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A code of conduct for the New Israel Fund

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Gerald Steinberg, THE JERUSALEM POST

The NIF's board of directors have an opportunity to lead the rest of 'civil society' by adopting and implementing clear ethical guidelines.

When the board of directors of the New Israel Fund meets on Sunday, its members will confront the most important decisions in the organization's 30-year history. With a budget of more than \$30 million, divided among more than 100 groups, the NIF is a major but unelected power in Israeli society and politics. And while two-thirds of this money goes to a wide range of significant social and educational causes, the rest goes to groups that lead anti-Israel delegitimization campaigns under the façade of "human rights."

In last year's Goldstone Report indicting Israel on allegations of "war crimes," Israelis recognized the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) B'Tselem, Adalah and Breaking the Silence among the most cited references.

While claiming to promote human rights and social equality, these and other NIF grantees are also heavily involved in demonization.

Using NIF funds, B'Tselem operates offices in Washington and London that lobby foreign governments to endorse Goldstone's destructive recommendations.

The Coalition of Women for Peace, which received \$285,509 from NIF between 2006 and 2008, and a former NIF grantee – ICAHD – are leaders in the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) campaign. BDS is a central part of the strategy adopted by NGOs at the 2001 Durban conference, which denies Jews the right of self-determination and defense against terror. European governments followed NIF's lead and provide substantial funds, allowing both groups to expand their political warfare.

SUCH NIF funding stands in sharp contrast to official claims of being a Zionist organization, supporting a "Jewish and democratic state" and telling donors it helps and "loves Israel." When NGO Monitor documented the contradictions, and Im Tirtzu launched a more frontal and personal assault, NIF lashed out by slinging mud. Its leaders portrayed themselves as the only defenders of Israeli democracy, and labeled as "McCarthyites" those who held different views. This political warfare did not convince many Israelis, nor did it mollify Diaspora donors who realized that their money was being used for some very negative activities.

To resolve this deep crisis of confidence, the NIF board members meeting on Sunday are going to have to change both their policy substance and style. A few references to tikkun olam and Jewish ethical principles can no longer be used to hide NIF's funding for organizations that engage in hard-core demonization.

In this context, NIF officials have an opportunity to lead the rest of “civil society” and human rights organizations by adopting and implementing clear ethical guidelines, which are greatly needed by these powerful social and political groups.

On this basis, NGO Monitor has sent NIF board members a draft code of conduct, based on existing models, with the goal of converting the declaratory “red lines” into actual policy, and to address NIF’s incivility and anti-democratic intolerance.

The proposed funding rules would end support for political advocacy groups involved in BDS, or accusations of “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” “war crimes” or “crimes against humanity.”

In addition, active involvement in “lawfare” (legal threats or actions against Israeli officials abroad) would be unacceptable, including support for biased UN processes such as the Goldstone Commission. No group denying Israel’s status as a Jewish and democratic state, or calling for a “one-state solution,” would continue to get money from NIF donors.

To implement these rules and restore lost credibility, the NIF board of directors also needs to create an independent ombudsman’s office, staffed and operated without involvement of the paid NIF leadership.

The ombudsman’s office would prepare biannual reports on advocacy activities of funded organizations, to determine compliance with the guidelines. The summary information and analysis should be made available to the board, sent to donors and made public.

The ombudsman’s office should also serve as an independent investigative body for complaints resulting from intolerance and uncivil statements by NIF officials and employees. A Jewish organization that uses the language of tikkun olam should not be involved in Nixonian dirty tricks against critics, such as publicizing fake Twitter accounts putting out racist messages using NGO Monitor’s name, or trashing critics as “a mouthpiece for the extreme right” with “no regard for objectivity or transparency, and only disdain for democratic process and open debate.”

And NIF’s New Generations and Development associate should not be posting obscene gestures on his blog (which have since been removed).

Before preaching civility and democracy to Israelis, NIF needs to fix its own problems. The program for NIF’s June 28 symposium on democracy, headlined “The Battle for Israel’s Soul,” is a one-sided political rally that shuts out any criticism – the antithesis of democratic debate.

In a recent article in Haaretz, NIF leaders Daniel Sokatch and Rachel Liel sought to defend themselves from criticism by writing that “now is not the time to scapegoat Israelis who are critical of Israel.”

But NIF’s role goes far beyond legitimate criticism. The funding provided by NIF’s Jewish donors helps powerful NGOs lead the campaign to delegitimize Jewish national self-determination. And it is NIF that is doing much of the scapegoating.

On Sunday, the NIF board has a chance to stop the decline by adopting a code of conduct and a transparent mechanism for implementing the red lines it claims to have. If the board members accept this challenge, they will help restore NIF credibility and its ability to contribute positively to Israel during this time of difficulty.

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