

Israeli human rights groups face state repression

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Israeli human rights groups and activists have become the target of a vicious campaign by right-wing groups, security forces and politicians.

It is the immediate response of the Israeli political elite to criticism of Israel's 2008-09 assault on Gaza in the wake of the Goldstone report. The UN report accused Israel of war crimes, and said that all those countries that had signed the 1949 Geneva Conventions had a duty to search for and prosecute those responsible, using their "universal jurisdiction" to prosecute war criminals.

The Israeli government refused to cooperate with the Goldstone fact-finding commission, but peace organisations and human rights groups did. These included organisations such as B'Tselem, Yesh Din, Adalah, Breaking the Silence, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Centre for the Defence of the Individual, the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, Doctors for Human rights, and Rabbis for Human Rights, amongst others. They have also provided international NGOs such as Christian Aid, Oxfam and Human Rights Watch with evidence for their reports on Israeli human rights violations. Such violations increased dramatically since Israel began building settlements in the territories seized and illegally occupied after the 1967 war.

According to a report by Im Tirtzu, which calls itself a "centrist-Zionist" student group, 16 Israeli NGOs provided 92 percent of the negative citations used in the Goldstone Report to criticize the Israeli Defence Forces' conduct in Gaza last year. Im Tirzu does not refute any of the evidence, but instead seeks to silence them with claims that they are funded by foreign forces hostile to Israel.

The main organisation cited is the New Israel Fund (NIF), a group, in fact, funded by Diaspora Jews for religious pluralism and democratic change, which it says gave the groups \$7.8 million in financial support in 2008-2009. It says that between 2003 and 2008, the NIF received \$20 million funding from the Ford Foundation, which also gives "tens of millions of dollars to anti-Israel groups across the Arab world, in the Palestinian Authority and within Israel."

The report also claims that it was NIF-funded organisations that signed a letter calling on Britain to prosecute senior IDF officials for war crimes.

A spokesman from Im Tirtzu said, "The Goldstone Report looks the way it does because of these 16 groups and the quotes they provided...In that vein, our goal is to remove the NIF's mask and show the public what they really are—which is a fifth column, plain and simple," he continued.

Im Tirtzu has launched a venomous media campaign against Naomi Chazan, the president of NIF. Its adverts show a picture of Chazan, a professor of political science and former Meretz member of the Knesset, with a devil's horn attached to her forehead, reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. Its members have demonstrated outside her home dressed in Hamas uniforms.

For groups such as Im Tirtzu it is treason to state the obvious: that Israel committed war crimes by bombing an essentially defenceless civilian population, destroying its public infrastructure and housing, and using white phosphorous shells.

But there is a further point. Opposition to war crimes that comes from groups who proclaim their loyalty to the Israeli state, but wish it to carry through its official policy of ending hostilities and establishing a Palestinian state, is now deemed unpatriotic.

Any criticism has now become intolerable to Binyamin Netanyahu's right-wing government, which refuses to accept any censure of its actions towards the Palestinians, much less any curb on its expansionist plans in the West Bank and East Jerusalem or its military supremacy in the region.

The cabinet has therefore backed a bill, introduced last week in the Knesset, which prohibits an organization in Israel from receiving money from a foreign political institution unless it registers with the Registrar of Political Parties. Every time a non-governmental organisation (NGO) receives funding from a "foreign political entity", it will have to inform the Registrar and provide details about the donor, the sum donated, its purpose, and the commitments

made by the recipients to the donors.

The NGO would have to list the aims of the organization, its address and the identification number of every key activist, including directors, members of the executive committee, active directors and those authorized to sign checks. It would have to declare in all public appearances that it represented an organization that receives overseas funding.

The stated purpose of the legislation is to “increase the transparency and to correct lacunas in the law regarding the funding of political activity in Israel by foreign political entities,” where “political activity” is defined as “activity aimed at influencing public opinion in Israel or one of the branches of government in Israel regarding any element of Israel’s domestic or foreign policy.”

In reality, the bill is part of a concerted campaign to crack down on human rights groups, many of whom receive funding from overseas governments, international foundations and the European Union, and to equate any opposition to Israel’s policies with “anti-Zionism” and the government’s charge levelled against the Goldstone report of “de-legitimisation of the Jewish state”.

Ron Dermer, chief of policy planning in the prime minister’s office, called the funding of political NGOs by foreign governments a “blatant and unacceptable” intervention into Israel’s internal affairs. “Just as it would be unacceptable for European governments to support anti-war NGOs in the US, it is unacceptable for the Europeans to support local NGOs opposed to the policies of Israel’s democratically-elected government,” he said.

Dermer added that what made it worse was that some of the NGOs were not merely opposed to specific policies, but “are working to delegitimize the Jewish state.”

The dual standards involved in this official campaign are obvious. Most of Israel’s settler and neo-conservative groups are funded with Israeli taxpayers’ money and US donations that benefit from US tax exemptions. In addition, Tel Aviv supports just such groups “opposed to the policy” of an elected government in Iran.

The last few months has seen a number of actions against human rights protesters and oppositionists.

- In January, the director of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and 16 other activists were arrested during their weekly demonstration at Sheikh Jarrah, in East Jerusalem, to protest the eviction of Palestinians from their homes in the city. One of those arrested was Yonatan Shapira, an air force pilot who publicly refused to attack illegitimate targets. The court ordered the unconditional release of the activists, rejecting the police claims that the demonstration was illegal and the demonstrators were dangerous. So far, more than 70 activists have been arrested

during the demonstrations at Sheikh Jarrah.

- Anat Hoffman, director of the Israel Religious Action Centre, which receives funding from the New Israel Fund, was hauled into a police station, fingerprinted and questioned about her prayer sessions at the Wailing Wall in the Old City with Women of the Wall.

- The following week, Hagai El-Ad, the director of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), another recipient of NIF funding, was arrested during a peaceful demonstration in East Jerusalem that ACRI was monitoring to protect freedom of speech.

- Attorney General Menahem Mazuz supported the five reservist soldiers’ appeal against Palestinian Israeli Mohammed Bakri for his film *Jenin, Jenin*, released in 2002.

- The government is now only giving tourist visas, not work visas, to employees of 150 NGOs operating in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including Oxfam, Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières. This will prevent them from working in areas under Israeli jurisdiction, including Area C (which makes up 60 percent of the West Bank) and all of East Jerusalem. This will effectively stop them from working with the Palestinians and impose further hardships on the Palestinian people.

- The government has also barred international visitors to the Palestinian Authority from entering Israel.

- Last month, the government deported Jared Malsin, a Jewish US citizen who is the English language editor for *Ma’an*, the independent Palestinian news agency, after detaining him at Tel Aviv airport and refusing him and his partner re-entry on his return from holiday in Prague. *Ma’an* said the decision could “only be explained as a retaliatory measure for his reporting on Palestine.”

The vilification of and clampdown on those opposing the murderous campaigns of the Israeli Defence Forces against the Palestinians, under conditions where the government is planning further campaigns against Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, reflect the rancorous divisions within Israeli society. That freedom of speech has become anathema to the ultra-nationalist layers testifies to the impossibility of establishing a democratic state based upon the dispossession and suppression of the Palestinian people.



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