



# NGO Warfare

**T**HE HEATED DEBATES OVER MASSIVE AND SECRET foreign government funding for political advocacy NGOs (ostensibly non-governmental organizations) – such as B’Tselem, Yesh Din, Gisha, and many more – that marked the beginning of the current Knesset session reflect the continuing concern regarding these issues in Israeli politics.

The proposed legislation tabled by MKs Tzipi Hotovely (Likud) and Ofir Akunis (Likud), and a similar draft from MK Fania Kirshenbaum (Israel Beiteinu) renewed the conflicts that marked the end of the previous legislative session. And while the current responses are problematic in many respects, they have support from many Israelis seeking a solution to NGO warfare.

Each year, the European Union and European governments provide an unknown amount, perhaps up to 100 million euros, to dozens of Israeli, Palestinian and Europe-based NGOs claiming a human rights mandate and active in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many of the Israeli NGOs, including the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHN), Adalah, and Breaking the Silence, play a central role in false allegations of Israeli “war crimes,” apartheid, and similar highly charged accusations.

Such NGOs receive funds under the façade of representing Israeli “civil society” and promoting “human rights and democracy.” But, their attacks take place far away from Israel – in college campuses around the world, European parliaments, and via international frameworks such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Publications from these groups were copied in the discredited UNHRC Goldstone Report on the Gaza war, and they are behind many of the lawfare cases seeking to label Israeli officials as “war criminals.”

As a result of this deadly political warfare, questions regarding the sources of illicit NGO power are now high on the Israeli public agenda, and the Knesset would be remiss if it did not take the threat seriously. Furthermore, this massive European government NGO funding takes place via highly secretive processes which themselves are direct violations of core democratic norms of transparency and accountability.

No other democracy is subject to similar interference and political warfare resulting from foreign-funded NGOs – Israel is a unique target. Europe uses frameworks with lofty titles, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Partnerships for Peace, and various church-based groups claiming to provide humanitarian aid, in attacking Israeli democracy. How these frameworks operate, the nature of the evaluation processes, if any, and the names and interests of the individuals who direct these abusive structures, remain highly guarded secrets.

As a result, questions on NGO influence are entirely legitimate concerns for Israel’s elected representatives. Earlier debates led the Knesset to adopt the NGO Funding Transparency Law in February 2011, which sought to provide Israeli democracy and civil society with the information necessary to uncover foreign government funding. Israel cannot legislate for Europe (whose taxpayers might be interested in learning how their money is being spent in secret for these campaigns), but the new procedures can provide much-needed



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information on NGO funding for Israeli citizens and civil society.

While the transparency law has yet to be fully implemented, the governments of the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland have gotten the message, to some degree, and each has taken steps to increase transparency and curtail unjustifiable NGO funding. Given more time, and full implementation, this law is

likely to lead to wider changes by exposing the undemocratic and unethical processes, without creating a backlash through harsher restrictions.

Unfortunately, the recent and more controversial legislative proposals confuse and obscure these dimensions, and allow the NGOs to portray themselves as victims of “anti-democratic witch-hunts.” One draft seeks limits on the amount of funding (20,000 shekels – \$5,360) allowed for “political” organizations (a term which lacks a consistent legal definition), while the other would remove tax exemptions from such NGOs. Neither of these proposals is likely to provide effective responses to the manipulation and political warfare resulting from foreign NGO funding.

This criticism has already been voiced, including by members of the Likud leadership who opposed the preliminary drafts, and is likely to increase in the committee debates. Amendments will be introduced, and even if the bills are adopted, they will be reviewed by the High Court, as is consistent with democratic processes.

But for the NGO network and its supporters, all criticism is dangerous. To avoid having their secrets exposed, they are seeking to silence this debate through the use of emotive accusations of “McCarthyism” and the “death of Israeli democracy.” The New Israel Fund, a US-based political framework supporting many Israeli NGOs funded by European governments, is coordinating this campaign, in cynical contrast to its repeated claim to support Israeli democracy.

The focus on systematic abuses by Israeli political NGOs and their funders is not going to suddenly stop – a major reform is long overdue. To have an impact, the critics of the current proposals would be well advised to present their own remedies, to learn the relevant details, and to confront their European counterparts. •

**The writer is president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institution dedicated to promoting universal human rights and to encouraging civil discussion on the reports and activities of nongovernmental organizations, particularly in the Middle East.**