

Soft Powers Play Hardball: NGOs Wage War against Israel

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The campaign of terror that began in late 2000, following the collapse of the Oslo peace process, was accompanied by a full-scale political campaign, aimed at de-legitimizing and isolating Israel internationally. This strategy was articulated at the UN-sponsored World Conference against Racism and Xenophobia that took place in September 2001, in Durban, South Africa. The Durban conference crystallized the strategy of de-legitimizing Israel as ‘an apartheid regime’, through international isolation based on the South African model.

This political warfare based on ‘soft power’¹ has been conducted through a number of frameworks, and in different venues, including the media, the UN, and other diplomatic institutions. In many of these campaigns, powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the main actors, providing the platform, the funds, and the political slogans. The funding is generally provided by governments (particularly in Europe and Canada), as well as philanthropic groups such as the Ford Foundation. Although these NGOs and their patrons generally use the rhetoric of human rights, humanitarian relief, and international law, their actions are primarily political. In contrast to the universality of these norms, in practice the language is exploited to promote particular political and ideological goals.

This attack is spearheaded by global NGO ‘superpowers’—Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Christian Aid, the International Commission of Jurists, and Oxfam. The vast resources and large number of employees at their disposal provide access to the media, diplomats (including direct involvement in UN proceedings) and other public relations channels for pursuing their anti-Israel agendas. In addition, hundreds of smaller pro-Palestinian NGOs, often linked together in associations such as PNGO (the Palestinian NGO Network), and closely tied to the PLO political leadership, have formed partnerships with the global NGOs. This provides the smaller local NGOs (often consisting of not much more than a website and a few employees) with funds, credibility

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and access to the media and the UN, thereby greatly amplifying their impact.

As a result, the NGO network has been central in the political fronts that reflect the Durban strategy of labelling Israel as the new South Africa. The battles include the Jenin 'massacre' myth; the Israeli separation barrier; the academic boycott, and the church-based anti-Israel divestment campaign.

This article begins with a presentation of the political activities, agendas and impacts of NGOs on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Subsequently, specific campaigns will be analyzed in detail, including the 2001 Durban conference, the anti-Israel NGO activities in connection with the Jenin 'massacre' myth, the separation fence ('apartheid wall') campaign, and the academic boycott and church divestment efforts. What follows is an examination of the sources of funding for these activities (particularly government sources), and the 'soft power' phenomenon which allows universal human rights norms to be distorted into tacit, and sometimes even explicit, support for terrorism. This paper will conclude with a presentation of the evolution of the counter-strategy designed to limit the impact of this manipulation of 'soft power'.

THE ROLE OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL NGOS IN PROMOTING ANTI-ISRAEL AGENDAS

The disproportionate emphasis placed by NGOs on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and specifically on condemnations of Israel, has been central in focusing disproportionate media and diplomatic attention on these issues, while contributing to the relative neglect of other, and even more horrendous, examples of human rights violations, such as the mass killings in Sudan and Central Africa. NGOs such as Amnesty International, Christian Aid, Human Rights Watch, B'tselem, The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), PNGO, and many more are at the forefront of the campaigns to label Israel an 'apartheid state', to impose academic and economic boycotts on Israel, to declare the separation barrier 'a violation of international law', and to condemn defensive actions against mass terrorism as 'war crimes'.

The impact of the NGO community is, to a large degree, a reflection of the resources at its disposal, their global agendas and worldwide reach. These NGOs claim a universal mandate focusing on human rights and humanitarian relief. For example, Amnesty International explicitly states that it 'does not support or oppose any government or political system... it is concerned solely with the impartial protection of human rights'. Similarly, HRW pledges to uphold objectivity and condemn human rights abuses on all sides. The International Commission of Jurists claims an 'impartial, objective and authoritative legal approach to the protection and promotion

of human rights'. Amnesty International's annual operating budget is US\$30 million and it claims to have projects in 140 countries, as well as half a million members. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has an annual operating budget of US\$28 million, and Christian Aid earned £58 million in 2002. (Christian Aid receives widespread support from a large range of the major UK churches including the Church of England, and Baptist and Lutheran churches,² which provide this organization with considerable influence.) Other global NGOs active in political campaigns in the Israeli–Palestinian arena include the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists, OXFAM, Save the Children, and Medicins Sans Frontieres.

The funding comes from both private and public (governmental) sources. HRW is unique in that most of its income comes from the private sector, including individuals and large foundations. The Ford Foundation is one of the major private sources of NGO funding, with an annual budget of \$500 million, of which a significant percentage goes to NGOs that are active in the Middle East conflict. Ford-supported NGOs, including HRW, the Palestinian Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (also known as LAW),³ and Al Mezan,⁴ were central to the Durban conference and promoted the radical anti-Israel agenda. Most of the other NGOs receive the bulk of their funding from governments, and from church groups (this is particularly true for Christian Aid, the Mennonite Central Committee, Caritas, and KAIROS (Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives)).

Government money, which is generally the major source of income for NGOs, is provided under the title of 'development assistance', support for civil society, or human rights. These government bodies include the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA),⁵ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK, and their counterparts in Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, at the EU level, and elsewhere. Thus, foreign governments and political bodies are in fact choosing the representatives of civil society, which, as noted above, is normatively defined as providing an alternative to political interests and processes.

This external governmental and foundation funding has also created the basis for the growth of hundreds of smaller local NGOs based in the region (some are registered non-profit groups in Israel; others are based in the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and elsewhere). Through partner relationships, the local NGOs also receive funding, media access, and personnel from the superpower in return for information and the legitimacy and appearance of credibility resulting from a 'presence on the ground'.

The key local NGOs supporting radical pro-Palestinian (and anti-Israeli) positions and campaigns through relations with the superpower organizations include Sabeel (headed by Naim Atik), LAW, Miftah (headed by PLO official and frequent spokeswoman Hanan Ashwari), I'lam, Al-Haq, Al-Mezan, ICAHD (the Israel Committee Against Housing

Demolitions),⁶ Physicians for Human Rights—Israel (PHR-I),⁷ PCHR (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights), B'tselem, and Adalah. (In some cases, such as Jeff Halper at ICAHD, a small number of radical Israeli academics provide legitimacy to these NGOs outside of Israel, allowing their supporters to claim that their activities are not inherently anti-Israel in nature.⁸) Unlike the global groups, whose wider missions require some activities other than those focused on Israel and this conflict, the Palestinian-based NGOs have only one objective, which is to attack Israel. And there are hundreds more, often with parallel positions and activities, many of which are linked under the banner of the Palestinian NGO Network. PNGO was central in promoting the academic boycott efforts in the UK (presented as a 'human rights' measure), as well as the divestment campaign.

Like other organizations in Palestinian society, these NGOs are closely affiliated with the power structure and do not deviate from official positions. Analysis of the activities and agendas of a large number of these NGOs shows little discussion of the human rights dimensions of Palestinian terror attacks or the impact of the corruption within the Palestinian Authority on humanitarian conditions.⁹ In contrast to their use of universal human rights rhetoric, these NGOs, which, as noted, are largely funded by external governments (European, Canadian, and in a few cases also the US¹⁰) as well as the major foundations, rarely criticize Palestinian violations of basic human rights. Their agenda is strictly focused on anti-Israeli activities. In this, they are aided by numerous explicitly pro-Palestinian NGOs based in Europe and North America, such as the International Solidarity Movement, the European Coordinating Committee of NGOs on the Question of Palestine (ECCP) headed by Belgian Senator Pierre Galand,¹¹ and the many Arab and Islamic lobbies and 'charities'.

SOFT POWER: IDEOLOGY AND THE RHETORIC OF HUMAN RIGHTS

There are tens of thousands of NGOs in the world, claiming to represent civil society—a highly amorphous concept, generally understood to reflect an alternative to the prevailing 'selfish and particularist interests' of states, governments (including democracies) and formal political organizations. NGOs are also non-profit organizations (NPOs)—in contrast to private business interests and for-profit institutions. They are often considered to be altruistic, promoting the common good, while business and political organizations are perceived to be selfish and particularistic.¹²

Thus, in their mission statements, funding requests and public activities, NGOs generally portray themselves as defenders of the weak and powerless against powerful governments and big business. But behind this image the core members of the NGO network are also very wealthy and

powerful, allowing them to press their own interests and ideologies. Issues that NGOs choose to emphasize in their reports, press conferences, e-mail campaigns and advocacy receive significant attention in the media and rise to the top of the international agenda.

As such, they are a major embodiment of the powerful impact of ‘soft power’, based not on the use of direct military power, but on more subtle ideologically based manipulation via the media, in the United Nations, university campuses, and similar venues. The exercise of soft power depends on the image, if not always the substance, of global altruism that seeks to correct the supposed evils of ‘militant nationalism’, as widely perceived, particularly in post-Cold War Europe, but also in North America and elsewhere. Thus, the causes espoused by NGOs cover a wide range—including environmental objectives, disarmament, gender issues (equality for women), human rights, the elimination of poverty, etc.

These idealistic missions gain support from private philanthropies and governments, providing NGO officials with major resources and platforms to promote their views and preferences. And they are protected from external analysis and accountability due to the ‘halo effect’ and the façade of civil society that uniquely shields NGO officials and their organizations from criticism or investigation.¹³ The ‘halo effect’ is the term used when noting the degree to which reports and statements made by prominent NGOs are routinely accepted at face value by journalists, diplomats, academics and others, who act as force multipliers for the NGO agendas.

These factors are of particular importance in examining the role of NGOs claiming to promote human rights and humanitarian objectives, particularly in the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict. The idealistic foundation that invokes the rhetoric of universal human rights, based on the norms formed in the wake of the revulsion following the Holocaust, is cited by the NGO community to justify its activities. This rhetoric and the façade of civil society are also the basis on which much of the money is raised from individuals, foundations, and governments.

Yet evidence shows that officials who control the activities of these NGOs use the universal human rights rhetoric to demonize and isolate Israel. As noted above, their reports, letters, books, press conferences, and campaigns pursued in the name of human rights, primarily focus on claims of Israeli violations, and largely ignore the context.

This approach—which is often accompanied by a deep hostility to American policy and use of force—also reflects the post-colonial and anti-nationalist ideologies that have become increasingly dominant in universities and in the media. Based on the essays and speeches of radicals such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, this post-colonial approach automatically favours Palestinian ‘victims’ and condemns Israel for being a ‘Western colonialist outpost’ and ‘hegemon’.¹⁴

Many NGO officials and activists reflect this radical ideological background. In the case of Human Rights Watch, Executive Director Kenneth Roth was a New York prosecutor with political goals before he joined the NGO to pursue his political agenda. Reed Brody (special counsel and advocacy director), who led the HRW delegation at the Durban conference, was also involved in promoting the attempt to bring Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to trial in Belgium. Sarah Leah Whitson was involved in other political advocacy groups before coming to HRW. Lucy Meir, who was hired in 2005 as a researcher for Israel and the West Bank, had previously been affiliated with the radical Electronic Intifada website, and Joe Stork served for many years as the editor of the strongly anti-Israel *Middle East Report (MERIP)*.¹⁵ For these groups, and many others, human rights claims and the use of NGOs are the means to promote radical political objectives that would be rejected through normal democratic processes.

The ability of the numerous anti-Israel NGOs (global as well as local) to pursue such a particularist ideological agenda, and the ready acceptance of their reports as neutral, is enhanced by the ‘halo effect’, as well as the absence of transparency. Officials from NGOs, while often preaching transparency and accountability to others, rarely practice it themselves. There is little information on the decision-making processes that are used by these groups to determine their agendas, or why some issues (particularly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict) receive far more attention from NGOs than conflicts in other places.¹⁶ Similarly, the accuracy of the reports and analysis issued by officials of the major international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (AI), and from local groups such as B’tselem and Physicians for Human Rights—Israel is rarely questioned, despite the absence of independent research capabilities and reliance on unverified Palestinian ‘eye witnesses’, journalists and other NGOs.¹⁷ After attempting to verify claims made in Amnesty reports, Alan Dershowitz concluded that ‘It is impossible under these circumstances for any outside researcher to replicate AI’s study and to confirm or disconfirm its conclusions’.¹⁸

The NGO community also promotes the Arab and Palestinian version of history (the ‘narrative’). In their references to history, human rights NGOs consistently present the standard Palestinian narrative that emphasizes the post-1967 war image of ‘occupation and settlements’, while ignoring pre-1967 violence and the origins of the conflict. Save the Children, for example, presents this biased version in its guide to teachers, accompanying information on this NGO’s humanitarian programmes in Gaza. Using their Palestinian NGO allies, major international NGOs such as the International Commission of Jurists and Christian Aid (based in the UK) consistently condemn Israeli responses, such as targeted killings (‘illegal assassinations’), while criticism of Palestinian terror is given only

fleeting mention. In its 2003 'Peace Under Siege' Christmas campaign, Christian Aid's fifteen-minute film had exactly four seconds of images from the scene of a bus bombing—the rest was devoted to tales of Palestinian victimization and Israel 'war crimes'.¹⁹

With very little variation, these NGOs also echo common Palestinian positions, including demands for Israeli 'withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory', an end to 'illegal settlements', and a return to the pre-1967 'borders' (referring to the 1949 armistice lines) on the grounds that the 'occupation' and 'settlements' are responsible for human rights violations. References to the pre-1967 era of this conflict, terrorism and its consequences are systematically missing in the NGO narratives.

In this context, the claims regarding refugee status and rights have been among the main points of contention since the 1948 war. The issue is extremely complex, but the positions of the international and local NGOs on these topics essentially support the Palestinian claims, disguised in humanitarian terms. For example, the Save the Children Fund's 'Eye to Eye project' provides an educational resource centre for teachers and educators which transmits anti-Israel polemics, lacks balance or fails to mention alternative narratives and interpretations of events. The time-line includes an incomplete and one-sided list of UN resolutions and treaties, resulting in a version of history that assigns responsibility for the conflict exclusively to Israel. Similarly, in this 'resource centre', the background to the renewed violence that began in September 2000 is based entirely on the Palestinian narrative.²⁰ None of this is related to Save the Children Fund's (SCFs) medical activities, and again highlights the exploitation of human rights claims, rhetoric and resources to promote a political agenda. The historical references and political prescriptions advocated by Christian Aid, HRW, Amnesty, International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), and all of their local Palestinian NGOs are also based on a highly selective reading of the history, focusing on Israeli 'settlements', 'occupation', etc. as causes rather than as symptoms of the conflict. For example, an analysis of HRW's statements and activities on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the period between 2001 and the 2004 shows a highly disproportionate emphasis on the condemnation of Israel.²¹

These activities are translated into political influence via NGO access to diplomats and the media, which act as force multipliers for 'soft power'. NGO officials, such as Kenneth Roth of HRW and Irene Kahn of AI, are frequent commentators on radio and television, and their analyses appear in the op-ed pages of major newspapers. These analyses and claims regarding allegations of human rights abuses are repeated in the media, where they are presented as unbiased, objective and credible, often reinforcing the existing bias and conventional wisdom.²²

Similarly, government ministers and legislators (particularly in Europe) consult regularly with NGO leaders, and their reports become the basis for

policies related to conflict areas, including the Israeli–Palestinian issue. EU officials, including members of Parliament, meet regularly with the representatives of NGOs, and their reports have significant policy impact. In the UK, the January 2004 report of the House of Commons International Development Committee on Development Assistance to the Occupied Palestinian Territories gave great prominence to the submissions from groups such as Christian Aid, Oxfam and SCF.²³ In the United Nations frameworks, NGOs constitute powerful lobbying organizations, and, as demonstrated in the case studies below, have a major say in its agenda and activities, particularly with respect to issues defined in terms of human rights. Reflecting on this relationship, Secretary General Kofi Annan declared that NGOs are ‘essential and indispensable partners for governments and the international community and act as a driving force in the conceptualization and implementation of decisions taken at major United Nations Conferences’.²⁴

Indeed, many of these NGOs, both global superpowers and their local allies, have ready access to a privileged position in the UN. For example, Jeremy Rabkin cites the link between the NGO agenda and the record of the UN Human Rights Commission, which ‘issued six condemnations of Israel in 2001 and eight condemnations in 2002, while no other state has ever received more than one condemnation in the same year’, reflecting the transformation of Israel into ‘the world’s most odious regime’.²⁵

CASE STUDIES

The combined impact of all of these factors that give the human rights NGOs the power to promote campaigns focused on attacking Israel’s status in the international community can be seen most clearly in a number of case studies. These campaigns include the 2001 Durban conference, the promotion of the Jenin ‘massacre’ myth, and the subsequent boycott and divestment drives, each of which will be analyzed in detail in the following section.

The 2001 Durban Conference

The UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WARC), held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001, constituted a declaration of political war against Israel. The conference took place one year after the beginning of the Palestinian campaign of violence and terror (called ‘the second intifada’, ‘Arafat’s war’, ‘the seventh Arab–Israel war’, etc.). The conflict had escalated into mass terror attacks, in which hundreds of Israelis were killed. Israel’s response consisted largely of limited incursions into the areas under Palestinian control, from which the terror attacks were being prepared.

In the political and diplomatic environment of the time, Israel was already very isolated. Media coverage systematically portrayed the Palestinians sympathetically as victims, and the Israelis as powerful aggressors and occupiers. Israeli victims of terrorism were largely invisible, while the image of Mohammed al-Dura, the Palestinian child filmed with his father attempting to avoid what appeared to be Israeli gunfire, became the central symbol. (Later analysis confirmed that the shots could not have been fired by Israeli troops, and provided evidence that the entire episode had been staged.²⁶) Largely consistent with this media campaign, the US and, to a greater degree, European governments publicly criticized and often condemned Israeli responses to terror, and demanded the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the areas under the responsibility of the PA under the interim agreements. The European Union debated economic sanctions against Israel, and the UN passed resolutions condemning Israeli policies, using the language of human rights and international law.

In this context, the Palestinians and their allies, including the NGOs, were able to use the Durban conference to expand the attack against Israel. The target was not limited to policies of the government in response to terror, but included a broader attempt to de-legitimize Israel as a sovereign state, marking the return of the 'Zionism is racism' theme after a brief hiatus.²⁷ The agenda and preliminary texts were set during a series of preparatory conferences, including one in Tehran, from which Israelis and Jewish delegates were excluded by the Iranian government. In their absence, the draft resolutions included references to Israel as 'committing *holocausts*' and 'being *anti-Semitic*' (<http://www.racism.org.za/index-2.html>).

Throughout this process, the NGO community played a central role, with the major involvement of the international 'superpowers' (HRW, AI, ICJ, etc.). Their special status within the UN Human Rights Commission, and the invitation extended to 'interested' NGOs facilitated this activity.²⁸ Two parallel conferences were held; one for government representatives, and the NGO Forum, which included over 1250 UN-authorized organizations.²⁹ The NGOs and their representatives, financed by grants from the UN and 'friendly governments' (notably Canada and the EU) and by philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation,³⁰ generated most of the attention. These included Miftah (an NGO established by Hanan Ashwari)³¹ and the Palestinian Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment. They played a central role in steering committees, workshops and other Durban-related activities, based on the theme 'that Israel was an apartheid state'.³²

In addition, major allies, such as SANGOCO (the South African NGO Committee) helped to promote this agenda and codified much of the language that formed the basis for the final declaration.³³ This text, which was adopted by consensus, included a fierce indictment of Israel and Israeli policy. The document asserts that the 'targeted victims of Israel's brand of

apartheid and ethnic cleansing methods have been in particular children, women and refugees' and called for 'a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state... the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel'. The NGO declaration also condemned 'those states who are supporting, aiding and abetting the Israeli apartheid state and its perpetration of racist crimes against humanity including ethnic cleansing, acts of genocide'. The document did not include any references to Palestinian terror, or of the use of densely-populated areas from which terror attacks were prepared and dispatched. In addition, the NGO document redefined anti-Semitism to include 'anti-Arab racism'.³⁴

This outcome generated immediate and intense criticism, particularly in the US. In an effort to limit the damage, some NGO leaders, particularly from New York-based Human Rights Watch, sought to avoid a loss of credibility and donations by distancing themselves from the anti-Israel incitement and from Durban's blatant political agenda.³⁵ However, the record provides a very different history. In a radio interview, Kenneth Roth, HRW's Executive Director, affirmed his organization's leading role in the process, declaring 'clearly Israeli racist practices are an appropriate topic'.³⁶ At the Durban NGO Forum, HRW and other groups were instrumental in barring the participation of representatives of Jewish NGOs, such as the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IAJLJ) from the caucus of international human rights NGOs. At this meeting, HRW's advocacy director, Reed Brody, explicitly stated that representatives of Jewish groups were unwelcome.³⁷

Thus, the Durban conference provided the framework and opening round of the NGO political war against Israel.

Jenin—Myths of 'Massacre' and War Crimes

The Jenin campaign took place a few months after Durban, following a series of terrorist attacks during March 2002, including the Park Hotel bombing on Passover in which 30 Israelis were killed and over 160 injured. Israel responded with Defensive Shield, a military operation directed at the centres of the terror network. Palestinian officials led by Saib Erakat, accused Israel of a 'massacre' in Jenin, and much of the media repeated the claim, in accordance with the Durban strategy of demonizing and isolating Israel politically.

Officials from AI and the UN gave credence to the myths, as shown in Martin Himel's documentary, 'Jenin: Massacring Truth'. Subsequent publications from NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, while noting the massacre myths, repeated accusations of Israeli 'war crimes', based on unverified claims of Palestinians and journalists. Professor Derrick Pounder, from AI, was quoted by the BBC as saying that all the signs

pointed to a massacre.³⁸ Irene Kahn (also from AI) and Ken Roth (HRW) avoided repeating false claims regarding Palestinian casualties, but their public comments, as well as press releases and detailed reports, included numerous references to allegations of Israeli ‘war crimes’ and violations of international law.³⁹

Months later, these NGOs issued more detailed reports but with similar conclusions, resulting in another round of prominent mentions in the media.⁴⁰ In June 2002, Adalah, an NGO based in Israel and funded, *inter alia*, by the Ford Foundation, the European Commission, and the New Israel Fund, issued a report on *Israeli Military Attacks on the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, in which the rhetoric of international law was used to promote the anti-Israeli agenda.⁴¹ The authors of this report claimed that

the assault on the civilian population, infrastructure and property and against the lives and bodies of civilians is *unreasonable and disproportionate*, and was carried out with *excessive force*. The petitioners sought an immediate end to the shelling and striking of civilians and civilian targets, as the army is prohibited *from indiscriminately attacking against civilian targets (emphasis added)*.

Following the general pattern outlined above, this terminology was repeated by the international NGOs in the continuing political assault following the ‘Jenin massacre’ campaign. AI gave a high profile (including press conferences and media interviews) to its report entitled *Israel/Occupied Territories: Wanton Destruction Constitutes a War Crime*, which stated:

Amnesty International calls on the Israeli authorities to put an immediate end to the practice of destroying Palestinian homes and other properties, and of using *excessive, disproportionate and reckless force* against unarmed Palestinians and in densely populated residential areas, which frequently result in the killing and injuring *of unarmed civilians*, including children.⁴² (*emphasis added*).

HRW and Amnesty followed this pattern as well, issuing reports with allegations of war crimes in May and November 2002, respectively.⁴³ While acknowledging that the massacre claims had been fabricated, these reports followed the pattern of erasing the context of the conflict in a manner that placed the Israeli actions in response to terror in an artificial framework, using the rhetoric of international law, and failing to consider comparable actions by other military forces.⁴⁴ Similarly, in HRW’s 2004 ‘World Report’ Kenneth Roth (the Executive Director of HRW), again levelled accusations designed to demonize Israel, including claims of ‘indiscriminate’ attacks that ‘cause disproportionate harm to civilians’ and argued against the substitution of ‘war rules when law enforcement rules could reasonably have been followed’.⁴⁵

The Geneva based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) acted in a similar manner. (The ICJ also has a clear political and ideological agenda, in sharp contrast to its mission statement, which claims that this NGO is ‘dedicated to the primacy, coherence and implementation of international law and principles that advance human rights’ based on ‘impartial, objective and authoritative legal approach to the protection and promotion of human rights through the rule of law’.⁴⁶) Based on its close ties with three highly politicized Palestinian NGOs—Al-Haq, LAW, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights—the ICJ used its resources in the anti-Israel campaign to publicize the ‘war crimes’ charge after Jenin. Many of the ICJ’s reports cited PCHR’s press releases, such as ‘Israeli forces rampant in Nablus Old City’ (23 February 2003), which features a list of Palestinian casualties, but no mention of terror attacks.

In the UK, Christian Aid, one of Europe’s most powerful ‘charities’, produced a film on Operation Defensive Shield (‘Peace Under Siege’) as part of its Christmas campaign. The film highlights claims that Israel’s anti-terror policies are designed primarily to ruin the Palestinian economy and destroy its infrastructure. The analysis of ‘the roots of Palestinian poverty’ focuses on Israeli policy, in which ‘every corner a Palestinian boy is shot’. A very general mention of suicide bombings is provided in a four-second sequence, followed by several minutes of images highlighting the damage caused by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) response. The film omits specific mention of the terror attacks preceding Defensive Shield, or of Palestinian bomb factories located in densely populated areas. In addition, scenes of tanks pushing ambulances were given prominence, while images of Israeli suffering were practically non-existent.⁴⁷

The NGO Network in the Boycott and Divestment Campaigns

The NGO-led anti-Israel political activity, based on the ‘South Africa strategy’ declared at the Durban conference, included a strong emphasis on the imposition of sanctions and boycotts. The NGO campaigns centring on the Jenin and Defensive Shield allegations against the IDF, including the repetition of terms such as ‘war crimes’ and allegations of violations of international law, were important precursors to the effort to gain international support for sanctions and boycotts.

As the reports related to the Jenin campaigns began to decline in the middle of 2003, they were replaced in the NGO network by a campaign condemning Israel’s separation barrier—built to prevent terror attacks. An intensive media campaign promoted a UN General Assembly resolution referring the issue, couched in terms of Palestinian victimization, to the International Court of Justice for an ‘advisory opinion’. This text would then provide a façade of international legitimacy for imposing sanctions and boycotts against Israel. The ICJ is a political body,⁴⁸ and the majority

opinion, issued in July 2004, predictably claimed that the Israeli policy was a violation of international law. (The dissenting opinion by Judge Buergenthal discusses the errors in the ICJ's analysis.)⁴⁹ This advisory opinion followed the mandate issued by the UN General Assembly, which essentially ignored the question of Palestinian terrorism. (In September 2005, the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled that, as a result of this bias, the ICJ's advisory opinion had no validity as a basis for policy-making.⁵⁰)

Human Rights Watch was among the most active NGOs in this phase of the demonization process, including the distribution of press releases and mass emails that included a call to the US government to penalize Israel.⁵¹ HRW's statements repeated Palestinian claims that the barrier impedes 'freedom of movement', endangers 'access to food, water, education ... medical services' and land, without giving the Israeli rationale.⁵²

As a result, HRW's reports and other activities provide little or no analysis of the Israeli security environment, the role of the Palestinian authority in the failure of the Oslo process, and the strategic use of terrorism. This framework, as well as the rhetoric and repetition of Palestinian claims, couched in the language and claims of human rights, was adopted and reinforced by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions and the ICJ's majority opinion.⁵³

Other major NGOs that were also very active in this phase of the political war included Christian Aid,⁵⁴ AI,⁵⁵ World Vision,⁵⁶ Palestinian NGOs assembled under the banners Palestinian Environmental NGO Network (PENGON), the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign,⁵⁷ Palestinian affiliates of the International Commission of Jurists,⁵⁸ the UK-based War on Want,⁵⁹ the Mennonite Central Committee⁶⁰ and Mediciens du Monde.⁶¹ The language and terms of reference that they used repeated, with variations, HRW's emails, reports and other attacks against Israeli policy on this and related issues.

This campaign provided the foundation for the next stage of the Durban strategy—the attempt to impose sanctions and boycotts against Israel. Parallel to the publicity given to the ICJ's 'advisory opinion' in the second half of 2004, preparations began in Britain to promote an academic boycott via the major university teachers unions. In addition, efforts began to press selected commercial firms, such as the Caterpillar Corporation, to end business with Israel. This boycott effort was accompanied by a great deal of publicity, including press conferences and rallies. And, based in a group of radical churches, the boycott campaign began calling for divestment from Israel.

In each of these efforts to promote the Durban strategy in the political war against Israel, the NGOs played a central role. In October 2004, HRW released a 135-page glossy condemnation of Israeli policy along the Egyptian border with Gaza, with the catchy title of 'Razing Rafah'.⁶²

This report focused primarily on allegations that Israeli responses to the smuggling of weapons and explosives in this area led to the unjustified demolition of Palestinian houses. HRW head Kenneth Roth came to Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel for a press conference and other media events to gain the widest coverage.⁶³ The largely unverified allegations in this report provided the basis for the next stage, in which HRW promoted the effort to force Caterpillar to end sales to Israel, including more emails and letters, as well as participation in rallies. (Other NGOs involved in these activities included AI and ICAHD.)⁶⁴ The main objective of this effort was to further promote the demonization of Israel, and to gain wider acceptance of the strategy of de-legitimization based on boycotts and sanctions.

During this period, the activities of other powerful members of the politicized NGO network contributed to the context in which the UK-based Association of University Teachers (AUT) gained momentum.⁶⁵ The language of the boycott resolutions was taken from campaigns led by the Palestinian NGO network focusing on this issue.⁶⁶ Many members of PNGO were active in Durban, and PNGO co-sponsored a conference held in London during December 2004 that re-launched the boycott movement.

In April 2005, the Executive Council of the Association of University Teachers (UK) voted to boycott two Israeli universities, using the standard allegations of human rights violations. (The AUT boycott effort was initiated in 2002, as part of the Jenin campaign to demonize Israel, and was revived in the context of the separation barrier campaigns and the ICJ 'decision'.) This decision created an intense reaction, and after stormy meetings of local chapters, another meeting of the executive council was called in May, in which the delegates voted to rescind the earlier decisions.⁶⁷

In terms of public relations and propaganda, however, the momentum behind the demonization process was maintained, despite the specific reversal of the boycott resolutions. In their wake, another front was opened, based on a series of anti-Israel divestment resolutions and debates, taken and publicized by a group of Lutheran, Anglican, and other politicized Protestant church groups.

This divestment campaign was promoted by many of the active Palestinian NGOs, such as MIFTAH; BADIL (a radical group, which promotes refugee claims); Al-Mezan, (based in Gaza); Association for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced (ADRID), Ittijah, and others. In addition, the public relations effort behind divestment has gained visibility through the activities of Christian-based NGOs, such as the Mennonite Central Committee (based in North America and a recipient of significant Canadian government funding), the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre (based in Bethlehem), and groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams⁶⁸ and Ecumenical Accompaniment

Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI).⁶⁹ These organizations are closely connected and often interlocking, along with Christian Aid. For example, Rev. John Gladwin, Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford and chair of Christian Aid's Board of Trustees, is a 'patron' of Sabeel's fundraising arm in the UK. The umbrella PNGO network also plays a central role in the campaign for church divestment resolutions.⁷⁰ Sabeel is a radical Palestinian organization, and its leader, Naim Ateek, uses Christian theological images to promote the demonization of Israel as an 'apartheid state'. Sabeel propaganda activities and Ateek's frequent speaking tours are funded by local support groups, which, in turn are aided by officials of major NGOs such as Christian Aid.

WATCHING THE WATCHERS: TOWARDS AN NGO COUNTER-STRATEGY

The political war against Israel, based on the Durban strategy in the form of demonization, boycotts and sanctions, was designed to accompany the Palestinian terror campaign. In the short term, this process attempted to isolate Israel and de-legitimize the use of force in response to terror attacks. In the long term, the goal was, and remains, ending Jewish sovereignty in Israel.

The impact of the NGO contribution to these efforts, through 'soft power' and the Durban strategy, was amplified by the absence of an effective counter-strategy. This was an example of a very successfully planned and executed surprise attack, which caught Israel unprepared. The Israeli government, including the Foreign Ministry, Prime Minister's Office, IDF, Ministry of Justice, and other branches, were essentially unequipped to deal with NGOs—indeed, they were considered to be irrelevant. Prior to the 2001 Durban conference, no branch of the government had formally or systematically monitored the political activities of the NGO network, and public responses to the systematic condemnations, reports, letters and statements issued by the global NGOs such as HRW and Amnesty had rarely been issued. In response to queries on this issue, the Foreign Ministry responded that by their nature, NGOs are 'non-governmental' and therefore outside the purview of an official body. During the summer of 2001, the chaotic response to the upcoming Durban conference, and the absence of any strategy was indicative of the situation. More broadly, the concept and implications of 'soft power' were not even recognized.

The 'Durban disaster' led to a few changes in the Israeli government's response to NGO-led attacks, including the appointment of a low-level official in the Foreign Ministry to monitor this activity. Public diplomacy in response to soft power, particularly the use of human rights and international law rhetoric as ammunition, was finally on the map, but

not in a systematic or effective manner. By 2005 there was still no overall strategy for defending against NGO attacks. In 2005, when HRW and AI issued annual reports, which included more ideologically-based condemnations of Israeli policy on the separation barrier, Israeli anti-terror measures, and Israeli responsibility for Palestinian suffering, the different government agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Defence (MOD), and IDF) continued to fight over which one had the responsibility for issuing a detailed refutation, and there was no response.

In the non-governmental sector, the response has been more robust, providing the basis for an effective counter-strategy. The NGO Monitor project (itself a form of NGO, under the auspices of the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs) was formed in the wake of Durban, and began to focus on the vulnerabilities of the self-proclaimed human rights NGOs that were leading the attack on Israel. These vulnerabilities are inherent in the structure of the NGOs and their tactics, including the 'halo effect', the absence of transparency, the dependence on donors, and the discrepancy between mission statements that emphasize universal human rights, on the one hand, and NGO activities, that pursue narrow ideological objectives and contradict basic human rights norms, on the other.

To counter the '*halo effect*', the façade of civil society, and the resulting lack of accountability among NGOs, issues such as absence of credibility of report, biased agendas, and politicized employment processes must be highlighted. NGOs are very vulnerable on this dimension—particularly the global 'superpowers', such as HRW, AI, Oxfam and the International Commission of Jurists. The 'halo effect' has, until now, shielded NGOs and their donors from the same accountability requirements that are inherent in other major frameworks that embody power and access to resources—including government, journalists, and private business. This shield is artificial and can be removed through a concerted effort, through independent analysis and publicity for reports on the NGOs themselves, through the use of the media and internet, and using the methods of the NGOs. In addition, NGOs that receive government funding, are registered as government-regulated charities, or have access to the United Nations, should be required to establish independent mechanisms to evaluate their activities, similar to the ombudsman offices and public editors established by professional news organizations.

The *absence of transparency* among global NGOs, particularly with respect to resource allocation and agenda-setting, has helped to maintain the halo effect that has impeded serious analysis. The reports of the NGO Monitor, as well as growing internet attention focused on NGO activities, are slowly providing that transparency, at least from the outside. And as NGO activities and biases are demonstrated through detailed presentation and analysis of the facts, secrecy is giving way to serious scrutiny, impeding the ability of ideological activists to choose targets and launch attacks.

NGO Monitor's annual and multi-year reports on the specific activities of NGOs, examined according to target country, balance, and subjective use of language (terms such as 'war crimes', 'violations of international law', 'apartheid', etc.) provides a model for such effective analysis.

The public availability of information is, on its own, insufficient to change the NGO agendas and their role in political warfare. In this, as in similar confrontations, access to resources is a key factor in policy-making, and if NGO funding is threatened or cut, this will lead directly to changes. Thus, the most effective way to halt the political assault of NGOs on Israel is to seek *changes in donor policy*. To do this effectively, information on the funding sources for each NGO must be analyzed.

Bringing donors—both private and government—into the debate on NGO activities is key to the counter-strategy. After the Ford Foundation's central role in funding the virulently anti-Israel NGOs involved in the Durban conference was exposed in analysis published by NGO Monitor, press reports, and hearings before the US Congress, the foundation's leaders halted funding for some groups, and issued guidelines to avoid similar activities.⁷¹ Publicizing the support provided by the New Israel Fund for some extremist NGOs, such as ICAHD and PHR-I led to protests from donors and direct funding for these groups ended. Similarly, in the case of HRW, some major donors (such as the Goldman Foundation) stopped providing funding. Others began to become involved in agenda-setting. Beginning in 2005,⁷² the intensity of attacks against Israel dropped to half the previous rate, and the focus of HRW Middle East activities moved to the human rights violations by the Arab countries and Iran.⁷³

Changing the NGO funding policies of church groups, such as Christian Aid, as well as governments, particularly Canada and the nations of Europe, requires a different strategy based on diplomatic confrontations, counter-pressure from citizens and wide exposure of NGO agendas. In Canada, some political leaders have begun to criticize government funding for radical NGOs (CIDA has provided funding for the Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights (BADIL), and for the pro-Palestinian Mennonite Central Committee⁷⁴). NGO funding will also have to be included high on the agendas of the Israeli embassies in discussions with the governments involved. The Israeli government can link European Union participation in security and economic agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority with the ending of official EU funding for NGOs that promote the Durban strategy of eliminating the State of Israel.

Pressing European officials and journalists to go beyond repeating the standard slogans about civil society and the need to assist Palestinian victims facing overwhelming Israeli power will be very difficult. But once the lack of substance behind the façade of rhetoric is exposed, it is hard to continue to use it to justify counterproductive policies. In 2005, BADIL's application for accreditation by the UN Economic and Social Council was

denied after government officials on the committee received the details of BADIL's extremist political agenda.⁷⁵

Finally, the most important long-term strategy in dealing with political war involving the NGOs is in the moral realm and the war of ideas. Universal human rights norms have been stripped of meaning and exploited by obsessive condemnations of Israel that systematically remove the context of the ongoing conflict and terrorism. This exploitation of human rights for a political war against Israel is fundamentally immoral.

Repeated exposure of this moral dimension is the most effective means of defeating the political attack and restoring substance to the concept and rhetoric of human rights. Once the internal contradictions are exposed and highlighted, it is difficult for politicians, particularly in Europe, who claim to promote policies and goals based on these norms and idealist approaches to international relations to promote policies that are entirely inconsistent with these claims.

This approach has had some successes since the Durban Conference, and despite the major resources used by NGOs in political warfare, their achievements to date are limited. The attempt to use the ICJ advisory decision on the separation barrier, and the UN process more generally, to isolate Israel has not made much progress. In the first year after the ICJ opinion, the process designed to impose official sanctions via divestment and boycott campaigns made little advance.

Whether these are short-term changes, or signs of a fundamental shift in the agendas and influence of the political NGO network, remains to be seen. In particular, the ability of such NGOs—both the major international groups, such as HRW, AI, Doctors Without Borders, Christian Aid, etc., and the local Palestinian groups—to maintain legitimacy under the façade of 'civil society' will provide the key to their future influence. Similar issues are increasingly being raised with respect to the anti-American agendas of many of the global NGOs.⁷⁶ An alliance of Western democracies against NGO-led ideological and political campaigns may provide the most effective counter-strategy for Israel.

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