

The UN, European Funds, and Israel's NGO Wars



Huffington Post

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October 27, 2016

While much of the world is focused on the American elections, ISIS and the tragedies of Syria, and other weighty issues, Israelis are debating a presentation by a dissident political non-governmental organization (NGO) at an informal meeting of the UN Security Council on October 14.

Hagai Elad, head of “B’Tselem,” and Lara Friedman from the U.S. branch of “Peace Now”, portrayed settlements in areas captured by Israel from Jordan in the 1967 war as the sole cause of the conflict and Palestinian suffering. Elad called for “decisive international action” against Israel, and neither NGO official mentioned decades of Palestinian extremism, incitement, war and terror.

For many Israelis, this UN session was a farce, accentuated by the sponsorship of human rights paragons Venezuela, Egypt and Malaysia (whose government produces a steady flow of toxic antisemitic statements). Israel was singled out – there was no debate, and no attempt to compare this “occupation” with Cyprus, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, or other areas.

Elad’s passionate ideological statement comes during a bitter struggle in Israel over the influence of foreign (mostly European) government-funded NGOs on Israeli politics and policies. For 15 years, NGOs have led demonization and boycott campaigns around the world, and Israelis are concerned over a possible Security Council vote in November or December to condemn settlements, in which, for the first time, the US would not cast a veto. Here was the representative of the most powerful civil society group in Israel using European taxpayer funds to demonize Israel.

The appearance on the UN stage, which, with a bloc of 57 Islamic states, is seen as hopelessly biased against the Jewish state, further fuelled the anger. (Just prior to the B'Tselem presentation, Israelis, including the Zionist left, blasted the states on UNESCO's governing council for a resolution that erased Jewish history in Jerusalem.)

In this environment, Israeli politicians reacted immediately. There was little they could do about the US branch of Peace Now, but Prime Minister Netanyahu called for the withdrawal of B'tselem's National Service intern position – a symbolic move. (Israelis exempted from the compulsory military service are assigned to schools, hospitals, and, in a few cases, to political NGOs.) Other politicians attacked the European governments and the UN, which together pay for over 60 percent of B'Tselem's budget, enabling these attacks. From the opposition, MK Itzik Shmuli charged the NGO with helping to advance “the libel and demonization of Israel.”

B'Tselem and its supporters seized the opportunity, hysterically denouncing “threats to free speech” and to “Israeli democracy.” Journalists at *Haaretz*, who might have examined the process by which B'Tselem's head was brought to New York for this event, instead lined up to defend and contribute to the NGO. (B'Tselem's dependence on outsiders is understood to be a weak point.) Shriill opeds by Elad and his defenders were published prominently, including by Daniel Sokatch, the head of the US-based New Israel Fund, which is Haaretz's political partner and B'Tselem's patron (among a network of some 25 similar NGOs). Sokatch's knowledge of Israeli reality is minimal, and his extreme and divisive rhetoric compared Netanyahu to Putin, Erdogan, and a “Trump controlled government.”

In addition, foreign governments that provide funds to and rely on Israeli political NGOs for policy formulation (a situation not found to this degree in any other democratic country in the world) also rallied to defend B'Tselem. The US State Department referred to criticism of the NGO as a threat to “a free and unfettered civil society” needed, ostensibly to “protect the freedoms of expression, and create an atmosphere where all voices can be heard.” If US-based NGOs received millions of dollars from foreign

governments, went to the UN to attack American officials as war criminals, and called for boycotts, the reaction would be quite different.

The European Union also issued a statement supporting B'Tselem and highlighting a €250,000 grant (one of many) officially designated for gathering “credible documentation of human rights violations.” Beyond the blatant bias in framing the project, the inherent tension between Elad’s ideological crusade and any research credibility stands out. And, as Israeli officials have noted, Europeans would presumably not be pleased if foreign governments would fund fringe political groups to “document” treatment of migrants or terror organizations.

The hugely disproportionate (and secret) money behind the power of a few radical and unaccountable Israeli NGOs is the key to understanding the concerns expressed by Prime Minister Netanyahu. B'Tselem, like the other NGOs in its network, derives its visibility and influence from an annual budget of \$2.5 million, of which two-thirds is provided by European governments, and the rest by the NIF (which also gets EU grants), George Soros, and some other private funders. If Israelis with different views had access to similar budgets, they would be able to promote their opinions, and at least present a real debate.

So instead of attacking the responses of PM Netanyahu, or more patronizing lectures on free speech and democracy, outsiders, including journalists, diplomats, and members of European parliaments that approve these funds should engage with the Israel’s elected representatives. Direct open discussions and negotiated guidelines that set criteria for NGO funding would be an important step in the right direction.