

The wrong way to fight foreign meddling in Israel

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Once again, members of the government coalition have introduced [legislation to tax and curtail foreign government funding](#) for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), aiming at groups involved in boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS), anti-Israel lawfare, racist activities and the undermining of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

Clearly and justifiably, after the widely critical headlines and a pro-forma vote, this legislation is going to be buried following the opposition of the minister of justice, and the concerns voiced by the attorney general. But this shouldn't be the end of the matter.

Now is the time to ask whether the prime minister and senior cabinet members, including the defense and foreign ministers, are really serious about initiating a confrontation on foreign (mainly European) government-funded campaigns against Israel led by political NGOs. And instead of problematic draft legislation, which is immediately exploited to promote campaigns that demonize Israel as anti-democratic and anti-human rights, the government should produce a coherent and potentially effective long-term strategy to defend Israel's sovereignty.

The demonization campaign singling out Israel was launched in 2001 by 1500 groups claiming to promote human rights at the UN Anti-Racism Conference's NGO Forum held in Durban - and the consequences are serious. The tens of millions of euros, pounds, and krona provided by European governments to groups that exploit universal moral principles are gradually leading to the political isolation of Israel. The goals of this political war go far beyond ending the occupation, but rather seek to reverse the international acceptance of Jewish sovereign equality among the nations - the essence of Zionism.

For over a decade, anti-Israel activists have tapped the funds made available by the European Union and a number of European governments, under the rubric of initiatives developed to promote human rights, democracy and peace, to specifically target Israel. This process, aided by a small number of European government officials with their own agendas, takes place in secret, in violation of the accepted practices of good governance and democracy. Most European parliament members are kept in the dark, and journalists are unaware of the central role of this funding to promote political warfare. As a result, a small number of zealots calling themselves "civil society activists" are able to promote private agendas through propagating the myths of Israeli "war crimes" and "apartheid" without oversight.

This threat is not the exclusive concern of the political right. Instead of scoring a few domestic political points by proposing dead-end and counterproductive legislation, a much wider approach is clearly necessary. An effective Israeli strategy would need to involve the Zionist center (such as Yesh Atid), and the center-left, including the Labor party, with the involvement of its new leader Yitzhak

Herzog, and other MKs who have been active in opposing delegitimization such as Nachman Shai and former MK Dr. Einat Wilf.

Indeed, if the goal is to build a wider cross-party strategy to effectively fight a 21st century political war that pivots on the use of NGO 'soft power', then restrictive legislation in Israel's Knesset may be the worst option.

Instead, the Israeli political leadership, across the board, should be taking the issue to Europe, demanding and using all available leverage to end the secrecy in the funding processes. In government and allocation of taxpayer funds, sunshine is the best medicine, while secrecy and the lack of transparency invite corruption, in different forms. Government funding from the EU, UK, Norway, the Netherlands or other countries, to dozens of groups that exploit human rights principles for political purposes is a form of moral corruption. If the MKs who introduced the latest legislation would instead have held a press conference with colleagues in the European parliament in Brussels to make this case, the impact would have been significantly greater.

A sustained effort focused on Europe, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, and involving the elected representatives of all the Zionist parties, is clearly needed and urgent. This issue should be on the top of all Israeli encounters with European leaders, such as the recent visit of the Dutch prime minister and other leaders. In keeping with the 21st century emphasis on moral arguments and public diplomacy, these leaders could be told that funding for anti-Israel political NGOs might equally be exploited to justify foreign interference to support Basque separatists in Spain, Scottish and Welsh nationalists in the UK, and fringe groups that falsely accuse European leaders of war crimes in the Balkans, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Rather than passing legislation that infringes upon democratic values and invites further demonization of Israel, the emphasis should be on holding Europe accountable for its destructive anti-Israel NGO funding policies. There are certainly more than enough positive and constructive causes out there truly worthy of their support.

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