

# European Aid Fatal for Palestine. “Black Lists and Secret Files”

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*Palestine cannot survive without foreign aid. For several years the EU has been the main donor. However, funding conditions are becoming ever more stringent and are steadily squeezing the Palestinian society to death. Meanwhile, the right to self-determination for Palestine and the Palestinian people is being buried deep underground.*

## Black Lists and Secret Files

*Once again, on the 22<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, the solidarity movement with Palestine and the Palestinian people was put into a state of alert. The Israeli Minister of Defense, Benny Gatz, had decided by military decree that another six Palestinian human rights organizations would be added to the list of terrorist organizations. Some European donors decided to temporarily suspend their financial support or simply stopped funding. The Belgian Minister for Development Cooperation, Meryame Kitir, kept cool and decided to wait for the results of further investigation.*

*It would take nine months, till July 2022, for nine European Member States to agree upon a joint, but brief, press release declaring that Israel failed to sustain the allegations with hard evidence, hence there was no reason not to resume financial support or to end it right away.*

The response of Michael Lynk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Palestine, was much more courageous. He took immediate action and needed only two days to unite other human rights experts in an explicit condemnation of Israel's decision together with a fierce reminder that counter-terrorism measures cannot be misused to silence human rights organizations.

Earlier upon that same year, in May 2021, the Belgian parliamentary Commission for Foreign Affairs had already summoned Minister Kitir. She had to justify her decision to allocate 8 million euro for humanitarian aid to the Gaza. For eleven days Israel had been serving the Gazans on one of the severest bombings ever.

The reason of the unrest among some of the commission members were not so much the 256 dead nor the 1,700 wounded, nor the 100,000 internally displaced, nor the thousands of homeless people. Their alarm went off because of a “secret file” that the Israeli security services had deposited on the desks of the European embassies in Tel Aviv.

Supposedly the file contained proof of Western funding for development aid that would have been channeled through European donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to Palestinian terrorist organizations. Minister Kitir had already ordered an internal inquiry. Just like her colleague in the Netherlands, who had immediately suspended all funding as a matter of precaution, she would come to the conclusion that the evidence submitted by Israel was not convincing.

## **The Game of the Cat and the Mouse**

For years EU aid for Palestine has been snapped on and off like a flash light. Whenever Israel shows up with “incriminating” evidence, aid to Palestinian organizations is being cut or suspended. This was also the experience of the Palestinian Authority.

The EU Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR) is the main EU financing instrument for humanitarian aid to Palestine and support to the Palestinian Authority (PA), including the Ministry of Education. Olivér Várhelyi, the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, was not pleased by the content of 156 textbooks and 16 teacher manuals for primary and secondary schools.

He demanded a thorough screening of the text materials. The final report of some 200 pages caused worldwide commotion. It did not contain recommendations, only conclusions. These were interpreted either as very positive, or, on the contrary, as devastating, depending on the political preferences of the reader. Várhelyi belongs to the latter and decided to withhold the remaining funding for 2021 until all anti-Semitic paragraphs were adapted or removed.

The consequences of this measure did not pass unnoticed. The Palestinian Authority was forced to look for budgets elsewhere for paying the salaries and pensions of some 140,000 PA employees, including teachers and health staff, who lost 20% of their income. The hospitals in occupied East-Jerusalem were unable to find the financial resources needed for initiating the cancer treatment of 500 Palestinian patients. Some 115,000 vulnerable families, who try to cope with a monthly income of 231 US dollar or less, did no longer receive additional financial support.

Eventually Várhelyi had to give in. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2022 the EU committed to unlocking the remaining 224.8 million euro of the year 2021. The conditionality to change the content of the text books was removed, but no apologies were given for the human suffering inflicted.

## **The Israeli Master Plan**

Ever since 2013 Israel has been continuously reinforcing its campaigns targeting Western donors, and more particularly the EU, against Palestinian organizations from, what Israel calls, “the extreme left”. The European Parliament and the EU Member States are systematically being approached and put under pressure to review their financial support to *“the bad civil society”*, meaning those NGOs that denounce the Israeli policy with regard to

Palestine and hereby “promote violence” and “glorify terrorism”. In doing so Israel focuses particularly, but not exclusively on [those organizations that support the worldwide Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions \(BDS\) campaign](#).

Campaigns are being launched at a steady pace: *The Money Trail 1* (2018), *The Money Trail 2* (2019) and *Terrorists in Suits* (2019). The Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs (MSA) plays a key-role and uses NGO Monitor as one of its basic tools.

NGO Monitor was created in the year 2002 as a conservative Israeli think tank. Its activities build on the premise that the occupation of Palestine is an Israeli “internal affair”. On its website some 250 Israeli, Palestinian, European and international organizations are blacklisted, allegedly because they constitute a threat for Israel as a sovereign state.

[An investigation](#) conducted by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) revealed that NGO Monitor presents its reports as if they were the result of thorough research but lacks all transparency regarding the methods used. NGO Monitor claims to be independent but is actually completely dependent on external funding, particularly from the USA. NGO Monitor also has close ties with the Israeli government, to such an extent even that its reports are published by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs as official documents to which NGO Monitor can refer afterwards as a legitimate and credible source of information.

The way in which the MSA operates definitely bears fruits. Donors are terrified by the idea of being associated with terrorism. In the year 2017 the donor consortium consisting of Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark, took its hands off from the Palestinian Human Rights/International Humanitarian Law Secretariat. The secretariat was created with the aim to strengthen the human rights organizations in Palestine with the support of the University of Bir Zeit. The reason for the closure of the secretariat was the latest NGO Monitor Report entitled “*Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Secretariat: Abusing Public Funds to Perpetuate Conflict.*”

The MSA has also fiercely targeted financial institutions in Europe and North-America. Showing supposedly “hard evidence” it has succeeded in blocking some 50 bank accounts. Even digital platforms such as GoFundMe, PayPal and Venmo, cramped and keep their portals closed.

## **To Bend or to Break**

The system of “secret files”, “black lists” and “official reports” does not fail to achieve its purpose. European donors are getting nervous and keep on imposing a growing number of administrative and financial [monitoring and controlling measures](#). For some years now, Palestinian organizations that are interested to apply for European governmental or non-governmental aid, have been facing another major hurdle, i.e. the notorious Article 1.5 bis, one more trophy that the MSA proudly claims.

In the year 2019 the EU added Article 1.5 bis to its grant contracts. It is a counter-terrorism clause providing that all organizations granted or contracted by the EU must give proof that they have no links whatsoever with individuals or organizations on the lists of the EU “restrictive measures”.

Not only staff and board members must be screened for potential terrorist relations or sympathies, but also sub-contractors, persons attending activities organized within the

framework of the aid programs, people benefiting from financial support and recipients of financial support to third parties. This obligation goes for both development programs and humanitarian aid programs.

The EU defines [terrorist offences](#) as acts committed “*with the aim to seriously intimidate a population*” and/or “*to unduly compel a government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act*” and/or “*to seriously destabilize or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization*”. For the definition of an offence the EU relies on the national legislation of the respective country where the acts are committed. In practice this means that, in the case of Palestine, it is up to Israel to determine what is right and what is wrong. Just for clarification: there is no such thing as an universally agreed definition of terrorism.

It needs no further explanation that a mention on the NGO Monitor list, however fraudulent it may be, is not an advantage. What is worrying the Palestinians even more, though, is that this new condition is the start of a process to gradually exclude all Palestinians who are politically and socially active from foreign aid.

Considering the fact that the EU Member States are increasingly more operating as *One Team Europe* and that there is a growing tendency within the EU to delegate the execution of its programs to the Member States, this kind of measures gradually grows into a silent killer intoxicating the development cooperation policies of the respective States.

The EU got the inspiration for this clause with the US Agency for International Development, USAID, which had already introduced a [partner vetting system](#) in Palestine in the year 2003. The USAID version is even more intrusive. The vetting and screening is not limited to the USAID funded programs. It must be done for all of the grantee’s global sphere of action. On top, USAID demands a retroactive vetting and screening going back ten years in time.

The USAID counter-terrorism obligations also apply to the UN agencies. The USA refuses to rely on the UN counter-terrorism measures and imposes its own rules and regulations. In July 2021 this became once more evident when the USA decided to resume its [aid to UNRWA](#), the UN agency that was specifically created back in 1949 with the aim to organize the aid to the Palestinian refugees.

## **Palestine on the Decline**

The EU together with the respective EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland is the main donor of Palestine and the Palestinian. The average annual budget amounts to 1.24 billion euro, or 2/3 of the official development aid (ODA) worldwide for Palestine. At the same time, though, there has also been a steep decline in the global budget support of the Palestinian Authority, which since has decreased with 85% from 1.24 billion euro in the year 2008 to a disastrous 191 million euro in the year 2020.

For quite some time the Palestinian authorities are no longer a privileged partner as donor distrust prevails. To a certain extent the Palestinian authorities are still being informed or consulted but donors prefer to maximally assign the execution of the programs to non-Palestinian non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and expensive consultancy bureaus, which have their liaison offices in Brussels, Washington, New York and Geneva where they co-decide on the development agenda.

Palestinian NGOs are increasingly used as mere executors of programs that have been conceived at embassies' and consulates' desks or elsewhere in the world. Structural, long-term funding that allowed them to develop their own programs based upon their own priorities, has been replaced by short-term projects with a duration of only a few months and loads of administrative work.

Moreover, this way of operating generates a cascade of both visible and hidden overhead costs. Each organization in the aid-pyramid can charge office, management, administration and logistics costs. These can amount to several dozens of percentages of the total budget, sometimes even up to more than half of it, hereby reducing even further the amount of resources available for the ultimate beneficiaries, i.e. the Palestinian people.

## **The Moral Bankruptcy of International Aid to Palestine**

All of this is happening against the background of an unscrupulous military occupation and colonization. Some 400 Palestinian organizations are blacklisted. More than 4,000 Palestinian people are detained in Israeli prisons for political reasons. For decades the Gaza has been turned into the biggest open air prison in the world. Eighty percent of the 2 million Gazans are dependent on foreign aid.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were deported from their homes in occupied East-Jerusalem to "behind the Wall", a monstrous construction with a total length of 712 kilometers enclosing the West Bank. Over time the West Bank has been split up in 165 separate enclaves, which are under continuous military control through 593 road blocks and checkpoints. And all of this is supposedly meant to protect 700,000 Israeli settlers who moved into 300 "legal" and "illegal" settlements all over the West Bank. Poverty among the Palestinian population has never been so appalling.

The "European Joint strategy In Support of Palestine 2021-2024" acknowledges that the situation in Palestine has never been worse. The EU even expresses its concerns about the "*de-development*" of Palestine and, indeed, recognizes that to a certain extent this is due to the Israeli occupation.

Officially the EU still claims to support the Two State Solution, but a critical reading of the strategy learns that this path was abandoned many years ago. In its strategy 2017-2020 the EU had already moved away from the right to self-determination to replace it by "*the quest for self-determination*".

In support of this "*quest*" the EU focuses on the strengthening the "*agency*" of the Palestinian civil society. This agency is basically meant to counter radicalization.(1) Respect for and protection of human rights are a main pillar, but the focus is restricted to the role of the Palestinian authorities. It is not about denouncing the role of Israel.

The title of the EU strategy could not be more cynical: "Towards a Democratic, Accountable and Sustainable Palestinian State". Palestine cannot survive without international support. The Palestinians are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, between resigning and not complaining or keeping their head high up and drowning.

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*various occasions as a researcher, an electoral observer and technical expert in charge of the formulation of human rights programmes. This article is the result of her experiences in the field and underpinned by publicly accessible documents.*

Translated from Dutch by the author

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<https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2022/09/27/eu-ontwikkelingshulp-rampzalig-voor-palestina/>.

(1) The terminology “agency” is used to indicate that the Palestinian grantees are responsible for the execution of the programs and the activities and bear the ultimate responsibility in case of failure.

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