

Open Palestine

An initiative of [The Philos Project](#)

I. Problem Statement

The USG supports a vibrant and independent State of Palestine. But the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is neither vibrant nor ready to be independent. Most people blame Israeli occupation, but a major part of the problem lies within Palestinian society itself. And that's not the opinion of outsiders – that's what Palestinians themselves are saying.

An [April 2018 poll](#) from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that about 50% of Palestinians see the status of democracy/human rights in Palestine as bad/very bad (interestingly, nearly 60% see Israel as good/very good). The same poll finds that 63% believe that Palestinians in West Bank can't criticize the government without fear, 70% want President Abbas to resign, and 80% say PNA institutions are corrupt.

Religious freedom is an area of special concern. Hamas blocks all but the most basic elements of religious freedom in Gaza. The West Bank is better but social and political forces constrain free expression of religious belief, unbelief, and conversion there, too. For example this past June police arrested 4 civilians for eating food on the street during Ramadan. Meanwhile Palestinian converts to Christianity face the real risk of being murdered. The [DRL International Religious Freedom Report for 2017](#) cites other problems for religious and ideological minorities.

Palestine will not rise if Palestine is not free. It will spiral into greater anarchy and tyranny, prompting stricter security measures by Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, and consequently more conflict.

OPEN PALESTINE seeks to break this cycle.

II. Idea

OPEN PALESTINE is a new project that aims to expand religious freedom in the Palestinian Territories (PT) by working with partners to create a network of indigenous Palestinian leaders who will advance freedom locally. Since this is a holistic project with many dimensions, collaboration and partnership is key. Local

partnership is especially important, as freedom cannot be imposed from the outside.

This project will have 3 phases:

- 1) Phase One (year one, first 6 months)
 - a. Program build-out
 - b. Survey research
 - c. Initial recruitment of 30-50 Palestinian leaders
 - d. First conference (private) in West Bank
- 2) Phase Two (year one, second 6 months)
 - a. Website launch
 - b. Second conference (public)
 - c. Publication of petition, media campaign
- 3) Phase Three (year two)
 - a. Third conference (public), release of petition
 - b. Public activism inside and outside Territories

The two-state solution depends on the emergence of a free State of Palestine. Existing leadership networks in the PT tend to focus on [peace with](#), or [antagonism toward](#), Israel. None of them deal specifically with the need for freedom in areas governed by the PNA.

To our knowledge this project is the only one that deals with Palestine on its own terms, apart from Israel, and works to deepen freedom – and especially religious freedom – inside the PT in order to advance USG policy goals in the Holy Land and wider region.

III. Resource Requirements

The Philos Project currently spends a lot of time in the West Bank and has developed many relationships that will be key to this project's success. Philos also has a fellow in Ramallah who will direct our activities on the ground.

Leadership development, coalition building, and network mobilization is precisely what Philos has been doing since its founding in 2014. We have the track record and relationships, and we believe our goals are feasible and very much within reach.

What we really need are resources and stakeholder buy-in. Below is a simple breakdown – further budgets and information available upon request.

A. Resources - \$500,000 (2 years)

Staffing	\$100,000
Conferences (\$50,000 x 3)	\$150,000
Survey research	\$50,000
Website	\$20,000
Media/communications	\$180,000

B. Stakeholder Buy-In

West Bank: Our relationships are fairly strong, but we seek additional connections to partners/grantees of the USG who are doing similar work, who share our values, and who can give us a head start. OPEN PALESTINE will likely support their missions by linking them to a larger network and amplifying their voices.

USG: Our contacts are not strong. We need support from those departments, offices, and agencies that are relevant to the region and the issues. Some of them we know; others, possibly many others, we do not. We hope that the Boldline Religious Freedom Initiative will help us make these connections and get the buy-in we need to make this project successful.

IV. Best Potential Partners

Americans:

1. US State Department (esp. Office of International Religious Freedom, Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Near East Affairs)
2. Broadcasting Board of Governors (esp. Middle East Broadcasting Networks)
3. Private donors and foundations

Palestinians:

1. [Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research](#)
2. [The Holy Land Trust](#)
3. Palestinian business networks
4. Other Palestinian organizations/NGOs

Israelis:

1. Ministry of Defense (esp. Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories)

Advisers:

1. [Amb. Sam Brownback](#)
2. [Amb. Alberto Fernandez](#)
3. [Elliott Abrams](#)
4. [Dr. Khalil Shikaki](#)
5. [Dr. Sari Nusseibeh](#)
6. [Sami Awad](#)
7. [Randa Fahmy Hudome](#)

V. Ideal End State

At the end of two years OPEN PALESTINE will have:

1. Created a visible pro-freedom movement inside the PT;
2. Articulated a new and authentic freedom discourse in Arabic that will serve as a model for other Arabic-speaking societies in the region;
3. Connected likeminded leaders from business, art, education, religion, science, and human rights around a common vision;
4. Developed a pool of young talent for future service in public life; and
5. Encouraged the PNA to make tangible reforms that open up society.

The key to Palestine's social, political, and economic success – and to greater regional stability – is the emergence of a strong culture of freedom inside areas governed by the PNA. For that we need local Palestinians who share our vision.

OPEN PALESTINE exists to give these Palestinians the platform and the resources they need to lead their society into the future.