

An Irresponsible Civil Society Harms Israel

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To the long list of hot-button topics embroiling the Jewish state, from Iran to terrorism, the spillover from Syria and the prospects for peace, we can now add one more: irresponsible nongovernmental organizations that use underhanded tactics in the name of human rights. NGOs that claim to promote peace and human rights are big business in Israel, with dozens of groups competing for money and headlines. One group, Breaking the Silence, or BTS, with a 2014 income of \$1 million, may not be the country's largest, but it's been making the biggest waves.

With about 10 activists on staff, BTS publishes anonymous and unverifiable testimonies from Israeli soldiers who claim to have witnessed Israeli forces committing war crimes. Representatives of BTS travel the world repeating these stories, appearing in parliaments and before United Nations bodies, university campuses and in the media.

To audiences with no experience in combat with terror groups, the emotional claims of these soldiers can easily appear authentic. Many of the details in these accounts are unreliable or are later proved false. But the accusations go unquestioned, and the political damage is significant.

This has helped fuel the boycotts targeting Israel, as well as the publication of the 2009 Goldstone Report on the fighting in Gaza, which has since been discredited even by its own author, the South African jurist Richard

Goldstone. Efforts in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to “arrest” Israeli leaders such as Tzipi Livni, the former foreign minister, based on allegations of war crimes, become international headlines and push Israel further toward pariah status.

The bigger problem is that groups like BTS get most of their money, up to tens of millions of dollars, from European governments, including Sweden and Switzerland, either directly or indirectly. The European Union, for instance, is reported as BTS’s largest single donor of 2015. BTS is also one of about 20 similar groups that were built by the powerful U.S.-based New Israel Fund.

These well-financed organizations have enraged Israelis and have triggered counterattacks and legislative proposals to outlaw, tax or limit NGOs involved in impugning Israel. Following the recent election, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked submitted a bill which, if passed, would label NGOs funded by foreign governments as “foreign agents” in publications and other activities. In meetings with public and elected officials, or in Knesset hearings, their tags would designate them as lobbyists for their funders.

Compared to competing proposals, which would, for instance, limit the activities of and impose financial penalties on these NGOs, Ms. Shaked’s bill highlights some symbolic aspects of these NGOs and targets their legitimacy. Foreign-state funding for BTS and other NGOs is seen as an attack on Israel’s national sovereignty, a very sensitive matter for Israelis. This has drawn centrist politicians in joining the condemnation of BTS and its European-state funders, adding to the support for Ms. Shaked’s bill or others which call for even more stringent limits.

Opponents on the left have denounced Ms. Shaked's proposal as "McCarthyite." NGO officials and their allies, both in and outside of Israel, compare her proposed restrictions to those used to curb free speech in Vladimir Putin's Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. But the proposal doesn't seek to limit the internal debate and criticism of the Israel Defense Forces, no matter how painful these discussions may be. It only seeks to address the threat from the outside, via NGO campaigns of demonization and boycotts.

A far more extreme counterattack has come from Im Tirtzu (annual budget: \$500,000), which launched a video portraying the leaders of BTS and three other NGOs as "moles" and "foreign agents" responsible for betraying IDF soldiers. European funders are presented as supporters of terrorism.

The video was ugly, over the top and counterproductive, shifting the focus from BTS to Im Tirtzu. It was denounced by members of the Knesset, ex-military officers and various commentators as "disgusting" and a form of "incitement." But it has also fanned anger on the right, stoking the belief that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other political leaders have done little to protect Israelis from BTS and demonization around the world.

For the majority of Israelis, the role of NGOs in Israel is an important debate to have. These organizations' invective, their propaganda campaigns and their attacks on Israel, with the assistance of foreign governments, will escalate further. Legislation on "foreign agent" restrictions may soon come to pass. European-funded campaigns attacking the country's moral standing and exploiting the language of human rights is taking the country across too

many red lines. The dangers of being turned into a pariah state through these international campaigns outweigh the costs of stigmatizing NGOs and limiting their travel.

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