



**Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to  
Human Rights Defenders**

# **Activity Report**

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**[www.emhrf.org](http://www.emhrf.org)**

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SIGRID RAUSING TRUST



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## 1. Summary

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, the Foundation recorded a 53% increase in requests for support from local human rights defenders and organisations who sought not only to adjust their activity to address rising inequalities facing the most vulnerable populations, but also to protect them from new infringements, notably in countries where the crisis has been used as a pretext by the authorities to further expand their control over the civil society sphere. While the crisis has contributed to curb physical gathering and mobilisation in the streets, timely and core resources proved essential to enable civil society actors to resist and adapt their activity with agility and speed, catalysing new forms of protection and mobilisation to promote and defend respect for human rights in the South-Mediterranean region.

The Foundation has scaled up its financial support actions by 28% and focused its interventions on expanding protection opportunities, addressing injustice and inequalities mainly facing the youth, women, LGBTQ persons, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and empowering a younger generation of civil society actors to claim respect for human rights. Overall, 136 human rights defenders (53 individual defenders and 83 groups or NGOs) received rapid and operational resources to protect their safety and develop their human rights work in the amount of EUR 2,3 million. In addition, more than half of them received tailored follow-up support to expand their long-term protection, collaborations, and outreach to technical and financial partners.

Nearly half of the Foundation's interventions aimed at **expanding local protection opportunities** to defend the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in contexts of significant repression of peaceful dissent and protest movements, whether on the streets or online. The Foundation has scaled up its urgent grants by 48% not only to protect threatened individual civil society actors to reach safety by enabling them to relocate to safer places, but also to enable civil society organisations to strengthen legal aid and representation services for the victims when they are judicially harassed, and cover material and medical costs when they are injured or facing trauma. In contexts of systematic targeting of the more prominent lawyers and their prosecution because of their engagement to defend peaceful activists, the Foundation has also strategically invested in supporting a younger generation of lawyers as a mean to broaden protection opportunities. The few case stories below attest to the directions and results of these interventions:

*A 26-years-old Syrian women's rights activist, whose house was raided and risked imminent arrest following her participation in the peaceful protest denouncing corruption and the deteriorating economic conditions in June 2020 in Sweida city, south-western Syria, successfully reached safety in southern Turkey on 9 September 2020.*

*A 28-years-old Egyptian human rights defender and member of student unions from the Nile Delta region avoided arrest on politically motivated charges in Egypt. Thanks to a relocation grant, he is today active in organising online campaigns aimed at mobilising the Arab youth in the diaspora to raise awareness about the human rights situation in Egypt.*

*Nine lawyers from Algiers, Béjaïa, Sidi Belabès and Tizi Ouzou consolidated a network of lawyers to provide legal representation at court to twenty-three former detainees and prosecuted activists who participated in or supported the Hirak protest movement in western Algeria.*

About thirty percent of the Foundation's interventions were aimed at **sustaining civil society actions to address rising injustice and inequalities facing the most vulnerable populations**, notably women, LGBTQ persons, migrants, detainees, undocumented workers and persons with disabilities. The Foundation has placed a key

focus on sustaining their efforts to combat discriminations and violence and to pressure the authorities to be responsive and accountable. For instance, the Foundation recorded a 30% increase in its support to women defenders and women's and LGBTQ rights groups, compared to 2019. The following examples attest to these directions and results:

*A grassroots women's rights organisation was enabled to confront a significant increase in requests for assistance and secure accomodation for women victims of domestic violence during the Covid-19 crisis and to strengthen the movement against gender-based violence in remote communities in Ramle, Lod and Jaffa in Israel. Beyond providing tangible assistance to 343 women, the organisation seized the opportunity to ask the government to act quickly on reforms long called for by the movement, by organising online and street protest actions, addressing a policy paper to the Knesset on improving emergency welfare services and advising the police on coordinating responses to domestic violence and protecting victims.*

*Although Morocco has significantly invested in its migration policy, foreigners did not benefit from government support for unemployed workers and informal sector workers during the state of health emergency. In view of their highly vulnerable situation, three community-based organisations received assistance to meet the urgent needs of several hundred of households, ranging from access to housing, food and health care. They have also collectively addressed these shortfalls by providing recommendations on improving access to basic necessities and the justice system that reached local media attention.*

*Basic necessities, health care, legal counselling, shelter and housing were provided to 691 LGBTQ persons in Lebanon, and social media campaigns launched to support the wellbeing of LGBTQ persons that have been significantly affected by the economic crisis, the Covid-19 situation and the Beirut Port explosions.*

Lastly, more than twenty percent of the Foundation's interventions were aimed **at empowering a younger generation of civil society actors to claim respect for human rights**. The Foundation has notably supported emerging and innovative civil society initiatives and strategies, mainly led by young people and often located in remote and hard-to-reach areas. The Foundation's approach has sought to encourage the development of new strategies and innovative digital, media and cultural campaigning allowing young men and women, vulnerable or marginalised groups and survivors of human rights abuses to access information and actively participate in matters relating to good governance, human rights, gender justice and equality, environmental protection and local development. For example, some of the emerging groups supported have created new websites or social media pages to combat censorship and they empowered vulnerable populations to take their transformational ideas from the margin to the mainstream. A few of the local partners' directions and results are presented below:

*More than three hundred statements by Egyptian government officials, civil servants, politicians and public figures from all political sides, were investigated and countered on a new social media platform, including the denial of violations such as enforced disappearances, or the persecution of journalists and demonisation of human rights defenders, as well as false narratives supported by the pro-government media on the protection of women's rights. The platform's followers reached 459,200 in Egypt in January 2021.*

*Thanks to sustained awareness and empowerment activities by a local civil society organisation towards female agricultural workers, a new union composed of 150 women was established in Sidi Bouzid on 18 July. This initiative aims at defending women's social and labour rights in a region where female agricultural workers do not benefit from any social or legal protection and are exposed to significant violations, inequalities and risks. The new union has established partnerships with the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) and the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH).*

*On 10 December, a peaceful march was organised by two victims-led organisations in Lebanon demanding the application of laws related to the rights of missing persons and persons with disabilities and calling for respecting the rights of individuals who were physically disabled as a result of the Beirut Port explosions. Thanks to this collective action, a new victim-led association, comprising people who became physically disabled because of the explosions, is in the process of being formed.*

Embedded in its core mission, the Foundation has given priority to support defenders and non-governmental initiatives who are isolated and especially vulnerable. **47%** of the beneficiaries were **women and LGBTQ rights’ defenders and organisations**, and **52%** were **young defenders** (below the age of 35) and **NGOs focusing on youth empowerment and leadership**. Finally, **70% of all beneficiaries were based or active in isolated areas** in the countries of the region.

The main areas of the Foundation’s interventions, financial and tailored follow-up, in support of NGOs, groups and individual defenders in the region, are outlined in more detail below.

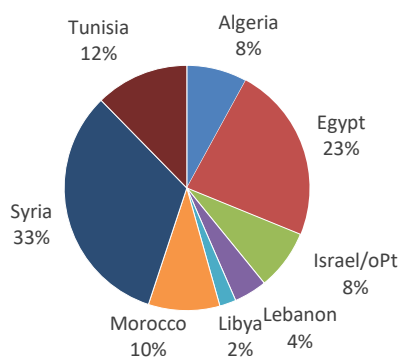
## 2. Financial Support Actions

Overall, the Foundation allocated 138 grants to human rights defenders and groups at risk or in distress and to emerging, innovative or sensitive initiatives that aim to develop women's and youth leadership, operate in remote regions and encounter difficulties in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Lebanon, and Syria.<sup>1</sup>

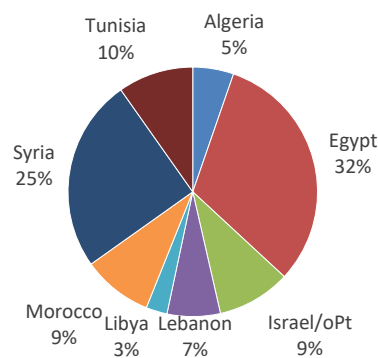
47% of the Foundation’s direct interventions were made in an emergency context to protect the lives and well-being of defenders and the resilience of threatened civil society organisations.

As illustrated by the breakdown of grants provided below, Syrian and Egyptian civil society actors continue to represent a significant share of the Foundation’s beneficiaries due to the harsh conditions for exercising human rights work, yet interventions have also been strengthened in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (by 43%), Tunisia (by 61%), Morocco (by 71%) and Lebanon (by 129%) compared to 2019:

Geographic distribution of interventions (# of grants)



Geographic distribution of interventions (amounts)



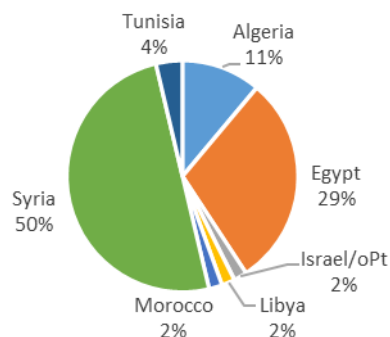
<sup>1</sup> Based on thorough due diligence reviews performed on 761 funding proposals and inquiries received by the Secretariat according to the [selection criteria](#), the Board decided to allocate direct support to 18% of the requests received. 1% of the Foundation's beneficiaries are members of its founder, EuroMed Rights. Cf. appendix 1.

Support is distributed in two main categories: urgent interventions to protect individual defenders, and operational support to develop and sustain local human rights initiatives.<sup>2</sup>

### **2.1. Urgent Grants to Protect Individual Defenders**

In 2020, the Foundation granted urgent support to protect the safety of **53 individual defenders (30% of them are women and LGBTQ defenders, and 54% are below the age of 35) and their families**. These grants were allocated in response to threats, mainly in Syria, Egypt, and Algeria as reflected in the pie chart below. They aimed at allowing these defenders and their families, 63% of whom are from isolated regions, to regain a sense of normalcy in their lives and consider means to pursue their activism in the future.

Distribution of individual grants per country



In particular, this support covered the **immediate and temporary relocation of defenders abroad** (54%), the **internal relocation and basic needs to safer areas of the country of origin** (33%), **medical expenses and psychosocial support** (10%), and **legal assistance** to challenge their arbitrary detention (3%).

Furthermore, the Foundation followed up closely on the situation of these defenders with a view to securing additional forms of support. It coordinated its urgent interventions in support of 37% of recipients with partners implementing solidarity actions (urgent appeals, letters to support asylum and resettlement requests, trial observation missions, meetings with officials, etc.); assisted 10% of defenders to secure complementary support, and helped 6% of them in accessing rehabilitation services, training and fellowship opportunities.

Overall, the **results of these protection grants** are encouraging:

- In **75% of cases**, the grants and follow-up undertaken **likely saved the lives of the defenders, allowing them to recover from severe health issues or to escape harassment, detention and shelling**. For example, a Syrian defender detained for 8 years in the Sadnaya and Suwayda prisons for his peaceful participation in the Darayya protest movements in 2011 could access medical treatments for his heart condition and his digestive system problems as well as psychological therapy for anxiety, stress and sleep disturbances following his release. At the time of writing, 35% of the defenders supported, notably Syrians and Egyptians, have asked for asylum and secured long-term protection abroad.

<sup>2</sup> The Foundation set up two mechanisms to respond as flexibly as possible to the needs expressed by defenders: an emergency response mechanism, through which the Board can decide to allocate grants of €5,000 (with a maximum of 20% of overhead costs, i.e. €6,000 in total) in less than ten days, and a mechanism based on regular consultations of Board members at their annual meetings, through which requests of up to €60,000 are considered.

- In **13% of cases**, the **support allocated also helped to develop the defenders' skills, notably when relocated abroad**. For example, the President of an Egyptian association, facing regular security threats and arbitrarily dismissed from his job, enrolled in a Master program on public policy in the UK in the fall 2020. The activist hopes to transfer the knowledge acquired to build a policy department within the association. Another Syrian activist, whose asylum claim is being examined in France, also enrolled in the faculty of literature and languages while exploring possibilities to form a diaspora association to defend the right to truth and justice for former detainees by armed groups in Syria. At the time of writing, 37% of the defenders supported have secured a stable source of income.
- Last but not least, the grants were instrumental in helping **57% of them to resume their work in defence of human rights whether in their countries or abroad**. For example, an Algerian activist, a victim of attacks and continuous judicial harassment because of his work in representing civil society actors at courts, could notably avoid arbitrary arrest and develop his professional activity in Europe that enables him to continue providing pro-bono counselling to families of HIRAK protesters and civil society actors arbitrarily prosecuted in the country. He is also writing a book on an activist who died in detention and whose judicial and prison record illustrates the abuse of the Algerian judicial and security systems.

However, these results should not conceal the additional difficulties that the pandemic has brought to many of the defenders supported. The inability for defenders at risk to relocate abroad in search of safety due to travel restrictions, the suspension of asylum claims' reviews and the difficulty to find employment opportunities have had a significant impact not only on the long-term protection but also on the well-being of defenders and their families. Many of the defenders supported have for instance decided to stop, at least temporarily, their activism in fear of retaliation in their home country. It is also worth mentioning that, unfortunately, one of the defenders supported died due to long term medical conditions.

## **2.2. Operational Support to Develop and Sustain Local Human Rights Initiatives**

While adapting interventions to different national dynamics, the Foundation provided operational support, *both on an urgent and regular basis*,<sup>3</sup> to **83 civil society initiatives** to address and advance the human rights and the human rights defenders' situation at the local level. **91% of these grants covered operational costs**, as these are essential to enable organisations to adapt their activity to the context and to the needs expressed by local communities, and to develop their professionalism and sustainability prospects.

This support mainly aimed at assisting them to **develop new initiatives** (30% of the grants) and to **deal with innovative or sensitive issues** (32%), to strengthen **youth and women's leadership** (30 and 33% respectively) as well as **preserving their activity in countries where the right to freedom of association is restricted** (40%) and sustaining it when **operating in isolated<sup>4</sup> regions** (74%).<sup>5</sup>

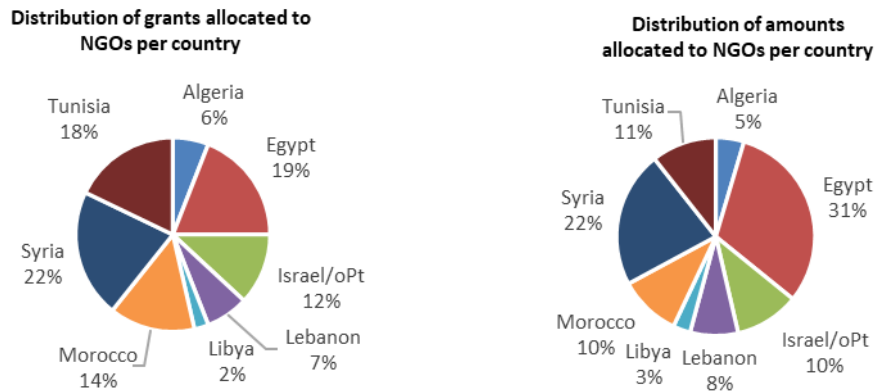
<sup>3</sup> 13 of the 83 civil society groups supported received urgent grants to overcome unexpected political and financial situations.

<sup>4</sup> The term "isolated or remote area" refers to a region outside the capital and the major urban centres of the country in question, characterised by the absence or weakness of public services and facilities and basic infrastructure and where civil society, cultural life and civic activities are weak or poorly developed.

<sup>5</sup> Several interventions have been distributed to more than one category in order to provide a comprehensive statistical overview of the Foundation's interventions.



The location of the activities implemented by the Foundation’s local partners is illustrated in the pie chart below.



In particular, the Foundation sought to respond to tangible needs expressed by civil society actors acting in the contexts outlined below.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2.1. Sustaining Syrian Civil Society to Empower Victims in Securing their Rights

The Foundation supported 18 Syrian civil society initiatives<sup>7</sup> to **document human rights violations by all parties to the conflict, provide assistance and empower vulnerable populations and victims, notably women,<sup>8</sup> to secure their rights and end impunity in Syria and neighbouring countries.**

The specific focus of the grants was:

- To develop interactive media platforms and documentation work covering rights issues and violations on housing, land and property rights, women rights, enforced disappearances, as well as businesspersons involved in violations and the networks of the ruling system.
- To empower survivors of violations to form associations to tell their story, collect evidence and advocate for ending impunity.
- To empower local and displaced populations in northern Syria, notably women and youth, to know their rights, voice their demands and participate in the public life.
- To protect the rights of vulnerable refugee populations in Turkey and Lebanon through documentation of abuses, support and advocacy actions.
- To empower civil society networks on conflict prevention and peacebuilding to foster a democratic and pluralist post-conflict society in Syria.

### 2.2.2. Upholding the Resilience of the Independent Civil Society in Egypt

The Foundation continued to focus its interventions on **sustaining the resilience of the independent civil society movement in Egypt** by helping human rights organisations to **protect their very existence and influence, at home**

<sup>6</sup> This section does not provide details about interventions in Libya because of their small number. Furthermore, no grant was allocated to Jordanian civil society initiatives, mainly due to other sources of funding available for civil society actors in the country.

<sup>7</sup> 50% of the grants supported initiatives solely operating inside Syria, notably in the northwestern governorates (39%).

<sup>8</sup> 44% of EMHRF interventions in Syria specifically focused on protecting and empowering women.

***and abroad,<sup>9</sup> to enable them to continue assisting victims of the repression and documenting violations, as well as developing innovative initiatives to enlarge the base of support for the civil society movement.***

The Foundation notably supported 16 initiatives seeking to:

- Expand local support networks for victims of arbitrary arrests and violations, notably human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, university students, bloggers and journalists, workers, migrants and refugees, victims of torture, arbitrary detention, and capital punishment as well as women survivors of violence. These support networks mainly aimed at providing pro bono legal services and representation before special courts and prosecutors as well as rehabilitation.
- Document human rights violations and arbitrary legal practices to preserve the memory and raise awareness of the State's human rights record within the public and the international community.
- Nurture innovative initiatives, notably in the field of media and digital rights, to combat censorship and disinformation, and enlarge the base of support for the civil society movement.

### **2.2.3. Strengthening Civil Society in Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Defending Palestinian Rights**

In Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, the Foundation focused its interventions on ***enabling civil society organisations to address a significant rise of violence against vulnerable populations, notably women and migrant women,<sup>10</sup> while maintaining its strategic direction to address ongoing violations of Palestinian rights.***

The mission of the ten supported NGOs was the following:

- To scale up legal, psychosocial, material and advocacy support actions aimed at protecting women from violence and empowering them in claiming respect for their rights within their communities in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ramle, Lod, Jaffa, and in Jericho and Gaza.
- To document violations against Palestinian minors who are detained by the Israeli forces and raise awareness about it in the Israeli public space.
- To protect Palestinians' rights to their lands and homes in the occupied Palestinian territory, and to a livelihood via legal actions and non-violent mobilisations of both Palestinian and Israeli citizens.
- To fill significant historical gaps related to the Nakba, the enduring violations of Palestinians rights and the Palestinians' right to return, in the Israeli public space and towards teachers and students.

### **2.2.4. Supporting Associations in Addressing Inequalities and Promoting Participatory Democracy in Tunisia and Morocco**

The Foundation continued to give priority to strengthening the core operations of ***civil society and community-based associations, especially those operating in isolated regions,<sup>11</sup> to address inequalities and to empower disadvantaged populations, notably youth, women, migrants and persons with disabilities, to participate in the defence and promotion of human rights.*** In addition, the Foundation supported initiatives aimed at ***monitoring the transition processes*** while ***strengthening spaces for debate on human rights and democracy between academics and civil society actors.***

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<sup>9</sup> 50% or 8 out of 16 Egyptian recipients of financial support have registered and relocated part of their operations abroad for safety reasons, which enabled them to develop new opportunities in terms of outreach, networking and advocacy.

<sup>10</sup> 60% of EMHRF interventions specifically focused on protecting women victims of violence during the Covid-19.

<sup>11</sup> Representing 63% of the Foundation's local partners in Tunisia and Morocco.

In particular, the Foundation supported 13 Tunisian and 14 Moroccan initiatives that pursued the following specific objectives:

- To empower young people in participatory democracy and in the defence and promotion of human rights to strengthen their participation in monitoring public policies and local governance in the regions of Gafsa, Ben Arous, Siliana, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine (Tunisia), and Rabat, Salé, Kenitra, Draa, Tafilalet, and the Oriental (Morocco).
- To scale up support actions, cultural and artistic activities aimed at combatting violence against women and at empowering them in playing an active role in the public sphere in the regions of Tozeur (Tunisia), Rabat, Salé, Kenitra, Fès, Meknès, Khénifra and Guelmim Oued Noun (Morocco).
- To protect and advocate for respect of the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, including domestic workers, in Morocco.
- To build the capacity of persons with disabilities to promote respect for their rights in Morocco.
- To follow up on and monitor the democratic transition process in Tunisia and strengthen civil society efforts to promote abolitionism and propose reforms of the electoral law and system, the health, economic and social sectors.
- To provide spaces for reflection and debate on human rights and democracy issues between academics and civil society actors, including on the origins and challenges of the human rights movement, on the relations between religion and politics, etc.

#### **2.2.5. Scaling Up Civil Society Support for Vulnerable Populations to Claim their Rights in Lebanon**

The Foundation increased its support actions towards Lebanese civil society actors to avoid waning amid an unprecedented economic, financial and political crisis, compounded by the pandemic and the Beirut Port explosions. This support mainly aimed at ***meeting the needs of the most affected populations, notably families of missing persons, persons with disabilities and LGBTQ persons, while empowering them to claim respect for their rights.***

The Foundation notably supported 5 initiatives seeking to:

- Meet the urgent humanitarian, housing, psychosocial support and legal counselling needs of LGBTQ persons to protect their rights and well-being during the health lockdown and in the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosions.
- Preserve the memory of the missings, empower persons with disabilities and prepare the basis for a victim-led advocacy plan seeking truth and justice.

#### **2.2.6. Protecting Civil Society's Rights to Freedom of Expression and Association in Algeria**

The Foundation supported five Algerian civil society initiatives, including within the diaspora, to ***provide material and legal representation to prisoners of conscience and to protect the space for freedom of expression and association, notably of the youth, in isolated regions.***

The specific focus of the grants was:

- To provide material and legal assistance to civil society actors facing arbitrary legal proceedings and detention, notably in remote regions, because of their peaceful participation in or support to the Hirak protest movement.
- To raise awareness on citizenship and human rights and empower young people to bear witness to the reality experienced and claim respect for their rights through producing documentary films.

- To strengthen the security of communications of civil society actors, and exchanges between emerging and traditional social movement actors.

Although it is too early to report on all NGOs' results since several partnerships are on-going, a few outcomes of the Foundation's local partners actions, reportedly reaching over ten thousand direct beneficiaries, among whom 51% were women, and over eight million social media users, can be highlighted:

***Three thousand reports, videos and documentaries were produced to uncover the truth and combat censorship, seek justice and open debate on human rights issues.***

- Early August, a 310-page book entitled "Funding War Crimes: Syrian businessmen who kept Assad going" was published by a **Syrian** civil society organisation, exposing networks that were used by the regime to circumvent international sanctions. More than 70 media reports covered the release of the book, and the trailer and publication of its content received more than 7 million views online.
- A hundred reports, including videos and investigations, covering the daily life of Syrians and violations to their rights in **southern Syria** were published. Among the issues covered, were children and drugs' trafficking, peaceful protests in Suweida, the Iranian influence and forced recruitment. One of the videos published in September 2020 revealing local networks recruiting Syrians from Suweida to fight in Libya received a million views.
- A new digital and privacy rights initiative published four reports tackling the systematic censorship of the Internet claiming to protect morals in **Egypt**, the laws applied to justify cracking down on internet content, the websites blocked, and the deals concluded with Sandvine, a company developing software and equipment for internet surveillance. These research allowed to trigger a complaint to challenge the constitutionality of Article 25 of Egypt's Cybercrime Law (Law 175/2018), which has been used by Egypt's Public Prosecution Office to imprison women on grounds of "breaching family values in Egypt" while appearing on social media accounts, most notably TikTok and YouTube.
- Three films and documentaries, produced by eight young **Libyan** civil society actors to bear witness to the Libyan reality, were shown during a public screening hosted by Ciné Mad'art at Carthage, Tunisia, in March. One of these films entitled "Hand in Hand" follows the young Ahmed, an activist fighting for effective citizenship in Libya, arousing either incomprehension or sympathy within the society.
- An **Egyptian** human rights group documented the arbitrary detention of nearly two thousand peaceful demonstrators and passersby who were arrested in eight governorates between 20 September and 10 October, for protesting the government's decision to impose high fines on "illegal buildings."
- A comprehensive documentation platform for truth and accountability on the 2011 **Egyptian** Revolution and its aftermath was launched in August, comprising the profiles of the injured, a diary of the 11 days of the uprising, a timeline of sit-ins and dispersal, casualties and trials, and a judicial cases archive, among others. Access to this platform was given to over a hundred of academics and think tanks and twenty civil society leaders to preserve the memory and support research and accountability initiatives.
- 182 cases of enforced disappearance were identified and documented in **Syria** between May and July, largely from Idlib and Hama governorates but also from Damascus, Latakia, Aleppo and Raqqa. These cases have been shared with the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism ([IIIM](#)) to uncover the fate of the victims and to initiate criminal complaints to bring those responsible of enforced disappearances to justice.

- Digital archives of the missing persons during the **Lebanese** civil war and the struggles of their families have been nearly completed and systematised with descriptive information and substantial levels. In the meantime, an emerging civil society group gathered testimonies and stories of 214 individuals who lost their lives as a result of the Beirut Port explosions. These different yet converging initiatives aim at preserving the memory of the missing persons and seeking truth and justice.
- A first edition of a human rights journal that brings together Moroccan academics, institutional and civil society representatives was published early 2021. This first issue, dedicated to "the human rights movement in **Morocco**: origins and challenges," analyses civil society dynamics and provides a space for debate and reflection between academics and civil society actors in the country.

***Legal assistance, representation, material and psychosocial support as well as rehabilitation were provided to more than two thousand victims of violations in the region, notably human rights and pro-democracy activists as well as women survivors of violence.***

- Pro bono legal counselling and representation services were provided to 628 pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, victims of sexual and gender-based violence and refugees who have been arbitrarily arrested and convicted in more than 150 judicial cases in **Egypt**. These support actions were handled before various courts (the Supreme Constitutional Court, the Court of Cassation, criminal, misdemeanor, terrorism courts and the State Security Prosecution Office) in 17 governorates, namely Cairo, Giza, Suez, Port Said, Qalubiyya, Alexandria, Sharqeya, Bani Suef, Aslut, Aswan, Mansoura, Ismailia, Beheira, Dakahlia, Qena, Gharbia, and Kafr El-Shaikh. Thanks to the assistance provided, 166 peaceful protesters and bystanders who were arrested in September-October have been released pending further investigation. Ten Sudanese refugees who were arrested in October for protesting the death of a 12-year-old Sudanese who was stabbed to death, were released pending further investigation. In August, the director of a human rights organisation, who was sentenced to months in prison for running an unregistered organisation, got the sentence commuted in a fine, and a human rights lawyer, who was arrested in connection with his social media post calling for the release of Egyptian prisoners amidst the Covid-19 outbreak, was released on precautionary measures. The Public Prosecution Office, however, has decided to charge several of those released with new accusations, in a process now commonly known as "recycling judicial cases" to avoid releasing activists when they exceed the legal length of two years of pre-trial detention.
- Thanks to legal representation services, teachers and activists who were arrested for protesting the arbitrary closure of checkpoints near Susiya by the **Israeli** army in November 2020 were all released.
- Psychosocial support was provided to 921 victims of torture and ill treatment and women survivors of physical and sexual violence in **Egypt**.
- Ten victims of trafficking of Philippine nationality, have been hosted and provided with physical and mental health support in a new safe centre in Salé, **Morocco**.
- 653 **Palestinian** single mothers and domestic workers victims of sexual and gender-based violence during the Covid-19 crisis, received counselling through a 24/7 emergency hotline in Israel to address a 40% increase in support requests. A pilot chat-service initiative was also developed, and volunteers trained to make sure that no woman was left behind. The organisation's crucial support and access to vulnerable women and victims of violence served to advice the local municipalities who entrusted the organisation to become part of the crisis management response.

***Nearly two hundred educational events, often making use of digital tools during the pandemic, were held to maintain debate on citizenship and human rights and to empower thousands of persons in remote regions, notably the youth and women, to claim their rights and play a greater role in matters relating to development, gender justice, social cohesion and good governance at the local level.***

- Thanks to a local civil society initiative, over three thousand inhabitants from the **Oriental region, Morocco**, among whom 65% were women, entered in an online dialogue in July with representatives from the Regional Council, including the First Vice-President, the President of the Commission for Economic and Social Development and the President of the Youth Interest Body, to discuss local public policies targeting the youth and their implementation at the local level. The youth interest body, established in application of the 2011 Constitution, was introduced to the population, in particular the youth, who could understand how the local institutional life is organised, what decision-making forums are open to them and debate. Many of the participants sent requests for information and meetings after this initial exchange.
- 69 educational and income-generating activities (such as cinema clubs, literacy and language classes, chess trainings, art exhibitions, hairdressing, sewing and weaving, handicrafts, and first aid) served to lessen the suffering of 2,518 war-affected victims and vulnerable displaced populations (IDPs) and strengthen social cohesion among the local populations in **northwestern Syria**. Such activities were used as entry points to empower women to know their rights and participate in public affairs in Azaz, Al-Bab, Salqin, Janudiyah, Maarat al-Misrin, Idlib, Kafr Takharim and Binnish. For example, storytelling exercises and group discussions on domestic violence, early marriage, inheritance issues, among others, were organised for the local and IDPs allowing women to report human rights violations and obtain the necessary physical and mental-health support. This also enabled them to consider participating more actively in public life and decision-making, notably in Salqin, where two meetings were organised with the Local Council in August 2020 to discuss ways to integrate displaced persons and establish a women office in the council.
- 13 **Algerian** actors aged between 20 and 25 years' old, involved in the protest movement and from the main cities, from the Central, Western and Eastern regions started sharing their views and experience of the movement by producing films and documentaries in January 2021.
- A **Tunisian** association strengthened its collaboration with the High Independent Authority of Audio-visual Communication (HAICA) and obtained an operating license in August for a new radio station, Radio Thala FM, to broadcast programs aimed at raising awareness on rights issues and strengthening the participation of citizens in the management of public affairs.

***Various civil society coalitions were formed; tools developed, campaigns and advocacy arguments moved forward to raise the voice of vulnerable populations and call for harmonising the legislations and practices with the constitutional provisions and the international conventions ratified by the countries of the region.***

- A human rights organisation notably formed a civil society coalition comprising thirty associations and the High Committee for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (CSDHLF) that played a key role in **Tunisian** public discourse to advocate for the abolition of the death penalty within an unfavourable context, when the President of the Republic, supported by a large movement on social networks and in the streets, expressed again support for its reinstatement following the murder of a young woman in September 2020. Thanks to sustained collective efforts, the press largely relayed arguments presented by the civil society to abolish the death penalty, and an open letter sent to the President of the Republic which, among others, led the country to vote in favour of the [moratorium of the death penalty at the UN General Assembly](#) on 16 December.

- Following years of advocacy led by a coalition of associations against female genital mutilation (FGM), **Egypt's** cabinet [amended a law](#) on 20 January 2021 imposing jail terms of up to 20 years (compared to 7 years previously) as part of efforts to stamp out the practice. The amendments also ban doctors and other medical staff involved in FGM from practising their profession for up to five years, and the person requesting it will also face imprisonment. Although sustained campaigns and legal actions undertaken by independent civil society actors attest to the positive change they can have on women rights, it remains to be seen whether its application will be ensured, witnesses protected, and educational reforms implemented.
- A local organisation active in the town of Thala, **Tunisia**, developed an alternative bill and recommendations to the government's draft bill on patients' rights and medical liability emphasizing the need to reduce territorial inequalities in access to healthcare and the harmonisation of guarantees imposed on the public and private health institutions. The bill is tabled for discussion with the Assembly of People's Representatives in 2021.
- A new coalition, the "National Popular Initiative for Rescue," bringing together a high variety of actors including the General Union of Tunisian Workers, the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights, the National Union of Tunisian Women, the Bar Association, the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, as well as public figures and progressive political parties was launched on 15 December to overcome the failure of national dialogue initiatives by providing citizens, notably from remote regions, with a framework to contribute with alternatives and solutions to end the unprecedented political and economic crisis in **Tunisia**.

However, these above-mentioned results should not conceal the ***significant threats and financial difficulties facing the civil societies from the region***, often exacerbated by the health crisis:

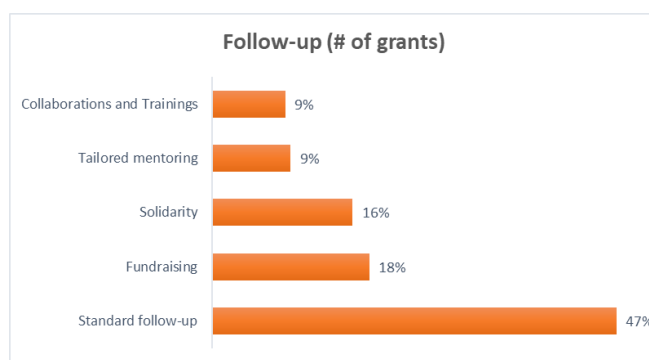
- ***Threats***: Many of the members of civil society groups supported have reportedly faced increasing scrutiny, intimidation and assaults because of their pro-democracy and human rights work and relations with foreign entities in Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, and Syria. Defenders' lawyers also reported significant state security intimidations at courts and at home.
- ***Financial difficulties***: Only half of the groups supported have been able to secure additional funds to sustain their activity in the future. Moreover, several Egyptian, Palestinian, and Tunisian partners reported having their bank transfers suspended or blocked. Syrian partners also faced increasing difficulties to open bank accounts abroad and to channel funds to Syria while they are no longer being able to receive resources through the Lebanese banking system. In addition to the rampant inflation, the significant devaluation of the pound also created complications in transfers and payments for Syrian and Lebanese civil society actors. Although all funds eventually reached the final beneficiaries, this proves the persistent need to devise appropriate means to continue supporting the independent civil society movement in the region at present and in the future.

Lastly, several NGO workers were accused of sexual harassment and assault during the year. Committed to promoting respect for human rights and gender equality and justice, the Foundation has closely monitored the cases raised and the ongoing investigation processes. It has also started developing a policy to protect from, address and prevent sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse in the workplace and in relationships with local civil society actors to guide its future interventions and practices in this field.

### 3. Tailored Follow-Up Actions

The Foundation's goals are to adapt to new and continuous transformation processes evolving on the societal level, and to contribute to disseminating and sustaining the activities of its local partners in the long term.

With a view to respond to the variety of needs, other than financial, expressed by its local partners, the Foundation undertook tailored follow-up actions to develop its local partners' skills, expand their collaborations, and outreach to other technical and financial partners, as reflected in the chart below. It also took part in regular exchanges with them and international partners, in addition to carrying out, albeit limitedly due to travel restrictions, field visits to better understand civil society challenges, prospects, and funding dynamics in 2020.<sup>12</sup>



Regarding **collaborations and trainings**, the Foundation encouraged 13 of its partners to build and maintain ties with other groups and institutions working on similar themes at the local, national, and regional levels and/or to benefit from specific trainings aimed at consolidating their action. For example, a Syrian female leader of an association was encouraged by the Foundation to take part in online classes on politics of non-violence with the [AUNHOR](#) university in November 2020. Another association was able to receive trainings from Free Press Unlimited (FPU) on cybersecurity, accounting, photography, and video. Others have been advised to insert operational training needs in the budgets they submit to EMHRF, to help strengthen capacities and open sustainability prospects for these associations in the future.

Regarding **tailored mentoring**, it notably encouraged and helped 14 newly formed groups to draft action plans and proposals to enable the Foundation to strategically respond to their needs, as well as providing them with strategic advice on the democratic management of associations, potential collaborations to exchange good practices, project implementation and reporting.

The Foundation also played a role in substantiating the situation of 25 local partners at risk and referring them to regional and international organisations whose mandate is to implement **solidarity** actions and advocate for their long-term protection. For example, the Foundation attended monthly coordination calls with a dozen of international partners to address urgent and temporary relocation requests from Egyptian defenders at risk. It also co-organised consultations held by EuroMed Rights and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies to develop a joint approach to support and advocate for upholding the resilience of the Egyptian civil society movement in the ongoing repressive context. The Foundation also participated in several meetings between

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<sup>12</sup> The Foundation notably organised a field visit in north-western Tunisia in March, where it could meet with 8 grassroots organisations in Kasserine, Jendouba, Ain Drahem and Testour, and another visit in Lebanon in December, where it could meet with 17 Lebanese and Syrian civil society organisations in Beirut, Saida and Tyre.



international and Algerian NGOs to coordinate solidarity actions across the year and it advised the European Parliament on civil society actors that could bear witness to the local developments prior to the adoption of the [November 2020 urgency resolution](#) highlighting “the deteriorating human rights situation in Algeria.”

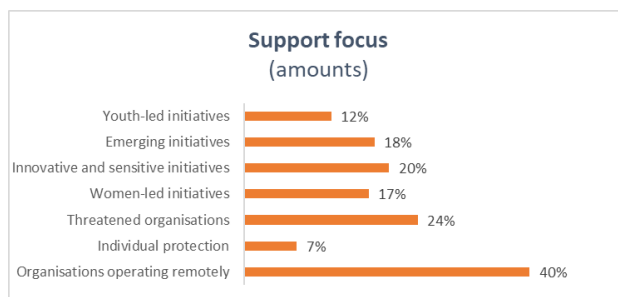
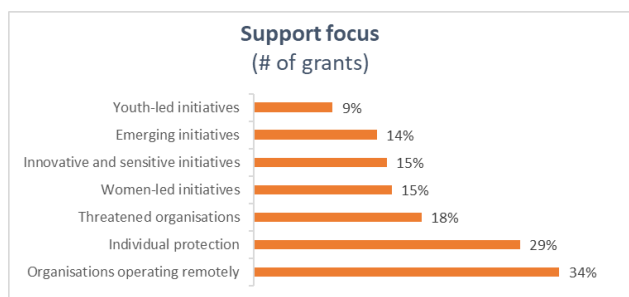
Regarding **fundraising**, the Foundation also facilitated the exchange of contacts, acted as an intermediary, forwarded a list of potential donors and/or assisted in drafting funding applications for 28 partners. For example, a Syrian women’s rights association was able to avoid collapse and the suspension of its activities by receiving an urgent grant from a partner foundation (Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights) to relocate outside the Marayan village, and to build a new partnership with another international feminist partner foundation (Global Fund for Women). Moreover, the Foundation maintained its regular exchanges with other likeminded foundations, through bilateral and multi-stakeholders’ exchanges, including with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR), International Media Support (IMS), the Sigrid Rausing Trust (SRT), the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Thanks to these regular referrals and exchanges, 54% of the Foundation’s NGO partners have secured additional resources to pursue their work.

However, the Foundation has itself undergone some challenges due to the pandemic, which included delaying its strategic direction to further assist exiled NGOs in holding tailored coaching/contingency retreats, and to collaboratively discuss pathways to strengthen an endogenous resource base for the civil society in Tunisia.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Quantified Overview

The following graphs provide a quantified overview of the grants focus in 2020.

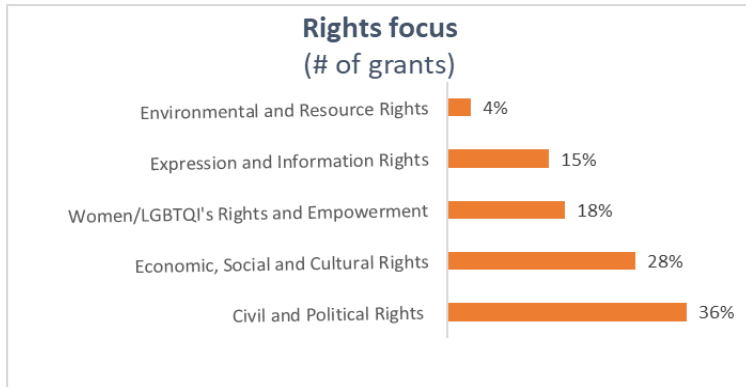
##### 4.1. Support Focus



*A significant share of grants was allocated to individual defenders (although the amounts are smaller) and organisations at risk (47%) as well as civil society initiatives operating in remote/isolated areas (34%) due to their limited access to support networks. The average amount of all grants (urgent and operational) levelled €16,767 and remained constant compared to 2019.*

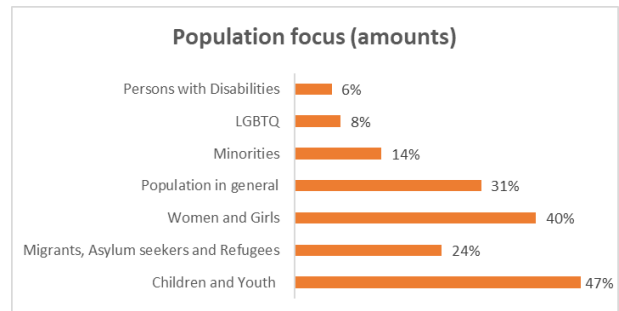
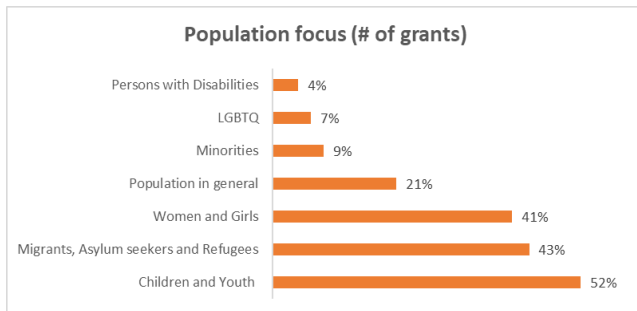
<sup>13</sup> Although the study on endogenous financing in Tunisia was updated and follow-up meetings were held with key experts, state representatives and the private sector in January 2020, the publication of the findings and the holding of a discussion seminar in collaboration with the civil society were postponed due to the lockdown. To note, the policy paper analyses the funding of civil society organisations through endogenous sources and provides 16 operational recommendations addressed to public officials and the private sector. The Board intends to resume these exchanges by the end of 2021 or the beginning of 2022.

#### 4.2. Rights and Activity Focus



The main thematic focus of the Foundation's NGO partners remains civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Complementary activities in the field of education, coalition building and advocacy, that are key to give impetus to human rights reforms and transformation, represent the most significant share of activities (47%) implemented by the Foundation's grantees. These are also encouraged by media, cultural and artistic activities, as alternatives to conventional tools, to reach a broader audience, notably the youth (13%). In a region with different national dynamics, a significant part of the activities carried out by the Foundation's partners also aimed at documenting violations, providing assistance, and pursuing justice and redress for the victims. These activities, which are taking place in particularly hostile environments, made up 40% of all activities carried out by the Foundation's partners.

#### 4.3. Population Focus



Women and young people are key beneficiaries of the Foundation's support actions because of their central roles in societies and democratisation processes. Protecting their rights and strengthening their leadership are of vital importance in a regional environment where they are underrepresented in both political and associative decision-making processes. Women and young people thus respectively made up 41% and 52% of the beneficiaries, and the Foundation allocated funding to groups and NGOs based on adequate representation of women in their leadership. Moreover, in view of their especially vulnerable situation, a key focus of the Foundation's interventions has been to support migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (43%), including community-based organisations that aim at protecting their rights and supporting durable and effective integration prospects in the countries of the region.

## 5. Organisational Issues

### **5.1. Internal governance**

Composed of twelve members working on a voluntary basis, the [Board](#) remained unchanged in 2020. Yet, it significantly adapted its internal modes of operation, by moving online and increasing its exchanges to maintain the highest level of cohesion, responsiveness and support available. The Board held six meetings to discuss the Foundation's strategy, programmatic and financial directions, and to consider applications from NGOs in the region. In addition to these meetings, the Board members were also consulted on a rolling basis to approve all urgent requests and they undertook meetings with local partners in their home countries.

While adapting its modes of operation, the Board also seized the opportunity to review its policies and procedures. The settings of the Foundation's accounting software and procedures (comprising digitization) and its financial manual have been updated. The grants' methodology and the funding agreements with local partners have also been reviewed in addition to developing a comprehensive privacy policy, a policy to protect from, address and prevent sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse, notably in the face of increasing reported cases within civil society organisations, and an external complaint mechanism. These policies will be finalised and published in 2021.

Overall, the Board was assisted by a Secretariat, composed of 10 full-time employees and one part-time consultant led by a management team comprising a Programme director and a Finance director. Early March, the Board notably decided to recruit a regional assistant to support the programme team in following up on the rising number of urgent requests.

The EMHRF also renewed its partnership with its founder, EuroMed Rights, that includes, amongst other things, the sharing of offices and related costs as well as IT services.<sup>14</sup>

### **5.2. Financial Partnerships**

Nine donors and foundations have entrusted the Foundation and contributed to its activity with more than EUR 3,1 million in 2020.<sup>15</sup> The Foundation notably signed new partnership agreements with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Open Society Foundations and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in 2020.

- Core support amounting to EUR 1,3 million (41%) was notably granted by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA),<sup>16</sup> the Sigrid Rausing Trust (SRT) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF).<sup>17</sup>
- Project support amounting to EUR 1,8 million (59%) was granted by the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency (SDC), the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the European Union's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the Danish Ministry

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<sup>14</sup> This arrangement was put in place as of 2005 to minimise the two organisations' administrative costs.

<sup>15</sup> Compared to 2019, the operating budget of the Foundation increased by 18%.

<sup>16</sup> Within this core support, SIDA covers grants related to all the countries in which EMHRF is active, unless these fall outside of the OECD-DAC rules for development assistance.

<sup>17</sup> Within this core support, OSF covers grants related to all the countries in which EMHRF is active, except those against which the United States maintains comprehensive sanctions.

of Foreign Affairs (DAPP-HRDC), the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

### **5.3. External Evaluations**

The Foundation, either independently or in collaboration with other NGOs, underwent four external evaluations by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and ProtectDefenders.eu in 2020. A few extracts from the external evaluation of the [EU Human Rights Defenders' Mechanism](#), to which EMHRF is a member and its specific actions on Syria were assessed, are provided:

*"The consortium partners' range of expertise (thematic and geographic) was a significant factor in the success of the mechanism. Their networks and connections to HRDs on the ground maximised the mechanism's reach."*

*"The mechanism responded to a number of crisis situations – for example, in Syria – where it provided a unique resource for HRDs. In these contexts, verification was difficult and time-consuming, and errors politically risky. Despite these challenges, ProtectDefenders.eu was able to exercise a high degree of due diligence due to the partners' extensive networks and insight into developments on the ground."*

*"One Syrian beneficiary, who received a grant (from EMHRF), directly attributed her decision to continue doing human rights work to the grant: You need a lot of things, you can't work here, you have so many things to worry about, you don't know if you will go back – emotionally it's a huge burden. So, the fund helped me a lot. I felt stability for many months, and I am free to decide what I do now. With the fund, I could stay (in Lebanon) and have some stability and think about whether I really want to go to the UK or stay here. And I decided to stay and establish an NGO."*

*Before receiving the (EMHRF) grant, a Syrian-led initiative aimed at supporting survivors of detention in Syria was struggling to survive on short-term grants. They "didn't have any options" as a newly formed organisation; "there were a lot of restrictions [on funding] because no one wanted to work in Syria or work on detention in Syria because it was political." The director explained the importance of the grant and what they were able to accomplish as a result of it: "In the first phase, 7-8 months, we couldn't do anything - just paperwork and supporting survivors in Turkey. In the year we had the grant, we expanded to Syria, expanded to have a gender focal point, and managed to start curating and expanding our network of survivors... [The grant] helped us survive for a year, and we grew enough that we got a grant for 3 years. Without this grant, we would not have survived. The grant gave us legitimacy."*

Specific recommendations from these evaluations consisting of developing a risk matrix on Syria and formalising a specific chart of ethics, among others, will be addressed by the Board in 2021.

### **5.4. Audit**

As Deloitte was auditing the Foundation for more than 10 years, the Board decided to pursue an audit firm rotation policy in October 2020. Following a competitive procedure, it appointed [BDO](#) for the function of external audit under international standards on auditing and the additional requirements applicable in Denmark.

The Foundation's 2020 audited financial statement is available on the Foundation's [website](#).

## Appendix: Overview of Grant Applications

### 1. Number of Applications

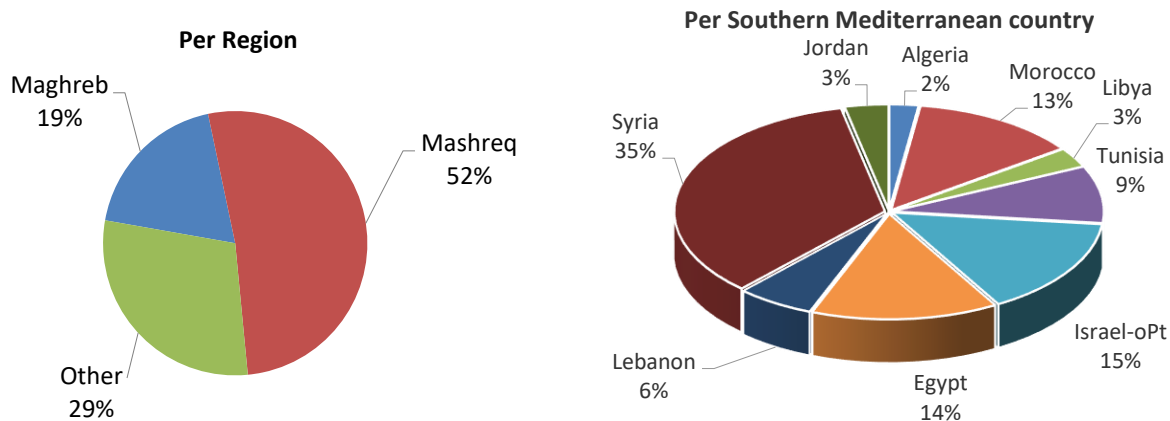
The Foundation received and reviewed **761** applications and inquiries (a 53% increase compared to 2019).

| Per type        |     |            |
|-----------------|-----|------------|
| <b>Urgent</b>   | 279 | <b>37%</b> |
| <b>Standard</b> | 285 | <b>37%</b> |
| <b>Inquiry</b>  | 197 | <b>26%</b> |

18% of these applications were granted for a total of **€ 2,319,907**, and 11% remain under assessment at the end of 2020.

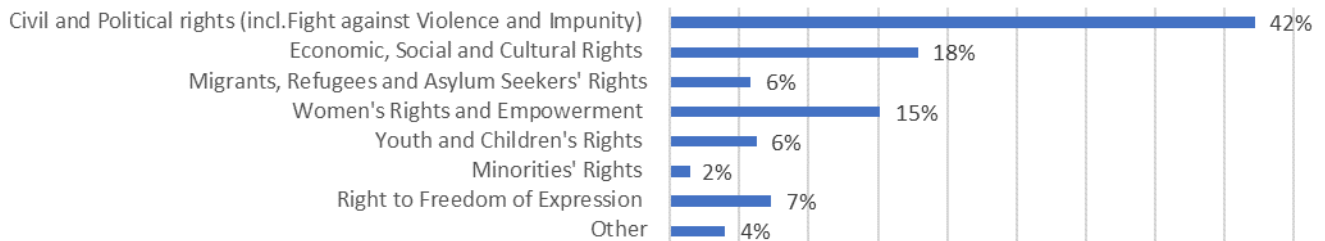
### 2. Geographic Distribution

**538** applications and inquiries originated from the Southern Mediterranean region (representing **71%** of all requests received), and mainly came from Syria, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, Egypt and Morocco.



### 3. Rights and Population Focus

The applications mainly dealt with the promotion and defense of civil and political rights, as reflected in the chart below. 13% of them were submitted by civil society actors facing additional risks and challenges because of the Covid-19 crisis.



#### 4. Reasons for Rejection

The main reasons which have justified the ineligibility of the applications are:

- The proposals did not meet the Foundation's main [criteria for support](#) (i.e. identity as a defender, nature of the proposal, necessity of the request and approach of the applicant) and received negative external recommendations. These applications accounted for **22%** of all proposals rejected.
- The activities suggested fell outside the geographical mandate of the Foundation, i.e. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the occupied Palestinian territory, and Israel. These applications accounted for **29%** of all proposals rejected.
- Applications otherwise fulfilled the criteria but were rejected because the applicants were not facing threats or could have access to other support mechanisms (for example, journalists could receive support from specific institutions), and the applicant's action and performance in the field were not documented. These applications accounted for **49%** of all rejected proposals.

In cases where applications fell outside the Foundation's mandate, the Secretariat advised and directed **3%** of them to alternative partners and donors. This service has, in particular, been provided in cases where individual defenders are facing urgent risks in other regions.

#### 5. Average Time for Response and Decision

As a rule, the Foundation aims to make sound and swift decisions on the applications received, while acknowledging that the assessment may require more time in very volatile and sensitive contexts, such as Syria, than in others.

The intervals between the receipt of the application, the initial response from the Secretariat and the decision taken by the Board are illustrated below:

| Average time <sup>18</sup>  | Response <sup>19</sup> | Decision <sup>20</sup> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Inquiry</i>              | 1 day                  | N/A                    |
| <i>Urgent application</i>   | 4 days                 | 24 days                |
| <i>Standard application</i> | 16 days                | 75 days                |

<sup>18</sup> The average time is calculated based on 80% of the applications and inquiries received in 2020.

<sup>19</sup> The Secretariat performs a due diligence review on each application received. This due diligence consists in first requesting information that may not have been provided in the application and holding discussions with the applicants to get to know them more and gather missing information to strengthen understanding of the situation and the relevance of the application.

<sup>20</sup> The Board takes all decisions based on the application and the due diligence review performed by the Secretariat. Beyond an initial response and exchange, the Secretariat undertakes online and social media background checks for all applications to analyse the content and examine their situation, ethics, track record and performances and contact trusted references to obtain additional information and to mitigate against risks of sanctions' violation, in particular in conflict areas, where most grants are allocated.