

Uneconomic Relationships: Israel's Relations with International Non-Governmental Organizations¹

Einav Yogev

In April 2016, Amnesty International published an announcement expressing concern about the safety and freedom of Palestinian human rights defenders active in the BDS movement, in particular Omar Barghouti, leader of the movement. Amnesty International sees Barghouti and other BDS activists as human rights activists who devote their time to non-violent and legitimate civilian activity designed to make Israel take responsibility for its ongoing violations of international law and human rights in the Palestinian territories and against its Palestinian citizens.² The announcement was published following public statements by Ministers Yisrael Katz, Gilad Erdan, and Aryeh Deri that Israel should engage in “targeted civil eliminations” against the boycott movement and threaten to deprive Omar Barghouti in particular of his basic rights as a permanent resident of Israel.³ According to Amnesty International, the statements by senior cabinet ministers constitute an escalation in a series of incendiary statements and threats by Israeli parties with whom human rights defenders and BDS operatives, headed by Barghouti, are forced to deal. Amnesty International alleged that there was a concrete threat to the human rights defenders’ freedom of expression and action due, inter alia, to the choice of words that hinted at the controversial policy of “targeted killings.”

The importance of the support to BDS operatives and Omar Barghouti by Amnesty International, one of the world’s oldest and most important human rights organizations, cannot be overstated. While in Israel the ideology and

methods of the BDS movement are regarded as denying the natural rights of the Jewish people to self-determination in their own country, Amnesty International gives BDS operatives full support as human rights activists, justifying and morally validating their actions and ideas. This expression of support testifies to the polarization between the Israeli public and a leading non-governmental international player like Amnesty International. While the organization has attracted widespread criticism and negative exposure in the Israeli media and public opinion in recent years, it enjoys high professional standing and wide legitimacy throughout the world and among decision makers, and in this vein was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

This gap between the Israeli framing of BDS ideology and actions and Amnesty International's announcement of support, and the division between the dismissal and criticism of Amnesty International in Israeli public opinion and the organization's high international credibility, highlight the chasm that has developed in recent decades between Israel and many of the important international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across the political spectrum. This is not a healthy situation for Israel, as these NGOs have great influence on Israel's international standing and on the delegitimization campaign. This article discusses the changes in the NGOs' status, their range of influence, and especially, the way they have operated in the international theater over the past twenty years. It examines how a positive change in the conception and policy of international NGOs toward Israel can be achieved, thus reducing their contribution to the delegitimization discourse.

Changes in the Modus Operandi of NGOs in the International Arena

The influence of international NGOs has grown since the end of the Cold War. While international relations were formerly the realm of diplomats, officials, and decision makers of the various countries, today there is a diverse group of players that cannot be ignored, including international NGOs. These organizations have moved from the sidelines to center stage in global politics and exert their power and influence in all aspects of international relations and the formation of international policy. They focus on local and international issues, including the war on poverty; the protection of human rights; the provision of physical security to all persons regardless of gender, sex, race, nationality, or religion; environmental protection; and universal access to health care and medical treatment. This focus at both

the local and global level has given these organizations a positive image in the international community. Very few countries relate to them with the suspicions and criticisms that frequently shape the approach to countries or corporations.

The changes in the world's political array of forces have also impacted the international NGOs' concept of action. When they were founded in the early or mid-twentieth century, organizations such as Oxfam, Care International, Amnesty International, Save the Children, World Vision International, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), and Human Rights Watch were careful to stick to apolitical policies, seeking mainly to ease the suffering of individuals or groups regardless of their political inclinations. In their actions, these organizations frequently declared that they were apolitical and sought to promote universal concepts that transcended nationality and local political complexities. This *modus operandi* lent them credibility and helped establish their reputation as entities that surpass politics and culture. With the changes in the world order, however, some of these organizations realized that in order to bring about a sustainable change in global priorities with respect to the issues on their agenda, they had to be actively and publicly involved in the political domain. Rejecting the idea that poverty, inequality, hunger, and disease are necessary and unchangeable conditions, these organizations claim that we now have the means and the technology to end the evils afflicting humanity. It is, they assert, political interests, and not forces of nature or unconscious decisions, that bring about these evils, and thus political interests and the business and political playing fields cannot be ignored if the organizations wish to achieve sustainable development and equality.

It was this insight that caused a change in the NGOs' operational concept. They realized that they had to alter their mode of operation and began to occupy the front of the political stage in four ways. First, they became increasingly aware of the way in which they lend assistance so as not to unintentionally create inequality and unfair social distribution or duplicate the existing balance of power in the societies in which they are working; in other words, they try not to focus their help only on the stronger elements and leave the weaker elements in the fringes. Second, they have become aware of the importance of people and groups taking part in the decision making that affects the decentralization and distribution of the existing resources. Consequently, they have started to scrutinize who is responsible for this

distribution and who are the winners and losers. Third, they have come to realize that in order to create a world without poverty, hunger, and disease, people must have control over their own lives, independent of mediation and politics, particularly in matters affecting their basic rights such as welfare, education, and health. The organizations realized that in order to achieve this independence, there is a need to create an appropriate public mood and relevant mechanisms. And lastly, they grasped the importance of a sustainable process, namely, that all the changes they are seeking must be maintained long term. They looked to achieve this sustainability by devising conventions, law, and policy. This has led to the formation of teams of lobbyists, lawyers, accountants, and volunteers who send mail, make telephone calls, visit decision makers, and publicize their worldviews in social media.⁴

Another aspect contributing to the status of these NGOs and giving them great influence is that they have, over the years, spread to many different countries where they have established branches and perfected their capabilities in many areas, including fundraising, financial management, human resources, program development, provision of humanitarian aid, communications and marketing, and general campaign management. In fact, in the past twenty years, these organizations have grown to such an extent that they now fit the definition of international non-governmental confederations, because their budgets and resources are sometimes equal to those of intergovernmental institutions.⁵ The term “confederation” refers to umbrella organizations that incorporate many local branches that all act for the sake of a common goal to which every member is committed. Each branch can determine its own local priorities, principles of action, and long- and short-term goals, and, in certain cases, even develop internal codes of behavior and norms that conform to the area in which it operates. This growth and expansion facilitates access to large and diverse groups. Furthermore, this organizational structure allows these NGOs and their branches to benefit from the budget of the international organizational confederation on which they depend and which they represent and to cooperate, when necessary, with similar organizations or with those with common goals. Due to the high degree of legitimacy and credibility enjoyed by these organizations among all the large developed countries, they benefit from cooperation with many governments and from financial and public resources allocations. These capabilities and the widespread connections they have developed enable the organizations to raise money

and recruit aid from the public, governments, and the business sector more rapidly and effectively than in the past for the purpose of carrying out their plans of action. Their power and influence in shaping decision making in these areas is derived from these capabilities.

The International NGOs and Israel

At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel and in its early years, some of these leading NGOs had a positive attitude toward Israel; they mobilized to help the young country out of a feeling of commitment and mission following the revelations of the horrors of the Holocaust and out of an affinity for the socialist ideology underlying the state's institutions. For example, Care International has operated in Israel since its founding in 1948,⁶ while in 1964 Amnesty International established in Israel one of its first branches outside the UK.⁷ The picture began to change after the Six Day War, a change that has become more pronounced with the prolonged occupation of the territories, the collapse of the peace process, and the spread of the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria. Motivated by the attempt to meet international standards while opposing human rights violations, the organizations began to shift most of their activity toward dealing with the distress of the Palestinian people, who were perceived as being in urgent need of assistance. Some even transferred their offices to East Jerusalem. This change in the stance of many international NGOs inevitably affected the perception among activists and supporters of the Jewish state and its needs, in comparison to the dire humanitarian situation of the Palestinians. The plight of the Palestinians was also measured empirically by agencies such as the World Bank, and this provided the organizations with the rationale for focusing their efforts on supporting and stabilizing the Palestinians.⁸ This shift, which was expressed in the alienation of the organizations and their supporters from events in Israel, also led to the prevailing perception in Israel that these NGOs only represent the interests of the Palestinians.

Another issue that has added to the gap between the Israeli public and the international NGOs, which hinders their ability to serve as credible agents of change and mediation between the conflicted parties, is the impression (particularly by Israelis) that the organizations fail to grasp the complexity of the security and civilian challenges facing Israel in the Middle East and to understand the feelings of Israelis. The reports published by these organizations tend to include one-dimensional analyses of Israel's policies

that ignore Israeli feelings of alienation, estrangement, suspicion, and lack of trust, following years of trauma caused by terrorist attacks and security threats. If this disregard for the Israeli public's trauma were not enough, the NGOs repeatedly accuse Israel of adopting excessively harsh security measures, at a time when the international community is silent about the threats posed by nearby events, such as the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria. In the eyes of Israelis, this approach does not convey credibility or demonstrate the ability to serve as a bridge for dialogue. Accordingly, the organizations repeatedly fail in their efforts to create a dialogue with large sectors of the Israeli public and to enlist public support for a real change in attitudes toward the other side. As a result, their well-intended actions often lead to the strengthening of extremist voices in Israel society.

In recent years, these NGOs have played a key role in shaping the discourse against Israel's actions in the territories and the Jewish settlements. They have been active in the political and civilian sphere – some deliberately and some less so – in calling for a boycott of Israel and its delegitimization. For example, in 2014, actress Scarlett Johansson, a goodwill ambassador for Oxfam, took part in an advertisement for SodaStream, which at the time had a factory in Judea and Samaria, and BDS and other pro-Palestinian organizations put pressure on Oxfam to cut its ties with the actress. BDS asserted that as an organization seeking to promote human rights and combat global poverty, Oxfam could not cooperate with “goodwill ambassadors” who were promoting a company active in Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria and responsible for maintaining the Palestinians' poverty and prolonged economic dependence on Israel. The incident escalated when Oxfam endorsed the arguments of the BDS operatives and halted its cooperation with Johansson. It should be noted that Oxfam concentrates on providing aid to residents of the Gaza Strip and on issuing reports about the damage caused there by its isolation, blaming Israel for their plight and totally ignoring the role of the Hamas government.⁹ Human Rights Watch, which sometimes refers to the area between Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea as Palestine with no mention of Israel, has published many reports criticizing Israel disproportionately. This bias became so pronounced such that Robert Bernstein, the organization's founder, published an article in the *New York Times* as early as 2009 rejecting the organization he had founded, accusing it of going astray and of betraying its purpose as an organization fighting equally and justly for human rights.¹⁰

Despite these and many other examples of political bias, it should be noted that some of the criticism of Israel by NGOs reflects international criticism of Israel's policy in the territories and the Jewish settlements located there since 1967 and should not be interpreted as a separate politically-motivated desire to boycott or destroy Israel or as pure anti-Semitism. There is a strong tendency in Israel toward a superficial and over-generalized discourse concerning these organizations. First and foremost, the Israeli public ignores the fact that the NGOs repeatedly state that what stands between them and Israel are the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria, which they allege are in violation of international law, and the continuation of the occupation, which constitutes an ongoing and especially harmful violation of the Palestinians' human rights. This criticism is no different from the past and present criticism by almost all heads of state, including Israel's allies. Furthermore, the Israeli public tends to label almost all of the organizations as part of a pro-Palestinian, anti-Semitic campaign that aims to undermine the existence of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

This one-dimensional portrayal of a complex and very influential sector is not true and not confined to Israel; it also characterizes statements and articles by opinion makers, academics, decision makers, and media figures who support Israel. This, for example, is the approach of books reviewing the activity and behavior of international NGOs in Israel and the territories published in recent years.¹¹ Likewise, some documentaries and television reports have focused exclusively on the negative aspect of the activity of the human rights organizations operating in Israel and the territories. Statements or initiatives by the organizations seeking to express their commitment to the Israeli public and their promotion of a just solution for both sides do not have much effect on the public,¹² and their image as ill-wishers is thereby maintained and enhanced in public opinion. Influenced by this hostile public atmosphere toward international NGOs and their local counterparts, especially human rights organizations, in July 2016 the Knesset passed the NGO Law, which requires local NGOs receiving more than 50 percent of their total budget from foreign countries to state the identity of the donor countries. In addition, in any public appeal or discussion in which a protocol is written, representatives of those organizations must declare that their financing comes from foreign countries. Prior to these measures were scathing and incendiary statements from civil and media entities concerning the NGOs' involvement and contribution to the delegitimization

campaign aimed at encouraging anti-Israel boycotts.¹³ In this intensive public discourse, however, decision makers in Israel neglected the fact that some of the local NGOs are recognized by international NGOs, even if they are not funded by them, and are regarded as reliable and representative of the prevailing mood in Israel. Of the twenty-seven NGOs affected by the new law, twenty-five are human rights organizations, and throughout the entire legislative process they received support from major international NGOs such as Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch, as well as from many world leaders. Some of these organizations even expressed solidarity with the Israeli NGOs by addressing a letter to the Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee demanding that the law be stopped, arguing that the proposal was damaging to Israeli democracy and was aimed at “marking certain organizations as illegitimate and imposing disproportionate restrictions on them that will detract from their activity... and will also undermine the principles of democracy and universal values by limiting freedom of expression and association in Israel.”¹⁴

The ongoing hostility in Israel toward the international NGOs has rendered this domain open to an increase in the number of activists in the delegitimization movement; in other words, Israel’s policy of ignoring this important domain of Western liberal public opinion has contributed to the success of BDS operatives and delegitimization ideologues. By adopting the terminology of human rights and universal justice, BDS operatives are working within the international NGOs as universal human rights activists seeking to promote the freedom of expression and restoration of the rights of, in their words, dispossessed Palestinians. The so-called liberal discourse adopted by BDS activists blurs the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and conceals the movement’s true goal, namely, to put an end to Israel as the national home for the Jews. Israel is completely unrepresented in this discourse, which facilitates its portrayal as an enemy of liberal values and a colonial and imperialistic country. While the NGOs usually refrain in conflict regions from intervening in the core issues involving security, nationalism, or identity, this is not the case regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And thus, this local conflict – undoubtedly complicated but marginal to the challenges of the twenty-first century – has become a key element in the international struggle for human rights and the implementation of universal socioeconomic rights.

Recommendations

Despite the desire to prevent foreign parties from exploiting the agenda of combating poverty and human rights for the purpose of interfering in internal policy and attacking Israel, the growing importance of international NGOs in the international arena makes it impossible to completely separate these organizations' attitudes toward Israel from Israeli official policy. Similarly, persecution and delegitimization of international NGOs and legislation against them or their representatives in Israel only play into the hands of those seeking to defame Israel and damage its international standing. Therefore, in order to address the gaps between Israel and the international NGOs, Israel should create the space for an alternative discourse with these organizations, which will help enhance Israel's legitimacy in the international domain and facilitate cooperation that may be productive not only to the two sides but also to parties seeking to promote a just and sustainable solution to the conflict.

As a first step in formulating new relations with NGOs, Israel should make a clear distinction between two types of organizations: those that work exclusively to promote the Palestinian agenda and narrative while ignoring or rejecting the Jewish-Israeli narrative, and those that seek to promote a global agenda dedicated to issues of health and universal access to medicine, human rights, the environment and sustainable development, equal opportunities for women and men, the elimination of discrimination, and especially, the struggle against prevailing poverty and socioeconomic inequality. This distinction will make it possible to determine with which organizations Israel can cooperate in various humanitarian and technological initiatives for the sake of both the advancement of a humanitarian dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians through a third party and the development and assistance in other countries, and thus bolster Israel's standing as a positive force for global progress and development.

The second step that Israel should take is a critical assessment of the Israeli discourse in which anti-Israeli statements receive far more media coverage and make a far greater impact than other statements about Israel by NGOs. As shown above, as a result of this public bias, the response of Israeli decision makers and the Israel public to the policy of the international NGOs to date has been the well-known saying, "attack is the best form defense." This policy, however, does not serve Israel or its international standing and ignores the complexity of the environment in which the international organizations operate – a theater that is very familiar to the BDS movement. However,

because these organizations are international confederations, it must be understood that one branch is not the same as another and that connections and collaborations can be created at a number of levels and in a number of regions, taking advantage of Israel's achievements in technology, medicine, and agriculture to deal with the contemporary challenges. Reinforcement of Israel's standing in the provision of foreign aid to developing regions will facilitate cooperation with international NGOs in order to achieve sustainable solutions, not only in Israel but all over the world, while at the same time merging interests in combating worldwide terrorism, poverty, and hunger. Initiatives along these lines already exist, but they should be further developed and expanded. This will foster new channels of communication and better understanding between the parties, even if it does not reduce the scope of criticism leveled against Israel as long as the political process is deadlocked.

In an era in which many democratic countries face great economic, political, and security instability, the rise of international non-governmental players cannot be ignored, whether these are terrorist organizations on the one hand, or civil society organizations on the other. While Israel has taken care to prepare itself for violent conflicts with non-state terrorist players, this is not the case in the international civilian arena. The result has been the ongoing deterioration of Israel's status in countries that are among its important allies. The Israeli government would be wise to take proper note of the power of the various organizations operating and exerting influence in the international domain, to map interests and common interfaces, and to act in order to create collaborations that will both strengthen Israel and make a significant contribution to the international community, which is currently facing innumerable challenges.

Notes

- 1 The title of this article is taken from the book by Yariv Itzkovich, *Uneconomic Relationships: The Dark Side of Interpersonal Interactions in Organizations*, published in Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015).
- 2 "Israeli Government Must Cease Intimidation of Human Rights Defenders, Protect Them from Attacks," Amnesty International, April 12, 2016, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/israeli-government-must-cease-intimidation-of-human-rights-defenders-protect-them-from-attacks/>.
- 3 Itamar Eichner, "Deri Mulling Revoking Resident Status of BDS Founder," *Ynet*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4784302,00.html>.

- 4 Peter Bell, "The Role of Global NGOs in World Politics: The Case of International Relief and Development NGOs," Princeton University Lecture, February 24, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5wEDGO676A>. See also Bill Morton, "An Overview of International NGOs in Development Cooperation, in Working with Civil Society in Foreign Aid," UNDP, 2011, <https://goo.gl/H5NKGK>.
- 5 Bell, "The Role of Global NGO's in World Politics."
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Amnesty International Israel, <http://www.amnesty.org.il>.
- 8 Bell, "The Role of Global NGO's in World Politics."
- 9 Oxfam, "Crisis in Gaza," July 3, 2015, <http://goo.gl/JST8DL>.
- 10 Robert Bernstein, "Rights Watchdog, Lost in the Mideast," *New York Times*, October 19, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/opinion/20bernstein.html?_r=2&m.
- 11 For example, see the publications by the NGO Monitor organization, which has received official endorsement and which clearly publishes only the anti-Israel biases of these organizations, thereby painting a partial picture of what goes within them: Tuvia Tenenbom, *Catch the Jew* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, 2015); Ben-Dror Yemini, *Industry of Lies* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot Publishers, 2014); and various websites, e.g., Uri Perednik, "Amnesty International vs. Israel," *Mida*, May 12, 2014.
- 12 For example, Oxfam's Middle East media manager, Jennifer Abrahamson, said: "I think there have been many misconceptions about Oxfam's relationship with Israel. We have worked in the country with both Jewish and Arab people and our mission is always only to help those suffering from injustice and poverty. We are obviously delighted to forge this new relationship with the Reform Movement. We share similar values, and I hope people will become more aware of the work we are doing with Israeli civil society." See Jessica Elgot, "Oxfam Works in Israel to 'Alter the Balance,'" *Jewish Chronicle*, November 2, 2010, <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/40531/oxfam-works-israel-alter-balance%E2%80%99>.
- 13 "Report of the Planted Moles," Im Tirtzu movement, 2015; Akiva Bigman, "A Boycott is a Boycott is a Boycott: The New Israel Fund and BDS," *Mida*, June 1, 2014, <https://goo.gl/kNk13W>; Arik Greenstein, "B'Tselem as a Hamas Mouthpiece," *Mida*, August 19, 2014, <https://goo.gl/wgyZiD>.
- 14 Tal Shalev, "A Foreign Agent in the Ministry of Defense: Sharp Confrontation in Debate on NGOs Law," *Walla!*, May 25, 2016, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2964451>; "Israel: Law Targets Human Rights Groups: Hefty Fines for Organizations that Don't Comply," Human Rights Watch, July 13, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/13/Israel-law-targets-human-rights-groups>.