

It's time for a debate on the New Israel Fund

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In response to my CJN column on "How the Diaspora can help fix Israel" (Feb. 8, 2007), which included a brief comment on the New Israel Fund, Isser Dubinsky, president of NIF Canada's board of directors, and Jay Brodbar, NIF Canada's executive director, wrote a long letter singing the praises of their organization and rejecting the image of "an aging-hippie projection of American Jews involvement in the Civil Rights era." One month later, the Harvard Crimson carried a news story headlined "New Israel Fund lawyers compare Bedouins' plight to U.S. civil rights movement." If the shoe fits...

In its almost 30-year history, the NIF has become one of the most wealthy and powerful Jewish institutions in Israel and the Diaspora – in that sense, it's a huge success. But like other power brokers, NIF officials systematically reject constructive criticism. As a result, mistakes are compounded until the organization reaches a crisis. As mail from NIF donors to me and NGO Monitor (of which I am the executive director) demonstrates, an increasing number of people are asking questions about how their money is being used.

But with at least 150 groups receiving grants at any time, it's difficult for anyone to get a general picture of the NIF, or to understand how its decisions are made. Some of these grants and projects are strictly charitable, such as assistance provided to communities in northern Israel to overcome the impact of last year's war. However, much of the NIF's budget goes to highly political activities designed to change Israeli society according to a particular design.

Some Israeli board members who are central in selecting the NGOs and projects are fringe politicians and activists who use the money to impose their agendas after being rejected at the ballot box. As a result, in this sense, many Israelis have an image of the NIF that is anti democratic, arrogant and dangerous – as a body that comes from the outside and mysteriously gives large sums of money to a few activists.

Unlike government programs that are subject to public debate and accountability, most Israelis have no recourse when the NIF promotes an agenda to which they strongly object. And most NIF donors are shielded from this perception. The largest chunk – one-third – of the NIF's annual budget goes to more than 20 organizations that claim to promote "civil rights" for Israel's Arab minority.

But these NGOs use the money to demonize and delegitimize the concept of Jewish sovereignty and equality among the nations. Some, such as Adalah and Mousawa, submit papers to the United Nations accusing Israel of apartheid. They also refer to Zionism as racism, and distribute an alternative constitution for Israel that would abolish the concept of a Jewish state. The NIF is responsible for "empowering" the most radical Israeli Arab voices and giving them the resources to dominate the discussion at the expense of moderate leaders.

Misguided NIF policies also support radical groups such as Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, whose head, Jeff Halper, supports the most virulent boycott promoters, such as Naim Ateek. And after funding Tel Aviv lawyer Shamai Leibowitz – who supports economic sanctions against Israel and the creation of a binational state west of the Jordan River – NIF officials quietly admitted that they don't endorse his views, but they didn't apologize for this error, and the damage was done.

For these and other reasons, the time for an open debate on the NIF is long overdue. NIF donors should be able to listen to different Israeli views and decide how best to use their considerable funds. The NIF is an important institution that should help cement the relationship between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. With realistic goals and by encouraging valid criticism and open debate, the NIF can play a constructive role. In this spirit of co-

operation, I urge Dubinsky and Brodbar to forgo the polemics and standard letters to the editor and join me and other Israelis in public discussions on how best to realize our shared goals.

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