

Peace Now and the facade of democratic debate

 The Times of Israel – December 11, 2013

Gerald M. Steinberg is professor of political science at Bar Ilan University and president of NGO Monitor

Former Knesset member Dr. Einat Wilf was recently invited and then suddenly uninvited by the Israeli NGO “Peace Now” to participate in their annual meeting, advertised as “the Conference of the Left.” According to Yariv Oppenheimer, the head of this group, Dr. Wilf became persona non grata due to her membership on the International Advisory Council of NGO Monitor. Apparently, NGO Monitor’s independent research and critical analysis violates the ideological litmus test, at least for the leaders of Peace Now, which identifies itself with the “liberal, progressive Left.” In response, Dr. Wilf noted, “If the Israeli Left has no place for those who support a two- state solution and who also wage battle against those who seek to delegitimize Israel, it will not return to lead the country.”

In a democracy, how we conduct debates and make policy is at least as important as the decisions themselves, and this applies as much to Israel as to other societies. To explore and discuss the extremely complex issues on the Israeli agenda, and expose simplistic myths, it is necessary to hear different voices and engage in principled arguments. In contrast, powerful groups that seek to monopolize debate and silence criticism through McCarthyite tactics are the antithesis of this process and a major danger to democracy.

Although NGO Monitor’s research focuses on groups in the area of human rights, and Peace Now is outside this framework, Yariv Oppenheimer, who heads the organization, justified blacklisting Wilf because NGO Monitor allegedly “tries to silence human rights organizations and civil society organizations.” A similar excuse was published by J.J. Goldberg in the Forward, another Jewish framework that claims to promote pluralism and democracy. And joining in the effort to defame NGO Monitor, American Friends of Peace Now (largely a fund- raising arm for the Israeli group) made additional false and defamatory claims.

Clearly, a major part of this anti- democratic outburst results from blind devotion to a simplistic political ideology – the Left and the Right both suffer from this malady, and each pole uses the other to raise funds. Under the banner of these ideologies, powerful “civil society” groups receive millions of dollars from foreign governments, with their own interests and agendas, and from private donors. And anyone who does not support their cause and provides independent analysis, such as NGO Monitor, is branded as a dangerous “enemy of democracy.” (To avoid complications, they erase NGO Monitor’s immediate and unambiguous condemnation of the immoral attacks against a Peace Now activist.) Similarly, independent thinkers with complex political views regarding complex Israeli political realities, such as Einat Wilf, are silenced.

In particular, NGO- led delegitimization campaigns, boycotts, legal processes based on false “war crimes” allegations, and “Israel apartheid” festivals are part of the Israeli reality that Peace Now prefers to erase. Beginning with the notorious NGO Forum at the 2001 Durban Conference, groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have led the strategy seeking “the complete international isolation of Israel as an apartheid state.” Exploiting the tragedy of apartheid and the language of human rights to

demonize Israel, many NGOs have sought to implement this strategy, from the false “Jenin massacre” in 2002, through the discredited Goldstone Report in 2009. Now, many of these NGOs are leading a global campaign which appropriates terms such as “ethnic cleansing” to demonize efforts of Israel’s democratically elected government to resolve issues related to Israel’s Bedouin Negev citizens.

Peace Now and its allies, which use the label but not the values of the “liberal progressive Left,” have long ignored this demonization and political warfare targeting Israel. In their black vs. white political world, complex images that are presented by Einat Wilf, who entered the Knesset as a member of the Labor Party and promotes a two- state framework while denouncing the demonization campaigns, are perceived as outside the discourse. Similarly NGO Monitor, whose research played a central role in convincing Judge Goldstone to acknowledge the false foundation of his UN “report,” is attacked and defamed as a dangerous enemy.

In responding to Peace Now, Einat Wilf addressed the “dogmatic thinking” that “seems to blind people to the importance of good manners, and the inability of those who preach tolerance to hear a point of view that is not their own.” While her chair will be visibly, empty, her powerful statement will echo throughout the coming conference, and for long after:

“Defending Israel and Zionism can and should be part of supporting peace and a two state solution. Israel is under attack for its very legitimacy and the human- rights discourse serves various groups to undermine the foundational idea of Zionism that the Jewish People have a right to a sovereign state in their ancestral homeland. If people, whose work for human rights is indisputable such as Elie Wiesel and Alan Dershowitz [also on NGO Monitor’s advisory board - GMS], find it proper to fight against the demonization of Israel, then I am proud to wage this battle with them.”