



# Delegitimizing Solidarity: Israel Smears Palestine Advocacy as Anti-Semitic

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In response to growing Palestine solidarity activism globally—and particularly in countries that have been traditional allies of Israel—the Israeli government has launched a well-resourced campaign to undermine such efforts. A key element of this campaign consists in equating Palestine advocacy; the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement; and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. The concerted effort to delegitimize solidarity with the Palestinians is taking place even as genuine anti-Semitism is on the rise, thanks to the resurgent white nationalism of the Far Right in Europe and North America—political forces that Israel is harnessing to help shield from scrutiny and accountability its apartheid policies toward Palestinians, both citizens of the state as well as those under military rule. In its efforts to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, the Israeli government is assisted by non-state organizations that nonetheless enjoy close ties with the state and its agencies.

ON 25 SEPTEMBER 2019, Israel’s Minister of Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan (who doubles as public security minister) went to the European Parliament in Brussels with the simple message that the Palestinian-led BDS movement was “an anti-Semitic campaign.”<sup>1</sup> Erdan was in Brussels to launch an Israeli government report dubbed *Behind the Mask: The Antisemitic Nature of BDS Exposed*. Sitting alongside the minister at the subsequent press conference was Elan S. Carr, the U.S. State Department’s special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, who slammed BDS as “classical old anti-Semitism, repackaged and rebranded, cloaked poorly as anti-Israel rhetoric.”<sup>2</sup> According to a press release by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the report, which was the work of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, headed by Erdan, demonstrates “how the BDS leadership hides behind a mask of liberal values and human rights, while disseminating content relating to Israel which is blatantly antisemitic.”<sup>3</sup> The document describes Erdan’s department as “responsible for coordinating the Government of Israel’s response to delegitimization and the boycott campaign” and notes that it “aims to show that . . . the BDS movement is an important contributor to contemporary antisemitism.”<sup>4</sup>

At the press conference in Brussels, European Jewish Association director Rabbi Menachem Margolin went even further, declaring the BDS movement “responsible for the vast majority of physical attacks and social media hatred against Jews in Europe.”<sup>5</sup> Such comments were particularly

extraordinary in light of the clear evidence linking the concurrent rise of right-wing populism and anti-Semitism in Europe, and as attested to by figures published in February 2019 showing that “an overwhelming majority of violence against Jews is perpetrated by far-right supporters.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to the press conference, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) hosted a committee room meeting for Erdan, who was joined by the European Union’s Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combatting anti-Semitism Katharina von Schnurbein.<sup>7</sup> Speaking immediately after Erdan, von Schnurbein told the gathering of MEPs and activists, “It is crucial to make people understand where criticism of Israel crosses the line into antisemitism,” an example of which, she claimed, was evident “when people question the right of existence of the State of Israel.”<sup>8</sup>

A month later, the lower house of the Czech Parliament easily passed a nonbinding resolution on what it called “growing anti-Semitism.” The resolution included rejecting “any questioning of the State of Israel’s right of existence and defense” and a condemnation of “all activities and statements by groups calling for a boycott of the State of Israel, its goods, services or citizens.”<sup>9</sup> Jan Bartošek, the head of the Christian Democrats faction who introduced the resolution (that was also partially formulated by the Czech Foreign Ministry) hailed Israel as the Czech Republic’s “strategic partner and ally in the Middle East.” Afterward, Israel’s ambassador to Prague expressed appreciation for the chamber’s “unequivocal condemnation of anti-Semitism and steadfast support of Israel,” while Israeli foreign minister Israel Katz tweeted his own thanks, calling “on more Parliaments to follow suit.”<sup>10</sup>

Erdan’s public relations exercise in Brussels and the resolution passed in Prague are developments illustrative of wider trends. There is an intensified effort by the Israeli government—and its allies—to tarnish the Palestinian struggle for basic rights and, in particular, to equate BDS and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. As Israel consolidates its de facto apartheid state in historic Palestine, such an effort is intended to stifle, or delegitimize entirely, any global opposition to, or criticism of, a reality on the ground that only gets grimmer with each passing day. As Joshua Leifer, an editor at *Dissent Magazine*, wrote in *+972 Magazine* in August 2019, “The Israeli government long ago adjusted its public relations strategy for the post-two-state reality” so that “today, the Israeli hasbara apparatus’s most active front is the attempted redefinition of anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism, with the goal of rendering any opposition to the occupation [or] Zionism—or even simply Israeli policies themselves—beyond the pale of mainstream acceptability.”<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Israel’s propaganda drive, or *hasbara*, includes alliances with a resurgent Far Right in Europe and North America, nationalist political forces that have been playing a key role in fomenting often violent and sometimes lethal anti-Semitism. The support expressed by far-right Czech politicians for the aforementioned resolution was emblematic of a trend that has seen the Israeli government seek close alliances with a cluster of far-right and conservative governments in Europe. In January 2019, the Associated Press (AP) noted that the “warm welcome” offered by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Lithuanian prime minister Saulius Skvernelis marked “his latest embrace of an eastern European leader who has offered strong political support while promoting a distorted image of the Holocaust.”<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, the AP article went on to point out that even though an official Israeli government report had concluded that the majority of global anti-Semitic attacks in 2018 were “carried out by neo-Nazis in Europe and white supremacists,” during a cabinet meeting on the day of the report’s release, Netanyahu singled

out “Islamic anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitism of the extreme left, which includes anti-Zionism.”<sup>13</sup>

Such an approach is extremely dangerous, even setting aside its impact on Palestinian advocacy. In the introduction to their 2017 booklet on the imperative of understanding anti-Semitism and the ways to do so, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), a U.S. activist and advocacy organization, emphasizes that there are “antisemites in the White House and neo-Nazis marching through Charlottesville, advancing a right-wing, white nationalist agenda.” Anti-Semitism not only hurts Jews, JFREJ points out, but it “undermines, weakens and derails all of our movements for social justice and collective liberation.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, in precisely this moment of resurgent white supremacy and anti-Semitism, Israel and its allies are not only dedicating their energies to equating the BDS campaign and Palestine solidarity movement with anti-Semitism but are working hand in hand with the same far-right forces fanning the flames of anti-Semitism in order to shield a de facto, single apartheid state from critical scrutiny.

## Historical Context

Israeli officials, as well as Israel advocacy organizations internationally, have a long history of charging Palestinians and their allies, as well as Israel’s critics and human-rights campaigners, with anti-Semitism. Prominent individuals are not exempted. Famously, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter was excoriated by pro-Israel advocates for his 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. Speaking at a town hall meeting in January 2007, Carter described how he had “been called a liar . . . an anti-Semite . . . [and] a bigot,” even though not a single critic of the book had “contradicted any of the basic premises.”<sup>15</sup> The very same weekend, renowned Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt used an op-ed in the *Washington Post* to charge Carter with “almost ignoring the Holocaust” and thus giving “inadvertent comfort to those who deny its importance or even its historical reality.”<sup>16</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a leading light of the anti-apartheid movement, faced similar smears after comparing “what happened to us black people in South Africa” with what Palestinians experience under Israeli rule.<sup>17</sup> In 2009, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) slammed the choice of Nobel Peace Laureate and globally renowned human-rights advocate as a commencement address speaker on two U.S. college campuses, claiming that “his statements about Israel have time and again conveyed outright bigotry against the Jewish homeland and the Jewish people.”<sup>18</sup> A year later, liberal journalist Michelle Goldberg leveled heavy criticism at the ADL for having “shown itself willing to smear human-rights activists when it thinks Israel’s interests demand it.”<sup>19</sup>

An important part of the background to such attacks is the emergence—and in some contexts, dominance—of the “new anti-Semitism” analysis and discourse. Judith Butler, in a critical review of Bari Weiss’s *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, traces this discourse’s origins to *The New Anti-Semitism*, a 1974 book by then-leaders of the ADL, Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein. That book, according to Butler, “claimed [that] a novel form of Jew-hatred—made manifest in viewpoints critical of the State of Israel—was emerging on the left.”<sup>20</sup> In 2004, Oxford University scholar Brian Klug also identified (and critiqued) “a spate of recent articles and books assert[ing] the rise” of this new discourse.<sup>21</sup> Writing in *The Nation*, Klug highlighted other titles—including

one by then-ADL head Abraham Foxman and another by Israel advocate Alan Dershowitz—which all made a similar claim, namely that a new form of anti-Jewish bigotry was on the rise, especially in Europe. In answer to the question “What puts the ‘new’ into ‘new anti-Semitism?’” Klug concluded that the answer lay in one word: anti-Zionism. Antony Lerman, who served as director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 2006–9, has described how the concept initially “emerged from serious discussions about the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism.”<sup>22</sup> Writing in the global media platform OpenDemocracy in 2015, Lerman points out that the concept’s “ubiquity by the mid-2000s was a direct result of a concerted campaign” to persuade governments and various multilateral bodies of its validity.<sup>23</sup> According to Lerman, “This campaign resulted from a much closer nexus between Jewish communal leaderships, national and international Jewish organisations, pro-Israel advocacy groups, institutional arms of the Israeli government and academics and researchers promoting the idea of the ‘new antisemitism.’”<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, Israeli officials have enthusiastically embraced the “new anti-Semitism” framework in their attacks on Palestine solidarity activism. During a 2016 interview with the *Washington Post*, then-justice minister Ayelet Shaked declared, “In the past, we saw European leaders speaking against the Jews. Now, we see them speaking against Israel. It is the same anti-Semitism of blood libels, spreading lies, distorting reality and brainwashing people into hating Israel and the Jews.”<sup>25</sup> For Shaked, BDS supporters are “using the same kind of anti-Semitism but instead of saying they are against the Jews, they say they are against Israel.” Also in 2016, Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs published a report on global anti-Semitism in which it describes “the traditional definition of Antisemitism” as being unsuited to what it calls “diverse new and complex expressions of current Antisemitism.”<sup>26</sup> The report goes on to praise the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism adopted the same year, highlighting the definition’s inclusion of “expressions of Antisemitism directed against the State of Israel, when it is perceived as a Jewish collective.”<sup>27</sup> The official Israeli report concludes that the IHRA “definition also refers to anti-Zionism . . . as a form of Antisemitism.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, while the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism by the Israeli government is not new, we are currently witnessing a concerted campaign to advance such a smear in what constitutes a response by Israeli officials and allied organizations to a growth in Palestine solidarity activism in Western Europe and North America, in general, and the BDS campaign, in particular.

## Palestine Solidarity Surges—BDS Is Born

A global wave of solidarity with the Palestinian people swept the world in the shadow of the Second Intifada. While this may have been worrisome from Israel’s point of view, the truly concerning development was the launch of the BDS movement by dozens of Palestinian civil society groups and organizations a year after the key International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the illegality of Israel’s “separation wall.” In response to Israel’s violations of Palestinian rights, and the concomitant impunity of the Israeli authorities, the BDS call urged a sustained, strategic campaign of economic and other forms of pressure, making three specific

demands of Israel: first, “ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall”; second, “recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality”; and third, “respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.”<sup>29</sup> These three demands, grounded in international law and human rights, resonated for many people already actively involved in other social justice issues, whether on university campuses, within trade unions, or simply in their communities. Gradually, the BDS movement became a genuinely global campaign.

The birth and growth of the BDS movement around the world, but especially in countries considered Israel’s traditional allies in Western Europe and North America, exacerbated a challenge that Israel had been facing since the outbreak of the Second Intifada and could, to a certain extent, be traced as far back as Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the Palestinians’ subsequent launch of the First Intifada in 1987. Used to relying on support across political party lines, whether conservative or liberal, Israel found there was growing opposition to its policies toward the Palestinians among the liberal Left or progressive opinion formers in spaces such as academia and student organizing—changes that were also reflected in racial and age-based demographics. Put simply, BDS emerged into a context—where it has since acted as a turbo-charged catalyst—in which Israel was already suffering from a significant and longstanding public-relations problem. In the early years of the BDS campaign, the Israeli government placed significant emphasis on “rebranding” as a purported solution. Following the devastation that Operation Cast Lead wrought on the Gaza Strip in 2008–9, one Israeli official put it this way: “We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theatre companies, exhibits. This way, you show Israel’s prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war.”<sup>30</sup>

A number of pro-Israel organizations, however, including some enjoying close ties with the government, were not interested in “rebranding” or “marketing” Israel; they were convinced that the best approach was to go on the offensive, smearing and attacking key Palestinian, Israeli, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with accusations of ties to what they called terrorism and, inevitably, anti-Semitism. As BDS garnered increasing support around the world—among labor organizers, students, scholars, artists and cultural workers, and faith communities—the Israeli government decided on a change of tack. While not abandoning its efforts at rebranding, it mandated the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and other branches of state, to go on the attack. The goal? To see BDS, anti-Zionism, and Palestine solidarity itself equated with, criminalized, and outlawed as a form of anti-Semitism.

## The Israeli State Mobilizes

The BDS campaign was ten years old when the Israeli government became focused on fighting what pro-Israel advocacy organizations had already identified as a serious problem. After Netanyahu declared BDS a “strategic threat” in June 2015, considerable resources were mobilized to go on the offensive.<sup>31</sup> According to a *Haaretz* report, in October 2015 Israel’s security cabinet gave the Strategic Affairs Ministry a brief to “guide, coordinate and integrate the activities of all

the ministers and the government and of civil entities in Israel and abroad on the subject of the struggle against attempts to delegitimize Israel and the boycott movement.”<sup>32</sup>

The following summer, the ministry’s director-general and former head of the military censor’s office, Sima Vaknin-Gil, told a Knesset committee that the government was making progress in its efforts against BDS and what Israeli official parlance refers to as the “delegitimization of Israel.”<sup>33</sup> In 2016, Vaknin-Gil told Israeli parliamentarians that the ministry’s budget for anti-BDS efforts that year was NIS 44 million (\$11 million), but she refused to disclose details of the ministry’s activities. “A lot of what we do is under the radar,”<sup>34</sup> she told committee members. In 2018, Vaknin-Gil’s boss, Erdan, established a public-benefit corporation in order to covertly carry out public relations efforts as part of the fight against the so-called delegitimization of Israel globally. The corporation received NIS 128 million (around \$36 million) in government funding, a sum supposed to be matched “in private contributions.”<sup>35</sup> Official records also revealed that Erdan had “cooperated with the Mossad in the fight against the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement.”<sup>36</sup>

Over time, some aspects—and indeed, some of the fruits—of the ministry’s work have emerged into the public domain. In February 2016, an Israeli government spokesperson told the *Financial Times*, “We have stepped up our efforts directly and indirectly, dealing with friends of Israel in a variety of countries in which we have the BDS movement, fighting it with legal instruments.”<sup>37</sup> Later that year, Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Danny Danon, claimed that his government was “advancing legislation in many countries . . . so that it will simply be illegal to boycott Israel.”<sup>38</sup> This was no idle boast. In the United States, more than one hundred measures targeting boycotts and Palestinian-rights advocacy have been introduced in state and local legislatures and Congress since 2014; and, as of April 2019, twenty-seven states had adopted such anti-boycott laws, including five executive orders issued by state governors.<sup>39</sup> On Capitol Hill, congressional representatives and senators have been actively seeking to restrict the right to boycott under the guise of combating anti-Semitism, including—thus far unsuccessful—efforts to outright ban BDS.<sup>40</sup> Encouraged by such developments, as well as by initiatives in European countries such as Britain, France, and Spain, Erdan announced in December 2018 that his ministry would invest more than NIS 3 million (about \$800,000) in the first two years to create an “international legal network” to fight BDS.<sup>41</sup> In 2017 and 2018, Al Jazeera’s documentary *The Lobby* exposed elements of the offensive by Israel and its advocates against Palestine solidarity campaigning and the BDS movement, including the use of the charge of “anti-Semitism.”<sup>42</sup>

Another tactic pursued by the Israeli government in its drive to associate BDS and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is to claim close links between BDS and armed Palestinian factions.<sup>43</sup> As reported by AP in February 2019, “Most of the cases were based on somewhat vague accusations of affiliation or expressions of sympathy . . . in some instances connected to acts that took place years ago,” and two people named by the report had even “received international recognitions for their human rights work.”<sup>44</sup> Still, the Israeli government’s efforts have met with some success. In June 2019, Israeli media reported the government’s claims to have brought about the closure of “dozens of fundraising accounts” associated with Palestine solidarity and BDS groups on the grounds of alleged connections to “terrorism.”<sup>45</sup> As part of its efforts, the Strategic Affairs Ministry had “apparently directed pro-Israel activists (legal [rights] NGOs, Jewish groups based in the United States and France, and international journalists)” to approach fundraising platforms with the



allegations.<sup>46</sup> According to Tzahi Gavrieli, Vaknin-Gil's replacement at the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, the drive to associate BDS with terrorism "has led to Canadian, British and German leaders calling out BDS as anti-Semitism."<sup>47</sup>

While the Ministry of Strategic Affairs has been officially charged with coordinating attacks on BDS and delegitimization, other government organs also play an important role. One such example is the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs—in particular, its coordination and hosting (along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of periodic conferences under the rubric Global Forum on Combating Antisemitism (henceforth the Forum). The Forum's first international conference was held in 2007, and it was followed by conferences in 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015, with the sixth, and most recent such gathering, convened in 2018 in Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> Over the years, Forum conferences have served as an important space for the Israeli state, along with local and international non-state actors, to strategize and coordinate efforts to fight the BDS movement, including through the conflation of Palestine solidarity and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

From the very first conference in 2007, the framing of the "new anti-Semitism"—which, the official blurb explained, "seeks to undermine the legitimacy of Israel and disguises hatred of the Jewish people by means of hatred towards the Jewish state"—was dominant.<sup>49</sup> In 2008, Forum conference materials declared that "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism have joined forces in order to fight Antisemitism in its newest manifestations, in the guise of Anti-Zionist and anti-Israel standpoints."<sup>50</sup> Panels included "Antisemitism in the Guise of Anti-Zionism: Defining the Borders of Legitimate Criticism" and "Antisemitism in International Organizations and Human Rights Groups." At the 2015 gathering, Netanyahu succinctly summed up the prevailing view by saying that the current "treatment" of Israel was no different from that "of our forebears. The Jewish state is being treated among the nations the way the Jewish people were treated for generations."<sup>51</sup>

Particularly from the third Forum conference onward, the gatherings became an opportunity for the Israeli government and pro-Israel advocacy organizations to strategize ways of combating BDS. In 2009, an anti-BDS working group was convened, proposing "legislative prohibitions" against the boycott campaign while "acknowledging the different legal traditions" in various countries.<sup>52</sup> At the 2013 conference, a "BDS and Delegitimization Task Force" produced a plan that included proposals to "lobby elected officials to adopt and strengthen anti-discrimination laws" and "educate officials about the connections between delegitimization and anti-Semitism."<sup>53</sup> At the 2015 conference, a working-group-produced plan on "Antisemitism in the Guise of Delegitimization and Anti-Zionism" recommended "going on the offensive" by "expos[ing] connections between the BDS movement and antisemitism," as well as by "work[ing] more closely with donors, trustees and high-level university officials to make them aware of antisemitism on their campuses in the form of BDS."<sup>54</sup>

## The Role of Quasi-official Bodies

At the same time as the Israeli government has been making strenuous efforts to equate Palestine solidarity activism, BDS, and anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, an important role has also been played by a number of groups that are formally NGOs but enjoy close ties to, and work with,

Israeli officials. In fact, some of these organizations—dubbed “GONGOs” (government-operated NGOs) by Israeli journalist Yossi Gurvitz<sup>55</sup>—were working to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism and toxify support for Palestinian rights long before the Israeli government dedicated resources to targeting, in particular, the BDS movement. These “GONGOs”—two examples of which are considered below—not only seek to delegitimize BDS activism but frequently target Palestinian, Israeli, and West-based mainstream human rights organizations for simply campaigning against the international law and human rights violations perpetrated by the Israeli state and the Israeli military. In the Israel advocacy ecosphere, such groups serve to produce and disseminate the materials subsequently used by both Israeli officials and diplomats, as well as pro-Israel civil society organizations, to target charities and NGOs working on Palestinian rights.

## NGO MONITOR

In August–September 2001, at the height of the Second Intifada, an international anti-racism conference took place under UN auspices in Durban, South Africa. The gathering made headlines, however, for the withdrawal of the United States and Israel over the conference’s support for the Palestinian struggle, as well as language that Washington saw as legitimizing reparations for slavery. More than a month prior to the conference, U.S. officials hinted that they might boycott the conference, citing a “series of insertions into the draft declaration . . . equat[ing] Zionism with racism and accus[ing] Israel of ethnic cleansing.”<sup>56</sup> The United States did indeed walk out. The *New York Times* reported how then-secretary of state Colin L. Powell said negotiators “had failed to persuade Arab delegates to remove criticism of Israel from proposed conference documents that assail ‘the racist practices of Zionism’ and describe Israel’s treatment of Palestinians as a ‘new kind of apartheid.’”<sup>57</sup> The final declaration adopted by a majority of delegates was characterized by Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres as “an outburst of hate, of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism without any consideration.”<sup>58</sup>

Among Israeli officials and pro-Israel groups, the conference quickly became—and has remained—a watchword for the supposedly anti-Semitic singling out of Israel for criticism (or, conversely, of the Palestinians, for solidarity). For Israeli academic Gerald Steinberg, the Durban conference confirmed his worst fears. A year earlier, in October 2000, with the Second Intifada only days old and dozens of Palestinians already killed by Israeli forces, the Bar Ilan University-based analyst published a piece in the *Jerusalem Post* in which he argued that “the first priority” was “fighting the propaganda war.”<sup>59</sup> A few weeks later, in an op-ed titled “Child Sacrifice Is Palestinian Paganism,” Steinberg claimed Palestinians were guilty of “willful child sacrifice.”<sup>60</sup> And in April 2002, in the aftermath of the Durban conference, he penned another op-ed where he talked about assailing “non-governmental organizations and aid agencies” that he described as “tainted by their support of anti-Israel political agendas.” The time had come for the long-overdue “dismantling [of] these UN groups and NGOs,” he wrote.<sup>61</sup>

Steinberg had found his niche. That year, he founded NGO Monitor, initially run from the Institute of Contemporary Affairs within the well-known right-wing Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA).<sup>62</sup> From the very beginning—origins which the organization today avoids publicizing—NGO Monitor had close ties to the Israeli government;<sup>63</sup> at the time of its launch, JCPA head Dore Gold, named as NGO Monitor’s “publisher,” was also serving as a senior advisor



to then-prime minister Ariel Sharon, after having previously worked as an Israeli diplomat and negotiator.<sup>64</sup> In addition, as reported by +972, Steinberg himself claimed to be working for, or of having worked for, the Israeli government as a consultant *after* founding NGO Monitor.<sup>65</sup> During NGO Monitor's early days, Steinberg coauthored a piece laying out the project's goals and the context for its establishment.<sup>66</sup> The article goes over familiar ground, with accusations that "humanitarian NGOs" had "played a major role in the ongoing ideological campaign to delegitimize Israel" and were engaged in "distorting basic norms." Thus, Steinberg continued, "NGO Monitor has set itself the task of monitoring the activities of such NGOs" with the "fundamental objectives" of analyzing "core agendas, biases, and long-term goals of . . . [NGOs] with regard to Israel."

From the very beginning of its output, NGO Monitor sought to highlight—and call into question—external (often European) funding for local, Palestinian rights-focused NGOs,<sup>67</sup> and it continues to do so. In 2017, the organization was part of a joint campaign with the Israeli state to "cut off foreign government funding for Palestinian human rights groups" using "smear tactics and misinformation."<sup>68</sup> A spokesperson for Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly acknowledged that the ministry worked closely with NGO Monitor. "There is a level of coordination and we share information," the official is quoted as saying by Middle East Eye.<sup>69</sup> "The aims of the Israeli government are no secret in this instance . . . and when NGOs have pertinent aims and objectives, then we are happy to cooperate."<sup>70</sup> In 2017, NGO Monitor was described by Israeli rights group B'Tselem's Sarit Michaeli as "a partner in the Israeli government's war against NGOs that resist the occupation."<sup>71</sup> In the same vein, Israeli human rights lawyer Michael Sfard has described NGO Monitor as "a militia of the Israeli government that works symbiotically with it to promote the same agenda: perpetuating the occupation by slandering and thwarting the funding of organizations that are working to end it."<sup>72</sup>

NGO Monitor has thrown itself into the Israeli government's more recent campaign to sabotage the BDS movement and advance a definition of anti-Semitism that delegitimizes anti-Zionism. In June 2016, the Knesset hosted an NGO Monitor event to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the Durban conference at which Erdan told attendees, "We must go from defense to offense and . . . display the truth about pro-BDS organizations and activists."<sup>73</sup> At the same event, former Member of Knesset (MK) Michael Oren described the Durban conference as "a war to prevent us from being a sovereign Jewish state in the land of Israel. . . . The BDS is very similar to ISIS. ISIS is an organization in an area, but ISIS is firstly an idea, a very dangerous idea." In a presentation titled "Applying Working Definitions of Antisemitism to the NGO and UN Communities," Steinberg made clear his efforts were based on the IHRA working definition. During the March 2019 conference where he presented, which was held at Indiana University, Steinberg stated, "The purpose of the work that I'm doing now and my colleagues at NGO Monitor is to try to expand the normative impact of the [IHRA] working definition . . . particularly in the realms of the United Nations and of nongovernmental organizations."<sup>74</sup>

## SHURAT HADIN

Another example of a "GONGO" is Shurat HaDin. Founded in 2003 by attorney Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, Shurat HaDin is "dedicated to protecting the State of Israel" by "fighting

academic and economic boycotts, and challenging those who seek to delegitimize the Jewish State” using “court systems around the world to go on the legal offensive against Israel’s enemies.”<sup>75</sup> When it was launched, Shurat HaDin portrayed itself as a “a non-political and independent body which is not affiliated with any branch or agency of the Israeli government nor any political party.”<sup>76</sup> A U.S. diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks told a different story, however.<sup>77</sup> The leaked cable reports Darshan-Leitner telling U.S. officials during a 2007 meeting that “in its early years” Shurat HaDin “took direction from the GOI [Government of Israel] on which cases to pursue,” and that “in many of her cases she receives evidence from GOI officials.”<sup>78</sup> The cable goes on to quote Darshan-Leitner directly: “The [Israeli] National Security Council (NSC) legal office saw the use of civil courts as a way to do things that they are not authorized to do.”<sup>79</sup>

Shurat HaDin has grown over the years and Darshan-Leitner has gone on to reiterate the above statements. In a 2014 YouTube interview with Swedish Jewish Dialogue (which describes itself as “the only independent and prominent pro-Israeli NGO in Scandinavia that aims to create a legitimate and correct attitude towards Israel and the Jewish People”), Darshan-Leitner says “governments cannot do what we do.”<sup>80</sup> Citing “political restraints” and “international treaties,” the Shurat HaDin founder adds that “private lawyers can play a role . . . the government cannot do.”<sup>81</sup> Israeli state officials, for their part, have expressed gratitude for the organization’s work. Education Minister Naftali Bennett has hailed Shurat HaDin as “a true strategic asset to the very security of the State of Israel,” while Yesh Atid party leader MK Yair Lapid has been forthright about the links between the official Israeli sphere and the organization.<sup>82</sup> “We are partners,” he is quoted as saying on Shurat HaDin’s website. “You are leading the legal fight; we are leading the fight in the media and in the political arena.”<sup>83</sup> Speaking at a Shurat HaDin-organized event in 2015, then-defense minister Moshe Ya’alon praised the organization for “fighting one of Israel’s challenges of today—lawfare, BDS, delegitimization of the State of Israel and its right to exist as a Jewish state,” and thanked Darshan-Leitner personally “for what you’re doing for the State of Israel.”<sup>84</sup>

Shurat HaDin’s efforts are deployed through a plethora of lawsuits, including one in 2011 (that “went nowhere”) claiming that Carter had “defrauded consumers” with *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*<sup>85</sup> and another against a pro-BDS Australian academic on the grounds that he was “in breach of the country’s anti-racism laws” (the case was dismissed by the Federal Court of Australia).<sup>86</sup> In 2019, Shurat HaDin worked with the Israeli government on the latter’s protracted and ultimately successful efforts to deport Human Rights Watch official Omar Shakir.<sup>87</sup> When the Israeli Supreme Court upheld the expulsion, Shurat HaDin publicly cheered the decision, proud of its contribution.<sup>88</sup>

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On 4 November 2019, president Reuven Rivlin hosted a number of international officials tasked with combating anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States, including the EU’s von Schnurbein; U.S. envoy Carr; UK special envoy for post-Holocaust issues Lord Eric Pickles; German government commissioner on anti-Semitism Dr. Felix Klein; and French special representative on racism, anti-Semitism, and discrimination Frédéric Potier.<sup>89</sup> “Anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism. There are no gray areas,” the Israeli president told his guests. “The moment it [criticism of Israel] turns to boycotts and actions against Israel that are influenced by anti-Semitism—we will not accept it.” This conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism does not bode well for fighting the

genuine threat posed by anti-Semitism, but it does promise yet further, and intensified, efforts to censor Palestinians and their allies.

Nevertheless, there are signs of a growing resistance to Israel's efforts to equate fighting anti-Semitism with delegitimizing the Palestinians' struggle for basic rights—part of what Butler, in her review of Weiss's book, calls "forms of solidarity," which establish that "the relations among us are not mere analogies, but living connections." The 2020 platform of the U.S. activist group IfNotNow makes plain that white nationalism and U.S. support for Israel's military occupation of the Palestinians constitute the Jewish American community's most urgent crisis today. "As people in America, Israel, and all over the world face the threat of racist authoritarian politicians, it is clearer than ever that the fate of Jews is inextricably tied to the fate of all those who are oppressed, including Palestinians. In particular, we know that the struggle against antisemitism is linked to the struggle for Palestinian freedom," the platform states.<sup>90</sup> Such initiatives become increasingly valuable in the face of the continuing offensive by the Israeli government and its allies to criminalize critics of Israel and BDS activists.

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Ben White is a writer and analyst specializing in Palestine/Israel. He has published widely in international media outlets, including Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and others. His latest book, *Cracks in the Wall: Beyond Apartheid in Palestine/Israel*, published by Pluto Press, appeared in 2018. He has addressed the Houses of Parliament and Amnesty UK and spoken at universities in both the UK and North America.

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