN Human Rights fora](#) (2023), [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#) (updated in 2008), [EU Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline](#), [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues with third countries](#) (revised in 2021). These commitments are deeply embedded in the EU’s founding treaties and are further reinforced by various UN Conventions.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU IN VIEW OF THE NEW PACT FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

1. ADOPTING A RIGHTS-CENTERED EUROPEAN NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY

Chronic instability in MENA countries will persist as long as the conditions for the rule of law, good governance and respect for fundamental rights, including social and economic, remain unmet. The EU must adopt a long-term strategy that prioritizes the fulfilment of these conditions, as the success of its cooperation and trade agreements depends on it. On the contrary, weakly-conditioned financial support risks continuing to subsidize and perpetuate authoritarian rule and the very policies that have led to the region's economic and social decline over the past decade.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 COMPLIANCE WITH AND ENFORCEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

- Ensure the EU Neighborhood Policy strictly adheres to international law, promotes accountability, avoids complicity in human rights violations or serious breaches.
- Guarantee that the New Pact for the Mediterranean incorporates human rights and the rule of law as core principles across all areas of focus, including investment, security, and migration, with a firm commitment to respecting international law.
- The EU and Member States must provide unambiguous support for the universality of international justice by endorsing the decisions and findings of international courts, such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice and implement the court decisions pertaining to the EU and its Members States.
- Establish an Intergroup within the European Parliament on International Justice that would monitor the EU's actions related to international justice both internally and externally, and advocate for policy and legislative improvements, while engaging with civil society through a dedicated mechanism.

1.2 A PRINCIPLED & DO-NOT-HARM APPROACH

- Critically assess the risks in cooperation partnerships, particularly for human rights, and implement a robust do-no-harm approach⁵.
- Broaden the scope of the [EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#) (extended until December 2026) to encompass clear International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law violations within the region to ensure that the individuals and entities responsible for these violations are held accountable.
- Phase-out cooperation deals that benefit regime elites or security/military apparatus rather than

⁵ Saliba (2023), [Shrinking Spaces in the Middle East and North Africa: Supporting Civil Society Resilience](#)

citizens.

- Tie EU financial support to the countries, both direct and indirect, to clear, measurable conditions related to human rights and accountability.
- Use conditionality to systematically leverage positive changes such as meaningful reforms (perceived as such by civil society) by responding with additional aid, trade, and strategic benefits, ensuring a more-for-more approach.

1.3 CONDITIONALITY & REVISIONS

- Leverage the Association Councils as a meaningful venue for structured dialogue, addressing key concerns and issues in the partner countries. Ensure meaningful and broad consultations with local CSOs before each Council.
- Revise Association Agreements when governments are suspected of breaching international law, particularly through the invocation of Article 2. The review process can only be launched formally triggered by unanimous decision of all 27 Member States, and under the “non-execution clauses” of each Association Agreement (e.g., article 90 MOR, article 104 ALG, article 90 TUN, article 86 EGY, article 79 ISR, article 101 JOR, article 86 LEB, article 70 PAL). Yet, a few recommendations:

- Set clear red lines: Specify explicit thresholds for action in response to gross human rights violations, such as violence against peaceful protesters, mass arbitrary detentions, or targeted repression of journalists and human rights defenders. Breaching these red lines would activate non-execution clauses, enabling the EU to impose “appropriate measures” including sanctions.
- Establish a clear and transparent EU-led mechanism, chaired by the High Representative/EEAS, to monitor compliance with Clause 2 and issue recommendations to the European Council on revising the Agreement when there are sufficient grounds to believe that a party is in breach of the Agreement. This body should gather evidence from various EU agencies (including diplomatic services and delegations), civil society, and other credible sources, and be linked to whistleblowing systems embedded within civil society to report concerns.

1.4 INTERNAL CHECKS, OVERSIGHT AND CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

- Strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms within the EU, by reinforcing Parliamentary scrutiny function on the negotiation and implementation of international agreements and direct budget support to third countries.
- Implement independent monitoring mechanisms, that works alongside the internal committee mentioned under 1.3., to assess human rights situation before, during, and after reception of EU macro-financial assistance, reporting cases where partner governments resist evaluation⁶.
- Reject informal, non-binding and opaque MoUs that bypass established procedures and weaken the EU’s constitutional framework. Ensure all agreements with third countries adhere to

⁶ Following the signing of the MoU with Tunisia, [both a delegation of Members of the European Parliament](#) (MEPs) and [a delegation of the European Commission](#) were denied entry into the country, later followed by President Saied [returning EU budget support](#). Such situations must be prevented.

established adoption procedures, maintaining accountability and transparency to prevent contributing to human rights abuses.

- Foster the inclusion of CSOs in the EU-partner countries dialogue and policy processes, automatise consultation of civil society ahead of Association Councils.
- Create a whistleblowing mechanism within civil society to report instances where EU funding might contribute to human rights abuses or environmental degradation. This mechanism should report to the internal committee referenced in 1.2, enabling it to trigger revisions or suspensions of agreements when necessary.

1.5 POLICY COHERENCE

- Reject the use of the term 'safe country' for any of the countries in the MENA region and the consequences of this categorisation, such as the rejection of asylum applications and returns to these countries.
- Ensure the effective implementation of the Gender Action Plan (GAP III). This includes fostering an inclusive and representative dialogue capable of strengthening the role of women's rights defenders and their organizations, in order to counter a growing anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUES

Human Rights Dialogues, guided by the [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues with Third Countries](#), are a critical component of the EU's external human rights policy, as highlighted in the [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy \(2020-24\)](#). These dialogues need to be revitalized and effectively integrated with other EU tools, such as political dialogues, public diplomacy, and civil society support.

We urge the EEAS and EUSR for Human Rights to prioritize the revitalization of Human Rights Dialogues and ensure that these are not routine exercises but are used strategically to address pressing human rights concerns. The EEAS and EUSR should mandate senior-level participation from EU Delegation and other relevant EU institutions and agencies including the European Commission and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Member States should be encouraged to participate as observers to maintain a unified EU approach.

2. FOSTERING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

We demand a fundamental shift in the EU-CSO partnership that is grounded in equality, shared values, accountability and political dialogue. The EU must better recognize, protect, strengthen and engage with CSOs, and use all available tools at its disposal to promote genuine political dialogue that respects the autonomy of CSOs. We also urge the EU to seriously advocate for the right to defend human rights and to take concrete steps to uphold it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 RENEWED POLITICAL DIALOGUE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

- Strengthen and facilitate more formal, regular, and structured channels for dialogue with civil society.
- Provide CSOs and HRDs with due access to EU high-level officials, including from Member States, for effective monitoring of the reality on the grounds, both during national visits but also in Brussels.
- Support, plan and fund consultation processes on key ENP programmes, tools and mechanisms, including but not exclusive: association agreements, strategy documents and action plans, MoUs, NDICI.
- Include local CSOs in the evaluation of the implementation of EU policies and funding, through the EU Delegations and regional dialogue mechanisms.
- Ensure CSO participation in human rights trainings for EU officials.
- Ensure cross-cutting coherence, information sharing and complementarity between dialogue processes and mechanisms established across all EU policy fields (Gender, Global Gateway, Digital, Energy).
- Ensure the formal inclusion of the Civil Society Facility for the Mediterranean mechanism as a permanent, consultative body within the European Neighborhood Policy.

2.2 PUBLIC AND DIPLOMATIC SUPPORT

- Advocate for and publicly champion human rights and civil dialogue standards during high-level visits to Southern Mediterranean countries by EU officials.
- Condemn the spread and misuse of anti-terrorist and anti-cybercrimes laws in MENA countries⁷, particularly when they contribute to offline/online repression and surveillance against civil society, activists, and HRDs. Denounce ambiguous formulation of laws and monitor their implementation.
- Advocate for legal reforms that protect fundamental rights and freedoms.

⁷ For more information about restrictive legal frameworks on freedom of association and expression in the MENA region, please see EuroMed Policy Note (2024).

- Raise serious or systemic human rights violations and restrictions on fundamental freedoms, as well as cases of at-risk HRDs during high-level visits, dialogues, and missions, addressing impunity in cases of violations against HRDs and calling for diligent, independent and exhaustive investigations.
- Ensure HRDs have unrestricted access to human rights mechanisms and effective justice, while denouncing reprisals against those who seek to engage international human rights mechanisms.
- Encourage partner countries to issue invitations for country visits to UN Human Rights Special Procedures and to accept and implement UN recommendations, including from treaty monitoring bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, the Council of Europe, and the OSC.
- Call for urgent action from Member States and other EU services when Parliamentary groups and commissions are restricted from entering a country, indicating severe anti-democratic values and shrinking civic space

2.3 COORDINATION AND RESPONSE MECHANISM

- Develop a comprehensive, evidence-based EU strategy to address shrinking civic space in the region, with clear policy commitments, adequate funding and declined on country-specific strategies in line with the National Human Rights Action Plans. Include cross-cutting priorities such as protecting vulnerable groups and women-led organisations, and advance gender rights.
- EU Delegations and DG NEAR should work closely with civil society to develop a comprehensive, systemic approach, and jointly identify and address barriers to creating an enabling environment. This involves adopting a nuanced, case-by-case strategy for protecting HRDs, mapping all relevant actors, analyzing local barriers and drivers, and planning for effective implementation. Ensure that individual HRDs, along with groups, collectives, and communities, are systematically included in decision-making processes to address their protection and remove obstacles to their work
- Create an interinstitutional task force on HRDs, led by EEAS with the collaboration of EU Delegations and the European commission and Parliament, to coordinate European efforts on priority cases of HRDs at-risk, maintain a register of HRD attacks and at risk, and facilitate regular participation of HRDs and vulnerable groups.
- Map national CSOs, identifying independent organizations and HRDs at risk.
- Adopt an annual list of focus countries with serious concerns regarding HRDs and activists, and monitor closely the implementation of EU policies, to enable a more coordinated EU response.
- Acknowledge the risk of the rise of anti-gender and anti-migration rhetoric, as well as strengthening of GONGOs for shrinking the space available for independent organization.

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

A [study](#) led in 2021 by the European Parliament think tank noted the EU “still has to decide whether tackling digital repression is a core geopolitical interest at the highest political level”. EU policy should treat digital authoritarianism in the region as a significant security and political concern.

As extensive evidence¹ shows, the online space in the MENA region is increasingly restricted, with a strong link between digital and physical repression. Digital surveillance is widespread, and authoritarian governments in the region have engaged in censorship, fear mongering, silencing independent media. They led disinformation and smear campaigns, often adopting a violent and misogynistic tone, while harassing and arresting journalists, activists and citizens over their social media content and internet activities, all under the pretext of “fighting terrorism” and safeguarding “national security”.

The proliferation of cybercrime legislation across the MENA region that restricts and even criminalises legitimate expression, association and assembly and privacy in digital spaces. Governments deliberately conflated legitimate political criticism with “fake news” and other forms of disinformation, allowing them to portray legal persecution as a defense of freedom of expression. State-led online repression is further enabled by technology transfers and the misuse of spyware.

Amidst this context, CSOs and HRDs face increasing challenges, operating under constant threat of surveillance and repression. Their ability to advocate for human rights and engage in meaningful dialogue is severely compromised, stifling the critical voices that are essential for democratic change and accountability in the region.

VISAS FOR HRDS

International mobility barriers for HRDs at risk remain a significant challenge, both for accessing the EU and traveling within the MENA region. For many, obtaining a Schengen visa is often the only viable option, even when relocation is in a non-EU country that recognizes Schengen visa holders. Currently, HRD protection and relocation processes often rely on informal networks or direct contacts in embassies or ministries.

Formalizing procedures and applying a common set of criteria would enhance equity, coherence and accessibility, ensuring consistency across EU Member States and offering greater certainty for applicants, whose lives are at risk.

A recent [study](#) commissioned by the DROI Subcommittee identifies a series of recommendations to improve HRDs access to the EU and better accommodate their needs, which include:

- ❖ Establish HRDs as a specific category entitled to visa facilitations, allowing electronic visa applications; applications from outside the country of residence; waiving visa fees; reducing documentation requirements; expediting visa processing; providing multiple-entry visas; and supplying visas with extended validity (90 days).
- ❖ Develop an EU-wide Standard criteria for identifying HRDs eligible for temporary protection, based on the trusted third-party system and instructions from the EEAS.
- ❖ Enhance the Visa Code Handbook to promote harmonisation among Member States and encourage them to apply the envisaged derogations for HRDs. Member States should also enable HRDs to transition to longer-term residence status with proper attestation, as well as participation in short-term EU activities (e.g., conferences, seminars).
- ❖ Provide socio-economic assistance for HRDs.
- ❖ Recognize HRDs through certificates, prizes and EU awareness campaigns, and support CSOs that identify and assist HRDs.

3. COMMITTING TO BETTER FUNDING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Conditionality in funding for CSOs has significant repercussions on their work and undermines their integrity, contributing to broader delegitimization efforts and straining their working relationships with the EU and EU civil society. The EU must elevate civil society to partner status under its assistance, promoting their access to sufficient and adequate funding without using it as a tool for coercion or political pressure. This approach enables CSOs to operate independently, uphold their principles, and represent the diverse voices and interests of communities they serve, contributing positively to democratic processes and social progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 INCREASED AND ADEQUATE FUNDING

- Increase the budget for HRDs and CSOs across all NDICI-Global Europe programmes for the next EU programming period (2025-2027) and future MFF to sustain their vital work and meet the growing challenges to civic space and human rights in the region.
- Allocate earmarked and whenever possible direct funding to CSOs, without the intermediaries of governments.
- Invest more resources in funding mechanisms, capacity and grant-giving infrastructure.
- Practice coherent, consistent and predictable funding policies, in consultation with civil society.
- Allocate more resources to increase expertise and capacity within EU Delegations and headquarters to effectively implement the context-sensitive funding and ensure meaningful engagement with CSOs.
- Ensure further funding directly targeting for grassroots organisations and those led/representing people experiencing intersectional discrimination such as persons with disabilities, migrant, women and LGBTIQ+ communities.

3.2 RECOGNIZING CSOS AS PARTNERS, RATHER THAN RECIPIENTS OF FUNDS

- Establish mechanisms for regular, predictable and transparent dialogue with CSOs throughout the design, implementation and evaluation phases of NDICI-Global Europe programmes – both at the national and regional levels – in line with the European Council [conclusions on the mid-term evaluation of the NDICI-Global Europe external financing instrument](#)⁸.
- Refrain from enforcing undue restrictions on expression or speech and ensure that no clauses in contracts or donor practices violate the right to freedom of expression, as well as the [EU Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline](#). Any changes, revisions or suspensions must be proportionate, justified, and follow the donor's own internal guidelines/procedures, which should be accessible to the grantees⁹.

⁸The conclusions follow up on the [European Commission's report on the evaluation of the European Union's External Financing Instruments for the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027](#).

⁹ Issues around the politics and priorities of individual Commissioners and their influence over funding have also arisen. The EU Commission's financial assistance package to Palestine being blocked in 2022 and further reviewed in 2023 was well documented.

- Take proactive actions to rebuild trust with MENA CSOs through dialogue. Facilitate discussions on terms and conditions that led to the suspension of funding and assess these terms in the framework of international law, considering linguistic and historic differences between Europe and MENA.

3.3 ACCESSIBLE AND FLEXIBLE FUNDING MECHANISMS

- Mainstream subgranting across NDICI-Global Europe and implement more flexible funding mechanisms, including for non-registered groups, in order to address growing restrictions around receipt of foreign funding.
- Improve the accessibility of calls for proposals for CSOs by simplifying application procedures, providing comprehensive information, accepting submissions in multiple languages and adjusting administrative requirements according to grant size.
- Build capacities of grassroots and small CSOs systematically to enhance their ability to access NDICI-Global Europe funding.
- Avoid competition between INGOs and local CSOs by establishing separate funding streams.
- Apply consistent fiscal standards for governments and CSOs in relation to VAT.

DECLINE IN FUNDING FOR HRDS IN MENA

A recent [report](#) by ProtectDefenders.eu reveals a troubling trend: despite the growing needs, funding levels for HRDs in the MENA region, remains stagnant. Globally, HRD funding represents a mere 0.11% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) annually, with the MENA region receiving 0.8% of this small portion, making it the least funded area in the world. The report highlights a shift in donor focus from human rights issues to stability concerns, including counterterrorism, migration and trade interests, coupled with a certain “donor fatigue”.

HRDs and human rights NGOs in the MENA region face severe funding challenges amid a complex and restrictive environment. The rise in targeting HRDs and CSOs through anti-terrorism and cybercrime legislation has compelled many organizations to register part of their activities abroad or as businesses, while many countries require foreign funds to be declared. In countries such as Egypt and Algeria, direct funding to independent civil society has become nearly impossible due to government restrictions. In countries like Jordan, receiving foreign funds is subjected to Government’s approval, while the rhetoric targeting CSOs as “foreign agents” is becoming increasingly common in the region. The EU now relies on European partners for re-granting or works with government-organized NGOs (GONGOS). International donors avoid openly supporting CSOs in order to avoid backlash.

The decline in funding for HRDs in the MENA region not only undermines their critical work but also poses a significant threat to the broader human rights landscape. There is an urgent need for the EU and other international actors to recalibrate their funding strategies to prioritize support for HRDs and civil society in the MENA region.

We call the EU to set up a specific MENA fund for civil society due to the specific threats faced in the region. The fund should support local CSOs as well as relocation efforts for CSOs and HRDs at risk.

IMPACT OF RECENT FUNDING SUSPENSIONS AND REVISION ON MENA CSOS

In the aftermath of the 7th of October, at least six European states and several private foundations have reviewed and/or suspended funding to civil society organizations across MENA countries, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia, following their public support for Palestinian rights. The European Commission also [reviewed](#) its funding for Palestine CSOs. While donor reviews focused on potential diversion of funds to terrorist activities – and found no evidence of such diversion-, some also scrutinized CSOs for hate speech or calls for violence based on their public statements.

The impact is significant: 19 Palestinian, 11 Israeli human rights CSOs, and 25 CSOs in other MENA countries, have been affected, although the actual number is likely to be higher¹. The funding from these donors represents between 40% and 100% of the CSOs’ annual income, leading to significant disruptions in their operations and a loss of trust after the suspensions. The funding losses, ranging from 4% to 60% of the CSOs budget, have resulted in layoffs, suspension of projects, and missed opportunities for growth. measures as attempts to undermine their freedom of speech. These suspensions and revisions have led some organizations to practice self-censorship and have fueled accusations of Western double standards, portraying CSOs as foreign agents.

In response to recent funding suspensions affecting civil society organizations (CSOs) in the MENA region due to their support for Palestinian rights, it is recommended that European Union institutions and Member States reaffirm their commitment to CSOs by reinstating funding and ensuring transparency and accountability in funding decisions.

About the Position Paper

This position paper is directed toward the European Union institutions and Member States. It was developed as part of the discussions within the Majalat II Regional Working Group, which addresses critical issues related to governance, rule of law, and human rights in the Southern Mediterranean region.

Majalat II is a regional initiative supported and financed by the European Union (2023-2025), whose main objective is to foster an inclusive and structured dialogue between civil society organizations (CSOs) and a broad spectrum of European stakeholders.