

Medical NGOs' unhealthy practice

While Israeli doctors offer unqualified aid to anyone in need, many humanitarian organisations politicise medicine as a tactic for demonising the Jewish State, writes **Rivka Hecht**.

ISRAELI doctors at the Schneider Children's Hospital in Petach Tikvah recently provided medical treatment to the infant granddaughter of Hamas's Gaza Prime Minister – at a time when senior Hamas officials threatened rocket attacks on Tel Aviv. This follows countless instances of Israeli army and civilian doctors treating victims and combatants from the conflict in Syria, a country with which Israel is still at war.

These examples, reminiscent of Israeli doctors saving the lives of terrorists who had just murdered Israeli civilians during the terror campaign of the early 2000s, epitomise the supremacy of medicine and humanitarian aid above politics and enmity.

The same value of "human life above all" is demonstrated by the recent Israeli army aid delegations to the Philippines, who were the first to set up a field hospital in the typhoon-ravaged country, as well as the Israeli humanitarian aid delegations to Turkey and Haiti, following earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

In contrast, there is a very disturbing trend among non-government organisations (NGOs) to politicise medicine and abuse medical claims as part of a campaign of political warfare targeting Israel.

A new report by Jerusalem-based research organisation NGO Monitor, *NGO Malpractice*, examines the abuse of medicine, morality and science by political advocacy NGOs.

NGOs that proclaim a mandate related to medical and health issues are shielded from scrutiny because they claim to promote universal humanitarian principles. As groups with a medical focus, they benefit from an added degree of credibility, reflecting a perception of altruism and scientific expertise.

For instance, the mission statement of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHR-I) clearly states its political agenda – "we oppose the occupation and endeavour to put an end to it." To this effect, PHR-I has stated that it "will only work with doctors who resist the occupation." In fact, their political objectives extend much further, in the context of the demonisation of Israel itself.

PHR-I has also provided pro-Palestinian activists with first aid training in preparation for protests against the



An Israeli doctor treating locals in the field hospital set up by the IDF in the Philippines after last month's typhoon.

security barrier at Bil'in that often turn violent. Pamphlets distributed during the course stated that it was provided "in solidarity with their struggle against Israeli occupation". In response, Dr Yoram Blachar, then president of the Israeli Medical Association, declared, "Physicians for Human Rights have proved that they are a radical political group disguised as a medical organisation."

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Another example is Medical Aid for the Palestinians (MAP), a British charity that is active in politicised campaigns against Israel. MAP expresses its political claims and promotes its agenda in medical terms, using healthcare and health services to frame its political campaigns against Israeli policies – "In the West Bank, the ongoing construction of the separation wall ... compromises the right to health in terms of accessible, affordable and appropriate services."

However, there is no mention of the numerous mass terror attacks that led Israel to construct the security barrier as an essential human rights measure. MAP

has also repeatedly joined other highly politicised European NGOs in pressuring the EU to sanction Israel, on issues totally unrelated to Palestinian health.

Some medical NGOs also engage in frequent demonisation and anti-Semitism. In June 2009, Dr Eyad Sarraj, General Director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), accompanied by GCMHP staffer Dr Ahmed Abu-Tawahini, appeared before the biased (and later discredited) Goldstone Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict.

Abu-Tawahini presented a "psychological profile of the Israeli soldier" to the committee, incorporating a combination of pseudo-psychology, crude stereotypes, and cultural guesswork: "... the Israeli soldier has the image of absolute superiority ... the instability, the psychological instability with the Israeli soldier has accumulated fear in him, has deprived him of this halo feeling that he had over the years and now he wants to restore this lost image."

Sarraj's testimony presented a stereotype that was entirely without any scientific or medical foundation: "... there is no restraint, no discipline within the army ... even there's an encouragement." His testimony then went a step further; "... inside Israel there is an identification with the aggressor, the Nazi."

Sarraj and his NGO have a long history of attacks against Israel, exploiting

the platform of expertise in psychology. In a 2003 interview with *Tikkun* magazine, Sarraj asked, "Are they evil by nature, these Jews? Or are they stupid, born mentally subnormal? ... They are psycho-pathologically disturbed ..."

In contrast, some medical NGOs are much more circumspect of the politicisation of their activities. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) views pursuing a political agenda while undertaking humanitarian work as a "contradiction in terms."

However, this distinction is not always enforced, and MSF has been involved in numerous incidents that reflect "contradiction", such as its one-sided, unsupported, and demonising comments on the Gaza conflict in 2009.

As highlighted by the contrast between Israeli humanitarianism, on the one hand, and NGO exploitation of medical claims, on the other, there is an urgent need to restore the moral framework in discussion of these issues. Instead of promoting medical assistance on the basis of universality and political neutrality, medical NGOs and their representatives have become central players in the political conflict.

Exploiting medicine and science for a political purpose undermines the integrity of what should be highly valued, noble professions, and respectable institutions.

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MEDIA WEEK

Unsettled

THE decision to change Australia's vote from supporting two UN resolutions condemning Israel, back to the Howard/Downer position of abstaining, exposed a lack of media understanding on the issue of settlements.

Asked by Barrie Cassidy "what do you think are the implications of" changing Australia's "vote in the United Nations from yes to criticism of Israeli settlements to abstaining," Labor foreign affairs spokesperson Tanya Plibersek responded that "We've had no formal confirmation from the government that this is indeed the case ... I certainly didn't hear of any community consultation beforehand. I haven't heard of any explanation from the

government since," (ABC TV *Insiders* 24/11).

Disappointingly, Cassidy did not ask Plibersek the obvious question "did the Rudd government consult the community before it changed its votes at the UN on these same resolutions?"

The answer, of course, is that the Rudd government did not. In contrast, Julie Bishop has repeated many times her party's opposition to the changes to Australia's voting made in 2008.

Nonetheless, Plibersek's comments appeared to set the agenda on the issue, prompting other media to follow her line that the Coalition should have consulted and that the change was a surprise or "stealthy".

On November 25, Fairfax reporter

Jonathan Swan wrote that the change gives "tacit approval to controversial activities including the expansion of settlements on occupied territory."

In fact, there has been no expansion of existing settlement boundaries since 2004. Furthermore, most Israeli housing construction in West Bank settlements occurs in the settlement blocs which are expected to remain part of Israel in any future peace agreement.

Swan's story included a response from AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein. Unfortunately, only the *Canberra Times* actually printed Rubenstein's explanation that the UN resolutions are "one-sided, biased and factually challenged ... they are part of the destructive international campaign to delegitimise Israel". *The Age* and *Sydney*

Morning Herald merely quoted Rubenstein welcoming the shift. Later that day, an updated online version of Swan's story reflected the approach which depicted the long-flagged voting change as non-consultative or a surprise, with the headline – "Julie Bishop says stealthy switch on Israel about 'balance'".

In *The Australian* (26/11) Joe Kelly and Brendan Nicholson quoted Australian Strategic Policy Institute executive director Peter Jennings' explanation that the new position offered a more "realistic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue [because] an approach which simply denies any possibility of flexibility towards the settlements is a recipe for a complete lack of progress towards a two-state solution".

Reporting on the vote change, Marius

Benson (ABC Radio *Breakfast* 27/11) did not hide his personal view on settlements asking Bob Carr, "Does it matter when the reality on the ground ... is so clearly that Israel is expanding these settlements regardless of what the resolutions say?" Somewhat unprofessionally, only Carr's opinion was canvassed.

In the *Canberra Times* (02/12) AIJAC's Sharyn Mittelman offered some context on the UN resolutions, noting "entrenched biases against Israel ... have rendered [the UN] ineffective as a mediator" and that therefore the voting change was "the act of a true supporter of Israeli-Palestinian peace".