

Manipulating the marketplace of ideas

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For over a decade, European governments have been major sources of funding for dozens of Israeli and Palestinian organizations claiming to promote human rights and similar moral causes. While these groups are known as "nongovernmental organizations," or NGOs, they are, in fact, selected and nurtured by foreign governments. And as seen in research to be discussed in a Knesset conference on December 1, their agendas are more political than moral.

This often hidden support helps pay for expensive newspaper advertisements, such as those recently announcing B'Tselem's 20th anniversary; the salaries of lawyers involved in dozens of High Court cases about the security barrier, treatment of Palestinian terrorists, etc.; the Geneva Initiative's conferences and booklets; and a flood of statements submitted to the United Nations condemning Israeli policies. Recipient NGOs have a major influence on many issues in our lives, and on the decisions of our democratically elected government.

Although foreign funding for Israeli NGOs is labeled as support for "civil society," this is false advertising. Organizations such as Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, B'Tselem, Hamoked Center for the Defense of the Individual, and many more, cannot claim to be rooted in Israeli civil society when they are funded both directly by the Swedish government, and indirectly through budgets provided by the same government to the Diakonia church organization. This process is repeated by another 15 governments (including Norway and Switzerland), as well as the European Commission, which between them fund more than 50 similar organizations.

The nature and scale of European influence is unique - in no other case do democratic countries use taxpayer money to support opposition groups in other democracies. Imagine the French response to U.S. government financing for radical NGO anti-abortion campaigns in Paris, or for promoting Corsican separatists under the guise of human rights. Would Spain tolerate foreign government funding of NGO campaigns involving the violent Basque conflict? But here, as in other areas, Israel is singled out and subject to different rules.

Taken together, the large sums provided to NGOS by European governments through secret processes constitute a major effort to manipulate the Israeli marketplace of ideas. This is inherently colonialistic, undermining the goals of Zionism and Jewish sovereign equality.

For example, Adalah's 2007 "Democratic Constitution" seeks to abolish the Law of Return; Mada al-Carmel's "Haifa Declaration," featuring the EU logo, calls for a "change in the definition of the State of Israel from a Jewish state" and accuses Israel of "exploiting" the Holocaust "at the expense of the Palestinian people." In the judicial arena, dozens of politicized court cases are brought by these NGOs, making them "repeat players" with an unfair advantage that greatly distorts the legal process.

Externally, officials from fringe ideological NGOs frequently speak at UN sessions on human rights, in churches and on university campuses, where they demonize Israel with terms like "apartheid," "ethnic cleansing," "genocide" and "war crimes." The allegations in the Goldstone report on the Gaza war are in some cases copied directly from reports of more than 20 NGOs funded by Europe, and many are also involved in the boycotts, divestment and sanctions campaign based on the Durban NGO Forum strategy of isolating Israel. The Coalition of Women for Peace, which receives grants from the EU, operates the "Who Profits?" divestment Web site, which tracks Israeli and international corporations allegedly "involved in the occupation." "Who Profits?" was central in the anti-Israel divestment campaign in Norway, and a similar project has begun in Britain. In parallel, using European funding, B'Tselem lobbyists in Washington and London campaign for the adoption of the Goldstone report, and oppose the policies of Israel's elected government. And the travel expenses provided to Breaking the Silence are used to promote its efforts to spread allegations of war crimes around the world. The use of taxpayer funds for this political warfare against Israel is unjustifiable.

The first step to ending this practice is a law to require full transparency - a principle that European officials preach, but when it comes to Israel, do not practice. Before any NGO can accept foreign government funding, the details of the grant would have to be made public. Israeli law should also require full notification when the money is used, so that the backing for NGO activities - newspaper ads, political protests and conferences - is clearly stated. Transparency would also allow European parliamentary oversight and expose the absence of professional evaluation of the purposes to which funds have been put.

Opponents and critics of research exposing European government funding allege that transparency requirements would hinder free speech. This is a diversion: Free speech is not the issue. As should be the case in civil society activities, private funding will always be available from local and Diaspora supporters for organizations representing the full spectrum of ideologies, including for allegations (real and fabricated) regarding human rights and related issues. Their main fear is that transparency will lead responsible Europeans to reconsider the wisdom of sending tens of millions of government euros, pounds and krona to favored Israeli fringe NGOs. Transparency may not halt the European practice of using Israeli NGOs to sell these agendas and manipulate policy and politics, but this is an important beginning.

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