

Rosner's Domain: Gerald Steinberg on European funding for Israeli NGO's

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Yesterday I asked [Will Israel allow continued European funding of "peace movements"?](#) and many of my readers were unhappy. They were unhappy with the way I presented the issue at hand, and with the answers provided by the new report issued by NGO Monitor and The Institute for Zionist Strategy (some of the details about this report are [here](#). In short: these organizations think that the support European governments give to Israeli NGO's who deal with sensitive political matters should not be tolerated). With this unhappiness in mind, I sent questions to Gerald Steinberg - President and founder of NGO Monitor, and Professor of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University.

Steinberg's recent academic publications include "Soft Powers Play Hardball: NGOs Wage War against Israel " and "The UN, the ICJ and the Separation Barrier: War by Other Means" (Israel Law Review). He is the editor of the NGO Monitor monograph series, including [Trojan Horse: The Impact of European Government Funding for Israeli NGOs](#). That's the report we are now discussing.

Here's the q&a:

1. Israel gets a lot of financial support from European countries for various projects - is it not reasonable to expect that some of this funds will go to support goals that seem important to those contributing countries?

European governments have many tools for promoting their political objectives, including diplomacy, direct financial and economic mechanisms, etc. There is no need or justification for the attempt to manipulate Israeli civil society through massive funding for a narrow group of non-governmental organizations. The US promotes its political goals regarding Israel without resorting to such "under-the-table" and non-democratic methods to influence public opinion.

2. Why not impose the same rules on governmental support for Israeli organizations and foreign private support for such organizations - is it not a way to silence left-wing activists without hurting right-wing groups who get more from private citizens and less (really, zero) from governments?

The principle of transparency should apply equally to NGO contributions from foreign governments and from private sources, while recognizing that there are also differences. When a state takes money and gives it to a non-governmental organization, taxpayers have no say in the choice of causes or the process (particularly when these are closely held secrets, as in the case of Europe). In contrast, private donors from the Diaspora on all sides of the political spectrum are using their own money - this requires a separate discussion.

3. Where do you draw the line between "legitimate" support for promoting "human-rights" and illegitimate support for promoting "political" goals?

Human rights are universal, by definition. When they are used to target Israel, using double standards, and when organizations that claim to promote these goals violate moral norms, this activity becomes a form of political warfare. This is clearly the case for groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and many Israeli organizations, all of which work closely with the UN Human Rights Council, dominated by the Organization of the Islamic Conference. As Robert Bernstein, the founder of HRW, wrote, his organization needs to "resurrect itself as a moral force".

4. Do you think that new rules aimed at having more transparency is all Israel needs - or would you try to actively prevent organizations from getting foreign funds (for example, by making organizations who get such funds the equivalent of "foreign agents")?

The European government funders (including the EU, Switzerland and Norway) that pour millions into these NGOs have refused to release any of the documentation on decision making, criteria, evaluations, etc. Transparency would lead to hearing in various parliaments, and critical articles in the European media on wasting funds and the lack of accountability. It would also place European funding for groups that promote boycotts, demonization, "war crimes" suits

against IDF officers, etc. high on Israel's diplomatic agenda. (The US-Foreign Agents Registration Act is also a form of transparency - it does not prevent the transfer of funds.)

5. What are the chances that the current push for change in regulations is going to achieve something that is more than symbolic? What will be a reasonable outcome?

A detailed public review of European funding practices for these NGOs would be a game changer. This review needs to take place both in the European institutions that provide the money (via Parliaments, governmental frameworks, policy think tanks, etc.) and in Israeli society, which is the object of this activity. I believe that as a result of this process, and the formation of rules of behavior ("best practices"), most European governments will decide to follow the US and Canada, and get out of the business of NGO funding to achieve political goals in Israel.

6. How do you answer those [claiming](#) that "NGO Monitor itself does not practice the same degree of transparency that it demands from others"?

NGO Monitor does not get funds from any government, and in terms of our foundation support, it is all reported in the same manner as other Israel-based amutot. In contrast to groups like Breaking the Silence, the Geneva Initiative, etc., NGO Monitor does not attempt to hide this information by registering as a corporation.

And here are two questions that were asked by readers in the "talk back" section:

a) Federal tax exemptions are considered in DC to be a government subsidy, the fund a lot of settlement and right-wing activity in Israel, why are they not considered government funding?

In contrast to European funding, US tax exemption policy for charitable groups does not secretly select one group of organizations that operate in other countries as beneficiaries. Under the 501c3 category, every organization that qualifies under this broad definition gets treated equally. There are many other differences as well, so while these tax regulations might be called government subsidies "inside the beltway", they are not in any way comparable to European support for favored Israeli political groups.

(b) Israeli government funding goes intransparently to NGOs such as the Od Yosef Hai Yeshiva, publisher of "the handbook for killing gentiles", yet it is not this agenda, why is this not on the "transparency" agenda?

As noted in the question, the recipient organization is a educational/religious institution and not a political NGO. More broadly, in Israel, like Europe, the boundaries between the state and the non-state institutions are blurred, and as a result, the state is used to funnel large sums of money to various sectors and institutions related to political parties -- from kibbuzim to youth movements and yeshivot -- with numerous stops in between. The resulting abuses across the board should be on the Israeli public agenda, but these are unrelated to externally funded NGOs.

