

Narratives of Control:

Settler Colonialism and the Criminalisation of Palestinian Civil Society

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Abstract

Over the past decade, most Western and European governmental donors have increasingly imposed political conditions on their funding agreements with Palestinian civil society organisations. This trend, rooted in the post-9/11 counterterrorism paradigm, reflects a broader securitisation of aid that has severely constrained meaningful civil society engagement in Palestine. Framed through a settler colonial lens, this research demonstrates how donor development policies are not neutral but are entangled with—and complicit in—the Israeli settler colonial project. The escalation of donor restrictions has occurred alongside an intensifying criminalisation campaign enacted by the Israeli settler state, in which Palestinian organisations are increasingly framed as “terroristic” or linked to “terrorist” activities.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Palestinian civil society representatives and a broad range of secondary sources, this study examines how the Israeli settler state, in coordination with other Zionist and pro-Israel organisations, systematically constructs and disseminates these delegitimising narratives and uses them to pressure Western and European donors to sever their ties with Palestinian partners. It further explores the material impacts of criminalisation and the strategies organisations adopt in order to resist and survive. Ultimately, the research argues that the “terrorist” label functions as a central narrative tool within the broader logic of settler colonial elimination—in other words, a settler colonial strategy designed to isolate, silence, and erase Palestinian civil society.

Keywords: development, civil society, settler colonialism, counterterrorism, criminalisation, delegitimation.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

As Frantz Fanon (1963) once observed, it is easy to argue that the masses must be governed from above—so long as one carefully chooses a language accessible only to graduates in law or economics. Similarly, if one carefully employs only the language of settlers and colonisers, it becomes just as easy to portray the native as a perpetual threat to the so-called civilised world—and thus justify their elimination as necessary for the greater good. This has been an argument repeated many times throughout the century-long Zionist colonisation of Palestine. As Edward Said (1984: 29) noted decades ago:

[...] the clichés advocating Israel’s right to do what it wants grind on: Palestinians are rejectionists and terrorists, Israel wants peace and security, the Arabs won’t accept Israel and want to destroy it, Israel is a democracy, [and] Zionism is (or can be made consonant with) humanism, socialism, liberalism, Western civilization.

Said recognised early on the power of language and narrative in shaping perceptions of Palestine. He argued that, unlike in other parts of the world, where facts often “speak for themselves,” in Palestine, facts have taken on a life of their own. What makes the relationship between facts, language, and narrative even more peculiar in this context is that, despite the vast amount written about Palestine, the Palestinian narrative itself often remains absent. At the time of Said’s writing, Palestine was receiving more attention than ever before due to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon two years earlier. Yet, he (Said 1984: 29-30) observed:

[...] never has so much been written and shown of the Palestinians, who were scarcely mentioned fifteen years ago. They are there all right, but the narrative of their present actuality—which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel—that narrative is not.

Facts, he argued, can only be absorbed when they are framed within socially acceptable narratives—those based on legality, legitimacy, and authority. While United Nations (UN) resolutions affirming the Palestinian right to self-determination exist, they lack the authority that the language of power—the language with which the “White speaks.” In other words, the language of colonialism. When Israel and its allies, particularly the United States, refuse to acknowledge these resolutions, they employ what Said describes as a “non-narrative”—one that erases Palestinian history and identity, reducing their struggle to a mere “problem” in need of a solution (Said 1984).

Over time, however, this exclusion has evolved into a deliberate effort not only to erase the Palestinian narrative, but to delegitimise the Palestinian cause in order to justify Israel's settler colonial project. Said calls this an “anti-narrative”—one that specifically relies on the rhetoric of “terrorism” to dehumanise and discredit any form of Palestinian resistance. The language of terrorism is especially effective as an anti-narrative because it is both vague and, paradoxically, precise. This is not to deny the existence of terrorism, but rather to highlight how this language has spawned an entire institutionalised system of narrative construction and dissemination aimed to increase and intensify the control over colonial subjects and accelerate their dispossession. Terrorism, in this framing, is perceived first and foremost as an alien, irrational, and inherently hostile force—portrayed as systematic, barbaric and destructive. As such, the framing can be invoked through time and space, from colonised lands and into cyberspace. Retroactively, pre-emptively, and indiscriminately. Within this framing, any sequence of events—cause and effect, oppression and resistance—all dissolve into an amorphous, ever-present threat called “terrorism” (Said 1984).

In recent decades, the application of this framing has expanded significantly. One reason for this is the fact that the primary forms of Palestinian resistance have changed (Khalidi 2020), with the Palestinian civil society currently being one of the primary threats towards the legitimacy of the Israeli settler colonialism, occupation, and apartheid in Palestine. This is mainly due to its knowledge production and dissemination about human rights violations perpetrated by Israeli military personnel and government officials (Gordon 2014). As a result, Palestinian civil society organisations have been increasingly targeted by smear campaigns and acts of criminalisation (Tartir, Wildeman, Shaheen 2025) built on the framing of “terrorism.”

I first encountered this type of framing over a decade ago, when I began working at a governmental development agency that funded several civil society organisations in Palestine. Within my first week, I was sorting and filing emails from pro-Israel organisations accusing the agency of supporting the spread of antisemitism. Notably, the arguments and accusations brought forward by these organisations had a striking resemblance to official Israeli talking points. Five years later, in 2018, while working as a Programme Analyst for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Palestine, I wrote down the following notes during a meeting with representatives from two other UN agencies, the European Union (EU), and three governmental development agencies, as a new wave of accusations—this time of supporting terrorism—was being discussed:

The right thing to do is to continue to support these [civil society] organisations, while right-wing Israeli governments are trying to close them all down. This needs to be in the risk assessment of the project proposals.

A representative from another UN agency then (according to my notes) said:

They are playing us against each other, it would be easier if we could develop a common Q&A [...] for example, if the [Palestinian organisations] are anti-Israel, they should instead say that they are pro-human rights in both Israel and Palestine, and be proud of that. Then the Israeli organisations attacking us can't say anything about it.

Following that statement, I ended my notes from the meeting with a question: "Or prove that 99% of the accusations are false?" What struck me most was the inability of governmental agencies and multilateral organisations to respond constructively to these accusations, with severe consequences for Palestinian organisations and societies alike.

This experience—alongside many that followed—made it increasingly clear that the ties between the Israeli settler state and other actors within the broader Zionist movement warranted closer scrutiny, as understanding these connections would be essential to unpacking the systematic delegitimisation efforts targeting Palestinian organisations as well as the operational logic underpinning their criminalisation. This ultimately sparked my interest in pursuing this dissertation, which examines the impact of this type of narrative framing on development projects, donor-recipient relationships, and, most importantly, their role in what has since then evolved into a full-scale criminalisation campaign against Palestinian civil society organisations. At the same time, I believe that even in the darkest circumstances, solutions and lessons can be found. For this reason, the research also seeks to explore the counterstrategies that these organisations have developed over time to resist and navigate these challenges.

Evidently, my initial approach towards this research has been one based on practical experience, and I hope that this research will achieve to bridge the gap between real world experiences and theoretical analysis that too often poses a limitation in peace and conflict studies.

1.1 Research aim and questions

The aim of this research is to examine and analyse the criminalisation of civil society organisations in Palestine within the broader context of Zionist settler colonialism, and to investigate how the Israeli state, together with other actors in the Zionist movement, has historically and contemporarily constructed settler narratives of Palestinian resistance; how these narratives are disseminated to discredit the work of Palestinian civil society actors; and what counterstrategies Palestinian civil society has developed to navigate and resist these evolving forms of dispossession. As such, the work is led by the following research questions:

1. Within a context of a settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure, how does the Israeli state, together with non-governmental Zionist and pro-Israel groups, use and produce narratives of Palestinian resistance?
2. How are Palestinian civil society organisations affected by these strategies?
3. What strategies do Palestinian civil society organisations avail of to negotiate and resist this hostile climate based on an additional layer of erasure?

While some research has already been conducted focusing on related topics such as pro-Israel lobby activities in Western countries and their connections to the Israeli state, they differ from this research precisely because they are focused on activities in specific countries such as the UK or the U.S. (see Aked 2023; Pappe 2024). Additionally, this research focuses on the effects of delegitimisation efforts on development initiatives specifically, and not foreign politics in general. Whilst a study that analysed the shrinking space for Palestinian civil society between 2017-2022 was published recently, the work did not include any in-depth, qualitative analysis of the data collected from conducted interviews, being more focused instead on statistics. Nor was it as broad in its scope, as it focused specifically on civil society organisations funded by the Belgian government (see Tartir, Wildeman and Shaheen 2025).

Focusing on how the dissemination of settler narratives has affected the work of Palestinian civil society actors and the counterstrategies developed in order to navigate these new modes of dispossession, this research expands our understanding of the ever-evolving nature of the “conflict” (a term used advisably)¹ in Palestine. It will further our

¹ Framing the settler-colonial relationship as a “conflict” imposes a false dual-protagonist narrative, obscuring the asymmetry of power and equating Zionist settler violence with Palestinian resistance.

understanding of how civil society organisations, as well as the donor community, navigate such complexities, spotlighting their (in)ability to *re-think* and *respond* to the dissemination of false narratives in general, and within a settler colonial context of a shrinking civic space in particular, thus contributing to the genealogy of the overall research topic.

It is worth noting that examining these systematic efforts to delegitimise Palestinian advocacy is not always straightforward and requires an added degree of reflexivity and empathy. As many scholars before me have noted, discussing the influence of any part of the “Israel lobby” remains highly taboo (see Aked 2023; Curthoys 2025). This is partly due to deliberate efforts by pro-Israel actors to resist and stigmatise critical scrutiny. At the same time, it is also true that harmful, racist myths about “Jewish power” persist. Unfortunately, this combination of factors has created an environment in which nearly any critique of the Zionist movement (or the Israeli state) risks being misinterpreted—or even deliberately misrepresented—as antisemitic (Gordon 2024).

Language, as mentioned earlier, plays a crucial role in this research. That is also the case in regards to terms such as the “Zionist movement” and “pro-Israel organisations” which appear throughout this dissertation, and will be explained in detail where relevant. However, this research does not conflate the Zionist movement and its lobbying activities with the antisemitic trope of “Jewish power.” It is essential to distinguish between Judaism—an ethno-religious and cultural identity encompassing a wide spectrum of political perspectives—and Zionism, which, as explored in Chapter 4, is understood here as an ethno-nationalist political ideology that seeks to establish and maintain an exclusionary Jewish state. Notably, it is estimated that the majority of Zionists worldwide identify as Christian Zionists (Ahmad and Kirk 2023), while many Jewish individuals do not identify as Zionists or support Zionist policies (Lamott Hill and Plitnick 2021). What makes the issue even more complicated is the fact that Christian Zionist views of Jewish people are, as Halah Ahmad and Mimi Kirk (2023: 3) point out, “characteristically antisemitic” in nature.

Even though these distinctions are clear and self-evident to me as an anti-racist, it is necessary to articulate them explicitly, especially in today’s world, where antisemitism (as well as both Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism) is on the rise. Some argue that one cannot simultaneously oppose antisemitism *and* the Zionist oppression and dispossession of Palestinians in historic Palestine. I reject this false dichotomy. In fact, I believe that

confronting both (and all) forms of racism is the only path forward, toward a truly just and equitable world.

1.2 Thesis structure

This dissertation is structured into nine chapters, including four analytical chapters, divided into four distinct themes. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic and outlines the structure of the dissertation, while Chapter 2 details the methodological approach, explaining the rationale for using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, thematic coding, and thematic analysis. It also discusses the sampling strategy, provides an interview guide, and addresses limitations and access challenges, along with how these were mitigated. The chapter concludes with reflections on ethical considerations and researcher positionality.

Chapter 3 presents the conceptual and theoretical framework, focusing on the driving forces behind settler colonialism and the most common strategies used to control and dispossess native populations, as well as the dynamics of civil society in undemocratic contexts, especially under settler colonial rule. These concepts are further contextualised in Chapter 4, which provides a historical overview of settler colonialism in historic Palestine and traces the evolution of Palestinian civil society, with a professionalised civil society that is facing more and more repression from the Israeli settler state.

The analytical section begins with Chapter 5 (Theme 1), which critically examines how settler narratives are constructed and weaponised to delegitimise Palestinian resistance and legitimise colonial domination. Chapter 6 (Theme 2) builds on this by analysing the tactics used by the Israeli settler state and its allies to fabricate and produce “evidence” of “terrorist” affiliations, aimed at influencing Western and European donors and triggering discriminatory laws and counterinsurgency measures central to the criminalisation process.

Chapter 7 (Theme 3) turns to the practical consequences of this criminalisation, exploring its impact on Palestinian civil society through both physical violence and more indirect forms of repression and control. It also examines donor responses—particularly the imposition of political conditions—and highlights the counterstrategies Palestinian organisations have developed in response. Chapter 8 (Theme 4), the final analytical chapter, considers the effects of the ongoing genocide in Gaza on civil society organisations, identifying emerging forms of criminalisation and reflecting on their implications for the future of civil society as a whole in Palestine. Chapter 9 concludes the analysis by

synthesising the dissertation's key findings and offering final reflections on the broader significance of the research.

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter set out to introduce the subject of this dissertation and briefly explain why I became interested in conducting this research in the first place. The chapter has described the aim of the study as well as the specific research questions, with the focus being the criminalisation of Palestinian civil society organisations within the broader framework of Zionist settler colonialism. The chapter has furthermore outlined the structure of the dissertation and briefly summarised the focus of each chapter.

Together, the following chapters and subsequent analysis will highlight all the ways in which the Israeli state, alongside Zionist and pro-Israel actors, systematically frames Palestinian civil society organisations as “terrorist” entities or as having links to “terrorism” by deploying and refining a set of settler colonial strategies—particularly through narrative and conceptual transfers. It will show how this specific narrative gained significant traction after the Second Intifada and the onset of the Global War on Terror, and will reveal how the subsequent implementation of anti-terror legislation was effectively built on already established settler colonial mechanisms of control and dispossession developed in Palestine. It will, moreover, show how this, in turn, has facilitated the securitisation² of development aid, exploiting the high dependency of Palestinian civil society on foreign funding and utilising it as a key component in the delegitimisation and criminalisation of Palestinian actors through defunding.

It will further demonstrate how recent efforts to delegitimise and criminalise Palestinian civil society have had tangible effects on the local and international standing of these organisations. Even when met with initial scepticism from donors, the combined force of settler-produced narratives and practical mechanisms of criminalisation has made solidarity with Palestine increasingly untenable and unthinkable. These attacks have shifted donor attitudes, leading to the adoption of political conditions and restrictions, and have prompted

² The term “securitisation” opens up a door to extensive International Relations and Security Studies literature that are outside the scope of this research. However, the concept of “security” (and especially the aspect of perceived insecurity) is essential to the narrative construction process, as the following chapters will demonstrate. Hence, the research will refer to the terminology when needed, yet without making it a primary focus of the conceptual framework.

diverse counterstrategies from Palestinian organisations—some more explicitly decolonial than others.

Ultimately, the research will tell us that the first examples of Zionist settler colonial narratives built on the “terrorist” framing—the ones that Edward Said described in the beginning of this chapter—are still central to the process of narrative control and erasure in historic Palestine, a process that has not only persisted but *evolved*—becoming more sophisticated and more criminalised with time. Today, the construction and dissemination of narratives that portray Palestinian civil society as “terroristic” must therefore be recognised as a calculated additional layer of the settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure.

Chapter 2. Methodological Framework

This chapter presents the methodological framework underpinning this study, detailing the research design from the preparatory stages through fieldwork and into the analytical process. It also critically reflects on key limitations, potential risks, security concerns, and ethical dilemmas, and discusses the strategies employed to navigate and mitigate these challenges across all phases of the study.

2.1 The research universe

According to Jennifer Mason (2017), it is useful to start the methodological design process with imagining and drawing up a wider “research universe,” which takes into consideration all actors, institutions, places, times, policies, and experiences relevant for the research study. The “wider universe” for the present study includes the settler population and the settler state, with other associated actors such as pro-Israel NGOs and Zionist lobby organisations, the native population, i.e., the Palestinian people, including the Palestinian leadership. It also involves civil society organisations and their linked initiatives; their donor agencies and organisations, including European governments; development policies; development activities; as well as the settler state’s legal framework, e.g., terrorist designations, issued arrest warrants, etc.

This study has adopted an ontological stance which argues that people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, and narratives are significant elements, or properties, of the social reality upon which the research questions have been based (Mason 2017). Additionally, the steering epistemological perspective holds that talking to and interacting with people, asking questions, listening, and gaining access to their accounts and first-hand experiences are, in turn, all legitimate and meaningful ways to gather data on these ontological properties. Taking this into account, the conclusion I naturally reached was to use qualitative methods, and specifically qualitative interviewing. Such qualitative methods offered excellent ways to interpret developmental processes in a detailed and multi-layered manner. Qualitative research is also particularly useful for research where one is aiming to answer questions regarding how something works, how it is constituted, how processes operate, and subsequently how they change (Mason 2017; Silverman 2004; Creswell and Poth 2018).

Intrinsically, the study took on a social constructionist approach, arguing that the reality (or, realities, as there are multiple ones) that is gathered throughout the research process is constructed between the researcher and the researched, and as such, needs to be interpreted (Patton 2015). Data that was collected was analysed using a combination of social constructionism and a critical interpretative framework (elaborated upon below).

2.2 Types of data

While large data sets might give an impression that the research is progressing well, it is important to acknowledge that in qualitative research, depth is generally more important than breadth. It is, however, often useful to explore multiple types of data before deciding on the most relevant and useful data set for answering the particular research questions at hand (Silverman 2004). After detailed and thorough examination of possible methods, it was anticipated that in order to generate a rich understanding, and to be able to account for the multiple aspects of everyday control played out by a multitude of actors, this study would benefit the most from adopting a multi-methods approach. This was due to a number of reasons. Firstly, for reasons such as those described above, the research has been based on qualitative, knowledge-based primary data collection, and secondly, in order to further improve the validity, credibility, and accuracy of the findings, the primary data has been complemented, extended, and cross-referenced with secondary sources, i.e., adopting triangulation (Silverman 2004).

Thus, this research has drawn on extensive secondary data analysis, including a detailed examination of Israeli legal frameworks, government statements, and press releases. It also incorporates a broad range of textual sources—books, reports, and scholarly articles—that explore settler colonial strategies in Palestine and their entanglement with donor policies, peacebuilding agendas, and coordinated efforts to pressure donors into defunding Palestinian activities. This secondary source material, including a vast array of written sources, was located through large databases, academic journals, and historical archives on policy reports, development work, civil society organisations and settler colonial studies. Additionally, in order to gather the primary qualitative data, fieldwork was conducted for an extended period of time, engaging with civil society actors in the Palestine context. Mainly through semi-structured interviews, these deep immersive fieldwork events took place over a number of months and allowed for the requisite thick description of the context in which erasure is taking place to be more wholesomely examined.

The below chart outlines the linkage between the research questions and the data sources and methods of collection.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	<i>Within a context of a settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure, how does the Israeli state, together with non-governmental Zionist and pro-Israel groups, use and produce narratives of Palestinian resistance?</i>	<i>How are Palestinian civil society organisations affected by these strategies?</i>	<i>What strategies do Palestinian civil society organisations avail of to negotiate and resist this hostile climate based on an additional layer of erasure?</i>
DATA SOURCES	Reports, articles, governmental statements, and press releases, collected through a scoping literature review, and when relevant, supplemented with interviews with staff members at Palestinian civil society organisations.	Interviews with staff members at Palestinian civil society organisations, as well as complementary analysis of relevant documents, such as legal agreements with donors or project proposals, provided by the interviewees.	Interviews with staff members at Palestinian civil society organisations, supplemented with press releases regarding joint initiatives.

WHAT WOULD THEY YIELD?	A broad description of the historical process that has led to the usage of narratives as a central settler colonial strategy in historic Palestine and how they are constructed and disseminated today.	First-hand accounts of the Israeli settler state's criminalisation of civil society organisations and the practical implications that have followed in terms of funding, partners, donors, proposed activities, etc.	First-hand accounts of the strategic response to the criminalisation and the practical implications described above, as expressed through coalitions, alliances, activities, legal proceedings, etc.
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2.2.1 Sampling

The most imperative aspect of qualitative sampling is to focus it strategically and meaningfully, rather than to try to represent the full range of possible experiences (Mason 2017). It is therefore useful to be guided by the assumed relationship between the sample or selected research population and the wider research universe. With this in mind, this study has used *strategical sampling*, meaning that the sample has provided a relevant range of actors, processes, events, and examples sufficient to answer the research questions.

The sample for the primary data collection consisted of representatives of selected Palestinian civil society organisations, and when relevant, their development aid partners, such as UN organisations. As this research has had a focus on the issues of narrative production and the counterstrategies developed by civil society organisations, the primary informants at each organisation were the staff members (as provided below). The aim was to interview those staff members who i) were experienced enough to have insight into how the issues at hand have affected the work of the specific organisation over a period of time, and ii) have held a role within the organisation that has allowed them to gain insight into the relations between the organisation and its partner agencies, e.g., donors, as well as strategic decision-making within the organisation. Hence, the majority of informants were at the director level. Informants were primarily found and accessed through “gatekeeping,” meaning that I successfully utilised my already established vast network of professional as well as private connections in Palestine to gain additional contacts.

Based on their documented exposure to the delegitimisation and criminalisation campaign, as described in the previous chapter, the following organisations have been interviewed, amounting to a total of 20 initial interviews and five follow-up interviews:

- Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association (based in Ramallah)
- Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (based in Haifa)
- Al-Haq: Defending Human Rights (based in Ramallah)
- The Arab Association for Human Rights (based in Nazareth)
- Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights (based in Bethlehem)
- Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic (based in Jerusalem)
- Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights (based in Gaza)
- Bisan Center for Research and Development (based in Ramallah)
- Defense for Children International—Palestine (based in Ramallah)
- The Independent Commission for Human Rights (based in Ramallah)
- Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center (based in Jerusalem)
- Palestinian NGO Network: PNGO (based in Ramallah/Gaza)
- Union of Health Workers Committees (based in Ramallah)
- Union of Agricultural Workers Committee (based in Ramallah)
- Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (based in Ramallah)
- United Nations Development Programme PAPP (based in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza)
- United Nations Women Palestine (based in Jerusalem)
- Anonymous informant (freelance human rights and advocacy adviser, former staff member at al-Haq, Badil and Defense for Children International—Palestine)
- Anonymous informant (professional expert on civil society issues in Palestine).

In other words, research participants were (or, as in two cases, had been) well-established staff members at programme- or manager level at the above-mentioned organisations, which have been selected due to their documented struggle against defunding and delegitimisation campaigns. UN organisations have been included due to their involvement in a high number of civil society projects in Palestine. Apart from managing activities under a direct-implementation-directive, as compared to most other countries where the UN operates, these UN organisations also work as a middle hand between European and

Western governmental donors and local partners in Palestine, and therefore have many insights in regard to the increasing attacks against Palestinian civil society organisations and their effects on the donor-recipient relationship.

Together, these actors have generated data that relates to all relevant processes within the wider research universe, i.e., the first-hand experiences regarding the construction of settler narratives and the counterstrategies developed by civil society organisations. The secondary data collection has complemented the primary data collection, and sources were found and selected through a scoping literature review, as described above.

2.3 Interviews

Qualitative interviews have been the primary source of data collection. The qualitative research interview can be understood as a process where the interviewer and the interviewee construct knowledge together (Brinkman and Kvale 2015; Roberts 2020). The interviewee describes their experiences and offers a rationale for the answer. The interviewer, on the other hand, is responsible for involving the interviewee in the process and making sure the response is an active one. When needed, the interviewer probes the interviewee for more information and clarifications, and by doing so, they first of all help the interviewee to make sense of it all, and secondly, by doing so they can also determine what to ask next. In order to have success with this type of interview, detailed planning is described as key (Brinkman and Kvale 2015; Roberts 2020). Within this research, interviews were carried out in a semi-structured, theme-based manner. The semi-structured approach was advantageous as it allowed for flexibility and adaptability when engaging with interviewees. Through drafting a theme-based interview guide, the interviews were given the possibility to be expanded with additional questions when needed (Thomsson 2010; Mason 2017; Roberts 2020).

Throughout the research process, it was acknowledged that the data—comprising interview responses and descriptions—is used as evidence, and that this raises several challenges. These include the limitations of self-reported data, the negotiation of mutual understanding, and the risk of misrepresenting the interviewee (Roulston 2019). Whittle and Reissner (2025: 4) describe this as an “epistemological leap,” in which the researcher moves “from their analysed interview data to a claim to know something about a phenomenon outside of the interview situation.” Crucially, they argue, the researcher must demonstrate and remain transparent about how this leap is made. As outlined in this chapter, the research design

addresses this by triangulating data: the evidence drawn from interviews was systematically cross-referenced with secondary written sources in order to ensure its validity.

In addition, qualitative interviews worked well within this research, as the research questions required more in-depth knowledge, focused on complexity and the explanation of social organisation and processes through analysis of a number of contextual and detailed accounts, rather than trying to describe or even explain surface level patterns and trends through analysing a large number of standardised accounts (Mason 2017; Silverman 2004). Moreover, the data collected was in its entirety not available in any other form, as reactions to criminalisation and delegitimisation as well as the counterstrategies developed, are not necessarily expressed or documented in open sources, especially not at the level of depth and detail that was needed for this analysis. Hence, interviewing relevant actors regarding their first-hand experiences was the only way to generate the needed data.

The interviews were conducted in all of historic Palestine, i.e., in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and inside what today is the Israeli state. More specifically, interviews were held at the offices of relevant organisations. The face-to-face interviews were carried out during my fieldwork, which was conducted during three months in the beginning of 2023. However, some interviews had to be done online. This was first and foremost due to issues relating to researcher access in Gaza, which is the result of the long-lasting illegal blockade imposed on the area. In those cases, the interviewee was allowed to choose the time in order to ensure that they could be in a space as calm and uninterrupted as possible. A planned second period of fieldwork also had to be cancelled due to unforeseen events, which will be elaborated on below.

2.3.1 Thematic interview guide

While the method of conducting a qualitative interview may seem straightforward, it is neither simple nor natural (Roberts 2020; Brinkman and Kvale 2015). In fact, it “requires a high level of skill on behalf of the interviewer, who needs to be knowledgeable about the interview topic and familiar with the methodological options available, as well as have an understanding of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge through conversation” (Brinkman and Kvale 2015: 19). It was therefore imperative to draft interview questions and the subsequent interview guide beforehand, ensuring that it aligned well with the overall methodology and the purpose of the study (Roberts 2020). Consequently, the following interview guide was drafted as a means of ensuring that the semi-structured

nature of each interview yielded the maximum results whilst also allowing for the flexibility of the interview process that is so critical to the semi-structured method, in particular (Thomsson 2010).

The themes worked as entry points during the interviews and were decided on in advance (Thomsson 2010). Core themes that were identified through desk-based research included (i) the scope of interventions and vision of civil society organisations; (ii) practical obstacles faced by civil society organisations to carry out their work (historically, contemporarily); (iii) experiences from targeted delegitimisation and criminalisation efforts and the dissemination of settler narratives; (iv) funding to civil society organisations and the role of donors; and lastly (v) counter-strategies and resistance. The second step in outlining the interview guide was to list a set of questions under each theme (Thomsson 2010). One way to make sure the main research questions were answered and covered was to create a number of “mini” research questions (Mason 2017). When linking the main research questions to the key themes mentioned above, a number of “mini” research questions and subsequently interview questions were generated.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	<i>Within a context of a settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure, how does the Israeli state, together with non-governmental Zionist and pro-Israel groups, use and produce narratives of Palestinian resistance?</i>				<i>How are Palestinian civil society organisations affected by these strategies?</i>			<i>What strategies do Palestinian civil society organisations avail of to negotiate and resist this hostile climate based on an additional layer of erasure?</i>	
	What settler narratives pertaining to Palestinian resistance can be found historically and contemporarily?	What settler colonial strategies and methods are used in the construction of these narratives?	What is the aim of the construction and dissemination of these narratives?	Has the aim and/or strategies changed over time?	Have these narratives been used in the current delegitimisation and criminalisation campaign against Palestinian civil society organisations?	Who are the main actors, apart from the Israeli settler state, that are constructing and/or aiding in the dissemination of these narratives?	What have the practical effects for organisations been in regard to scope, activity, and funding?	Have Palestinian civil society organisations developed any counterstrategies to help with the practical effects of the current delegitimisation campaign?	How have these potential counter-strategies affected the relationship with partners and donors?

THEMES AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	As described earlier in this chapter, the above main research question, including its subsequent mini research questions, will mainly be answered through an extensive secondary analysis which builds on a detailed scrutinisation of existing Israeli legal frameworks, governmental statements, press releases, reports and articles. However, the research question will in part also be answered by the <i>overall</i> analysis of the data set, including the mini research questions regarding other actors that are listed under the second research question. The presentation of the findings is dependent on the data collected, yet this specific research question works as a meta-analysis of the whole data set.	<i>The scope of interventions and vision of civil society organisations:</i> Tell me about the organisation you work at and your role. Who are your beneficiaries? What other actors, Palestinian as well as colonial, operate in this space? <i>Practical obstacles faced by civil society organisations to carry out their work:</i> What are the main obstacles and limitations that you as an organisation deal with today? Has this changed over time? Why do you think that you are facing these obstacles now? <i>Experiences from the 'Legitimacy War' and the dissemination of settler narratives:</i> What role do narratives that delegitimise your organisation and yourself as a staff member play in these obstacles? What do these narratives represent to you? <i>Funding to civil society organisations and the role of donors:</i> Who are your main donors? Has the dissemination of these narratives affected the relationship between you and your donors?	<i>Counter-strategies and resistance:</i> How are you planning to deal with these changes? What have the results been so far?
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Furthermore, in keeping with the semi-structured approach, it was important to ensure that the interview guide was flexible rather than static, allowing the conversation to move in various directions depending on the responses provided. Mason (2017) lists a number of aspects that I took into account to ensure that the interviews were as successful and smooth as possible:

- Ensure that the interview makes sense to the interviewee in terms of language (i.e., does not use terms that they might not understand or feel alien to);
- Make sure to be somewhat acquainted with the experiences of the interviewee beforehand, and omit any irrelevant question if needed, so that they feel that they can actually answer the posed questions;
- Be sensitive to the interviewee, and take their needs and rights into account;
- Listen carefully to the interviewee, and based on that try to help the flow of the “conversation” rather than the opposite.

One way to ensure this, and to make sure the interview guide was always updated and improved, was to continually analyse the result of each interview and how the listed questions worked in that particular situation. This was done by selecting a number of interesting and for the study highly relevant excerpts from each interview, and then listing the questions that generated that particular information. Then, I compared the posed questions to the correlating questions listed in the interview guide. The possible discrepancy between the two would then tell me if the interview guide should be updated or not. Using the first interview conducted as a pilot, the following template was drawn up to exemplify the process (excerpts have been shortened considerably due to confidentiality as well as space considerations).

Interesting excerpt	Interview question asked	Corresponding interview question in IG	Suggested revision
Yeah, of course [...] the strategy has changed. The overall strategy is the same. But of course, it had different phases, which even, interestingly enough, the spokesperson of NGO Monitor acknowledged in an interview that when	So, if you think about the strategy from the Israeli government from the start, can you see that it like, changed over time? Or	What are the main obstacles and limitations that you as an organisation deal with today? Has this changed over time?	Do you think that this strategy of Israel and other enabling actors to discredit civil society and human rights

Israel put, in the beginning eight Palestinian civil society actors on the Israeli terrorist list, the spokesperson of NGO Monitor said that they are now in the third and last phase of their work. [...]	have they implemented the same strategy all along?		work changed over time?
But when you talk about narrative globally, I mean, there's a global development of narratives being absolute. [...] And with it comes the absolute narrative. So, within this overall global development, also Israel and Palestine are based on, so when you look at narrative from an ideological point of view, we can see a certain development also in Israel or in Palestine. And when we look at Israel when it comes to this ideological narrative today, it's much more prominent than it used to be.	So, what would you say that, considering this strategy of theirs, what role do you think that narratives play in that?	What role do narratives that delegitimise your organisation and yourself as a staff member play in these obstacles? What do these narratives represent to you?	What role do you think narratives play in this strategy to delegitimise civil society in general and your organisation in particular?

2.4 Thematic coding and analysing

The recorded interviews were then transcribed and analysed as textual data. The data was coded through thematic coding and analysed using a corresponding thematic analysis. The process of coding and especially analysing should first and foremost be understood as a creative act, where something must be actively created. Quoting Paul Atkinson (quoted in Strauss and Corbin 1990: 117; emphasis in the original):

Making it all come together . . . is one of the most difficult things of all. . . Quite apart from actually achieving it, it is hard to inject the right mix of (a) faith that it can and will be achieved; (b) recognition that it has to be worked at, and isn't based on romantic inspiration; (c) that it isn't like the solution to a puzzle or math problem, but has to be *created*; (d) that you can't pack everything into one version, and that any one project could yield several different ways of bringing it together.

By itself, thematic analysis builds on creating a number of codes and themes throughout the whole data set (Braun and Clarke 2021; Mason 2017; Flick 2006; Thomsson 2010). While Mason (2017) describes this as a quite short and straightforward process, where the generation of thematic codes (not to be confused with the thematic themes used during the interviews) happen through a cross-sectional slicing of the data in search for common themes, researchers such as Lofland and Lofland (2006) and Braun and Clarke (2021) have suggested dividing the process into several additional steps, where the data set will first be coded and then, based on the initial codes, *thematically* coded. Whichever way one chooses, it is suggested that the process should start with an intensive immersion in the data. This process of indexing all the collected data is hence also a process of getting to know one's data: one needs to read them, listen to them, play with them and think about them in order to find the right codes (Mason 2017; Lofland and Lofland 2006).

The initial coding was thus conducted through constantly asking questions like: What is this? What is this an example of? And, what does this represent? Questions like these were asked while working my way through the whole data set. The answer, usually a word or a short set of words, then formed the code for a specific section or paragraph. In essence, the first stage of coding is nothing more than locating, categorising, and sorting the data (Lofland and Lofland 2006; Braun and Clarke 2021). The codes found were then indexed, which means that any code (and later on, theme) could be retrieved easily in order to create new sets of texts that in turn could be analysed or in other ways manipulated (Mason 2017).

This research benefitted from generating and using four different types of codes in the initial step of analysis: housekeeping codes, analytical codes, fieldwork codes and lastly chronological codes (Lofland and Lofland 2006). The first type, housekeeping, means that the researcher is coding information about things such as organisations, people, and places. Housekeeping codes help with making information, that otherwise would be buried in field notes or oddly labelled among the analytical codes, more accessible. Moreover, housekeeping codes offer another perspective from which to inspire analytical coding. Examining the information included in such codes would occasionally reveal significant details or patterns that were obscure in the materials that had been analytically coded (Ibid).

The next type of coding, the actual analytical codes, was initially more open-ended, where codes would mirror anything from the language of the informant to the theoretical concepts applied in the research. A select number of the interviews were determined “key interviews,” i.e., the codes generated from those interviews would then be used to process

the remaining textual data (Flick 2006; Thomsson 2010; Lofland and Lofland 2006). Basically, after generating the first code, the data was read until the next important extract was found. Then, I would decide if the previous code could be used again or if a new one had to be created (Braun and Clarke 2021).

The third type of coding was related to the specific fieldwork conducted, emphasising the importance of documenting the process of research and analysis itself. This was also closely related to the last type of coding, which was chronological coding. Coding chronologically in reality meant that the data was filed in a chronological order and then read from beginning to end, which helped with discovering patterns or other larger units of analysis. In addition, it was also useful to write out explanations for the different coding categories, called “memoing.” This worked as a type of theorisation of the codes, through which memos would help with tying different parts of the data set together into a recognisable cluster that in turn could be shown to be part of a general concept. As such, memoing helped with making sense of the data (Lofland and Lofland 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994).

The next step was to shift the analysis from codes to themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), a theme captures something significant about the data in relation to the research question and reflects a patterned response within the data set. In other words, all the generated codes were reviewed together in order to identify areas of similarity. In this research, the aim has been to generate interpretative thematic codes, i.e., key themes that do not necessarily involve the *actual* words spoken, but might include *interpretations* as examples of conceptual themes such as “donor-recipient relationship” or “resisting delegitimation and erasure” (Mason 2017).

After a number of themes had been identified and indexed, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested a process of reviewing all of them as just potential themes. In this process, it proved helpful to ask questions like the ones below: Is this a theme or simply some code? Are there sufficient (relevant) facts to support this theme? How strong is the theme? Does the data lack consistency because it is too varied and broad in scope? The second step of the review process—reviewing the themes in connection to the complete data set—was started after a definite and cohesive set of themes that relate to the coded data extracts was established. This required conducting a last read-through of all the data to assess if the themes accurately represented the complete data set or only a subset of it (Braun and Clarke 2021).

The next step of the analysis has been described as the most crucial analytical phase. Themes were definitely named, and extracts were selected in order to present and set out the story for each theme. Essentially, the writing up of the analysis was about telling a story, as data do not speak for themselves. Hence, the aim was to develop an analytical narrative that can tell the reader what about each extract is interesting and important—and why that is. While all the themes were developed in their own right, they also relate to each other as well as the research questions to ensure that the analytical conclusions were drawn from the whole data set (Braun and Clarke 2021).

Without coding, the limited capacity of one's memory and ability to organise information in the brain will create a restricted zone for analysis, and therefore, indexing has helped with creating "handles" on the collected data that in turn helped me with getting into an analytical generative zone more quickly and more comprehensively (Lofland and Lofland 2006). Even if themes were scattered across the data set, the coding made them more accessible, and it was possible to decide more actively how to focus the analytical activity, to omit what was not relevant, and to develop emerging arguments and explanations (Mason 2017). Using thematic codes as an analytical tool worked well within this research, as the data was predominantly text-based and, as such, easily codable. The generation of codes was, however, not only based on the interpretation of the interviews but was also influenced by the overall aim of the study, my background knowledge as a researcher, the theoretical orientation and last but not the least, the research questions and linked ideas that I was looking for across the data set. As such, it was important to ensure that the coding would generate the right kind of vertical slicing of the data. The aim, according to Mason, should be to be able to move between the data set, the research questions, and the bigger research universe easily (Mason 2017). For this study, I used software that enabled the creation of these assemblages without difficulty. Several free software programs on the market today allow for content search, data visualisation and reporting, storing and coding, data linking and data mapping. While there are many options, I chose to use the QDA Miner Lite software, which is easily used for the analysis of textual data from interviews, news articles or other open resources (Predictive Analytics Today 2022).

In turn, the literature review contained a variety of categories of documents. Apart from the textual sources that informed the design of the research study and the historical background of the context, I selected a number of relevant policy documents relating to the donor-recipient relationship and funding of civil society projects. The selected documents were,

with benefit, included in the indexing of collected data, as they were in textual form. The logic for doing such was that analysing documents offered an unobtrusive method and had the ability to give an unfiltered perspective on the field and its processes (Flick 2006).

2.5 Ethical reflections

This research rests on the eight basic principles of integrity and good research practice as identified by the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity: (i) honesty, (ii) reliability, (iii) objectivity, (iv) impartiality and independence, (v) open communication, (vi) duty of care, (vii) fairness, and (viii) responsibility for future science generations (ALLEA 2017). Additionally, the research was carried out in accordance with the vital principle that the researcher has to be free from external influences and manipulations, meaning the researcher should also present facts that argue against the hypothesis concerned, and not only facts in support of the hypothesis (Gustafsson et al. 2005:16-17).

It was furthermore crucial that the research project took relevant laws and regulations into account and ensured that they were followed. In this case, those included the Policy, Practice and Regulations on Intellectual Property, governing intellectual property (IP) in Trinity College Dublin, the Trinity College Dublin Policy on Good Research Practice, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the Irish Data Protection Act, which implements the GDPR in Ireland (Trinity College Dublin 2018a; 2018b; 2021).

In summary, GDPR requires the research to deal with personal data in accordance with (i) lawfulness; (ii) fairness and transparency; (iii) purpose limitation; (iv) data minimisation; (v) accuracy; (vi) storage limitation; and (vii) integrity and confidentiality (Trinity College Dublin 2021). Even more critical in a conflict zone, it was of utmost importance that the research also adhered to the principle of “do no harm,” i.e., to reach maximum benefit with minimal harm. Therefore, all foreseeable issues and dilemmas had been addressed in the planning phase of this project, in addition to ensuring that the project had the adequate resources and tools to respond to any unforeseeable event while in the field. On the following pages, you will find an outline of possible ethical issues, reflections on safety concerns and access, and applicability of policy guidelines, as well as codes of conduct and regulations.

2.5.1 Data collection in the field

Procedures and guidelines can address many dilemmas reasonably well, but ethical research is first and foremost dependent on the judgment and adaptability of the researcher; hence, following abstract rules will not be sufficient (Wood 2006; Browne and Moffett 2014). I have extensive experience living, working and conducting research in Palestine. In 2013, I conducted a three-month field study in the West Bank for my master's thesis. During this time, I was based in Bethlehem, but travelled all over the West Bank (including Jerusalem). From 2014-2015, I was working at two Palestinian civil society organisations, one based in Jerusalem and one based in Ramallah, and lastly, from 2018 to 2020, I was, as earlier mentioned, working at the UNDP Programme of Support to the Palestinian People (PAPP). My main office was in Jerusalem, but the position included weekly visits to Ramallah and monthly visits to Gaza. Thus, my extensive experience with multiple stakeholders in Palestinian society, including my dealings with regard to various security issues as well as my familiarity with the region's geographical complexity, has mitigated any potential risk of miscalculation.

Moreover, I have extensive experience in terms of the United Nations Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (SSAFE) course, which included everything from risk assessment, how to respond in dangerous or threatful situations, to administering first aid and CPR. Additionally, as a previous United Nations staff member with maintained connections, I was able to access the daily security updates from United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), which further removed any element of surprise.

My well-developed network in Palestine, including both close friends and professional contacts, was moreover very valuable during the data collection. Thanks to the connections of Trinity College Dublin, I was also able to draw upon the association with the Human Rights Clinic at al-Quds University, and the Kenyon Institute in Jerusalem.

2.6 Self-reflexivity and positionality

As the majority of qualitative research is conducted under the assumption that knowledge is situated and contextual, it is consequently the interviewer's responsibility to ensure that the pertinent circumstances are brought into sharp focus, in order to develop situated knowledge. For some people, this extends to the notion that information and knowledge are created during the interview through dialogic (and other types of) interaction. Most

people would concur that knowledge is, at the very least, produced in interview situations as opposed to being “objective” facts that are just recounted. This viewpoint contends that meanings and understandings are produced by interaction between the interviewees and the researcher, which effectively functions as a co-production (Roberts 2020; Mason 2017). Moreover, David Silverman (2004) explains that facts, i.e., the data we collect in the field, can never be fully objective, as they are always coloured by our assumptions. Ultimately, this begs the question regarding how to deal with one’s positionality and self-reflexivity as a researcher and interviewer.

First of all, there are scientific techniques that improve the accuracy of observations within social sciences. As such, in order to distinguish truth from opinion, social scientists will definitely go through a more thorough process than the majority of people would ever need to. With that said, it is also true that researchers will view facts through conceptual or theoretical lenses (Silverman 2004). Martin O’Brien (1993: 10-11) describes this as:

[...] a kaleidoscope ... the child’s toy consisting of a tube, a number of lenses and fragments of translucent, coloured glass or plastic. When you turn the tube and look down the lens of the kaleidoscope the shapes and colours, visible at the bottom, change. As the tube is turned, different lenses come into play and the combinations of colour and shape shift from one pattern to another. In a similar way, we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope—by shifting theoretical perspective the world under investigation also changes shape.

In order to exemplify further, Silverman (2004: 44) shares a useful illustration:

[A] group of social scientists from different disciplines are observing people at a party through a two-way mirror. The sociologist might observe the gender composition of various conversational groups, while the linguist might listen to how “small-talk” is managed between speakers. The psychologist might focus on the characteristics of “loners” versus people who are the “life and soul” of the party, and the geographer might observe how the spatial organisation of the room influenced how people conversed. The point is that none of these observations are more real or more true than the others.

This also speaks to the fact that as researchers, we focus on the topics and societal issues that interest us. Usually, there are some previous lived experiences that have made us more invested, engaged or interested in a specific region, event, struggle, theory or concept—we

do not simply start conducting research on a to us completely unknown topic. Hence, it is also impossible to be entirely objective, or, as some would say, a “clean slate” when collecting or analysing our data.

In order to navigate this complexity, this study has, since the outset, been guided by feminist methodologies, which has demanded ongoing processes of positionality and reflexivity that necessitated ongoing engagement with issues of politics, ethics, and power relations, both for the me as the researcher, in relation to the social field in which I worked, and for the knowledge that was generated and how it addressed social hierarchies of gender, class, race/ethnicity, etc. Considering the focus of the study, i.e., the use of narrative construction in a matrix of control and dispossession, it has been natural for me as a researcher to continuously reflect on the knowledge production of the research itself, and how it could possibly generate or reproduce any structures of marginalisation or silencing (Ackerly et al. 2006; Wilkinson 1999; Ackerly and True 2010). This was furthermore even more important due to the fact that Palestine should be characterised as a conflict zone. Jonathan Goodhand (2000) explains that in such contexts, researchers must establish ethical frameworks that keeps them open to the prospect of doing some good while also ensuring they “do no harm”. To ensure this, particular attention was given to the various factors that affected how people responded to the interview questions (including fear for their own safety); how different conflict parties in the area reacted to the presence of me as a researcher; the feasibility and flexibility of the research (given a highly unpredictable and delicate environment); and the level of risk one was willing to accept in order to conduct the research, as crucial to conducting research in conflict zones (Romano 2006).

More specifically, researchers must be mindful of how their interventions could influence the structures and incentive systems driving violent conflict or how they might affect community safety and coping mechanisms. Through the promotion of some voices and the silencing of others, conflict manipulates information. Thus, selecting whose perspectives are taken into account and whose expertise is valued throughout research entails making both rational and moral decisions. However, researchers are most likely to “do harm” when they have not anticipated any of these challenges beforehand. In other words, reflection and preparation (i.e., having both a plan B and C, even possibly a plan D) is key. Additionally, the planning needs to include the proper amount of time that is required in order to switch to alternate plans or to postpone interventions (Goodhand 2000; Romano 2006).

In practice, the data collection process was conducted through careful engagement regarding my positionality as a researcher in the encounters with informants and interviewees. While recognising that I am an external, European female, and how that might have influenced the interviewer-interviewee relationship, I also recognised that the interviewees worked at well-esteemed civil society organisations, where they were used to working in an at least partially international context, with many international colleagues, donors and partners. But nonetheless—they were at the same time working in a space that was oppressive on various levels. Therefore, it has also been the aim of this research to be decolonised in its approach.

Intrinsically, applying a decolonised approach came naturally to this research process as (i) Palestinians are an indigenous population oppressed by colonial legacies, and (ii) this study builds on a settler colonial framework. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) suggest that decolonised research should (i) adopt critical reflexivity, (ii) respect reciprocity and self-determination, (iii) embrace “other(ed)” ways of knowing, and (iv) embody a transformative praxis. As pointed out earlier, research frameworks contain hidden power dynamics, which are especially noticeable in studies of disadvantaged communities, where researchers hold the uneven power to define, identify, and alienate oppressed populations. One example of how to continuously work against these hierarchies, and one which has been utilised in this research, is to reflect upon the interview questions: are they framed and directed towards an expert, or a victim or merely a witness? Another suggested method that I implemented during the data collection was to listen actively and affectively to the interviewees and their communities. This, according to Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021), can open a space for researcher responsibility and conscious change of how to conduct (decolonised) research.

2.7 Data safety and storage

One ethical challenge was to ensure the security of the data gathered, as sensitive data might have political implications for the informants should it end up in the wrong hands. This was extra sensitive since the collection of data in this project required passing through military checkpoints on multiple occasions.

As part of the structured PhD program at Trinity College Dublin, I had received training in research ethics, including data safety and storage. In accordance with the training and TCD Guidelines, I used an encrypted Dictaphone during the data collection of this research. This

gave me the opportunity to upload the data files to a storage service before passing any checkpoints (Browne and Moffett 2014). The Dictaphone, as well as the laptop in use, was end-to-end encrypted, and in accordance with the TCD Policy on Good Research Practice (Trinity College Dublin 2018b), the managed storage option provided by the college was utilised for uploading and storing the data. In addition, the devices as well as the storage space had access control, meaning only authorised users were be allowed to access the research data.

Moreover, it was imperative that the data was continually backed up. Adhering to the principles of storage limitation and data minimisation, the textual research data was stored in text documents, with one master copy of the data and at least two copies, as per the rule of 3-2-1 of backups. A schedule for frequent backups every week was be set up with reminders. The research data was organised in folders based on theme/chapter and subcategories. The files were named using the study name, a brief description of the document, my initials, version and date. This was done so that data could be retrieved and then used more easily.

Interview transcripts were labelled with codes instead of names, as per the pseudo-anonymisation procedure. The codes were generated so that only I could extract the needed information from them.

2.8 Accessing informants

As mentioned earlier, I already had a well-developed network of development professionals in Palestine, which I utilised for interviews as well as finding additional informants. As the informants were highly educated staff members at high- and middle level at these organisations, which conduct a major part of their work in English, I did not encounter any problems with conducting the interviews in English. In addition, my knowledge of Arabic allowed me to deal with any shorter, unforeseen interactions in Arabic without the need of a translator to accompany me.

I was, however, always ready to deal with unforeseen problems regarding accessing informants. Browne and Moffett (2014) describe how building rapport and trust with those you wish to interview can be challenging. Additionally, the fact that Palestinians live under occupation and constant surveillance meant that I, as the researcher, had to put extra effort into ensuring my legitimacy (Kovats-Bernat 2002; Browne and Moffett 2014). However, informants have been very willing to tell their story and no one has ever declined to

participate in my research. Elisabeth Wood (2006) describes the same observation, as those she interviewed during her research frequently expressed a desire for their story to be told, so that accounts of the local history could be made.

However, following my initial field trip to Palestine during the spring and summer of 2023, the situation changed dramatically. On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on southern Israel—an area commonly referred to as the Gaza Envelope—resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,200 Israelis, including both civilians and soldiers, and around 200 individuals taken hostage (UNOCHR 2023c). In immediate response, Israel initiated a full-scale invasion and imposed a total siege on the Gaza Strip. Since then, the invasion has decimated all aspects of Palestinian life and resulted in the killing of over 50,000 Palestinians, with some estimates suggesting the toll could be as high as 200,000 (Khatib, McKee, and Yusuf 2024; Falah Saab and Suleiman 2025). A majority of those killed have been women and children (UN News 2024b), and the International Court of Justice has described the situation as presenting a “plausible case of genocide” (UN Human Rights Council 2024).

Shortly after the invasion of Gaza, Israel also launched an incursion into southern Lebanon (Bob 2024). Simultaneously, conditions in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have significantly deteriorated, marked by intensified oppression of Palestinians, including mass arrests and the widespread use of administrative detention (Addameer 2024). Settler violence and ethnic cleansing have escalated sharply, with a record number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank (UN News 2024a). The crackdown has also extended to Palestinian citizens of Israel, where several individuals—including prominent university professors—have been arrested for expressing sympathy with the people of Gaza and for condemning the ongoing genocide (Middle East Eye 2024).

Understandably, I had to cancel my second field trip, planned for the fall of 2023, due to these security concerns. Moreover, the situation delayed a number of my scheduled interviews. Even if it was possible to do interviews online (which, in a number of cases, I did) many of the informants had just had their lives torn apart, had lost family members, or had been unavailable to meet with me due to work commitments, and rightly could not prioritise interviews during such circumstances. While this was mostly the case with organisations in Gaza, it also affected one interview that was scheduled with an organisation based in the West Bank. The day before the scheduled interview, the interviewee contacted me and asked to cancel the interview as a close family member had

just been killed in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. While the interviewee offered to get back to me with a new date and time a week later, I never sent them a reminder, out of respect for the victim and their family.

Nevertheless, conducting the remainder of the interviews digitally did not have any apparent effect on their quality, as the same level of rich data could be collected from the interviews. In the end, I was able to collect enough data to finalise the analysis and the overall research project.

2.8.1 Consent

I always begun my encounters with interviewees by sharing personal information regarding my life and current state of education, the motivation behind the research, how it was going to be conducted and what the outcomes could be. This was accompanied with an information sheet in both Arabic and English, explaining these issues more in detail. A draft of the information sheet can be found in Appendix.

In addition, consent was collected from each informant before any interviews were conducted, ensuring that they had given and understood their informed consent to participate in the research project, with its potential risks and benefits. The informants were encouraged to express any discomfort that they might have had. It was made clear that interviews could be cancelled at any point, and that there was a possibility to exclude the interview, or parts of it, from the final product before it has been published. It was also made clear that the project planned to keep the identities of the informants confidential. A draft consent form can also be found in Appendix.

However, with regards to the sensitive nature of the research and the security implications it might have for the participants, I conducted the consent procedure orally, as any written and physical record could have compromised the risk to participants. The oral consent was hence included in the audio recordings, which allowed me to upload it to the storage space immediately after the interview had taken place.

2.8.2 Debriefing arrangement

A week after the conducted interviews, the informants were provided with a debriefing form which thanked them for their participation, repeated the aim of the study and provided them with information about how to withdraw their participation, if needed. The form also

included contact information in case they would have needed any further assistance regarding their participation in the study.

2.8.3 Confidentiality

In accordance with GDPR, the research data needs to be kept confidential, and the data gathered can only be used for the main purpose of the research (Vetenskapsrådet 2002, ALLEA 2017). GDPR lists special category data, also known as sensitive personal data. This was applicable to the research project as the interviews included political views and opinions, meaning that anonymisation or pseudo-anonymisation was of extra importance.

GDPR defines personal data as: “any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’); an identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person” (Trinity College Dublin 2021).

In this research project, personal research data pertaining to human subjects was collected and pseudo-anonymised, which means characteristics which could help identify someone were replaced with other values which do not allow the data subjects to be identified. In contrast to anonymisation, GDPR applies to pseudo-anonymisation. However, more than only pseudo-anonymising personal details, the GDPR request researchers to secure computing devices, use safe data storage, secure data transfer, exercise caution online and to check the security with other IT services and suppliers. Most of these points and their correlating action plan have been covered in previous sections in this chapter. Nonetheless, to ensure the uttermost confidentiality and security, the TCD GDPR checklist was used before, during and after the data collection (Trinity College Dublin 2018a).

2.8.4 Data sharing and long-term preservation

Lastly, the research project has applied the FAIR principle, which means making the research data findable (discoverable with metadata, identifiable and locatable), accessible (data available and obtainable), interoperable (understandable), reusable (sufficiently described and shared with the least restrictive licences).

In order to take appropriate responsibility for future science generations and to ensure the data is as FAIR as possible the research project has used common formats, standards and controlled vocabularies. The research data has also been deposited in TARA and findable and accessible through using Google Scholar and other search engines. So as to ensure that the data is stored safely for the long term, and adds license information the research data will be deposited in a general repository, such as Harvard Dataverse.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the methodological approaches and specific data collection methods chosen for this study as being qualitative, semi-structured interviews with primarily Palestinian civil society organisations; thematic coding; and corresponding thematic analysis. Interviews were mainly conducted in Palestine during the spring and summer of 2023 but due to the constantly deteriorating security situation following October 2023, a number of remaining interviews had to be conducted digitally, which within itself has not had any noticeable negative effects on the quality of the data collected.

3. Conceptual Framework

In this chapter key concepts that have been identified as central, and thus crucial, to this study are examined and unpacked. The chapter is organised and divided into two sections, focusing on *civil society* and *settler colonialism*, respectively. Firstly, I examine what is meant by the term “civil society” and how it comprises a variety of diverse actors. Emphasis is laid on the various roles these actors can play in a context of liberal peacebuilding and development. Secondly, I turn to the underlying driving force of settler colonialism and the multiple strategies it applies in pursuit of its goal to control native territory, including—as is crucial throughout this thesis—civic spaces. Unpacking these concepts will help us understand the role that Palestinian civil society organisations assume against a backdrop of ongoing Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine, including how the transformation of these civic spaces has led to the creation of a “colonial peace” paradigm—a paradigm that ultimately can be utilised in the silencing of Palestinian voices through the promotion of settler colonial narratives.

3.1 The emergence of civil society

The history of the term *civil society* can be traced to the “*societas civilis*” of Aristotelian tradition. While Aristotle described it as a type of independent and self-sufficient association of free and equal men, the Roman philosopher Cicero came to describe it as a civilised political community that included “groups, communities, and individuals united by laws and institutions, which organise their activities in such a way as to create a flexible equilibrium among them” (Laine 2014: 61). Initially, philosophers did not see civil society as separate from the state, including more recent thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who would come to describe civil society and the state as coexisting and interdependent (Laine 2014).

During the Enlightenment—an era when states were largely absolutist—the concept of civil society carried distinctly positive connotations. It was often imagined as a utopian vision of the future, where private individuals, both as family members and as active public citizens, could flourish. Jürgen Kocka (2004: 66) describes this vision as one in which individuals would be:

Independent and free, independently cooperative under the rule of law but without being spoon-fed by the authoritarian state; there would be tolerance for cultural,

religious, and ethnic diversity but without too great social inequality, in any case without the traditional form of corporative inequality.

Thus, the emergence of state despotism had naturally led to a conceptual separation between civil society and state. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers David Hume, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith became amongst the first to explicitly define civil society as a web of interpersonal connections *outside* of the state sphere (Laine 2014).

Hence, civil society gradually developed into a concept that was defined by its *distinction* from the state. Further developing the concept, German philosopher Immanuel Kant described civil society as the space not just outside the state but specifically between the family and the state (Kaldor 2003). According to Kant, the public sphere was the place where the interests of the members of civil society could be reconciled with universal moral obligations. To him, civil society would therefore not need to be nation-bound but could rather be universal. G. W. F. Hegel, in turn, came to describe civil society as a sphere built on economic and social arrangements regulated by civil code and thus not directly dependent on the state. While he placed civil society outside the spheres of the state and the family, the concept was still fluid and included everything outside those two realms (Peddle 2000; Laine 2014).

Consequently, capitalism and the early industrialisation of the first half of the 19th century influenced philosophers such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx to elaborate on the relationship between the civil society and the market (Kocka 2004). The Marxist philosopher and politician Antonio Gramsci, and others with him, managed to bring many of these ideas together in a description of civil society in which it is operating a space not only outside the family and state, but also the market (Kaldor 2003; Zinecker 2011). This understanding of civil society—as a space distinct from the family, state, and market—remains influential today, even though a universally accepted definition of civil society has yet to emerge. The UN defines civic space as an environment that should enable different civil society actors, including the most excluded and marginalised, to “participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of society.” It holds that the wide variety of actors includes “human rights defenders and activists, women human rights defenders, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer activists, NGOs, journalists, lawyers, academics and students, artists and cultural activists” (Human Rights Council 2023).

While it is important to recognise the historical roots as well as the organisational form of civil society, it is imperative for this research to steer the focus towards the actual *functions* and *roles* of the diverse set of actors that we can find within the sphere of civil society today. This is especially significant as many aspects of civil society remain underexplored. Additionally, historical and philosophical conceptions of social organisation often idealise or romanticise civil society—portraying it as a space of societal harmony and moral progress, while overlooking systemic inequalities and embedded power dynamics. They often also fail to adequately account for how power structures shape social relations and constrain agency, with the risk of presenting an incomplete and sometimes distorted understanding of civil society and its functions. Since many of these foundational theories are grounded in Western intellectual traditions, they also tend to be Eurocentric, which means that they risk overlooking the rich diversity of cultural, social, and historical contexts in which civil society operates (Cohen and Arato 2020; Kaldor 2003; Trentmann and Hall 2005; Fine 1997).

Building on these conceptual foundations—and recognising their complexities—this research understands civil society as a distinct societal sphere, one that is at least nominally separate from the state, the family, and the market (Kaldor 2003; Zinecker 2011). It is approached here as a dynamic and contested space, where a wide range of actors compete for influence, legitimacy, and power. For the purposes of this analysis, particularly with its focus on processes of criminalisation of civil society actors and their entanglement with ongoing settler colonialism, these actors are grouped into three primary segments: the *organic* segment, the *professionalised* segment, and the *manufactured* segment (Hodgson 2004; Jad 2007; Kaldor 2003; Dana 2014). Each segment reflects distinct origins, strategies, and political alignments, and together they form the analytical framework through which the shifting terrain of civil society against a backdrop of settler colonialism will be examined.

The organic segment most closely resembles the early, historical forms of civil society, which were deeply embedded in the social fabric of everyday life. These included informal, community-based associations such as religious institutions, tribal councils, worker collectives, mutual aid groups, women’s circles, and student unions. Today, this segment comprises uncoerced, progressive civil society organisations—including charities, mass movements, and groups of human rights defenders—that have emerged organically in

response to societal needs, often through bottom-up, community-driven processes (Jad 2007; Kaldor 2003).

In contrast, the professionalised segment is made up of coerced and institutionalised civil society organisations that often have evolved from formerly grassroots movements into formalised nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). These organisations are largely sustained through foreign (often governmental) aid—referred to in this study as “donor” funding—and are thus often shaped by donor priorities and agendas, leading to a more top-down orientation (Jad 2007; Barnes 2009; Andrieu 2010; Zaum 2012). Finally, the manufactured segment consists of regime-aligned or state-sponsored NGOs that operate within state-private networks (Aked 2023). These organisations are typically created to suppress independent civil society activity while bolstering state narratives and legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. As such, they are accountable not to grassroots communities but to the political goals of the regime itself (Hodgson 2004; Toepler et al. 2020). While the emergence of civil society in its early, organic, and bottom-up forms has been outlined above, the following pages will turn to examine the rise of more professionalised and manufactured forms of civil society organisations.

3.1.1 A global and professionalised civil society: the peacebuilding agenda

The emergence of a more professionalised segment of civil society can be traced back to the 1980s, when the idea of the role of civil society had to be adjusted to the emerging political movements that opposed the authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet bloc. Their role in the following democratisation process came to be seen as a testament to civil society’s significance for democracy and development overall (Jensen and Miszlivetz 2005: 3). This also meant that civil society became intrinsically connected to the current prevailing liberal peacebuilding agenda and its liberal democratic paradigm that started to emerge shortly after (Pasha 1998).

This agenda is characterised by the promotion of liberal democratic values and institutions with the promise of a more peaceful international system. As such, it has an innate belief in the capacity for political institutions to advance social progress and in the ability of states to engage in meaningful cooperation. This means that liberalism supports global institutions to promote cooperation and facilitate trade, with the goal of making war unaffordable for all parties involved (Wildeman 2024). Since its rise, this agenda has been

widely used by the UN, EU, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and individual Western governments in their development interventions globally (Zaum 2012).

Intrinsically, civil society had, at the end of the 20th century, not only been recognised as a significant part of the direct democratisation process itself, as in Eastern Europe, but also as crucial for the continued political stability in the post-communist era (Pietrzyk 2003). The liberal democratic paradigm views a strong state and a robust civil society as distinct from one another yet crucially dependent upon one another. This suggests that civil society would only exist in relation to the state; it is not seen as an independent, potentially democratic space where other theories of democracy may be explored. In other words, it only exists as a support structure for democracy itself (Baker 1998; 1999). While the functions of civil society in the peacebuilding agenda have a wide range, covering everything from providing services and advocacy work to surfacing injustices and preventing violence, its influence is often limited by top-down approaches that prioritise state institutions and lack attention to local voices (Barnes 2009; Andrieu 2010; Zaum 2012; Dodge 2013).

In response to the limitations of the liberal democratic paradigm, a parallel shift began to take shape—commonly referred to as the “global turn.” This shift saw segments of civil society become less bound to territorial nation-states and more inclusive of local voices and priorities. Enabled by international human rights legislation and growing cross-border cooperation, this global turn helped create a transnational political space for civil society activism (Kaldor 2003). Through global collaboration and appeals to international bodies, marginalised and indigenous communities began organising their struggles for decolonisation collectively (Todorova 2021). In essence, this decolonial turn challenged the colonial underpinnings of international development, particularly the historical, racialised assumptions embedded in agenda-setting, intervention design, and hiring practices. In other words, it sought to subvert the dynamic between the “developer” and the populations deemed “to be developed” (Patel 2020).

However, the parallel emergence of a global civil society partially focused on decolonial struggles did not stop the peacebuilding agenda and its liberal democratic paradigm from being the prevailing approach among international actors. The utilisation of civil society as a crucial component within the peacebuilding agenda opened the door for the emergence of the more professionalised segment of civil society, with a multiplication of NGOs during the first decade of interventions. With time, the liberal democratic paradigm created a

version of civil society that Mary Kaldor (2003) describes as “neoliberal,” in which mechanisms for facilitating market reform and the introduction of parliamentary democracy are the areas that receive the most attention. Instead of social grassroots movements, as per the organic segment of civil society, the key actors in this version of civil society are NGOs, which Kaldor defines as “tamed” social movements. Kaldor further explains that when social movements fail (which she claims that they always do sooner or later), one out of three things can happen: they can be “tamed” and professionalised as NGOs; they can disappear, or they can become violent.

The issue relating to the professionalisation of civil society itself brings several presumptions about the role of civil society into question. While the primary tasks of civil society have been described as advocacy, service delivery, human rights monitoring and joint activities, which can bring divided societies closer together (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006), this also suggests that it indirectly can increase the legitimacy of state power. For example, it has been argued that this is possible when civil society actors work to check abuses of state power and encourage wide citizen participation, in turn consolidating democracy (Diamond 1994).

But certain types of civil society actors are, arguably, more susceptible to external interventions and political governmental agendas than others (Mercer 2002). The typical difference between civil society organisations, such as social movements or grassroots organisations and professionalised NGOs, is notable. Julie Fisher (1998) argues that NGOs strengthen civil society by simply increasing the number of organisations that act as intermediaries between citizens and the state, and that the sheer number of NGOs demonstrates the strength of civil society. Elaine Stenberg (2010), on the other hand, describes the difference between the two as one of coerciveness. While civil society is essentially non-coercive, NGOs can have coercive agendas that involve governmental interests and limit individual freedom, as they are accountable not only to governments but also to donors for resources, service delivery, and staff members. As such, they appear as key actors in the backlash against the decolonial turn. This also means that there can be widely different actors operating in the same space (even though an organisation can operate in several spaces in parallel—at the local, national and global level), where some NGOs will be deeply involved with a government’s oppressive and discriminatory agenda, while others will be focused on monitoring the same state’s human rights abuses.

Heidrun Zinecker (2011) ties this to the fact that the Western ideal type of civil society, as an autonomous and uncoerced societal sphere, is not the case in most developing countries. Especially within failed nation states, non-democratic civil society actors may end up fighting to take over state functions in an overextended civil society. Moreover, in economies that are rent-based, rather than dependent on a functioning capitalist market, rents are used to establish civil society institutions—and especially NGOs—which in turn are used to acquire more rents (Zinecker 2011; Taghdisi-Rad 2014). At the same time, donors work under a “purpose-made civil society umbrella” that is ideal for NGOs that want to engage in developmental policies and find potential partners for financing (Zinecker 2011: 9-10). Consequently, this professionalised version of civil society has been allowed to represent the “respectable option” within the liberal peacebuilding agenda, described as the typical partner in negotiations (Kaldor 2003).

This means that donors have shown a greater willingness to support NGOs over other types of civil society actors (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006). As previously noted, NGOs typically rely heavily on funding from international donors, including foreign governments, financial institutions, and multilateral organisations (Dana 2014). As a result, more grassroots-driven components of sustainable peacebuilding—such as mass movements and community-based initiatives—are often marginalised, despite their strong member bases and bottom-up approaches. This means that support is frequently channelled to urban, middle-class groups with links to the political establishment, something that creates a donor-driven NGO-civil society that lacks a strong membership base in society (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006). Dominik Zaum (2012) describes this phenomenon as one in which civil society actors—due to the shortcomings of the liberal peacebuilding agenda itself—are created through external intervention.

Ultimately, these Eurocentric and individualistic tendencies within the neoliberal version of civil society came to provoke the emergence of civil society actors based in other non-individualistic contexts, with key actors like religious foundations (Kaldor 2003). Even though these actors have critiqued the neoliberal version of civil society, they would not necessarily support the global or decolonial segments of civil society either. This means that civil society actors can be active, passive, progressive, or regressive, all depending on one’s perspective (Todorova 2021).

3.1.2 The manufactured civil society: increasing state power

These diverse manifestations of civil society underscore the extent to which civil society actors are shaped by the broader democratic deficits of their surrounding societal spheres. As a result, civil society can become fractured by channels of non-democratic or non-economic discourses, processes and actors (Zinecker 2011). Toepler et al. (2020) describe this as a defining duality within hybrid and authoritarian regimes, where some civil society organisations face repression and operate under shrinking civic space, while others are actively supported and co-opted by the state to serve its political objectives.

In such settings, civil society does not always function as a force for democratisation. On the contrary, certain organisations may play a central role in anti-democratic processes by advancing nationalist, religious, or racist agendas. These dynamics have led scholars to distinguish between “good” and “bad” civil society—evaluated not by structure alone, but by whether they contribute to open, pluralistic societies or work to dismantle them. Tactics employed by “bad” civil society actors often include the delegitimisation of liberal opponents through public shaming, stigmatisation, silencing, and lobbying efforts aimed at outlawing dissenting groups or cutting off their financial lifelines (Jamal 2018).

This means that civil society can be divided into three groups of organisations: (i) *claims-making and advocacy NGOs*; (ii) *nonprofit service providers*; and (iii) *regime-loyal NGOs* that support populist or nationalist discourses (Toepler et al. 2020). However, these categories are not fixed. The distinction between organic, professionalised, and manufactured segments of civil society is often fluid, with organisations shifting between roles depending on context and external pressures. What is more is that while the prevalence—and to some degree the functions—of organisations within each segment varies with the degree of democratic openness in surrounding civic spaces, all three groups can be found in democratic as well as non-democratic settings.

As the following analysis will illustrate, some actors within the organic segment operate as claims-making/advocacy grassroots, rather than purely professionalised NGOs, while there are some professionalised NGOs that, due to donor priorities, focus more on service delivery. Additionally, some actors within the professionalised segment, especially those “tamed social movements,” might claim to be organic while their financing, organisational structure and partnerships indicate otherwise.

The actual definition of organisations within the manufactured segment is even more complex. Lesley Hodgson (2004) describes these organisations as groups “formed and funded, at least initially, through some type of state initiative.” She explains that these groups often are directly accountable to the government and have to meet targets set by the same. She (Hodgson 2004: 159) adds that:

Rather than an organic development—“people doing it for themselves” (the very crux of grassroots initiatives)—manufactured civil society is orchestrated by government. Rather than playing the “people’s song,” manufactured civil society chants the mantra of government criteria, ultimately playing to the government’s tune.

Hil Aked (2021: 33) similarly argues that civil society functions as an extension of state power when governments and private actors form state-private networks that “harness the relative advantages of both state and non-state actors.” Such networks deliberately cultivate private institutions that appear autonomous but in practice advance state agendas. By doing so, governments bolster their legitimacy, generate popular goodwill, and promote initiatives aimed at foreign publics. This strategy is particularly effective, Aked suggests, because contemporary publics tend to be sceptical of state power—viewing government officials and diplomats with suspicion—while perceiving civil society groups as more open, independent, and accountable (Aked 2023; Hodgson 2004). As a result, simply changing the messenger, without altering the message, can enhance the state’s ability to influence public opinion and international diplomacy.

In authoritarian contexts, however, the relationship between governments and regime-loyal NGOs not only tends to be more transparent but also more accepted among the general public. Reza Hasmath, Timothy Hildebrandt, and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu (2019: 276), who refer to such organisations as “government-organised NGOs,” explain that:

In Western liberal democracies, where there is a general social expectation that NGOs should be relatively independent actors, their symbolic and interpretive powers can be compromised given their closeness to the state. In contrast, in authoritarian contexts—notably those with strong corporatist tendencies—there is a social expectation that NGOs (or private actors) will have some meaningful form of interaction with the state, either tacitly or overtly, and their symbolic and interpretive powers are generally not compromised.

However, this conceptualisation has notable limitations. For example, Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu (2019) identify an organisation's *origin* as the key criterion for defining government-organised NGOs. They argue that, with few exceptions, these organisations are almost always founded and funded by the state, whereas other NGOs are not. While this aligns with Hodgson's (2004) description of manufactured civil society, it contrasts with the characteristics of the professionalised segment discussed earlier, which often relies heavily on government funding—particularly from foreign state agencies. Another limitation lies in the scope of their analysis, which focuses primarily on service-delivery organisations and largely overlooks advocacy or claims-making actors.

Elian Weizman offers a complementary perspective, highlighting how segments of manufactured civil society often play a role in the criminalisation of other civil society actors, in alignment with state interests. Notably, she observes that these efforts often begin with *informal* tools and strategies, which then “pave the way to more formal tools, mechanisms and strategies by state agencies and authorities” (see Cristiano et al. 2023: 4–5). In other words, this suggests that state initiatives that fund, or even form, manufactured civil society organisations could initially have been influenced by civil society organisations *outside* state-private networks themselves, instead of vice versa.

This brings us to what Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu (2019) describe as an additional organisational type: “government-*influenced* NGOs.” These are organisations that in many ways resemble government-organised NGOs, but in comparison, they have emerged outside the constructs of the state. With time, they have started to work closely with government partners and, in some cases, include government representatives on their boards of directors. Taken together, these observations point to the diversity of organisational forms and origins within the manufactured segment of civil society. Whether they try to conceal governmental influence—as is often the case in democratic contexts—or collaborate more openly, as in non-democratic contexts, such organisations share a common trait: they function as strategic tools of state power. Whether by providing services that reinforce state benevolence, promoting preferred ideologies, or by discrediting opposition groups, they ultimately serve to legitimise the government.

Lastly, it is important to recognise that the degree of government involvement in civil society often hinges on whether organisations are national or transnational. Transnational, heterogeneous movements, while vulnerable to criminalisation, are harder to outlaw entirely due to their structural autonomy and capacity for anonymity. In contrast, national

civil society actors are more exposed to legal and political accountability, making them significantly more susceptible to state supervision and control (Todorova 2021). Equally important is the recognition that transnational solidarity—along with its possibilities and constraints—is deeply shaped by the global history of settler colonialism. This legacy has direct implications for international development efforts, as civil society actors working within contemporary settler colonial contexts are inevitably influenced by what John Collins (2011: 30) describes as the “settler international”: a network of countries founded on settler colonialism that continue to sustain strong diplomatic, military, and cultural ties. John Strawson (2002: 363–64) argues that although traditional forms of colonialism have ended, elements of the old colonial order continue to be reproduced in the postcolonial world—something that keeps the West in a dominant position and former colonies at the margins. In this way, the colonial present often reflects and reactivates the power structures of the colonial past (Zureik 2016).

Significantly, many Western governments—shaped by such histories and cultural ties—are also among the largest funders of international development initiatives (OECD 2022). According to Elia Zureik (2016: 79), the rationale behind this tendency is that foreign aid allows states to “domestically espouse liberal values” while at the same time acting as “practitioners of empire” abroad.

3.2 The driving force of settler colonialism

A central focus of this research is the role civil society organisations play within settler colonial contexts and how their societal contributions and internal cohesion are shaped—and often constrained—by the settler colonial condition. While civil society is known to be instrumental in advancing coercive state-driven agendas in authoritarian, hybrid, or failed states, its function under settler colonialism remains less clearly defined and underexplored. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (2005: 12) explain that the concept of civil society can be difficult to apply to settler societies, “for when settler colonialism is most fully elaborated, civil institutions mirror the settler-indigene divide or are the exclusive preserve of settlers.” This observation underscores the need to critically interrogate how civil society operates within a framework that is inherently exclusionary and structured by colonial dominance. Therefore, a deeper engagement with the concept of settler colonialism is essential for advancing this research.

Settler colonialism, within this research, is conceptualised as a type of racial domination marked by a settler population, often but not always supported by an imperial metropole. In line with the theory of Patrick Wolfe (1999; 2006), settler colonialism is furthermore conceptualised as being organised by the principle of the *logic of elimination*, meaning that the settler population is colonising a territory with the aim to destroy and eliminate the native society in order to replace it with a society dominated by settlers. In order to achieve this goal, which is justified by using constructed settler narratives depicting the settlers as a “chosen people” and driven by an urge to always conquer more land, a number of settler colonial strategies and transfers are used to expel and oppress the indigenous population (Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2010; Parker 2021).

3.2.1 The blueprint for settler colonialism: made in Ireland

Even though colonisation evolves with the rise and fall of empires and hegemonies, colonisation from a world-historical perspective has remained (Collins 2011). Settler colonialism, however, is, according to Collins, “a relatively modern phenomenon” (Ibid: 30-31). The British colonisation of Ireland, and to some extent Canada, has been described by researchers as the blueprint for a colonial rule that developed into settler colonialism. Based on its geographical location in close vicinity of the British Crown, Ireland was early on used as a laboratory for developing innovative and distinct colonisation patterns that later on were exported to other colonies established by the British, such as Canada, India and Ceylon (Rahman et al. 2017; Browne 2024).

Aziz Rahman et al. (2017) describe this blueprint as consisting of a number of colonial methods, primarily based on the Penal Laws that were introduced after the Catholic elites in Ireland were defeated in the 1690 Battle of the Boyne. The Penal Laws forbade Catholic and Protestant dissidents from owning land, holding public offices, and raising their children in their own faith. By transferring Protestant settlers to Ireland, the British would control the native population by using a divide-and-rule principle, which pitted different groups against each other (Rahman et al. 2017). Ultimately, the idea of native inferiority culminated in the ethnic cleansing and genocide by starvation of the Irish native population, in addition to an attempt to erase its culture, including its language, art and customs (Browne 2024).

In comparing the British colonial rule in Ireland to the one in Canada, it appears that the principle of divide-and-rule, control of land, religious suppression, ethnocentrism and de-

politicisation through the application of apartheid laws, sometimes by the use of force, are all common colonial tactics. In Canada, however, the colonisers based their colonisation on *terra nullius*, i.e., “they fought over the land as if it were empty and could become theirs” (Rahman et al. 2017: 21). But either way, the goal was the same: to access native lands for military strategic purposes, potential economic profit and political power. As evidenced by the forced emigration from Ireland, the forced containment onto small reserves in Canada, and the forced relocation to urban centres, the peoples of native lands were either used as a means to access the lands’ potential or *removed* to clear access to more lands (Ibid).

Thus, the act of removing native populations from their lands is key to understanding the inner logics of settler colonialism. Even though both colonialism and settler colonialism are attempts at racial dominance, extractive colonialism—or imperial expansion—is more concerned with gaining access to resources, commerce, and military power, and therefore necessitates maintaining a separation between the coloniser and the colonised (Veracini 2010: 27f; Zreik 2016; Elkins and Pedersen 2005). In such circumstances, the imperial colonisers often prefer to cooperate with indigenous “partners” or chartered corporations rather than to concern themselves with the annexation of land or, for that matter, the state of internal affairs in the colonised territory.

In comparison, Elkins and Pedersen (2005) argue that settler colonialism is distinguished by the presence of a settler population determined to make a territory their *permanent* home while at the same time continuing to enjoy metropolitan living standards and political privileges. A growing number of researchers have, as mentioned above, argued that it is not only the permanent aspect that differentiates settler colonialism from colonialism, but the *ongoing* effort to dispossess, or remove, native peoples from their lands. This effort stems from the *logic of elimination*, which, as mentioned, drives settlers to try and *replace* the presence of the native with a society dominated by themselves as settlers (Veracini 2010; Wolfe 1999; 2006; Sayegh 2012; Salamanca et al. 2012).

This means that settler societies tend to share a number of features, as well as issues, that are related to the asymmetrical relationship between diverse native and migrant collectives. A common feature among settler collectives is that they often are composed of people deemed “undesirable” in their countries of origin—whether for religious, economic, or political reasons. In other words, settler colonialism has historically functioned as a pressure valve for the metropole, relieving internal tensions by exporting surplus or marginalised populations. In turn, these populations became active agents of dispossession

across the colonial world. Notable examples include the Puritans who fled persecution to settle in North America, the forced relocation of England's urban poor, early trade unionists to Australia, and the deportation of Paris Commune survivors to Algeria (Englert and Bhattacharyya 2024).

Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis (1995), on the other hand, explain that another shared trait derives from the foundational claims that have been made by European settlers throughout history. They argue that these claims were made with the aim to build sovereign states *independent* of their metropolitan centres, in addition to the constant involvement of the domination by settlers over indigenous populations (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995: 3-4):

Historical accounts of settler colonies tend to focus on the transplanted habits, tastes and skills of a European capitalist culture among settlers or more accurately among the racially and ethnically dominant settlers. [...] By dating history or the “formative period” of history in settler societies as coinciding with the beginnings of European colonisation, it effaces and distorts the complex histories and societies of indigenous peoples which existed prior to and during prolonged periods of contact with Europeans.

In other words, settler colonialism can be described as a mode characterised by “producing dominance and privilege capable of historical continuity and expansion” (Svirsky 2021: 74). “Successful” (according to its own perspective) settler colonialism is therefore one that destroys to replace, eventually making itself independent of the colonising metropole. It eliminates indigenous autonomy and integrates various waves of migration—in other words, it aims to ultimately cease to be settler colonial (Veracini 2012: 27-28; Zreik 2016).

3.2.2 The multiple logics and strategies behind a settler project

As the history of settler colonial projects globally shows us, the settler colony will deploy various sets of strategies in its constant strive to make itself independent of the imperial metropole, all of which are dependent on the progression of the settler project itself. Jeff Halper (2021) elaborates by arguing that there are five different stages of settler progression, according to the inner logics and structure of settler colonial projects, that can help us understand the specific combination of settler strategies utilised at each stage. First, there is the *impetus*, in which settlers, together with the colonial metropole, start by focusing on a specific foreign land or territory to conquer. After follows the *settlement*

invasion, i.e., the arrival of settlers with the intent to conquer the specific land, thus displacing its native population. Even if this takes place over a long period of time, it still constitutes an invasion, according to Halper. Wolfe (1999) draws the same conclusion, as he explains that the invasion operates as a structure, not merely an event (Wolfe 1999).

The first stage of establishment, called *foundational violence*, must therefore be imposed by force. The next stage of settler progression is the establishment of a *dominance management regime*, which describes a system that deploys militias, military and police to take control over the land and provides security to the settlers; expels and suppresses the native population; and disseminates the settler narrative to normalise and legitimise the settler project. Lastly, the settler progression ends with the *triumph of the settler regime*, during which a “normal” state and society emerge. At this stage, the native population has been driven out, killed, pacified and marginalised, and the land, quite obviously, “belongs” to the settlers (Halper 2021: 35-36).

Lorenzo Veracini (2010) describes a number of different strategies that are typically used during this progression pattern of settler colonialism. As the settler project is only made possible if a “collective sovereign displacement” takes place during the first stages of progression, the concept of “transfer” becomes foundational. Here, Veracini does not only refer to the typical “mass transfer” of large populations but also the “cleansing” of the colonised territory from all native alterity. As such, there are a number of transfers that can be enacted vis-à-vis the indigenous population, such as necropolitical transfer, civilisational transfer, perception transfer, transfer by assimilation, transfer by accounting, transfer by means of “authenticity”, multicultural transfer, bicultural transfer, transfer by coerced lifestyle changes, and administrative transfer.

The strategy, or as Veracini (2010) calls it—transfer—that appears to be the most central and thus most commonly used in such a combination, is that of *ethnic transfer*, which is characterised by the forced deportation of native communities, either within or outside the territory claimed or controlled by the settler entity. However, Wolfe (2006) notes that a low number of natives remaining after an ethnic transfer is not, in most settler colonial projects, seen as an issue, as they will cease to be native—they will instead become individuals, as they are without their previous community and as such exist without threatening the settler polity. Related to this, we also find the *transfer of racialisation*, meaning the creation of a “racial contract” that allows for the native to be categorised as something distinctly different from the settlers, e.g., non-white, colonised people. This racial transfer, in turn,

eradicates the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism, meaning that the settler colonialist project disappears behind other forms of colonial expropriation and control, even though it is still organised according to the logic of elimination (Veracini 2010: 53-54).

Moreover, Collins (2011) claims that the logic of elimination works in tandem with a number of additional logics: the *logic of expansion*, the *logic of exceptionalism* and the *logic of denial*. The logic of expansion is first and foremost expressed through the never-ending territorial expansion of the settler project, as it is driven by a constant urge to conquer more land. But additionally, this logic uses the systematic fostering of fear in the settler population, which is crucial during the establishment and maintenance of the dominance management regime, in order to justify this ongoing conquest of native lands. This means that it utilises so-called “legal grey zones” where “frontier justice” can be dispensed with relative impunity.

The logic of exceptionalism, on the other hand, contributes to the logic of elimination and the logic of expansion by constructing powerful ideological concepts that present the settlers as “chosen people” movements, of course in stark contrast to the native population (Collins 2011). This, according to Veracini (2010), is clearly articulated in the settler colonial strategy of *transfer by conceptual displacement* and *narrative transfer*. Through conceptual displacement, native people cease to be considered indigenous to the land. Instead, they are perceived as exogenous “others” who have entered the space of the settlers. In addition, two types of narrative transfer are particularly significant. The first represents indigenous people as backward, unchanging, and primitive, while the second involves settlers claiming they are also natives, with a historical connection to the land—emphasising continuity in contrast to narratives that depict the native population as disconnected due to historical ruptures or fatalities (Veracini 2010: 47). While these narrative transfers are used throughout the progression of the settler colonial project, from the impetus to its “final triumph,” they typically take on a more institutionalised approach during the later stages, which the following analysis will show.

Finally, the logic of denial describes how settlers use several forms of denial to normalise and legitimise the settler colonial project. The first type of denial, *literal* denial, is used to deny that a specific event in the past happened (e.g., the land was never ethnically cleansed); the second type of denial, *interpretive* denial, is used to give something a different meaning (e.g., forcing natives to move is not equal to ethnic cleansing); and the

third type of denial, *implicatory* denial, is used to deny the political, moral and psychological implications of an event (e.g., being ethnically cleansed from one's land does not have serious and long-lasting consequences). Lastly, the fourth type of denial, *cultural* denial, is used to normalise the oppression of the native population as a part of daily life (Collins 2011: 32-34). In other words, settler colonialism can be defined as a project that aims to eliminate the native through different stages of expansion and dispossession while using a perspective of exceptionalism and denial in order to legitimise the project itself as well as the specific strategies used during its progression.

3.2.3 Settler states: colonialism through liberalism

The general rule is that when a settler colony develops beyond the stage of independence from the metropole in a way where power is still structured along a settler-native divide, it transforms from being a settler project, and becomes a settler *state*. Therefore, the “ideal type” of settler colonialism (again, only according to the perspective of the settler population), and specifically the settler state, can be analysed through the level of institutionalisation of settler privilege versus the level of settler incorporation into its governance (Wolfe 2006; Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Collins 2011).

The relationship between the settler population and the colonising metropole can thus tell us a lot about the progression of a specific settler project. Veracini (2010) recognises this as a triangular system made up of (i) the imperial metropole, (ii) a settler population and (iii) a native population. Elkins and Pedersen (2005), on the other hand, claim that the settler colonial system is made up of four, instead of three, key groups. Apart from the imperial metropole, the settler population, and the native population, which has to be significant enough to make itself noticed, this typology also includes a local administration that is meant to maintain order and authority within the settler colony. Typically, these groups are marked by an ongoing power struggle between themselves, based on the threat of elimination and erasure.

Wolfe (2013), however, emphasises the significance in viewing the relationship between native and settler as structural—that is, as the constant binary in the native/settler division—as such a divide captures the permanent *incompleteness* of the settler colonial project, which in turn is key to understanding its logic and utilised strategies. Rana Barakat (2018) further argues that any analysis that distorts or sidelines such a binary divide risks erasing and abandoning the ongoing reality of settler colonialism and will contribute to the

de-politicisation of scholarly work itself. But while it is important to centre the structural relationship between the native and the settler, it is also, according to Wolfe (2013), imperative to not make them codependent. In other words, the native should not only be created in opposition to the settler—i.e., as dependent on the settler’s existence and presence—but needs to exist in its own right. As such, the typologies presented by Veracini and Elkins and Pedersen will, within this research, primarily be used as reflections of historical accounts of the practical organisation of settler colonial societies, rather than as reflections of the inner logic of settler colonialism itself.

The transformation from settler project to settler state is interesting for additional reasons. For instance, settler states such as those in the U.S., Canada, and Australia demonstrate how the incorporation of the settler/native divide into state institutions has utilised the very concept of liberal democracy to enhance its efficiency. In these cases, the building of liberal institutions (for the enjoyment of those considered citizens) has been simultaneous with the ongoing elimination and oppression of indigenous communities (Wildeman 2024; Veracini 2010; Cristiano et al. 2023). In other words, it adopts a liberalism built on the exclusion and domination of indigenous peoples along colonial, racial, and gendered lines. This reflects an ongoing effort to align liberal ideals with the realities of settler colonial rule—essentially serving as a framework that *justifies* domination (Tatour 2021). Indeed, researchers have described how liberal principles like democracy, civil rights and the rule of law can give imperialism and settler colonial oppression a benevolent face, ultimately enabling settler colonialism to function more in tandem with liberalism than in opposition to it (Wildeman 2024; Cristiano et al. 2023; Park 2021). Therefore, Lana Tatour argues, settler states like those in Canada and Australia should be defined as *liberal* settler states (see Cristiano et al. 2023).

For example, in Canada, the state’s recognition of indigenous peoples has not led to meaningful equality but has instead reinforced state dominance. Recognition has operated as a top-down process that, rather than enabling true reciprocity, continues to rely on practices of forced exclusion and assimilation. As a result, even so-called “progressive” political efforts risk reinforcing the same colonial, racist, and patriarchal power structures that indigenous movements have long resisted (Coulthard 2014). In this view, racism is not in conflict with liberalism but is instead woven into its colonial and exclusionary history and present (Tatour 2021), just as colonialism is not inherently opposed to democracy. As Elia Zureik (2016: 79) observes, many “so-called ‘European democratic states’ were

colonial in the first instance,” and colonialism has been espoused by several of these governments that in reality continue to exercise colonial dominion over others. The issue for both liberal settler states and the wider collective of the “settler international,” therefore, is not whether settler colonial domination and supremacy should exist, but rather in what *form* they should be maintained (Tatour 2021).

What this all suggests is that the utilisation of liberal concepts and principles is a central component in upholding Western hegemony in colonised territories. In the same way that the liberal democratic paradigm within the peacebuilding agenda has worked to stifle grassroots organisations, “taming” mass movements and effectively overshadowing the global turn in civil society by facilitating neoliberal market reforms and promoting “good governance,” the trickery of liberalism within the colonial state-building process has worked to facilitate criminalisation of anticolonial struggles. In line with the settler colonial logic of elimination, the process of criminalisation in liberal settler states seeks to eliminate certain acts and thoughts that challenge the settler colonial reality and thus works as a political tool. As Weizman (2024a: 3-4) explains:

Such actors, ideas and acts will be monitored, controlled and contained; particular laws will be written to classify such activity as illegal/criminal; law enforcement agencies will move into operation; and legal professionals use new and existing legislation to prosecute such deeds and actors to remove them from society and its acceptable modes of behaviour.

This process of criminalisation is facilitated through liberal concepts because the institutionalisation of the settler/native divide within liberal settler states ultimately means an institutionalisation of the settler colonial strategy of transfer of racialisation, i.e., the racial contract. By employing this strategy, the settler state is categorising the native as something distinctly different from the settlers—as an exogenous “other”—in practice excluding them from its population registry and/or economy. This is simply for the reason that including them in the population registry would risk exposing their oppression, at the same time as it would make it more difficult to criminalise their resistance against colonial rule. Thus, just as civil society is influenced by the democratic deficits within their surrounding societal spheres, it is also influenced by the settler/native divide within liberal settler states.

Veracini (2010) outlines several ways in which native populations can be excluded from the settler state's population registry and economy. While one method of exclusion involves the systematic targeting of individuals through incarceration, criminalisation, or institutionalisation, another set of methods operates the exclusion through political structures. In cases of *diplomatic transfer*, for example, native populations are placed under the authority of sovereign or semi-sovereign entities that exist within the settler-controlled territory. This allows the settler state to retain territorial control while at the same time having indirect control over the colonised subjects. Conversely, *non-diplomatic transfer* involves the settler entity maintaining control over a region while formally denying responsibility for it. In both cases, the settler state can continue to present itself as upholding the liberal democratic paradigm, while only at the exclusive enjoyment of the settler population.

Ultimately, this undeniable connection between liberalism and colonialism can be traced back to their mutual dependency on expansion. Just as colonialism, and in this case settler colonialism, is dependent on the constant access to, and conquest of, more land (Collins 2011; Wolfe 2006), the liberal democratic paradigm, and in this case the liberal peacebuilding agenda, is centred around market reform and never-ending economic growth (Kaldor 2003; Wildeman 2024). Thus, the capitalist system is dependent on ongoing access to new resources and markets. Similarly, Marcelo Svirsky (2021) has claimed that the logic of settler colonialism is intertwined with the logic of capitalism, as both are organised around the logic of dispossession. According to the logic of capitalist exploitation, workers are dispossessed from control of their reproductive resources, while, according to the logic of settler colonialism, workers in settler societies are provided with opportunities that are made accessible only through the dispossession of the native. According to Jeremy Wildeman (2024: 202), the settler state will routinely deny public goods and markets to the native (as “noncitizens”) as part of “the process of their dispossession,” while at the same time “providing goods and markets to people it considers citizens.” Yet, natives that are eliminated and transferred according to the logic of elimination cannot be continuously economically exploited, requiring a combination of these strategies in practice.

Nonetheless, just as constant economic growth is impossible on a planet with finite natural resources, constant territorial expansion is not possible for any settler colonial project or state. This leads us to what Collins (2011) describes as *exocolonialism* and *endocolonialism*. When the frontier of the settler colonial project, which is initially

exocolonial, reaches its own limits in terms of geopolitical conquest, it will transform and give way to more intensive and all-encompassing forms of exploitation, surveillance and social control. In other words, it will turn its course—from constantly expanding, it starts focusing its direction inwards. This second phase of colonialism's deep structure, endocolonisation, ultimately means that the preparation for war in the settler colony's impossible search for total security becomes endless, to a point where the preparation itself cannot be distinguished from actual war (Collins 2011).

The “permanent war” that is typical in an endocolonial environment is intertwined with the “permanent incompleteness” that is expressed through the binary structure of settler colonialism, since binaries, as suggested by Wolfe (2013), produce “settler anxiety” and signal incompleteness. Describing this ongoing frontier settler colonialism as a “permanent frontier” can, nevertheless, be problematic, as the framing of settler colonial projects in terms of “triumph” and “defeat” risks centring the settler narrative at the cost of the indigenous narrative. More than that, it also signals the possibility of a permanent end to the settler colonial project. Wolfe (2013), as well as Barakat (2018), claims that when the settler invasion is seen as a structure, not an event, the progression of the frontier does not stop. In other words, the settler colonial project can never “triumph.” Taking this into account, it is clear that while the five stages of settler colonialism presented by Halper (2021) will be useful within this research, they will primarily be understood as a description of the various categories and practicalities of specific settler strategies deployed by the settler colonial project or state in relation to its own perspective and strive towards triumph through the elimination of the native, and not a description of a possible and permanent outcome as such. Barakat (2018) points out that this notion is key in the utilisation of the settler colonial framework to analyse the situation in Palestine. This is because, when we recognise that settler colonialism never is complete, we avoid eclipsing Palestinian narratives through our use of Zionist frameworks.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine the roles and functions assumed by divergent civil society actors in contexts characterised by democratic deficiencies, with a particular focus on settler colonial settings. It outlined three distinct segments within civil society: organic, professional, and manufactured. Since the 1990s, the dominance of the liberal democratic paradigm and the cojoined liberal peacebuilding agenda has disproportionately promoted

the professionalised segment—often at the expense of organic, grassroots actors. Parallel to this shift, there has been a marked rise in the manufactured segment: regime-aligned organisations created and funded by states to legitimise repression and reinforce hegemonic power structures within civil society. This co-optation is especially potent in settler colonial contexts, where the criminalisation and exclusion of native expressions are foundational strategies of domination. As such, settler colonial entities often operate seamlessly through liberal institutional frameworks—such as those embedded in the peacebuilding agenda—to further entrench their control, displace native alterities, and advance toward the ultimate “triumph” of the settler colonial project.

The chapter has thus illustrated how civil society can be strategically contained and criminalised within a settler colonial context, revealing the specific settler colonial strategies and logics that underpin such processes. It underscores how the targeting of civil society is not incidental but central to the functioning of the settler colonial project, operating through mechanisms such as narrative production, conceptual erasure, and delegitimisation. By foregrounding these dynamics, the chapter introduces a critical analytical lens—one that positions narrative control and erasure not merely as byproducts but as foundational components of settler colonial governance. This perspective contributes an important conceptual layer to the settler colonial framework and directly informs the overarching research aim: to understand how settler colonial narratives are constructed and disseminated in the delegitimisation and criminalisation of Palestinian civil society and to examine the material and political impacts of these strategies on the ground.

Yet, it is worth noting that it has been imperative that the study does not sideline indigenous voices and narratives. And while recognising that some previous studies have been unsuccessful in centring the native perspective, especially amidst an increasing number of scholarly works on Palestine that are based on the settler colonial framework and specifically Zionism as a settler colonial movement, I also recognise that the central tenant of this research is nothing but the Palestinian experience of narrative construction, specifically.

Thus, I have exclusively interviewed those working to promote the Palestinian narrative, even if that often is done in response to the narrative promoted by the Zionist settler entity. This, I maintain, is exactly why the conceptualisation of settler colonialism in combination with various theoretical perspectives on the role of civil society has been a useful tool in understanding how the settler colonial project, historically as well as contemporarily, has

worked to eliminate the native resistance in Palestine, especially through the use and dissemination of narratives—and not an attempt to centre the analysis around the settler experience itself.

Chapter 4. The Settler Colonial Context in Historic Palestine and the Transformation of Civil Society

Based on the conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter, the aim of this chapter is to explain how civil society actors operate in the specific Palestinian context. For this purpose, the chapter starts with unpacking the emergence of the settler colonial project in Palestine and its relationship to the Zionist movement, before turning to the historical background and transformation of Palestinian civil society under occupation and colonial rule. These developments are imperative for our understanding of the criminalisation of civil society in Palestine today, as it ultimately works as a continuation of the settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure.

4.1 Settler colonialism in Palestine: the Zionist movement

Scholars have described the situation in historical Palestine as one characterised by colonialism, and later on settler colonialism (see Wildeman 2024; Weizman 2024; Browne 2024; Khalidi 2020; Halper 2021; Hawari et al. 2018; Sayegh 2012; Salamanca et al. 2012; Collins 2011; Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Zureik 2015). In fact, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, has stated that the pretext of settler colonialism is crucial for understanding the historical background against which atrocities in Palestine are currently unfolding (UN Human Rights Council 2024).

Within this context, the Zionist settler project is described as a national movement that started in the 1880s (Masalha 2012) and reached its culmination in 1948, when Jewish paramilitary groups ethnically cleansed Palestine (Pappé 2006; Khalidi 2020; Sayigh 1997; Weizman 2024; Erakat 2019; Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007), an event that Palestinians refer to as the Nakba (catastrophe). Within a period of six months, over half of historic Palestine's native population were uprooted and more than 500 villages destroyed (Pappé 2006; Masalha 2012). The dispossession of the Palestinian people has continued steadily since the Nakba, and throughout the Six-Day War in 1967 (also referred to as the Naksa, meaning "setback") that resulted in the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and the Sinai Desert (Bendix et al. 2022). In the end, this ongoing process of dispossession has proven to be an essential component of the Israeli state-building process (Falk 2021; Lamott Hill and Plitnick 2021).

Recognising the importance of language and terminologies in shaping how we see and understand our reality, the language used in this chapter reflects existing research on the situation in Palestine and Israel. Thus, terms used to refer to the Zionist movement and the pre-state Yishuv in historical Palestine will be “the Zionist settler colonial project, entity or polity” (see Sayegh 2012; Masalha 2012; Salamanca et al. 2012; Hawari et al. 2018; Khalidi 2020), while referring to the current Israeli state, I will use the terms “the Zionist settler colonial project” and “Israeli settler colonial state, project, entity or polity” interchangeably.³ At times, when the Israeli settler state is referred to multiple times in a paragraph, the flow of the text will be improved by alternating with the simplified term “the Israeli state.” The occupied Palestinian territories, i.e., the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza strip, will be referred to as Palestine or occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). When referring to Palestine including the Palestinian areas that later became the Israeli state, I will simply use the term historic Palestine. Palestinians will be referred to as the native or indigenous population, while Israeli Jews, as well as those who belonged to the Jewish Yishuv in the pre-state period will be referred to as settlers (see Khalidi 2020; Halper 2021; Pappé 2006; Salamanca et al. 2012; Wolfe 2006; Lentin 2020).

4.1.1 The first seeds of Zionism

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world was at the height of the colonial age, and European powers are said to have been in colonial occupation of approximately 85 percent of the globe (Said 1979; Erakat 2019). During this time Palestine was under Ottoman rule, as it had been for the last four centuries (Strawson 2010). As part of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine was divided into three provinces: Acre covering the north, Nablus in the middle, and finally Jerusalem, which included many southern parts of Palestine (Strawson 2010). For well over a millennium, the population comprised a majority of people whose language and religion were Arabic and Islam, respectively (Said 1979; Khalidi 2020). In addition, other religious sects were also present, including about 5-6 percent of those who belonged to the Jewish community (Pappé 2006; Masalha 2012).

During the era of global colonial rule and expansive European empires, Zionism emerged as a secular political movement with the aim of establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in historic Palestine through colonialism (Masalha 2012; Chomsky and Pappé

³ While it is important to distinguish between the settler colonial project in the pre-state period and after, it is equally important to recognize that the current Israeli state is (still) closely intertwined with the Zionist movement.

2015). The twilight of peaking European colonialism also meant that Zionism was shaped not only by nationalist aspirations but also by the realities of antisemitism (Wildeman 2024). In response to violent pogroms in Southern Russia (Elkins and Pedersen 2005) and the exclusionary conditions fostered by primordialist nationalist ideologies in Western Europe, Zionism—from the 1880s onward—increasingly strived to realise the desire to settle Jews outside of Europe. In other words, Zionism reflects two European ideas and realities—nationalism *and* colonialism—against a backdrop of antisemitism.

During this first phase of settler colonialism, recognised as the impetus, territories like Argentina, Uganda and Madagascar had all been considered for a possible Jewish state, before the movement decided to focus its efforts on Palestine (Masalha 2012). A community of Zionist settlers started to arrive in Palestine shortly after, in what is considered as the second phase of settler colonialism, namely the settlement invasion. This first community of settlers was called the *Yishuv*, and became very distinct from the old Jewish community in Palestine, which was usually non-Zionist, religious, and living in mixed Arab-Jewish cities (Masalha 2012), or as Ahmad H. Sa'di refers, “Jews of Arab culture” (Sa'di 2007: 288). The *Yishuv*, which aimed to create a new society separate from the native Palestinian population, did therefore not appreciate the ways of this old Jewish community (Masalha 2012).

Despite wealthy Jewish financiers, the first 15 years of the colonisation project was slow, as many Jews in Europe still preferred to emigrate to Argentina or the United States than to the state-building project in Palestine, which in practice meant living under racial segregation. Hence, the movement eventually felt a need to reassess its strategy. At the Zionist Basle Congress in 1897, a new goal was thus formulated, and it read that “the aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law” (Sayegh 2012: 209). In practice, this meant that the project became more organised than before. According to Fayez Sayegh (Ibid), the practical program approved by the congress stated that:

Other European settlers could coexist with the indigenous populations—whom they would exploit and dominate, but whose services they would nevertheless require, and whose continued existence in the coveted territory they would therefore tolerate. But the Zionist settlers could not countenance indefinite coexistence with the inhabitants of Palestine. For Palestine was fully populated by Arabs, whose national consciousness has already been awakened, and who had already begun to

nurse aspirations of independence and national fulfilment. Zionist colonisation could not possibly assume the physical proportions envisaged by Zionism while the Arab people of Palestine continued to inhabit its homeland; nor could the Zionist political aspirations of racial self-segregation and statehood be accomplished while the nationally-conscious Arab people of Palestine continued to exist in that country. Unlike European colonisation, therefore, the Zionist colonisation of Palestine was essentially incompatible with the continued existence of the “native population” in the coveted country.

Consequently, the movement decided to establish the World Zionist Organization, which in turn established a number of institutions in order to plan, finance and supervise this process of colonisation in Palestine. At the same time, the organisation was also looking for political, diplomatic and financial support among the most powerful states at the time, as it was not yet tied to any colonial metropole. As mentioned in the previous chapter, settler colonial projects without the backing from a colonial metropole are uncommon, and in order to increase the project’s likelihood of success, it became a prioritised matter for the Zionist movement. Initially, the Ottoman Empire was at the centre of efforts, but the Turkish Sultan was unconvinced to endorse the project. Other early initiatives that included the British government and the German Emperor, all failed (Sayegh 2012).

The Zionist movement continued their search for a great-power patron that could support their project, and with the start of the First World War the situation changed in their favour (Sayegh 2012). Finally, the movement found sympathy among the members of the British government, which at the beginning of the 20th century represented the greatest power in the world (Khalidi 2020).

The fact that Zionism aimed to obtain a territory to settle from a colonial power was not controversial a hundred years ago, as colonialism had not yet been officially discredited as oppressive. The modus operandi of the time, where European colonial powers were the norm, played a crucial part in shaping the Zionist movement (Wildeman 2024; Erakat 2019). As Sayegh (2012: 207) describes it: “European fortune hunters, prospective settlers, and empire builders raced for Africa,” while “Zionist settlers and would-be state-builders rushed for Palestine.” Theodore Herzl, one of the main figures of early Zionism, framed Jewish settlement in Palestine as beneficial to colonial Europe, claiming that it would be an outpost of civilisation among “barbarism” (Erakat 2019). This emerges as the first

example of the settler strategy of narrative transfer, as previously described by Veracini (2010), where settler colonial projects are justified by using a set of “imaginative geographies.” Just as in the case of British blueprint colonisation of Canada, the Zionist settler movement based their colonisation on *terra nullius*, making claims that the land was empty before it was settled. In the few cases where they recognised that there were already people living on the land, they depicted them as an unproductive, “backward” people, ultimately not considered to be as civilised as the settlers (Collins 2011: 31-32).

Following the outbreak of World War I Palestine became a key battle ground between the British and Ottoman armies (Khalidi 2020), and by the end of the war, the whole territory came under the control of the victorious British Empire, with the approval of the League of Nations (hereinafter, LN) (Strawson 2010; Erakat 2019). After an initial period of British military rule, the territory was officially administered by the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920 (Wildeman 2024; Khalidi 2020; Erakat 2019; Masalha 2012) in what for Palestine and the Palestinian people just became another period of colonial rule.

This development played out well for the Zionist movement, as in November 1917, three years before the start of the British Mandate period, the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration—a declaration that would prove to have tremendous implications for the situation in Palestine. In the form of a letter to the representative of Zionist interests at the time, the British government had declared its support for the Zionist project, noting that it did “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (Said 1979: 16; Aked 2023; Falk 2017; Erakat 2019; Masalha 2012). This occurred despite the fact that the British had promised Sharif Husayn, the Sherif of Mecca, Arab self-determination in Palestine already in 1916, in exchange for Arab support in the war. The promise had then been repeated in multiple public pledges thereafter (Khalidi 2020; Erakat 2019). In other words, the British government ascribed national rights only to “the Jewish people” even though they represented a minority in the country. As Rashid Khalidi (2020: 25) describes, two of the main reasons for this were “a religiously derived philo-Semitic desire to ‘return’ the Hebrews to the land of the Bible,” as well as an antisemitic desire to decrease the Jewish presence in Britain. Thus, a century-long assault on the Palestinian people, aimed at fostering an exclusivist “national home” at their expense, started.

Even if the LN stated that the “communities formerly belonging to the Turkish [i.e., Ottoman] Empire must be a primary consideration,” and while Mandatory Powers were typically established with the aim to provide “‘administrative advice and assistance’ to the native population until it was able to ‘stand-alone’ and practice self-governance,” Britain remained committed to establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and thus worked to see the Balfour Declaration incorporated into the Mandate (Erakat 2019: 3). As a result, the final text of the Mandate for Palestine, as approved by the LN in 1922, never described Palestinians as a community or as natives of the land. Palestinians only appear by association, as “non-Jewish”, even though they were the overwhelming majority in the country. Moreover, Palestine was classified as a Class A Mandate, as several other countries in the region. Even though every other Class A Mandate had a native governing authority alongside the Mandatory Power, the Palestinians were not allowed to have or develop any self-governing institutions. At the same time, Britain actively supported and recognised the newly founded Jewish Agency as a self-governing institution (Erakat 2019).

Even though the country had endured many centuries of oppression, the Balfour declaration launched a full-blown colonial conflict on the people of Palestine (Khalidi 2020). What made things even more complex and difficult for Palestinians seeking to overthrow colonialism and occupation was the fact that instead of “only” fighting the colonial power in the Western European metropole (as in most other colonial spaces at the time) they had to further struggle against a singular colonial-settler movement that was independent of (but still up to this point supported by) the colonial power back in London (Ibid).

In the years following the Balfour Declaration, Jewish immigration continued apace and a Zionist administration with associated para-state emerged in parallel to the British government in Palestine, thus shifting the economic, military, and demographic balance in favour of the Yishuv (Khalidi 2020: 37-39). As a result, a significant Palestinian grassroots uprising broke out in 1936, with a six-month general strike, which subsequently developed into the Great 1936-1939 Revolt, to which the British responded brutally. It would take the “full might of the British Empire to extinguish the Palestinian uprising” (Khalidi 2020: 46). At its conclusion, ten percent of the male Palestinian population were either killed, wounded, imprisoned or exiled, further weakening their capacity for engagement in anti-colonial struggle (Erakat 2019).

At this time, the war-weary British forces faced new challenges due to the situation in Europe. As the British government realised that part of World War II would be fought on Arab soil, it became imperative to improve its image and standing among Arab countries. Hence, in 1939, Britain released one of its several Commission reports aimed to set out a new policy for Palestine (Khalidi 2020: 46-49). This time, the report, called the White Paper, opposed the unregulated Jewish immigration and suggested establishing an independent Palestinian government within ten years, but without any guarantees for full independence. While the Palestinians refused to accept nothing less than independence and statehood, the Zionist movement felt betrayed by their previous colonial metropole, and as a response the Yishuv started mobilising militarily in order to confront the British armies (Erakat 2019). In fact, parts of the Zionist movement went underground and started using terror tactics against both the Palestinians and the British authorities, with the aim to make the British give up its mandatory role in the country and leave (Bisharat 2013). This proved to be an effective tactic for the Yishuv, as the British forces could no longer dispense as much military to Palestine as they had during the crushing of the Great Revolt a few years earlier (Falk 2021).

4.1.2 The Nakba: from settler colony to settler state

The rapid evacuation of British forces from its mandate in Palestine by the end of World War II (Wildeman 2024) ultimately meant that it handed over the governance to the newly established UN. This in turn culminated in the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) report, which favoured partitioning the country. The 1947 Partition Plan proposed dividing Palestine into three different entities: a Jewish State, a Palestinian State and the internationally administered area of Jerusalem (Strawson 2010; Wildeman 2024), giving the Jewish minority no less than 56 percent of Palestine, including its prime agricultural areas. This despite the fact that the settler population owned less than 7 percent of the land (Wildeman 2024). According to the UNSCOP, the country had 1.85 million inhabitants at this time, of whom 33 percent were Jewish and 67 percent were Palestinian Arabs (UNSCOP 1947, vol. 1). As such, the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 provided the international birth certificate for a Jewish state in most of what was still an Arab-majority land, in violation of the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter (Khalidi 2020: 71-72; Erakat 2019). As Wildeman (2024) points out, the unjust nature of the partition plan was in many ways a product of a UN that, despite seeing decolonisation at the horizon, was still very Eurocentric—and thus, colonial. Additionally,

as Erakat (2019) explains, the UN effectively contributed to normalising the exception of Palestine, and one might argue that the organisation thus took over the role previously held by the British—i.e., to support the settler colonial project by assuming the role of a modern type colonial metropole.

In parallel to the UN dealings with the Partition Plan, the violent end to the Mandate period had provided the perfect pretext and context for the Zionist movement and its para-military groups to, with relative ease, implement their ideological vision of an ethnically cleansed Palestine (Pappé 2006; Sayigh 1997; Erakat 2019; Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007). On the 15th of May 1948, Israel declared itself an independent and sovereign state (Khalidi 2020), an act that marks the initiation of the third phase of settler colonial progression, namely the phase of foundational violence. As such, the Nakba of 1948 (even though research has shown that the plan was set into motion already in 1947), is also the most notable example of the settler colonial logic of elimination, which, as earlier mentioned, stems from the desire to create an entirely new society in place of, or on the ruins of, an existing one, i.e., it aims to destroy so as to replace (Wolfe 2006; Collins 2011).

Within six months, what ensued was a clear, well-executed blue print of ethnic cleansing leaving more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, uprooted, 531 villages destroyed, and many murdered in what came to be a high number of massacres⁴ (Pappé 2006: 258-261). However, according to Nadim Khoury (2021: 117), it is important to note that elimination in this sense is not (yet) the same as extermination:

While natives were exterminated in some settler colonies, they were not in Palestine/Israel. In this case, elimination was achieved through the ethnic cleansing of 82% of Palestinians, the destruction of their villages, the prevention of their return, and the diplomatic reduction of their plight to a humanitarian problem. Israel deployed the full extent of its newfound sovereign power to achieve this end: military power to displace people, legal power to seize their land, and symbolic power to legitimise the new status quo.

Indeed, the villages were destroyed to the point that no houses, garden-walls or tombstones remained standing. This was, in part, to ensure Palestinian refugees were prevented from

⁴ While Israeli historian Benny Morris suggests that 24 Israeli massacres were carried out, Dr Saleh Abdel Jawad has compiled a list of no less than 68 massacres carried out between 1947-1949, and Israeli military historian Arie Yitzhaki claims that ten major massacres were carried out, in addition to about a hundred smaller massacres, all committed by Jewish forces 1948-1949 (Masalha 2012: 77-78).

returning to their property, and also, as Israel Shahak so well describes, so that “visitors are passing and being told that it was all a desert” (Shahak 1975: 43).

There was not, and has never been, any humane way by which the Zionists could achieve the goal of a Jewish settler colonial state. It is clear that all available means had to be used in order to overcome the presence of the Arab majority population in the country and their inevitable resistance to such a colonial project (Falk 2021). The dispossession of the Palestinian people has moreover continued steadily since the wake of the Nakba in 1947, and this ongoing process has, as mentioned, proven to be an essential part of the Israeli state-building process. Hence, the Nakba cannot be viewed as an isolated, past event, but exists as a structure (Falk 2021; Wolfe 1999; Robinson 2013).

The Nakba is moreover a clear example of the settler colonial strategy of *ethnic transfer*, which as previously described, is characterised by the forced deportation of native communities, either within or outside the territory claimed or controlled by the settler entity. Wolfe (2006) notes that the tendency of Palestinian expulsion has not been limited to exercise of force, as it was during the Nakba, but that there are also a number of additional strategies of elimination used, out of which assimilation into the Zionist entity is one (Sayegh 2012; Wolfe 2006; Salamanca et al. 2012).

Theo Goldberg (2008), however, considers the events of 1947-1948, and ever since, as a form of *ethnoracial purging*; the process of removing and evicting *almost* all those Palestinians identified from the land where the settler colonial polity was about to establish their dominance management regime. In comparison to ethnic cleansing, ethnoracial purging involves forcing a considerable percentage of group members out of the national territory, and so out of the moral imaginary, moving them further away and outside of national boundaries, more and more into enclosed enclaves, even within what is regarded as their own territory (Goldberg 2008: 35). In addition, as Wolfe (2006) has noted, a low number of Palestinians remaining have not, as in most settler colonial projects, been seen as an issue for the Zionists, as they have ceased to be native. Without their previous communities, they have instead become merely individuals.

Immediately after the Nakba, the settler community and its Zionist leadership adopted multiple measures to make sure that the displaced Palestinians could not return to their homes or to the country overall (Abu Hussein and McKay 2003). While those who remained in the West Bank and Gaza were put under Transjordanian and Egyptian

occupation respectively, those that remained in the territory controlled by the Israeli settler polity, i.e., those that the Zionists had failed to expel, were put under a military regime that came into effect in October 1948 (Pappé 2006; Weizman 2024). Palestinian life under military rule included harassment, physical abuse, detention in prison camps, looting of houses, confiscation of fields, desecration of holy places, and numerous restrictions violating basic human rights (Pappé 2006). In other words, the incompleteness of the ethnic cleansing of historic Palestine in 1947-1948 forced the settler colonial polity, at the time of establishing a dominance management regime, to experiment with new *settler technologies* of dispossession. The first of which, land confiscation and the connected ethnic transfer, was complemented with the gradual growth of a structural system of what Goldberg calls “compound discrimination”—an organised, all-encompassing web of discrimination that combines discriminatory policies in many different areas, such as municipal allocations, infrastructure, industrialisation, education, taxation, redistribution and social welfare, housing, employment practices, permit systems and movement restrictions (Goldberg 2008: 57, Korn 2008; Salamanca et al. 2012).

In other words, this compound discrimination constitutes a *matrix of control*, described by Halper, and other researchers with him, as a type of total, multilayered discrimination (Halper 2000: 14-16; Wildeman 2024). In practice, the matrix of control operates a series of mechanisms that together control, govern, manage and restrict every aspect of Palestinian life. It is a process that is more focused on control of native life than on physical territorial conquest. Halper (2000: 15) compares it to the Japanese game of Go: “instead of defeating your opponent as in chess, in Go you win by immobilising your opponent, by gaining control of key points of a matrix so that every time s/he moves s/he encounters an obstacle of some kind.”

This compound discrimination is further organised around what has been previously described as the strategy of transfer of racialisation, through which the native is classified as something clearly separate from the settler, such as non-white, colonised people (Veracini 2010). Goldberg connects this to the fact that the Zionist settler colonial polity claims its modernity—and as in the case of many other settler states, its liberal modernity—through racial articulation, a state defined by its contrast to the exogenous “other.” Thus, racial *palestinianisation* constitutes a settler colonialism that is underpinned by an accompanying moral eviction, where the settlement is extended by renomination, i.e., “the shrinkage of Palestinian proprietorship materialised in the disappearance of recognisable

titles”—the native is removed, and made homeless, also in a national sense (Goldberg 2008: 38-39).

The racial transfer that classifies the native as distinct from the settler is furthermore exemplified by what Tatour (see Cristiano et al. 2023) describes as the criminalisation of indigenous life. From the beginning of the state-building process, criminalising Palestinian existence was achieved by creating what Tatour (Ibid: 8) describes as:

[A] racial legal category of “infiltration”, which targeted Palestinians who became refugees and tried to return to their homes and villages. Those returnees became criminalised as infiltrators, invaders, and trespassers on their own land and in their homeland.

Ronit Lentin (2020), explains that these daily practices of exclusion and control, i.e., under the matrix of control, have created an exceptional, yet routine, *racialised regime*. This regime, according to Lentin, has constructed its hegemony along racial lines in two ways; firstly, through technologies and strategies controlling borders, immigration, citizenship, surveillance, and census categorisations; and secondly, through the creation of imaginary state narratives that relate to the history and memory of the settler state (Lentin 2020). Hawari, Weizman and Plonski (2018) similarly demonstrate that apart from the apparent violence that the Zionist settler regime produced, and still produces, it has also used countless modalities and liberal matrixes which has hidden the violence from plain sight and in turn normalised it. Just like Lentin, they point to the cultivation of a hegemony which controls how we see Palestine and Palestinians. They describe this hegemony as “key to the assemblage of material and discursive practices operating to erase and replace Palestine, on multiple front lines, in multiple places” (Hawari et al. 2018: 3).

In other words, by ethnically cleansing the majority of ex-Mandatory Palestine, the Zionist settler colonial project managed to make itself independent of its old colonial metropole, being the British Empire. Secondly, by creating a racialised regime based on the matrix of control, the settler colony also managed to develop beyond its independence in a way where power was, and still is, structured and maintained through exclusivist and discriminatory policies along liberal, yet racial, lines. Thus, the settler colonial project had developed into a *settler state*.

4.2 The “peace process” and its transformative strategies

The Israeli settler colonial project’s attempted transformation into a settler state put it in the company of like-minded liberal settler colonial states like United States, Canada and Australia. To the benefit of their image globally, these states are regularly described as liberal democracies instead of as settler colonial (Wildeman 2024). From its inception, Israel’s leaders understood that the legitimacy of the Zionist settler colonial project in the eyes of the West depended on the strategic deployment of liberal rhetoric, especially as there was “a willing identification between Western liberal discourse and Zionism” (Said 1979: 37). As Tatour (2021) notes, the alignment of Zionism with liberal ideals shaped the state-building process. One example is the construction of its citizenship regime. To secure international recognition and establish liberal credibility—something that would allow the newly founded state to join the collective of the “settler international”—Israel extended citizenship to a portion of the Palestinians who remained within its borders after 1948. This move, while framed as liberal inclusion, was inherently underpinned by colonial motives.

In fact, the regime was never intended to equalise the status of settlers and natives. Instead, it functioned as a tool of racial formation—producing citizenship and racial categories in tandem. Jewish settlers were positioned as natural, authentic citizens, entitled to near-automatic, semi-birthright citizenship. In contrast, Palestinian citizenship was framed as a benevolent concession by the state. In this way, Israel’s citizenship regime racialised political belonging: Jewish settlers were constructed as indigenous to the land, while Palestinians were (again) reimagined as exogenous “others” (Tatour 2021), all according to the enabling structures of so-called progressive liberal policies.

In addition to the image of liberal democracy trumping the one of settler colonialism, the Zionist imaginative geographies used especially during the first decades of the movement, also developed further. The narrative depicting Palestine as an empty desert and its population as backwards, unproductive and uncivilised Arabs, would with time evolve to a national narrative which included presenting the Palestinians as racist and inclined towards terrorism. This narrative, which Israel successfully made the West believe and often use themselves, ignored the fact that the Palestinians had been unjustly displaced, dispersed, and oppressed. Instead, it internalised the slogan attributed to the Arabs of “throwing the Jews into the sea.” Such an image inevitably led public opinion in the West to support and feel protective toward the infant Jewish state, especially considering the long overdue guilt that had arisen in the West after the Holocaust (Falk 2021: 285).

For almost two decades after the Nakba, it seemed like this Israeli settler strategy had worked, with Palestinian voices marginalised and far away from the international stage. It had been the other Arab nations who, quite unsuccessfully, represented Palestinian interests at an international level (Khalidi 2020), and apart from a failed peace agreement attempt in 1949, the UN and the international community had not made any serious attempts to initiate a peace process during this time (Pappé 2006). However, during the 1960s, several things would change. Firstly, the nature of Palestinian resistance had been evolving, especially among those Palestinians living in exile, with a strong focus on the Right of Return. As a result, Yassir Arafat and other Palestinian activists living in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the neighbouring Arab countries, founded the secular and non-ideologic Fatah, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, in 1965. Around the same time, the Arab League had founded the national umbrella front, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (hereinafter PLO). The PLO was rather quickly taken over by the refugee-based leaders of the Palestinian resistance in exile, and was henceforth led by Fatah (Hroub 2010; Khalidi 2020; Pappé 2006). As such, the Palestinians could, for the first time in decades, start speaking for themselves at the international stage. This was of course a setback for the Israelis, and not soon thereafter did the settler state try to connect the organisation and its leaders with terrorism and hatred, rather than a forgotten but just cause (Khalidi 2020).

Secondly, in 1967, war broke out between Israeli settler state and the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, as Egypt's leader Abdel Nasser was determined to win back Palestine. The war was, however, over in only six days, with the defeat of the Arab armies, and by the end of the war the settler entity had occupied Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem (henceforth referred to as the occupied Palestinian territories, or oPt), the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights (Hinchcliffe and Milton-Edwards 2004). Thirdly, following the war and the possible annexation of all of ex-Mandatory Palestine, the international community finally attempted at initiating another peace process (Pappé 2006).

Nevertheless, as none of the international interventions actually managed to improve the situation on the ground for the Palestinians, tensions would grow. By the mid-1980s, the PLO tried to improve its chances of regaining the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by relinquishing its long-term goal of liberating (all of) Palestine. Thus, the organisation recognised Israel and its “right to exist,” and moved away from armed struggle as its main strategy (Hroub 2010). Yet, tensions continued to grow, and a spontaneous and popular uprising broke out in December, 1987 (Naser-Najjab 2020). The uprising, called the *First*

Intifada, was a popular, mostly non-violent movement, that Israel met with extreme force. Its eruption was so spontaneous that it even surprised the PLO leadership in Tunis. According to Nadia Naser-Najjab (2020: 62), it “reconfigured Palestinian-Israeli relations, transformed internal Palestinian political arrangements and fundamentally altered the perceptions that international observers had of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” Thus, the First Intifada proved to be an incentive for both the PLO and the Israeli settler state to meet in direct negotiations. The time for a new Middle East peace process, with the West emerging out of the Cold War, seemed to be perfect (Wildeman 2024).

By the end of the 1980s, a new political movement had formed. Hamas (meaning the Islamic Resistance Movement) emerged as a doubly driven religious-nationalist liberation movement which preached the Islamic religious call while simultaneously embracing the strategy of armed struggle against the occupying power. Hamas, as an organisation, has to be understood as a part of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which has Islamisation of society as its primary goal. The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was established in Jerusalem already in the 1940s, but started gaining strength in the two decades following the 1967 war, and on the eve of the First Intifada, it decided to “undertake a major transformation within the movement [...] with the specific mission of confronting the Israeli occupation” (Hroub 2010: 9; Lamott Hill and Plitnick 2021).

As such, Hamas came to take off where PLO had left off, salvaging the Palestinian liberation struggle from a complete capitulation to the Israeli settler state. Naturally, Hamas also rejected the outcome of the peace negotiations (Hroub 2010; Bhungalia 2023), which nonetheless resulted in the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (hereinafter referred to as Oslo Accord I) in September, 1993. The agreement meant that the Palestinians could establish the Palestinian Authority (the PA), a semi-autonomous governing body, in the oPt, and outlined the principles which would guide its cooperation with the Israelis during an interim period. After the interim period, which was set at six years, direct peace talks (known as Camp David) were supposed to occur, aimed at resolving “final status” issues such as borders, the Right of Return, Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the oPt. Two years later, the Oslo II agreement was signed, which established the basis for the implementation of Oslo I (Naser-Najjab 2020).

In practice, this deeply flawed agreement divided the West Bank and Gaza Strip into three areas: A, B and C. This division stands until today, under which Area A is under Palestinian control in both administration and security—although the PA is coordinating “security issues” with the Israelis—and Area B is controlled by Israel militarily and Palestine administratively. Area C, which covers most of the territory, is still controlled by the Israeli settler polity completely (Amnesty International 2017; Times of Israel 2020; Hinchcliffe and Milton-Edwards 2004; Salamanca et al. 2012; Naser-Najjab 2020). This division has transformed Palestinian communities and towns into “semiautonomous cantons” that are cut off from each other and surrounded by settlements, security zones, military installations and separation barriers (Haddad 2020; Wildeman 2024). In reality, the PA’s control is severely limited while the settler polity continues to act with total impunity all over the West Bank (Dabed 2021). Hence, this emerges as a clear example of how the liberal matrix of control, through its administrative practices, can lend a benevolent face to control and occupation. While in reality, it can only be sustained by military power.

The structure of control without (complete) territorial conquest means that the settler colonial polity needs a Palestinian state, but it needs it to be a weak and dependent one. Since the Six-Day War, the settler state’s main issue has been that it wants the land, but not the people living on it. Annexing the territories occupied in 1967 would in practice mean absorbing the Palestinian population, and thus disrupting the demographic majority it had achieved as a result of 1948 (Erakat 2019). Therefore, the settler colonial polity allowed for the establishment of a Palestinian state authority, which can grant citizenship to all Palestinians living on occupied territory and thus separate them from the idea of an Israeli liberal democracy. However, if the Palestinian state is strong and independent, the settler polity cannot exert control over the entire country, with its settlements, natural resources and borders (Halper 2000). In other words, the settler state can only claim to be a liberal democracy if it removes the native population from its direct control and population economy. Instead, it will continue to control native life *indirectly*, through the use of liberal matrixes of control.

One way for the Israeli settler entity to achieve this, has been by applying what has previously been described as the strategy of diplomatic and non-diplomatic transfer. Meaning that native people are subject to sovereign or semi-sovereign political bodies that remain inside the territory that settler groups control. As the governance apparatus post-Oslo has expanded the reach of Israel's security regime through “self-rule” institutions

while simultaneously undermining and impeding collective modes of politics and political mobilisation (Bhungalia 2023), the PA can be categorised as a semi-sovereign entity. Especially in the West Bank, where the Zionist settler polity still retains ultimate control over, *inter alia*, natural resources. At the same time, there is also a non-diplomatic transfer happening in Gaza, as the settler entity retains the control over the area but seemingly denies its responsibility over it. Indeed, the Zionist movement, and later on the Israeli settler state, has used and developed quite novel legal strategies in order to maintain its control over native life. The settler polity has claimed that the lack of a sovereign in the territories means that the situation is *sui generis*, or “exceptional” as a matter of law (Erakat 2019).

4.2.1 Criminalisation and the politics of intensification

After the planned Camp David negotiations had collapsed, another uprising broke out in year 2000, which lasted for five years. In comparison to the First Intifada, which according to Naser-Najjab (2020: 64) “was predominantly peaceful, the *Second Intifada* [or *al-Aqsa Intifada*] was violent.” Instead of facing demonstrators armed mainly with rocks, the settler polity was for the first time confronted with Palestinians that bore firearms and wore uniforms. The response to the militarised Second Intifada meant an overall intensification of the matrix in of control, and its use of force, in the oPt. As George E. Bisharat (2013: 73) explains, it provided the settler state with the cover to “flex its overwhelming military advantage over the Palestinians, including the use of F-16s, attack helicopters, and other technologies typically employed only against opposing armies.”

Moreover, as a continuation of its *sui generis* approach, Israel started to claim that it was engaging in an armed conflict “*short of war*” (Erakat 2019: 179). Not declaring it as a war, neither as civil war (defined as a non-international armed conflict), nor a war against a liberation movement (defined as an international armed conflict), meant that Israel was trying to assert its right to use lethal force while simultaneously denying the Palestinians the same right. For if the settler state would recognise its confrontation with the Palestinians as a non-international conflict, it would effectively “unravel the false partition separating Israel from the oPt” which in practice would “acknowledge Israel’s maintenance of a singular, discriminatory government, thus exposing it to more pointed claims of pursuing a policy of creeping annexation and overseeing an apartheid regime” (Ibid: 179). At the same time, if it would recognise the confrontation as an international armed conflict, it

would mean that it also recognised the right of the Palestinians to use force in pursuit of self-determination (Erakat 2019).

Following the Second Intifada, and in the wake of a global rise in reference to a “war on terror,” the settler state pivoted to use the language of “terror” when referring to Palestinian armed struggle, which effectively expanded its right (or what it claimed to be its right) to use lethal force. As it did not recognise that the Palestinian people represent an embryonic sovereign, it insisted that any Palestinian use of force is terroristic and criminal. And even though the settler state had assassinated Palestinian political leaders and military commanders for decades, it now started to take responsibility for the attacks publicly, vowing to attack anyone that threatened the security of the settler population (Bisharat 2013; Erakat 2019). Bisharat (2013) points to the fact that this shift represented a new phase in what he refers to as Israeli “legal entrepreneurialism,” as it was more institutionalised and persistent than before. The settler polity’s ability to produce legal innovations is furthermore what makes its policies unique, compared to other states who are trying to escape the bounds of law. Ultimately, this type of legal innovation stands as a supreme example of the new forms of oppression and occupation methods that are required in an endocolonial environment marked by permanent war—or as the settler state would word it, permanent “almost war.”

Yet, the Second Intifada, together with Hamas’s subsequent activities aimed at supporting the poor and marginalised in Palestinian society, gave the movement more power and influence in regards to its “resistance project.” With its increased popularity, Hamas decided to participate in the municipal and legislative elections of 2005 and 2006 respectively. Moving towards the top of the Palestinian leadership, the movement decided to put its military activities on ice for an unspecified amount of time, and it also considered joining the PLO. Even though Hamas won both elections, the movement’s trajectory would nonetheless change, as both Fatah and international actors such as the U.S. and the EU refused to accept that Fatah had lost to what they referred to as a terrorist organisation. This led to further fragmentation of the oPt, as the PA remained in control in the West Bank, now without any real legitimacy, while Hamas took power in Gaza, something that led Israel to further intensify its movement restrictions on the Strip (Hroub 2010; Wildeman 2024; Lamott Hill and Plitnick 2021). In effect, this weakening of the PA—ultimately a supreme example of the colonial practice of divide-and-conquer—was beneficial for the settler entity in its aim to stifle any Palestinian attempt to achieve sovereignty.

By 2008, Gaza faced yet another wave of intensified colonial violence, as the Israeli settler state attacked the Strip. This time, it was trying to transform the interpretation of what constitutes legitimate targets during combat. As Israeli military spokesman at the time Captain Benjamin Rutland explained: “Our definition is that anyone who is involved with terrorism within Hamas is a valid target” (Bisharat 2013: 76). For example, this approach led Israel to bomb and kill around 250 civilian policemen that were not engaged in fighting. Despite such deliberate killings being considered war crimes according to international law, Israel made clear that all employees of the Hamas-led government in the Gaza Strip would be treated as “terrorists,” and thus legitimate targets for liquidation (Ibid).

The interpretation of who can be considered a “terrorist” or “supporting terrorism” is closely intertwined to the process of criminalisation, as the following chapters will exemplify. While Alina Korn (2008) claims that the settler strategy of indigenous incarceration and criminalisation was the most common in Israel before the Oslo Peace process, when thousands of Palestinians were jailed each year for violating the military regulations that they lived under, its overall pattern of control has changed since then. The number of Palestinians held in prisons started to decline after Oslo, while the restrictions affecting Palestinian dwelling places increased, turning them into fragmented population reserves. In other words, imprisonment in Israel was replaced with “ghettoization” in Palestine (Korn 2008: 119). However, while the total number of imprisoned Palestinians was going down for a number of years, the number of Palestinians held under administrative detention, which allows for detainees to be held without charge or trial based on “secret information” for an indefinite time, has been going up (Addameer 2022; B’Tselem 2021). Mass arrests have also increased recently, with almost 2,000 Palestinians being arrested between April and May alone in 2021 (Addameer 2021), and more than 7,000 in the West Bank between 2023 and 2024, with about half being kept under administrative detention (Nashed 2024). But more than anything, it is the main targets of the intensified criminalisation campaigns that have changed. As this research demonstrates, there is a fluidity between criminalising and incarcerating Palestinians at an individual level, and criminalising Palestinian civil society organisations.

Tatour importantly points out that while this type of criminalisation and incarceration is meant to affect a whole (native) population, it does so by operating through individual mechanisms of prosecution. Hence, the liberal nature of these mechanisms aims to separate the cases of incarceration from each other, making it more difficult to notice the settler

state's purposeful use of collective punishment against the native population. The impact of mass incarceration on Palestinian families, communities, and society is severe, and it has, according to Tatour, always been driven by the fact that Palestinians, as natives, are inherently perceived as a threat to the settler colonial state (see Tatour and Tatour 2023; Cristiano et al. 2023). Thus, the act of criminalisation cannot be separated from the settler colonial logic of elimination.

The Israeli settler state's constant intensification of the oppressive and discriminatory practices within the matrix of control must be understood as characterised by a process where each wave of Palestinian resistance has been met by an intensification of the Zionist settler colonial strategies. The Six-Day War and the subsequent occupation of the remaining parts of historic Palestine, which meant a shift from exocolonisation (outwardly driven) to endocolonisation (turning inwards once the outer borders of the territory are reached), marks the start of this policy, which I refer to as the *politics of intensification*. In practice, the strategies that first were used as part of the occupation policy, and which were characterised by increased collective punishment, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture, would later on be expanded and intensified further, every time as a response to a new wave of Palestinian resistance. In addition to increasing instances of collective punishment and mass arrests, the politics of intensification meant that the First Intifada was followed by an expansion of movement restrictions through the use of military checkpoints, while the Second Intifada was met with the construction of the Separation Wall in the West Bank. The Wall came to further restrict the movement of Palestinians, and helped the settler polity to confiscate more land and separated Palestinian cities, towns and villages from each other (Addameer 2024).

4.2.2 Development aid and professionalisation as settler colonial tools

In effect, the intensification of settler strategies targeting Palestinians combined with multiple waves of Palestinian resistance and ultimately the signing of the Oslo Accords, at a time when the international community was redefining its development framework according to the liberal democratic paradigm, meant that the implementation of a “peacebuilding” agenda in the oPt started gaining more and more ground internationally in the beginning of the 1990s. Despite this, the development model designed for Palestine by Western policymakers in 1993 was ignorant of the settler colonial context in the country (Wildeman 2024). As a result, developmental aid started to flood the West Bank and Gaza

Strip post-Oslo with the ambiguous task of promoting “peacebuilding” through “society wide transformation” (Keelan and Browne 2020).

In effect, Western donors assumed the role of “developing” local Palestinian partners and preparing them for (some sort of) statehood, often involving projects focused on “capacity building,” “good governance” and the promotion of capitalist institutions (Paris 2011; Keelan and Browne 2020; Wildeman 2024). As Wildeman (2024: 202) explains, the approach assumed that “Western ‘experts’ can provide necessary oversight to re-develop Palestinian state and society, as though the Palestinians are uniquely less capable than other peoples in countries like Kuwait, the United States, or Romania.” By itself, this form of liberal peacebuilding can be seen as presenting a modern version of the old *mission civilisatrice*, now often represented by NGOs and local government officials (Paris 2011; Keelan and Browne 2020). Yet, some researchers also opine that the high level of international funds to the new Palestinian government and the increasing number of civil society actors merely worked as a way to “buy consensus” to the detrimental Oslo agreement (Allen 2013: 7; Haddad 2022).

Conversely, the peacebuilding agenda has been used by the Israeli settler polity as one of the main tools of colonial control in the oPt, both through policing the Palestinian people and by giving the settler state a number of advantages and opportunities in its aim to further the settler colonial project (Bahdi and Kassis 2016). Therefore, the “peace process” and the Oslo agreement must be understood as yet another shift of settler colonial tactics, where a number of new colonial practices could be institutionalised. As Naser-Najjab (2020: 67) points out, “peace does not therefore mark the termination of colonial relations but instead enables them to take a different form.” In fact, as long as the settler polity has failed to realise the “triumph” of the settler project (i.e., the elimination of the native), it will adapt its strategies to respond to current forms of ongoing resistance. As Fanon (1963: 136), explains: “The enemy, in fact, changes his tactics. At opportune moments he combines his policy of brutal repression with spectacular gestures of friendship [and] manoeuvres calculated to sow division.”

The peacebuilding framework post-Oslo worked according to the liberal theory that if “both Israelis and Palestinians were to have a liberal democracy, they would realise they have more to gain working together peacefully than in conflict” (Wildeman 2024: 200). This disposition has helped the Israeli settler state to spread and maintain the idea that it is naturally predisposed to peace, precisely because it is a liberal (settler) state, something

that connects it to both former European colonial metropolises such as the United Kingdom, and settler states like the U.S. Therefore, the broader problem of the “conflict” has been assumed to be the “less developed” Arab population (Ibid), something that in turn has allowed for an increased focus on containing the Palestinians and providing security for the settler polity, while at the same time claiming to support democratisation and access to free markets.

According to Turner (2012), this condition can be described as a dual process, compromising an assemblage of colonial practices, where the processes of exploitation/domination and development/modernisation run in parallel. Ultimately, these processes do not create anything but a colonial form of “peace.” In Palestine, this dual process started with several waves of transformation that Palestinian civil society has gone through in the last century. The latest transformation started to occur during the Oslo years in the early 1990s. Pre-Oslo, which marks the time before the global turn for civil society, Palestinian civil society was characterised by grassroots-based, mass movements, deeply connected to the resistance movement and embedded through a mixed representative leadership, filling the vacuum found after the banning of Palestinian political parties in 1967 (Jad 2007; Perugini and Gordon 2015). Intrinsically, these organisations and movements can be identified as uncoercive civil society actors within the organic segment of civil society. However, the high levels of international aid post-Oslo meant that the earlier mass movements turned into a professionalised civil society with increased external interventions, staffed by a new, urban professional elite. In this neoliberal version of civil society, typically made up of NGOs as “tamed” social movements—and thus also coercive in its nature—many of the most capable sections of the liberation movement became institutionally embedded in various organisations focusing on human rights, health, agriculture, women’s, children’s and governance. These projects tend to operate in isolation from the general context (Haddad 2016; Jad 2007), and are often described as effective “partners for peace.” Intrinsically, the “radical social visions” of the former resistance movement have in most cases been altered, even if a few activists have managed to cling to previous collectivist ideals (Allen 2013). Unfortunately, this meant that these new elites became heavily dependent on the hierarchical channels of aid for their livelihoods and futures alike (Turner 2014; Dana 2014).

In reality, this also meant that many development projects became mere “cash cows.” Always donor-driven and taken on mainly to “garner international funds rather than to serve

the Palestinian people according to a locally relevant agenda of priorities” (Allen 2013: 67). As such, the aid industry keeps on rolling out projects, funds and jobs without managing to actually end the occupation or its abuses, while the settler polity has continued to implement colonial practices such as extracting and controlling Palestinian resources and expanding settlements on Palestinian land (Turner 2012; Bhungalia 2023). In other words, the previously grassroots-based Palestinian civil society organisations became professionalised actors in a rent-based aid industry, with a *raison d’être* referred to by Palestinians as *dakakin*—“money-making corner shops” (Allen 2013: 7; UNESCWA 2022).

4.2.3 Enabling and sustaining occupation

The specific assemblage of colonial practices, constituted on the basis of the inner logic of colonialism and organised around racial domination and access to resources, is key to understanding the Israeli settler state’s transformation of the native/settler divide in relation to development aid and a shrinking space for civil society. In fact, the peace process and the signing of the Oslo Accords represented a change in the dominating logic of Zionist settler colonialism, referred to by Khoury (2021), as the *logic of constitution*. Although the settler polity evidently recognised Palestinian peoplehood through the mutual letters of recognition in 1993, the recognition was only a constitutive one. It was constitutive in the sense that, to the settler polity, the Palestinian people continued to only exist within the ideological confines of the “peace process.” Outside these confines, the same old policing strategies of containment, control and erasure, still existed. The constitutive recognition of Palestinian peoplehood however meant that those policing strategies could be expanded and updated to include not only the settler polity, but also other actors who participated in the peacebuilding agenda, such as civil society organisations, NGOs, international organisations and ultimately the PA itself, who now had to self-police its own narrative to prove itself worthy of statehood.

Apart from the transformation of civil society, the creation of the PA has played a central role in the effective settler colonial strategy to reshape the power relation between coloniser and colonised. Through what Dabed (2021) calls a model of “indirect rule regime,” the Palestinian leadership has first of all primarily used the PA as an instrument to consolidate its power, as the “good governance” approach adopted by the authority has no more than resulted in authoritarian tendencies and more repression of the Palestinian people.

Moreover, the “indirect rule regime” means that the PA reproduces several of the main colonial strategies deployed by the settler polity in Palestine, such as the non-sovereign status of Palestinians and the division of the colonised and occupied population into social groups with different legal statuses (e.g., Palestinians living in historic Palestine versus those living in the oPt, or even in exile) (Dabed 2021).

The PLO, historically based outside the oPt and representing all Palestinians, including those living in exile, as compared to the PA, would realistically be more difficult for the settler polity to control. Therefore, the establishment of the PA, as a clear example of the implementation of the settler colonial strategy of a non-diplomatic transfer, has played an important role for the sustainability of the occupation and colonisation since it in reality meant that the PLO’s decision-making power was decreased and transferred to the PA (Fatafta and Tartir 2020). By itself, the structures and complexities brought about by the Oslo years, have ultimately turned the PA itself into an obstacle in the fight against occupation and colonial rule in Palestine (Dabed 2021; Tartir 2015). The logic of constitution combined with increased levels of international intervention, development aid and a professionalised civil society has not only meant a weakened national resistance movement (Turner 2014) but has also offered a number of strategic opportunities for the settler polity in its progression towards the triumph of the settler colonial project and the erasure of the native.

The detrimental arrangements put in place by the Oslo Accords, including the 1994 Protocol on Economic Relations which formalised economic relations between the settler polity and the Palestinian population, has created a structure of an “indirect rule regime” also in the economic sphere. Through a skewed customs union that favors the stronger settler economy and gives the Palestinian economy little space to develop and become independent (Fatafta and Tartir 2020; UNESCWA 2022), the Palestinian economy has been choked under the matrix of control. As such, the Israeli settler colonial entity has created a number of mechanisms and “rents” that ensure compliance with the settler polity’s security priorities and undermine the development of an independent Palestinian economy. In turn, the Palestinian economy has become completely dependent on and incorporated into the Israeli settler economy (Taghdisi-Rad 2014; Korn 2008; Goldberg 2008), which in turn has created a complete dependency on international aid post-Oslo as well as an erosion of the PA’s legitimacy (Tartir 2015; Keelan and Browne 2020; Taghdisi-Rad 2014). This while the high influx of aid at the same time further helped to cement the PA’s position as the de

facto Palestinian representative, especially in terms of the “peace process” (Fatafta and Tartir 2020). While the dependency on international aid has resulted in socio-economic stagnation for Palestinians (Fatafta and Tartir 2020; Keelan and Browne 2020), it also means that a decrease or discontinuation of development aid in Palestine would have severe consequences to the fragile Palestinian economy (Wildeman 2024).

Additionally, development aid covers many of the costs of the occupation in the oPt. One way it does this, is by taking on the responsibility to rebuild the infrastructure Israel continuously destroys. Another way in which development aid is covering the costs of the occupation, is by supporting the delivery of services to the Palestinian population (UN News 2024c). Since an occupying power is obliged under international law to maintain infrastructure as well as services for the civilian occupied population, this means that development initiatives are relieving the occupying settler state of its obligations under international law,⁵ making the occupation more sustainable.

Moreover, development projects implemented by international and local Palestinian partners have a tendency to create “facts on the ground” (meaning the situation in reality as opposed to the abstract) which in turn aid the settler polity in its aim in controlling every facet of indigenous life, by cementing occupation structures and allowing for the expansion of settler colonial practices. If we take as an example, the physical development of road infrastructure projects that aim to make the life of Palestinians more bearable by bypassing illegal settlements and roads to which Palestinians have no access. These projects do, even if unintentionally, take into account settler architecture and adapt to it accordingly. Ultimately, this means that they contribute to the creation of more settler footholds, that are part of the settler colonial architecture and its logic of territorial expansion in the oPt (Bahdi and Kassis 2016).

Development aid within the peacebuilding agenda also means that development workers are solicited into the Israeli settler colonial entity’s security agenda without any additional costs to the settler polity, as donors prohibit any development aid to be received or implemented by individuals or organisations on UN and EU designated terrorist lists (Bahdi and Kassis 2016).

⁵ The Fourth Geneva Convention imposes an obligation on the occupying power to ensure services such as food and medical supplies for the occupied population, while the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977) prohibits the destruction of infrastructure.

This stands as a supreme example of how development work is manipulated by the settler polity through the control of narratives—i.e., who is labelled a “terrorist” and not. Scholars and activists alike have long expressed concern about Palestinian civil society’s reliance on Western conditional financing, as the largest and most powerful component of civil society, despite everything, still continues to rely on foreign aid, thereby placing various restrictions on the activities of civil society actors due to it being heavily politically and ideologically conditional (Dana 2020). Restrictions, especially for “security reasons”, are closely intertwined with the criminalisation process, and in order for the settler polity to utilise, and even exacerbate, the asymmetrical relationship between Palestinian civil society actors and Western donors, it must construct and disseminate narratives that depict Palestinian organisations as unreliable or unworthy “partners for peace.”

Sequentially, Allen (2013) describes the donor-recipient relationship itself as a form of soft colonialism. More than anything, the relationship is typically dictated by foreign donors and based on political goals, which means that it ultimately is coercive. In Palestine, the political goals of donors have been to fund and sponsor a paradigm aimed at establishing a monopoly of violence in the security sphere, i.e., through security coordination with the settler polity, as well as a neoliberal agenda in the economic sphere (Tartir 2015). In the end, this is possible because international donors have taken a decontextualised “business-as-usual” approach towards humanitarian and development intervention in the territories, while also purposefully contributing to Palestine’s increasing reliance on foreign aid. According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the reason why Western governments are unwilling to confront the underlying causes of Palestinian oppression and suffering is because they continuously prioritise Israel’s territorial claims, security demands, and their own political objectives over the application of international law in Palestine. Foreign intervention in Palestine has failed to be implemented with a human rights-based approach which prioritises the right to self-determination (UNESCWA 2022).

But while this is an example of the colonial condition in Palestine which continually tightens and expands its control over the colonised subject, it is also a dynamic that contains less controlled spaces which can be used for resistance and refusal. According to Reem Bahdi and Mudar Kassis (2016: 2013), one of those spaces is the “reshaping of donor states’ political horizons,” where the settler polity is already trying to rebrand itself through the creation of a narrative around the “peace process,” development aid and capacity building

to turn the attention away from the occupation and its colonial reality. This has been further exemplified by the Israeli settler state's efforts to steer the world's attention towards the peace process as a way to hide the realities on the ground (Halper 2000) and to fragment both the Palestinian leadership and the Palestinian territories.

Logically, participating in development aid programs has become problematic for many development and civil society actors that are critical voices of these interventions. Participating on the terms set by donors and the international community means contributing to the reproduction of neo-colonial structures of control, while not participating means that the same space can easily be occupied by those development and civil society actors that are not critical or especially committed to the end of colonisation in Palestine (Bahdi and Kassis 2016). As such, this tension has become a key issue for Palestinian civil society organisations, and it ultimately is an expression of a weakness that the Israeli settler state can utilise for its own advantage.

4.3 Conclusion

In the beginning of this chapter, I examined the emerging Zionist movement and its early settler colonial project in Palestine. It was described how the initial project eventually established itself as a liberal settler state. This, all according to the practical program developed by the Zionist movement, was made possible with the support of the British Empire and at the expense of the Palestinian population, which was ethnically cleansed, displaced and dispossessed during the 1948 Nakba. The following trajectory of the settler colonial project was, however, shaped by the fact that the Zionists failed to expel all of the Palestinians, which made the final "triumph" of the settler project all the more difficult to achieve.

Since then, the Israeli settler colonial polity in historic Palestine has deployed a large number of discriminatory strategies and practices which have become so all-encompassing and cover so many aspects of Palestinian life, that they have been described as a complete matrix of control. Through this matrix of control, the settler colonial polity is distinguishing itself from the native, who becomes an exogenous "other", through the usage of technologies that control borders, citizenship and surveillance. As a result, the anticolonial struggle is ongoing, and every new wave of Palestinian resistance has led the Israeli settler state to expand and intensify the settler colonial strategies that control, and aims to eliminate, native life.

The role of the Oslo Accords and the following peacebuilding agenda, with its adjoining development activities and neoliberal economic approach, has been key to the continuation of the settler colonial project in the oPt, with expanding settlements, land grabs and ethnic cleansing. As such, it has led to another shift in the settler colonial tactics, where development interventions marked by coercive agendas and forced professionalisation of civil society, are directly contributing to the compounded discrimination under the matrix of control, through what can be seen as a “colonial peace” paradigm. The following chapter will describe and exemplify how the transformed role of civil society has presented the settler colonial state with an excellent opportunity to expand its control and further its efforts to eliminate and erase all segments of the Palestinian society that still opposes the settler colonial project in historic Palestine, by utilising one specific key point in the matrix of control: the role of settler narratives.

Chapter 5. Theme 1: The Battle of Narratives

This chapter will explain and critically examine the construction and use of settler narratives, highlighting their advantages in weakening native resistance and legitimising the settler colonial project, especially in a context marked by the “colonial peace” paradigm. The chapter will demonstrate how these two outcomes are achieved by systematically ascribing specific negative characteristics to the Palestinian population in general, and especially groups and organisations that are actively opposing occupation and settler colonialism, through the application of conceptual and narrative transfers. As such, the chapter sets out to analyse how and why settler narratives have become a key feature in the Israeli government’s strategy to target and silence Palestinian civil society actors. In addition, it outlines how this strategy has gained considerable ground since the start of the Global War on Terror (hereinafter GWOT) and its drastic increase in counterterrorism legislation globally.⁶

5.1 A spearheaded terrorist narrative

As described in Chapter 4, the continuing effects of the liberal peacebuilding framework, with an almost completely dependent Palestinian economy and an increased reliance on conditional development aid, has contributed to a decreased sense of legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership as viewed by the vast amount of the Palestinian population (Tartir 2015; Turner 2012). The “colonial peace” paradigm has created a void of political leadership in Palestine, which in turn has led to a parallel crucial shift, where more reliance has been put on civil society, shifting the emphasis away from the government and governing elites, those who were considered principal agents of historical change. Consequently, critical sections of Palestinian civil society have increasingly used their agency to wage a “war of legitimacy” aimed to regain control over the discourse relating to human rights and international law in the oPt (Falk 2017: 45-46). This is what the Israeli settler state and other Zionist thinkers have referred to as the “delegitimisation project” (Aked 2023: 51). What this indicates is that civil society has, since the Second Intifada, been the last frontier of Palestinian society that still actively fights against occupation and colonialism (Khalidi 2020; Lund 2023).

⁶ Commentary from the chapter also informs the analysis and conclusions presented in the article “Settler-colonial theory and the erasure of the other: constructing hegemonic narratives” which was based on this research and published in *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* in October, 2023.

This war of legitimacy has in turn posed a threat to the settler polity's narrative production and dissemination, causing it to intensify its efforts to delegitimise Palestinian civil society, through a type of "counter-delegitimation" (Aked 2023: 117). The idea of a "narrative battle" between the coloniser and the colonised is within itself not unique nor novel, as narrative and conceptual transfers are cornerstones of settler colonialism's dehumanisation of native populations in its attempt to legitimise the settler colonial project itself. In a colonial relationship, the coloniser routinely desires to mimic the colonised. One way to do so, according to Perugini and Gordon (2015: 120), is by "displacing Palestinian history and geography and replacing it with a Zionist imaginary." The logic of elimination, the desire to destroy and replace the native society, therefore also applies to control and erasure of native history, narratives and imaginaries, and not solely to territorial conquest and control over bodies and resources. To mimic the native can be described as an inversion, whereby the settler sees itself as the native, and should be understood from a settler colonial perspective as being an attempt to mitigate the very presence of the (actual) native, something that ultimately constitutes a threat to the settler polity (Perugini and Gordon 2015; Salamanca et al. 2012). In other words, the settler polity seeks legitimacy for its actions to eliminate and erase while at the same time delegitimising the Palestinian struggle and resistance (Bradley 2020).

Therefore, the shift towards portraying the Israeli settler state's use of extreme force during the Second Intifada as merely "fighting terrorism"—in effect, an expression of the institutionalised new phase of Israeli "legal entrepreneurialism"—also reflected the settler colonial state's growing perception of Palestinians and the Palestinian struggle as a threat to the expansionist trajectory of the settler project itself (Bisharat 2013). As earlier mentioned, following the Second Intifada, the Israeli settler state has grown even more insistent in its claim that any use of force by the Palestinians is "terroristic" and criminal. As a result, the Israeli national narrative has expanded. While it first shifted from depicting Palestine as an empty desert and its inhabitants—the exogenous "others"—as "uncivilised Arabs," to labelling Palestinian political parties and the Palestinian leadership "terrorists," the efforts to delegitimise and criminalise are now directed at any Palestinian actor who opposes the settler colonial trajectory as it advances toward its ultimate "triumph," whether through peaceful or violent means, or whether carried out by the military wing of Palestinian political parties or internationally funded civil society organisations (Halper 2021; Masalha 2012; Khalidi 2020; Falk 2021).

By constructing and disseminating these settler narratives, the Israeli settler state seeks to discredit targeted organisations through guilt by association. At the same time, it attempts to divert attention from the ongoing “war of legitimacy,” which, in reality, is intensifying the documentation of—and criticism against—the state’s escalating oppression of the native Palestinian population. Ultimately, the goal is to silence Palestinian civil society actors or, at the very least, to increase their self-censorship, thereby suppressing the dissemination of the Palestinian—or native—narrative. This was a common theme that was noted across a number of respondents during interviews. As R15 explained, there are three primary types of settler narratives used in this delegitimisation process, two of which are particularly prominent today:

They use three labels: antisemitism, terrorism and corruption. The terrorism term is used more, because corruption is more difficult to prove. You know, these Palestinian NGOs are heavily monitored by the donors and scrutinised [...]. If you claim there's corruption, you need to provide evidence. But with antisemitism it's different. Palestinians in general, historically, even like in the 1950s, the language was never antisemitic. [...] The Palestinian national movement in the early 1930s and 1940s, always distinguished between Jews and Zionists. [...] So, with terrorism it's easier for them because, if they say: “Oh, he appeared on this”, for example, or: “You invited a representative of a terrorist group to your workshop”, [...] then you have this connection with terrorism. It's loose, and it's difficult to defend yourself against that.

The data presented highlights the growing malleability of narrative transfers by Israeli state institutions and Zionist intellectuals since the Second Intifada. Although the prominence of the “terrorist” narrative has intensified in the 21st century, efforts to institutionalise its use can be traced back as early as the 1970s. Bhungalia (2023: 31–32) describes how the Jonathan Institute—an Israeli think tank founded in 1976 by current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and closely tied to the Israeli government from its inception—organised two international conferences on terrorism during the late 1970s and 1980s:

[T]he first conference in Jerusalem was explicitly framed as an “intervention to change the international discourse on terrorism” positing it as a direct assault on “civilisation,” “democracies,” and “the West” and arguably fuelled by the Soviet Union and Arab states, respectively. [...] Conference speakers, who included a

number of prominent Israeli military and governmental leaders, including then Prime Minister Menachem Begin, promulgated a discourse that explicitly linked modern terrorism to the conjoined forces of “communist totalitarianism” and “Islamic (and Arab) radicalism,” as Benjamin Netanyahu would argue in his 1986 book, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*.

In actuality, the reason the “terrorist” narrative did not acquire considerable traction, at least globally, until some 25 years after these conferences were originally held, was due in part to the fact that the Second Intifada coincided with the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. According to R20, the timing of 9/11 is critical for understanding the increased use of the “terrorist” framing:

To prove that you are a terrorist or supporting terror is very easy. You don't have to go into details [...] After 9/11, this whole notion of anti-terror became a major one. Now you do not have to prove that an organisation is a terrorist entity, you just have to label it, to name it, or say that you have secret information about these links, and that is enough.

The attacks in 2001 marked the start of the U.S.’s war on terrorism, which quickly transformed into the GWOT (Halper 2015; Aked, Jones and Miller 2019). Indeed, the possible political benefits of the 9/11 attacks were immediately recognised by the Israeli government. When asked about its effect on bilateral relations on American television in 2001, Netanyahu said it was “very good.” However, he quickly caught himself. “Well, not very good, but it will generate immediate sympathy,” he said, as he believed that the attack might strengthen the bond between Israel and the U.S., as the American people had now “experienced a massive haemorrhaging of terror” (Loewenstein 2011). The message was undeniable: “We have been fighting a war on terror since our birth. We’ll show you how it’s done” (Loewenstein 2023: 58).

Thus, the long-lasting process of narrative transfer in Palestine was undoubtedly altered by 9/11 and the GWOT that followed, which in particular succeeded in accelerating the “terrorist” framing. Immediately after the attacks, the American government hurried to construct a narrative around the events of 9/11 that would build popular support for the GWOT. While U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell invoked the idea early on that terrorists were “attacking civilisation,” President George W. Bush said that “a ground of barbarians has declared war.” In contrast, the West was described as being guided by “civilised values”

(Llorente 2002: 39-40). In effect, these narratives meant that people of the East were, again, constructed in the image of the exogenous “other.” Within the first four years following 9/11, the United States detained over 80,000 people worldwide without charge or conviction using a variety of discriminatory tactics including stop-and-search, surveillance, intelligence collecting, pre-emptive detention, and the use of so-called “secret information” (Halper 2015). Subsequently, many countries followed suit. Within a decade, more than 140 countries worldwide had enacted or reformed their national counterterrorism laws. As such, the proliferation of new anti-terrorism measures is one of the most dramatic legal developments in the last century that has severe consequences for civil liberties worldwide (Human Rights Watch 2012). In other words, the GWOT has meant a global shift towards militarised securitisation.

On the official website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024b), the Israeli state has described the Hamas attack in the early hours of October 7, 2023, as a “barbaric attack” carried out in a “manner evocative of ISIS.” Hamas and the other groups involved are portrayed as “bloodthirsty and uncontrollable groups [...] devoid of any moral inhibitions, [...] motivated by hatred.” The statement concludes by declaring that the attacks “revealed their true face of evil.” Three months into the subsequent—and still ongoing—Israeli invasion of Gaza, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continued to construct the same narrative, stating that “this is a battle, not only of Israel against these barbarians, it's a battle of civilisation against barbarism” (Jaffe-Hoffman 2023).

These words echo those of George W. Bush and Colin Powell two decades earlier. In fact, the predominantly racialised policies spearheaded by the GWOT have a striking resemblance to the discriminatory and racist tactics the Israeli settler state has been employing against the Palestinian people since the late 1940s. The GWOT followed the Israeli model also in terms of narrative construction, as its policies have become deeply ingrained in the security infrastructure as well as the political and national imaginaries of Western societies, built on the constructed narrative around an unprecedented “threat to civilisation.” Notably, these policies often focus on the elimination of the potential for possible future plots to cause violence, rather than actual, active plots to cause violence (Aked 2015; Aked, Jones and Miller 2019), through so-called “preventive force” (Erakat 2019).

In the decades following 9/11, there was hardly any question in the mainstream media about who defined terrorism, or how, which allowed states to routinely misuse the term to criminalise a broad range of organisations, actions, and political expressions that were critical towards the state (O'Donnell 2022: 22). Since the Israeli government, especially since the Second Intifada and 9/11, has managed to link the Palestinian struggle to extremism, and since public discourse on the subject has been mostly superficial, many governments have come to value Israeli "expertise" in combating terrorism. Terrorism experts appear in the media to talk about the endless threat posed by insurgents, no matter how big or small. They purposefully lump together groups such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas and Hezbollah, as if they "were all the same irrational, Jew-hating force" that must be destroyed militarily (Loewenstein 2023: 66). What this all suggests, is that the events of 9/11 in combination with the "legal entrepreneurialism" of the Second Intifada effectively turbocharged Israel's defense sector and internationalised the "Israeli war on terror." Consequently, the Israeli settler state has been able to promote itself as the world's foremost authority on counterterrorism, allowing it to export its model of counterinsurgency, stabilisation, and long-term pacification abroad (Sa'di 2021; Loewenstein 2023).

This ultimately meant that, for a time, the settler state's policies in Palestine could be implemented with reduced scrutiny (Sa'di 2021). The parallel actions of the U.S. only served to amplify the relevance and resonance of the so-called "Israeli war on terror." In the current context, the GWOT and the increased use of surveillance and discriminatory policies and practices in other countries, has thus also allowed for a significant acceleration of the Israeli settler state's own policies in Palestine. The GWOT is on the one hand a reflection of the decades-long colonisation and occupation of Palestinian land, while it on the other hand has offered the Israeli settler state an opportunity to extend, refine and reinvent its methods and modes of oppression. This is especially apparent in regards to the criminalisation campaign against civil society in Palestine, as the following pages will show.

5.2 Blurring the lines between war, counterterrorism, and development aid

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the structures of Israeli settler colonial warfare, counterinsurgency, forced displacement, surveillance and rhetorical violence against Palestinians are all prime examples of the settler project's transformation from

exocolonisation to endocolonisation, which primarily started taking place after the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan Heights in 1967. In an endocolonial environment, occupied territories often work as laboratories for new forms of control (Collins 2011). With an emphasis on cyber tools, weaponry, and surveillance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has effectively been pushing Israel to become one of the world's leading tech innovators. Both the Israeli government and private corporations sell these new devices as having been “battle-tested” on Palestinians in war (Loewenstein 2023: 60; Sa’di 2021).

Thus, while the era of sovereign states waging war against external, specific enemies was fitting in the system of exocolonisation’s outward expansion, the current endless preparation for war that is so typical of this era marked by the GWOT, is directly reflected in the total control that is endocolonisation. The condition of permanent war requires expansive and intensified surveillance, since the settler state is developing a narrative that the threat to the settler society is no longer external and waged by specific enemies, but materialised through a series of “faceless threats”—spanning from military sites to civic spaces and on into cyberspace (Halper 2015; Collins 2011). Intrinsically, it also presents a dichotomy. The blurred lines between security and war creates a reality where the settler population becomes more insecure. The settler colonial project needs to foster and capitalise on precisely this type of fear among its population, as it justifies its further conquest of land and reproduces the intensified modes of surveillance and securitisation that contributes to the perceived insecurity in the first place (Collins 2011). Therefore, the state of permanent war and the production of permanent securitisation goes hand in hand with the state of permanent emergency, no matter if the emergency is waged by real or imagined enemies. It is no accident that the declared “state of emergency” in Israel, which grants the government the legal right to enact regulations at any time, has been in continuous effect since 1948 (Ben Ari and Elran 2020).

Put another way, there is constant preparation for a war that never can be won, especially for a settler colony, which is essentially incapable of achieving “zero vulnerability” due to its settler colonial nature. Yet, Israel has used the GWOT to spread the narrative that unwinnable wars actually *can* be won by using certain settler colonial strategies of control (Halper 2015). This ever-expanding securitisation has enabled the settler polity to use a language that within itself emphasises the narrative transforming Palestinians into “security threats.” Such a “securitising move”—which allows for extraordinary measures to combat

and “defend” against these constructed threats—effectively removes specific issues from the realm of ordinary politics and places it within the framework of “panic politics” (Zorob and Paluszek 2024: 3). The attachment of the “terrorist label” is therefore central to the act of criminalisation.

As discussed in Chapter 3, this political strategy begins by identifying what threatens the existing order—in this case, the sustainment of the occupation and the advancement of the settler colonial project—and then moves to monitor, control, and contain the actors, ideas, or actions deemed subversive. Where necessary, laws are written or adapted to criminalise such resistance, and law enforcement agencies are mobilised to enforce them (Weizman 2024a). As a result, any action, behaviour, or statement challenging the subjugated position of Palestinians under the current colonial condition is framed as a “security threat,” often through alleged links to “terrorism.” In this way, Palestinians experience a double dispossession: not only of their territorial and material resources, but also of their political resources and capacities (Bhungalia 2023).

With this approach, Israel has managed to, on the one hand, intensify its control over Palestinians through the deployment of high-tech surveillance and weaponry, while on the other hand, create an additional smokescreen (apart from the one offered by the so-called “peace process”), where its all-encompassing system of control can be hidden behind the image of the liberal settler state as a leading, innovative, high-tech society. Additionally, the lucrative global market for technology that enables more efficient surveillance, counterinsurgency and warfare helps (apart from high levels of fiscal aid) to pay some of the high costs of Israel’s decades long occupation and a never-ending state of emergency (Loewenstein 2023; Halper 2015).

Hence, it is clear that the settler project’s shift from exocolonisation to endocolonisation not only correlates with the introduction of “legal entrepreneurialism” and the institutionalised strategies behind the Israeli settler state’s innovative colonial warfare, but also with the specific construction of the “terrorist” narrative. What this means, is that when the settler project was primarily outwardly driven by the conquest of more land, the focus was to construct a narrative that severed the relationship between the native and the land itself. When the settler project shifted to a securitised and inwardly directed colonisation, the constructed narrative was instead based on “terrorism,” i.e., it was designed to create a

“security threat,” aimed at severing the relationship between Palestinian organisations and their international donors and partners.

This internationalisation of the narrative transfer tells us that the specific construction of an “enemy” or “threat” within Zionist settler imaginaries ultimately should be understood as deliberate reflections of global opinion. The reason being that the resemblance between constructed narratives pertaining to Palestinian resistance and those pertaining to the “global enemy” automatically make the first more effective among an international audience. As R20 notes: “Globally [terrorism] has become a more accepted term. When you get to the war against terrorism, it is a global frame. So, it's very easy to speak to the U.S. listeners or European audience about this, because it's already there.”

Within the nexus between settler colonialism, the GWOT and securitisation, it is the international audience that plays a crucial role in advancing Israel's ongoing dispossession of Palestinian life. Thus, the Israeli settler polity is constructing narratives not only to reinforce the idea of exceptionalism among the settler population itself, but also to convince other states of the settler polity's exceptionalism and superiority vis-à-vis the indigenous population's primitive subordination. Therefore, it has become central to the settler state to utilise the primary animosity of the Western world, i.e., the animosity towards Islam. According to R1, this makes the narrative construction flexible:

When the big enemy of the West was communism, all Israeli enemies, including Palestine, were labelled by Israel as communist. All of them. Today the big enemy is Islam, so Israel labels its enemies as Islamists. The strategy is more how to link the global opinion to the situation in Israel or Palestine. And even sometimes you have the same actors in Palestine, which initially have been labelled by Israel as communist, have then been labelled as Islamists. So, the narratives are very flexible.

Thus, the key component in the nexus between settler colonialism, the GWOT, and securitisation is narrative construction. Both as an enabling factor to the articulation and implementation of racialised anti-terror legislation, but also as the ultimate outcome—with the intensified and expanded use of settler colonial narratives spearheaded and shaped by an intensified and expanded logic of elimination. Hence, narrative construction and its dissemination, or let us say the “narrative battle,” is one of the key points in the matrix of control, and as such of uttermost importance to both the settler state *and* the native resistance.

The criminalisation process against Palestinian civil society actors has become intimately intertwined with the global counterterrorism framework, as the use of the “terrorist” narrative allows for the application and utilisation of a number of discriminatory and racialised counterinsurgency tools and anti-terror measures that effectively work to silence Palestinian actors and diminish their manoeuvrability. It is precisely this combination, between the utilisation of Palestine as a laboratory for surveillance and innovative warfare, and the manipulation of anti-terror legislation, that makes the Israeli model of criminalisation so effective.

5.3 Targeting “security threats” in civic spaces: strategic and opportunistic

At the core of this criminalisation process lies the secret report drafted in 2021 by the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence, named “*The Palestinian Battle for Area C—Creating a Security Situation on the Ground, Description and Significance.*” As the report centres on the Israeli government's plan to continue with the systematic ethnic cleansing of the West Bank and the subsequent annexation of Palestinian land, the activities implemented by Palestinian civil society organisations among vulnerable communities in Area C of the West Bank, are specifically recognised as posing an obstacle to these annexation plans. For these purposes, the report suggests that Israel should implement a strategy to (i) criminalise Palestinian civil society organisations, (ii) discredit their work, and (iii) sabotage their international funding efforts.

In summary, the report (Bisan 2022) recommends that:

A comprehensive plan must be formulated for a campaign based on offensive nature in all dimensions of the campaign in which the Palestinians challenge Israel [...]. The plan must include components such as: legal campaign, planning campaign, international campaign, communications, thwarting funding (private and political), and humanitarian campaign effort.

It is of special importance to note that the report suggests that these efforts should be implemented with the use of anti-terror legislation and counterinsurgency tools. According to R6, the report was never meant to be released to the public:

It talked about that one of the basic needs of Israel, for example, in order to maintain what they call “operational capability” in Area C, is to target civil society. And this was the premise of the report. And I think if it weren't that the Foreign Relations

Committee and the Security Committee was headed by a member of Meretz [an Israeli political party], this report would never have come to our knowledge. And this is actually only the redacted version, that we got. There's a much worse version of this, but it is still secret. But the official, released version is on the Israeli government's website. It was discussed in a committee session, where they talked about using anti-terror tools against civil society organisations. And this is part of the annexation policy, they said that: "We need to target them in order to keep the Israeli options viable in Area C." And they talked about the whole Palestinian civil society [...], the entire documentation of occupation.

What this exemplifies is that the borders between development work and anti-terrorism legislation are becoming increasingly blurred. The deepening securitisation that is typical of the endocolonial environment, has now come to include international aid—as international funding is the main income source for a bloated Palestinian civil society—something that, according to Bhungalia (2023: 89) is "part and parcel of the refinement and evolution of liberal warfare and counterinsurgency."

In a supreme example of how this continued extension of the use of "terrorist" imaginaries in the "narrative battle" work to repress civil society actors in Palestine in practice, six prominent Palestinian civil society organisations were designated as "terrorist organisations" under Israel's Anti-Terrorism Law in October 2021. According to the law, which was passed in 2016, a group does not have to commit a terrorist act—which is defined as an offense motivated by political, religious, nationalist, or ideological aims, intended to instil fear in the public or coerce a government, foreign authority, or international organisation into action or inaction, with risk of serious harm to individuals, public safety or even the state's economy—in order to be defined as a "terrorist organisation." In fact, it is enough if the group promotes, or intends to promote, such acts (Adalah 2016).

The six civil society organisations in question, namely Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association (Addameer), Al-Haq Law in the Service of Man (Al-Haq), Bisan Center for Research and Development (Bisan Center), Defense for Children International Palestine (DCI-Palestine), the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), and the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees, have described the step as

Israel's "latest bid to delegitimise their image and isolate them from their partners and solidarity networks" (Lund 2023: 217).

The designation withal, meant that, absent a military order, the organisations could continue to operate legally across the occupied West Bank, with the exception of East Jerusalem. As a result, about two weeks later, on November 3, 2021, Israel's Central Command commander-in chief issued a military order designating the organisations as "disallowed associations" and thereby extended the classification to the occupied West Bank as well. The order stated that "every member [...], whether he is incorporated/associated with [the organisation] or not, whether he [acting as] branch or faction thereof, and whatever name is called, including any member or belonging person to this stream, known by various aliases, is an illegal organisation in the meaning of the defense regulations" (Al-Haq 2021; Lund 2023). Thus, the act of including anyone "associated" with any of these organisations in the terrorist designation, is in line with the legal innovations engineered and institutionalised by the Israeli settler polity at the time of the Second Intifada.

Yet, the law and its interpretations are not inherently novel; rather, they represent a continuation of previously established applications of the former emergency law concerning "supporting terror," which Samera Esmeir (2004) characterises as a legal mechanism that has facilitated the operation of the Israeli security apparatus. Similar to the criminal "terrorism" cases brought against individuals in the U.S. post-9/11, these regulations are not dependent on actual evidence that the "support" in question has been aimed at advancing actual "terrorist" activities. Thus, the ambiguity of the phrase "supporting terror," under both Israeli and U.S. law, may render every charity initiative a potential security concern. Esmeir (2004: 4) describes this as a "black hole" that can absorb many non-security realities:

It sucks in all that is beyond it and exterior to it, and these in turn disappear into it. It follows that security is simultaneously vacant of meaning and all encompassing. When all issues become potential matters of security, security loses any distinct socio-linguistic meaning. This is the strength and weakness of the term security—it captures everything at the risk of losing itself in itself.

The reason behind this increased attack on specifically civil society actors, and the subsequent utilisation of anti-terror legislation on aid infrastructure in Palestine, is however twofold. First of all, Palestinian civil society has, as previously mentioned, presented Israel

with an increasing threat to its occupation and colonial rule, by furthering the Palestinian cause more than any Palestinian political party has managed to in recent decades. With civil society initiatives documenting and bringing attention to decades of settler colonial violence, occupation, and apartheid, Israel's international image has been in a slow decline for decades (Aked 2023: 50). In a telling example, Bezalel Smotrich, current Minister of Finance in the Israeli government, referred to several of the most active human rights organisations as “a swarm of mosquitos,” arguing that Israel must deal with them as an “existential threat” (UN Human Rights Council 2023: 3). Gerald Steinberg, the founder and president of NGO Monitor, a Zionist organisation with close ties to the Israeli government and accredited consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has publicly referred to Palestinian civil society organisations as an “anti-Israel NGO machine” that leads world-wide “demonisation” of Israel, through what he describes as “repeated assaults on Israel through false accusations of apartheid and war crimes” (Steinberg 2022). As this exemplifies, and as several of the specific examples on the following pages will show, the activities of Palestinian civil society organisations are receiving an increased amount of attention from the Israeli government to the point where they are more and more often being perceived as a strategic threat to the settler colonial state.

Second, there is a tension within the civic space in Palestine that has been used to the settler state's advantage. As noted above, the “colonial peace” paradigm has rendered Palestinian civil society professionalised and dependent on international funding within a rent-based aid industry that has lost its connection and involvement with the Palestinian resistance movement. Therefore, Palestinian civil society is, on the one hand gaining more traction in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, but on the other, increasingly dependent on, and influenced by, the widely differing political agendas of international donors. This in turn means that the Israeli settler state has been presented with an excellent opportunity to indirectly oppress, silence and control Palestinian civil society organisations through regulating the (dis)involvement of international donors, as a means to address the pressing strategic threat to the settler state that these organisations present. These practices, aimed at both criminalising the organisations themselves and pressuring their Western partners, have effectively become part of the compounded discrimination under the matrix of control (Halper 2000). Thus, the settler polity's adaptation to the peacebuilding agenda and the adjoining international aid activities is, in itself another exceptional example of how settler

colonial dominance constantly adapts to any interruptions of modifications not only imposed by the resistance, but also by the international community.

In effect, the opportunity to influence the implementation of the peacebuilding agenda works as a sophisticated extension of the logic of elimination, aimed to silence and erase those segments of Palestinian society that still resists the occupation and its settler colonial reality. Speaking to this issue directly, R5 noted that:

This is what makes Israel worried. This is why Israel needs to attack the civil society, because it's the only group within the Palestinian society that is still alive and fighting. Still resisting in legal ways. And at all levels, both legally, internally, internationally.

R12 agrees, and adds that the key term is “accountability”:

They see that Palestinian civil society has increased the demand for accountability, international law, asking about apartheid, more crimes against humanity, you know. And I think that's the reason. The minute we ask for accountability, we have to be silenced. They will smash us. Because how come the modernised and the classy and the elegant is being accused of those things?

R4, on the other hand, describes the intensification of the criminalisation as part of the overall elimination process:

The strategy is to silence us. But since we decided to not be silent, they continue then to eliminate us, and the only way to eliminate us is to criminalise us to be a security threat here as well as abroad. Now they are, I believe, dealing with us according to this policy, which is to criminalise anyone. And with time you will die alone. So now there is more than 420 entities in Palestine considered as terrorist entities.

Detailed analysis of the collected data suggests that the Palestinian civil society, since the start of the peacebuilding agenda and its effective weakening of the Palestinian leadership, has had four relative successes and achievements that are especially problematic to Israel maintaining its hegemonic position as the colonial power, and its standing in public opinion internationally: namely the submission to the International Criminal Court (hereinafter ICC); the increased use of the term apartheid among international organisations; the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), as well as projects supporting the

steadfastness in Area C of the West Bank as a means to fight back against the threat of ethnic cleansing and settler violence.

5.3.1 The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement

The global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), which was launched by Palestinian civil society actors in 2005, calls for broad boycotts and divestment initiatives against Israel, similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era. Moreover, it argues that such punitive measures should be maintained until Israel complies with international law by, in summary, ending its occupation and colonisation; giving Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel equal rights, and respecting the rights of Palestinian refugees (Lim 2012).

Thus, as a civil society initiative, the BDS Movement has succeeded in speaking to the full Palestinian experience by including not only the issues faced by the population living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, but also those of the Palestinian refugees living in exile since 1948 and the discrimination of Palestinian citizens in Israel. This has constituted a sharp break from previous diplomatic efforts and, later on, the so-called peacebuilding framework, which has been the dominant approach since pre-Oslo (Aked 2023). Thus, the initiative was immediately recognised as a strategic threat by Israel (Zorob and Paluszek 2024), as R1 explains:

When BDS started in Palestine, Israel identified it as a serious threat. And I don't know if you have seen or have read the speech Netanyahu gave to AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] around 15 years ago. Where he said, "there are two threats to Israel, number one is Iran and the potential nuclear bomb. And number two, that is the BDS movement."

While R20 has the same understanding, he adds that the perception of BDS as a strategic threat by Israel was the culmination of a process that started already in the late 90's, when a first, rather marginal attempt to launch a boycott materialised:

We were among the first organisations who signed the [first] boycott, in 1996, I think, when the first people came out. [...] Then, in the beginning of 2000, Israel started to deal with the whole issue of boycott as major thing, they were calling it a strategic threat and they put it with Hezbollah and Iran, you know, it's a crazy concept. And it worked. Nobody would support Hezbollah.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has, since then, just as in the cases regarding the ICC and the use of the term apartheid, tried to link the boycott movement to historic antisemitism (Beaumont 2015). In 2017, the Israeli government introduced an amendment to the “Entry to Israel Law” to include foreign nationals that calls for economic, cultural, or academic boycotts against Israel as being subject to civil liability (Liebermann 2017).

Based on this law, the director of Human Rights Watch in Israel and Palestine, Omar Shakir, had his work permit revoked and was deported from the country in 2019, after being accused of promoting boycotts of Israel (Shakir 2019). The year after, in 2020, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNOHCHR) in Palestine launched a database with 112 business enterprises involved with Israeli settlements in the oPt (UNOHCHR 2023a). By the fall of 2020, all international staff members at UNOHCHR in Palestine were forced to leave the country, as Israel refused to renew or issue any new working visas (UNOHCHR 2022). Intrinsically, this points towards a tendency by the Israeli government to use a wide range of tactics and strategies in the attempted erasure of not only the native population, but also those institutions that monitor human rights abuses internationally. The manipulation and combination of discriminatory laws, permit systems and financial restrictions used against international actors is just yet another modification of the matrix of control that is used to oppress the Palestinian people in general.

In an era marked by global and transnational approaches to counterinsurgency, securitisation and surveillance, Israel has also managed to spread the enactment of similar laws abroad. In 2019, the same year that Omar Shakir was expelled for speaking up for human rights, Mike Pompeo, former U.S. Secretary of State, referred to the BDS movement as a “cancer” and reiterated the administration’s commitment to fighting the movement during a joint press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. The Prime Minister described the administration's declaration as “simply wonderful” (Bandler 2020). The following year, it was announced that:

[The U.S.] Department of State would designate as “antisemitic” organisations that engaged in boycotts against Israel, including those showing support for the [UN] OHCHR database of companies that conducted business with Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, and would deem such organisations ineligible for government funding (UN Human Rights Council 2023: 4).

Inherently, it is clear that the Palestinian civil society organisations facing intensified criminalisation campaigns and delegitimisation attacks from the Israeli settler polity all play, or have played, key roles in the war of legitimacy. Their focus on international advocacy and the discourse of international law is something that is perceived by the Israeli government as an existential threat. Thus, as the data shown suggests, the application of discriminatory laws, explicitly drafted and designed to target those opposing the settler state's colonial rule and erasure in historic Palestine, rely on the narrative transfer that specifically depict those actors as “antisemitic” or “terroristic.” As such, the settler strategies of erasure and elimination, as they intensify in terms of their engagement in more extreme and brutal colonial violence, simultaneously turn to more sophisticated efforts of narrative control.

5.3.2 The International Criminal Court and the case of apartheid

Similar tactics that have long been used to delegitimise the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement are now being deployed to undermine the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Erakat and Reynolds 2021). The ICC's investigation into alleged war crimes committed in the Palestinian territories followed the Palestinian Authority's ratification of the Rome Statute in 2015 (ICC 2015). After years of contention over whether the Court had jurisdiction to address claims made by both Israeli and Palestinian actors, a formal investigation was finally opened in 2021. Throughout the process, the Office of the Prosecutor often appeared, as Erakat and Reynolds (2021: 1) argue, “at pains to draw out the wrangling over the preliminary question of whether it could accept jurisdiction.”

Unsurprisingly, the Israeli settler state vehemently opposed the move (Al-Haq 2020; 2017; Beaumont 2021). Israeli authorities went so far as to label Palestine's accession to the ICC as “diplomatic terrorism.” One official described it as a crossing of a red line and “perhaps the most aggressive thing the Palestinian Authority has ever done to Israel in the international arena” (Abraham and Rapoport 2024). Despite Israel's attempts to delegitimise the ICC and obstruct its investigatory efforts, many scholars have questioned the actual emancipatory potential of the ICC for Palestinians (Erakat and Reynolds 2021). After all, the ICC is a political institution embedded within the global order, and therefore not immune to the dynamics that uphold prevailing constellations of power. As such, if institutional structures—particularly at the UN—were more equitable, the focus might

instead shift from prosecuting individual officials to calling for broader political and economic sanctions against Israel itself.

Nonetheless, Palestinian civil society organisations have been key actors in the following submission of evidence to the Prosecutor of the ICC, which alleges that high-level Israeli civilian and military officials have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in the occupied West Bank and Gaza (Al-Haq 2017; 2020). As described by R7, a representative for one of the organisations involved in the submissions to the ICC, there has been a clear correlation between their activities and the escalation in attacks against the organisation:

[Israel] started targeting the organisation itself. That was because we started to work against the culture of impunity. We worked on the individual accountability component; and we went to the ICC, and we went after Israeli war criminals. [...] We had to start documenting torture as a war crime, arbitrary detention, house demolitions, property destruction.

This is particularly significant given that much of the evidence submitted to the ICC is grounded in the documentation and data collection carried out by Palestinian civil society organisations themselves (Al-Haq 2020; 2017). When the investigation was first opened, it was noted that it could potentially expose “hundreds of Israelis—including soldiers and senior political figures—at risk of prosecution” (Beaumont 2021). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed the investigation as “pure antisemitism” (Yasin 2021). Yet it took three years and a full-scale invasion of Gaza, until the ICC moved to issue arrest warrants for Netanyahu and former Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant in 2024 (Bowen 2024).

At the time of the warrants, the Prime Minister called the ICC Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan “one of the great antisemites in modern times” (Bowen 2024). It was subsequently revealed that Israeli officials had been surveilling and threatening ICC prosecutors for over a decade (Abraham and Rapoport 2024). These reactions underscore the symbolic and political significance of the ICC investigation and help explain the Israeli government’s attempts to discredit those involved. Despite the ICC’s delay in advancing the investigation, the very decision to open it marks a significant victory for Palestinian legal activists and civil society organisations (Erakat and Reynolds 2021). Importantly, the value of the investigation lies less in its immediate practical outcomes and more in its potential to

disrupt the Israeli settler state's efforts to maintain complete narrative control. In other words, the investigation can help challenge dominant settler narratives and strengthen the native counter-narrative.

Similar tendencies may also be seen in regard to the increased use of the term “apartheid” in reference to Israeli discrimination policies. Human Rights Watch was the first big international organisation to release a comprehensive report on the subject in 2021, called “*A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*” which states (2021: 2) that:

Laws, policies, and statements by leading Israeli officials make plain that the objective of maintaining Jewish Israeli control over demographics, political power, and land has long guided government policy. In pursuit of this goal, authorities have dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated, and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity.

In 2022, Amnesty International released a report on the same theme, called “*Israel’s Apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime against Humanity*,” which describes how land theft, unlawful killings, forcible transfer and movement restrictions are all part of a system of practices and policies that together amount to the crime of apartheid under international law (Amnesty International 2022).

The fact that recognised international organisations have labelled Israel an apartheid state has, according to R2, contributed to shifting the paradigm: “Now we have passed this threshold. Two years ago, it was not acceptable to call it apartheid. Today it is. Now, anybody who oppose it, is basically a person living in denial. That's it. It's your problem, not mine.”

As with the submission to the ICC, the role of Palestinian civil society organisations was crucial for the drafting and release of these reports. According to R5, the reports heavily rely on the continuous documentation and data collection conducted by the Palestinian organisations in the field:

The other side is in this issue of human rights and accountability, and organisations like Amnesty International talking about apartheid all out of a sudden. How come Amnesty issued the report? If you review the report, you will see that they used the information from the local civil society organisations.

Worth noting is that the apartheid analogy has been used for decades. Examples include Faye Sayegh's book *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (1965), Edward Said's book *The Question of Palestine* (1979), and Uri Davis's book *Israel: An Apartheid State* (1987). Thus, these reports were not groundbreaking in terms of the actual analysis, but became internationally renowned due to the fact that they were conducted and presented by mainstream, Western, organisations, a problem in and of itself, when one considers the colonial underpinnings that such revelations suggest.

Similar to the attacks directed at Palestinian civil society organisations documenting Israeli violence and supporting Palestinian communities, these international organisations were faced with both rhetorical abuse and criminalisation tactics from the Israeli government. The report published by Amnesty International drew immediate accusations of antisemitism from Israeli government officials, saying that the organisation's "extremist language will pour fuel on to the fire of antisemitism" (Srivastava 2022). Yair Lapid, who at the time served as the Foreign Minister in Israel, also stated that "Amnesty isn't a human rights organisation but just another radical organisation [...]. Instead of seeking the truth, Amnesty echoes the same lies shared by terrorist organisations" (Ibid). According to Gordon, it is especially organisations that utilise human rights instruments in their criticism of Israel's laws, policies and practices, that are "being cast as antisemitic" (Gordon 2023: 1-2). He moreover notes that the specific reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty were accused of using "anti-Semitic tropes" (Ibid).

What this all demonstrates, is that attacks by the Israeli government and other enabling Zionist and pro-Israeli actors, especially those built on the narratives of "terrorism" and "antisemitism," are directed at both the organisations that release the reports or the parties that bring charges against Israel before the ICC, and the organisations that provide the very information used in the reports and the submissions of evidence. In other words, the Israeli government is concentrating on eliminating not just Palestinian civil society actors, but also the very access of international judicial organs—like the ICC—to vital data and documentation of human rights abuses committed in the oPt. Ultimately, what this demonstrates, is the existence of an additional layer of silencing and erasure, as the "successful" eradication of documentation and accessible data effectively also in an effort to eliminate any potential *future* attempt, by *any* organisation, to hold the Israeli state accountable for its crimes. Or, in other words, just like natives were physically removed from indigenous lands to clear the access to more territory, the Israeli settler state is trying

to remove the access to data in order to clear the way for an expanded liberal settler colonial narrative.

5.3.3 Steadfastness in Area C and beyond

It is thus clear that the “partners for peace” discourse, centred around a conflict narrative and the donor-recipient relationship, is intertwined with the ongoing Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine and it is this evolving modality of control and attempted erasure that is of central importance in understanding the criminalisation of civic spaces in Palestine. Yet, settler colonialism does not only expand horizontally in its ongoing efforts to increase its own access and eliminate all native alterities—it also expands vertically. Attempted settler colonial erasure and elimination, therefore exists in layers, visible through the Israeli settler state’s attacks carried out in spaces spanning over multiple levels, often simultaneously. From attacking international organisations at the UN and foreign state authorities, to local projects carried out by (a decreasing number of) grassroots organisations in historic Palestine.

Thus, the role of Palestinian civil society has been especially significant in Area C of the West Bank. Since the PA does not have any control in Area C, more reliance has been put on the ability of civil society organisations to support vulnerable communities living there. As such, Palestinian civil society organisations have been relatively successful in promoting steadfastness in these parts of the West Bank, something that is directly posing an obstacle to the settler polity’s annexation plan. As R13 explains, they are:

Defending the Palestinian rights, in particular farmers, [...] which means that we have to confront the occupation policy on the ground, [...] and we started having some kind of pressure from Israel in order not to continue this kind of crucial economic programs to support farmers. Since maybe 15 or even 20 years. Not just us, even others. [...] Because we are dealing with land in Area C, and you know land in Area C is composed of more than 63 percent of the land in the West Bank, and since Israeli has a policy to annex Area C, [...] they start attacking and following our organisation in order to make us cease our work in those areas.

R14 further describes the extreme environment in which these civil society organisations have to work, noting how the Israeli strategies to target civil society in these areas has affected the work of the organisations:

They have been affecting the organisations [...], all of these attacks are against Palestinian organisations that are just doing their job, providing services that the Palestinian people in the marginalised areas need to receive. [...] The final objective of the Israel is to stress and pressure, in order to stop our work and our services to the people, and then the people will be in a very critical situation. Finally, they will not be able to continue living there because they will have no more access to water. No source of food [...]. Without having these resources, it's impossible to have a life. So then if they leave the land, the next day [Israel] will take the settlements and grab the land.

As the above demonstrates, the Israeli settler state has, as part of this “narrative battle,” invoked a narrative construction that depicts all those successful civil society initiatives as being antisemitic or being led by actors that are either terrorist organisations themselves, or that have support from, or connections to other terrorist organisations.

Instead of recognising the non-violent measures that have been deployed in order to deliver services, advocate for Palestinian rights, and to document, investigate and speak to international law violations, their activities have willingly been (mis)interpreted as an actual act of “terrorism.” This, I argue, shows that by seeking to criminalise the actions of Palestinian civil society organisations, noting them as being “terrorist,” “antisemitic” or “corrupt” in their aims and approaches, the goal of the settler polity is to advance its form of settler colonial control in a sophisticated way by expanding the logic of denial. While implicatory denial has been used to deny the actual political and moral implications of a shrinking space for civil society, cultural denial has been used to try and normalise the oppression it inherently brings as a part of daily life in the oPt (Collins 2011). As such, implicatory and cultural denial are among several deliberate methods that contribute to the layered strategies of settler colonialism aimed at erasing and replacing Palestine. These forms of denial function as central components of a constructed hegemony that shapes how Palestine is perceived more broadly—and how Palestinian civil society is understood in particular.

What furthermore becomes clear, is that narrative construction plays a central role in the coercive political agendas imposed on Palestinian civil society organisations by international donors within the “colonial peace” paradigm, as all these narrative transfers attempting to label Palestinian organisations as either “corrupt,” “antisemitic” or “terrorist” evolve around the *funding* or *support* of “terrorist” activities and/or “antisemitic” partners.

In effect, this shows that the language of peacebuilding has failed to capture the asymmetrical power relationship between coloniser and colonised and has instead contributed to the reproduction of nothing but a continued asymmetrical power structure. Intrinsically, it is in the context of this power structure of international interventions that settler colonial practices work to silence, weaken and dispossess Palestinian civil society. As R7 exemplifies:

The [...] issue is them trying to engineer the Palestinian civil society. This is bad, this is good. This is terrorist, and this is not terrorist. This is the way. When we would write anything [they] would take it and build their own narrative. They are experts in the fake narratives and stories.

According to R18, the “terrorist” narrative has become so deeply engrained and all pervasive, that it almost applies anywhere in Palestinian society:

For the Israelis, every Palestinian is terrorist. We see how they are targeting the women, the children, everyone. Both in Gaza and the West Bank. So, for them, if you follow what they are saying in the media, they say that [the Palestinians] are animals. This discourse actually shows what they are thinking about the Palestinians. So, every Palestinian who is alive is a terrorist. They killed the pregnant women, children in the hospitals, the newborn. I think when they surrounded the whole hospital with those newborn children [in Gaza], we saw that the word terrorist, they use it in a wide sense. There is no specific meaning for this word, they use it against every Palestinian. Sometimes they said that Mahmoud Abbas [the President of the PA] is a terrorist. So, from the President to the youngest child in Palestine, everyone is a terrorist.

R19 takes this one step further, pointing to the fact that today, the “terrorist” narrative is not limited to only Palestinians. It has expanded to include anyone who threatens the progression of the Zionist settler colonial trajectory:

It is not even Israel versus Palestine; it is Israel versus human rights. Anybody or anything, even if it's a country, even if it's ICJ [International Court of Justice] speaking about human rights, it is attacked. What is actually at stake here is the human rights discourse. No matter if you are talking about cultural rights, agricultural rights, or educational rights—or even admitting Palestinians’ right to exist. Basically, when you talk about being accused of terrorism can essentially

happen to any organisation that is speaking about the human rights of Palestinians [...]. [Israel] is becoming a model of dictatorship, you know, where you cannot criticise the Prime Minister, you cannot criticise the government, without being chased and having your accounts shut. So, if we are basing this discussion on the premise that [Israel] is a democracy, I think we might be fooling ourselves. It might wish to be perceived as a democracy, but it is not.

As the data clearly illuminates, the expansion of the use of the “terrorist” narrative correlates with the intensification of the settler project’s efforts to expel and eliminate the indigenous population, which in turn has followed a reactive pattern vis-à-vis every new wave of Palestinian resistance, with especially the Second Intifada marking a significant expansion of the settler state’s delegitimisation efforts, to also include civic actors, and even individuals as civilians, in Palestine. What this further reinforces, as noted above, is the shifts within the construction of settler narratives themselves, and how they correlate with the shift of the settler project’s trajectory, from exocolonisation to endocolonisation.

The fact that the “terrorist” imagery depicts Palestinian human rights advocates in a light of violent and militant resistance in turn reinforces the logic of exceptionalism. As has been well established, the label “terrorism” is inherently political in nature, and in the present context is specifically designed to delegitimise forms of asymmetrical political violence (and non-violence) carried out by non-state groups, such as civil society organisations, against the interests of a “powerless” state. It effectively draws attention to the perceived violence of the “other” while implicitly legitimising any state action that is taken against them (Collins 2011). In doing so, it is effectively minimising the settler state’s role in provoking political action and resistance in the first place. Instead, the settler becomes the truth seeking, peace striving population under attack, while the native becomes the “terrorist,” even in the field of human rights advocacy and development work. The conceptual and narrative transfer that labels Palestinian civil society organisations as “terrorists” also means that their elimination and erasure by the settler polity becomes justified and logical.

In a telling example, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently stated that “Palestinian civil society needs to be transformed so that its people support fighting terrorism rather than funding it” (Staff 2023). In order to expand its control and exertion of power through the matrix of control (Halper 2000) even further, Israel has refined its narrative construction and dissemination by outsourcing it to regime-loyal actors within

state-private networks. Referred to as “neoconservative NGOs” by Gordon (2014), the strategies used by these actors in their dissemination of the “terrorist”, “antisemitic” and “corrupt” narratives will be described and analysed in the next chapter.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyse how and why settler narratives have become a key feature in the Israeli government’s strategy to target and silence Palestinian civil society actors, and why this strategy has gained considerable ground since the start of the GWOT and its drastic increase in counterterrorism legislation globally. As such, the chapter has shown how a number of relative successes and achievements by Palestinian civil society organisations, in combination with actions carried out by the Israeli settler state, has led to a steady decline in the Israeli government’s standing in public opinion globally.

The Israeli settler state has recognised this as being of uttermost strategic importance, describing it as a “battle of narrative”, which is a common approach in a settler colonial context. This has, in turn, led the settler polity to apply and utilise a number of narrative and conceptual transfers against the native population in general, and Palestinian civil society organisations in particular, describing them as “corrupt,” “antisemitic” or “terroristic.” The goal with such transfers is to delegitimise, and ultimately eliminate, all forms of Palestinian opposition and resistance to the settler colonial project, and later on, state.

Moreover, the chapter has demonstrated how the long-standing process of narrative transfer in Palestine was significantly reshaped by the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and the subsequent GWOT, which amplified the reach and resonance of the “terrorist” narrative. In the aftermath of 9/11—and bolstered by the “legal entrepreneurialism” that emerged during the Second Intifada—Israel was able to turbocharge its defense sector and successfully internationalise its own version of the “war on terror.” This enabled the Israeli settler state to position itself as a global authority on counterterrorism, providing it with a powerful platform to extend, refine, and re-invent its tools and techniques of domination and control.

In order to make this useful narrative construction as effective as possible, the Israeli government has developed a number of new governmental strategies. These strategies, which will be outlined in more detail in the following chapter, are in line with a secret report by the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence, which recommends the government to speed up the annexation plans of Area C in the West Bank by criminalising Palestinian civil

society organisations, specifically by discrediting their work through the dissemination of narratives depicting them as “terrorists,” and thus breaking their connection to international funding streams. The narrative battle has thus transformed into a governmental policy. The fact that Israel sees delegitimisation and sabotaged international funding as a key point in their strategy shows that the “colonial peace paradigm,” with aid dependency and sensitivity to donors’ political agendas play a role in the settler colonial reality in historic Palestine.

The slow encroachment of state power into shrinking “civic spaces”—arenas in which civil society organisations, social movements and ordinary citizens can organise—is a trend which suggests that the real fault-lines today are not between different nation-states, but between nation-states and civil society.

Beyond attempts at delegitimising the actions taken by these actors against the settler state, ascribing the indigenous population negative characteristics also serves to utilise a settler colonial logic of expansion, one which aims to foster fear in the settler population. Creating a reality filled with “faceless” threats in a state of emergency helps to inculcate a narrative, one that fosters acceptance and support among the settlers for the oppressive strategies used against the colonised population in the first place.

Thus, in so doing, Israel is enacting a campaign of criminalisation with the goal of eliminating those actors who sustain Palestinian communities, in order to facilitate and hasten the process of further annexing Palestinian territory. Ultimately, this leads us directly to the next question, namely: How is this criminalisation campaign organised? What strategies are utilised by the regime-loyal actors that the Israeli settler state has enlisted to disseminate these settler narratives?

Chapter 6. Theme 2: Organising Three Phases of Delegitimisation

This chapter explores the key strategies utilised by the Israeli settler state in order to produce and disseminate hegemonic narratives that delegitimise Palestinian civil society actors, framing them as “terrorists” and “antisemites,” as discussed in Chapter 5. It examines how the act of producing “evidence” of alleged “terrorist” connections plays a crucial role in activating discriminatory laws and counterinsurgency measures that are central to the criminalisation process in Palestine. Furthermore, the chapter highlights how the Israeli government has enlisted so-called manufactured civil society actors, within a coordinated state-private network, to generate and spread the bulk of this “evidence.”

6.1 The anti-delegitimisation network

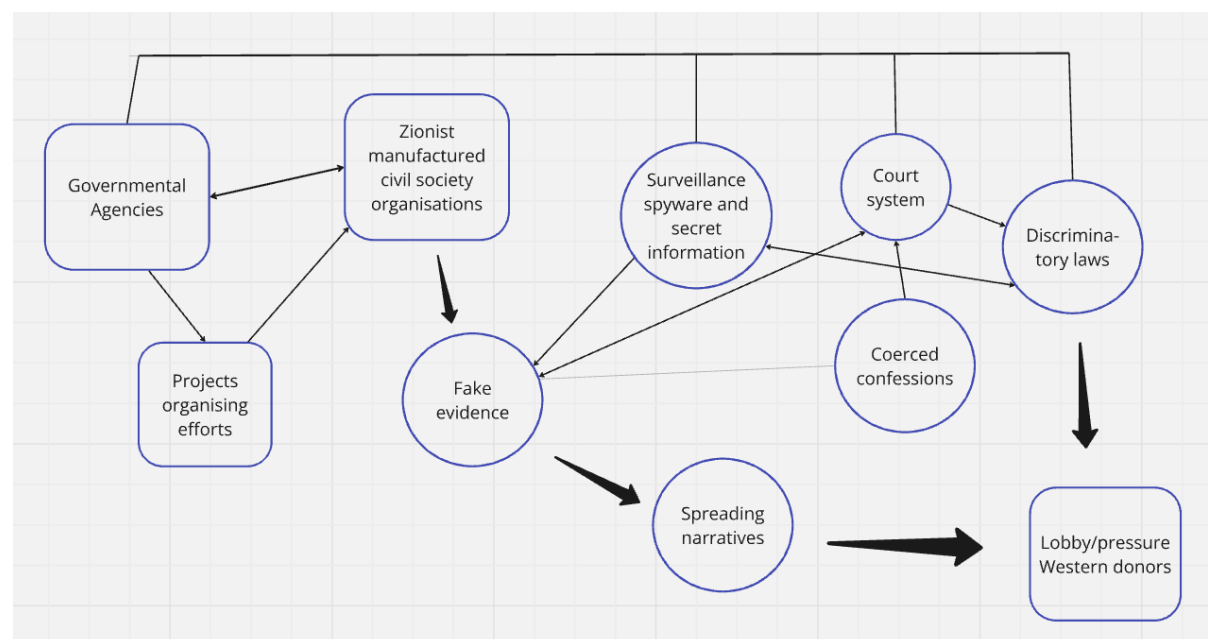
As mentioned in earlier chapters, the criminalisation process against civil society in Palestine comprises an innovative combination of numerous methods and tactics. The backlash against (relatively) successful civil society initiatives like the BDS, and later on initiatives such as the submission to the ICC, has led to a shift in the long-lasting process of Zionist narrative transfers, as described in Chapter 4 and 5, moving towards an *institutionalised* construction and dissemination of settler narratives pertaining to Palestinian actors as “terrorists,” “antisemites” or “corrupt.” In other words, the intensification of Israel’s image decline has mirrored its efforts to delegitimise Palestinian civil society organisations, and consequently the narrative battle has turned into a key point in the matrix of control (Halper 2000). Intrinsically, the logic of the politics of intensification also applies to the construction and dissemination of settler narratives that aim to legitimise the settler state.

Criminalisation is a political process that unfolds in stages and involves the interplay of multiple state and non-state actors (Weizman 2024b). Since the Second Intifada and the start of the Israeli “legal entrepreneurialism” with the subsequent internationalisation of the “Israeli war on terror,” the settler polity has been investing significant amounts of resources into enlisting and coordinating a network of Zionist proxy organisations whose primary task is to produce and disseminate “evidence” targeting Palestinian civil society organisations and the BDS movement, and to lobby foreign parliaments and donors to sever their partnerships with Palestinian actors. While anti-terror legislation stands at the centre of such methods and combinations, and while the overall purpose is to *discredit* opponents (as a first step towards legitimising their erasure and elimination) and *distract* from the

crimes committed under Israel’s colonial rule, it is clear that, since the Second Intifada, surveillance and spyware technology have increasingly been combined with “secret information,” coerced confessions and a system of discriminatory and biased military courts in the West Bank in order to produce data, i.e., “evidence,” to be used against those who pose a threat towards the Israeli occupation, apartheid and colonial erasure in Palestine.

The production of this assumed “evidence” is thus crucial to the narrative construction process because it serves to validate and bolster the negative characteristics ascribed to Palestinians in general, and those who advocate for human rights and Palestinian liberation in particular. As a result, the “evidence” that is produced using counterinsurgency tools such as “secret information,” coerced confessions, or surveillance can be used to both strengthen and legalise the settler colonial narratives evolving around “terrorism,” “antisemitism,” and “corruption,” on the one hand, and to implement a set of discriminatory laws that aim to reduce the manoeuvrability of civil society actors on the other. In other words, it *creates* a political reality in which normal legal and political limitations can be bypassed, as any oppressive and repressive measures are reframed as policies to combat the alleged security threat itself (Lentin 2019; Zorob and Paluszek 2021).

This government-backed network of Zionist proxy organisations, referred to here as the *anti-delegitimisation network* (see Aked 2023), is primarily focused on countering Israel’s image decline since the onset of the “legitimacy war” (Falk 2017), and generally operates as per the chart below.



The overall strategy can be divided into three phases of delegitimisation and criminalisation: firstly, the focus is on *producing* “evidence” in line with established settler colonial narrative transfers, to be used against targeted actors; secondly, the focus is on *disseminating* the “evidence” in order to lay the basis for the enactment of discriminatory laws against Palestinian actors as well as specific lobby activities directed at Western donors; and lastly the focus is on the *operationalisation* of the criminalisation and erasure, i.e., to conduct a set of targeted and direct activities that directly outlaw and suppress civil society actors, and pressure their partners and funders. As such, the last two phases are focused on organising targeted actions against both Western donors *and* Palestinian organisations, in parallel.

6.1.1 NGO Monitor: leading the manufactured segment of civil society

The flowchart above outlines the key actors operating within the network across all three phases. These actors fall into three main categories: (i) Israeli governmental agencies, including the former Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Diplomacy, the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; (ii) Zionist pro-Israel civil society organisations; and (iii) a hybrid public benefit company that facilitates and coordinates efforts between the first two groups. Based on this structure, the findings from the data collected is analysed through these three layers within the framework of the production, dissemination, and operationalisation phases.

While all three categories of actors are crucial to the success of this state-private network's overall strategy, the core driving force behind defamation campaigns lies with regime-loyal Zionist civil society organisations. These groups play a central role in fuelling the anti-delegitimisation network, with the Israeli government increasingly relying on both local and foreign Zionist civil society organisations throughout all three phases outlined above (Perugini and Gordon 2015; Aked 2023). This is important to highlight, as the role of think tanks in the criminalisation process is often overlooked—despite numerous instances where they have produced demonstrably poor-quality “research” that has directly contributed to government attacks. Recognising the symbiotic relationship between formal institutions and informal networks is, according to Waqas Tufail (see Cristiano et al. 2023: 3), imperative for understanding the criminalisation process:

Many of these groups [...] enjoy access to MPs, so if we are talking about the tools and strategies of criminalisation, then we have to look at not just the state as it exists

in terms of government or formal institutions, but those often very wealthy funded think tanks and pressure groups. [...] They play a key role in the furthering of state racism. They repeatedly call for new or more extreme policing and counterterrorism measures, they produce very partisan research, which often highlights that Muslim “extremism” has to be the key policing and counter terrorism focus and this is still playing out now, decades into the “War on Terror.”

This quote perfectly captures several of the functions assumed by the actors in the anti-delegitimisation network—a set of actors who have become well-known within Palestinian civil society and among Western and European donors for their frequent reports, seminars, articles, op-eds, parliamentary issues, debates, and various lobbying activities (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018d; Perugini and Gordon 2015). Through these efforts, they accuse international donors of funding Palestinian “terrorism,” “antisemitism,” or “corruption,” using lies and half-truths to construct a narrative that portrays organisations as suspicious and guilty by association (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018d). While it is difficult to map out all actors within the network, some of the main organisations have been identified as NGO Monitor, Shurat HaDin, UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI), International Legal Forum, the Institute for Zionist Strategy, the Lawfare Project, and UN Watch (Zorob and Paluszek 2024; Jamal 2018).

Overall, this new set of actors has emerged following the last wave of civil society transformation in historic Palestine. What sets them apart from other organisations, according to Gordon (2014), is not only their ties to the Israeli government, but also their ability to appear autonomous despite those connections. These actors further distinguish themselves through the novel strategies and tools they are adopting in the ongoing narrative battle. While scholars have classified these organisations as “neoconservative Israeli NGOs” (Gordon 2014: 1) and “conservative nationalist civil society organisations” (Jamal 2018), and while the main actors in the anti-delegitimisation network are indeed Israeli NGOs and governmental agencies, it is imperative to note that there are a number of actors that are not Israeli. Notably, this means that multiple civic spaces are implicated in the processes of delegitimisation and criminalisation in Palestine. While this research focuses on the targeting of Palestinian civil society, the anti-delegitimisation network emerges as a composite of manufactured segments within both Israeli and global civil society. Based on the common traits and strategies of these actors, they can be understood collectively as part

of a manufactured Zionist civil society.⁷ Hence, I refer to the actors within the anti-delegitimisation network throughout this thesis as regime-loyal Zionist and/or pro-Israel proxy organisations within a manufactured segment of civil society.

While all the Palestinian organisations interviewed reported being attacked by various pro-Israeli and Zionist proxy groups, one organisation stood out in particular: NGO Monitor. Every interviewee mentioned being specifically targeted by this organisation. Based on the data collected, NGO Monitor emerges as one of the key actors within the state-private anti-delegitimisation network (see also Perugini and Gordon 2015). While R13 describes NGO Monitor as “a criminal group” that has become “the core problem” in the criminalisation process against Palestinian civil society, NGO Monitor defines itself as “a globally recognised research institute promoting democratic values and good governance,” with a mission to “ensure that decision-makers and civil society operate in accordance with the principles of accountability, transparency, and universal human rights.” In its own words, it publishes “fact-based research and independent analysis about NGOs, their funders, and other stakeholders, primarily in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict” (NGO Monitor 2024a).

Founded in 2002, the organisation was one of the first to engage in anti-delegitimisation activities. R11 describes one of the attacks from NGO Monitor:

I think it started more than 10 years ago, and there was a campaign against [the organisation] led by the NGO Monitor accusing it of antisemitism, and that the organisation belongs to a terrorist entity. And in 2011, there was a caricature published by someone who submitted for an award. It was a competition that was organised by [us]. The caricature was just the submission by someone. But NGO Monitor picked up that submission and presented it as our publication. And actually, they initiated a successful campaign, which resulted in pushing the donors to freeze our accounts. And this lasted for almost one year. Then the donors discovered that all of those campaign allegations were just lies. And that it wasn't true, it was just a submission, and we cannot control who submits, and what kind of submission.

⁷ Importantly, this network does not confine its efforts to Palestinian organisations; it also targets Israeli civil society groups that challenge apartheid policies and the occupation of Palestinian territories. In these cases, critical Israeli organisations are framed not as “terrorists” but as “enemies of the state” (Jamal 2028). In other words, the involvement of diverse civic spaces highlights how the anti-delegitimisation network operates across multiple settler colonial geographies, from Gaza and the West Bank to the whole of historic Palestine.

In comparison, NGO Monitor used information regarding another person in the attack against R20:

On NGO Monitor's [website], you will read a little bit about the [organisation] and about myself, but you would read very false information. They speak about me, [name anonymised] as director, but they speak about somebody else, not about me. Someone affiliated with a terrorist organisation in Lebanon or something like this, but I never tried to correct this.

These two quotes exemplify how almost any information can be used in the production phase. R7 also adds that, when needed, NGO Monitor produces its own sources for these purposes:

They are experts in the fake narratives and stories. They for example say that they have an interview "with an expert" and then it's someone from the Shabak [Israel Security Agency, also known as Shin Bet], so the connection is clear.

R7 continues to explain how the methods and strategies in the production and dissemination phase constantly evolve:

Then there was another step: once it is out in the open that this is a tool they are using, they start using other names. They are producing other proxy organisations, that use and recite the NGO Monitor statements and reports, like triangulation. It looks like more sources, but it is all from one source.

This tells us that the production phase involves both fabricated sources and fabricated data. For R12, the type of information that NGO Monitor has access to in their "evidence" production is telling:

Honestly, you cannot differentiate between this and that. I mean, they are backed by the government. Of course, the kind of information they get, it is clear that they work for the government, and they're supported by the government.

R5 is also convinced by the connection:

The NGO Monitor has connections to the government; it is not a secret. And there was research published about the connections between the people sitting on its board, or even the founder of the NGO Monitor himself, and Netanyahu and the Prime Minister office, and the government. They are acting as the long arm of the

state. And I suspect as well that the funds they receive, part of it, is related to the government, but of course, they are powerful. They know how to hide it. And how to avoid accountability.

Initially, the poor quality of research produced by NGO Monitor led many Palestinian organisations to disregard its constant accusations and smear campaigns as nothing but a nuisance, and not a serious threat. As R7 explains:

From the Palestinian side, I think that the organisations did not regard it as this threat, as for instance, when NGO Monitor started to operate, it was looked at as being very unprofessional. And the reports they publish, as being very weak in terms of any academic standard. So, the idea was that such organisations and such reports will not be regarded as credible among the international actors, such as donors.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, however, the smear campaigns have had a stronger impact on Western and European donors and their development strategies than Palestinian civil society initially expected. Gerlad Steinberg, the director of NGO Monitor, has himself declared that the organisation has “changed how we talk about human rights organisations in Israel today. Now we speak truth to power” (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018c). In the words of R16, it is clear that the organisation communicates, and coordinates its work, with the Israeli government in regard to specific cases, even at the highest level:

There are constantly small defamation attacks even if there isn't one especially big one, you know? NGO Monitor has a lot of fun on their website about us, all of these terrible things that we have done. But if you compared it to this other organisation [name anonymised], which works mainly to declassify and release government materials based on Israel's declassification laws [...] NGO Monitor went after them really, really hardcore on their Norwegian funding. To the extent that Netanyahu actually called the Norwegian ambassador and said like “we do not want you to continue to fund this organisation” and there was a letter sent out. Nothing like that has happened to us yet, but it is certainly on the table.

Similarly, an Addameer representative has previously reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in the company of Gilad Erdan, former Minister of Strategic Affairs, had mentioned their names in each meeting with European partners: “The Irish foreign minister in his first visit to Israel, he met with us two hours after his meeting with

Netanyahu, and he told us that Netanyahu named the partners of Irish aid one by one, [and] he requested Ireland to stop funding us” (Zorob and Paluszek 2024: 7). R20 shares another example of when Israeli government officials have brought lists of Palestinian organisations to donors:

One of the people who were working in the British Embassy [...] he told me clearly that the [Israeli] Deputy Foreign Minister came and she met with the people in the embassies and she had a black list of organisations that should not [receive] funding. We had a little bit of funding from embassies, but still, our name was on the list. And she was clearly speaking about these organisation as if they were antisemitic and anti-Israel. [...] In the end, I worked for almost two years without salary, but then it was impossible.

This process reveals how organisations like NGO Monitor, in close coordination with the Israeli settler state, create reports and briefs where the so-called “evidence” consists of a blend of falsehoods, half-truths (such as references to specific submissions in an open caricature competition), and statements from government officials—like Shin Bet staff—who are presented as objective “experts.” These sources are then repeatedly cited across multiple reports and “research” papers by other organisations within the anti-delegitimisation network, creating the illusion of a more substantial body of evidence.

In addition to this, there are a number of overlaps between those working in Israeli governmental institutions and the staff and board members of these Zionist proxy organisations to be found in the dataset. These connections are important to look at for multiple reasons. As Turner (2025) points out, mapping the “gatekeepers” (i.e., people in leadership positions) and experts at a certain think tank (or as in this case, a certain organisation) and the circles they move in, is a critical aspect of network analysis that, in parallel to analysis of the views expressed and the funding behind them, can reveal connections to the Israeli state and/or the Israel lobby. Detailed analysis of the data has revealed that one of the founders of NGO Monitor, Alan Baker, has served as Israel’s Ambassador to Canada and as Legal Adviser and Deputy Director-General of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018b; JCFA 2024b). In addition, Alan Baker is a Fellow and Expert at the Jerusalem Centre of Foreign Affairs (JCFA), another organisation within the network, where he is also appointed Director of its Institute for Diplomatic Affairs (JCFA 2024b). His connection to NGO Monitor remains to this day, as he is currently on the organisation’s Advisory Board (NGO Monitor 2024b).

In fact, NGO Monitor's director, Gerald Steinberg has stated that the organisation started "in the basement" of the think tank JCFA (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018b). Today, Steinberg is one of the JCFA's fellows (JCFA 2024a). However, Lotta Schüllerqvist and Mats Gezelius, who have written a number of articles about NGO Monitor, point out that Steinberg often forgets to mention that the former Israeli Ambassador to the UN, Dore Gold, played a decisive role in the founding of the organisation. Dore Gold served as the head of the JCFA from 2000 to 2022, and at the time of the establishment of NGO Monitor, was advisor to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. What is more revealing is the fact that he, since the 90s, has been an adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu at various times, both in his capacity as Prime Minister for two terms and as leader of the opposition. Between 2015 and 2016 he also served as Director-General of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018b; JCFA 2024a).

These connections, I suggest, demonstrate how different layers of actors within the anti-delegitimisation network interact across all three phases. However, as described in Chapter 3, the initial forms of this kind of network are not always created by the settler state; rather, a small number of informal actors and partnerships that arise are often picked up, formalised, coordinated, and institutionalised by the government once their possible benefits have been confirmed (see Cristiano et al. 2023). Resultantly, the data provided cannot beyond doubt establish whether it was informal partnerships and networks that influenced the Israeli settler state to initiate the enlisting of Zionist and pro-Israeli proxy organisations and coordination of the anti-delegitimisation network as a new phase in the narrative battle and its delegitimisation efforts, or if it was the other way around.

In the case of NGO Monitor, Anja Zorob and Anna Paluszek (2024: 7-8) note that the organisation "has been in contact with the Israeli government since the start," and particularly with the Ministry of Strategic Affairs. They also describe how NGO Monitor has facilitated lobbying meetings in European capitals—meetings it has often attended alongside Israeli diplomats. Nevertheless, as R17 explains:

It is not necessarily possible or very important to trace exactly who founded most of these NGOs. Usually, the boundaries are quite blurred, and for a lot of them there is a big revolving door with the personnel. For example, in the UK, there is an organisation [that is part of the network], and someone who used to be the head of that is now working as an Israeli government spokesman. And it is the same in the opposite direction. So, it is certainly true that over time, think tanks were trying to

push the government a bit in terms of certain tactics and whatnot, but there are also think tanks that were going to work for the government and vice versa.

Turner (2025: 11) refers to this “revolving door” as revealing a “constant carousel [...] between government positions and prestigious think tank fellowships, and between one think tank and another.” Just as R17 points out, the founding of these organisations is not the primary concern of this research. Instead, the focus is on how they *operate* in these spaces today, particularly in their collaboration with the government.

6.1.2 Combining the methods: the example of the military court system

A key element of the collaboration between Zionist proxy organisations and the Israeli government in the production phase that warrants closer examination—particularly in the fabrication of alleged “terrorist connections”—is the military court system in the West Bank. This system effectively became one of the first institutionalised tools for delegitimisation and defamation against civil society organisations in Palestine. In a telling example, R5 describes how NGO Monitor leverages both the military court system and digital assets in constructing its reports:

NGO Monitor has ECOSOC status. The PA does not have ECOSOC status in the UN system, but NGO Monitor would be sitting with the human rights committee, to review a Palestine report next week. On the internal Palestinian discourse. Isn't it an irony? Where their information comes from, is just another example of why we are claiming that you cannot take the NGO Monitor reports as a serious source. This is because of how they collect their data. If you review one of their reports, you will find it very easy to understand that they rely on the social media, and then they elaborate on it the way they want to. And they use the military court information, where they are able to have access. Because one of the researchers or the people connected there, we know who he is. Maybe his name is not so popular, and they hide it after we started to name him in our interviews and publications.

R5 continues:

Maurice Hirsch, who used to be the chief military prosecutor for more than six years, and worked in the military court in Ofer [prison] and knows [our organisation] and [another designated organisation] in person, was sharing the information that he knew about us as a military prosecutor with the NGO Monitor.

And this is how they were able in their reports to report about my team, the lawyers. And what cases they defended in court. And to associate it, because in the court, we don't present the name of the organisation. We don't come to the court and say to the protocol, please, I'm so and so from this and that organisation. No, it's not the way it will work. They know from the usual daily communication.

In fact, Maurice Hirsch, who lives in the settlement of Efrat (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018a), started working as a Senior Military Consultant for NGO Monitor after he finished serving as the Director of the military court system, officially named Military Prosecution for Judea and Samaria. Since then, he has also written a number of articles for the JCFA, in addition to heading the Legal Strategies unit of the Palestinian Media Watch, which is yet another actor within the network. On top of that, he has served as and an advisor to the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior (JCFA 2024b).

The multiple positions held by Hirsch exemplifies the interconnectedness between the military court system and the production and dissemination of settler narratives well—especially how the connections to the Israeli government and Zionist proxy organisations like NGO Monitor, that utilise court data for their delegitimisation efforts, work in practice. As shown in the flow chart, the military court system is just one out of several methods and strategies used in the production of “evidence” and its later dissemination aimed to delegitimise, criminalise and ultimately erase Palestinian civil society. Yet, it clearly exemplifies how this process works in practice. The Palestinian organisation Addameer (2022) explains that:

Israeli military courts form the central mechanism of the Israeli military judicial system, a product of and an integral element to Israel’s occupation and apartheid regime over the occupied territories. As part of the military judicial system, Israeli military courts prosecute Palestinians of all ages and backgrounds [...] [and] effectively criminalise all basic Palestinian individual and collective rights, including fundamental freedoms of expression and association. Under this racist military judicial system, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been tried and convicted in farcical court proceedings— at a conviction rate of over 99%—and subjected to brutal detention conditions, torture, prolonged incarceration, and gross violations of their rights and dignity.

This is a military court system where the accused has no right to be informed of the charge on which grounds they are being held, without delay, or in a language they understand (Latte Abdallah 2020; Hajjar 2005). Moreover, if the Israeli military invoke what it refers to as “secret information,” the detainee can be held indefinitely without charging them or allowing them to stand trial. Indictments can be filed based on a broad range of offenses, with one of the main ones being “Hostile Terrorist Activity” which “includes offenses related to membership in ‘illegal associations’—associations deemed illegal by the Israeli military commander” (Addameer 2017). In other words, these offenses can now be levied not only against Palestinian political parties, but also against the six well-established and prominent civil society organisations introduced in Chapter 5, which were designated as “unlawful associations” in the West Bank and “terrorist organisations” in Israel as of 2021 (Lund 2023).

What is more, the designation of the six civil society organisations was based on alleged connections to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP, a Palestinian political party with its own military wing). The “evidence” used to back those claims up were, in fact, nothing but “secret information” and coerced confessions extracted from former civil society workers subjected to violence and threats during interrogation. In some cases, it was also based on decades-old military court rulings (Lund 2023). R4, who works at one of the targeted organisations, explains that the alleged “evidence” presented was nothing new:

We established and registered our organisations under the Israeli control, and we have been recognised since the 1990s. But now, in 2021, they claim that our organisation was established by PFLP. So, they want us to believe that they wake up after more than 30 years, with all the security that they have, to realise that this organisation is established by PFLP? That's why I'm rejecting this argument.

I think it happened because we crossed more and more the red lines that they put for us, especially in 2014 when we expand our work to the U.S. We have U.S. staff. We started to lobby the Congress. Now they brought up a case, as evidence, regarding a previous staff member. He had been arrested by Israel as a PFLP actor. But that was in 1967! And he was sentenced for that, for 15 years, and released in 1985. And then he joined [our organisation] in 2005. So, if he was with PFLP all that time, why did you leave him alone until now?

Using this type of information to retroactively punish staff members and the organisations that employ them becomes even more problematic when considering how common it is for Palestinians to be arrested under military rule. R13 explains:

We are under occupation. And there is none of the Palestinian families, who doesn't at least have one family member who has been arrested, you know that. From 1967, maybe more than one million Palestinians were arrested. We have around 10,000 prisoners. And they are not criminals. They are activists against occupation, according to international law, in your country, your home, your place, you, yourself under occupation, you have the right to defend yourself. And those are the fundamental rights given by international law.

So, maybe over the last, for example, 15 years, we have something like 600 or 700 employees working with [our organisation] in different phases and stages. So of course, you will see that part of them were in jail, part of them have different political opinions. We have not put any condition as [an employer] for having any political opinion. But [the organisation] prevents anyone from being active while working with [us]. The law, the system, the manuals for [the organisation] is preventing us from having activists that are active while they're working. But before or after, we do not have any restrictions for people to not be active. So, this is the same as everywhere in the world, even for the UN employees, they have the same rules. But of course, this was the big, big allegation against us and the other organisations. They mentioned some of the names of people who were already dead, they are dead since like 20 years. They mentioned some names of people who were working with [us], like something like six or seven years ago. And they said they were in jail, in 1969, can you imagine? They were in jail because they were supposedly connected at that time with PFLP. And they said some of the names, it's like an allegation which is baseless, full of lies. If you go through the allegations, you will keep laughing because of their standard.

R5 describes how anything can be used as “evidence” within the military court system, and how any accusation may lead to a criminalisation of an organisation:

You know, that every writing on Facebook or on Twitter or on any of the social media platforms can end with a criminalisation in the military court. For inciting violence. It's very vague, the definition is very wide. It can include any action,

actually any slogan, any written material, if they have the interest to arrest and prosecute you under this charge. So, all these measures could take place, even if the organisation itself is not declared yet as a terrorist or illegal entity. And this is what we suffered from for a long time.

If someone will claim that we support terrorist activity, they can come to you and say: “Did you know that [this colleague] is convicted by the military court of being a member of an illegal association? And you pay her salary. Isn't it supporting terrorism?” What you will do? It is not clear. And again, are partners going to base their decision [for funding us or not] on the military court that we, together, are working against for 30 years, a court that they say is not a just court and that they don't respect? You cannot rely on the rulings that the military court issue!

What this data exemplifies is that the military court system allows for the activation of settler colonial narratives through an institutionalised narrative construction process. The high conviction rate within the military court system (almost 99%), in combination with the fact that almost one in every five Palestinians has been arrested and charged under Israeli military orders (UNOHCHR 2023b), effectively leads to the criminalisation of large segments of the entire Palestinian population. Additionally, if one takes the settler state's strategy of “guilt by association” into consideration, it becomes clear that even a conviction based on unfair trials, coerced confessions or “secret information” is enough to criminalise any Palestinian organisation because of the history, social connections or family relations of any of its (current or former) employees.

Therefore, the military court system is an excellent example of how criminalisation within a settler colonial context is intended to target the whole native population, even though it operates through individual methods of persecution (Cristiano et al. 2023). Because criminalisation attempts to erase and eliminate Palestinian life in both a practical and narrative sense, it is impossible to separate the fluidity between criminalisation of Palestinian civil society organisations and the criminalisation of Palestinians on an individual basis from other forms of settler colonial strategies.

6.2 Proxies and the government: the new public diplomacy

In the same way, it is impossible to fully separate the level of governmental engagement in the anti-delegitimisation network from the non-governmental levels, as the “evidence”

production and dissemination occurs at several levels simultaneously. As outlined in detail above, the Israeli government plays an active role in the anti-delegitimisation network across all three phases, and governmental reports and statements have repeatedly referenced “evidence” based on information from the military court system (e.g., see Israeli Prime Minister’s Office 2019). While the specific government ministries involved in the anti-delegitimisation efforts have shifted over time, R1 explains that the institutionalised production and dissemination of settler narratives initially emerged as part of the pushback against the BDS movement:

The Israeli government installed the Strategic Affairs Ministry, which just recently was dissolved into the Foreign Ministry. This ministry basically had the task to deal with the issue of international civil society in solidarity with the Palestinian case. And the very first target was to discredit the BDS movement. When the BDS movement started, Israel basically started its counter movement to the BDS movement.

According to R15, the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs has played a key role in organising the anti-delegitimisation network, even if the boundaries between the Israeli state and the Zionist proxy organisations are sometimes hard to distinguish:

If you look at their documents and the statements of this ministry, it is clear that it was basically to undermine the BDS movement, and Palestinian NGOs. Also, Palestinians that called for accountability and work on ICC. The Israelis perceived them as strategic threats to Israel. So, they invested a lot of funding and support to these organisations. But you know, the Zionist movement and their solidarity and their network around the world, sometimes there's no boundaries between Israeli government, NGOs, solidarity NGOs, Israeli solidarity NGOs, Zionist movement, Zionist donors. So, they are well organised and well-funded, sophisticated, more integrated in the Western societies than Palestinians and pro-Palestinian groups. More entrenched in the politics and in the power circles of these governments. So, for Palestine, it is a big challenge to face these campaigns.

Right after its establishment, the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs focused on coordinating intelligence and diplomatic information on the perceived “Iranian threat”, but shortly after it came to change its focus. The shift in the agency’s focus happened in 2015 when hardliner and Likud Party member Gilad Erdan took over, and persuaded Benjamin

Netanyahu to firstly quintuple the ministry's budget, and secondly, to include combating BDS in its portfolio (Pink 2020; Horovitz 2018a; Landau 2020). R7 describes that this shift was in part due to the failure of other, previous strategies:

The Ministry of Strategic Affairs was launched in order to target civil society, BDS and human rights organisations. As the other tools did not work well enough, they are now, as a government, involved directly. State and diplomacy at the front line, they call us terrorists in suits. They are like a third world when it comes to information, they lie in reports, and they are not professional with information.

This leads us to one of the most notable production efforts from the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, namely a report entitled: “*Terrorists in Suits: The Ties Between NGOs promoting BDS and Terrorist Organizations*”, which was released in 2019. On the Israeli government’s website, the report is described as having “concluded that Israel is facing a network of closely linked NGOs which are conducting anti-Israel activities and campaigns which promote the boycott of Israel” and that “the deep link between designated Palestinian terror organizations Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and anti-Israel NGOs promoting boycott divestment and sanctions (BDS) of Israel is exposed” (Israeli Prime Minister’s Office 2019).

The report examines ties between 13 NGOs worldwide, three out of which are Palestinian civil society organisations that later were designated as terrorist organisations in 2021, namely al-Haq, Addameer and DCI-Palestine. The report claims to have found “over 100 links between the terror organizations Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and anti-Israel BDS-promoting NGOs” as well as “30 terror operatives [...] most of whom served time in Israeli prisons” (Israeli Prime Minister’s Office 2019). Notably, incarceration under the inherently discriminatory and biased nature of the Israeli military court system cannot be regarded as definitive evidence of wrongdoing by an organisation or individual. Rather, as discussed above, it must be understood as a key mechanism within the broader strategy of criminalising large segments of the Palestinian population.

The nature of the “ties” presented in the report warrants closer attention. For example, one “tie” involves Addameer’s field researcher, whose mother was imprisoned in Israel at the time the report was written (Ministry of Strategic Affairs 2019: 34). Another example concerns a man with years of experience in management, operations, and fundraising for al-Haq, who was arrested between 1988 and 1992 (Ibid: 38). Detailed analysis of the reports

further demonstrates that two further examples of “ties” regarding DCI-Palestine are noteworthy. The first is similar to the previous example, and details how a board member was tried and sentenced in the 1980s for alleged links to the PFLP. The second refers to an employee of the organisation who has been referred to as a “comrade” by a PFLP official (Ibid: 41). Finally, the report mentions the Palestinian human rights organisation PCHR. Unlike the other organisations, PCHR was accused of connections to Hamas, and not PFLP. One of the reasons being that the organisation’s director has been quoted calling Hamas “professional” since his and other human rights organisations can operate freely in Gaza (Ibid: 54).

Ultimately, the Israeli government used the report to push international aid organisations and Western governments to, in its own words “examine the activities of NGOs [...] which advance the radical agenda of terrorist organizations, and verify that these NGOs maintain no links, direct or indirect, to terror organizations” and to “cut off immediately any financial aid given to these NGOs, and to thoroughly verify that past funds were not transferred to terror organizations” (Israeli Prime Minister’s Office 2019).

Despite the release of the “Terrorists in Suits” report, the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs quickly recognised that the effectiveness of the anti-delegitimisation network’s global connections would depend on a new structure. After all, the blurred lines between the Israeli state and other levels of engagement were not necessarily the most efficient way to carry out delegitimisation campaigns against Palestinian civil society and BDS activities. Therefore, the new setup needed to achieve two goals: first, ensuring that Israeli governmental agencies had full access to projects and action plans across all three phases, and second, creating a degree of separation between the government and the Zionist and pro-Israel civil society organisations it sought to enlist. This need for distance was driven not only by the report’s reception—Western and European donors dismissed it for lacking concrete evidence of terrorist connections—but also by the reluctance of several targeted organisations to accept direct funding from the Israeli government. This was the case especially in the U.S., where federal legislation regulates funding from “foreign entities,” i.e., other states (Pink 2020; Horovitz 2018a; Landau 2020).

In a supreme example of the settler state’s ability to adapt and constantly renew its strategies and methods, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs established a “public-benefit company” in 2017—essentially functioning as an NGO—tasked with combating BDS while serving as an intermediary. According to Micah Lakin Avni, Chairman of the Board

of the organisation now known as *Voices of Israel* (formerly *Kela Shlomo* and *Concert*), the initiative's goal is to construct a comprehensive strategic overview of the individuals and groups involved in delegitimising Israel: identifying who they are, what they are doing effectively, and how best to counter their efforts. Once this landscape is mapped, the next step is to coordinate and fund a targeted counterstrategy. By 2018, several priority areas for such strategic responses had already been identified. Generally, Zionist pro-Israel organisations different "skill sets" would create synergies through collaboration, especially in regards to information gathering. For this purpose, Voices of Israel had been working to set up an infrastructure for data collection in the "delegitimisation world"; to figure out how to analyse it and how to disseminate it within the network (Horovitz 2018b). As such, this description of the first few steps in the organisation's counter-strategy clearly describes the first out of three phases previously presented in the flowchart, being production of data, i.e., "evidence" for narrative construction. While Voice of Israel's website is unavailable at the time of writing, a considerable amount of data was collected from it already in March of 2024. Back then, the organisation described itself as "supporting and empowering the global pro-Israel community":

Voices of Israel Ltd. (PBC) is a public benefit company. The fundamental goals of Voices of Israel are to enhance the image of Israel in the global arena and combat delegitimisation and new antisemitism worldwide, using tools of public diplomacy. Voices of Israel provides funding to like-minded groups that promote programs consistent with the objectives of Voices of Israel. Voices of Israel supports and fosters cooperation within the network of pro-Israel organisations in Israel and abroad, using a range of tools, such as mapping, planning, and research; organising delegations of thought leaders to Israel; facilitating social media engagement and campaigns; empowering initiatives of organisations in the pro-Israel network; building professional capabilities and advancing innovative and creative endeavours that promote a positive perception of Israel and combat hate and incitement against the State of Israel (Voices of Israel 2024).

In regards to its funding, Voices of Israel explains that its "activity and funding are based on a partnership between philanthropists, organisations and a joint venture agreement with the State of Israel and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Voices of Israel 2024). As such, the description has not changed from that of Concert a few years earlier, and Voices of Israel has effectively allowed individuals and organisations worldwide to receive Israeli

funding for projects aimed at bolstering the settler state's reputation without drawing attention to themselves, thereby shielding both the government and regime-loyal Zionist organisations from direct financial ties (Pink 2020; Horovitz 2018a; Landau 2020). The Israeli government's relationship to this public benefit company is based on a "cooperative agreement" (Pink 2020; Horovitz 2018a). Back in late 2018, Lakin Avni gave an in-depth interview with the Times of Israel (Horovitz 2018b) about the initiative, where he explicitly described the organisation's close partnership with the Israeli government:

You can't talk about Israel's image, or combating the delegitimisation of Israel, without the government actually having some kind of involvement in that [...]. [There] are lots of challenges working with the government—and every day I learn about new ones, [...] [but] to my mind you can't address this in a major way without them having a seat at the table.

If you have an organisation whose mission is to protect the state and to build up the state's image, and it's not working in full cooperation with the state, then it can't really be doing its job [...].

In the end, the goal of the counter-strategy, according to Lakin Avni, is to empower the pro-Israel community and "help with public pro-Israel campaigns," as he explains, "through existing organisations—marketing and public relations, getting messaging across" (Horovitz 2018b). In other words, to disseminate the produced data/"evidence." As such, the second set out actions in the counter-strategy are a clear description of the second phase as illustrated in the flowchart at the beginning of the chapter: being the dissemination of constructed narratives and produced "evidence."

R15 has explained that the dissemination phase and operationalisation phase both follow a certain pattern, which he described as a "sophisticated system" of direct and indirect activities and actions:

It extends to lobby organisations, to parliamentarians, to pro-Israeli groups, to journalists, that are also invoking allegations of "antisemitism," of "terrorism." [...] Mainly the pressure comes from the capitals. And the capitals, I sense there is a very organised lobbying that is taking place with parliamentarians, with journalists. So, it is usually how the dynamic works. It is usually... like an Israeli NGO or something that supports Israel, a Zionist NGO, like the NGO Monitor. They make connection with right-wing parliamentarians. Usually right-wing or even ultra-right

parliamentarians. And they feed them with this information, propaganda. And then these parliamentarians, they go to the government for questioning. So, the government comes to their office here, the [donor] representative office in Ramallah, and then they come to us. So, then we have to give these explanations. And of course, the representative office say they do not like to be questioned too much by their leaders. And the government does not like to be questioned by the parliament. So, it is an annoying process, even if at the end it does not even lead to cutting the funding, but it is annoying and disruptive.

As described by the interviewee, the anti-delegitimisation network operates through a sophisticated system of dissemination and lobbying, following a chain in which fabricated “evidence” and constructed narratives are first circulated among members of European parliaments. These members then raise the issues with their respective governments, who in turn pass the concerns on to donor agencies and/or embassies in Palestine. These agencies, now compelled to respond, initiate investigations by bringing the allegations to the targeted Palestinian organisations, who are then required to address and disprove them. However, the analysis of the data reveals that in parallel to this formal dissemination route, the “evidence” is sometimes delivered directly to donor agencies, skipping the parliamentary and governmental stages altogether. These two approaches are strategically used in combination to accelerate and widen the circulation to amplify impact.

According to the European Legal Support Center, certain actors within the network play a dedicated role in amplifying the distribution of reports produced by entities such as NGO Monitor (The Rights Forum 2021). This clearly exemplifies the dissemination infrastructure embedded within—and extending beyond—the broader anti-delegitimisation network, which has been described by Voices of Israel as a key component in its counterstrategy, as it aims to generate synergies by coordinating the diverse “skill sets” of its members. In other words, identified narratives are disseminated to key actors in a very structured and systematic way.

The data collected and analysed in this research indicates that the relationship between pro-Israel NGOs and the Israeli settler state is not merely instrumental to anti-delegitimisation efforts—it forms the very engine driving them. As Tzahi Gavrieli, former Director of the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, put it, the Ministry’s strategy to combat delegitimisation required “technology, data, a civil society engine and digital assets, [...] infrastructure and a coordinated plan” (Harkov 2021). This quote tells us a couple of things.

Firstly, it exemplifies how numerous, previously separated, battlespaces merge in an endocolonial environment. Even if access to land and natural resources continue to be key points in the matrix of control (Halper 2000) and the driving force behind the settler colonial logic of elimination, it is clear that the settler state has expanded its practical settler strategies, now utilising both digital spaces and civic spaces as colonial battlegrounds. Secondly, the quotes tell us that, as previously shown, the “civil society engine” is of crucial importance in these battlespaces, and thus underscores how central civil society actors have become to the Israeli settler state’s broader delegitimisation campaigns. In the words of R4:

The Israeli government is behind them and feeds them with lies. So, it is decorated with some organisations. In Netherlands. In Belgium. In Geneva, in the U.S. Everywhere, everywhere. They invest a lot in that. A lot. A lot.

The close ties between the Israeli state level and Zionist proxy organisation are revealed not only through the origins of Voices of Israel and the clear alignment between its initiatives and the strategic goals of the Israeli settler state, but also through a detailed analysis of its gatekeepers, founders and staff members. From the outset, Voices of Israel’s leadership and stakeholders included a number of individuals with links to the Israeli settler state and government, such as:

Former Foreign Ministry director-general Dore Gold; ex-ambassador to the UN and UK Ron Prosor; former IDF military intelligence chief, INSS [Institute for National Security Studies] think tank head and would-be Labor Defense Minister Amos Yadlin; ex-senior IDF intelligence officer and prime ministerial foreign media adviser Miri Eisin; and former national security adviser Yaakov Amidror (Horovitz 2018a).

In addition, further detailed data analysis has revealed that another of the organisation’s founders worth mentioning is Yossi Kuperwasser, given his senior position as a former head of the Research Division of IDF Military Intelligence and Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs from 2009 to 2014 (Horovitz 2018a). Kuperwasser was reportedly working with Marcus Itamar, the founder and Director of Palestine Media Watch, to develop an “incitement index” for the Ministry of Strategic Affairs back in 2010 (Keinon 2010). Other key figures in Voices of Israel, and previously Concert, include Navah Edelstein and Lior Weintraub (Voices of Israel 2024). Edelstein, a former fellow at the pro-Israel organisation StandWithUs, is currently a member of NGO Monitor’s amuta

(NGO Monitor 2025c). Lior Weintraub, who later became the CEO of The Israel Project, previously served as chief of staff at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, from 2008-2012 (Jerusalem Post 2016).

Apart from several of the stakeholders having clear connections to the Israeli settler government, the initiative also has a steering committee where government officials are represented. Amongst other things, they oversee the budget (Horovitz 2018b). After the closure of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs (which meant the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took over the coordination efforts) the organisation has, according to Micah Lakin Avni, entered a new phase in its work (Haaretz 2022). What this all suggests, is that the stated strategy of Voices of Israel, combined with the direct involvement of the Israeli government and key actors within the anti-delegitimisation network—evidenced by overlapping gatekeepers, staff members, stakeholders, allocated budget and coordinated efforts—demonstrates that this public-benefit company plays a central role in several of the phases in the anti-delegitimisation initiatives fundamental to the criminalisation process in Palestine.

In front of a Knesset committee, Gerald Steinberg described the essence of the settler strategies behind the anti-delegitimisation network in a telling way, and ultimately describing why an actor like Voices of Israel is so important for the network's viability: "With complete respect for the Jewish Agency, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other public institutions. It has to come from the civil society. NGO to NGO [...] then there can of course be space for collaboration, information sharing, and the development of cooperative initiatives between governmental and non-governmental organisations" (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018c).

This quote illustrates what Aked describes as the power of the state-private network: regime-loyal Zionist and pro-Israeli civil society organisations do not wield any inherent or mysterious power; rather, their influence is the result of a collective effort designed to supplement the actions of the Israeli government (Aked 2023: 10). The goal is to disseminate information as widely as possible, and considering the large number of organisations involved in the network, it quickly becomes an echo chamber. At that point, whether the accusations are true, partially true, or entirely false becomes irrelevant—the narrative takes on a life of its own and spreads autonomously (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018d).

6.2.1 Beyond anti-delegitimation: expanding initiatives and influencing laws

However, the analysis reveals that these efforts go beyond trying to pressure foreign aid agencies to stop funding Palestinian civil society organisations. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel has raised concerns that many of these organisations—several of which hold Economic and Social Council accreditation—not only work to delegitimise civil society initiatives such as the BDS movement, but also play a direct role in shaping Israeli state policy, including the drafting of discriminatory legislation (UN Human Rights Council 2023: 4):

They support Government officials in fundraising to cover legal fees relating to litigation; provide staff members in election campaigns; collaborate on the drafting of government bills; and the establishment of parliamentary lobbies; and engage in well-organised smear campaigns against human rights organisations and individuals, alongside government actions targeting the same organisations.

In other words, the coordination of the work within the anti-delegitimation network does not only include “evidence” production and dissemination, but organisations like NGO Monitor appear to have high influence on the legislative process and drafting of new laws. For example, back in 2009, Gerald Steinberg wrote in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz about the efforts of Israeli human rights NGOs B’Tselem, Breaking the Silence, and others, to spread knowledge about the situation in the occupied territories with the help of foreign funding. He argued that it is indefensible to use foreign tax funds to finance such a “political war against Israel” (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018c). Consequently, Steinberg suggested that the Israeli government should draft a law that requires complete financial transparency, including the purpose of each grant, when it is utilised, and what it is used for—whether it be for conferences, political protests, ads, or something else entirely (Ibid).

Evidently, such a bill was passed by the Israeli Knesset two years later, specifically designed to attack groups who oppose the Israeli occupation and its settlements. In addition, a plan to tax organisations' revenue at a rate of sixty-five percent on funds received from “foreign governmental entities” has recently been examined. In effect, such a law would make it economically unsustainable for organisations with partnerships with foreign aid agencies and other multilateral organisations to continue operations. Other bills examined include a law prohibiting the public display of the flags of terrorist groups, an “enemy

country,” or the Palestinian Authority, and a bill prohibiting the recording of troops while on duty (UN Human Rights Council 2023: 5).

Yet, these efforts and legislative tools are continuously evolving, just as the categories of criminalised groups are ever expanding to gradually include larger segments of the population (Weizman 2024b: 4). Immediately after the October 7 attacks, the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism started a new set of efforts. The two agencies opened a “war room” responsible for “managing the public diplomacy effort in conjunction with pro-Israel network around the world” (Ministry of Diaspora Affairs 2023). By the end of February, 2024, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Israel Katz, commented on the new efforts and said that Israel is “in an existential war and [...] will strive to work hard in cooperation with the amazing people who have been fighting for Israel on social networks since 7 October” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024a). Accordingly, the war room, which includes representatives of civil society organisations and openly admits that it works as part of the campaign against delegitimisation, creates “public diplomacy materials” and distribute them to network members. The operations room is in regular contact with agencies such as the National Information Headquarters, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ibid).

Another component within this new set of efforts is a designated budget for new projects and communication campaigns. The Minister of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, Amichai Shikli, and Ministry Director General, Avi Cohen Skally, agreed on the creation of a variety of “campaigns against entities, organisations and individuals who perpetrate antisemitism, and on dedicated campaigns to strengthen the position of the State of Israel through, among other means, deepening the support of civil society” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024a).

While information about the specific campaigns and projects are currently not available on the ministries’ websites, a call for papers for the initiative could still be found on the Voices of Israel’s website back in March 2024, as well as on the official website of the Ministry of Diaspora and Combating Antisemitism. The initiative, headlined as “Winning the war over the Israeli story”, was, evidently, a response to the challenges Israel was, and still is, facing in regards to world public opinion after the onset of the genocide in Gaza. The initiative promised monetary grants to dozens of small to mid-size “civilian information initiatives,” enabling them to “[operate] since the outbreak of the war to preserve and

expand activities and assist the State of Israel in the battle for world public opinion” (Voices of Israel 2024).

Although the organisations funded through this initiative are not publicly listed on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora and Combating Antisemitism, the call for proposals clearly reflects the initiative’s alignment with the *modus operandi* of the anti-delegitimisation network. It emphasises the production of targeted material, its dissemination among network members, and the strengthening of partnerships with (pro-Israel) civil society actors. One key actor involved in amplifying such material is the “troll farm” Act.il—an initiative organised by an Israeli college and financed by conservative American billionaire Sheldon Adelson (Schüllerqvist and Gezelius 2018c). Act.il, along with NGO Monitor and JCFA, was among the organisations that received funding from Voices of Israel (at the time known as Concert) through the Genesis Prize initiative in 2019 (Genesisprize 2019).

Today, Act.il has developed into the Act-IL app, which send out “daily missions” to its community. These missions involve liking, sharing, commenting or reporting content on social media, sending an email or signing a petition (Abba Eban Institute n.d.). The initiative is headed by Mark Regev, the Prime Minister’s Senior Advisor for Foreign Affairs and International Communications between 2020-2021 and the Prime Minister’s Advisor and International Spokesperson from 2007-2016. He is a veteran ambassador that has served in the UK, Hong Kong, Washington DC and Beijing. On top of that, he also was the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem 2004-2007 (Abba Eban Institute 2020). Following the events of October 7, 2023, Mark Regev took a leave of absence to rejoin the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, where he served for four months as a senior advisor to the Prime Minister and spokesperson to the international press (Abba Eban Institute 2020).

This chapter has clearly shown that a strong collaboration within the state-private anti-delegitimisation network already existed before October 7, 2023. The analysis highlights that the Israeli settler state continues to invest in and expand the activities of the anti-delegitimisation network. The statements regarding new initiatives aimed at constructing and disseminating narratives that aid the Israeli settler state in the battle for world public opinion, shows that the narrative battle is still considered imperative for the settler colonial polity and its survival. Secondly, it points towards an expansion of the already ongoing

efforts to delegitimise, criminalise and ultimately erase the Palestinian narrative and those who promote it through civil society initiatives. This is evidenced by the close connections between key actors involved in launching the call for papers—namely, the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism and Voices of Israel—the initiative’s clear focus on civil society efforts aligned with anti-delegitimation goals, the revolving door of staff between Act.il and the Prime Minister’s Office, and the fact that Act.il had already received funding from Voices of Israel as early as 2018, pointing to an already established partnership.

Just as the settler colonial polity will change and adapt its strategies to the native resistance throughout the different phases of the settler colonial progression towards this final “triumph,” the strategies utilised in the criminalisation process targeting civil society organisations in historic Palestine has, according to the organisations interviewed as part of this research, gone through different phases. R1 explains:

The strategy has changed. The overall strategy is the same. But of course, it had different phases, which even the spokesperson of NGO Monitor acknowledged in an interview. In the beginning, when Israel put eight Palestinian civil society actors on the Israeli terrorist list, the spokesperson of NGO Monitor said that they are now in the third and last phase of their work. Which of course means that there was a phase one, which through their perspective was successful. And then there was a phase two that was successful, and now they're on phase three. And, if you look at it, it's in a way what happened to the BDS movement. Even if you look at it more broadly, Israel stopped engaging within the international human rights bodies since a long time.

What this suggests is that, in addition to the strategies described above—such as utilising the court system to produce “evidence”, disseminate “terrorist” narratives, and enacting discriminatory laws—is that the settler colonial polity employs a different strategy specifically in response to direct criticism from human rights organisations, both within and outside historic Palestine. Reflecting on the overall purpose of the anti-delegitimation network, which seeks to discredit opponents and deflect attention from the crimes committed under Israel’s colonial rule, Palestinian civil society organisations have observed that when all other tactics fail, Israel resorts to a final strategy: discrediting not only specific actors, such as Palestinian civil society organisations or political parties, but

in fact, the entire system, including global governance institutions like the UN. R3 believes that this tactic is a logical approach:

It's the same thing, you know? I like to simplify things. So, if we get into an argument, I will claim that you don't know anything. I discredit you. Another way of discrediting you is that I go out and I attack you, and try to disconnect you from your friends. I say, why are you with that girl? She's crazy. So, I try to break your relation. But yes, we have our reasons for thinking that this is happening [...] it's one of the tactics.

R7, on the other hand, views this as a deliberate tactic, noting that the Israeli settler state has consistently refused to respond to criticism or documentation of war crimes. This has escalated to the point where Israel has disengaged from certain parts of the UN system entirely:

Israel is simply disengaged from [UN human rights mechanism]. But Israel's strategy was not just to disengage with it, but to discredit the whole system. So, if you look at any report of NGO Monitor, if you look at any report of the Israeli Strategic Affairs Ministry, if today, you look at any report of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, speeches, et cetera, Israel does not engage with any content of criticism. Now, they will not tell you, for instance: "We do not practice apartheid because A, B, C, D." They will not tell you: "Because according to international law, apartheid would require one and two, but we explained that this is the case, this is our situation." So, it's not this. And they simply say that if you say that Israel is an apartheid state, you are antisemitic.

R4 shares a similar example, highlighting how the information collected by Palestinian organisations for advocacy efforts is never challenged directly:

So maybe anything they have, they will use and attack us because we are exposing the policies of the Israeli system. Even in the campaign attacks that we are subjected to since 2006-2005, and until now, they never challenge us in our narrative. They never tell us that we are wrong for this or that reason. They just say that you are terrorist affiliated, terrorist organisation, terrorists. Where is the evidence? We are saying that you are committing a war crime. You tortured Mohammad. Here are the details, you killed Ali. These are the details. This is our narrative. This is our work. And on the other side, the international community come, and believe in our work

and take our information and use it everywhere. Talking about war crimes committed by Israel and asking for accountability, asking for justice.

In the end, this tactic reveals two key reasons for the attacks on Palestinian civil society organisations. On one hand, the settler polity seeks to eliminate and erase the work of these organisations, particularly as their documentation of Israel's colonial warfare tactics and the compound discrimination faced by Palestinians, i.e., their Palestinian narrative, has grown in recent decades. Designating these organisations as terrorist entities and spreading a narrative that links them to terrorism is a strategic tool to achieve this. On the other hand, the delegitimisation itself serves as a distraction from the factual documentation of human rights abuses, war crimes, and apartheid in Palestine produced by these organisations. Thus, this distraction renders the criticism secondary and irrelevant, effectively negating the need for direct engagement with the data and content they present. Naturally, the next chapter will examine in detail how these tactics have impacted the work of Palestinian civil society organisations in practice, in addition to analysing how the donors have responded to the increasing level of delegitimisation and criminalisation of the work of their development partners in Palestine.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the key strategies employed by the Israeli settler state in the production and dissemination of hegemonic narratives that delegitimise Palestinian civil society actors, labelling them “terrorists” and “antisemites.” The chapter has described how the fabrication of “evidence” of alleged “terrorist” connections is central to this process, and how it in turn serves to justify discriminatory laws and counterinsurgency measures that underpin the criminalisation of Palestinian organisations. A crucial aspect of this strategy is the role of manufactured civil society actors operating within a coordinated state-private network, tasked with generating and spreading much of this “evidence.”

The chapter has also shown that this overarching strategy unfolds in three distinct phases. It begins with the production of “evidence” that aligns with settler-colonial narratives to target specific actors. This is followed by the dissemination of this fabricated material, creating the conditions for the final phase, in which the Israeli state operationalises criminalisation through direct actions aimed at suppressing Palestinian civil society organisations and exerting pressure on their partners and funders.

Of key importance to this overall strategy, is the network of Zionist and pro-Israeli organisations supporting and collaborating with the Israeli government, i.e., the anti-delegitimisation network, as the Israeli government has been depending more and more on Zionist civil society organisations in all three phases of the strategy. Two of the most significant governmental agencies that collaborate within the anti-delegitimisation network are the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism and the former Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Diplomacy (now incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In effect, the collaboration between state actors and non-state actors within the network is managed by a “public-benefit company” that was set up by the government in 2017.

The regime-loyal Zionist civil society organisations, that are the engine of the anti-delegitimisation network, have emerged after the last wave of civil society transformation in historic Palestine. The chapter has described how they are distinguished by not only their connections to the Israeli government, but also by the new strategies that they are equipped with. They have made themselves known among Palestinian civil society and Western and European donors for their frequent reports, seminars, articles, op-eds, parliamentary issues, debates, and other lobby activities through which they accuse donors of funding Palestinian “terrorism,” “antisemitism” or “corruption.” Lies and half-truths are ceaselessly used to build a narrative that make organisations appear suspicious and guilty by association. Produced sources are then used, i.e., multiplied, in numerous reports and “research” papers by a set of other organisations in the anti-delegitimisation network, creating a sophisticated system of triangulation that make the crucial assessment of their validity difficult.

Chapter 7. Theme 3: Development Diffused: Criminalisation and Solidarity in Practice

This chapter aims to examine how the strategies deployed by the Israeli government and other Zionist non-state actors within the anti-delegitimisation network, as described in the previous chapter, impact Palestinian civil society organisations in practice, both in terms of *direct* physical violence, such as arrests and destruction of office material, and *indirect* violence and mechanisms of control, such as defamation, delegitimisation and the severing of donor-recipient relationships. This chapter will also explore the various, and sometimes contradictory, responses from Western and European donor agencies, including the growing political conditions in partnership agreements. Lastly, the chapter outlines relevant counterstrategies developed by Palestinian civil society.

7.1 Structures of criminalisation and unthinkable solidarity

As shown in the context of Palestine, the political goals of donors have been to fund and sponsor a paradigm aimed at establishing security coordination with the settler state, as well as a neoliberal agenda in the economic sphere (Tartir 2015; UNESCWA 2022). But it is exactly this prioritisation of political interests over true solidarity with Palestinians—which ultimately makes donors sensitive to (political) pressure from Israel—*combined* with the high economic dependency, and especially the widespread aid dependency among Palestinian organisations, that has presented Israel with an opportunity to exert its colonial power within the peacebuilding agenda. By manipulating the engagement, or disengagement, of Western donors, Israel can effectively control international development interventions in Palestine.

As mentioned in Chapter 5 and 6, Israel has, together with actors within the state-private anti-delegitimisation network, increasingly been accusing Palestinian organisations of “corruption”, “antisemitism” and connections to “terrorism.” These allegations have then been used to pressure Western and European donors to sever their donor-recipient relationship with their Palestinian partners. This has been made possible utilising a number of settler colonial strategies which operate within multiple colonial structures, aimed at making solidarity with the indigenous population both untenable and unthinkable (Collins 2011). The research has shown that especially the global proliferation of counterterrorism measures that have increased during the last two decades (Aked, Jones and Miller 2019)

have created a conducive environment for Israel in this type of criminalisation campaign against civil society.

According to Collins, these structures of criminalisation become particularly aggressive during times of ideological crisis. While it is evident that the growing crisis for Zionism involves “direct state repression of individuals and organisations” (Collins 2011: 148) engaged in solidarity-based politics in Palestine, this nonetheless raises the question of whether Western and European development aid to Palestine is, in actuality, based on the type of solidarity that is required for achieving true global justice. Evidently, this research suggests that it is not. However, as Collins argues, the “particularly fraught politics of Israel/Palestine mean that all solidarities with the Palestinian people are dangerous by definition, especially in places where support for Israeli settler colonialism has traditionally been strong,” i.e., particularly in the West (Ibid: 147-148). As the most fundamental structure working to render Palestine solidarity unthinkable and untenable is the structure of exceptionalism, which precludes any critical analysis of Israel as a settler state, it follows that the dissemination of constructed settler narratives is focused on precisely Western and European parliaments, governments, and aid agencies.

7.1.1 Physical and legal attacks on offices and employees

The criminalisation of civil society organisations in Palestine has had practical implications and consequences on multiple levels and across various spaces simultaneously. The data reveals that physical attacks on both the material assets of targeted organisations and their employees are common. At the organisational level, one of the most drastic measures is the closure of the entire office and/or the outlawing of the organisation. One of the most recent attacks on organisations in Palestine was, as has been mentioned earlier, the designation of six Palestinian civil society organisations in 2021. The designation was reportedly based on the organisations’ alleged connections to PFLP, while the “evidence” was built on coerced confessions from interrogations with two former staff members of the Union of Health Work Committees, another Palestinian civil society organisation accused by Israel of having “terrorist” connections (Lund and Browne 2024). All of the designated organisations have faced direct, violent assaults, and several of them were raided by the Israeli military in 2021, resulting in property destruction and the seizure of devices. In August 2022, all six organisations were raided again, with more devices confiscated and additional property destroyed. The entrances were sealed with

iron plates, and the military left behind notes declaring the organisations unlawful and ordering that they were shut down (Lund 2023). R4 says that “they came, raided the office and stole some computers and some files [...]. I received a call [...] and I came to the office. I found that they left, but the door was broken.” R18 remembers multiple attacks:

I remember they raided our offices many times, 2009, 2012, more than one or two times. It was not easy for us, especially after 18th of August, 2022, when they raided our offices and they closed it. And in our case, they confiscated everything from the office, and they damaged the rest. The tables, the files, they took all the electronics.

For R18, the latest attacks were worse than the previous ones, especially in regards to how the employees were treated:

At the beginning, they called 15 of our employees for a direct interview [...] and some of the women decided to go. When they go, a lot of it is threats that they will be arrested. And it's the same scenario that they repeated to everyone. They threatened them, and because we are mothers also, all of them were threatened with their children: “We will damage your life, we will target your children.” They create a fear among us.

Until now, the reason and the evidence [against us] are in a so called “secret file”, even as the accused we didn't obtain it, we don't know what it says. And when three of the other organisations went to a hearing in court, they were also told that it's a “secret file” and that they can't obtain it. Israel said in the media that the six organisations are linked to be PFLP, but they didn't provide any clear evidence about this. They arrested a lot of our employees and volunteers. And lastly, our chairperson. They arrested her after the designation and before the designation two times. Now I have the pictures of our colleagues on the wall, [...] all are under administrative detention. This means that there is no evidence. There is not. They are still talking about “secret files.”

R18 continues to describe her own experience from the interrogation and the accusations she faced, despite the clear lack of evidence:

The designation was like an earthquake, the way they attacked our organisation. For example, they said that the directors will be arrested for 10 years. Other

employees for five years. Anyone who has a relation with the organisation is also considered a terrorist.

After the closure of the office in 18th of August 2022 [...] they called me, and asked me to have a meeting with them at nine o'clock. I decided not to go, and I closed my mobile. After five minutes, he called my daughter. [...] I decided not to take the call. They called me again, and said: "If you don't come, I will arrest your daughter." I decided to go. When I meet them, it is the same thing, the same threats, the same scenarios: "We will damage your life." Why will you damage my life? You will destroy everything, why? "Because your organisation has ties with PFLP." Why, I asked them. I didn't know that my organisation has this tie. I work there since many years, and we work in women's issues, we work with children, and we are not a political party.

A lot of our volunteers and employees, they raided their houses, at night, saying the same thing: "You must stop working with this organisation." And sometimes they collect some information, and they say: "We know that yesterday you were in Ramallah, what were you doing?" This is not easy for us.

These quotes are examples of a larger policy through which several figures from Palestinian civil society have been targeted, incarcerated, and even deported. One example is Addameer lawyer Salah Hammouri, who was arbitrarily arrested in 2022 and held under administrative detention without trial for months. Meanwhile, the Israeli authorities revoked his residency in Jerusalem on the basis of "breach of allegiance", and in late 2022 he was ultimately deported to France (Lund 2023). Another example is Khitam Sa'afin, the President of UPWC, who was sentenced last year by a military court in the occupied West Bank to 16 months imprisonment, after nearly 15 months of administrative detention, for her role as a director in one of the designated organisations. One further example worth mentioning is the case of Mohammad el-Halabi, Gaza director for World Vision International, who was arrested by the Israeli authorities in 2016, and indicted on terrorism-related charges. According to the UN Human Rights Council, his trial raised serious issues of "unfairness and breach of due process, including evidence not presented in open court, credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and pressure to confess under duress" (UN Human Rights Council 2023: 21).

Another common way to target the directors and staff members of Palestinian civil society organisations is to place them under a travel ban. R18 was unaware that she was placed under a travel ban after her interrogation, as she says that she “tried to travel in September 2022, but they returned me from the Jordan border.” She also adds that there is a travel ban for several of the organisation’s board members. R7 on the other hand, recalls that he was put under a travel ban as soon as he became the director of the organisation, and that the travel ban itself was made possible through the “evidence” production described in Chapter 6:

When I became the director of [the organisation] in 2006, I got a travel ban. The [Israeli] Ministry of Foreign Affairs would answer that they used the information from NGO Monitor, so it was clear for us that [the network] was a stick with which the government could beat Palestinian civil society.

R6’s travel ban came just before he was supposed to participate in an international meeting on the issue of apartheid in Palestine:

We've been closed twice by the Israelis [...] and now I'm travel banned of course. I've been travel banned for one year. Although I have two citizenships, I also have a U.S. passport. I was arrested in 2019 by the Israelis [...] and put under administrative detention. I was arrested one week before participating in a convention on apartheid. That was before the work of Amnesty. I was part of the efforts there of guiding that. And two days after that I was supposed to address the European Parliament, [...] but I was arrested and the website of the organisation was targeted, it was taken down, of course. I was sentenced for membership of an illegal organisation. They have nothing on the organisation; the NGO Monitor talks about my case. But there's nothing that can be said about the organisation.

R10 has also been imprisoned for his “membership” of an organisation, and after his release he was exiled from Jerusalem:

I was working for [an organisation] that was closed down twice. And I was arrested for that. In 2015, I was arrested for being the director of youth programs at [another organisation]. Their case builds on linking the organisation to the PFLP but, in the details, it's like saying that what we were doing, through summer camps, clowning, health education, trips, travel, was linked to PFLP. At that time,

they changed the law, so that promotion of a terrorist organisation became equal to membership. This is how I ended up being in jail, for being a “member.”

They arrested someone, and during the interrogation, he said that we went on a trip. I remember the trip; it was literally for fun. And the kids were singing national songs in the bus. One of these songs? It's for the PFLP. Also, they assumed that the organisation belonged to the PFLP because the founder of the organisation, according to them, was “known as a PFLP member”. He passed away in 2008. They also said that some employees were arrested for PFLP activity, you know, very small details. It's not really linked. It has no meaning. It has no direct indication. But it was a lot of information that was gathered in a similar way.

In other cases, employees have not necessarily been arrested or put under a travel ban, but they have nonetheless been harassed. R7 shares an example from his organisation:

There was his case with one of our staff members working with the submission to the ICC, she was based in the Hauge. Her [...] family received a call saying that their daughter was under threat and that she should leave her position. They asked who was calling and they said they were the Palestinian intelligence. Initially they talked to the police [in the European country where they lived] but they didn't do anything, so I received a call from the father and he told me what had happened. Then the colleague received a call from a person who introduced himself as being from the Dutch Ministry of Health. He says that they want to get some information for a study on health issues. That they had selected her number just by a random sample, and ask her for her mobile number. She didn't think that this is part of the ongoing harassment, so she gave them the number. But after that, she started receiving calls from people saying that they were intelligence. That they were watching her: “You are here, there, we see you, your house is there, we are sitting next to you at the corner of the coffee shop”, things like that. She collapsed.

R7 continues to explain how the employee continued to be targeted in multiple ways, and that the Dutch government later on confirmed that a state with especially advanced technology that was behind at least some of the attacks:

They also disseminated 40,000 leaflets under the name and logo of [our organisation]. Everywhere in the city. They put these things in the mailboxes,

saying that we are interested in issues relating to immigrants, refugees, and the Muslim community. Asking people to donate any additional toys, bicycles, things like that, that they had. And to put it in front of this house. And they put the address of our colleague's house. At that time, our colleague was on her way home from France. When she came, she found all of these things in front of the house. She contacted the police. The police in the Netherlands, they didn't take it seriously at the beginning. Then her computer was hacked and damaged completely. And through her computer, they hacked the computer of Amnesty International, that was also working with the ICC case. It was the Amnesty program of protection that detected it. And they became concerned. They said: "We were hacked through your computer". After that they put her name and number on a website for sexual services. And she starts receiving calls. For two weeks, she kept silent, because she was afraid. But when I hear about it all, I flew over there. I met with the police there, and we hired a big name of a lawyer [...] who also received funeral roses that came to her from Amsterdam. And later on, during the investigation, they discovered that the Rosa Shop sent them. But with PayPal from Luxembourg. Then they tried to retrieve the call that she received from the so-called Ministry of Health, but they couldn't find it in the system, which means that it was removed by someone. The Dutch later confirmed that those behind it are more advanced than them. And they said the conclusion was that the Palestinians cannot be behind it. They concluded that it was a sophisticated state, but they didn't name that state. That's what they said.

According to R6 and R7, the ICC case and the detection of the Pegasus spyware is closely connected to the designation itself, not least in regards to the timing of it. R7 explains:

One week before the designation, we discovered that they are using the Pegasus spyware against our field workers in Jerusalem. We discovered that through the help from our partners in Dublin and Canada. They are experts in that field. We checked the mobiles for our organisation. They discovered one that was infected. And the other one is the one belonging to the director of [another designated organisation]. And then another two people. I tried to make a test on anything relating to the ICC, so we checked the mobiles of two people in the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs working on the ICC case. We found that they were also infected. We kept things quiet. And we tried to do a press conference to

declare the findings. And I think the first date we planned was a Tuesday. But the Citizen's Lab, in Canada, and Frontline Defenders, they said that they need more time in order to give a full technical report. And for me, two things were clear. One, why did the designation come in a hurry? They did this because of the planned press conference. Because we discovered Pegasus, and I'm sure that they were monitoring us at that time, and listening to what we decided. Maybe this is what they calculated. You know, just to attack before we attack them.

What this suggests is that the timing of the designation was not only a result of the previous failure to convince foreign donors and governments that the six organisations had strong ties to the PFLP, but also due to an additional push stemming from the exposure of the illegal use of the Pegasus spyware. While the surveillance was likely conducted to gather evidence against the now-designated organisations, Wessam Ahmad, staff member at Al-Haq, has previously explained that the fact that the use of the spyware was detected played a role in Israel proceeding with the designation, “in order to distract and create fear towards engaging with the civil society” (Lund 2023). In other words, the timing of the designation corresponds well with the overall strategy of discredit and distract, as described in the previous chapter. The data shows that there are a number of key oppression and criminalisation tactics that have been used as part of this strategy: namely harassment; threats of violence against family members; arrests; coerced confessions; travel bans (especially when directors or staff members are supposed to attend international conferences or meetings); surveillance, including hacking of devices; destruction and confiscation of assets and material; closing of offices; year-long imprisonment of staff members; revocation of residence permits; deportation, and ultimately, of course, terrorist designations. In the end, this set of diverse criminalisation practices and tactics is focused on those actors who are deemed to have the capacity to challenge the Israeli settler narrative, by silencing and containing their Palestinian counter-narrative. Yet, the effectiveness of such measures and tactics will always be dependent on the responses from the receiving audiences, which in this case, are the donors.

7.1.2 Practical dissemination efforts

As R13 puts it, “the main purpose of this designation is to scare everyone from continuing the partnership with our work.” The attacks on Palestinian civil society organisations,

their offices, and staff must therefore not only be seen as direct attempts to shut down their operations, but also as public demonstrations—a clear message to those supporting them. In other words, to make solidarity with Palestine both untenable and unthinkable. As R5 describes it, the physical attack on the organisation was motivated by the pressure it would put on the donors:

All of us, we reopened our offices and kept working from our offices [...]. Most of the property, in our case now, is back, but they're still pressuring the donors. For example, some of the donors are still facing challenges internally in their own countries, in their own context. At the end of the day, the main purpose of the whole designation and attack against us is to dry our resources. To silence us by cutting our funds. In the end, we cannot survive. We will close; we will be shut down. And this is the purpose.

R12 agrees that the main strategy is to dry up the resources of the targeted organisations, but also adds that it can be a starting point for an even more destructive process:

[We were targeted] many times but we were not designated. The whole rationale is delegitimisation and defunding. Israel is trying to delegitimise our work as a human rights organisation. That's why they targeted donors directly, and they targeted governments, again, trying to terrify them. Now with the designation of the six organisations, I think [the donors] know it's bullshit. The head of EU mission in Palestine, Sven, was the first to visit [one of the designated organisations] and meet with the people there and show solidarity. Look, solidarity is important. Very much appreciated. You were the first to show that this is not acceptable. But on the other hand, it's not solidarity [that is the point]. It is to resend this because it could be a starting point of destroying the whole civil society.

According to R7, the criminalisation process and targeting of the organisations can be divided into several phases. He agrees that the main goal of the strategy has been to dry the resources and make it impossible for them to continue their work. However, he explains that for several years, that strategy seemed to not be effective, and he started fearing that the campaign would therefore escalate, to either a terrorist designation—which is exactly what happened 7 years later—or even assassinations:

They have tried to dry our resources, silence us, more than that we did not receive any questions about accusations from partners or donors for 6-7 years. It seemed like they had lost that phase. In 2015, I told my board of directors: they failed to dry our resources, but maybe they will come and use the last bullet in their hand. Maybe designate us or assassinate me as a terrorist.

R5 shares the same analysis, pointing to the fact that the designation worked as a desperate escalation of an already ongoing—and at least partly failing—process to target civil society:

In the end, all this smear campaign didn't go as they wanted. Most of the donors, they would believe that it's just for harassment. And, they were not taking actions based on the NGO Monitor's reports. And this is why they needed the designation, because it's the last tool in their hands. What other thing they can do to arrest us? They know that it will not work.

Part of why this strategy has been viable—and somewhat effective—is that European and Western donors often lack a deep understanding of the cultural context in Palestine. R4 explains how Israeli government actors, along with actors within the anti-delegitimisation network, can influence donors despite lacking actual evidence to back up their allegations, largely due to this cultural insensitivity, “they have nothing. But for foreigners, for anyone outside the context, such kind of claims work. So, they keep lying, lying, lying.”

According to R15, the donors' lack of cultural sensitivity in Palestine is particularly noticeable when compared to their other projects around the world. In effect, this cultural insensitivity, R15 argues, leads to self-censorship among organisations:

We know that this will trigger the Israelis and our name already appears on the NGO Monitor. Some nonsense, but still, we are under the radar. There's nothing solid against [our organisation], but they annoy us. They say: “Oh, this [organisation's] staff member... Three years ago, he wrote something on his Facebook page. He appeared in a condolences house for a Palestinian terrorist.” For a Western audience, they don't understand the context here. For them, when they hear the word Hamas, that rings a bell for them. They don't understand the context, the community, how we live here, our social relations, how everything is connected, how everybody knows everybody. We have extended families. We

find in the same family, [that there's] somebody from Hamas, someone from Fatah. They don't understand also how the government work in Gaza and the West Bank relations. This adds a burden on Palestinian human rights organisations and also on development agencies here, who support Palestinian human rights organisations, because they have to defend their work. They audit and scrutinise in a way that they don't do in other places in the world, but they do it here because they understand they are under the radar themselves.

However, according to R1, this is not just because of cultural insensitivity, but also because of Europe's problematic history:

On the international level, I think that working in Palestine was not, never really, easy compared to other regions in the world, due to the sensitivities concerning the state of Israel regarding Europe's own history of antisemitism. So, the strategy used internationally was that they did not want to respond [to the attacks]: "We do not want to deal with the issue, so that it might disappear on its own. If we react to it, if we engage with it, we only will make it bigger and we will make it stronger." At the same time, I'm not sure if it was a conscious decision to implement this strategy or if it was subconsciously, but this was the main strategy used by the various actors, to not engage with this kind of problem with a hope that it'll disappear on its own. Unfortunately, as we know today, it did not disappear. And it was a huge threat. It was even very successful in changing the relationships between state governments and their own civil society in their countries, and then between those donor organisations and the local Palestinian organisations.

Additionally, one might ask whether this cultural insensitivity is, at least in part, rooted in the colonial legacies of many Western and European countries—legacies that make settler colonial narratives, built on perceptions of Palestinians as less civilised, easier to conceptualise and accept. Nevertheless, some of the most efficient tactics for lobbying and pressuring Western and European agencies and donors appear to be through continuous, and sometimes anonymous, dissemination of allegations and so-called "evidence." This is mainly done through letters and emails that are systematically sent directly to donors. As R7 explains, "all of our partners used to receive letters and emails

from NGO Monitor about us, claiming we were corrupt.” The same letters are sometimes reused over the course of years. This was also the case for R4’s organisation:

I can say that they are repeating themselves the same line. Once, [...] I got a call from the British consulate; they said they would like to see me in an emergency situation. I knew why. So, I prepared the letter that had been sent to them, because I had received it already from all our partners, but not from the British yet. But it was the same letter, the same text. So, I prepared the answers to it that I had written down before. I gave an explanation for everything, including the case of the staff member who was sentenced in 1967, released in 1985 and never has been arrested after that. Israel even gave him pension, and now suddenly they are asking me to report him. They guy from the consulate came; I gave him water [and] the letter. He asked me how I know what is going on. I tell him that they target anyone who work with us. He thanked me and told me to please don't say anything by phone and not to send any documents. He left after a coffee and after two, three hours he had forgotten everything.

R7 also shares a telling example that involves anonymous dissemination (or, rather, under false identity) of “evidence” and allegations of corruption:

They also wrote to the auditors saying that one of their clients are a corrupt organisation. The audit company responded and asked them to send over the information, but they didn't send anything. And then they start sending messages under different names to our partners. They sent the whole team at Sida [the Swedish development agency], not just those working with us. One of the emails said “I would like to inform your partners. I'm a Palestinian. My name is Fadi. I'm working with the Palestinian Prime Minister's office partner in charge with the civil society. I'm so sorry. I can't say this. Even though heart is a broken, the biggest, the oldest, the most prestigious organisation is now under investigation, and we are close to finalise things. It's under investigation due to corruption.” I wrote to the Prime Minister's office. They denied that there was any investigation and said that they wish all organisations would be like [us]. And then he wrote to all of the partners again, saying: “We are so close. I will update you soon. We're finalising our investigation file now.”

And then [...] an Israeli journalist started to investigate everything. I gave her all the emails, all the information. She wrote an article in Haaretz. The so-called Fadi wrote a letter the day after, saying that “You were right. I didn't share my real name, because I am under pressure, and now they closed the file. And now I am at risk. Me and my family. [The director of the organisation] he will go after us.”

Apart from the dissemination efforts being very persistent, the data also shows that the efforts go all the way up to the highest diplomatic level, as in the case of R11:

The director from Danish Church Aid headquarters came to have a meeting with [our organisation]. She told me that every month, the Israeli ambassador would visit her or ask her to go come to his office. Every time he has a claim or allegation against [us]. He would say: “This press release was published by them regarding this report, using the term ‘Mandatory Palestine’,” or “When [they] write Israel, they put it between quotation.” Or “they use the term ‘Palestine 48’ instead of Israel.” She told me that they had “realised that [we] have never written anything in support of the two-state solution.”

And so, I told her: “No, because it's not [our organisation's] role, we are advocating human rights. I leave the political solution, if it is one state, two states, 10 states, for politicians. Our job is to defend human rights. This is our role as civil society.” And at that time, she was convinced and told me: “Oh, great answer, please write it and sign it and send it to me. Every time the ambassador will come to visit me; I will give it to him.”

Moreover, one of the key tactics utilised in these campaigns are to concentrate efforts on the economic aspects of both Palestinian organisations and their funders, as exemplified by the following quote from R4, in which he explains that the organisation's current audit firm has been targeted by a Zionist proxy organisation called UK Lawyers for Israel:

The organisation [that contacted our audit firm] is an Israeli creation. They target anyone working with Palestinians or supporting the Palestinian case. They send their claims to people and publish it on their website. [Our current] audit company has been very much supportive. They continue working with us and they told me later, after they won the case, [...] that: “We received less than 70,000 from you in the seven years, but we lost more than 200,000 during the process.”

This means that not only are the finances of Palestinian civil society organisations targeted, but also those of companies that partner with them. By making it extremely costly to collaborate with Palestinian civil society, the anti-delegitimisation network is, as noted, actively working to make solidarity with Palestine untenable. Some donors have acknowledged that the costs associated with the delegitimisation and criminalisation of their Palestinian partners—through smear campaigns and accusations of “corruption,” “antisemitism,” or links to “terrorism”—are significant, especially when compared to their work in other contexts, as exemplified by R4’s quote:

It's considered a risk to work. Even one of the donors told me that they work in a hundred countries around the world. Their work in Palestine is less than 5%, but the efforts spent in Palestine is more than 40%. For just 5% of their budget. So at least you have to act against these allegations. Because maybe their work will continue for now, but maybe other donors are not as dedicated and stop when 5% of their budget require so much effort. To waste 40% for the 5%.

Especially from the perspective of the peacebuilding agenda, which has, in part, pushed for neoliberal reforms in the economic sphere, this raises significant concerns regarding the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of such low-cost efficiency measures.

7.1.3 The double-standards of donor responses

This brings us to the next key observation, which is that the process that makes Palestine solidarity more and more unthinkable and untenable is also driven by the reputational concerns of donor agencies and the political climate in their home countries. After years of accusations and smear campaigns, donors have started to reevaluate their approach to Palestinian organisations, often expressing discomfort with the terminology used by Palestinian actors. As R10 puts it:

It's funny that just a report, just an article can terrify all the white organisations and people. Sometimes just one article is enough, to change [donors'] policies or funding. There were a lot of different experiences that no one can explain, why the funders didn't give this organisation or that organisation funds. And we can't, again, create an assumption that it's only because of being afraid of the pressure of the NGO Monitor or similar lobby organisations. There's a lot of things happening.

Notably, there is a clear difference in the donor responses from governmental and non-governmental donors, as R7 explains, “no one left us, it was clear for them all what was going on. The difference was states though, they began to shake more.” A typical example of a query from a governmental donor comes from R15:

We received an email recently from our Finnish donor. They asked about a workshop that we organised like two to three years ago in Gaza, about Palestinian administrative detainees. There is a committee called the National Committee for Palestinian Prisoners, which includes representatives from all Palestinian factions. So, we invited this committee [...]. There was a representative from Hamas, from Islamic Jihad, from Popular Front, and it was a public workshop. We invited lawyers, human rights activists, journalists, and so forth. There's a picture on our website that shows these representatives sitting in front of [our] logo. So, [the donor] sent us a long email asking why Hamas and Islamic Jihad appear before [our] logo. We send them the newspaper, like what we published in the news about this meeting.

And then somebody in the ministry in Helsinki spotted another article. A statement by the representative of the committee. Two years ago, there was an Israeli girl arrested in Iraq, and it was said that Iraqi militia arrested her. So, he made a statement in front of the office of the Red Cross in Gaza. It was a demonstration for the families of prisoners. A statement where he said: “I ask our Iraqi brothers, who hold this girl, to ask for a prisoners exchange.” [...] And from the translation in English, it appears as if he's saying that his group of people arrested the girl in Iraq, but he didn't say that. She was arrested by an Iraqi Shia militia. And this guy is a representative of the Palestinian People's party, which is a pacifist party, by the way. But anyway, we had to go back and forth [with] explanations and emails, it was very annoying. We didn't like the tone of the questions. And to be honest with you, it's humiliating.

The data shows that anything can be taken out of context and spun into a whole new narrative, as R12 says, “here [...] you can easily go to a wedding where flags of factions are there. And a picture is taken while you are just passing,” because “they pick whatever allegation and they just throw it.” According to R5, the donors do have reasons to be

afraid to work with the designated organisations, at least if they want to continue to have an office in the country:

This is why they designated the organisations, so that they can make the donors afraid, especially those that have offices here. For example, the international organisations that have an Israeli license in Jerusalem to open a branch, they are under a serious threat. If the Israeli authority wants, they can close the offices and prosecute them, they can charge them for continuing to communicate with [us] and support [us]. That's the point.

R6 agrees that it will not “be beneficial for them to work with someone that's designated by Israel as a terror organisation, and then having NGO Monitor or UN Watch coming after them with lawsuits.” As exemplified throughout this chapter, the targeting of Palestinian civil society organisations has, in effect, led donors to censor and pressure their Palestinian partners into avoiding terminology that could make them vulnerable to further attacks. In other words, this silencing and censorship extends not just to organisations that have already been targeted by the anti-delegitimisation network, but to all organisations. As R1 puts it:

All terms which might be looked at, such as apartheid or the right of return of Palestinian refugees, is vocabulary that can be used by governmental-linked NGOs trying to discredit Palestinian human rights work, which then will also be used to discredit the work of international partners because of working with Palestinian human rights organisations. This led to this kind of situation for the international partners of not being able to justify their interventions in Palestine. So basically, the international partners were afraid that by using such terms, as it will be used against them.

Some of the international partners never faced any kind of criticism or issue, but because they know that in the past there were such cases, they were already censoring themselves and they were trying to basically delegate the censorship to their partners in Palestine. Even without having been criticised in the first place. It's not necessarily that each partner already experienced this in order to come to the conclusion that they want to avoid certain terminology.

Yet, these steps of caution from Western and European donors are precisely the problem, according to R12:

I mean, why to have a headache? When they can just leave it aside. Why to work with [a designated organisation]? For us, it is clear. The international community is really part of this, they are part of elevating the problem. So, the context is very important to understand, where we work. And as I said, we are walking on a very thin thread. Obviously, it's getting shorter day by day.

R15 adds that this approach has shifted over time, with more focus on communications material and the language used:

I can see there is a change in the attitude of donors. They become very careful. They scrutinise our work. They pay a lot of attention to our communication, press releases and so forth. They do not like to see our work stress too much on accountability of the occupation, ICC, these words, they don't like it.

What this suggests is a tension. While Western and European donors acknowledge that allegations are often unsubstantiated and recognise that there is an ongoing systematic campaign to silence and smear Palestinian civil society, they, at the same time, act in a way that contradicts this stance. As R12 explains:

When investigations are being conducted in the [European] parliaments, the conclusion is that those allegations are baseless and [the donors] say that they are committed to supporting the civil society. But that's not enough. They know the people; they work with them for years. It's not only about showing solidarity, I believe. Because currently 40% of my time is either spent defending [our organisation] or trying to fundraise due to the developments on the ground, it's too much.

When we were in the embassies, people used to say: "Oh, you know how it works here, consensus, it's the capital." And when we are in the capital, they say: "No, it's not us, it's the embassies." And so, this is the situation. But that's what we have. We know the kind of pressure they have on them, and they know the kind of pressure we have on us.

According to R15, this contradiction may stem from a tension between local donor offices and the governments and parliaments in their capitals. As discussed in Chapter 6, these capitals are often influenced by the anti-delegitimisation network and tend to have less cultural sensitivity to the Palestinian context than the staff at local offices and embassies.

As R15 explains: “I don't blame the people here in the field, like the representatives or embassies; I think they understand the situation and the work of Palestinian human rights organisations. But mainly, the pressure comes from the capitals.” R19, who works directly with a number of local organisations, agrees and adds that local embassy staff often do not even inquire whether the accusations are true or not, but instead focus on how the situation can be addressed:

Usually, the people who work in Palestine know the situation very well. And when the conversation comes to an organisation being banned or put on a blacklist, we never talk about why. We talk about what to do. They would ask: “Can you provide us with this and that information and can you do this”, like it's more practical. But I haven't encountered a situation where a donor would say like: “Why were those committees banned; did they do anything wrong?” When they're banned by Israel, we usually skip over that and they say: “Okay, you know that our headquarters need this information, how much money did you give them, for what activity,” so we delve more into the technicalities, at least with the people who are here. The offices here are faced with these questions and they have to provide it to parliamentarians, which must be very difficult for them. Our role is to help them get the information that they need in order to provide it to their capitals, basically.

In the opinion of R15, it might not be worth continuing with the partnerships at all if the donors do not change their attitude:

If they continue with this attitude, maybe we just don't want this funding at all. It's better to close down the entire organisation than to be humiliated and always be cornered. We are not supporting terrorism. We are not terrorists ourselves. We are not excited about terrorism. They put you in a defensive position. And then at the same time, they don't like to see that we refer to the ICC in our reports. Even the term genocide. Shortly after October 7th, we warned against genocide, based on Israeli statements and actions. Some of our donors, like Sweden, they asked: “Why did you use the word genocide in your statement?” Well, I told him, this is an international law term. I'm framing my work within international law. He was: “Oh, OK, if it's within international law, it's OK”. So, they are becoming very sensitive. They over-scrutinise our work.

As a result, the space for civil society in Palestine has continuously been shrinking, with foreign donors ordering countless audits (which as of yet have found no evidence of foul play). In regards to the designation of 2021, the only example of a connection to the PFLP provided by the Israeli dossier distributed to the donors was that of Palestinian dance classes held in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Thus, the dossier did not reveal any concrete information about ties between the six designated organisations and the PFLP. Even though several Western governments, such as Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, expressed that they would continue their “strong support” of Palestinian civil society, the designation was followed by a number of concerning developments. For example, the Dutch government decided to end its funding for UAWC while the European Commission implemented an arbitrary funding suspension of one of Al-Haq’s projects (Lund 2023). As R13 describes, this is typical of the European donors:

There are two languages within Europe. In our internal meeting they said: “We’re not believing any of these bullshit allegations that comes from Israel, and we’ve checked this several times and we conclude that it’s all false.” Even when they go public, they say something positive and repeat that there is no evidence. But when they translate that into practical steps on the ground, instead of maintaining their fund for working with the organisation, they suspend them and they keep postponing signing any new agreements which means that they are applying double-standards here. From one side they don’t believe in the allegations, but from the other side they listen and follow the Israeli instructions. We have raised that many times with them, and they don’t have an answer, they say: “Okay, positives will be coming soon, just wait.” We wait since like three years now or more; nothing has changed which means that they changed their policy on the Palestinian civil society. This has become very clear.

R13 continues to explain that, in addition, development aid to Palestine has been monitored for so many years that it would have been nearly impossible for both European donors and the Israeli government to miss any irregularities:

We hear some very soft condemnation from the European Western countries, which is fine. But again, they are our partners for 20-30 years maybe. So, when Israel accuses us like this, it means that they accuse them as well, because if we

have a mishandling of financial funds, it means they must have missed it, since they were checking and auditing us for the last 20-30 years. They know each single dollar, from where it comes and where it goes. And if the smart Israelis suddenly discovered that we are corrupt, the whole Palestinian civil society, then it means that the European system is not even valid from the point of the Israelis. That's exactly it, and history is full of stories like that.

According to R15, some of the donors over-scrutinise the work of the Palestinian organisations to the point that they even start going over events and communications material retroactively:

We were asked by the Finland donor about [the director of another organisation]. Because in one of our publications, it is mentioned that he is on [our] board. He is not on our board; he was one of our founders. They asked us about him and his involvement with us. And they sent us an article written by the NGO Monitor in 2021 that had been given to a parliamentarian. It was about an event where he was given like a symbolic gift or something. And in his speech, he mentioned that 20 or 30 years ago, he was arrested by the Israelis on the grounds of affiliation with the PFLP. And he said that is part of his past and he is proud of that. He didn't say that he is an active member of the Popular Front, and even, 30 years go, the Popular Front was not on the terrorist list of the EU. So, Palestinians are also now being judged retroactively. They can go 30 years back into your past for a statement that you made, that at the time was okay, but now it's not acceptable. [...] That's why he suffers cuts of funding; he's been labelled now.

R6, who was earlier convicted and imprisoned for “membership of an illegal organisation” explains that this approach has had detrimental consequences in terms of funding:

Due to the damage of the organisation's reputation, we received zero funding in 2020. So, I worked on that after my release. [...] Even in my sentencing by the Israelis, the judge said that there are evidentiary difficulties in the case. But they still sentenced me. Well, we were able to communicate with the donors again, and get back the funding. They understood that it was political targeting. In 2022, we were actually supposed to double our annual budget from quarter million, to half million dollars. But after the designation, we lost most funding again. Cause

people were doing the risking for their [own] organisations. We have partners that have offices registered with the Israeli authorities and they say: “Okay, look, there's too much legal risk for us, but we don't believe the designation.” The governments knew.

R10, who has also been imprisoned, was excluded from multiple boards after his release out of fear from defunding:

After [I was released] from jail, I quit with the [the organisation] and started working for [another organisation]. And being a board member for several organisations. I was asked to leave all the organisations that I used to be a member of, due to the pressure that was created by the Israeli police intelligence on funders. There was the idea, that if I continue being a board member, they could lose the funding and the organisation might be closed.

In addition, the Swedish Consulate began reviewing his most recent appointment nearly a year after he had already started the job:

I was also questioned by the Swedish Consulate, about how the recruitment was done for choosing me as a manager. Someone sent them an email saying that, “he is related to the PFLP.” So, after almost one year of being in the job, there was questioning from the Swedish Consulate, the main funder. And I had to find all the records and minutes of meetings, the criteria, and document exactly each board member's opinion about why I had been chosen.

And we were asked to do more reporting. And then we started being pressured by the Israelis, which included my arrest. I was arrested several times. One time I spent five days. I'm not really an important person, the directors of the organisation, they didn't really spend more than couple of hours. I stayed there for one week. So, you know, this is the life.

For R13, the consequences have been severe, with large funding cuts that in the end only affect the number of beneficiaries in already vulnerable communities:

And we lost our partners, of course. The governmental partners we had already lost. Some other partners are scared to do work. Some hurt us in a very bad way. We lost maybe 60 or 70% of our source of funds, which is huge actually. And it's influenced in reducing the number of beneficiaries. This is the punishment against

the beneficiaries, and the poor families in areas where now we're able to serve around 3,000 or 4,000 families instead of 20,000. The other 17,000 families remain without any support which means they will be threatened to be displaced from their homes and communities.

For R5, one of the donors stopped funding the organisation even before the designation, meaning that the designation followed a period of advocacy work and active lobbying from the anti-delegitimisation network:

A donor stopped funding us just a few weeks before the designation, and I think it was related because this was Switzerland. It's weird that Switzerland decided not to support [us] by claiming that they changed their strategies [...]. I believe it's mostly political pressure, because I'm aware that, at that time, the Foreign Minister who used to be the one responsible for taking the decision who to fund or not to fund, was a very pro-Israeli person. So, it seems they succeeded because before this decision, there was a long period of campaigning against us and against the Swiss Development Agency in Switzerland by individuals and groups, lobby groups that were pressuring the Swiss agency. Asking why they funded [us], calling us a terrorist organisation and so on. So, this is why I believe it was related to the designation.

While R20 was not part of one of the organisations that were designated “terrorist” organisations back in 2021, he had a similar experience back in 2018, which clearly sheds light on the process of politicising development and human rights work:

For example, we had an issue with the Netherlands, where a church-based organisation was supporting us for almost 20 years. Suddenly they stopped the contract in the middle, we had three years, but they supported one year and a half and then they stopped. Why? Because the government changed and they said: “We do not want to have any involvement in politics, we want to support charities. We do not want to work in human rights, and especially not in Israel because of the antisemitism issue.” [...] At one point we had almost 15 workers and then we finished with maybe one and a half positions. So, it was impossible to do it. But it was clear that it was a process that was deteriorating all the time.

R7, on the other hand, has been quite satisfied with the donor responses so far, and thinks that the Israeli government has miscalculated the response:

I think this is the first time ever in the history of Israel, that their security, their politicians, their officials stood strongly behind one thing and no one received them. And there was no one who was convinced by their information or by their allegations. Even from their close friends. And the Israeli industry which they are selling everywhere. They are seen as the competent when it comes to working against terrorism. They are the one who is facing terrorism. They are expertise in fighting against terrorists. But then, if this is the information you have regarding terrorism.. if this is the nature of your information, and this is the level, go get help. I think they killed themselves before they killed us. If the Palestinian civil society, if they are the terrorists, what's left? These are ridiculous things. I think they were shocked from the donor responses. Because of that we are now in an open war. We won the battle field at this moment. But it doesn't mean that we won the war.

In line with the perspective of R7, Zorob and Paluszek (2024) argue that the “renewed” attempt to delegitimise and criminalise Palestinian civil society organisations—i.e., through the 2021 “terrorist” designation and the broader strategy of deplatforming—has largely failed in terms of its impact on their standing within local and global civil society. They claim that rather than isolating these organisations, the move was met with strong backlash and a show of solidarity. Clearly, this research would argue that this is not the case. The data collected as part of this study has shown that, even when met with disbelief from donors, the combination of constructed, disseminated settler narratives and practical measures of criminalisation and delegitimation can still succeed in making solidarity with Palestine untenable and unthinkable. In its quest to silence and erase the work of Palestinian civil society, the process of criminalisation has, despite the initial responses among Western and European donors, led to a shift in their attitudes.

7.1.4 Introducing political conditions

While anti-terror legislation has been increasingly utilised by the settler polity in the direct attacks against Palestinian organisations, the lobbying of Western and European donors has pushed donor responses to gradually diffuse the borders between counterterrorism measures and development approaches. Consequently, donors such as the EU and other individual states have responded with introducing new counterterrorism clauses in their contracts. The EU, for example, started introducing these clauses in their contracts with Palestinian organisations back in 2019. The specific clause in question, reads that “grant

beneficiaries and contractors must ensure that there is no detection of subcontractors, natural persons, including participants to workshops and/or training and recipients of financial support to third parties, in the lists of EU restrictive measures.” As the Palestinian organisation Badil explains (Badil Resource Center 2020: 9), “although neutrally worded, [the article] has earmarks of an anti-terrorism clause and carries far-reaching implications for Palestinian signatories.” R12 points out that the clause is problematic especially due to the fluidity of its application:

Most donors have adopted this, trying to change or to add to the contracts, some clauses on anti-terrorism. The problem is this: all would go for fighting terrorism. But, what is terrorism? Not only here, everywhere. I mean, identifying terrorism, as you can see, without agreement, it's still problematic.

R16 points out that the clauses can be especially problematic for organisations that provide legal counsel and services to other organisations:

On a lot of the foreign funding, especially American funding, there are these clauses around that the funding cannot go to any organisation supporting terrorism. But it's quite broad in the way that it's phrased. Does it include if the organisation was legally representing a group that's been charged with terrorism, like the Palestinian six? It comes down to really specific details, like if the contract is only for the project funds or if the project funds can be revoked because the organisation has done something, like providing legal representation to one of the designated organisations. I know that that's very prevalent in the American contracts. I know for the EU, it's related to the EU requirements. This process has been going on for the last seven to 10 years.

R5 is critical towards the fact that Palestine, in this regard, is treated as if it is not an occupied territory:

Even before the designation, all these anti-terror articles on the EU list were added. And it was problematic because in the Palestinian context, you cannot consider terrorism the same as in a normal situation, inside a state. There are differences, and it should be taken into consideration. Unfortunately, neither the UN or the EU was sensitive to the Palestinian context when it came to fighting terrorism and financing terrorism. For the contracts with the civil society, this was an issue debated for a long time.

R5 continues to explain that due to the occupation, the situation in Palestine cannot be measured against the same parameters as other developing countries—and that in refusing to be sensitive to the specific context, donors could actually be complicit in the crimes committed against the occupied population:

I think the states should be more sensitive to the different political and conflict situation, it can't be treated in the same way, definitely not when we are talking about such a situation as a prolonged occupation. According to international law, Israel is controlling the occupied territories for more than 55 years, and is it legal? Is it illegal? What does it mean to be complicit? What's the responsibility of France, Germany, Belgium, the UK, for allowing this situation to continue?

This is significant for several reasons. While Chapter 4 explored how Zionist and Western colonial narratives, built on the logic of exceptionalism, have justified the settler colonial enterprise in Palestine by depicting settlers as a “chosen people” (Collins 2011; Park 2021), these narratives also portray the absence of a sovereign in the occupied territories as proof that the situation in Palestine should be treated as *sui generis*, or “exceptional,” as a matter of law (Erakat 2019). Ultimately, it tries to justify exempting the Israeli settler state from accountability. In this context, exceptionalism allows the settler polity to employ various settler colonial tactics against the native population, while simultaneously constructing a narrative that depicts Palestinians as the exception—excluded from human rights and international legal frameworks.

This double-edged approach also extends to donor responses and their use of political conditions. On the one hand, Western and European donors have historically maintained a “business as usual” approach in Palestine, failing to recognise the unique challenges faced by the Palestinian population and civil society due to the Israeli settler state’s illegal occupation, compound discrimination, and apartheid, while instead prioritising Israel’s security interests as well as their own political interests. This approach reflects donors’ refusal to acknowledge the specific difficulties that make political conditionality particularly problematic for Palestinian civil society organisations.

What this means, is that donors do consider the specific situation, but not in a way that benefits local actors. While conditionality itself is not new in the development sector, there has been increasing pressure to include *political* conditions in agreements with Palestinian organisations. All the organisations interviewed in this study highlighted this as one of the

main obstacles to carrying out their projects. Combined with the over-scrutiny of Palestinian civil society activities, it becomes evident that European donors *recognise* Palestine as an exception due to its political sensitivity, yet simultaneously *make* it the exception by turning it into one of the most decontextualized spaces for development interventions globally.

The Palestinian organisation Badil explains that, in practice, these political conditions tend to lead to defunding of projects related to the right of return of Palestinian refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, as well as the BDS movement, while they also try to reduce the thematic scope of projects to solely humanitarian aid. Lastly, the geographic scope of projects becomes limited, to only include the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967, effectively excluding Palestinians living in historic Palestine or in exile (Badil 2021). These practices are clearly decreasing the agency of organisations that are fighting against occupation and colonialism. All of the interviewed organisations have shared that they have tried to push back against the new conditions, or even refused to sign contracts where the clause is included. R10 describes how they tried to change the wording of the clause, and how that was actually used as evidence against the organisation itself:

There was big pressure in 2019, about funding and our position against the anti-terrorist paragraph of the EU. I don't know how the Israeli police found the letter that was sent by [us] to the EU, asking them to change the paragraph, and to remove the anti-terrorism clause. There was an assumption by the police and the intelligence that we are lobbying the EU because we are, in fact, a terrorist entity and we are channelling funds to terrorist organisations. So, it was very stupid because there was a lot of documents to clarify everything. Transactions had been checked by me, by the accountant, by the board members, and also by the accountant of the organisations that we were funded by, and then in D.C. and by the Swedish consulate. It was like five times checked. There was no way to make any stupid transaction. But people created these assumptions. They just had an image, and created facts around it.

R4 explains that his approach to the conditions imposed on Palestinian actors is based on the fact that they are not based on due process:

My problem is political conditions. It's a condition, not administration. [...] This is to forbid any NGOs to work with political parties. [...] I told them I'm against the

EU anti-terrorism list, because none of them legally speaking have been offered a fair court or been convicted. If as an EU court they offered them a federal court, in theory, if convicted, then I will abide. But none of them have. Secondly, you ask me to sign not to work with those who are mentioned, the six entities. I could sign a declaration saying that I'm not going to work with armed Palestinian groups. None of them will benefit from the fund that I'm receiving. And I will declare that I'm going to spend all the money from the contribution according to the proposal that I have submitted to you. What more do you need from me? Don't force me to sign that these organisations are terrorists.

Evidently, this stands as an ultimate example of how development work is manipulated by the settler polity through the control of narratives—i.e., who is labelled a “terrorist” and not. Scholars and activists alike have long expressed concern about Palestinian civil society’s reliance on Western conditional financing, as the largest and most powerful component of civil society, despite everything, still continues to rely on foreign aid, thereby placing various restrictions on the activities of civil society actors due to it being heavily politically and ideologically conditional (Dana 2020). Sequentially, Allen (2013) describes the donor-recipient relationship itself as a form of soft colonialism. R11, who was interviewed as part of this research, describes this as a type of moral dilemma:

We had started a campaign against the conditional funding. Actually, at the beginning it was the largest network in Palestine, and there were more than 350 organisations engaged in that campaign but, slowly, under the pressure of the donors and the need for the funds from the EU, individual states and other international funding organisations, Palestinian organisations started to sign the contracts anyway, and withdrew from the campaign. They try to justify it under the benefit of our people.

Logically, participating in development aid programs has become problematic for many development and civil society actors, as participating on the terms set by donors and the international community means contributing to the reproduction of neo-colonial structures of control. At the same time, as R11 mentions, the Palestinian people are in need of these services. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, not participating means that the same space can easily be occupied by those development and civil society actors that are not especially committed to the end of colonisation in Palestine (Bahdi and Kassis 2016). As such, this tension has become a key issue for Palestinian civil society organisations, and it ultimately

is an expression of a weakness that the Israeli settler state seeks to exploit to its own advantage. R11 explains:

[We have] never been granted [funds] by any government. For example, [this] Swiss organisation, they started their partnership with [us] in 2002 or 2003, but unfortunately, we lost them in 2018 or 2019 because of the imposition of these conditions that we didn't accept, and because they had changed their strategy, and they had a new manager who didn't like using the term “apartheid” and “colonisation.” [We] insisted on using these terms, it's our analysis, and our terminology. And it's supported by international law. They said that it's not used by the UN and you should stop using them. So, we lost our partnership with them. Also, Danish Church Aid funded [us] since [our] establishment. And we lost them in 2019 after they had insisted to impose a term to not use their money for Nakba commemoration. We rejected that. So, they continued supporting [us], and then in 2019, they developed a two- or three-page paper. It was called the “Anti-Terrorism policy,” in which they included the EU sanction list and the restrictive measures, including vetting and screening. So, we rejected that. It took one year, but we really failed to convince them to remove or to exclude [us] from this policy. And we lost our relation with Sida. They used to cover more than 40% of our budget. And they imposed new terms that were actually worse than those imposed by the EU itself. And we couldn't convince them.

This suggests that the boundaries between securitisation, counterterrorism, and development are becoming progressively more blurred, creating a complex environment where the situation for Palestinian civil society organisations is steadily growing more untenable. In response to this evolving landscape, a range of emerging counterstrategies have been developed by Palestinian civil society, which will be outlined below.

7.2 Emerging counterstrategies: the global approach

Overall, there are two different tendencies among these organisations and the strategies they develop to counter this development of increasing criminalisation and political conditioning of funds. Seemingly, organisations either adapt a *global approach* and outreach strategy, or a more *local, grassroots-based one*. The first group of organisations, tend to be more willing to sign agreements with counterterrorism clauses, even though not all of them have. As a result, these organisations have started to censor their language

around nationalistic vocabulary such as the “Nakba” and “colonialism” in their reports and communications material. Instead, they try to use more of the language and vocabulary relating to international law, as that is more difficult for the donors to criticise. Additionally, a number of them have started using communications materials in English, as compared to before when they only published materials in Arabic. As R6 describes: “We actually didn't do international advocacy before [we were designated a terrorist organisation], all the research was done and published only in Arabic.”

These organisations also try to build global networks and collaborations, not only with pro-Palestinian groups abroad, but also with international and multinational organisations and agencies. R1 mentions this as one of the main opportunities for organisations in developing counterstrategies:

There needs to be a complete change in strategy. [An] important aspect would be to connect the situation in Palestine to global situations. That it's not really unique what is happening in Palestine. And the way the Israeli government is dealing with it is also not unique.

R15 makes a similar assessment, even if he thinks that the international efforts primarily should be focused on politicians and parliaments abroad:

Palestinians need to work more on their international advocacy. All the Palestinian leaders are well connected globally and open to the outside world. But I think we need more sophisticated and organised work in the capitals and the parliaments. Also, we need to count on pro-Palestinian solidarity groups to have better networking with them. Even like parliamentarians, there are lots of like moderate parliamentarians or parliamentarians who are even pro-Palestine or pro-international law. I think there are lots of venues that Palestinians can use, although as I mentioned, these are very sophisticated campaigns against us. But on the other hand, I think there is no corner in the world where you cannot find a Palestine solidarity group. But they need better mobilisation, coordination, maybe sustained work, more concentrated work on lobbying and working with parliaments.

In fact, R15 believes that Palestinian civil society is well under way with achieving this, with communication efforts becoming more professional and focused on the language surrounding international law:

I think Palestinian NGOs in general; they have become more sophisticated in terms of communication. And I think many of Palestinian organisations, they have become more careful in how they communicate over social media because they don't want to be spotted by these NGO Monitor and so forth. So, they are adapting in terms of how they communicate. I think now everybody tries to frame everything within international law. I think international law provides lots of tools for us to express the situation, to highlight the gravity of the injustice here in Palestine. You still can manage with that. But because of differences in language and culture, sometimes people express feelings or statements that can be used against them. For example, I understand why the Swiss government cut support for the Palestinian Human Rights Center in Gaza, and Palestinian NGO Network. They said that they found their communication not consistent with the financial agreement. I think that means that some of their communication material does not use international law language. More nationalistic. Which is common here in Palestine, people they just talk that way. So maybe they were not very careful, but that cost them funding.

R12 also agrees with the global approach, and believes that the primary focus should be on political parties rather than ministers and other individual politicians:

We spend a lot of resources and time meeting with officials. It's a success story for [us] to meet with the Foreign Minister of Sweden, the Foreign Minister of Norway or Ireland. But finally, he belongs to a political party. So, we have to engage with political parties, especially those who are not friendly with the Palestinians. We should engage with political parties, and not with the ministers. They are important, but they come and go, so I think it could make some difference if we make the whole parties learn more.

R12 continues to explain that in some ways, the global approach has become more difficult to pursue in recent years, as Palestinian actors are now less often invited to European and Western governments:

I think we need to do more advocacy and network in an organised way to be there, to spread the word. We know that many are not willing to welcome us. I remember five or six years ago, we usually went to Brussels, for example. We open the door like this and meet with anyone there, from the Chairman of the Commission to anyone in the embassies. Now I was asked this question by the EU mission of

Egypt: “When was the last time you were in the embassy?” Five, six years ago. Me and [the director of another organisation]. We have not been in Brussels, imagine this, for the last five or six years. We used to be invited like the people of Ukraine are at the moment. But now we're not popular. I mean, not because we are bad, but because of those campaigns.

However, as R1 reflects, this emphasis on cultivating ties with Western and European capitals has ultimately amounted to little more than a castle in the air—built on promises rather than tangible support. Additionally, it has shifted focus away from dealing with the attacks from the anti-delegitimisation network in a more direct and constructive way:

Palestinian civil society thought that they have very strong ties to especially European civil society, and that these strong ties will not be jeopardised by this kind of Israeli propaganda. [...] So, [...] they didn't regard this as an actual threat. And because they thought they have the strong ties with Europe. So, they didn't really try to work less on the actual issues they were working on in order to put time or energy in this field.

The designated organisations, and also some of those not designated yet, started to coordinate their work more immediately after the designation, as a way to find common counterstrategies. For example, they made joint public statements, launched a joint digital campaign (known as #StandWithTheSix) which later on developed into a website aimed at spreading information about the attacks on civil society, and organised workshops for diplomats and donor representatives in the country (Zorob and Paluszczek 2024). In addition, five of the organisations issued a “procedural objection to request the cancellation of the decision,” while three of the organisations also requested a hearing with the Israeli Advisory Committee in order to clarify the reasons behind the designation, but both procedures failed (Ibid: 12). R13 describes the process:

From the first moment of the designation, we had a kind of committee working together to coordinate and decide the best plan that we should follow. Most of the efforts are done jointly. For example, we worked to appeal the designation, and we challenged it in the Israeli court, but we had no answer from that moment until now. But we expected that. They say it's all about security issues. Being frank, it's nothing related to security, but it's more about politics. Some of the other organisations said: “We know the result, there will be no change, we'll just focus on the international

lobbying and advocacy” and so on. Well, is that valid? We get nothing from challenging this. Even after we appealed, they raided the offices of the six organisations and destroyed things, they stole everything from the offices and then they blocked the offices for more than one year now.

R7 adds that part of the strategy was to continue to be professional in the interaction with both the legal system and the donors:

We had strategies. It wasn't easy for the team, but also to be together is important. The question is how to deal with things on a legal front. But at the same time, you don't want to flip at the political level, for instance, or not to be principal. You have to be considerable also in dealing with the legal issue. This is an issue where one should work together, collectively. Another part is to use all of your contacts and network, to go outside and to disseminate your messages in a clear way. This is important.

What this tells us, is that this group of organisations continues to be dependent on the support from European and Western donors. They primarily focus on challenging the designation on a legal level and through international advocacy. Criminalisation, much like settler colonialism, is an ongoing process and structure, rather than a single event, and as long as the Palestine exception is not challenged, the lines between securitisation, counterterrorism, and development will continue to blur. This raises important questions about the organisations' connection to Palestinian society and local communities, their long-term sustainability and viability, as they become increasingly professionalised in their efforts to appeal to international donors.

Additionally, the increasing reliance on legalism within the Palestinian liberation project has been critiqued for potentially reinforcing, rather than disrupting, existing power structures (Erakat and Reynolds 2021). Scholars have described this trend as a self-defeating turn toward liberal legalism—wherein the struggle for Palestinian liberation becomes reframed as only a question of rights under international law. As a result, legal advocacy can inadvertently aim for a *better colonialism* rather than the dismantling of colonial structures altogether (Rabie and Qato 2013), as it focuses on Israel's excesses rather than the foundational ideology of Zionism (Erakat and Reynolds 2021).

7.2.1 The grassroots

The other group of organisations then, typically does not agree to the counterterrorism clauses. Consequently, this group of organisations is trying to turn away from governmental funding, as governments (and intergovernmental organisations such as the EU) tend to be more sensitive to pressure from Israel and non-state actors within the anti-delegitimisation network. Governments also have a higher tendency to use counterterrorism measures in development programs and to impose political conditionality in the first place. What all this shows is that those organisations which had less governmental funding, and more funding from solidarity-driven organisations, have managed to counter the criminalisation campaign better than others. R11 explains this by saying that:

We succeeded, it's true that our budget nowadays is less than our budget was before 10 years ago. But actually, we managed to keep standing due to our partnership with the community-based organisations and with new donors. We managed to find new international partners, and actually we feel that they are really partners. They contribute to our strategy, to our advocacy. Which is very good. And not only with money.

R18 has had a similar experience, as the organisation's reliance on non-governmental partners has made it less vulnerable to defunding:

Regarding our donors, we were clear that we don't accept any conditional funding. But we had built relationships with organisations and social movements who share our values. Because of that, after the designation, we have the same financial situation as before, because they support the [organisation] and are aware of our work. We have some partners that bring the donation from their government, like the Spanish, but we don't have any direct relation with governments.

What these organisations have also done, is openly campaign against the Western donors and the increased conditionality, as compared to the other group of organisations that mainly discuss these issues with the donors behind closed doors. R11 works at an organisation that previously had been targeted by the Israeli policies, and the organisation's donors had repeatedly been accused of funding "terrorism." However, the organisation was not one of the designated organisations back in 2021, which indicates that Israel focuses most of its efforts on organisations that still are dependent primarily on Western and European funding, i.e., that have a "strong" donor-recipient relationship to sever. R11

describes how the organisation was warned and advised not to challenge the new conditions and the counterterrorism clause, but that in the end, the organisations seemed to have had a successful strategy:

When the EU decided not to grant us, no one expected that [we] would issue a press release about the EU and their policy here in Palestine. And actually, some of our partners blamed us, and they didn't expect that. And they said it: "You are crazy. This means that you will never get any fund from the EU, and other donors will become afraid to deal with you or to give you any funding contract." We said it's okay. This is our strategy, and when those other organisations were classified, we issued a press release, and we raised the issue that we have to challenge this policy depending on our staff, not on the EU or other international actors, with those soft condemnation or questions.

R11 also explains that they directly advised the designated organisations to not take the case to court, as it could lead to the legalisation of the designation itself:

Actually, we were a member of the Palestinian Human Rights Organization's Council, together with the other organisations, but we withdrew from the coalition when members signed the conditioned funding contracts. So, we have good relations with some of these organisations, and we had a meeting with them to discuss what happened and to develop strategies. On how to face the classification by Israel. Actually, they were talking about a strategy to take action before the Israeli courts to appeal. And, they believe that they can encourage European states, the EU, to put some pressure on Israel to terminate the order of the designation. Actually, we have rejected this strategy of going to the Israeli court because we believe that this will legalise the order itself and it's very dangerous. So, [...] we suggested to organise a new campaign to pressure states to publicly and clearly denounce the Israeli classification. And to confirm that they will continue supporting the Palestinian organisations.

R5 describes the differing counterstrategies among the targeted organisations as a split within the civil society:

It's contradicting. And this is why I think it ended up with a kind of split in the Palestinian society. Unfortunately, some of the NGOs signed the EU contracts, with these limitations, and others decided to be stricter and continue to avoid signing

such, very clear, articles saying that seven Palestinian political parties are terrorist groups. So, I would say this is the most difficult restriction we are facing from donors in the name of the Global War on Terror.

This data clearly illustrates how civil society indeed can become fragmented by non-democratic processes and actors, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Zinecker 2011). Evidently, in a settler colonial context like Palestine, the fracture is not merely dual but can manifest along multiple lines, with international donors playing a decisive role in creating a professionalised segment in civil society. Ultimately, the majority of organisations interviewed as part of this research applies a more top-down approach, while the grassroots-based organisations who apply a more bottom-up approach that centres local voices and decolonisation, were fewer in numbers. In effect, this approach calls for a return to how organisations functioned during the pre-Oslo era, particularly during the First Intifada, when more organisations were community-based. As R11 explains:

We suggested that we have to evaluate our relations with the donors in general, and to look at how it was before and during the First Intifada. We should go back to our original strategy, which depended on our people as we did in the past, especially during the First Intifada. So, we suggested, for example, to enhance our relations with our people, with the community-based organisations active with our people. And this is the alternative. And we can, slowly or gradually, reform our relations with our people, and not to 100% depend on the international donors for funding. This will give us the opportunity to be supported by our people on one hand, and also to, exert some pressure on donors. To take practical measures in facing the Israeli policies. Unfortunately, some organisations out of the seven organisations [that were designated terrorist organisations] chose the other strategy to go to court and to depend on those vague statements or positions made by the EU and other Western states.

R14 has seen several organisations that continue working without funding, and explains that this is typical for grassroots organisations that are based on the needs of the people as per the organic segment of civil society—in other words, when people are doing it for themselves:

The civil society is the voice of the people. You cannot cut and stop the voice of the people. So anyway, even if the civil society is with funding or without funding, it

will keep existing. Even before the First Intifada, the civil society in Palestine historically existed. And it was working with funding, or without funding. Because we believe in what we are doing and we are the voice of our people. So, I do not think that they will stop. And this is it. The civil society, it is a need. I'm not sure that the donors are going to support it, but if there are no civil society organisations, we will just go direct to the people, and then the people will accept them. All communities need a civil society, and historically civil society in Palestine is always existing and will continue working. So, maybe that their way of working will be different, but it doesn't mean that it will stop.

R18 shared an example that sheds light on the new ways in which civil society organisations can continue to work after the designation:

After the closure of the office in Ramallah we decided not to open it again because it was completely destroyed, but we took a joint and voluntary decision, that we will continue working, but in a new way. Taking some measures to protect ourselves. We continue, we work from home, from the street, from coffee shops, from anywhere. We changed a lot, actually, but it got better. Before we had our regular meetings, not just for the staff but for all the voluntary bodies that we have, we had meetings on clear dates, we published about the meetings or the decisions online, but now we decide not to gather the women in order to protect them. After a while we returned to work with our roots and women in the field, but without publishing anything in the media. And sometimes we focus on social issues and not political issues in order to protect the women from being arrested. That's what has happened. So, it was not easy, there were a lot of consequences on our work, on the achievements, but I am proud, we really organised ourselves again, to have this connection to the women. We are not employees just working on laptops in an office, we are working in the field. At the donor level, maybe the goal of this designation was to cut our funding, but fortunately, we didn't lose any of our funding. All of them became more committed to support us, both financially and politically.

R13 continued working even though they lost up to 70% of their funding, simply because they are a grassroots organisation:

We are a grassroots sort of organisation. We started as a voluntary organisation, with volunteers and volunteer work and we don't believe that the funds and the projects is like number one in our life. We have different initiatives that can run, that can be continued without even having funding. We are agronomists. We're not doing anything against any law, even the Israeli law. We are specialists in agriculture, because we are experts in agronomy. Our background is agronomy. And we continue, and keep our relations to the farmers in Area C, and keep the relations with some grassroots organisation as funders, and as partners who can support us and believe in our values.

This suggests that civil society, when it exists in its own right, and has not had to adapt to the political agendas of foreign governments and their donor agencies, relies more on the local population and therefore builds a stronger relationship to local communities, and arguably represents local voices to a higher degree than the professionalised segment of civil society. However, there are some similarities in the counterstrategies the two sets of civil society organisations in Palestine has developed, to which I now turn.

7.3 Hiding in plain sight

Some organisations, both those applying a global approach and those applying a grassroots-based one, have started to make information more difficult to attain for outside actors. This works in several ways. On the one hand, it is done to protect the staff members from attacks by the Israeli state and non-state actors within the anti-delegitimisation network, and staff members can therefore work under a different name or in a secret location. On the other, reporting is done in a way as to hide some of the sensitive terminology, as R15 explains, “we use words like ICC, but we hide it and don't show it in our reporting.” Yet another way in which this works is to remove annual reports and similar documentation from official websites, as a way to protect their donors from the anti-delegitimisation network, since they are known to utilise open sources. R18 explains some of the strategies they have applied:

In order to protect our women, some of them will work under the names of other voluntary bodies, and 90% don't work under our name. I think that in the West Bank they will continue to target the civil society organisations as well because the grassroots play an important role in enhancing the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. They are the one remaining voice against the normalisation of the

occupation. The coming period will not be easy for us. As I said, they arrested four of our members. But I'm optimistic actually. After the designation I felt like they succeeded, but after the genocide started, I feel like they failed. I felt like that because in many of the public activities, our women used to be very active, they were in the demonstrations, on Prisoners Day, on Land Day, but after the designation, many of them stopped participating. Often it was the decision of their family. Some of them resigned. But after the genocide all of them came back and said that they have the ability and capacity to volunteer. Some of them I have not seen for years, and they now want to come back. Both the old ones that left and even new ones, a new generation volunteers. So, I feel like this is important. They failed. We reorganised ourselves, we continued, and our commitment increased.

Another example is to remove the logos of donors from communications material, as R5 explains:

I know that there are some other cases where donors will continue to support the organisation, but they will ask that the organisation not use their logos publicly because they are afraid. It happens sometimes. But now it's kind of changing, because it used to happen a bit more before the designation. During the smear campaigns, they wanted to avoid being targeted. So, they were avoiding to publish anything with us, like using their logos in publications. Now it's the opposite. Some of them think this is the kind of support and protection that they can offer, so they insist that their logo should be included. It could be both ways today.

R8, who works with multiple local organisations as well as international donors, explains that multinational organisations like UN agencies have become a type of shield for donors who are afraid to engage directly with Palestinian civil society organisations under attack:

Even the project document was crafted in a way as to hide the intention of the project. We wrote it as form of support to the capacity of civil society organisations in Palestine and in Israel and all that shit. Without mentioning the specific civil society organisations that we were working with or whatever. It was a very vain document so that if anybody goes into the system and sees it, they won't see the details, but in reality, it is the continuation of the Human Rights Secretariat [that was shut down in 2018 after attacks from NGO Monitor].

R8 continues to explain that sometimes, even with the best intentions, donor engagement can actually mean that Palestinian organisations get more attention internationally, which is something that can put them on the radar and make them more vulnerable to attacks:

There are lots of eyes. That's why we we're keeping a low profile, but we're also trying to manage the colleagues. My colleagues are getting super excited and they want to engage. But I know from experience, if I engage, I am losing. I am hurting the opportunity of the recipient organisations. I'm constantly minding these things. So, we're doing that level of facilitating, and I think we are happy with that.

R12 has seen the same development among donors:

Many of the donors, especially governments, have to go through what they call a mediator now. Like a middle hand. It might have, politically, less of a cost on them. So, they leave it to, for example, UNDP. So, the [UN agencies] work with us. I know two setups that we are part of. We used to get more money directly from them. Now they have a setup where the beneficiaries are Israeli and Palestinians. We don't have any objection on this because our Israeli colleagues are also suffering from the same situation. We meet regularly. But I believe this is also part of those dynamics. There are other donors that use the same setups as well. Those setups have increased due to the situation, and they have been created as a way to be outside the direct engagement with [us]. I'm not giving a conspiracy theory here; those are facts on the ground.

In regards to alternative counterstrategies, R8 stresses that there is a lack of critical engagement: “There's anecdotal discussions about how to counter the attacks. You know how good we are in bullshit, and talking endlessly without actually coming to a concrete action plan. It's so freaking essential.” According to R14, the future of civil society in Palestine requires a vision that is not based on the liberal peacebuilding agenda:

I think the framework of these donations to Palestine; it came under the peace process and the Oslo agreement, which means it is all politics. So, this funding is just coming for the peace process and something like that. But if we as a Palestinian civil society organisation want to continue, we have to try to find another dream. So, we can have more freedom to talk, more freedom to do things, and more freedom to benefit our people as well.

However, it is important to understand that even if some donor responses are somewhat understanding and supportive, the fact that the discussion even takes place is evidence enough that the donor-recipient relationship is not one of true solidarity. As R1 puts it:

Here we are talking about a problem between partner organisations. A local organisation working together with an international organisation. I can't say that any strategy was more successful because in the end, both lost. Because it wouldn't matter if the local organisation continued with a project without the international organisation, there was already then, a split between the two. Or whether the international organisation in the onset, said that: "It's fine, please continue." There was already a split, and a problem. Even if they were able to agree in that moment, it was only a question of time until the problem would pop up again. So, unfortunately, I cannot say that any of the options used, or strategies used, were more successful than others because it's difficult to measure success only in the implementation of the actual project.

Projects were implemented and others were not. So, this is the success rate. Projects which were implemented, you could say it's successful, but if you look at it from an overall perspective, it wasn't successful because of the fact that the discussion took place. This is a problem which needs to be tackled, and which was not tackled properly by the local Palestinian organisations, and which wasn't at all tackled by the international organisations. Because when we look at the overall situation and the pressure rising in order to discredit Palestinian human rights work, it has not happened overnight. We are looking at a development over many, many years. And within all these years, there was very little, until no point of counter-movement or resistance to it.

In the end, what all this suggests is that the practical implications of the criminalisation campaign against Palestinian civil society have exacerbated the coerciveness within the "colonial peace" paradigm, exemplifying how foreign aid is not neutral nor benign, but rather a component of colonial objectives. Whether Western and European donors are actively or subconsciously responding to the criminalisation process in this detrimental way, is, after all, rather irrelevant. What is more important, is understanding that the donor responses, as presented in this chapter, have become a key component of Israeli settler colonial control over Palestinian lives and civil society organisations, in Palestine,

but that they have also led some of the Palestinian organisations towards more grassroots-based, decolonial strategies.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine the strategies employed by the Israeli government and other Zionist non-state actors within the anti-delegitimisation network and their impact on Palestinian civil society organisations, alongside donor responses and emerging counterstrategies among Palestinian organisations. The chapter has demonstrated that Palestinian organisations and their staff members often face a range of attacks, including harassment, threats of violence against family members, arrests, travel bans, surveillance (including hacking of devices), confiscation and destruction of assets, office closures, long-term imprisonment, revocation of residence permits, deportation, and, ultimately, terrorist designations. These tactics are primarily aimed at making solidarity with Palestine both unthinkable and untenable.

The chapter also explored the responses of Western and European donor agencies, which are sometimes contradictory. While donors may publicly express support for the targeted organisations and acknowledge that accusations regarding “terrorist” connections, “antisemitism,” or “corruption” are unfounded, their actions suggest otherwise. Donor cuts, increased scrutiny of communications materials and civil society activities, and a rising number of audits, is proving the donor-recipient relationship to have become untenable within itself, particularly from a Palestinian perspective.

Lastly, this chapter also describes how mounting conditionality from Western and European donors, with counterterrorism measures diffused as necessary in development agreements, has led to two differing trends among Palestinian organisations. One segment of Palestinian civil society has taken on a more global approach, using language surrounding international law, building global networks and appealing to Western donors, while the other segment has turned its focus back towards Palestine with a more local, grassroots-based approach. The chapter has shown that those organisations that are more community-based, have managed to reject the Western and European conditional funding to a higher degree. In the end, the chapter has shown that international development intervention and subsequent funding can work as a colonial tool, but also that it can work as the opposite.

Chapter 8. Theme 4: The Genocide in Gaza: A New Wave of Transformation?

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Hamas' attack in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israeli government's subsequent full-scale assault on Gaza have had a significant impact on this research. These events not only necessitated a shift to digital interviews for the remainder of the data collection process but also led to the understandable cancellation of numerous interviews with organisations based in Gaza. Additionally, the Israeli military invasion—deemed a “plausible case of genocide” by the International Court of Justice (ICJ 2024) in a landmark case—has intensified and accelerated several of the processes examined throughout this thesis.

Given the profound significance of these events in historic Palestine and beyond, further analysis is necessary. Where possible, standard interview themes have been supplemented with questions addressing the impact of these events on civil society organisations, emerging forms of control and criminalisation, and the broader implications for the future of civil society in Palestine.⁸

8.1 Intensified and accelerated processes of elimination and erasure

In Palestine, the post-1967 state of endocolonialism has meant that every new wave of resistance to the settler state has led to further intensification of oppressive Israeli strategies. This was the case after the First Intifada, after the Second Intifada and most evidently now, after the 7 October attacks, with the recent Israeli response being the most extreme so far. As Fanon (1963) observes, the coloniser—despite professed concerns about native barbarism—ultimately recognises only the language of force, deriving its legitimacy from violence and making little attempt to obscure this reality. Yet, the politics of intensification has not only been apparent in the physical violence imposed on Palestinians, through enforced starvation and carpet-bombing campaigns (Frankel 2023), but has also been apparent in the criminalisation campaign and the subsequent expanded use of the “terrorist narrative.” These narrative transfers have been widely utilised by the Israeli settler government and other Zionist proxy organisations to manufacture domestic and international consent for the atrocities committed in Palestine since October, 2023.

⁸ Commentary from the chapter also informs the analysis and conclusions presented in the co-authored article “Stigmatisation as settler colonialism: designating humanitarian and civic society organisations in Palestine as security threats,” which was based on this research and published in *Journal of Peacebuilding* in October, 2024.

In a telling example from as early as December 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu framed the “deradicalisation” of Palestinian civil society as a prerequisite for peace, stating that “Palestinian civil society needs to be transformed so that its people support fighting terrorism rather than funding it” (Staff 2023). In other words, he portrayed Palestinian civil society as radicalised and complicit in terrorism, indirectly suggesting a connection between Palestinian civil society organisations and the Hamas attack in October 2023. In another example of the intensification of this logic of expansion, the 7th October attacks and the following Israeli military operation in Gaza led many Israelis across the political spectrum to engage in demonstrations aimed at stopping humanitarian aid from entering Gaza and reaching a starving population, based on a routinely repeated fallacy that such aid will ultimately “help militants” (Ward and Swails 2024). According to a recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute, two-thirds of Jewish Israelis support this view (Hermann and Kaplan 2024).

Equally revealing was the immediate response of the European Commission and several European countries—including Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Germany—all of whom imposed additional funding restrictions on their Palestinian partners. These measures included freezing funds for Palestinian civil society organisations and reviewing development aid portfolios in order to avoid what they claimed to be the undesired goal of funds “reaching terrorists” (see European Commission 2023; Murphy and Marsh 2023; SWI 2023). In reality, this new wave of restrictions was merely an extension of the ongoing process of imposing political conditions on civil society, as discussed in the previous chapter.

For example, in Sweden, the government commissioned the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, to conduct a comprehensive review of all development and humanitarian aid to Palestine on October 13, 2023. According to the government, the purpose of this review was to “ensure that no Swedish funds go to actors that do not condemn Hamas or other terror organisations, that use violence, threaten or incite violence against the State of Israel or its population, has an antisemitic agenda or has collaboration with such actors” (Swedish MFA 2023).

In the report, Sida clearly concluded that it had not found any indications that any of the partner organisations had connections to Hamas or any other organisation that is to be found on the EU sanctions list. Moreover, the review found that all partner organisations

condemned violence against civilians. However, as Sida pointed out in the report, fully adopting the government's approach, which could be understood as singlehandedly condemning the actions of Hamas *without* condemning the violence and crimes committed by Israel, and without recognising the *root causes* of the conflict, would make it impossible for Sida to partner with any organisations in Palestine, including UN organisations. Sida also noted that false accusations regarding terrorist connections and antisemitism against Palestinian organisations are common, and that those attacked or accused were often in fact, the actors who had warned about the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, criticised Israel for violating international humanitarian law, or pointed to the occupation of Palestinian lands as the root cause of the "conflict" (Sida 2023).

Despite the result of the in-depth review, which Sida submitted to the government on 1 December, 2023, the government shortly thereafter decided to task Sida with another, expanded, review. This time, all organisations, even those not directly partnered with Sida, or the government, should be screened, and all of their social media communication should be analysed in search of any support for Hamas. Thus, Sida carried out an analysis of all (207 organisations) external communication, with over 107,000 statements (i.e., mostly social media posts) assessed, about 40 percent of them in Arabic. Sida (2024: 13) found that:

The vast majority of the statements either condemn Hamas, often in contexts where Israel is also criticised for its warfare, or generally distance themselves from all forms of violence against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law. Some of the organisations have not made any statements at all. One local organisation, which was part of a now ended multi-partner UN programme which Sida funded indirectly, is deemed to have explicitly praised or defended Hamas.

Göran Holmqvist, director of the department for Asia, Middle East and Humanitarian Assistance at Sida, said in regards to the expanded review instructions that he "had never experienced anything like it" (Göteborgsposten 2024).

Similar developments unfolded across most European countries that froze or cut funding in 2023 (see SWI 2023; Murphy and Marsh 2023). The European Commission published results of its review of ongoing EU financial assistance for Palestine at the end of November 2023. The review concluded that the Commission's "controls and existing

safeguards [...] work well and no evidence has been found to date that money has been diverted for unintended purposes.” Despite this finding, the Commission introduced additional measures, including the incorporation of “relevant anti-incitement contractual clauses in all new contracts,” and ensuring their strict monitoring and enforcement at all times (European Commission 2023).

As Shawan Jabarin, general director of the Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq, told *The New Arab* (2023) shortly after, “Vetting is only an excuse to advance the pressure that these countries have been putting on us for many years to accept political conditions, taking advantage of the events on 7 October.” As R13 put it, these new restrictions and reviews were simply the next step in a long-standing trajectory of Western donor policies:

It's been an easy out for a lot of the governments. It's like: “Oh, we'll review the funding and make sure.” And anything that's edgy, we'll just say, “Oh, here's a good reason.” We are really not sure if they will continue to fund us. And we have been feeling like that for a few years, that maybe they will withdraw funds. But this is such a golden opportunity for them to just back out. So, we are really trying to compensate for that, we are anticipating that that is likely to happen. But it is very interesting because most NGOs are very much beholden to the government funding that they receive.

R13 explains that while organisations that were already targeted and criminalised before the genocide have not been as heavily impacted by this new wave of restrictions and funding freezes, the difference now is that all organisations are feeling the effects:

You know, after October 7th, I think each single Palestinian is affected. We all are. And it is horrible and it is a genocide, a war against the Palestinians, and ethnic cleansing here in West Bank. As a designated organisation, we were already affected by the Western governments, who announced that they will do revisions for their policy and agreements. So, we do not have any actual consequences from that, as we work after 7th of October. Because we had that since before. But the rest of the Palestinians, yes, they have problems and it is like some of the funds and the grants and projects are suspended. But it is shameful actually, that during this very tough time, instead of increasing and doubling the support, people who are facing genocide, are banished. It is a shame. It is something I cannot believe is happening.

R15 believes that this round of reviews and increased requirements is just going to continue to escalate and intensify in the coming years:

We see that also becoming even more after October 7th. As you understand, some donors already suspended funding. Others, they say they are in the process of reviewing funding. So, I expect that the coming period of funding will become even more difficult. Also, some of the donors, like for example Sweden, they have a right-wing government now. In Netherlands, the government is still in the process of formation. But if this ultra-right politician, if he manages to form the government, I think that will immediately affect the funding to Palestine in general, not only human rights. So, I believe that now funding Palestinian human rights organisations is becoming more difficult. It is not very popular in Europe because of the scrutiny and of the designation and all these campaigns. So, the Israelis, I think to some extent, they managed to shrink the space for Palestinian human rights organisations. For example, Al-Haq, they have serious funding problem now. Much of their energy is directed towards the defending themselves and proving that they are not terrorists.

From R14's perspective, these restrictions and allegations all stem from the development framework that came post-Oslo, where even service delivery became political:

Anything that benefits the people, it is now criminalised. Even if you distribute food for people, which is nothing. Because all these donations are coming from the frame of the Oslo agreements, so they come to punish the civil society organisations, to cut their funding or they ask them to sign some clauses. It is all political donations within this frame. But we have to find another frame, which is more based on what we are doing on the ground, for the people, and how we are helping the people. Why this need to check if I am a criminal or not, I am providing services for my people, that's it.

In addition to wanting an easy way out of partnerships, R14 believes that one reason for donor's reviews might be that due to precisely the political sensitivity, donors want to move away from development initiatives, and instead focus more on only humanitarian initiatives:

All of the donors, they started doing some investigation and that's when they suspend the funding, but they are reviewing their programs. Maybe they will

change some of their priorities after the 7th of October. They are reviewing [and] they do some investigation related to the program effectiveness, figuring out if they are going to do humanitarian aid. No more development.

R19 has seen some donors retreat from their initial funding freezes and reviews, to re-align their support for Palestine. However, just like R14, she emphasises that it is apparent that this re-aligned support is first and foremost focused on humanitarian support, and not development:

What we are talking about now is that the existing donors, in this context for example the Spanish, they withdrew funds at the beginning and then they retreated and now there is a certain support to the UN and to its organisations, mainly on the humanitarian work. On the development I think it's different and I think of course it will be impacted by the results of the war and what will happen by the end of the war, I also think that the region is being torn, with Lebanon and Yemen and Syria.

This aligns with the experiences of Palestinian civil society organisations, as discussed in the previous chapter, where increasing political conditions have sought to narrow the scope of projects to purely humanitarian aid. The shift toward humanitarian initiatives is particularly notable given recent developments, which show that the Israeli settler state has expanded its criminalisation campaign to target humanitarian actors as well. The attacks on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) stand as the most striking example of this escalation.

8.1.1 Expansion of the criminalisation campaign

Following the ICJ verdict in January 2024—which ordered Israel to “take all measures within its power” to prevent genocide after determining a realistic possibility of “irreparable prejudice” to Palestinian rights in Gaza—Israel shifted its focus to humanitarian aid providers. It accused a dozen of the 13,000 UNRWA employees of actively supporting the Hamas attacks in Israel (Lund and Browne 2024; UN Human Rights Council 2024; Mizzi 2024; Sinmaz 2024).

On January 18, a diplomatic representative from Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed UNRWA’s head, Philippe Lazzarini, of the allegations, reading from a “large dossier” that appeared to originate from Israeli intelligence. However, this dossier was

never shared with UNRWA itself, only with the agency's donors. Israel's claim rested on an unverified assertion that it could "flag around 190 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist operatives who serve as UNRWA employees" using intelligence documents and identity cards allegedly seized during the conflict. Yet, the six-page dossier sent to donors contained no concrete evidence to substantiate these claims (Lund and Browne 2024; Mizzi 2024; Sinmaz 2024).

In a striking example of reverse due process, nine of the twelve accused UNRWA employees were immediately dismissed (with two others already killed), while the identity of the twelfth person could not be verified as an agency staff member. Lazzarini explained that the terminations were driven by the explosive nature of the allegations, at a time when UNRWA was already facing "fierce and ugly attacks" threatening its ability to function (Lund and Browne 2024; Mizzi 2024). In addition to these dismissals, an Israeli bank account belonging to UNRWA was frozen, the agency was warned that its tax benefits would be revoked, and simultaneously, the United States, the United Kingdom, and 14 other countries froze approximately \$450 million in funding for UNRWA's life-saving programs in Gaza (Lund and Browne 2024; Mizzi 2024; Colonna 2024). According to R15 the donor response was shocking:

Look at the reaction of over 15 countries who decided to cut off funding to UNRWA. They rely on intelligence information from the Israelis. And even many of these countries, they did not receive a written report. It was just a statement by the Israeli foreign minister on his Twitter. And they immediately responded by cutting funding to millions of Palestinians. And it's an international organisation. It is not even a Palestinian NGO. It's the UN. And you know how the UN bureaucracy and the system and the audit and... It is crazy.

In 2024, the Israeli parliament took further steps to criminalise the agency and initiated a process to designate UNRWA a terrorist organisation under the Anti-Terrorism Law of 2016. On September 10, 2024, Lazzarini commented on the move in a statement (UNRWA 2024), where he said that:

Draft legislation in the Israeli Knesset seeks to evict the Agency from its premises of more than 70 years [in Jerusalem], revoke its privileges and immunities, and designate it as a terrorist organisation. It is unprecedented and unconscionable that

a UN Member State is attempting to designate a United Nations entity, which has a mandate from the General Assembly, as a terrorist organisation.

Full implementation of the laws that ban UNRWA from operating in the “sovereign territory of Israel” and ban contact between Israeli authorities and UNRWA came into effect in the beginning of February, 2025 (UNRWA 2025).

Given that six leading and well-respected civil society organisations in the West Bank have already been designated as “terrorist entities,” the allegations against UNRWA in the aftermath of October 7 follow the same pattern of intensification politics. Most notably, the attacks on Palestinian civil society organisations and UNRWA align with the policy recommendations outlined in the secret 2021 report from Israel’s Ministry of Intelligence, described in further detail in Chapter 5. This report details the Israeli government’s systematic plan to continue the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank and facilitate the annexation of Palestinian land. As previously noted, the report advises Israel to criminalise Palestinian civil society organisations, discredit their work, and sabotage their international funding efforts—in other words, to manipulate the narrative in ways that secure effective settler-colonial control (Israeli Ministry of Intelligence 2021; Bisan 2022). By doing so, Israel is waging a campaign of criminalisation aimed at eliminating the very actors that sustain Palestinian communities, thereby accelerating the process of annexation (Lund and Browne 2024).

Since the start of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, Israel’s ultimate goal—i.e., an ethnically cleansed and annexed Gaza Strip—has become increasingly evident through both its stated aims and actions, despite official denials. This was further reinforced in the ICJ ruling (Lund and Browne 2024; International Court of Justice 2024; UN Human Rights Council 2024). In the immediate aftermath of the court’s decision on provisional measures, thousands of Israelis, including dozens of government ministers, gathered in Jerusalem for a far-right conference titled “*Settlement Brings Security and Victory*.” The event explicitly called for new Israeli settlements to be built in Gaza, tacitly endorsing its ethnic cleansing. Israel’s Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, stated that true security could only be achieved through increased settlement expansion in Gaza. Meanwhile, the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, declared, “It would be a shame to wait another 15 years to go back to [Gaza]. This is the time to return home, to build

settlements, to enforce the death penalty for terrorists, and to secure victory” (Lund and Browne 2024; Sharon 2024).

Beyond the clear connection between Israel’s annexation plans and its strategy to criminalise and discredit Palestinian actors in those territories, there are additional striking parallels between the two cases. First, the timing of the attacks on UNRWA is closely linked to its role in the ongoing legal proceedings against Israel. Just as Israel designated Palestinian civil society organisations as “terrorist” due to their key role in submitting evidence to the ICC and contributing to reports from international organisations such as Human Rights Watch that labelled Israel an apartheid state, UNRWA has been targeted because several of its statements were used as evidence in the recent ICJ case in which Israel is charged with genocide. Around the time of the court hearing, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his stance clear, declaring that “UNRWA’s mission has to end” (Lund and Browne 2024; Kingsley and Bergman 2024).

Second, there is a striking resemblance between the dossier used to accuse UNRWA personnel and the one used against the six designated Palestinian civil society organisations. In the case of the six organisations, the allegations relied on supposed personal ties between senior members and the PFLP, yet the 74-page dossier presented no concrete evidence to support these claims. Similarly, the six-page dossier accusing UNRWA personnel makes vague allegations, such as claims that UNRWA IDs were found on Palestinians arrested in Israel after the October 7 attack. It further asserts that one staff member kidnapped a woman, another distributed ammunition, and a third directly participated in an attack on an Israeli kibbutz. However, as with the previous case, none of these claims were substantiated by the “evidence” presented in the dossier (Lund 2023; Lund and Browne 2024; Zorob and Paluszczek 2024).

Third, in both cases, Israel has built its so-called “evidence” on coerced confessions and relied on the same methods to obtain them. As with the 2021 “terrorist” designations of Palestinian civil society organisations, UNRWA has released a report stating that Israeli interrogators tortured its staff in Gaza to extract forced confessions. According to the report, detained staff endured “severe physical beatings, waterboarding, exposure to dogs, threats of violence [...] rape, and electrocution; verbal and psychological abuse; threats of murder, injury, or other harm to their family members; humiliating and degrading

treatment; being forced to strip naked and subjected to photographs” (Lund and Browne 2024; Abraham and Rapoport 2021; Speakman Cordall and Pedrosa 2024).

Beyond these coercive methods, the most telling and significant similarity between the two cases lies in the overarching narrative: that these organisations supposedly have “terrorist” connections, support “terrorism,” or employ staff involved in “terrorist” activities. The portrayal of Palestinians as “terrorists” is, as described in Chapter 5, a central component of the strategy outlined in the secret report from Israel’s Ministry of Intelligence, which explicitly advocates for “utilising anti-terror legislation” to discredit and defund Palestinian actors. Moreover, it is clear that the produced “evidence” needed to enact such legislation has followed the combined methods utilised throughout the three phases of delegitimisation, namely by producing, disseminating and operationalising the “terrorist” narrative, as outlined in Chapter 6.

The timing and deployment of accusations against UNRWA suggest a deliberate strategy. A meeting held in the Israeli Knesset in January 2024—before the allegations were made public—provides insight into the state’s approach. Hosted by the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee’s Subcommittee for Foreign Policy and Public Diplomacy, the meeting included representatives from Israeli civil society organisations, the Israeli army, the Israel Security Agency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Participants repeatedly accused UNRWA of having direct “terrorist” ties and framed it as an obstacle to the settler state that needed to be dismantled. A representative from the Kohelet Policy Forum unambiguously stated, “UNRWA undermines the existence of the State of Israel and is currently run by Hamas” (Lund and Browne 2024; Knesset 2024).

As of early May 2025, a new humanitarian plan has surfaced that, in reality, further accelerates the dismantling of UNRWA. Shared with major humanitarian and development actors operating in Gaza, the plan outlines a shift in control over aid distribution. According to the document, Israeli forces are going to construct aid distribution hubs—while satellite imagery suggests this phase is already underway—which will be used by private contractors to deliver calorie-counted meals to Palestinians. A previously unknown NGO, registered in Switzerland, claims to provide this “new operational model” that other humanitarian actors are encouraged to “take advantage of.” Under this model, private contractors will manage the transport and security of aid, which will only be distributed to civilians who have been vetted and deemed eligible to receive

food packages—in itself a violation of neutrality and impartiality (Akkad 2025; Rozovsky 2025). In effect, this initiative represents a continuation—and escalation—of the Israeli settler state’s established strategy of using proxies in order to advance its political agenda, further securitising humanitarian aid and reinforcing its military presence in the besieged enclave.

What this all demonstrates, is that the settler-colonial logic driving annexation, ethnic cleansing, and the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements has now not only extended to include narrative attacks against organisations providing humanitarian relief to a besieged population—but also to push for a complete restructuring of international aid infrastructure. While this development is a natural progression of the settler-colonial project in Palestine due to its expansionist logic, its acceleration has been directly prompted by the Hamas attack on 7 October. R18 can clearly see the similarities in the policies implemented in Gaza and the West Bank:

After the genocide against Gaza and the attacks in the West Bank, we see that they work in a similar way as they do in Gaza. When you go there, you find that the camps have completely disappeared, hundreds of houses demolished and a lot of people killed. In Hebron, there is an iron door at the entrance to each village, I mean hundreds of villages, you can imagine this kind of discrimination. You cannot go to the city, they only open the door from 9-10am, and then reopen it only after four hours. And our villages are very marginalised and poor. Imagine a pregnant woman who wants to go to the hospital in the middle of the night, how can she? The students, they killed the students from Hebron at the checkpoint. They have to walk through the checkpoint, not go by car, and they shot one of them. They are going to separate the cities in the West Bank from each other. At [our organisation] we have women in all of these villages, as I said, we are not only a group of women working in an office, we have the committees, in each village we have at least 20 volunteers. Also, in the villages that are isolated, meaning that we can document the cases through them.

Although the specific targets of Israel’s criminalisation campaigns differ between the West Bank and Gaza, the overarching strategy remains the same. In the West Bank, civil society organisations, which provide critical services to vulnerable communities, have been the primary targets. In Gaza, where UNRWA plays a central role in humanitarian

infrastructure, it has become the main focus of Israel's defunding and criminalisation efforts (Lund and Browne 2024). The 7 October attacks provided Israel with a unique opportunity to push for the complete dismantling of UNRWA—a long-standing objective of successive Israeli governments and a logical extension of the Zionist state-building project's settler-colonial ambitions. This is not least due to its mandate, which rests upon the Palestinian Right of Return, and which is a constant reminder of the fallacy of the Zionist state building process itself. By controlling the narrative and branding the primary provider of lifesaving humanitarian aid as complicit in or supportive of "terrorism," Israel has sought to justify its attacks on UNRWA's mandate (Ibid).

As shown throughout this thesis, the portrayal of Palestinians and Palestinian resistance as "terrorists" has long been a core element of Israel's settler-colonial violence. However, this narrative transfer has now expanded and intensified, targeting a broader range of Palestinian actors. As shown, this practice of intensification politics has accelerated Israel's efforts to control and weaken already vulnerable communities, particularly in areas where it aims to advance its annexationist goals. The inclusion of humanitarian actors in this process underscores how the expanded use of the "terrorist" narrative aligns with the increasing efforts to displace and eliminate the indigenous population—following a well-established pattern of Israeli responses to every new wave of Palestinian resistance.

Nevertheless, the expansion of the criminalisation campaign not only targets a broader range of actors but also extends to a wider set of actions—and even thoughts. In November 2023, the Israeli Knesset passed an amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Law, introducing a new criminal offense: the "consumption of terrorist materials," punishable by up to one year in prison. The law defines these "specific publications" as expressions of praise, support, or encouragement of terrorist acts, direct calls to commit terrorism, or documentation of terrorist activities (Adalah 2023).

According to Adalah, this amendment represents "one of the most intrusive and draconian legislative measures ever passed by the Israeli Knesset," as it effectively criminalises thoughts by punishing individuals for passive engagement with certain content. Because the law classifies even passive social media use as "consuming terrorist material," Adalah warns that it will lead to increased surveillance of online communications and an unprecedented rise in arrests for alleged speech-related offenses. Initially, the law applies

to materials linked to Hamas and ISIS, but it grants the Minister of Justice the authority to expand the designation to additional groups (Adalah 2023). R19 has already seen the surveillance of social media engagement increase, and sees a risk that it will be further intensified after the end of the Israeli invasion of Gaza:

So only yesterday, the Minister of Interior Security, Eben Gavir, he reported a teacher who reposted a post from a year ago, which happened to be from 7th of October, and she was dancing with a cat or something, and they interrogated her, humiliated her. And I think the surveillance on social media more broadly and the surveillance on the digital sphere related to Palestinians and mainly organisations would come back.

When the war is over and when the dust is settled, the Israeli authorities will have more time to dig into social media activism, to dig into the work of specific NGOs, to know who has been doing what. Like now people are doing a lot in terms of posting and being active. But if the war will not end with a declared victory for Israel, I think they will most probably be more revengeful, even more than now.

Given that Israel has already classified several Palestinian civil society organisations and the humanitarian agency UNRWA as terrorist entities, this amendment paves the way for a severe escalation in the criminalisation process. It not only raises the possibility of criminalising the consumption of material from these designated organisations but also directly impacts legal professionals representing them. As R16 explains:

We still have this process of criminalisation and we are seeing this massive expansion in what can be considered a terrorist offense by Israeli law, which is wild. So, it is just very difficult to avoid it, because it is a passive law. I do not really know how they plan to prosecute this offense, but plenty of lawyers, for instance, need to watch materials relating to their cases. Does that count as consuming terrorist material? If you are arresting lawyers and saying that they are terrorist affiliates or preventing them from seeing their clients, saying that they are aiding and abetting terrorism, this is a total perversion of what lawyers should be allowed to do in any kind of regular circumstance.

R16 continues to explain how charges of terrorist activities or support of terrorism are increasing, despite lack of evidence and with no due process, both among students

protesting against the genocide and among lawyers representing those charged with accusations of terrorism:

There has been a lot of incitement against Palestinian lawyers, and there is one lawyer who is still detained. And we are following the student cases right now, where there is a lot of systematic things happening. You have the government level, which is basically allowing for mass arrests and charges of crazy terrorism offenses. These are extremely serious offenses and the standard of proof is nothing. And then you have the universities, who are then taking it upon themselves to show that they are strong by penalising these students without any due process. All of these students were suspended without any hearing, no procedure, nothing. And then in one of the initial letters that we had written to one university, the immediate response of the principal “how dare you have the audacity to talk to us about due process and to not talk about what Hamas did on October 7?”, it was a two-page response. [...] And I see a similar process happening with lawyers, there are no legal protections, with the Bar Association saying: “Yeah, we support the disbarment of any lawyer who supports terrorism.” Which just means anyone who says anything that somebody does not like. It is crazy that as a defense attorney defending a client, you can be seen as cooperating with terrorism.

R20 shares a similar example, where a journalist in Jerusalem was arrested for allowing to be interviewed by a journalist from al-Aqsa news, which is affiliated with Hamas, as the Israeli authorities claimed the interview was equal to “contact with a foreign agent.” Historian Ilan Pappé argues that the ongoing genocide in Gaza is an intensification that, within itself, is a consequence of the settler state’s failure to reach its final triumph. According to Pappé, as Israel escalates its efforts to eliminate the native population, it will increasingly struggle to be able to justify its actions as mere “responses” or “retaliations” against “Palestinian terror.” However, until this narrative framing collapses entirely, the settler state will continue deploying its military power with devastating consequences for Palestinians—as long as they resist being reduced or pacified to the point where they no longer pose any perceived threat to the settler society (Pappé 2024). In other words, as this research has shown, a further escalation of the intensification politics is to be expected, not the least in terms of criminalisation and delegitimisation.

The question remaining being, how long does it take for the current narrative framing to collapse?

8.2 The future: a crisis for human rights and peacebuilding?

Three days before the 7 October attacks, R12 remarked that “the key word in Palestine is accountability.” Unaware of just how prescient his words would be, he went on to say that UN fact-finding missions had repeatedly concluded that Israel had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity not just one time but “a second time, a third, fourth, fifth—and the worst is yet to come.” Reflecting on the lack of accountability, R12 offered yet another striking observation: “We usually hear that people might boycott the system, claiming it's biased. In the case of Israel, it's the system that boycotts the victims in Gaza.”

In several ways, the lack of accountability has never been more apparent than since the start of the genocide in Gaza. This is especially evident in the role of the international community, where the rhetoric of international law, human rights, and institutional development—the very foundation of the liberal peacebuilding agenda—has been exposed as hollow in the face of Israel’s ongoing atrocities. Instead of taking action to stop these war crimes, Western nations have not only failed to intervene but have actively aided and abetted the occupation state by cutting funding for UNRWA’s life-saving programs in Gaza and continuing to supply the very weaponry that enables Israel to erase the presence of a starving Palestinian population in the besieged Gaza Strip (Mason 2023; UNOHCHR 2023c). According to R20, this is because of an increased indifference among governments in regards to possible human rights violations:

People say that the human rights work is about shaming governments. Now governments are not ashamed and they do not care if they are labelled. It does not matter [...] human life is not an important thing for them anymore. So, they admit that they are silencing [us]. Of course, they are still using some of the old rhetoric about antisemitism, or support for Hamas or support for terror or things like that, but in principle, it is the same strategies, but clearer and more direct, without trying to hide it or wash it off. And the intimidation and harassment are more direct and obvious.

In the words of R13, the failure of Western governments to stop the atrocities in Gaza is challenging the whole idea of liberal democracy:

It's against the values of democracy. I think this war is changing everything, and after that it will be totally reflected everywhere. [...] I think that this genocide is going to end up being a crisis for the idea of the liberal democracy. It's unbelievable and it is difficult even to describe. Human rights values are already affected and no more. As a Palestinian, you do not believe in that. Frankly speaking, it is like something is disconnected, with all these kinds of values that follow lies. Telling our children and women, up to today we have 13,500 victims. 70% of them are children and women, 6,000 children. We still have 6,000 children under their houses, how come? How is this happening in this century under the observation of everyone around the world? And the governments have still stated that Israel has the right to defend itself. Come on, come on, it's too much.

While R14 explains that “the understanding of the international law will not be the same” as “the people who drafted the international law and the human rights law, they are the ones who are now violating it,” R13 continues to explain that this crisis of international law and human rights will have severe effects on civil society organisations and their ability to continue working as before:

We lost everything, even the hope and we lost all our plans and our futures and our stories and even all our tools that we used to use in the past to convince others, they are also no longer valid. We cannot anymore, as a civil society, talk about our values, about international law. I think the Palestinian civil society will find itself in a very critical situation after this war. I don't know if they have the power to continue, or if they have to impose a change in a dramatic way regarding their strategies and even their partnerships, their relations, their links with this kind of international law or whatever we call it. But I think there are big changes that will be needed and it will not be as before, even on a personal level.

This brings us back to the convergence of liberal values and the “practice of empire” among Western settler states and their donor frameworks. As Perugini and Gordon (2015) argue, while human rights law is often assumed to be inherently progressive and emancipatory, it can also serve as a tool of domination—used both to advance liberal policy goals in postcolonial contexts and to frame historical narratives. For instance, the violation of women’s rights was invoked to legitimise military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In this sense, the language of human rights operates not only as a

political instrument but also as an epistemic framework—one that shapes how actors understand their position within social spaces and interpret the meaning of events that they are concerned with (Ibid). In the specific context of Palestine, the growing reliance on human rights discourse has, paradoxically, narrowed the gap between coloniser and colonised. Through routine petitions, court hearings, and legal appeals, the institutional structures of the Israeli settler state are engaged with on a daily basis—and thus, legitimised (Perugini and Gordon 2015).

While R15 agrees that the genocide has laid bare the shortcomings and paradoxes of international law and the human rights discourse, she also sees a contradictory development, where the invocation of international law has increased among donors precisely due to the shortcomings of the international community:

There are very important contradictory effects of October 7. On one hand, I think now the entire agenda of human rights and international law in the region has been undermined. The credibility of the system, of the actors, is now questioned. And this will make our work even more challenging, to promote human rights and to talk about human rights. Second, on the other hand, we see more invocation of international law in framing and using the language. All actors, like the Israelis, they say: “Oh, we respect human rights, we respect international law.” Hamas asks for the respect of international humanitarian law. And Palestinians, they found that the ICJ was kind of a possible venue for change. So, they had high expectations on the ICJ. So, there's kind of this ambivalent effect. The donors, at the same time, on the other hand, as I mentioned, they became more vigilant and they became more careful about Palestinian NGOs and funding Palestinians. Now, most of them are going through review. Now, most donors are conducting a review of their funding to Palestinian human rights organisations and to Palestinian NGOs in general. But on the other hand, I see that, because of the gravity of the Israeli crimes in Gaza and the West Bank, donors will become more susceptible to our involvement in this language and even at the ICC. People see that there is a genocide happening and that you are doing nothing. So, at least just let people try to find a way, although this, you know, although the international law as a system, it's just one venue for action.

R19 has made a similar observation, that the severity of the atrocities in Gaza has made at least some donors re-emphasise human rights, and international and humanitarian law:

I think the sad and severe development of the situation made a lot of donors change their perspective and align with the human rights approaches. And I can tell you that, whether from within the U.S. system or outside of it, we saw some governments coming up and emphasising the rights of Palestinians, emphasising the right of Gazans to stay in Gaza, not to evacuate, emphasising the importance of humanitarian aid. So even if we saw in the beginning some hesitations because of what happened on October 7th, when the revenge of the war continued with its collective punishment, I think that many donors aligned or re-aligned their support and approaches.

As the data demonstrates, there is an ambivalence around international law and its applicability, in other words a crisis for human rights and international law, and not the least among Western and European donors, that poses the risk of spilling over on the Palestinian civil society organisations. According to R20, the impact of these developments on the whole sector of human rights organisations and activities will be so altering that it is difficult to assess the outcomes at this point in time:

We will see the impact of this in the future. I mean [...] in the future, if we start any human rights project, any education [about] all these universal values that we truly believed in and we truly tried to mobilise in the community. The impact will be there. It's not just a personal thing. I speak with a lot of people who are activists in the Arab world and even in Europe and in the [United] States. If you look to what happened in the universities in the [United] States, I don't know how you can teach about the U.S. Constitution, for example, as something that gives us human rights and equality and all of these things [...]. Or the Universal Declaration for Human Rights. It has become worthless, and clearly governments were very bold and clear about that [...] it is not an issue. What we are living now will impact the future of the whole thing that we used to call the human rights movement. How will we behave in the future? Okay, the war will end at some point, but what will we do? How will we act, will we do our normal work?

As R4 puts it, an organisation that will continue as before, using the language of international law and framing its activities within the liberal peacebuilding agenda, risk

alienating itself from the local community, which has been taught that Palestine is the exception in international law—a land outside legal norms where even a human rights activist becomes a “terrorist”:

What is important is [...] the international complicity, and to understand that our communities risk receiving a message that there is no belief in international rule. Do not believe those who claim that they are the human rights activists. They are terrorists. So, this means that as a Palestinian, you are under ongoing occupation, facing ongoing crimes. And then there is no way to fight against that by using what is called international law. What do we live for then? Oh, to keep them crazy in the streets without hope. To take their own initiative. By having a knife or using the car in a shooting. This is the message. They took that from us.

In the view of R14, this crisis has led the Palestinian civil society to now have its own understanding of human rights and international law. This means that it will not accept if the double standard continues to apply in the future:

I think what happened after the 7th of October, it is like an earthquake. All over the world, our humanity has become more of the standard for everything now—because it is no longer the written laws and conventions. But all of this money which has been spent on promoting this and teaching us human rights, it is not the case anymore. After this war has stopped, after the ceasefire, everything will have changed. The values, the principles, everything. I mean, you cannot come here to evaluate us. That's it. It's not about whether you are with Israel or not, or Palestine, it is about if you are with humanity or not. That's it. I think there will be new standards for everything. And now it will not be accepted that you, as donors, talk about something, plan something and then do something else. Your actions need to be in line with what you claim to be your values. So, now there is this contradiction between all these aspects, and it will not work anymore.

Exactly how this will translate into practice is of course difficult to say. R19 believes that several things will be taken into consideration from a donor perspective:

I think the post war situation can bring different challenges, one of them is the donor relations and let's say funding trends or priorities, and I think it can be affected by many things. The issue of funding terrorism and the funds going to where it should go, and not funding militant groups or people affiliated with them.

I think this will continue. I don't think this will stop. The safest instrument based on what we are hearing, whether from the EU donors or from the EU itself or from Arab donors, is that everyone wants to think of a unified funding mechanism that has foreign control and that has the PA in the leadership. And I think one of the reasons behind that, although the world has been concerned with the PA being a corrupt authority for many years, it would be a compromise to minimise any, I would say reputational risks more than others, because we know that at the end the people would benefit, homes will be built, streets will be built, schools will be built, but I think it is, I would say a mitigation measure, and I think there are limitations to the human rights discourse.

All of this suggests that donors may ultimately fail to break the cycle of selectively applying international law, and that they will continue to prioritise development strategies driven by political interests—among them their own reputations—rather than a genuine rights-based approach. As several interviewees have pointed out, the so-called “re-alignment” toward human rights and international law only emerged after the atrocities and collective punishment of Palestinians in Gaza became indefensible in the eyes of public opinion—not before.

As R13 puts it, “Everyone in the world is under this test now. Either we stick with our values as humans or with the values of occupation.” Yet, the donor community has shown little willingness to address the root causes of Palestinian oppression, instead shifting away from development initiatives and narrowing their focus to humanitarian aid. One example of this is the increased use of “resilience” as the operational policy for donors and international organisations in Palestine, as a way to achieve tangible “results” without challenging the illegal occupation of the oPt or the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip (Keelan and Browne 2020; ESCWA 2022). Given this reality, the responsibility for a change in strategy increasingly falls on Palestinian actors and those in solidarity with them, bringing us back to the emerging decolonial strategies discussed in the previous chapter.

The genocide in Gaza is so profound in its significance—not just for Palestine, but for the world—that it risks either dismantling the efforts of Palestinian organisations attempting to resist political conditions, as they struggle to meet the overwhelming humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people, or it might deepen the divide between

Palestinian organisations and Western donors to an irreparable extent. If the latter occurs, more Palestinian organisations may adopt a decolonial approach, returning to the grassroots forms of organising that existed before the Oslo Accords and the so-called peacebuilding agenda. As mentioned in earlier chapters, a decrease in donor dependency could, on the other hand, possibly decrease the Israeli settler state's leverage in its delegitimisation efforts targeting Palestinian actors, not the least through the anti-delegitimisation campaign. Moreover, R14 states that a change within the Palestinian civil society can already be seen, and that it is both due to the Palestine solidarity movement and the steadfastness of the population in Gaza:

I think there will be a change, between new a generation of civil society and the old generations. It will be more like a mass movement. [...] I think the coming future will be for this movement, which will change everything. I don't know if you remember. In the past, we had to work heavily to just to convince young people to go to the street. Now they find their way. And you know that all the countries, they are against this mass movement or social movement. But now it's created. Like this. Like magic. All over the world. And we have to understand that. The voice of the people is the power. And you can imagine what's going on in Gaza. The people, their voice is loud. Even when they are killed every day, even they have this horrible situation, their voice is loud. That is what we have to learn even as civil society organisations. It brings some hope for the future. I think because young people, they are the future, not only the present.

While R20 agrees that changes can be seen among organisations, he thinks that there will be a split, with some organisations also keeping a more pro-government agenda. Nevertheless, he points out that the current situation has created a rupture that sheds light on the fact that Palestine reflects global issues and trends:

It's like, okay, human rights organisations have documented millions of stories about human rights violations in Palestine, but it seems it was useless. Maybe it is harsh to say useless, but it did not affect people as we thought that it will. So, it will be very interesting to see how these things will really impact activism, especially now that the limitations and the restrictions are not just related to Israel. Because it has become a global thing, that suddenly we realise that a lot of the

issues are not an Israeli-Palestinian issue, but it is a global issue. Especially with what is going on right now at the universities in the [United] States.

R20 continues to explain that this globalisation of repression can be an opportunity for stronger advocacy around the world:

The fact that it's not like an issue of only Israel anymore, it's also an issue of principles about human rights, about freedom of speech, about freedom of organisation and freedom of expression, it is much easier to present it to the public or to the media. Although, there are changes, we have to admit that now the situation is bad, not just because the governments are bad, but because a lot of the values are being reframed [...]. There is a huge gap that people are facing between what they were told or what they were educated to believe, and what they see on the ground. Maybe there will be a need to speak more about the root causes, not just about equality and all this nice human rights work. So, at the same time, it becomes much clearer, and it creates more interest in it for progressive people. Maybe good things can come out of bad things.

The struggle for liberation in Palestine is, in other words, nowhere close to being eliminated—and after all, the struggle against colonialism is not only about liberating the colonised, but also the coloniser. As R12 so clearly describes it: “Believe me, no one is doing Israel any good by tolerating this. Because tolerating it means humiliating the whole nation without giving them hope. I think it's sort of self-destruction. Israel should be liberated from itself.”

8.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how civil society organisations in Palestine have faced an intensified clampdown following the Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Israeli invasion of Gaza—an assault that quickly warped into genocidal violence and the total destruction of Palestinian life in the besieged enclave.

It has shown how pre-existing processes of delegitimisation and criminalisation have not only accelerated but broadened in scope. While civil society organisations were already facing delegitimisation and criminalisation, these colonial strategies have now extended to humanitarian actors, legal representatives of the targeted, and even ordinary social media users—some of whom have faced legal consequences for their online engagement.

The chapter also demonstrates how the Israeli settler state is leveraging the current situation not only to criminalise humanitarian organisations like UNRWA, but to push for a complete restructuring of the international aid infrastructure. This includes the establishment of a new aid mechanism through a Swiss-registered foundation, designed to bypass and ultimately—one could argue—replace UNRWA. This new system threatens both the mandate of the UN agency and the broader aid framework, while granting the Israeli settler state new tools for control, surveillance, and the consolidation of its colonial authority.

The chapter has also clarified how the dual focus—on civil society organisations in the West Bank and humanitarian organisations in Gaza—within the ongoing processes of criminalisation and delegitimisation, are closely tied to the Israeli settler state’s annexation plans in both regions of historic Palestine. By targeting these organisations, the settler state aims to further destabilise and weaken already vulnerable communities, facilitating their displacement in line with a settler colonial logic of expansion, elimination and erasure.

At the same time, in an opportunistic move to tighten the restrictions on Palestinian civil society organisations, Western and European donors quickly froze payments to Palestinian partners, opened investigations into alleged “terrorist connections” and took yet one step away from a rights-based development approach in Palestine. This weaponisation of development and humanitarian aid, together with the inability of the international community to stop the genocide and its atrocities, has ultimately created a crisis for human rights and international law—not only in Palestine but globally. In the end, this crisis poses the risk (or possibly an opportunity) of completely reshape civil society engagement in Palestine.

Chapter 9. Conclusions

This research project has sought to examine and analyse the criminalisation of civil society organisations in Palestine within the broader context of Zionist settler colonialism. It has investigated how the Israeli settler state, together with other actors within the Zionist movement, constructs settler narratives pertaining to Palestinian resistance—both historically and in the present day—and how these narratives are disseminated to discredit the work of Palestinian civil society actors. Additionally, it has examined what counterstrategies Palestinian civil society has employed to navigate and resist these evolving forms of dispossession.

To unpack the systematic delegitimisation efforts targeting Palestinian organisations, as well as the operational logic underpinning their criminalisation, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of Palestinian civil society organisations both in the oPt and within Israel proper. I propose that the role of narrative construction and development in the criminalisation of civil society organisations in Palestine can be effectively analysed by focusing on three key areas: (i) how the construction and dissemination of these narratives can be understood through a conceptual and theoretical framework grounded in settler colonial logics and strategies; (ii) which other actors are involved in this process, drawing on a framework that distinguishes between uncoercive, grassroots civil society and professionalised, coercive, and manufactured organisations; and (iii) the role these narratives play within the broader criminalisation campaign against Palestinian civil society, particularly in how they have been operationalised through the wider development agenda, and how Palestinian organisations have navigated and responded to these processes.

The final chapter aims to bring together the core findings from the preceding four analytical chapters, situating them within the theoretical framework and case-specific realities that have shaped this study, in order to present the main conclusions of the research. Structurally, the chapter will follow the sequence of the core research questions that have guided the project. After addressing and answering these research questions, I will offer some final reflections in regards to this long PhD journey, and discuss the broader contextual realities in which the research was conducted. Finally, I will outline directions for future research before offering some concluding remarks.

9.1 The role of narrative construction in the criminalisation process

One of the central objectives of this research has been to examine the mechanisms through which the Israeli settler polity constructs and deploys narratives that work to delegitimise and criminalise Palestinian civil society. Thus, the first research question guiding this project was: Within a context of a settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure, how does the Israeli state, together with non-governmental Zionist and pro-Israel groups, use and produce narratives of Palestinian resistance?

The central role of narratives in the context of the settler colonial logic of elimination and erasure must be traced back to the origins of the Zionist project in historic Palestine. Just as the processes of dispossession, erasure, and elimination of Palestinian society have continued uninterrupted over the past century, so too has the strategic use of narrative and conceptual transfers against the indigenous population—always in service of the settler project. From its inception, the Zionist movement framed its colonisation of Palestine through the doctrine of *terra nullius*—claiming the land was empty prior to their arrival. In instances where the presence of Palestinians could not be denied, they were depicted as unproductive, “backward,” and ultimately less “civilised” than the settlers.

Evidently, the evolution of these narrative transfers over the following decades closely followed the overall trajectory of the settler colonial project itself, particularly shaped by the Zionist movement’s failure to expel all Palestinians during the Nakba of 1948—which stands as one of the most evident examples of the settler colonial logic of elimination (Pappe 2006; Masalha 2012). This incomplete act of total ethnic cleansing made the settler colonial polity experiment with new settler technologies of dispossession, resulting in a complex system of mechanisms that govern, control, oppress, and ultimately contain, every aspect of Palestinian life—through what has come to be known as the matrix of control (Halper 2000).

At its core, this matrix is sustained by, and articulates, the settler-native divide embedded within constructed settler narratives. The settler polity defines itself in opposition to the native, who is reimagined as an exogenous “other.” By rendering indigenous Palestinian life inherently distinct, the settler state not only excludes it from the realm of legitimate political life, but also justifies and enables its criminalisation.

The rich qualitative data provided as a result of this research has shown that this exceptionalism works through liberal matrixes of oppression and criminalisation. Not only

do they hide and distort attention from structures of colonial violence, but they also give them a benevolent face. As such, the criminalisation of Palestinian civil society is woven into multiple layers of this matrix, including the three phases of delegitimisation outlined in this research. The power of this strategy lies in its dual character: it is both expansive—casting a wide net of allegations—and highly selective—targeting those actors most capable of challenging the colonial order.

While narrative and conceptual transfers have long been central to settler colonialism's dehumanisation of native populations in order to legitimise the settler project, the Israeli model of criminalisation—particularly against Palestinian civil society actors—distinguishes itself through the effective integration of multiple methods. This model combines narrative construction and dissemination within an endocolonial environment, which means that it is deeply embedded in surveillance practices and innovative forms of colonial warfare, alongside the strategic manipulation of anti-terror legislation. At its core is the promotion of a Zionist national narrative that frames Palestinians as inherently racist and inclined towards terrorism—a framing that began with the labelling of Palestinian political parties and leadership as “terrorists.”

This framing gained powerful momentum after the Second Intifada, as it aligned itself with the post-9/11 global security paradigm and the launch of the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT). Since then, the Israeli settler state's claim that any use of force by the Palestinians—violent or non-violent, political or civil—is inherently “terroristic” and illegitimate. The scope of criminalisation has widened: no longer limited to armed groups and political parties, it now targets any Palestinian actor who opposes the settler colonial trajectory as it advances toward its ultimate “triumph,” including grassroots movements and internationally funded civil society organisations. To this end, the settler polity has adopted a language that frames Palestinian organisations as “security threats.” This rhetorical move legitimises extraordinary measures to “combat” and “defend” against these constructed threats (Zorob and Paluszek 2021). In doing so, the GWOT has not only provided cover for, but actively accelerated, Israel's own policies in Palestine, embedding them within a global framework of counterinsurgency.

The particular focus on Palestinian civil society organisations within these processes stems from their increasingly active role in Palestinian advocacy, their documentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity, their support of vulnerable communities in Area C,

and the launching of relatively successful initiatives such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In a political vacuum marked by the absence of strong Palestinian leadership and the outlawing of political parties, these acts—framed by Israel as a “legitimacy war”—are perceived as some of the most significant strategic threats to the advancement of the settler colonial project and the maintenance of occupation and apartheid in the oPt. Ultimately, the objective is to silence Palestinian civil society actors as a means of erasing and eliminating the dissemination of the Palestinian, or native, narrative.

Central to this strategy is a secret (well, at least initially) report produced in 2021 by the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence, titled *“The Palestinian Battle for Area C—Creating a Security Situation on the Ground, Description and Significance.”* Focused on advancing the Israeli government’s plans for the systematic ethnic cleansing of the West Bank and the annexation of Palestinian land, the report identifies the activities of Palestinian civil society organisations—particularly those working with vulnerable communities in Area C—as a significant obstacle to these objectives. To counter this, the report recommends a strategy aimed at (i) criminalising Palestinian civil society organisations, (ii) discrediting their work, and (iii) undermining their international funding sources. The strategy, according to the report, should be based on anti-terrorism legislation and counterinsurgency tools.

This illustrates the growing blurring of boundaries between development work and anti-terrorism legislation, and means that the deepening securitisation characteristic of the endocolonial environment has expanded to encompass international aid, as the narrative battle has evolved into an official state policy. As a result, the settler polity has been investing significant amounts of resources into enlisting and coordinating a network of Zionist proxy organisations whose primary task is to produce and disseminate “evidence” targeting Palestinian civil society organisations and the BDS movement, and to pressure foreign parliaments and donors to sever their partnerships with Palestinian actors. While anti-terror legislation remains at the core of these methods, and while the overarching goal is to discredit opponents—thus paving the way for their erasure and elimination and diverting attention from the crimes of Israel’s colonial regime—it is evident that since the Second Intifada, surveillance and spyware technologies have been increasingly paired with “secret information,” coerced confessions, and a discriminatory military court system in the West Bank to manufacture data, or “evidence,” against those deemed threats to the occupation, apartheid, and colonial erasure in Palestine.

The production of so-called “evidence” is a central component of the narrative construction process, as it serves to reinforce and legitimise the negative traits ascribed to Palestinians in general, and to human rights defenders and advocates of Palestinian liberation in particular. Counterinsurgency tools not only bolster and formalise settler colonial narratives around the three mainly used framings “terrorism,” “antisemitism,” and “corruption” (with “terrorism” being the most commonly used), but, as previously mentioned, also provide justification for the application of discriminatory laws aimed at restricting the activities of civil society actors. This process is driven by a coordinated, government-backed network of Zionist proxy organisations—referred to as the anti-delegitimisation network—which employs a strategy that unfolds in three phases of delegitimisation and criminalisation.

First, the focus lies in manufacturing “evidence” that aligns with established settler colonial narrative transfers, targeting specific actors. Second, this “evidence” is disseminated to create the groundwork for the enactment of discriminatory laws against Palestinian organisations and to lobby Western donors. Finally, the third phase involves the operationalisation of criminalisation and erasure through direct actions aimed at outlawing, suppressing, and isolating civil society actors, while simultaneously pressuring their partners and funders. In this way, the latter two phases work in tandem, coordinating targeted efforts against both Palestinian organisations and their international support networks.

These regime-loyal Zionist civil society organisations are distinguished not only by their close ties to the Israeli government but also by their adoption of new strategies and tactics. They have gained notoriety among Palestinian civil society actors and Western donors for producing frequent reports, hosting seminars, publishing articles and op-eds, raising parliamentary issues, and conducting lobbying campaigns—all aimed at accusing donors of financing Palestinian “terrorism,” “antisemitism,” or “corruption.” Lies, distortions, and half-truths are routinely employed to construct a narrative that paints targeted organisations as suspect and guilty by association. A clear example of this process, as highlighted in the research, is the use of the military court system in the West Bank. The widespread and systematic arrests, coupled with the court system's high conviction rate and lack of due process, result in large segments of the population—and thus also organisations—being criminalised.

These acts of criminalisation are based on nothing more than the family ties, social connections, and employment history of the targeted individual or organisation. Due to the policy of guilt by association, even someone distantly related can serve as proof of someone's "terrorist" affiliation. The "evidence" allegedly proving these connections are then disseminated and amplified through numerous reports and "research" papers generated by other entities within the anti-delegitimisation network, creating a sophisticated system of triangulation that makes verifying the accuracy of these claims exceedingly difficult.

This means that individuals and organisations in Palestine can be charged under anti-terror legislation even when the so-called "evidence" is entirely unsubstantiated. Not only *can* they be charged, it is of key importance to sustaining the colonial order that they are. These acts of criminalisation are thus not incidental, isolated cases of discrimination—they are systematic and structural. Once these charges are made, they become almost impossible to overturn through legal means. As such, those targeted find themselves excluded not only from political legitimacy but also from fundamental legal protections such as due process. In this way, settler colonial narratives work also to transform Palestine and Palestinians into the exception—making them an exogenous "other" also in terms of the human rights framework.

In terms of the second phase of the strategy, the anti-delegitimisation network operates through a sophisticated system of dissemination and targeting, following a chain in which fabricated "evidence" and constructed narratives are first circulated among members of European parliaments. These members then raise the issues with their respective governments, who in turn pass the concerns on to donor agencies and/or embassies in Palestine. These agencies, now compelled to respond, initiate investigations by bringing the allegations to the targeted Palestinian organisations, who are then required to address and disprove them. However, the analysis of the data reveals that in parallel to this formal dissemination route, the "evidence" is sometimes delivered directly to donor agencies, skipping the parliamentary and governmental stages altogether. These two approaches are strategically used in combination to accelerate and widen the circulation to amplify impact.

Two of the most active governmental agencies involved in this collaboration are the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, and the former Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Diplomacy (now incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In practice, the coordination between state and non-state actors within the network is facilitated through a "public-benefit company" established by the Israeli government in

2017, now known as Voices of Israel. The research shows that Israeli state officials, including figures such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and even, on occasion, the Israeli Prime Minister, have been directly involved in these activities.

At the same time, all the Palestinian organisations interviewed reported being consistently targeted by one specific organisation: NGO Monitor. Based on this data, NGO Monitor stands out as a key player in the state-private anti-delegitimisation network. Nevertheless, the extensive analysis of secondary reports and material gathered as part of this research, when read alongside the qualitative data gathered through direct interviews with key respondents also reveals that the boundaries between state and non-state actors within the network are increasingly blurred. There is a significant revolving door between personnel at all three levels of the network — from governmental agencies, to the public-benefit company overseeing the three-phase strategy, to the Zionist proxy organisations that drive these efforts, and thus it is imperative to assess and analyse their activities as part of one institutionalised, systematic strategy to delegitimise, criminalise and ultimate silence and erase Palestinian civil society organisations and the Palestinian narrative that they help spreading—and not as separate, disconnected cases of lobby activities.

9.2 From forced development and dependency to delegitimisation and defunding

Moving on towards the analysis of the practical implications of these settler colonial narratives and their dissemination, the second research question to guide this research project was: How are Palestinian civil society organisations affected by these strategies?

By focusing on the intimate embeddings of securitisation of development aid in the context of Palestine, this research has advanced the argument that settler colonial narratives play a central role within structures of criminalisation. The research has highlighted a tension within Palestinian civic space that the settler state has effectively exploited. The “colonial peace” paradigm has transformed Palestinian civil society from mainly grassroots-based, uncoercive movements, to a professionalised Palestinian civil society that is increasingly dependent on international funding within a rent-based aid industry, that in turn has distanced itself from the Palestinian resistance movement. As such, the enduring effects of the liberal peacebuilding framework have resulted in a nearly entirely dependent Palestinian economy.

Therefore, in parallel to the Palestinian civil society gaining more traction in the struggle for Israeli accountability and the “war of legitimacy,” it has also become increasingly dependent on, and influenced by, the widely differing political agendas of international donors. This in turn means that the Israeli settler state has been presented with an excellent opportunity to indirectly oppress, silence and control Palestinian civil society organisations through regulating the (dis)involvement of international donors, as a means to address the pressing strategic threat to the settler state that these organisations present. Thus, the settler polity’s adaptation to the peacebuilding agenda and the adjoining international aid activities is, in itself, another exceptional example of how settler colonial dominance constantly adapts to any interruptions or modifications not only imposed by the resistance, but also by the international community.

The construction of narratives is central to the coercive political agendas imposed on Palestinian civil society by international donors. These narrative transfers—branding Palestinian organisations as “corrupt,” “antisemitic,” or “terrorist”—typically hinge on accusations of funding or associating with so-called “terrorist” activities or partners. The research has exposed a range of key tactics deployed during the third and final phase of the anti-delegitimisation network’s strategy, namely the operationalisation phase. These include harassment, threats against family members, arbitrary arrests, coerced confessions, travel bans (particularly when staff are set to attend international events), surveillance and device hacking, asset seizure, office closures, year-long imprisonments, revocation of residency permits, deportations, and ultimately, terrorist designations. A striking example occurred in the fall of 2021, when six leading Palestinian civil society organisations were designated as “terrorist” entities in Israel and “disallowed associations” in the West Bank—based largely on dubious evidence drawn from the Israeli military court system, coerced confessions and unsubstantiated allegations of “terrorist” ties initially brought forward by NGO Monitor and other organisations within the anti-delegitimisation network.

However, the effectiveness of these measures ultimately depends on the responses of their intended audience—in this case, the donors. While Western and European donors acknowledge that allegations are often unsubstantiated and recognise that the targeting of Palestinian civil society organisations is an ongoing systematic campaign to silence and smear Palestinian civil society, they, at the same time, act in a way that contradicts this stance. The research findings shared in this thesis clearly demonstrate that donors have censored and pressured their Palestinian partners into avoiding terminology that could

make them vulnerable to further attacks. In other words, this silencing and censorship extends not just to organisations that have already been targeted by the anti-delegitimisation network in any of the three phases, but to all organisations.

The research has pointed towards this contradiction stemming from a tension between local donor offices and the governments and parliaments in their capitals, as the capitals are often influenced by the anti-delegitimisation network and tend to have less cultural sensitivity to the Palestinian context than the staff at local offices and embassies. Crucially, many of the largest donors are themselves former colonial powers or settler colonies, revealing how development agendas are not neutral, but deeply rooted in and shaped by enduring colonial legacies (OECD 2022).

As a result, the space for civil society in Palestine has continuously been shrinking, with foreign donors ordering countless audits (which as of yet have found no evidence of foul play). In other words, this study has shown that, even when met with disbelief from donors, the combination of constructed, disseminated settler narratives and practical measures of criminalisation and delegitimisation can still succeed in making solidarity with Palestine untenable and unthinkable. For example, donors such as the EU and several individual states have introduced new counterterrorism clauses into their contracts with Palestinian organisations. The EU began imposing such clauses in 2019. What this underscores is the extent to which the securitisation of aid has become routine across nearly all donor streams. The processes accelerated by the GWOT have established a new normal for aid practice that will be exceedingly difficult to roll back. It is unlikely that donors will remove counterterrorism clauses and sanctions lists from their aid flows anytime soon. As the data above has revealed, political conditional funding has become part of how development aid works in Palestine today.

This is in part due to the “business as usual” approach that Western and European donors have adopted in Palestine for decades, through which they are refusing to meaningfully confront the realities of Israel’s illegal occupation, systematic discrimination, and apartheid. Instead, their policies consistently prioritise Israel’s security narrative and their own political interests, at the direct expense of Palestinian rights and sovereignty. This posture reflects a deeper unwillingness to engage with the realities that render political conditionality particularly harmful and unjust in the Palestinian context.

In reality, donors are well aware of Palestine's exceptional political circumstances—but their response has only worked to entrench power asymmetries. While political conditionality is a long-standing feature of the development sector, Palestinian organisations now face unprecedented levels of pressure to conform to externally imposed political conditions. Every organisation interviewed in this study identified such conditionality as a major obstacle to their operations. Coupled with the intense over-scrutiny Palestinian civil society is subjected to, it is clear that Palestine is treated as an exception also in within the development sector: donors acknowledge the sensitivity of the context, but specifically use it as justification for transforming Palestine into one of the most restricted, decontextualised spaces for development intervention anywhere in the world.

Participating in development aid programs has thus become increasingly problematic for many Palestinian development and civil society actors, as operating under the terms dictated by donors and the international community often means reinforcing neo-colonial structures of control. Yet, the pressing needs of the Palestinian people make the provision of these services essential. Opting out, however, risks ceding this critical space to actors who are less critical of, or less committed to ending, the colonisation of Palestine. This tension has emerged as a central dilemma for Palestinian civil society organisations and reflects a structural vulnerability that the Israeli settler state seeks to exploit.

At the same time, as the boundaries between securitisation, counterterrorism, and development are becoming increasingly blurred, it is creating a progressively more hostile environment for Palestinian civil society. This dynamic exposes the failure of the peacebuilding discourse to recognise the fundamental asymmetry between coloniser and colonised, ultimately reinforcing the inequalities it claims to address. It is clear that the “partners for peace” framework—rooted in a conflict narrative and the donor-recipient relationship—is deeply entangled with the ongoing Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine. Under the continued trajectory of settler colonialism in Palestine, one might have expected the Israeli settler state and Zionist organisations to steadily intensify pressure on European donor states in the coming years, in order to make them fully adopt the counterterrorism agenda. While this may still be the case, the events of 7 October and their aftermath have altered this trajectory. While they on the one hand have accelerated and expanded the already existing and ongoing processes of criminalisation and delegitimisation, the research findings shared in this thesis have revealed that they have

done so with such a speed that Palestinian civil society organisations are now compelled to fundamentally reconsider their modes of engagement—particularly their relationships with governmental donors.

9.3 A new phase: decolonial resistance or colonial peace?

In order to also capture potential opportunities and lessons learned amid processes of delegitimisation, defunding, and criminalisation, the third and final research question asked: What strategies do Palestinian civil society organisations avail of to negotiate and resist this hostile climate based on an additional layer of erasure?

In response to this increasingly hostile environment, Palestinian civil society organisations have developed a range of counterstrategies. Broadly speaking, two distinct tendencies have emerged. Some organisations have adopted a globalised outreach strategy, while others have doubled down on local, grassroots-based approaches. Those pursuing the global route are often more willing—though not always—to sign agreements containing counterterrorism clauses, accepting the heavy political conditioning attached to their funding. In doing so, many have begun self-censoring, scrubbing their reports and communications of national liberation vocabulary such as “Nakba” and “colonialism,” and replacing it with the more palatable language of international law—seen as less vulnerable to donor scrutiny. These organisations are not merely engaging with pro-Palestinian solidarity networks abroad; they are actively seeking alliances with international and multinational organisations and agencies, adapting their strategies to fit within the increasingly securitised and depoliticised framework imposed by Western donors.

However, the focus on cultivating ties with Western and European capitals has largely proven illusory—built more on empty promises than meaningful support. Worse, it has diverted attention from confronting the attacks by the anti-delegitimisation network more directly and effectively. In the aftermath of the terrorist designations against the six organisations in 2021, the targeted organisations moved quickly to coordinate their responses. They issued joint public statements, launched a collective digital campaign (#StandWithTheSix), and organised workshops for diplomats and donor representatives to push back against the delegitimisation efforts. Procedurally, five organisations filed formal objections seeking to overturn the designation, and three requested hearings with the Israeli Advisory Committee to contest the accusations. Both legal avenues, however, were

dismissed without serious consideration, further exposing the political nature of the criminalisation process.

What this reveals is that these organisations remain heavily reliant on Western and European donor support. Their primary strategy centres on challenging the terrorist designations through legal channels and international advocacy. Yet criminalisation, like settler colonialism itself, is not a singular event but an ongoing structure—and as long as the Palestine exception remains unchallenged, the boundaries between securitisation, counterterrorism, and development will only continue to dissolve. This dependency raises serious questions about these organisations' ties to Palestinian society, their long-term sustainability, and the risks of becoming increasingly professionalised at the expense of their grassroots foundations.

Moreover, the growing reliance on legalism within the Palestinian liberation struggle has been sharply criticised for reinforcing, rather than dismantling, existing power structures. Scholars have described this trend as a self-defeating shift toward liberal legalism, where liberation is reframed narrowly as a quest for rights under international law. In doing so, legal advocacy risks striving for a “kinder” colonialism rather than confronting and dismantling the settler colonial project itself, by focusing on Israel’s most visible excesses rather than its foundational Zionist ideology (Erakat and Reynolds 2021; Rabie and Qato 2013).

The second group of organisations, by contrast, typically refuses to accept counterterrorism clauses. As a result, they are actively distancing themselves from governmental funding, recognising that states—and intergovernmental bodies like the EU—are far more vulnerable to Israeli pressure and to the lobbying efforts of the anti-delegitimisation network. As mentioned, governments are also far more likely to embed counterterrorism measures and political conditionality into their development programs.

The experience of these organisations makes one thing clear: those with less reliance on government funding, and greater support from solidarity-driven organisations, have been better able to withstand the criminalisation campaign. Unlike the first group, these organisations have openly challenged Western donors and their increasing conditionality, rather than confining their critiques to closed-door conversations.

The research suggests that Israel concentrates its attacks on organisations still heavily dependent on Western and European funding—those whose donor-recipient relationships

are seen as strategic vulnerabilities to exploit and sever. However, the majority of organisations interviewed as part of this research aligned their activities with the top-down approach promoted by European and Western donors, whereas grassroots-based organisations—those that prioritise local voices and embrace a decolonial framework—were notably fewer in numbers. In effect, the approach favoured by these organisations calls for a return to how civil society functioned during the pre-Oslo era, particularly during the First Intifada, when more organisations were community- and volunteer-based.

This suggests that civil society organisations which have remained independent from the political agendas of foreign governments and donor agencies—those grounded in local support rather than external funding—build stronger ties to their communities and arguably represent local voices more authentically than the increasingly professionalised sector. Ultimately, the practical consequences of the criminalisation campaign have deepened the coerciveness of the “colonial peace” framework, demonstrating that foreign aid is neither neutral nor benign, but a tool of colonial control. Donor responses have become integral to Israel’s settler colonial system of control over Palestinian lives and institutions. Yet, paradoxically, these same processes have also pushed some Palestinian organisations to move toward more grassroots, decolonial strategies.

In several ways, the conclusions drawn from this research have been brought to the fore by the ongoing genocide in Gaza—which stands out as the ultimate outcome of the politics of intensification and the settler colonial logic of elimination. The politics of intensification, which means that each wave of Palestinian resistance is met with ever more extreme settler colonial violence—has manifested itself not only in relentless physical destruction of the Gaza Strip, but also in the accelerated criminalisation of Palestinian civil society since October 2023. The expanded deployment of the “terrorist narrative” has been central to this escalation, weaponised by the Israeli settler state and its Zionist proxy organisations to manufacture both domestic and international consent for the atrocities committed.

In effect, the expansion of the “terrorist” narrative has led to humanitarian organisations like UNRWA being accused of “terrorist connections” and subsequently designated a terrorist organisation in Israel; lawyers defending those accused now risk being branded as “terrorists” themselves; and even basic forms of social media engagement increasingly

coming under attack, with individuals risking terror charges for passively “consuming terrorist material” on social media platforms. Evidently, counterterrorism powers have evolved into ever-expansive domains and notably, embed themselves in not only development agendas, but also humanitarian assistance, legal aid, and on into cyberspace. The research has shown that this targeted assault on civil society organisations in the West Bank, and humanitarian actors in Gaza, is deeply entwined with Israel’s broader annexation plans across historic Palestine.

This intensification has also elevated the global significance of Palestine. There is an ongoing global trend toward increased restriction and closure of civic spaces, with a discernible rise in state-led repression of civil society, that has been directly affected by these recent developments in Palestine (El-Sabawi 2024). Indeed, since the onset of the genocide, the crackdown on Palestine solidarity worldwide has mirrored—almost seamlessly—the structures of warfare, counterinsurgency, surveillance, and narrative repression long deployed against Palestinians themselves (Browne, Weizman and Matchain 2025). This gradual encroachment of state power into shrinking civic spaces—arenas where civil society organisations, social movements, and ordinary citizens should be able to organise and mobilise freely—has thus become part of a broader global wave of repression.

In response to growing international solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the ongoing genocide has created enabling conditions for both state and non-state actors to implement increasingly authoritarian measures (El-Sabawi 2024). Strikingly, the Palestinian cause has alone accounted for approximately 10 percent of all documented instances of global repression of free expression in the years of 2023 and 2024 (Vaughan 2025). In other words, solidarity with Palestine has become a key trigger for censorship and the curtailment of civic freedoms worldwide. A telling example is the British government’s recent decision to designate the protest group Palestine Action a “terrorist organisation.” This move effectively places the group alongside entities such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hezbollah on the list of proscribed organisations. Under this designation, membership or “public support” for the group is criminalised, carrying penalties of up to 14 years in prison. Even acts as symbolic as wearing a t-shirt or badge bearing the group’s name may lead to a sentence of up to six months (Ibid).

Another telling example of this trend is the detention of over 3,200 students, faculty, staff, and journalists in U.S. campus raids between April and May 2024. University administrators accused pro-Palestinian students and organisations of charges such as

“material support for terrorism,” despite a lack of evidence. These accusations were followed by proposed discriminatory actions such as visa cancellations and deportations (El-Sabawi 2024). In Germany, authorities labelled a one-year-old child a “security threat” and separated him from his mother—later citing her participation in pro-Palestinian demonstrations as the basis for their decision. According to the European Legal Support Centre, this incident exemplifies the German state’s broader exploitation of residence, asylum, and citizenship laws to repress specifically Palestinian solidarity (Akkad 2025).

Lastly, in Sweden, the government has proposed an amendment to its alien law that would allow for the deportation of individuals not only for criminal acts but also for broadly defined “misconduct.” Under this proposal, even expressions of opinion or political statements could be deemed sufficient to classify someone as a “security threat” (Lindberg 2025). This shift must be understood in the context of recent statements by Swedish government officials, who have accused pro-Palestinian activists of acting in contradiction to “Swedish values” by “legitimising a violent [...] and authoritarian theocracy,” “celebrating terrorists,” and “calling for sabotage, threats, and violence” (Bortz, Hellström, and Strand 2025). Given such rhetoric, it is reasonable to anticipate that those expressing solidarity with Palestine are likely to be those primarily targeted by the proposed legal changes.

Taken together, these developments not only illustrate the growing repression of dissent globally, but also signal a deepening disconnect between governments and parts of civil society within liberal democracies. Notably, this trend of repression operates through the same mechanisms as those used to criminalise civil society actors in Palestine. Not just through the use of surveillance and legal adaptation designed to criminalise dissent, but also through powerful narrative framings—casting activists as “security threats” or associating them with “terrorism.” As such, this research has contributed to the understanding of how civil society actors are delegitimised and criminalised—not only in the Palestinian context, but globally.

At the same time, another dimension of the “globalisation of Palestine” (Perugini and Gordon 2015) has come to the fore: Palestinians’ partial entry into the global “circle of victims” of human rights violations, reflected in the rising—though increasingly hollow—invocation of human rights discourse. Yet, this globalisation is not only about solidarity. It is, first and foremost, mediated through the language of colonialism and, more sharply, through the globalised framework of “terrorism.” The stark contrast between the human

rights discourse and the realities on the ground—particularly as these dynamics have extended beyond the borders of Palestine—may, as several interviewees in this research have observed, make the Palestinian cause more accessible to international audiences. In other words, as the gap between Western governments and their civil societies has widened, the distance between civil society actors in the West and those in Palestine appears to have narrowed.

The genocide—and the international community’s failure to intervene meaningfully, coupled with donors’ inadequate responses and renewed funding restrictions—has precipitated a profound crisis for human rights and international law. The genocide in Gaza is so profound in its significance—not just for Palestine, but for the world—that it risks either dismantling the efforts of Palestinian organisations attempting to resist political conditions, as they struggle to meet the overwhelming humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people, or it might deepen the divide between Palestinian organisations and Western donors to an irreparable extent. Therefore, one can conclude that this moment, this deep rupture, carries a double edge: it threatens to dismantle existing forms of civil society engagement in Palestine, but also opens the possibility for reimagining and rebuilding new, decolonial forms of resistance.

What this reveals is that the anti-narrative Edward Said (1984) identified already in the 1980s—one aimed at delegitimising the Palestinian cause and its anti-colonial resistance through the rhetoric of “terrorism”—lies at the heart of a process that has not only persisted, but has become increasingly sophisticated, institutionalised, and criminalising with time. As Ilan Pappé (2024) argues, this intensification, alongside the extreme colonial violence unfolding in Gaza, reflects the logical culmination of a failing settler colonial project. And yet, this culmination also signals a subtle shift in the deep structures of settler colonialism in historic Palestine. While the Israeli settler polity has largely pursued an endocolonial (inward-focused) trajectory since 1967, the genocide in Gaza—with explicit governmental plans for territorial takeover (PBS 2025) and discussions of resettlement—suggests that an exocolonial (outward-focused) trajectory can actually operate alongside, and even reinforce, an endocolonial one.

9.4 Closing remarks, reflections and future research

Conducting research during this period of profound significance for the Palestinian struggle has been deeply challenging. On a personal level, it has been painful—witnessing the

destruction of Gaza, including my former office building and knowing that former colleagues now lie buried under rubble heavier than the world itself, has weighed heavily on me. Yet, these experiences have only strengthened my conviction that this research is not only worthwhile but urgently necessary. The discrediting and silencing of voices speaking up for Palestine is intensifying and expanding globally, and the criminalisation of Palestinian civil society actors is accelerating at an alarming pace. At the same time that we are witnessing the most blatant manifestation of the settler colonial logic of elimination unfolding in Gaza, Western and European donors are turning their backs on their Palestinian partners.

Looking to the future, it is difficult to propose new research directions amid an ongoing genocide. I recognise that this study has only captured a small part of a much larger and evolving field. I therefore believe that it would be valuable to expand its scope to also include Israeli organisations that face criminalisation from the Israeli settler state, or to conduct comparative research that incorporates other anti-colonial struggles around the world. By doing so, one could possibly draw more conclusions in regards to the probable success or weakness of emerging decolonial counterstrategies.

In the end, this research has shown that narratives matter. Settler colonial strategies are highly adaptive—continuously evolving in response to both resistance from Palestinian organisations and shifting dynamics within the international donor landscape. Exposing the destructive processes advanced by actors such as the anti-delegitimisation network—as they fabricate falsehoods in their attempt to appeal to the language of “civilisation”—is therefore one, but not the only, way through which we can begin to respond to these intensified and accelerated processes of delegitimisation and criminalisation.

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Appendix 1 – Information Leaflet

NAME OF STUDY: Settler Colonialism and the Erasure of the Other: Controlling Narratives of Palestinian Resistance

You have been asked to be involved in this research study because I am trying to find out how Palestinian civil society organizations have been affected by what Israel calls the 'Delegitimization project'. I would like to ask you a number of questions regarding the scope of your previous work, funding sources, potential issues that have arisen due to Israeli efforts to discredit your work, and possible counter-strategies.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to participate in the study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what taking part involves.

Background information to the study

This study is part of a PhD dissertation at the School of Religion, Theology and Peace Studies, Trinity College Dublin. The aim of the research is to study how Palestinian civil society organizations have been affected by Israel's intensified efforts to delegitimize, criminalize and ultimately silence the Palestinian civil society through the use of false narratives in combination with new and old technologies and strategies, and how, in turn, civil society organizations are navigating these complexities.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to participants, however I hope the results of the study will help us to understand how civil society organizations, as well as the donor community, can re-think and respond to the dissemination of false narratives in a context of a shrinking civic space.

Disadvantages

The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours.

Involvement in the study will also inherently include potential risks in regards to the security situation in the country, especially since the study has a focus on politically sensitive information. As such, there is a risk, even though minimal, that the information given by you or your organization is leaked. This could in turn lead to legal or economic repercussions.

Do I have to take part?

It is your choice whether you would like to take part in the study or not. If you do not wish to participate, you do not have to give a reason and you can change your mind at any time. In other words, you are free to withdraw your participation even after the interview has been conducted and up until the actual publication of the data findings. If you decide that you do not wish to be part of the study, now or later, you will continue to receive the same level of information about the end publication.

Please contact me, Caroline Lund, PhD Candidate, if you wish to withdraw from the study at any time. My local phone number is +972 XXX XX XX.

What happens if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, I will schedule a meeting in a location that feels secure and comfortable to both parties. I will ask you a number of questions on the following topics:

- the scope of interventions and vision of the organization
- practical obstacles faced by the organization to carry out its work (historically, contemporary)
- experiences from the 'Delegitimization project' and the dissemination of false narratives
- funding for the organization and the role of donors
- and lastly counter-strategies and resistance.

The interview, which will take approximately 1-2 hours, will be audio recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone. Immediately after the interview, the audio recording will be uploaded to a secure storage service. The data will be kept, in a pseudo-anonymized format, in the Trinity College storage space until the study has been completed, at a maximum of 10 years. Once the study is completed, the data will be deleted and destroyed.

Will my records remain confidential?

Your privacy is important. As mentioned, your personal information will be stored securely in a digital storage space with access restrictions in Trinity College Dublin for up to a maximum of 10 years. Inevitably, there is a minimal risk that confidential information is leaked, but all potential risks are assessed and mitigated before, during and after the study in order to ensure that this does not happen.

Additionally, if you divulge any information that is critical towards your organization or employer, it will not be shared with anyone else within your organization.

Any information that leaves Trinity will have the name removed so that your identity remains confidential.

We will never share your audio files with any third parties.

Anonymized data may be shared with the scientific community in the future.

What will happen to the results of this research?

The information from this study may be published in scientific papers and on public registries. If this is the case, your identity will remain confidential and no one will know that you took part in the study.

What do I do if I have any further questions?

Please ask me, the researcher, as I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have, preferably over phone +972 XXX XX XX

THANK YOU

DATA PROTECTION INFORMATION

Data Controller	Trinity College Dublin
Data Protection Officer	Data Protection Officer Secretary's Office Trinity College Dublin Dublin 2 Dataprotection@tcd.ie

What is the lawful basis to use my personal data?

We will use the information you provide to us for this research study which is social research in the public interest⁹.

What are my rights in relation to your use of my personal data?

You are entitled to:

- The right to access to your data and receive a copy of it
- The right to restrict or object to processing of your data
- The right to object to any further processing of the information we hold about you (except where it is de-identified)
- The right to have inaccurate information about you corrected or deleted
- The right to receive your data in a portable format and to have it transferred to another data controller
- The right to request deletion of your data

This applies unless the request would make it impossible or very difficult to conduct the research. You can exercise these rights by contacting the PI at School of Religion or the Trinity College Data Protection Officer (contact details above).

Please note that these rights relate to data which could identify you (personal data). If your data has been anonymized, we will not be able to access or delete it, as we will have no way of being able to link the data to you.

⁹ (Article 6(1)(e))

Appendix 2 – Consent Form



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

STUDY NAME: Settler Colonialism and the Erasure of the Other: Controlling Narratives of Palestinian Resistance

Centre ID:

Identification Number for study:

Consent Form

There are 2 sections in this form. Each section has a statement and asks you to tick the box if you agree. The end of this form is for the researchers to complete.

Please ask any questions you may have when reading each of the statements.

Please leave the box blank if you do not agree.

Thank you for participating.

General	Tick box
I confirm I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for the above study. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I understand that this study is entirely voluntary , and if I decide that I do not want to take part, I can stop taking part in this study at any time without giving a reason.	
I understand that I will not be paid for taking part in this study .	
I agree to take part in this research study having been fully informed of the risks, benefits and alternatives which are set out in full in the information leaflet which I have been provided with.	

I know how to contact the research team if I need to.	
I agree to take part in an audio recorded individual interview as part of this research study.	
Data	
I understand that any identifiable information about me (personal data), including the transfer of this personal information about me outside of the EU, will be protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
I understand that anonymous information from this study may be shared with third party academics worldwide for research and learning purposes.	
I understand that the audio recording of my interview will be retained by Trinity College Dublin for maximum 10 years for use solely by Trinity College Dublin, and then destroyed.	

Participant Name (Block Capitals)

Participant Signature

Date

To be completed by the Principal Investigator or nominee.

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant, the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks and possible benefits involved. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

I have given a copy of the information leaflet and consent form to the participant with contacts of the study team

Researcher name

Title and qualifications

Signature

Date

|

|

|

2 copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 3 – List of respondents and corresponding codes

- R1: Anonymous informant (freelance human rights and advocacy adviser, former staff member at al-Haq, Badil and Defense for Children International—Palestine)
- R2: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center
- R3: Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic
- R4: Defense for Children International—Palestine
- R5: Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association
- R6: Bisan Center for Research and Development
- R7: Al-Haq: Defending Human Rights (based in Ramallah)
- R8: United Nations Development Programme PAPP
- R9: United Nations Development Programme PAPP
- R10: Union of Health Workers Committees
- R11: Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights
- R12: Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights
- R13: Union of Agricultural Workers Committee
- R14: Palestinian NGO Network: PNGO
- R15: The Independent Commission for Human Rights
- R16: Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel
- R17: Anonymous informant (professional expert on civil society issues in Palestine)
- R18: Union of Palestinian Women's Committees
- R19: United Nations Women Palestine
- R20: The Arab Association for Human Rights