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RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

## Broadbent calls on Harper to preserve agency's independence

Conservative appointees accused of bringing Mideast politics into Rights and Democracy

Campbell Clark --Ottawa

Tim Krochak/The Canadian Press

*Former NDP leader Ed Broadbent said he believes Ottawa wants Rights and Democracy to cut ties with any foreign group that criticizes Israel.*

A clash within the Canadian government's human-rights agency has sparked allegations that Conservative appointees are bringing Mideast politics into the arms-length organization, and has led four former presidents of Rights and Democracy to demand the Prime Minister preserve its independence.

*Ed Broadbent, who was the agency's first president and served for six years, said he believes Stephen Harper's government wants it to cut ties with any foreign group that criticizes Israel.*

"They are bringing what can only be described, it seems to me, as Middle East politics, directly into the heart of the centre. Never was there such interference before," Mr. Broadbent said.

The dispute spilled out after the Jan. 7 death of the agency's president, Rémy Beaugard.

Staffers wrote a letter demanding three board members resign, saying they had mistreated Mr. Beaugard.

Now, Mr. Broadbent and three other past presidents – Warren Allmand, Jean-Louis Roy and Jean-Paul Hubert – have asked Mr. Harper to address "a subversion of the independence and integrity of the institution."

The chair of the board of Rights and Democracy, Aurel Braun, yesterday called that offensive.

A trio of grants to organizations in the Middle East were part of a dispute between Mr. Beauregard and some board members, he said, but added that the larger clash was over staff's accountability to the board to provide details of spending and accept board policy.

The grants included two of about \$10,000 each sent a year ago to groups in Gaza: Al Haq and Al Mezan. . At a meeting the night Mr. Beauregard died, the agency's board voted to "repudiate" those grants.

Those groups accuse Israel of human-rights violations on their websites and are some "of the most vitriolic anti-Israeli organizations," Mr. Braun said, adding that giving them grants to investigate charges of rights abuses by Israel does not pass the test for using taxpayers' money.

He argued that there is no way to ensure that some of the money given to groups in Gaza does not go to the banned terrorist organization Hamas, which controls the area.

Mr. Braun also said Al Haq's executive director, Shawan Jabarin, is an activist for the banned Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Mr. Jabarin has insisted he is not.

Mr. Broadbent said staff at Rights and Democracy asked Foreign Affairs officials if the Gaza groups were credible and were given a green light.

He likened the board's clash with Mr. Beauregard over a few small grants to the government's decision to cut funding to church-coalition aid group, Kairos, which Immigration Minister Jason Kenney linked to criticisms of Israel. Other aid groups, Mr. Broadbent said, are being given a warning: "There's a chill."