ملتقى المؤسسات العربية الداعمة
Arab Foundations Forum

Humanitarian Access in Gaza

Licensing Restrictions, Operational Impacts, & the Path Forward for Philanthropy

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Executive Overview

On 17 February 2026, the Arab Foundations Forum convened an urgent panel discussion bringing together senior representatives from international humanitarian organizations and Palestinian civil society networks operating in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. The session examined the cascading impact of Israeli deregistration and licensing decisions on humanitarian operations and explored what the philanthropic sector can do in response.

The conversation revealed a humanitarian system under extraordinary and, by the panelists' collective assessment, historically unprecedented pressure. Restrictions on aid organizations' operating licenses, physical access, goods importation, staff movement, and financial transfers have combined to create what was repeatedly described as the most restrictive humanitarian operating environment in the world. Panelists emphasized that these are not isolated bureaucratic obstacles, but a systematic strategy to constrain, criminalize, and ultimately dismantle the international humanitarian presence in Palestine.

The Licensing & Deregistration Crisis

At the center of the discussion was the Israeli government's decision to deregister at least 37 international humanitarian organizations. Panelists noted that this process has been characterized by a striking absence of formal, direct communication from Israeli authorities to the affected organizations. Instead, information has largely reached them through media reports, rumor, and informal channels, creating a climate of deliberate ambiguity.

> *"We have been included on the list of 37 who have been deregistered by Israel. It's important to note that we have not gotten formal communication from the Israelis that we have been deregistered, nor have we applied to register again. A lot of the context with which we're operating is based on rumor, media, and spreading of information that's not factual."*

Panelists were unequivocal that their legal standing to operate derives from their registration with the Palestinian Authority, not from Israeli licensing, and that they intend to continue operations on that basis. However, the practical reality is that Israel controls the physical chokepoints: border

crossings for goods and personnel, work permits, and the coordination mechanisms that govern movement within Gaza.

> *"Israel may be able to control the borders of who has mobility and who can enter. They do not have formal control over who can operate within the occupied Palestinian territories or Gaza at this moment."*

Critically, the deregistration is not a standalone event. It was described as the culmination of a long pattern of escalating restrictions. Goods pipelines were shut down after the previous ceasefire ended in March 2025, with international organizations refused re-entry even once pipelines nominally reopened. Work permits for international staff had been blocked since October 2023. The deregistration formalizes and deepens a chokehold that was already tightening over years.

> *"This is just one tool in the toolbox we've seen used against INGOs or the humanitarian sector to restrict access. Even before the registration expired, we weren't able to bring in goods. Even straight after October 2023, we weren't able to issue work permits for international staff."*

The Scale of Humanitarian Impact

The panelists painted a devastating picture of the operational consequences. Drawing on data compiled by the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) and the UN cluster system, they outlined the depth of international organizations' role in sustaining basic services in Gaza.

Health

INGOs constitute 44 of the 80 active health partners in Gaza. The deregistration process effectively removes more than half of the health cluster's operational presence. International organizations currently operate 60% of field hospitals, 42% of primary healthcare centers, and 23% of medical points, supporting approximately 300,000 primary health consultations, 1,000 births, and 10,000 hospital admissions per month. No UN agency or local organization has the operational bandwidth to absorb this gap. The loss of international medical professionals is compounded by the significant numbers of Palestinian medical staff killed over the past two years.

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Food Security

Some 180 community kitchens supply approximately 1.7 million meals per day to displaced persons. While 50% of these kitchens are run by local and national organizations, 82% of the supplies for those kitchens are secured by UN and international actors. Of the 195 cooked meal provision points across Gaza, more than 68% rely on INGOs for staffing, supplies, or operational continuity. Two-thirds of the Gaza population face food insecurity, with 100,000 people at catastrophic levels.

Water, Sanitation & Hygiene

INGOs make up 62% of WASH partners and deliver 42% of all water, sanitation, and hygiene services across Gaza. Some 900,000 people depend on water trucking, which relies on fuel and desalination infrastructure supported by international actors. The removal of INGOs would directly slow or halt safe water provision, emergency latrine installations, hygiene distribution, and waste collection, with immediate implications for disease outbreaks.

Shelter, Education & Protection

More than 74% of all shelter and non-food item activities since the beginning of 2025 came from INGOs. Over 80% of schools have been destroyed, and temporary learning spaces depend on international supply chains even for basic stationery. The clearance of explosive remnants of war requires international expertise that Israel is already blocking from entry. Currently, operations are limited to marking affected sites and delivering risk awareness education.

Throughout these sectors, 1.4 million people remain internally displaced, living in approximately 1,000 temporary shelters without adequate privacy, dignity, or access to basic services. The situation extends to the West Bank, where forced evictions, land confiscation, settlement expansion, and settler attacks continue.

> *"When we talk about 500-plus aid workers killed in Gaza in two years, that's something outrageous that really needs to be spoken about as often as possible, because there is no safety."*

The Human Cost on Staff & the Question of Duty of Care

Some of the most powerful moments in the conversation came when panelists described what these conditions mean for their teams. National staff, Palestinian women and men living under

the same bombardment and displacement as the communities they serve, form the backbone of humanitarian operations in Gaza. They have been displaced ten to twenty times. They have lost family members, homes, and colleagues. There were periods when staff members themselves were starving.

> *"You can't underestimate what our staff have gone through over two years. There are times where our staff are seen as privileged. They're the ones, at least, that have a job, that have a salary. But there were times where they were starved, and they couldn't find food for themselves or their families."*

Organizations described opening shelters for staff and their families, allowing staff to bring up to ten family members and to define "family" on their own terms. This was a new and unprecedented step in humanitarian operations. One panelist recounted the internal anguish of the Gaza City offensive, when teams had to make decisions about who would stay and who would go, while receiving intelligence that there would be no services, no food access, no water, and no electricity.

> *"How can I possibly go to sleep at night knowing that you are still there? Every other day, our HR was tracking where people were, so that we had a sense of what the organizational footprint is, in terms of humans."*

For one organization, staff refused to leave even when opportunities arose. Their mothers had experienced displacement from Palestine and would not undergo it again. Another panelist spoke to the moral weight of working from outside the zone of conflict while colleagues endure its full horror.

> *"You have this unwavering guilt, day in and day out, because we are between a rock and a hard place, and we've been put in that position. There isn't a right answer, there isn't a perfect answer to anything. A lot of the time you're just trying to make the best decision out of the worst options put in front of you."*

Protection by Presence: The Erosion of a Vital Safeguard

Panelists highlighted a lesser-known consequence of blocking international staff: the loss of "protection by presence." The physical presence of international workers, while never a guarantee

of safety, adds a layer of deterrence against attacks on humanitarian sites. Organizations have made conscious decisions not to differentiate between local and international staff in deconfliction notifications, despite Israeli requests for such information, precisely to extend whatever protective value that presence offers.

> *"When you have organizations deregistered and banned from bringing staff into Gaza, that added layer of protection, however small it is, is also removed. We never differentiate between locals or international staff, even though that has been requested previously by Israel."*

There was a frank acknowledgment that deconfliction is not a guarantee. A known international NGO building in Gaza City was bombed on 9 October 2023, and coordinates shared for the protection of civilians have, in documented cases, been used to target those same locations. But the removal of that mechanism altogether leaves national staff even more exposed.

Misinformation, Narrative Control & the Weaponization of Neutrality

A recurring theme was the sophisticated and aggressive misinformation and disinformation campaign panelists described facing. Multiple speakers said this was unlike anything they had encountered in any other humanitarian context globally.

> *"The strategy is flooding the zone with as much misinformation and disinformation as possible, so we end up going down rabbit holes, trying to argue on truck counts, or trying to argue what we can all see with our own eyes when we see photos of people starving and dying of starvation."*

The manipulation extends to the concept of neutrality itself. Panelists were adamant that neutrality in humanitarian work means not taking sides in military hostilities. It does not, and has never, meant silence in the face of atrocities. Yet the accusation that humanitarian organizations breach neutrality by speaking out about violations of international humanitarian law has been weaponized to justify restrictions and delegitimize their work.

> *"Every humanitarian organization has the right and the responsibility to call out violations of international humanitarian law wherever we see it. That is the*

foundation of IHL. There is intentional manipulation, intentional politicization, and criminalization with the intent to chill and suppress organizations' voices."

"Lies can really travel fast around the world before the truth is even able to put on its shoes. Sometimes you don't end up speaking about the issues you want to speak about, because you're just trying to bring a grounded reality to the lay of the land as we see it."

Bank De-Risking: The Financial Chokepoint

Perhaps the most alarming structural threat raised was the escalating pattern of bank de-risking. Panelists reported that banks are freezing wire transfers to partners in Palestine, citing the deregistration as justification, even in the absence of formal documentation. One organization reported having more wires blocked this year than at any point in its history.

"Rumors are causing Israeli banks to freeze wires. Even though the Israelis only control the border movement, we do worry that in the future they could freeze wires going into the occupied Palestinian territories and into Gaza, which means that even if the intention was to restrict INGO operations, you've now chilled the entire sector."

This was framed as part of a broader pattern that has escalated steadily since 9/11, with governments and banks increasingly treating humanitarian operations in certain contexts as inherently risky, leading to the systematic de-banking of organizations working in those areas. Panelists warned that this financial chokepoint could become the most effective tool for shutting down humanitarian operations when all other mechanisms fail.

"When all other attempts to block fail, the one place is they could just throttle the banking system, and that's that."

A Global Precedent: Authoritarian Drift & the Future of Humanitarianism

Panelists were emphatic that what is unfolding in Palestine is not a localized crisis but a template that could be replicated globally. The mechanisms being deployed, including defamation of humanitarian actors, criminalization of access, forced deregistration, financial de-risking, and the

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militarization of aid, were described as an emerging playbook for authoritarianism's approach to civil society.

> *"This could be the first step in a mechanism, as we see growing authoritarianism, that could be used around the world. This is the moment for us to say no in a collective way, as loudly as possible."*

The discussion turned to the introduction of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) as a concrete case study. The GHF represented a model of militarized, private-sector-led aid delivery that the humanitarian community collectively rejected. Panelists described the intense pressure to participate and noted that the successful pushback by both INGOs and UN actors to prevent its normalization was one of the rare successes of the past two years. However, they warned that the same concept continues to resurface in different guises in post-ceasefire plans.

> *"What happens in Gaza does not stay in Gaza. We see all the most destructive operating modalities being introduced inside a Gaza context, from militarization of aid to privatization. Once normalized, they will be exported and utilized in other places around the world."*

What the Broader Sector Can Do: Calls to Action

In closing, panelists were asked directly what the broader philanthropic and development community can do. Their responses converged on several clear themes:

Sustain Funding and Keep Money Flowing

Panelists stressed that continued financial support to humanitarian organizations, civil society actors, and entities like UNRWA is critical. The defunding of organizations is itself being used as a weapon, and maintaining funding streams is an act of resistance against that strategy. Funding for advocacy initiatives was specifically highlighted as a priority in a context where the space for advocacy is shrinking rapidly.

> *"Money does talk. We're seeing increasingly that money is being used to punish organizations. If you can shut off the pool of money that heads towards*

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an organization, then you're already able to cripple all of its operations and achieve your goal."

Amplify Palestinian Voices

With INGO staff blocked from entering, journalists killed, and access revoked, the space for public witness is contracting. Every actor in the sector was encouraged to share and amplify Palestinian voices, particularly from those working inside Gaza, across every platform and space available to them.

Confront Bank De-Risking Collectively

The chilling effect of financial de-risking on the entire philanthropy sector demands a coordinated, sustained response. While the issue is technical and bureaucratic, panelists warned that it will be the mechanism through which humanitarian operations are ultimately shut down if not confronted.

Maintain Political Pressure at the Highest Levels

The restrictions cannot be resolved at the country level. Diplomatic engagement at capital levels, in the US, Europe, the UK, and beyond, is essential. The biggest challenge organizations face is when Gaza fades from media headlines; sustained attention and pressure on elected officials is what creates the political conditions for change.

Speak Out Courageously and Collectively

Teams on the ground have consistently asked their organizations for one thing above all: to use whatever platform and privilege they have to speak out against the atrocities they are witnessing, even when it carries risk.

"The one thing that gives our team comfort is when our leadership takes bold, courageous action. They don't want us to be quiet, even if it affects their safety. They want us to be speaking out against the impunity."

Resist Normalization

The humanitarian sector, philanthropic actors, and INGOs were urged to own their power and privilege and take courageous positions together. The way Israel is conducting operations and

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restricting humanitarian access is not normal; it is not the standard in any other conflict zone in the world, and it must not be normalized.

> *"Israel is the most restrictive in terms of humanitarian access in and out in the world, except perhaps North Korea. The extreme restriction and oppression is unprecedented. I really think that we have normalized this behavior too much."*

A Note of Acknowledgment

The Arab Foundations Forum extends its deepest gratitude to the panelists for their candor, courage, and generosity in sharing their experiences and insights under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Their commitment to staying, delivering, and speaking truth at enormous personal and professional cost is a testament to the resilience of humanitarian workers in Palestine and a challenge to all of us to do more.

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