

Israel outlaws six Palestinian human rights groups, branding them “terrorist organisations”

Jean Shaoul
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On Friday, Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz signed a military order declaring six of the most prominent Palestinian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the occupied Palestinian territories “terrorist organizations.”

The decree is an attack on Palestinian human rights activists and the communities they represent, and on the local and international public's right to information about the situation in the occupied territories. The six NGOs have documented abuses by Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, and sought to defend Palestinian prisoners, farmworkers, women and children.

Gantz claimed, without providing any evidence, that they are part of an international network run by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), designated as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the US and the European Union (EU). Once one of the most important Palestinian organisations, the PFLP, which rejected the Oslo Accords in favour of a one state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, views both the Fatah-led PA government in the West Bank and the Hamas government in Gaza as illegal because there have been no elections since 2006.

The military order asserted that the NGOs are “controlled by senior leaders” of the PFLP and employ its members, including some who had “participated in terror activity.” Furthermore, the order stated, they served as a “central source” of financing for the PFLP, having received “large sums of money from European countries and international organisations.”

Despite claiming to have “unambiguous and cast in concrete” evidence, Israel has not announced any plans for a criminal investigation. The six groups have two months to appeal the decision.

Gantz's edict, issued under Israel's domestic anti-terrorism law of 2016, enables the authorities to close the NGOs' offices, seize assets, arrest staff and even prohibit funding or public expressions of support for their activities.

Crucially, it serves to intimidate and prevent third parties

and international organisations from funding or supporting them and their work, since Israeli counterterrorism law mandates jail terms not just for members of groups designated as terrorist organizations but also for people in Israel who express support for them. It is thus aimed at depriving the NGOs of their funding as international opposition to Israel's criminal suppression of the Palestinians has grown.

The order is explicitly aimed at human rights organisations that have played a major role in exposing the crimes committed by the military, security, police and intelligence forces against the Palestinians, as well as right-wing Jewish settlers' violent and murderous attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank. The six organizations include:

- Addameer, which offers legal aid to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, collects information on prisoners and the conditions of their incarceration, campaigns against practices such as administrative detention without trial, torture and solitary confinement by the Israeli authorities.

- Al-Haq, which compiles reports on human rights violations in the occupied territories by both Israel and the PA and has published reports on torture in PA prisons and the lack of freedom of expression in Palestinian society.

- The Bisan Center, which has criticized the impact of the Israeli occupation on poverty in the West Bank and the PA's neoliberal policies.

- Defense for Children International Palestine, a branch of the Geneva-based Defense for Children, which provides aid to children being tried in Israeli military courts and researches children imprisoned by Israel, numbering 200, and the impact of the occupation on children's rights.

- The Union of Palestinian Women's Committees, which trains women to take part in politics, helps establish cooperatives and offers legal and psychological aid to women.

- The Union of Agricultural Work Committees, which seeks to promote “farmers' steadfastness and sustainable

livelihoods” and aids Palestinian farmers—mainly in Area C of the West Bank that is under Israeli military control and home to the vast majority of the Israeli settlements—who have been subject to years of harassment by settlers with the active support of the Israeli army.

Israel’s decision has been condemned by human rights organisations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Israel’s B’Tselem. The UN Human Rights Office in the occupied Palestinian territories issued a statement saying, “Counter-terrorism legislation must not be used to constrain legitimate human rights and humanitarian work.” It described the reasons cited by Gantz as “vague or irrelevant” and his decision as the latest move in a “long-stigmatising campaign” against the Palestinian NGOs.

The PA called the military edict an “unhinged assault” on Palestinian civil society. Its statement said, “This fallacious and libelous slander is a strategic assault on Palestinian civil society and the Palestinian people’s fundamental right to oppose Israel’s illegal occupation and expose its continuing crimes.”

None of the Palestinian organisations has yet issued a response.

The major powers, including the US, Germany, Britain, France, and India, as well as Greece, that are currently participating in joint aerial exercises with Israel, have studiously avoided condemning Israel’s action.

The US State Department, Israel’s puppet master, issued a hypocritical, pro forma statement about the importance of human rights, emphasising it had not been informed about the measure and would request more information about the designations.

The EU, which claims to support the Palestinians’ human rights and has funded some of the NGOs while supplying Israel with weaponry, has remained silent on the issue. Similarly, the UK, which is cracking down on support for the Palestinians on university campuses under the pretext of fighting anti-Semitism, has said nothing.

Within Israel, B’Tselem and more than 20 NGOs ran a front-page ad in *Ha’aretz* stating, “Criminalizing human rights organizations is a cowardly act that is characteristic of oppressive authoritarian regimes” and pointing out that “Over the years, Israel has consistently framed any Palestinian move that was not a surrender to apartheid and occupation as ‘terrorism.’”

This latest escalation follows a long line of efforts to suppress protesters, activists, community organizers, lawyers and journalists in Palestine, Israel and internationally who seek to expose, challenge and sanction Israel’s human rights abuses. Israel’s ministry of strategic affairs, working with far-right nationalist forces and settler groups, has targeted and slandered Palestinian NGOs with claims of corruption

and misuse of funds, clamped down on their finances, denied entry to their employees and international co-thinkers and raided their offices.

Last July, Israeli security forces broke into the offices of Defense for Children International and the Bisan Center for Research and Development, confiscating equipment and files, while Addameer has for years faced countless raids on its offices that have involved the damage or theft of equipment and files.

As Al-Haq points out, “It is no coincidence that Israel’s recent escalation of punitive measures against Al-Haq and fellow civil society organisations has come in the immediate aftermath of the opening of an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into Israel’s crimes in the Situation in Palestine.”

Some of the six groups played an important role in the campaign to prosecute Israeli leaders at the ICC that culminated in the ruling last March by then ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda that there was enough preliminary evidence to justify an investigation into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories. Israel has refused to cooperate with the inquiry. By designating these groups as terrorist, Israel is seeking to undermine the case and their witness statements in the eyes of the court.

The outlawing of human rights groups and persecution of humanitarian activists follows Israel’s decades-long suppression of the Palestinians that has included collective punishment, house demolitions, deportations, detention without trial, torture, targeted assassinations and most recently the denial of COVID-19 vaccinations. This, along with legislation establishing an apartheid state, confirms that Israel has repudiated all the limited characteristics of bourgeois democracy.

It demonstrates that it is impossible for Israel’s financial and political elite to maintain even the semblance of democratic rule while illegally occupying Palestinian land and the Golan Heights, discriminating against their own Palestinian citizens and systematically impoverishing the vast majority of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis.



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