

Europe's secret NGO wars: Who is anti-democratic?

JP jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Europes-secret-NGO-wars-Who-is-anti-democratic-319836

By GERALD M. STEINBERG

Judge Richard Goldstone. Photo: Denis Balibouse /Reuters

When is a non-governmental organization (NGO) actually an arm of state power and interest, masquerading as a non-political do-good civil society group? For starters, this absurd category, known as a GONGO – a governmental non-governmental organization – applies to the dozens of Israeli and Palestinian advocacy groups that are funded primarily by the European Union, its member states, as well as Norway and Switzerland.

For Europe, NGO funding is a major form of promoting state interests, with goal of changing Israeli policy through the political activities of these organizations.

In politics, as in nature, such hostile actions produce opposite reactions, and the impact of these Europe-funded political campaigns has alerted Israel's democratically elected representatives in the Knesset.

These objections often take the form of proposed legislation that seeks to prevent such abuse. The latest draft would prohibit all foreign government grants above NIS 20,000 for political entities whose members or employees promote NGO political warfare against Israel. In particular, the proposal refers to NGOs that campaign for discriminatory boycotts, use false war crimes allegations to urge legal action in international courts, deny Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish and democratic state, incite racism and support armed attacks or terrorism.

While more specific than similar legislation introduced (and withdrawn) last year, the definitions remain problematic, and the new proposal was immediately denounced as "anti-democratic." Supporters, in turn, refer to the abuses of European soft power as anti-democratic and neo-colonial, in that they seek to use the power of unaccountable NGOs to impose their preferences on Israel.

Given the complexities, instead of proceeding directly to legislative proposals, the concerned MKs should begin by reviewing the details, holding hearings and inviting European officials. This process would show that every year, taxpayer funds are channeled to tens of fringe groups many of which engaged in demonization. Some of this money comes from government aid and development ministries, while more goes first to private or church groups such as Diakonia in Sweden and ICCO in Holland.

From there, the funds are allocated to numerous NGOs active in BDS – boycotts, divestment and sanctions – as well as promoting false war crimes allegations and other forms of political warfare.

For example, B'tselem, Yesh Din, Gisha, Breaking the Silence and their Palestinian allies were responsible for many of the allegations in the infamous UN Goldstone report on Gaza, designed to promote the isolation of Israel. (To his credit, Judge Goldstone later acknowledged that these claims were invented, but NGO officials did not.) Similarly, many of the lawfare cases against Israeli officials, including efforts directed at the International Criminal Court, involve the European funded GONGOs.

This externally-funded NGO network is also active in anti-Israel warfare throughout Europe, poisoning relations and increasing demonization. In one of many such events, a June 20 hearing in the EU Parliament subcommittee on human rights regarding the Beduin population – another issue exploited simplistically for Israel bashing – heard statements from Adalah and other NGOs, but not from any Israeli government officials. In Knesset hearings, the broader process by which Europe uses NGOs to bypass Israeli democracy and national sovereignty would be documented.

In addition, this process would highlight the extreme secrecy with which the EU and its member states make decisions on NGO funding – without the transparency that they preach to others.

All significant documentation that might explain how the EU manages to fund the same anti-Israel NGOs year after year is classified top secret, on the invented grounds of "public security." In response to questions, officials repeat the mantra that they fund only approved projects, and not NGOs – a non-distinction.

A few years ago, I was invited by a visiting committee of the European Parliament to present my research as head of NGO Monitor. The head of the EU delegation to Israel at the time tried to prevent me from revealing what he referred to as "classified information." Perhaps he missed the brochures of the recipient groups, which proudly

displayed European flags.

In 2011, the Knesset took a major step in promoting the public's right to know the details of foreign government manipulation through NGO funding, passing legislation requiring all recipients regardless of political agenda to report quarterly. Implementation began last year, and the reports to date have shed some light on this process. But many NGO recipients have not filed the required reports – another dimension that would be highlighted in the hearings and documentation.

The secrecy of the European NGO funding process also prevents accountability – both before European taxpayers who pay the bills without any policy achievements, and to Israelis who are damaged by the NGO-led BDS and lawfare campaigns.

The officials would be asked to explain the double standards and huge budgets for fringe Israeli political advocacy NGOs – far more than the EU provides to NGOs focusing on the worst dictatorships and abusers of human rights.

Knesset fact-finding hearings will give the Europeans officials responsible for enabling GONGO-led political warfare the opportunity to respond directly to Israel's democratically elected representatives. If this does not bring the long-overdue end to secrecy and damaging political warfare, carefully considered legislative measures might then be justified.

The writer is president of NGO Monitor and a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University.