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## **Comment: Transparency, not ban, is the way to handle foreign NGO funding**

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gerald m. steinberg , THE JERUSALEM POST

Herb Keinson's article "Israel targets foreign gov't NGO funds" (July 31) quotes an unnamed Israeli official as advocating a law to ban foreign government funding for numerous radical organizations.

If this, in fact, is the thinking among some Israeli government officials, it should be dropped. Prohibitions in democracies are generally undesirable, and while the claims that such curbs would violate free speech are exaggerated, this approach is unnecessary.

Instead, a policy of complete transparency regarding such funding would be entirely justified and be a major and very belated step towards protecting Israeli democracy from such crude manipulation.

Tens of millions of euros, British pounds, Norwegian krona and Swiss francs are provided by European governments every year to dozens of political NGOs, but most of this is hidden. These governments treat their funding for groups like Yesh Din, ICAHD, PHR-I, Breaking the Silence, Bimkom, Peace Now, etc. as "top secret," reflecting the realization that such activities lack legitimacy.

This obsessive secrecy is reflected in the fact that the Dutch ambassador to Israel and the Spanish deputy chief of mission acknowledged that they were not informed of their own governments' support for Israeli NGOs.

Indeed, much of this funding comes from outside the foreign ministries, and is funneled through separate aid groups, such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the British Department for International Development. The officials in these agencies often have close relations with the officials in the NGOs that they fund, and share their ideological biases, or know how to prey on their weaknesses.

Similarly, the European Commission (EC) sends tens of millions of euros every year (the total is classified) under numerous programs, and there is no central listing or accounting for the funds. When NGO Monitor officially requested the details under the EU's own "freedom of information" of regulations, the first response was an attempt to invoke security claims.

Following an appeal, and six months later, the EC sent a CD with some documents, from which almost all of the information was deleted - again demonstrating that this massive manipulation is a highly guarded secret.

**A law requiring full disclosure of foreign government transfers of funds to any Israeli**

non-governmental organization 60 days in advance would lift the cover from this illicit and anti-democratic practice. Israel is the only democratic country in the world where other democracies use massive funding for political groups to influence policies and public opinion.

Israeli NGO recipients would be also be required to disclose funding information involving foreign governments whenever they place an advertisement in a newspaper, organize a demonstration, or initiate one of the flood of cases in the High Court. How many Israelis knew that the EC had allocated money to the Four Mothers movement that pressed for the 2000 unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, and all of the consequences that resulted?

Such a policy would not be unique to Israel. In the United States, lobbyists who are funded by other nations must register as agents of foreign governments. This does not restrict their freedom of speech, but it does alert the public, members of Congress, and others to the origins of the resources used for such lobbying.

Such transparency may not end such foreign government funding for NGOs, but it is likely to make it far more difficult to justify.

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