

Adv. Reut Shaer, Association of Civil Rights in Israel, “Civil Society Organizations in Gaza”, 14/9/2025

Introduction

Hello everyone. Welcome to our daily gathering, the “Eyes on Gaza” meeting. Today, we are hosting attorney Reut Shaer, director of the Department for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories at the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI). As we know, ACRI has filed several petitions to the High Court of Justice concerning the prevention of humanitarian aid to Gaza’s population. But today, Reut will shed light on another aspect of her work — one we have hardly discussed and never devoted a session to until now: the work of civil society organizations inside Gaza itself. So, thank you very much, Reut, for coming to talk with us today. We are looking forward to hearing from you.

Paper

Good afternoon, everyone. I want to begin by explaining why we chose to focus on this topic today. ACRI, together with other human rights organizations, is deeply engaged with the war crimes being committed in Gaza, the humanitarian crisis, and — particularly in recent days — the bombardment of Gaza City and its catastrophic consequences. But when I spoke with Lior a few weeks ago, I realized that this forum had already discussed the issues we have petitioned about: humanitarian aid, hospitals, the prevention of medical treatment, and related topics. What I wanted to do today is to highlight the remarkable resilience and proactive spirit that still exist in Gaza — without in any way engaging in *pinkwashing*. I think it is truly striking, both practically and humanly, to recognize how many people and organizations in Gaza continue to act, trying to help those around them amid endless suffering. We wanted to shed light on that aspect as well. It somewhat reminds us of stories of human greatness we know from ghettos, concentration camps, and other human catastrophes — not to make comparisons, but because it’s a dimension worth acknowledging. A final disclaimer: I will present the activities of these organizations as they are. This should not be taken to imply that their work is substantially easing the suffering or mitigating the humanitarian disaster in Gaza — clearly, it cannot. I’m also not fond of attempts to portray Gaza’s residents as if they were immune to what is happening to them. But I do believe it’s important to show the active side of this reality.

Let me get to the substance. I have come to realize that many local grassroots aid organizations operate in Gaza — groups founded by local people through community work or their own initiatives. I’ve learned about them through forums that ACRI and other Israeli and international organizations participate in, alongside Palestinian groups. These forums cover both the West Bank and Gaza. There are clusters — thematic working groups — such as a Legal Task Force, which includes some of the organizations I’ll mention today. We meet every two weeks throughout the war. Each time the situation deteriorates badly, I tell myself: “surely today they won’t join the call, or they must have had to shut down their activities.” And yet, every time, I’m amazed to see that lawyers, social workers, community workers, and medical staff from these organizations still show up — sometimes with the sounds of fighting in the background — and share how they adapt and keep working. That’s what I wanted to share with you today. Anyone who wants can find more information online about each organization, and also ways to support them.

The main fields of activity for Gaza’s civil society organizations are listed on this slide: legal aid, material aid (food, money), medical and paramedical assistance, rescue and emergency services, site management in refugee and displacement camps, psychosocial and mental health support, specialized aid for women and children, infrastructure and waste management, and responses to environmental hazards — which are widespread given the massive destruction across Gaza.

The first organization I'd like to discuss is the Palestinian Civil Defense, which is roughly the equivalent of a fire department elsewhere. Since the war began — and in an unprecedented way since October 7 — its staff have been responding to every bombing site, risking their lives to rescue and recover the injured and the dead from under the rubble or from fires. As of June [2025], the organization reported that 113 of its workers — some salaried, others volunteers — had been killed in Israeli strikes. This is the place to note that aid and humanitarian workers are supposed to be protected from attack. Civilians in general should be protected, but humanitarian workers are granted special protection that explicitly enables them to rescue the wounded and provide assistance. Tragically, data show that about 500 aid workers have been killed since the war began. This number is an estimate, as definitions of “aid workers” vary — for example, whether to include social workers or those in official positions. Still, the scale is clear: roughly 80–85 percent of the killed workers are local Gazans, Palestinians, and the rest are foreign nationals from international organizations who died in the line of duty.

Here is testimony from one Civil Defense worker describing their routine: he arrives for his shift to find that there is enough water, but the rescue vehicles are not operational — damaged by bombings, batteries dead, no fuel. Israel has not allowed in repair equipment or spare parts for the engineering machinery that Civil Defense needs to extract people from the rubble, directly undermining their ability to save lives. The worker, Ahmad Radwan, whose story was reported in the international press, says his family, displaced to a camp, worries constantly about him. He rushes out to every bombing scene. Many of his colleagues also risk their lives and have been killed on duty. He says he no longer shares the details of what he experiences with his wife and children — he wants to protect them as much as possible, though they themselves are living through the same hardships.

The second organization is the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) — a relatively well-known group based in Gaza that also operates in the West Bank. It provides legal aid, documentation, and monitoring, and works on both strategic legal advocacy and individual cases. Remarkably, PCHR has continued to operate throughout the war, documenting human rights violations by occupation forces and engaging in a range of legal issues. What struck me most in our meetings with our Palestinian colleagues is how much attention they devote to everyday legal problems — something one might not expect under such devastating wartime conditions. For example, children born during the war who need birth certificates and identification papers; or, conversely, those who have died, for whom families must obtain death certificates and inheritance documents. Property rights are another issue: even though most residential buildings in Gaza are now uninhabitable or destroyed, there is still concern with how to restore land records, after Israel's bombings destroyed most civil and property registries in Gaza — which it treats as belonging to Hamas's civilian administration.

All these issues occupy a central place in the daily work of Gaza's civil society organizations. This was especially evident during the ceasefire period, when many of them began developing plans to address the new realities on the ground — for instance, how to resolve cases where an apartment building that once housed ten families was completely destroyed. They sought ways to establish proof of ownership for the displaced residents and to secure alternative housing for them. Beyond the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, which we have already discussed, it is also important to highlight several organizations working in the field of women's rights. The Wafaq Society for Women and Child Care is one such organization, dedicated to protecting women. Despite the ongoing war and mass displacement, it continues to operate shelters for survivors of gender-based violence, relocating them repeatedly to ensure their safety while providing psychological and emotional support. Another organization, the GINA – Gaza Infant Nutrition Alliance, focuses specifically on breastfeeding, a crucial and life-saving issue in Gaza. GINA is registered in Scotland to prevent funding from being blocked under anti-terror financing laws, and supporters there have even organized art sales to raise funds for the organization. The PMRS – Palestinian Medical Relief Society functions somewhat like Israel's Magen David Adom, but operates as a nonprofit

organization rather than a formal state institution. It takes on many of the responsibilities of public health in Gaza, filling the enormous gap left as hospitals collapse or struggle under the weight of critically injured and severely ill patients. The last organization I'll mention is the YVS – Youth Vision Society, a local initiative founded by young Gazans. It works not only on preventing gender-based violence, but also on a wide range of issues supporting vulnerable populations. That's it — a brief overview of the final part.