

December 30, 2008
Special to: The Jewish Week

Bad Timing: B'tselem and the Durban Conference

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As preparations proceed toward another all-out attack against Israel at the Durban Review Conference in April, this is not the time for B'tselem, a powerful Israeli NGO, to expand its controversial activities to Washington. The weapons of choice used in the Durban strategy to demonize Israel are fashioned from the language of human rights, and while B'tselem was not active in the original 2001 United Nations World Conference on Racism, its publications and allegations against Israel are very much part of the assault by other NGOs. There may be justification for discussing human rights among Israelis in the context of terrorism, but there is no basis for preaching in America about alleged Israeli abuses (including many false claims).

In reality, the objective here has less to do with human rights than with Israeli politics. Like Peace Now, B'tselem was founded "to change Israeli policy in the occupied territories," and while using the language of human rights, the main objective is to "end the occupation." Its mission is facilitated by an annual budget of \$2 million for advocacy, provided by the Ford Foundation, the New Israel Fund, European governments and radical churches that supported the notorious Durban NGO Forum. B'tselem does not have Israel's best interests at heart, to understate the case.

After failing to gain political power in Israel, B'tselem's officials have followed Peace Now to Washington. The group's stated goal is "to become the central clearinghouse for information about human rights conditions in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip for members of Congress, the State Department and other policy makers." But in the context of the Durban-based campaigns to label Israel a "racist and apartheid" state, including boycotts, divestment and sanctions, these advocacy efforts in Washington will intensify the attacks against Israel's legitimacy.

To head its office, B'tselem hired Mitchell Plitnick, an activist in Jewish Voice for Peace, a group which promotes anti-Israel demonization by using terms such as "apartheid" and referring to the 1948 Arab invasion and the creation of Israel as the "naqba" (catastrophe).

Although considered more accurate than other self-proclaimed "human rights" NGOs, particularly the crudely biased work of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, many of B'tselem's reports have been shown to be inaccurate. For many years, the UN, the U.S. State Department, foreign politicians, diplomats and major news organizations such as Reuters and CNN have quoted B'tselem's running

casualty counts comparing the numbers of Israelis and Palestinians killed in the conflict. But these comparisons are both highly inaccurate and worse than meaningless — they erase the moral difference between terrorism and self-defense.

The implication of B'tselem's highly visible casualty comparisons is that the greater number of Palestinian deaths somehow proves that Israel is the aggressor. This is not only irrational but highly offensive. As a recent detailed study by Jonathan Dahoah Halevi shows, these statistics fail to distinguish between Israeli civilians who were attacked deliberately and Palestinian "non-combatants," many of whom were involved in assisting terrorists in different tasks.

In addition, B'tselem reports use Palestinian "eyewitness" accounts, which are often false. Mohammed Al-Dura, the Palestinian boy whose televised death appears to be have been staged in order to inflame anti-Israel incitement, is still listed as a victim of Israeli gunfire.

By definition, human rights must be universal — everyone is treated equally. But ideological groups like B'tselem give priority to Palestinians as perennial victims. In its much publicized "shooting back" campaign, Palestinians were given cameras to film Israeli soldiers and capture abuses — such as the point-blank shooting with rubber bullets — but there is no parallel to emphasize the far greater Palestinian abuses.

The cliché that "two wrongs do not make a right" notwithstanding, B'tselem's cameras did not catch a recent acid attack by a Palestinian on an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint or the shooting of two policemen in Jerusalem. B'tselem's one-sided agenda reinforces the image of Palestinians as innocent victims, and the parallel image of Israel as the world's most egregious violator of human rights.

For an organization with moral claims, the immorality of such distortions is particularly offensive.

Washington has been slow to prepare for the 2009 Durban Review Conference, although a recent bipartisan House resolution presented by the Foreign Affairs Committee has called for American leadership to prevent another round of crude anti-Semitism and incitement. The resolution emphasizes the highly negative role of the NGO Forum, and ranking member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) has called for "an alternative to Durban, one rooted in freedom, in tolerance, and in democratic values."

In contrast, B'tselem's ideological campaigns, and its silence in the face of Durban's demonization, will be used to justify more of the hatred seen in the first conference in 2001.

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