

Knesset NGO vote is the beginning of the debate, not the end

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The millions of shekels transferred annually from European governments to about 30 very political Israeli NGOs is a serious issue.

Attempts to dismiss focusing attention on this simply as “a right-wing campaign against human rights” are far off the mark.

The latest legislation is part of ongoing efforts to deal with a unique threat facing Israel – more than 15 years of demonization, BDS and lawfare. These political attacks have been enabled and bolstered by tens of millions of euros, pounds, Swiss francs, and krona from governments, provided to NGOs on a scale unseen anywhere else in the world.

The European funding for this industry is uniquely disturbing in another way. Every year, the same narrow group of NGOs receives most of their operating budgets (including travel and salaries) from foreign governments, while the vast majority of the 400 Israeli NGOs working on similar issues get nothing. The beneficiaries, such as Breaking the Silence, B’Tselem, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and Public Committee against Torture in Israel, are highly polarizing and politically active – both within Israel and internationally. They use the language of human rights and the allegations of “war crimes” to promote their private agendas, fueling the conflict and the polarization in Israel.

As such, Israelis see European funding as an attempt to manipulate Israeli democracy and generate external pressure to overturn the results of the democratic process.

For their part, most European officials and parliamentarians are unaware of the details of how their tax funds are spent to support radical anti-peace Israeli and Palestinian NGOs, including some involved in overt anti-Semitism. European taxpayers are financing NGOs pushing a “1948 agenda”, emphasizing “nakba” and “refugee return” themes, such as BADIL, Zochrot, and one-staters such as Alternative Information Center and Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. With this money, BADIL and Zochrot do campus and church speaking tours in the United States to discuss “the ongoing Nakba affecting Palestinians both in Palestine and in the diaspora.” These anti-peace NGOs lobby against the policies of their governments, reflecting the unsupervised nature of the NGO industry and the powerful “halo effect” that has protected their funding from scrutiny.

This is slowly changing, in part due to the debate surrounding the legislation, and many European officials and MPs do not like what they beginning to see. In June alone, three European countries initiated more constructive approaches to addressing the issue of NGO funding uniquely targeting Israel.

The Dutch parliament adopted a motion calling on the government “to end ... financing of organizations that pursue or promote ... a boycott or sanctions against Israel.” The Swiss legislature is discussing a similar motion that makes a direct link between BDS and racism. In the UK, the House of Commons critically debated UK aid with special emphasis on NGO funding, and the Department of International Aid pledged to check for abuses.

These actions, resulting in large part from direct bilateral dialogue between Israeli MKs and their European counterparts, need to continue, particularly as some of Israel’s remaining supporters in Europe – including Germany – have yet to join the process. German MPs have been vocal in opposing the current legislation, repeating NGO talking points referring to the bill as antidemocratic, claiming it “would constitute a massive assault on freedom of association and freedom of opinion.” This hyperbole is

counterproductive, and reinforces the impression among Israelis that Europeans are using a narrow group of selected NGOs to manipulate Israeli democracy.

At the end of the day, opponents of legislative efforts – both in Israel and abroad – cannot beat something with nothing. They must provide an alternative to solve the problem of government funding used uniquely to target Israel.

NGO Monitor has been consistent and clear in analyzing and proposing alternatives to the legislative efforts, recommending direct P2P (parliament to parliament) discussions on funding practices. The establishment of a body comprising Knesset members and European parliamentarians to oversee these allocations would enable both parties to voice their concerns as well as suggest concrete steps.

Whatever approach is chosen, a key element is increased accountability and oversight. Most European government bodies keep all documents on funding to Israeli NGOs top secret.

The secrecy means either there is no meaningful evaluation of NGO projects once money is disbursed, or that the evaluations are also kept secret, allowing a small number of bureaucrats in the European Commission and individual states to control the processes. The few documents that have been leaked, such as a 1999 EU protocol or the budget of the “IHL Secretariat,” (\$17 million from Switzerland, Holland, Denmark, and Sweden) show deliberate interference in internal Israeli politics, support for marginal actors to that end and largescale financial waste.

To be sure, once the legislation has passed, it can still be reversed like all democratic processes. But that will only happen if an alternative is created and shown to be effective.

The problems related to the scale and nature of foreign funding for a few powerful Israeli NGOs are not going to go away. The Europeans who profess their support for Israel must take the problem seriously and engage with the elected representatives of

the Israeli public.

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