

Putting Israel on trial at the Zurich ‘Kulturhaus’

JP The Jerusalem Post

Gerald Steinberg

Last Thursday night, hundreds of Israelis protested outside the Swiss Embassy in Tel Aviv. In an unprecedented display against a European government, the protesters were demonstrating against an upcoming event in Zurich, to take place between June 4 and 14, featuring Israeli non-governmental organization Breaking the Silence (BtS). The 10-day exhibit, with guided tours and multiple anti-Israel speakers, uses taxpayer money provided blindly by the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the City of Zurich and a number of hostile church groups that also receive taxpayer funds.

Throughout Europe, BtS and other left-wing NGOs use weapons of demonization, false allegations of “war crimes” and double standards, and exploit the language of human rights and international law. They are funded primarily by European governments, and Switzerland stands out in this process. Millions of Swiss Francs, euros, pounds and krona are channeled every year to anti-Israel groups, including fringe Israeli ones, financing the boycott movement (BDS), lawfare, and the manipulation of the United Nations.

In discussions with Swiss diplomats and in correspondence with the Zurich Municipality, officials provide inconsistent explanations that demonstrate their lack of understanding of the dynamics, to understate the case. The federal government thinks it is funding “human rights,” while Zurich thinks it is holding a “cultural event” at the Reform Church “Kulturhaus” to “inform [and] question common opinions” and “make a contribution to the dialogue.” Neither justification has any substance or connection to the reality of the two-month war of 2014, nor the political warfare that erases Hamas’ role and the 4,560 rocket attacks of last summer.

It appears that none of these officials had read the 240-page volume of “testimonies,” also paid for by the Swiss government, which BtS published to create publicity for the Zurich and similar initiatives. If they had, they might have realized that the basis for the event – anonymous and unverified allegations that Israeli soldiers intentionally killed innocent Palestinians in Gaza – is entirely unsupported.

AS NOTED by journalist Matti Friedman, “The Latest ‘Breaking the Silence’ Report Isn’t Journalism. It’s Propaganda.” By sponsoring this theater of absurd, Swiss and Zurich officials are guilty of immoral behavior.

In the ongoing war, this example of immorality and demonization is one of many publications, events and campaigns funded and enabled by European governments. Switzerland, the EU and its member states, as well as Norway, provide at least 100 million euros every year to single out the Jewish state for attack.

The double standards are clear.

With many wars and conflicts around the world, there are no parallel groups funded by the Swiss and the others that “break the silence” on wars and conflicts outside of Israel.

Reports and exhibits in Zurich or elsewhere are not organized to document the wars and real atrocities in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen to name a few.

So why does Switzerland, like other European countries, single out Israel for demonization, by funding and hosting groups such as BtS? Ignorance explains part of this – the understanding of the Swiss officials who provide the funds is painfully limited. Human rights is often called the “religion of the 21st century,” and its high priests, with their myths and slogans, are unquestioned.

In addition, Israel is an easy target – the responses of a small country are far more limited than those

of China or Russia.

Furthermore, Palestinian victimization myths are deeply entrenched among intellectuals, as part of a wider post-colonial ideology in which wars and terrorist attacks are patronizingly erased. And, as reflected in the major church involvement, classic anti-Semitic themes are readily revived, transferring the hate from individual Jews to the Jewish sovereign State of Israel.

In response, Israelis are asking what can be done to fight back against these campaigns of libel and defamation.

The most appropriate response is based on “naming and shaming” the Swiss government, the City of Zurich and other funder-enablers.

By repeatedly and emphatically calling attention to this moral travesty, the exposure of blatant human rights hypocrisy is a powerful form of counter-pressure.

On this basis, the Israeli government, as the elected representatives of the public, should issue a strong, public diplomatic protest directed at Swiss government officials. Similarly, the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee should summon the Swiss ambassador to Israel to provide an explanation, and respond to the protests of soldiers who risked their lives and saw their comrades killed in Gaza.

The Swiss public should not be surprised if these protests are directed to the Swiss Embassy in Tel Aviv, or if other soldiers travel to Zurich to make sure their anger is heard and seen.

In political attacks that exploit the universal values of human rights, including the one being prepared by Breaking the Silence in the Zurich “Kulturhaus,” staying silent is not an option.