

# Resilience support for CSOs in the WANA region

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**Summary and Recommendations**

European donors have long supported civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Asia and North Africa (WANA) region as key actors in promoting justice, accountability, rights and good governance. However, increasing authoritarianism, and with it the rapid shrinking of civic space across WANA countries, has severely challenged the ability of CSOs to operate. Based on a study examining the repercussions and restrictions faced by CSOs, and exploring adaptation strategies from CSOs in Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Lebanon, this brief distils lessons for European donors active in civil society support in the region, focussing on the goal of enhancing the resilience of CSOs.

Between 2011 and 2024, governments across the WANA region implemented increasingly restrictive legal frameworks, administrative barriers, surveillance tactics and repressive approaches to control civil society. The pace of new forms of repression and novel restrictions has largely outpaced the ability of CSOs and their international supporters to adapt, leading to a significant degradation of civic space.

Nevertheless, CSOs in WANA countries have demonstrated remarkable resilience by adopting novel strategies to sustain their operations. These include registering abroad, relocating staff, enhancing digital security and risk assessments, self-censorship, limiting public visibility, engaging with international actors to build coalitions, diversifying funding sources, and pursuing legal challenges against restrictions and repercussions. However, these adaptations often come at significant costs – financially, operationally and emotionally – to organizations and their staff, undermining their ability to keep up their invaluable work.

Against this backdrop, this brief presents recommendations for European donors to more effectively support civil society resilience in the WANA region. The EU and its Member States should lead efforts to safeguard civic space in this region. This not only aligns with European values but also serves strategic interests in promoting stability, good governance and human rights in the region.

First and foremost, civil society support should not be considered an obstacle to effective foreign policy or crisis management. Donors should use all tools at their disposal to safeguard civic space and sanction those who violate fundamental freedoms, while ensuring full compliance with international human rights standards in their own policies and ensuring their own policies do not contribute to enhancing or enabling repressive actors in the region to restrict CSO work. For example, providing authoritarian regimes and their law enforcement agencies with spyware and surveillance capabilities often directly counteracts efforts to support civil society.

To strengthen civil society resilience, European donors should consider adopting a more strategic and flexible approach to funding, prioritizing long-term capacity building over short-term project support. This includes providing core funding, supporting digital security and risk assessment enhancements, and investing in regional networks for knowledge sharing and collective advocacy. Additionally, donors should leverage diplomatic channels to push back against restrictive measures and support public awareness campaigns to counter defamation of CSOs, for example through their embassies.

# Ten recommendations to increase European civil society support in the WANA region:

1. More flexible funding mechanisms: Develop unbureaucratic short-term funding lines and grants for CSOs working in contexts of shrinking civic space, and provide more long-term non-project-related funding programmes that allow CSOs to better adjust and adapt to the rapidly changing contexts they face.
2. Establish emergency response mechanisms: Establish rapid response funds for CSOs facing immediate threats or crises.
3. Invest in capacity building: Invest in programmes that enhance organizational resilience, including digital security, risk assessment capacities, mental wellbeing of CSO staff, financial management and advocacy strategies.
4. Increase diplomatic pressure: Leverage diplomatic channels to hold governments accountable for violating international human rights standards by applying conditionality, for example in trade and economic cooperation, if repeated violations occur.
5. Support regional collaboration: Support regional CSO networks like the SharaKa programme to foster knowledge sharing and amplify collective advocacy efforts.
6. Public awareness campaigns: Fund initiatives that highlight the critical role of civil society in promoting accountability, social justice, and access to rights and services.
7. Support diaspora organizations: Provide targeted assistance for CSOs and activists operating from abroad due to risks from surveillance, repression or persecution.
8. Increase legal support: Fund legal aid and strategic litigation efforts to challenge restrictive laws and practices by WANA governments.
9. Increase digital security investments: Prioritize funding for tools and training to protect CSOs from surveillance and cyber-attacks.
10. Diversify local partnerships: Engage more directly with grassroots organizations and informal initiatives, not just established NGOs.

European policymakers should consider strengthening civil society as a strategic policy field, crucial for regional stability and good governance. With authoritarianism on the rise globally, European donors should propose an ambitious civil society support agenda that addresses all aspects of civic space: legal frameworks, media freedom, freedom of association, freedom to protest, anti-corruption efforts, electoral integrity, judiciary independence and the rule of law, as well as good governance and citizen participation.

In addition, European donors will need to improve coordination and strategic alignment in their civil society support efforts. This includes establishing dedicated task forces or working groups to mainstream civil society support, focusing on enhancing CSO resilience across different policy areas and funding instruments. Donors should also regularly evaluate the impact of their support and adapt strategies to update their policies in response to evolving challenges and trends for CSOs in the region. Moreover, ensuring policy coherence through screening trade, economic, security and migration policies, to ensure that these do not entail measures or components that contradict their civil society support policies and the long-term



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