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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE IN THE SHADOW OF TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDERS: RESOURCING IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article traces the impacts of the Executive Orders issued during the early phase of Trump's second presidency upon funding for civil society actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It takes stock of the key thematic and geographic areas affected by funding cuts and shortfall, including particularly activities conducted by actors committed to advocating for social change (e.g. those focused on reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights, diversity and race etc). At the same time, highlighting areas that have been spared major cuts (e.g. strategic military/security partnerships and curbing migrant flows to the West) indicates emerging shifts in donor priorities. Beyond documenting funding reductions in the region, the article contributes to existing literature by arguing that the Executive Orders have compounded, and been compounded by, parallel, sometimes pre-existing crises for civil society actors. In light of the above, the article concludes by reflecting on possible approaches that may be taken by civil society actors going forward.

Keywords

Foreign Aid; NGOs; Donor Policy; Localisation; Philanthropy; Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the implications of developments during the early phase of US President Trump's second term on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) funding landscape for civil society, research and humanitarian activities, and the resultant impacts on activism and knowledge production. In particular, it focuses on disruptions caused by Executive Orders passed by President Trump between re-etnering office in January 2025 and the end of December of that year. Additionally, the article considers other parallel, and sometimes preceding, shocks and crises that have also affected the funding landscape in MENA.

The article seeks to answer questions about which civil society actors, sectors and streams of works have been (most) affected by funding cuts. It also considers what kinds of programming and interventions have been minimally impacted through the disruption caused by Executive Orders, and what this implies for the trajectory of international aid and donor engagement. By taking five case studies, covering Lebanese, Libyan, Palestinian, Syrian and regional contexts, the article illustrates the impacts and risks that such decisions and actions have had for the work of civil society actors in the region, while also tracing efforts to establish more creative, sustainable and localised funding pathways to ensure the continuity of vital civil society and research work going forward. Beyond documenting funding reductions in the region, the article contributes to existing literature by arguing that the Executive Orders have compounded, and been compounded by, parallel, sometimes pre-existing crises for civil society actors. With this in mind, the concluding section reflects on possible strategic approaches for both civil society actors and supportive donor entities seeking to navigate such challenges.

2. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This article employs a mixed methodology. Firstly, it draws on desk review of secondary reporting about Trump's Executive Orders and their impact on the MENA region. Given the recency of the topic under study, there are limited relevant articles in peer-reviewed journals. Instead, available sources include donor reports, grant databases, organisational disclosures, NGO and UN activity reporting, selected to capture both the scale and the complexity of civil society funding across the MENA region. I prioritised the inclusion of public sources from different levels (governments, international foundations, private-sector, national and local actors) for the triangulation of information to the extent possible.

Secondly, desk review was complemented by 15 key informant interviews with representatives from civil society actors. These interviews added the perspective of individuals directly affected, presenting their daily concerns, which were often not covered in published literature. Alongside contributing to the article's broader mapping of macro dynamics across the MENA region, these interviews additionally feed into 5 case studies focused on individual civil society actors working in Lebanese, Libyan, Palestinian, Syrian and

regional contexts with a view to examining and illustrating impacts as well as mitigating strategies. While not representative of the full range of experiences by civil society actors across the entire MENA region, these case studies were selected to collectively illustrate the diversity of actors impacted in different geographic contexts. The temporal scope of the case studies was up until the end of 2025, with each interviewee contacted several times throughout that year via online communication to monitor both initial impacts of the Executive Orders and how actors were seeking to respond over time.

The chaotic nature of Trump's Executive Orders means that it has been challenging to comprehensively follow their disruptive impacts. Solid data are often only partially available, with cited figures varying across public sources rendering systematic tracking difficult. Indeed, research attempting to "follow the money" is hindered by methodological considerations relating to both limited availability of publicly accessible data and structural complexities within the international aid industry. While a review of NGO funding notes growing academic attention given to NGO fundraising over the last decade (Al-Nowairah & Saji, 2024), a number of methodological considerations present limitations regarding the accurate tracking of NGO funds. Although donors regularly announce funding pledges, full datasets are often not publicly available. For instance, a 2025 assessment of funding transparency notes that there is "no reliable overview of EU funding granted to NGOs" (European Court of Auditors, 2025). Moreover, given political sensitivities, some civil society actors in MENA have operated without overtly declaring that they are recipients of US (or other western) funding. Equally, NGOs will not always be inclined to report on suspended funding while in the process of advocating for its recovery. Ultimately, most data on philanthropic grant-making globally is self-reported (Sovner, 2017), making it largely patchy as well as fragmented. Inconsistent, sometimes unclear, reporting periods further make it difficult to draw conclusions about longitudinal developments.

Another challenge relates to the funding landscape itself. The complex structural mechanisms used to disperse funds through "trickle-down" processes make capturing the true reality of where money is invested a bewildering task. This is especially the case when funding is allocated through modalities such as "pooled funding" mechanisms where multiple actors may report on use of the same funds, potentially resulting in double counting. Reporting on different levels can also be confusing or deceptive, and many times details about the regional share of globally earmarked funds are simply not available. Indeed, it has been acknowledged in existing literature that where data on funding sometimes exists on the global level, there may still be "limited aggregated knowledge of how much funding – and through what channels – goes to local actors at the country level, particularly funding that reaches local actors indirectly" (Els, 2017). At the same time, non-standardised budget reporting categories, and lack of breakdown across programmes, partners and locations further complicate the picture, impeding accurate analysis.

Nonetheless, to the extent possible, the early sections of this article provide an overview of available data on these dynamics. To this effect, the article scopes other research published on the impact of the Executive Orders and wider developments in the MENA funding landscape. A particular focus here is given to studies that present discussion of quantitative data that can potentially fill gaps otherwise existing in information concerning affected programming and wider impacts. Later sections of the article consider other shocks and crises that have also impacted the MENA funding landscape. Finally, the article seeks to reflect on ways forward for MENA actors to secure the necessary resources to achieve their goals, while considering questions of future sustainability and ethics. It does so by providing a series of recommendations tailored to civil society actors and funding bodies looking to provide more sustainable and meaningful support within this challenging landscape.

3. DISRUPTIVE EXECUTIVE ORDERS DURING TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY 2.0

This article focuses on the impact of Executive Orders issued between January and December 2025. Since returning to office in January 2025, Trump broke historic records for the most Executive Orders issued during the first 100 days by any US president (Gómez & Bryson, 2025). Of the 147 issued by early May 2025, a number of these Executive Orders had reportedly brought about disruptive change expected to have long-lasting impacts (Gans, 2025). Notably, most of the Executive Orders passed to date that have directly impacted international aid were passed in the first two months of Trump's second Presidency. Alongside a rollback on environmental protection agreements, restoring the death penalty, and the controversial introduction of various trade tariffs,[1] multiple executive actions have related to the suspension of well-established funding pathways, and the demolition of bodies responsible for the management of such funding. Indeed, one of the slews of 26 Executive Orders Trump signed on his very first day back in the White House (20 January 2025) brought in a 90-day pause in US foreign development assistance pending reviews of "programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy" (Executive Order 14169, 2025). This was on the grounds that "The United States foreign aid industry and bureaucracy are not aligned with American interests and in many cases [are] antithetical to American values" (Ibid, Section 1). The near-total freeze of US foreign assistance ultimately paved the way for the complete dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) - an independent body operating since 1961 (Kates et al, 2025). Other Executive Orders issued the same day brought in the withdrawal of US funding from the World Health Organisation (Executive Order 14155, 2025) and the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) (Executive Order 14158, 2025) - an entity further empowered by later Executive Orders to dismantle government agencies and funded organisations.

[1] For a full compilation of the Executive Orders issued by President Trump, see: https://www.dlapiper.com/en-gb/insights/publications/2025/01/trump-executive-orders.

Following outcry against the sudden cuts to funding, on 29 January US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a waiver, instructing that "implementers of existing life-saving humanitarian assistance programs should continue or resume work if they have stopped" (US Department of State, 2025a). The waiver explicitly stated that there would be no continuation of any activities related to abortion, family planning, gender, transgender surgery, and DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] "ideology programs". On 19 February, the "Commencing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy" Executive Order "eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law" the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), alongside other organisations, on the basis of the President considering it an "unnecessary governmental entity" (Executive Order 14217, 2025). Other Orders suspended funding to United Nations agencies (Executive Order 14199, 2025). Given that the US had been by far the largest single donor to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for its humanitarian work with Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, Trump's sudden cancellation of all US funding to the agency has had significant impacts on the international community's ability to secure continued assistance to Palestinians in these countries. While there have long been arguments that many large UN entities, and the humanitarian system in general, are in need of reform, the Executive Orders have produced large-scale dysfunction - symbolized by the massive wastage of supplies that could feed 3.5 million people for a month while held in storage (Revell, 2025).

4. MAPPING IMPACTS OF TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDERS ON MENA'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE

In addition to the global rejection of the established rules-based order and multi-lateral humanitarian and development action, the Executive Orders since January 2025 have had a significant impact on the funding landscape for humanitarian, research and civil society actors in MENA. This is on top of existing funding challenges as the result of unmet fund-raising goals for regional humanitarian responses. Already during Trump's first term as President (2017-2021), the top budget line in US spending for MENA was cut 12% despite overtures to the strategic importance of the region to the Administration (Middle East Democracy Centre, 2017). For instance, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)'s budget was cut by 58% in 2017 (Ibid).

The Executive Actions of 2025 have had much more devastating impacts on MENA given the effective zeroing out of USAID and other federal agencies. Indeed, in 2024 USAID was providing some $4.2 billion to the region, approximately half of which was focused on humanitarian aid to Gaza, Iraq, Syria and Yemen (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2025: 2). Notably, the main areas to have been spared funding cuts in the region have been the strategic military aid to Israel and Egypt (Sinai) (The Guardian, 2025). This has sent a clear message to civil society professionals and wider populations in the region that international donor priorities are for their own military and security interests, while the promotion of

"progressive" values has been sidelined. The US trade wars (themselves partly implemented through Executive Orders) have reportedly had an impact on start-up funding across MENA, further widening the gender funding gap in this area (El-Shaeri, 2025).

UNHCR's regional operations, notably including the already markedly under-funded Syria refugee response plan (UNHCR, 2024), have been significantly cut due to suspension of US funding through the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). A large proportion of this funding was covering activities focused on Child Protection and Sexual & Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), while some countries in the region relied significantly on US funding (e.g. Iraq reportedly at 70%).[2] While PRM released some suspended funding following the 90-day period, the future of refugee assistance in MENA continues to look bleak. In noting the disproportionately high impacts of funding cuts on displaced populations globally, by July 2025 UNHCR reported 43% cuts to its programmes in the Middle East and North Africa - the highest impact in any of the world's regions - cf. 26% cuts in the Asia/Pacific region; 31% in East and Horn of Africa; 34% in Europe; 25% in West, Central and Southern Africa; 42% in the Americas (UNHCR, 2025: 5-7). The agency further details that: "In Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, severe cuts to financial aid, shelter assistance and health care are forcing families to choose between food, medicine, and rent. Key protection services for children and survivors of sexual violence are also being suspended, with others at risk" (Ibid, 6). A key informant in Iraq reported that most of the main providers of legal assistance to Syrian refugees (including NRC, UNHCR and its partners) had all drastically reduced their activities to the point that some teams are no longer able to adequately monitor evolving needs and protection trends.[3]

Support to Palestinians - both humanitarian and civil society - has been particularly badly hit by the recent funding crisis. After the first Trump Administration had already eliminated the vast majority of funding for humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in the Middle East (Beaumont & Holmes, 2018), funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was restored under the Biden Administration (Al Jazeera, 2021). Shortly into Trump's second term in the White House, in February 2025 the President issued an Executive Order effectively defunding UNRWA on the claim that the agency had become "infiltrated by members of groups long designated by the Secretary of State as foreign terrorist organizations" and that agency staff had been involved in the 7 October 2023 attack against Israel (Executive Order 14199, 2025). It should be noted that decisions to suspend funding to UNRWA by the US, UK and Germany following the 7 October attacks predate President Trump's return to office (Livingstone, 2024), although it is notable that Germany did commit subsequent funding to UNRWA in April 2024 (UNRWA, 2024). In parallel to the UNRWA funding crisis, in March 2025 the USAID-funded Middle East Regional

[2] Author interview with UNHCR staff member working in the Amman Regional Bureau, October 2025.
[3] Author interview with Iraqi lawyer working with an INGO in Iraq, September 2025.

Cooperation (MERC) program, which was created in 1979 to foster exchanges between citizens of Israeli and Arab states, was also shut down (Dayan & Samuels, 2025).

Trump's war on DEI, in conjunction with the massive funding cuts, has also significantly impacted civil society organisations striving for social change in the MENA region. For instance, as described in Case Study 1, HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement lost its funding to directly support human rights defenders (Hearst, 2025). The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which had been established to focus on providing smaller grants to non-governmental actors to work on "political freedoms" (Yerkes & Wittes, 2004), was named by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as one of the 2,600 entities under scrutiny for closure (New York Times, 2025a). Similarly, the US State Department's support of pro-democracy activists in Iran through the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program was suspended. Meanwhile, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which frames its MENA engagements as "support[ing] advocates throughout the region, including independent civil society organizations, think tanks and research centers, and media working towards democratic goals" (National Endowment for Democracy, undated), had mounted legal challenges against Trump's funding freeze (New York Times, 2025b). A February 2025 *op ed* issued by a centre founded by the conservative reformer currently heading the OMB is critical of NED's MENA work in stating that: "Among the groups unintentionally empowered by NED's "pro-democracy" meddling in the Middle East are radical jihadists like the Houthis in Yemen, the Al-Nusra Front in Syria, and the Islamic State (otherwise known as ISIS) in Syria and Iraq" (Center for Renewing America, 2025).

While most of the EOs related to international aid were issued during the early period of Trump's second Presidency, a number of later EOs are interesting for the new policy directions they imply. Firstly, in June 2025, President Trump passed an Executive Order initiating the lifting of sanctions on Syria in recognition of "the positive actions taken by the new Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa" (Executive Order 14312, 2025). This EO further authorised the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury and the Attorney General, to "take all appropriate action with respect to the designation" of HTS and Sharaa as "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" (Ibid, Section 8). As discussed in Case Study 3 on Syria, the US government's lifting of sanctions on the country as part of its stated commitment to support Syria's transition coincides with an increased focus on alignment with foreign and trade policy interests. Other Executive Orders have shifted the US's intervention in MENA to focus on new very specific directions of cooperation and engagement underlined by US national security interests. This is clear, for example, in the "Assuring the Security of the State of Qatar" Executive Order of September 2025, which explicitly frames its objectives through the prism of "shared interests, and the close relationship between our armed forces". This EO ultimately states that the "The United States shall regard any armed attack on the territory, sovereignty, or critical infrastructure of the State of Qatar as a threat to the peace and security of the United States" (Executive Order 14353, 2025). While this Executive Order is not directly related to civil society funding, it

makes clear the prioritisation of strategic military cooperation with selected MENA states (including also Egypt, Jordan and Israel) over principled engagement with the third sector.

The timing of Trump's disruptive Executive Orders also coincided with multiple other factors that have exacerbated the impacts in given contexts. For instance, ongoing conflict in Sudan has contributed to a deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the country. Just a few months prior to the funding cuts, UNICEF had welcomed the grant of $1.75 million funding from the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to respond to the refugees fleeing the escalating humanitarian crisis in Sudan (UNICEF, 2024). Lebanon was already suffering from multiple pre-existing crises (as discussed in Case Study 4). Meanwhile, the Case Study 3 below considers how the fall of the Assad regime in Syria during December 2024 brought new urgency at a time of resource confusion. Ultimately, the funding cuts introduced by Trump's Executive Orders have both compounded, and been compounded by, parallel crises and challenges affecting the MENA civil society space.

5. PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING MENA'S FUNDING LANDSCAPE

In addition to Trump's cancellation of funding to UNRWA, the MENA civil society and research landscape has been significantly impacted by the political positioning of various western donors following Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack against Israel, and Israel's subsequent genocidal intensification of Gaza. While many prominent European donors who had been active in supporting civil society actors in the MENA expressed immediate solidarity with Israel following the 7 October attack, the failure by some to comment equally assertively on the unfolding genocide against the Palestinian people thereafter exposed problematic political positioning, and created ethical and reputational dilemmas for activists and partners in the region. For instance, youth activists withdrew from the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* (FES) programming in Tunisia over the organisation's perceived back-tracking, then silence, over, and lack of solidarity with, Palestinian victims of Israel's state violence and human rights violations (El Atti, 2023). Similarly, the lack of any modification or supplement to the immediate declaration by Chairman of the German foundation, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung* (KAS) that it stands in "uneingeschränkte Solidarität" (unconditional solidarity) with Israel following the 7 October attack exposed the organisation's one-sided position (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023). More widely, German actors have been accused of showing a lack of "balance" in their approach to Middle East engagement (Casey, 2024). This is highlighted by a controversial law passed by the German parliament, which tied funding for cultural and scientific projects to support for Israel by making actors calling to boycott Israel or actively supporting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement ineligible for German funding (Frag den Staat, 2024; Whittle, 2024). This can be alongside the tendency to "weaponize" against civil society actors critical of the Israeli state's action the expansive International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism – an observation shared by a key drafter of the IHRA (Stern, 2019). This trend predates Trump's

return to office. In parallel, some MENA-based organisations report increased challenges and opacity regarding passing German vetting.[4]

Prior to 7 October, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had already severely impacted economies in the region (International Crisis Group, 2022), and resulted in a diversion of funds and interests away from the region, with expectations in 2022 that many MENA states would experience a 25-50% funding cut, while Egypt was projected to incur up to a 75% reduction in humanitarian funds (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2022). The above developments have coincided with a general scaling-back of European Union and other western funding provided for democracy promotion and wider international development assistance in the MENA. Some such developments are part of global framing to reduce international development spending, such as the UK's 2025 announcement of a major cut in international aid to fund increased military spending - primarily as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Crerar & Stacey, 2025). This, *inter alia*, has resulted in a significant funding reduction for programs targeting women and girls, and supporting gender equality (Care International, 2025), further compounding the shrinking in support to the Women, Peace and Security agenda over recent years (Avichezer, 2024). For its part, France announced significant cuts to its development aid funding for the 2025 financial year (Masseguin, 2024). Further, it is clear that much available funding for civil society and humanitarian actors in MENA is premised on clear security objectives of western states - e.g., the UK Integrated Security Fund (UK Government, 2023). For its part, the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) announced a structural reform, including the elimination of Division "S," which is responsible for stabilization, peacebuilding, crisis prevention and humanitarian assistance programs. (Centre for Humanitarian Action, 2025).

Coinciding with increased annual anti-gender spending in Europe, fourfold from 2009 to 2018 (Datta, 2021), recent years have seen resourcing for LGBTI communities and inclusive gender justice movements cut globally. Part of this is resulting from the Open Society Foundation (OSF)'s strategic shift initiated in 2021 (Nowrojee, 2021), which ultimately led to the closure of its Human Rights Initiative and Public Health Program that had each extensively supported LGBTI+ communities worldwide. Indeed, according to a review by the Global Philanthropy Project focusing on the impacts to LGBTI+ funding, it was found that 8% of the budget of LGBTI+ movements outside the USA had been provided by the OSF (Global Philanthropy Project, undated). This highlighted how the sector had become heavily reliant upon OSF funding (Igoe, 2024). As elections have resulted in swings to the right across Europe, commentators have warned about the likely impacts on funding to gender equality initiatives (Coi, 2024).

Civil society work committed to intersectional social change has been particularly negatively affected by de-funding by the US government, but also through wider funding dynamics. Notably many feminist and women's rights movements were already facing

[4] Author interviews, anonymised, May 2025.

funding challenges, indicated by a 2022 study finding that most Women's Rights Organisations had never received unrestricted or multi-year funding (Alliance for Feminist Movements and Equal Measures 2030, 2025: 8). Women rights advocates have highlighted concerns over funding cuts against the context of the global anti-gender movement and anti-feminist backlash. In Lebanon, for example, one civil society advocate highlights how "a rising backlash [against feminism] in Lebanon and the MENA region" has coincided with ongoing budget cuts in the MENA region. (UN News, 2025a). Globally, women-focused programming, and that focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights for young women living with disabilities, women living with HIV, those who identify as LGBTQ, has been significantly impacted, with particular focus on the Global South.

Finally, another recent dynamic that has coincided with US funding cuts is the policy shift in the engagement of Gulf donors. While historically cautious to fund human rights programming, many Gulf states have engaged in large-scale humanitarian donation. Notably, the Gulf states have been major donors to a number of UN agencies, including UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP (Pericoli, 2025). However, the recent reduction in western funding to the MENA region has coincided with Gulf states "redraw[ing] their foreign financial policies, shifting away from the "open-handed aid" model that had characterized them for earlier decades" (Ali, 2025). Instead, "Funding has now been tied to political and economic conditions and to standards related to state authority and governance" (Ibid). This results in further challenges for MENA civil society actors who must operate in an increasingly restrictive climate.

The following five case studies Illustrate a range of dynamics confronting civil society actors in the MENA region. They highlight a number of common points: namely the vulnerability of locally-rooted civil society to donor dependency, and the compounding effects of parallel and preceding shocks to the funding and operating landscape.

5.1. *Case Study 1: HuMENA's Suspended Support to Human Rights Defenders Regionally*

The case study of HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement highlights the risks of donor dependence, especially for human rights defenders working on DEI and LGBTQ+ subjects. It illustrates how wider dynamics present barriers to replacing lost funding from other sources and represent further challenges when operating in an environment increasingly hostile to human rights and equality work. As an organisation working to support the work and wellbeing of human rights defenders across the Middle East and North Africa, HuMENA reported loss of 76% of its overall funds as a result of suspension of US support through Trump's Executive Orders. HuMENA had been receiving some of its funding from USAID directly and another portion through the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The organisation was consequently forced to close 3 projects in their entirety and to scale down

other operations.[5] These included programming focused on LGBTQ rights in Morocco and civil space in Tunisia, while also having to reduce staffing and downsize activities more broadly, resulting in a clear reduction in impacts for planned activities. The organisation's Executive Director, Mostafa Fouad, reported how these programmes supporting human rights defenders and social movements had been providing strong connections with activists working on the ground. "Now we are in a phase of trying to find other ways to continue the support", he added. HuMENA has also faced challenges in its work as a result of the fact that, not only have they lost funding, but so too has the entire civil society ecosystem. Some organisations not directly implicated by the loss of US funds have been negatively impacted by the generally more competitive environment that the US funding cuts have produced, resulting in many organisations having to reduce their staff or have them go part-time. "Everyone is suffering from this issue," remarks Fouad. "The only winners are the authoritarian regimes in the region."

HuMENA considers the loss of USAID funding to its Human Rights Defenders at Risk programme as part of the "wider attack on human rights and equality work". Following a 3-month assessment by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) after the initial Stop the Work Order, the organisation's work was ultimately fully terminated on the basis that its projects did not align with the direction of the new US administration. HuMENA has sought to work with its partners to explore ways to fill some of the lost funding, but the gap remains unfilled. While its Executive Director reports that several EU state actors expressed an interest in engaging to fill the gap, little such funding materialised since European priorities shifted towards funding military assistance in Ukraine after Trump's confrontational Oval Office meeting with Zelenskyy in February 2025 (Bayer et al, 2025). Other European foundations and donors proved to have complicated paperwork, or include a minimum project budget, making it difficult for small or medium-sized organisations to apply. Alternatively, the requirement to provide a full external audit similarly *de facto* excludes smaller actors given the high costs involved in covering such services. HuMENA also found that some European donors prefer to fund NGOs with registration in their own countries, which proved to be a further obstacle.[6]

Reflecting on the possible regional implications, HuMENA's staff expect to see that national civil society actors in many countries will struggle to survive, anticipating that "as many as 70% might close up their operations within the next two to three years." While the present lack of opportunities for sustainable engagement with, and real capacity building of, local actors is a pressing challenge, HuMENA acknowledges that the funding crisis has sometimes "forced" closer collaboration as well as sharing of data and resources. Indeed,

[5] Author interview with Mostafa Fouad, HuMENA Executive Director, 23 June 2025.

[6] For example, many Italian public funding schemes for civil society (e.g. through the Agenzia Italian Per La Cooperazione Allo Sviluppo, AICS) are restricted to organisations legally established and registered in Italy as per Law No. 125/2014: https://www.aics.gov.it/fields-of-action/osc-profit-ed-enti-territoriali/elenco-osc/?lang=en.

Fouad revealed that HuMENA and two other organisations have been contemplating merging in order to combine forces to better operate within the current landscape.

5.2. *Case Study 2: Al Magharbia Foundation Struggling to Map Impacts in Libya*

This case study of a research centre in Libya shows how even attempts to take stock, and map the full picture, of the impacts brought about by funding cuts were themselves impacted by the demolition of civil society infrastructure due to the same shocks. Further, the case highlights the wide range of sectors affected and the intersection with political currents already hostile to civil society actors. In Libya, such dynamics played out against the backdrop of civil society having been severely restricted for more than 40 years of Gaddafi's rule, followed by actors struggling under an unstable legal framework for a decade and a half since his fall. US agencies had been working on implementation of a 10-year strategy signed under the Biden administration focusing on sustainable peace (US Department of State, 2022). This included tying interventions to a long-term political vision promoting transition towards unified civilian-led governance, enhanced public services and inclusive, democratic institutions. Many projects were focusing on integration of marginalised communities in southern Libya into the national framework. Libya had also been identified as one of 5 target geographic areas in the 10-Year plan under the Biden Administration's Global Fragility Act (GFA) seeking to address conflict and promote stability (US Embassy in Tripoli, 2023), with over a billion USD dedicated to target these areas over a 5-year period (Alliance for Peacebuilding, undated). Actors working in the peacebuilding sector, including Mercy Corps, US contractors such as Tetratech, and their local partners were consequently hit hard by the sudden suspension of US funding to activities in Libya in early 2025. Chemonics International and Democracy International's interventions to support transitional governance in Libya were among the USAID-funded programmes terminated in early 2025 (Siken, 2025). The former included the Libya Governance and Civil Society Program (LGCS), known locally as the "Taqarib" (Coming Together) project, which supported Libyan municipalities in service delivery. USAID had also been a key supporter of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Libya to provide capacity building for electoral authorities over a number of years. IFES's website currently shows Libya as a country of "Past Programming" and makes no mention of it under "Current Activities", suggesting a suspension of the Foundation's work in the country (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, undated). Municipal elections in Libya have been significantly affected by funding cuts since election committees lost US funds, ultimately resulting in elections being delayed by several months (Kouachi & Abu Shamala, 2025).

Having been recently re-established by a group of Libyan peacebuilding professionals after a period of suspension following "uncertainty in the civil society legal framework", Al Magharbia Foundation for Public Policy and Democratic Enhancement sought to assess the

situation and impacts of these funding cuts.[7] The organisation launched a survey appealing for civil society actors to share information about the implications of cuts on their work. However, the group reports that the fact that impacts were so widespread hindered their ability to access accurate information and fully take stock of the situation. "Almost everyone was affected so they did not have time to fill out our survey. We did get 10 submissions with some interesting data, but then we found ourselves unable to dedicate time to proper analysis of the results since we had also been directly impacted", explains the founder of Al Magharbia, who had also immediately lost his work and income as a consultant on a Tetratech programme.

Nonetheless, reporting suggests that governance, economic development, elections, and peacebuilding work has been severely affected, while some security cooperation interventions in Libya continue. The reduction in US engagement in southern Libya has provided an opportunity for increased Russian intervention there (Ghoulidi, 2025). While Russia has refocused its influence on Libya following its withdrawal from Syria in late 2024 (Lovotti & Pavia, 2024), it appears to have invested little in civil society there. The founder of Al Magharbia reported that almost all projects and consultancies relating to governance were terminated immediately following news of Trump's first Executive Orders in office with stagnating impacts on the Libyan NGOs and development sector, as well as for key Libyan government institutions that had been reliant on US funding. The impact of US funding cuts in Libya has been exacerbated by a government crackdown on NGOs in the country. While many draconian laws and other measures used to target and harass activists in Libya predate Trump's Executive Orders (Human Rights Watch, 2025a; International Commission of Jurists 2023), the loss of international support has generally negatively affected the broader civil society ecosystem. In addition, ten INGOs supporting migrants in Libya, including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and Terre des Hommes, were suspended in April 2025 on accusations of "hostile actions that undermine" national security (Arab Weekly, 2025). The representative from Al Magharbia further explained that "this is not the first time Libya has been vulnerable to cuts due to its heavy reliance on international funding", adding that many non-humanitarian INGOs left the country between 2014-17.

Meanwhile, much European funding for Libya remains focused on responding to potential trans-Mediterranean migrant flows. For instance, an early proposal of the European Commission's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034 gives an indication of possible future funding allocation priorities, suggesting that "the amount of money allocated to migration matters will be significantly increased from the previous budget" (tripling from 25 billion to 81 billion Euros), while "the Commission has made borders the top priority" (Lindsay, 2025). Of the total 2 trillion Euro MFF, 42.9 billion Euros is proposed to go to the Middle East, North African and the Gulf - disbursed through the "Global Europe" instrument (European Commission, 2025e). While it is officially stated that "Global Europe

[7] Author interview with founder, June 2025.

will guarantee the EU's longstanding support for peace, democracy, human rights, civil society, free media and local authorities" (Ibid), this funding may also include the EU's externalisation of migration control (Lindsay, 2025), primarily through the training and equipping of North African Security Forces and Coast Guard services tasked to "stem" the flow of migrants into Europe by means of interception and forced returns (for such practices in Libya, see, e.g. Mellersh, 2025).

Reports suggest that the USAID has suspended its previously approved £50 million aid package to Libya, which was due to focus on i) governance and anti-corruption ii) voter engagement iii) media integrity to combat disinformation, much of which was largely administered through Chemonics International (Libya Express, 2025). It should be noted that foreign funding in Libya has been a sensitive issue following international intervention to topple Gaddafi that resulted in years of chaotic civil conflict (Mikaïl, 2013: 5). This has resulted in some observers responding to news of USAID funding cuts by providing critical accounts of the history of US (and EU) funding creating donor dependency (Fetouri, 2025), and "U.S. imperialist aims in maintaining instability and dominance over the country" (Osazua, 2024). It is, therefore, perhaps noteworthy that security cooperation between the US and Libya appears to continue largely unaffected (AlMamlaka TV, 2025). For its part, EU funding has been largely premised on combating migration to Europe by, for example, providing funding through the Tripoli government to municipalities to cope with the flow of migrants (Middle East Monitor, 2023; Dettmer, 2017). The transactional nature of Trump's position on Libya has been clear through the focus of his Administration on continuing engagement with the National Oil Corporation (NOC), while Europeans continue to prioritise curtailing migration (Libya Review, 2025; Rashed, 2025). In contrast, civil society actors working for social change have often both lost funding and been entangled in political debates as Trump's Executive Orders have produced division within Libyan society on the value of international funding, with some countering the above critiques with recognition of the benefits achieved through - sometimes indirect - USAID funding (Diwan Research, 2025). In all cases, the sudden US funding cuts to civil society, research and humanitarian actors in Libya has had disruptive impacts on programming.

5.3. *Case Study 3: Cuts Coinciding with Regime Change in Syria*

The case study of Syria highlights the coincidence of significant funding cuts with new stabilisation needs brought about by the sudden political transition following the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024. The case shows how funding uncertainty can disrupt services even when assistance is nominally exempt or unaffected. Confusion over waivers and delayed funds had severe consequences for service continuity when humanitarian and civil society needs were changing rapidly and organisations were trying to adapt their operations. In this situation, funding cuts exposed civil society actors to heightened public criticism and frustration arising from the gap between expectations and reality.

Trump's cuts to USAID and other Executive Orders impacting the MENA funding landscape have coincided with Syria's transition following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Due to donor fatigue and other "competing" priorities, by August 2025 the UN coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria had only received 11.6% of the required USD 3.19 billion funding to cover surveyed needs (The Syria Report, 2025). While Syrians have been relatively patient and sympathetic towards the fact that the new authorities have been impacted by international sanctions (introduced against the former Assad regime), and were therefore largely unable to pay public salaries for their first six months in power, many have not shown the same level of understanding towards civil society actors in the country who have often had their budgets decimated by international (primarily US) funding cuts.[8] Often, everyday Syrians have little awareness of the extent to which civil society and humanitarian actors have been negatively impacted by the global funding crisis, and are critical of their limited capacities in responding to the newly emerging needs following the fall of the Assad government in late 2024. As sanctions remained in place in Syria for the first six months following the regime change, the population turned to civil society to perform the government's functions (that had previously been largely bank-rolled by Assad's ally, Russia).

The inability of NGOs to effectively respond to the situation and fill these gaps, while actors such as the World Bank have been cautious in engaging decisively post-regime change, has the potential to lead to increased tensions between members of different conflict-affected communities in the country. This risk is greater given the large movements of population returns following December 2024, which have often resulted in challenges for social cohesion and reintegration given the many intractable HLP issues that have been left behind as Syria's population has been affected by multiple waves of displacement. Syrian actors affected by funding cuts have been wide-ranging, including women's groups, humanitarian and medical actors, victims' associations, emergency services and media actors (Danon, 2025; Al-Khateeb, 2025).

During this critical period, the suspension of most of the US funding channelled through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to beneficiaries through Syrian NGOs has resulted in the US no longer being the single largest active donor within the Syrian context. Further, despite Marco Rubio's 29 January waiver for the continuation of life-saving humanitarian assistance including "core life-saving medicine, medical services, food, shelter, and subsistence assistance, as well as supplies and reasonable administrative costs as necessary to deliver such assistance" (US Department of State, 2025a), there has been much confusion as Syrian relief actors have found themselves exposed to previously unimaginable financial risks as expected funds have not arrived. An NGO specialising in the provision of prosthetic limbs, stated: "We were informed that the grant was suspended without receiving

[8] This point was prominent within discussions during a community consultation held in Douma, rural Damascus, organised by a Syrian NGO in April 2025.

the operating costs for the first month of 2025, which caused a financial breakdown due to previous invoices and operating expenses" (Al-Khateeb, 2025). As a result, its centres were forced to close due to lack of operating costs despite significant investment in the set-up. Some local NGOs even faced security threats from supplies due to unpaid payments.[9] Elsewhere, there have also been real humanitarian impacts, with whole camps and informal settlements suddenly cut-off from services. For example, ACTED reportedly suspended its Food Security and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services (including waste removal) to camps in the Bab al-Hawa region of Idleb (Ibid). While Human Rights Watch reported that the US government's suspension of aid to organizations in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps in northeastern Syria could exacerbate life-threatening conditions due to the immediate and palpable impact on all aspects of the response, including the delivery of essential goods by organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2025b), this is one of the areas where implementation was granted a reprieve given the security sensitivities of the camp residents' affiliations with ISIS (Böhm, 2025).

The Syrian media landscape has also been significantly hit by funding cuts, with several agencies having "scaled back on key areas of their operations, or ceased output entirely, since late January" (Dixon, 2025). While few of these platforms had publicly acknowledged their US funding, they have conspicuously "decreased their output across broadcast, online and social media since the end of January" - including counter-disinformation efforts. Several outlets saw a significant drop in activity in February 2025, downsizing operations - with one station (Radio Al Kul) suspending all social media operations, including livestream broadcasts, and Halab Today freezing its activity from 30 January to 22 February (Danon, 2025). Given that this coincided with the critical period of regime change and immediate transition, "[t]he move poses questions about the ramifications of the US's shifting global role for the future of local, independent reporting and fact-checking in Syria in the tumultuous transition period ahead" (Ibid). Verify-Sy reported that it had been receiving hundreds of requests a day since the takeover asking for verification of social media content, and had not been able to respond while there was an increase in fake and misleading media with a sectarian focus since December 2024. It should be noted that the Department of State's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Assistance Coordination (NEA/AC) had announced in 2023 support for independent media in Syria to the value of $15 million (Funds for NGOs, 2023). As actors were seeking to respond to the transition (including switching the locus of their operations to Damascus etc), funding uncertainty and limited resources have reduced their response capacity. The raising of sanctions, initially by the US (Slattery et al, 2025), and then by the EU (Council of the European Union, 2025), presented some new opportunities for civil society and humanitarian actors working in Syria, but many Syrian civil society actors have nonetheless struggled to find alternative funds to cover some of their core activities.

[9] Author interviews, anonymised, March-June 2025.

5.4. *Case Study 4: Implications for Lebanon: Compounding Cumulative Crises*

The Lebanese case reveals how sudden funding cuts can compound an already severe, overlapping crisis. Since 2019, the country's financial collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion, and the effects of the war in Ukraine have weakened the funding environment. The aid reductions arising from Trump's Executive Orders have added further pressure across many sectors of civil society implementation, with rights-based initiatives being particularly badly impacted. At the same time, debate about localization, collaboration, and more sustainable funding models presents avenues for examining possible responses. Together, these dynamics make the case valuable for understanding how aid dependence, donor decisions, local capacity, and political narratives shape civil society's ability to sustain essential services and advocacy in MENA.

Prior to the start of Trump's second presidency, Lebanon was already facing multiple crises affecting the funding landscape for civil society, humanitarian and research actors. The ongoing financial (and liquidity) crisis affecting the country since 2019 had been exacerbated by each of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 Beirut port explosion and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Delacloche, 2025). USAID had been providing significant support to actors in Lebanon, including through the Syrian refugee response (Moussa, 2025). As Lebanon has been home to the largest refugee population per capita in the world, such assistance has been critical. The country has seen a reduction in foreign aid from $220 million in 2024 to only $70 million for 2025 (US Department of State, undated). While some 142 million of the 2024 funds were earmarked for military financing and a further 80 million for humanitarian assistance, a significant proportion of the remaining funds covered Quality Instruction Towards Access [23 million] and Higher Education [20 million] (Ibid). Indeed, the education sector has been particularly badly hit, as the US had been both supporting the school system and providing scholarships for university students (Al-Faour, 2025). Indeed, university education has also been badly impacted by cuts and the preceding Covid-19 and economic crises (Now Asharq, 2025).

The funding cuts have left Syrian refugees in Lebanon short of material essentials due to suspended cash assistance and other relief aid, sometimes resulting in child malnutrition (Osseiran, 2025). With only 14% of UNHCR's operational planning for Lebanon covered by secured funding, the agency has had to cut 347,000 Syrian refugees from a joint cash assistance programme with WFP from April 2025, and anticipated being unable to support another 206,000 after June (Ibid). Meanwhile WFP has itself also reduced assistance from 830,000 to 660,000 Syrian refugees and from 162,000 to 40,000 for vulnerable Lebanese citizens. This has likely resulted in community members resorting to negative coping mechanisms (including "survival sex") and exposing families to generalised vulnerabilities that are likely not captured in reporting, while also having impacts on social cohesion as refugees and members of host communities struggle to provide for themselves. Such dynamics were already apparent in Lebanon in 2023 when Helem, an LGBTQ+ NGO in

Lebanon decided to suspend its UNHCR-funded programme to support LGBTQ+ refugees as it had been unable to fundraise to "match" support for the host community (Medina, 2023). Lebanon's economic collapse, together with aid budget cuts, has contributed to a worsening climate for queer people in the country (Ibid). While LGBTQ+ and gender equality movements have been historically strong in Lebanon, the crackdown in recent years has coincided with global reduction in support for associated programming, e.g. from well-established donors like the Open Society Foundation to organisations such as KAFA, Mada Network and LADE (Al-Akhbar, 2023; Jang & Howe, 2023).

In reflecting on the possible implications of cuts to civil society support in Lebanon, Alaa Sayeg, Democracy Matters Initiative Advisory Group Member at MEDC stresses how society in Lebanon has been able to weather multiple crises by relying on civil society as a constant support, adding that "[i]t has stepped in every aspect where the government has failed and it kept people with the basic needs and services", and further questioning: "What happens when the last safety net is pulled away? What happens when the US development aid, one of the few remaining lifelines, is suddenly frozen?" (Middle East Democracy Center & Arab Center Washington DC, 2025). His own response is that "we need to focus on localization and supporting local civil society groups to survive and to innovate for funding options and to use this crisis as an opportunity and to change it, to be an opportunity for more collaboration between civil society groups to keep all the achievements that have been done in the past and to save what can be saved." For his part, Nadim Shehadi has argued that "There may be some benefits from a reset triggered by the USAID freeze and the European squeeze" if it is possible to overthrow some of the inefficient and redundant bureaucracy in the aid sector (Shahadi, 2025). In this respect, one research consultant has observed a possible silver lining in the opportunity to promote stronger local partnerships and collaborations between academia and NGOs for more sustainable funding models (Tabsh, 2025). Indeed, prior to Trump's funding cuts, Lebanese women's groups were already calling for a reformed approach to funding civil society (Hivos, 2024).

Even when not directly impacted by funding cuts, actors within the civil society landscape have been negatively impacted by the wider fallout of Trump's Executive Orders and the associated discourse. An example is the main current of the migrant domestic workers solidarity movement in Lebanon. Despite reportedly not having been historically supported by US funding, a Tweet by Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed "The American taxpayers should not be funding misguided programs like "Building the Migrant Domestic Worker-Led Movement in Lebanon" (Rubio, 2025). This shows how the most vulnerable can become the target of political stunts within the international funding landscape. Notably, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon had already significantly suffered from the Covid-19 crisis (International Labour Organisation, 2020), and then again by displacement caused by Israeli strikes on Lebanon (Kelly & Michaelson, 2024). Such rhetoric from US officials may be damaging to rights-based movements even when not recipients of US funding in the first place (Hamadi, 2025).

5.5. *Case Study 5: UNRWA's Aid to Palestinians – Making of a Pariah Humanitarian Agency*

The Palestinian context presents a critical case for examining how donor decisions and political pressures can converge to constrain both humanitarian operations and civic space. UNRWA's experience demonstrates the vulnerability created by reliance a limited donor base: the suspension of US funding compounded a funding crisis that predated Trump's second term, while Israeli restrictions on the agency's operations and barriers to aid entry intensified the demands on its services. The case also shows how the politicisation of aid complicates long-term funding. Debates over the agency's neutrality and management have shaped subsequent donor decisions, even as some donors resumed or maintained contributions. Beyond humanitarian agencies, US sanctions targeting Palestinian NGOs and the criminalization of pro-Palestine groups elsewhere illustrate how political action can directly affect civil society organizations and their ability to operate. At the same time, the Palestine case highlights important efforts to protect civic space through coalition-building, knowledge production, and collective action. Together, these dynamics speak to the interaction of funding dependency, politicisation of aid and associated political restrictions on civil society across MENA.

Humanitarian aid organisations and civil society movements targeting Palestinians have been particularly negatively affected by Trump's funding cuts, amidst wider action to discredit relevant Palestinian actors. UNRWA was already facing a crisis as a result of funding cuts during President Trump's first term in office (BADIL, 2018). With the US historically being UNRWA's biggest funder, the complete suspension of funding to the agenda has created a resource crisis at the very time UNRWA seeks to respond to the massive humanitarian needs caused by Israel's war on Gaza. This has been exacerbated by Israeli laws restricting the agency's operations (UN News, 2025b), alongside the wider blockade of aid into Palestinian territories (particularly Gaza), resulting in a situation of famine (UN News, 2025c). Despite speculation about engagement from Gulf countries to fill UNRWA's funding gap following concerted advocacy efforts targeting the region (Alhasan & Alajlouni, 2024), the agency faced a funding deficit of 200 million USD (Nichols, 2025).

Prior to Trump's Executive Order targeting UNRWA, the agency was already struggling to survive. Alongside the US, other donors that had temporarily suspended funding to UNRWA following the 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas include Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Estonia, Japan, Austria and Romania (AlJazeera, 2024). While many of these states had eventually resumed their support to UNRWA, the politicisation of the agency has made long-term fund-raising challenging. Within the UK's announced renewed funding to UNRWA in July 2024, part is specifically targeted at facilitating reforms of the agency's management (UK Government, 2024). In 2024, Swiss lawmakers voted to suspend funding to the agency, citing risks of assistance going to Hamas (Merlin, 2024).

Other actors have, however, continued support for UNRWA. The Australian government, for instance, has maintained annual support to UNRWA of approximately 20 million Australian dollars, committing at least two additional one-off donations of support (10 million and 21.5 million AUD respectively) since the start of Israel's full-scale military operations in Gaza in 2023 (Keene, 2025). Following the announcement of Trump's January 2025 Executive Order against UNRWA, Norway, as the fifth biggest donor to UNRWA, stated that it intended to continue its support to the agency (Donor Tracker, 2024). The European Commission reports "stepping up" to support UNRWA's work (European Commission, 2025d).

Besides EOs, the US has on multiple occasions imposed sanctions on Palestinian NGOs, either based on the accusation of links to Hamas (Reuters, 2025), or for engaging with the International Criminal Court (ICC) procedures to investigate and prosecute Israeli nationals (US Department of State, 2025b). In the latter case, the Executive Order sanctioning the ICC established the provisions through which these NGOs were subsequently the target of their own sanctions (Executive Order 14203, 2025). Globally, pro-Palestine groups, such as the Palestine Action in the UK, have similarly faced criminalisation (Siddique, 2025). In order to "counter efforts to restrict civic space by supporting civil society in three areas: coalition building, knowledge production, and collective action", Hivos has, with funding from Norway, established its first partnerships with civil society actors in Palestine (Hivos, 2025).

6. DONOR RESPONSE AND PUSHBACK STRATEGIES

In response to the funding cuts to MENA actors resulting from US Executive Orders, some other actors have stepped in to partially address some of the emerging gaps. For instance, in May 2025 the European Commission announced provision of some "boosted" humanitarian funding to Syria, Lebanon and Gaza - €50 million for Gaza, €20 million for Northeast Syria, and €13 million for Lebanon (European Commission, 2025c). However, such gestures are limited in covering what has been lost. In particular areas of programming, other international actors have stepped in to - partially - fill some of the gaps left by the US funding cuts. This particularly includes programming for Syria where compelling arguments relating to the new political situation can make engagement appealing to donors. For instance, the EU pledged 2.5 billion Euros for Syria transition and host countries (European Commission, 2025a), while Japan has donated to support UNHCR's work with civil registration systems inside Syria (Syrian Arab News Agency, 2025). Likewise, in May 2025 the European Commission announced a new aid package for Yemen (European Commission, 2025b). Such programming is often disbursed through UN structures where - if involved at all - national civil society actors sometimes serve simply as service delivery mechanisms rather than being able to develop their own strategic interests.

While MENA civil society activists have themselves long been sceptical of US foreign policy interests, the sudden suspension of so-called "pro-democracy" funding has left actors in the sector faced with new existential questions as alternative resourcing options remain

scarce. It is widely acknowledged that international funding - in both its provision and its withdrawal - can have negative impacts on civil society movements in MENA, including through co-option towards Global North policy priorities. Discourse around "systems change" has been prevalent in the aftermath of Trump's Executive Orders, with some in the relief sector calling for a "humanitarian re-set" (UN OCHA, 2025). In response to the "broken" aid system, a number of actors have launched initiatives designed to mitigate negative impacts or even to reform the dominant *status quo* (Catalyst 2030, 2025). For instance, Impact Funding has begun to curate a live directory of funding opportunities "Driving Systems Change Across the Globe". Funding mapping efforts have been undertaken, sometimes with a particular regional focus, e.g. Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central and North Asia (Dalan Fund, 2025).

A number of donors supportive to civil society, usually with smaller pools of funds, have focused on more flexible grant-making. Some funding has been ear-marked to directly support the transformation of the aid industry by centring affected communities (Legatum, 2025). The Doria Fund was established in 2021 as a notable response to the wider funding dynamics in the MENA funding landscape, including risk of international co-option of regional feminist movements (Abou-Habib et al, 2021). This constitutes part of the emerging global ecosystem of feminist funds (Hessini, 2020). The continuation of the Asfari Foundation and Makesense's Tabadol Sustainability Grants to civil society actors in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine (with 2025 expansion to those in Syria also) in notable for its design focus to "develop creative solutions to sustain the transformational change they are leading in their communities" through innovation and collaboration with social entrepreneurs (Tabadol Program, undated).

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case studies incorporated within this article present how Trump's Executive Orders signal a trajectory towards more conditional funding against a backdrop of his Administration's transactional engagement with the MENA region (and beyond). This politicisation has exposed the vulnerability of civil society to donor dependency for regional actors (Case Study 1), while hampering the ability of civil society advocates to even take stock of the scale of impacts (Case Study 2). At the same time, Trump's actions to limit funding to civil society have coincided with major other shocks like the fall of the Assad regime in Syria (Case Study 3), and have compounded pre-existing and ongoing crises in Lebanon (Case Study 4). Finally, politicisation of the civil society space accompanies funding cuts introduced by the Executive Orders is perhaps at its most evident when considering the role of UNRWA in its support to Palestinian refugees (Case Study 5).

While seeking to do "more with less", many civil society and research actors have struggled to find replacement funding from alternative sources to smoothly continue their programmatic activities. To an extent, the EU has stepped in to cover certain areas, and some

commentators have speculated that other actors - China, Russia and the Gulf - might step up to partially fill present gaps (Belbagi, 2025). Reportedly, already "China and Russia are becoming increasingly intertwined with Egypt and Jordan, especially the former" (Holyoke, 2025). Such aid - if provided - may be just as transactional and linked to the policy interests of these other world powers, signalling a greater politicisation of the MENA funding landscape, which would likely further disadvantage human rights-based programming. Civil society actors are currently facing the dilemma of accepting funding from unprincipled donor sources in order to "save" their current staffing structures and ongoing programmes. Moreover, it is unlikely that any such increases in aid provided by these countries will be a full substitute for the large-scale USAID funding providing life-saving material humanitarian assistance to millions across the region. Nonetheless, policy-makers have highlighted the potential to use the present tragedy to focus on a much-needed "humanitarian reset" to transition towards a more "efficient" and fit-for-purpose aid system (Lennon, 2025).

As this article's five case studies have demonstrated, Trump's Executive Orders do not operate in isolation, but compound – and are compounded by – other challenges in the funding landscape. While the long-term implications of such funding changes for civil society actors in the MENA region remain to be seen, many actors are already wisely exploring new collaborations to maximise resources. This might include sharing resources through regional consortiums, allowing local NGOs to bypass INGO resource monopolies. Innovative cross-sector collaborations among research entities, NGOs and the private sector can also unleash new potential, and particularly help in building the capacity of smaller civil society organisations who might otherwise struggle to access funds unilaterally. Meanwhile, civil society actors might benefit from negotiating contractual protections ensuring that funding cannot be made conditional upon political alignment with a donor government policy. Pushing for direct, flexible, multi-year funding that includes overheads and operational costs is equally important to ensure sustainable civil society development. Alongside this, diversified funding, including through private-sector partnerships and socially-responsible entrepreneurs may help increase possibilities for sustained engagement. This can ultimately contribute to the consolidation of networks of civil society actors built around principled engagement.

For their part, supportive donors should consider launching smaller grant opportunities in order to support grassroots movements who have been cut off from funding they were receiving through other channels. Moreover, it is important that they ensure funding conditions do not exclude new or smaller NGOs (e.g. by removing requirements relating to minimum annual budget). Providing opportunities for multi-year and flexible funding will be vital to supporting long-term sustainability of civil society actors across MENA, while localising funding through regional mechanisms is essential to ensure national actors can access resources.

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