

An NGO black hole in the Foreign Ministry

Gerald Steinberg

July 8, 2008

The Jerusalem Post

For many years, the rhetoric of human rights has been one of the most effective weapons used against Israel. The strategy is simple - Israel is attacked, responds, and is instantly condemned for "war crimes," "apartheid" and "collective punishment." As a result, one would have thought that the Israeli government would have long ago launched a counter-offensive to expose and defeat such campaigns, led by powerful non-governmental organizations and amplified in the UN and the press.

But despite repeated defeats on this propaganda battlefield, the government, and the Foreign Ministry in particular, have failed to understand the danger or invest significantly in effective responses. For many years, the Foreign Ministry declared: "We only deal with governments, and not with non-government organizations (NGOs)." This may have been logical, but in practice, it meant that the intense bombardment from powerful organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and local NGOs such as B'Tselem, Adalah, Machsom Watch, and many more went unanswered. The officials of these groups used their resources to set the media agenda, invent (or distort) the terms of international law, falsify facts, and violate the universality of human rights.

Israeli silence changed briefly following the notorious NGO Forum of the UN's 2001 Durban Conference on Racism. Four thousand officials from 2,000 NGOs declared Zionism to be apartheid, and adopted an anti-Israel strategy of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS), propelled by human rights rhetoric, and in parallel to the Palestinian campaign of mass terror. The racist goal of this ostensibly anti-racist gathering was to delegitimize Israel as the home of the Jewish people. In response, the Foreign Ministry finally set up a desk to monitor and respond to the NGO attack. This was a small and grossly inadequate step, but at least it was moving in the right direction.

NOW, AS the UN and the anti-Israel NGO network prepare for the Durban Review Conference to be held in Geneva in April 2009, the Foreign Ministry has left the minimalist NGO desk empty. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni has denounced the anti-Semitism of the UN's Durban process, and announced that Israel will not participate if this continues. But the Israeli diplomatic corps was surprised when the Preparatory Committee for this review conference accredited the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign. European members of the committee simply waved them through, and no Israeli official was aware of the process.

The damage from this black hole in the Israeli diplomatic universe goes far beyond the Durban process. Some of the NGOs promoting the demonization campaigns get more than half their annual budgets from European governments, under the misleading headlines of "partnerships for peace" or projects claiming to promote democracy and Palestinian development. Additional funds come from the Ford Foundation and from often well-intentioned Jewish donors to the New Israeli Fund based in the US, Britain and Canada. In every discussion with the ambassadors, heads of state and foreign ministers, as well as NIF members, Israeli officials should make the case for a halt in this funding of demonization.

Officials from the United States government, while generally less prone to repeat the mantras of human rights rhetoric and the false factual claims directed against Israel, are not immune. As NGO Monitor's detailed analysis show, the State Department's annual human rights reports often copy NGO claims without bothering to check their accuracy or the underlying bias. And recently, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice condemned Israel for barring candidates for a Fulbright fellowship from traveling from Gaza to Jerusalem for interviews. (Rice failed to mention the attack on the Fulbright convoy that killed three Americans 2003, after which video interviews were initiated.)

The false charge was linked to press reports of the activities of a political NGO known as Gisha, which receives funds from the Dutch and Norwegian governments. Gisha published a typically one-sided report condemning Israeli responses to rocket attacks in Gaza, including the closure to prevent movement in and out, as "collective punishment." (Gisha's concern for students does not extend to Israelis in Ashkelon and Sapir Colleges.)

MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, who heads the Knesset Education Committee and is a member of the governing coalition, gave Gisha a public platform, and he repeated the false claim of "collective punishment." Gisha translated his words in a press release, and they were quoted in The New York Times and other major newspapers. Then, without consulting Israel, the State Department announced that as a result, it was canceling the scholarships for Gazans. By the time the facts were checked and corrections were published, the considerable damage based on Gisha's human rights warfare was done. Had the Foreign Ministry been prepared to refute and repel this NGO attack, the harm could have been avoided.

If Israel is to defeat this kind of attack, the government must first find the battlefield.

The writer is executive director of NGO Monitor and chairs the Political Science Department at Bar Ilan University.