

Manipulating 'civil society'

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The differences between Europe and the Israeli government over the status of the West Bank - Judea and Samaria - are well known. In London, Paris and Brussels, this area is viewed as "occupied territory," while for Jerusalem, the area is "disputed."

A similar debate is taking place within Israeli society, as groups with different ideologies challenge the government's policies, including the expansion or removal of settlements and the route of the security barrier. This discussion is important, legitimate and extremely complex.

But when foreign governments team up with and provide financial support to private Israeli groups in order to oppose policies that are set by democratically elected leaders, this is a problem. It is also a violation of sovereignty, and a clear example of neocolonialism.

Nevertheless, the recent discovery that the British Embassy in Tel Aviv is funding an Israeli non-governmental organization (NGO) known as "Bimkom - Planners for Planning Rights" - is not surprising. The ostensible focus of the "research" is on the impact of the security barrier on Palestinian villages caught in the middle, and since Bimkom is a political organization, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In this way, the British government will receive an analysis from an Israeli group that supports London's position against the route of the barrier. The same information could have been obtained through official government channels, (i.e., intelligence) but without the important political dimension. (The Danish government provided Bimkom with \$200,000 for a project on "Palestinian neighborhoods.")

For years, European governments have used the same approach by providing funding to well-known Israeli domestic political groups, such as Peace Now, B'Tselem, and the Peres Center. The Swiss Foreign Ministry and the European Union, among others, supported the failed public relations campaign to sell the Israel public the Geneva Initiative - a track-two peace proposal led by Yossi Beilin and his Palestinian counterparts.

And under the misleading label of "partners for peace," the EU Delegation in Tel Aviv is funding a group known as the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, which promotes anti-Israel boycotts and divestment. It also funds Israeli-Arab groups, such as Mossawa and Adallah, which ostensibly advocate for social and economic justice for the Arabs of Israel, but have done their fair share to demonize the Jewish state.

WHAT IS new in the case of Bimkom is the response of the Foreign Ministry, which stated: "It is interference by Britain in an internal Israeli matter. How would they react

in London if our embassy was to fund research on a British organization that is trying to promote an agenda that is critical of [the government]?"

The language is a diplomatic and understated - indeed, almost English - reaction to a fundamental defect in European policy toward Israel. A more blunt response might have provided a hypothetical examples - such as an advertising campaign funded by the US government in London or Paris promoting a hard-line anti-abortion position. Or a propaganda effort on the Northern Ireland conflict, or in support of separatist movements in France (Corsica) or Spain (ETA).

Furthermore, the scale of European government funding for Israeli and Palestinian political organizations that claim to promote human rights, peace and democracy is huge, and largely hidden. The massive Euro-bureaucracy has created a complex network of funding agencies for "civil society" in the region, and no central index or reporting system exists.

Until last year, the EU office in Tel Aviv violated its own principles of transparency and kept the list of Israeli NGO beneficiaries secret, ostensibly due to threats of violence. *NGO Monitor's* investigations led to a change in this instance, but funding for Palestinian NGOs is still largely covert.

THE CHANGE in Israeli government policy and a willingness to confront such anti-democratic manipulation, particularly by European governments (including non-EU countries such as Norway and Switzerland), marks an important step. Going beyond the terse statement, the Israeli representatives should bring a detailed file on the funding provided for politicized NGOs to every meeting between heads of state, foreign ministers and government officials.

If Europe expects to play a more important role in regional security and diplomacy, it cannot also continue to provide funding designed to undermine the Israeli government's positions, both internally and in the international arena.

In Europe, the amorphous entities known as "civil society organizations" and NGOs also need close scrutiny. These bodies are unelected, and their officials are not accountable.

In democratic societies, government officials who provide funds to these entities generally use this as a means to promote their own interests and objectives, without checks and balances or transparency. In closed non-democratic societies, such as Syria, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, foreign government assistance for NGOs that promote democracy, tolerance, and human rights may have a positive impact, but only if this support is carefully monitored to prevent abuse. Europe's failure to provide such monitoring exacerbates the damage.

Israel, as a vibrant democracy, does not need, and should not be the target of "civil society initiatives" engineered by foreign governments, whether well-meaning or hostile. From this perspective, the example of Bimkom, the security barrier, and the British Embassy is small but highly illustrative.

The time has come to end this misguided and patronizing policy.

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