

Open Letter: Human Rights NGOs Deplore Politically-Motivated Claims Aimed at Discrediting Human Rights Defenders



1 February 2010

The Board of Directors of *Rights & Democracy*, a not-for-profit organization created by Canada's parliament in 1988 to encourage and support human rights around the world, recently voted, with substantial objection, to repudiate grants given to *Al Haq* and *Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights*, two well-known Palestinian human rights organizations located respectively in the West Bank and in Gaza

The Chairperson of the Board of Directors of *Rights and Democracy*, Mr. Aurel Braun, was quoted (in *The Globe & Mail*) as criticizing both organizations for being two 'of the most vitriolic anti-Israeli organizations' and for 'their accusations against Israel's human rights violations. Further, the article reports that Braun had said 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'. He also led a personal attack against *Al Haq's* executive director – the well-known human rights defender Mr. Shawan Jabarin – for allegedly being an activist in a PLO faction (*ibid*). These remarks made by the chairperson of *Rights and Democracy* are extremely grave as they seem to support the Israeli government's policy of silencing human rights' defenders.

In recent years, Israel's attempts to silence any voice of opposition regarding its human rights violation, have reached alarming levels. In addition to arrests of activists and the closing down of organizations, Israel has also denied many human rights defenders the possibility of effectively advocating for human rights by the imposition of travel bans. A new tactic used by Israel, supported by right-wing groups, is to go after the funders of human rights organizations. In this context, it came as a shock to us – Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organizations – that instead of advocating for and defending human rights defenders, who work to counter Israeli violations of human rights and ensure respect for international human rights and humanitarian law, *the board of Rights & Democracy* has instead chosen to join the side of the violator.

The undersigned organizations contend that labeling esteemed human rights organizations such as *Al Haq* and *Al Mezan* as 'questionable' under the aforementioned circumstances is to take sides with the violator. It seems that the Board's decision to repudiate grants to *Al Haq* and *Al Mezan*, might well be because they have been doing their job too well, in particular their investigations of Israel's human rights violations during last winter's attack on Gaza. Or perhaps, it could be due to *Al Haq*'s exposure of and litigation against the involvement of Canadian businesses in such human rights violations in the West Bank. Maybe it was this unexpected and apparently unwelcomed exposure that prompted *Right and Democracy*'s recent misguided conduct.

The contention that *Al Haq* and *Al Mezan* are some "of the most vitriolic anti-Israeli organizations," because they 'accuse' Israel of human rights violations on their websites is a distorted and misleading representation of the facts. *Al Mezan* and *Al-Haq* carry out professional documentation of the human rights violations committed by all of the involved actors in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Their documentation has been deemed reliable and precise by international bodies that apply the strictest relevant standards. Without this proper documentation by them and other human rights NGOs, defending human rights is a mission impossible.

The two organizations receive support from a wide array of donors including governments and non-governmental contributors who are satisfied with their work and their management due to the transparency that each organization exhibits.

The public smear campaign initiated by the Board of Directors of *Rights & Democracy* is intended to stop NGOs from doing their vital work of human rights monitoring and reporting. It is equal to a call to cease altogether any meaningful promotion of respect and protection of human rights in the oPt, in clear contradiction to Canada's declared interest in furtherance of universal values of human rights and the promotion of democracy.

In November 2009, the UN General Assembly reiterated its commitment to defend human rights defenders recognizing 'the substantial role that human rights defenders can play in supporting efforts to strengthen peace and development, through dialogue, openness, participation and justice, including by monitoring, reporting on and contributing to the promotion and protection of human rights.'

Israel, recognizing that same strong role, carries out deliberate policies and practices that directly or indirectly seek to suppress, obstruct and delegitimize human rights organizations in Israel and the oPt. We denounce these policies and practices, and call on fellow human rights defenders around the world to also denounce them. We also denounce Israeli travel bans on human rights activists operating in the oPt and Israel, and especially the blanket travel ban on Gaza human rights defenders. While Israel is violating their rights, Rights and Democracy Board is trying to delegitimize them, using the same rhetoric.

We demand that we be allowed to meet, to advocate, and to struggle for what we all hold dear: human rights and social justice.

Signatories:

Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority Right in Israel
Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association Ramallah,
AL Dameer Association for Human Rights –Gaza
AL-JANA – The Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts – Beirut, Lebanon
Al-Quds Human Rights Clinic
American Jews for A Just Peace
Architects & Planners for Justice in Palestine
The Association Swiss-Palestine ASP
Association for the Support of Needy, Palestinian Children, Switzerland
Association France-Palestine Solidarité (AFPS)
Arab Association for Human Rights – HRA
BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights
Boston Coalition For Palestinians Rights (BCPR)
Coalition of Women for Peace (Israel)
Defence for Children International - Palestine Section
Ensan Center for Democracy & Human Rights
Flemish Palestine Solidarity Committee
Gaza Community Mental Health Programme
Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement
Group for Justice and Peace in Palestine (JPP) Switzerland
Habitat International Coalition – Housing and Land Rights Network
The International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN)
Institute for Policy Studies Washington DC USA
International Jewish Anti-zionist Network (IJAN), France
International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network
The Israeli Association for the Palestinian Prisoners
The International Committee of the National Lawyers Guild
Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center (JLAC)
Jewish Voice for Peace, USA
Labor for Palestine

Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate

Medico International

Medico Swiss

Mopat – Movement Palestine for All - Brazil

The Netherlands Palestine Committee

New York City Labor against the War

Olive Oil Campaign Switzerland

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), UK

Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between People

Palestine Think Tank

STW (Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign)

Palestinian Workers Union –Greece

The Peace People in Belfast

Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHR-Israel)

Public Committee against Torture in Israel (PCATI)

Right to Education Campaign – Birzeit

Tlaxcala Translations Collective

U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel

Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC)

Women in Black Union Square in New York City

Women in Black (Vienna)

Women in Black, Maastricht, Netherlands

cc: Right & Democracy, Canada, Fax: (514) 283-3792

Source: Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights

http://www.mezan.org/en/details.php?id=9524&ddname=Human%20Rights&id2=7&id_dept=12&p=center_more