Absurdity of Defense Minister Gantz’s Policy

Human Rights Organizations Classified as Terrorist; Settler Terrorists Act with Impunity:

Partners for Progressive Israel on the Absurdity of Defense Minister Gantz’s Policy

Last week’s decision by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to declare six Palestinian human rights groups to be “terror organizations” is the only latest in a series of deeply troubling steps that both exemplifies and further cements Israel’s brutally undemocratic control of the occupied territories.

As is typical of military rule, which denies basic civil rights to the occupied population, Gantz made his declaration with an unacceptable lack of transparency, not bothering to share detailed evidence – with the public, with the international community, or even with members of his own government!

The UN Human Rights Office, for example, has termed the limited details released so far “extremely vague or irrelevant.” The US and European Union have similarly noted that related Israeli allegations submitted to the EU earlier this year had “not been substantiated.” Meanwhile, Meretz chair, Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, has publicly called on Gantz to brief him so that Horowitz, himself a member of Israel’s top-level Security Cabinet, might be privy to the pertinent data. As Israeli law professors Eliav Lieblich and Adam Shinar wrote this week, “In 2021, it should be clear to everyone that criminalizing human rights groups on the basis of classified intelligence is absolutely unacceptable.”

If Defense Minister Gantz has real information that the six organizations are part of or working with a genuine terrorist organization, he must make it public immediately. Until such time, we regard his declaration as suspect and unwarranted.

We concur with Minister Horowitz, who stated that, because Israel is “a strong, sovereign state … in a situation of occupation [it] must be extremely cautious about imposing restrictions, which carry human rights implications, on Palestinian civil society organizations.” Horowitz referred to the whole affair as “problematic,” employing a level of understatement apparently obliged by his role in the cabinet.

Unfortunately, the problem runs even deeper than this latest egregious incident. In the absurd reality depicted by Israel’s security establishment, human rights organizations are classified as terrorist, while actual settler terrorists are being allowed to perpetrate their acts – against Palestinians and against Israeli and international human rights activists – with effective
impunity and increasing frequency. As we noted in our statement of September 30, Israel’s security establishment is turning a blind eye to daily settler violence, amounting to a form of complicity that aids and abets the perpetrators.

To add insult to injury, the far-right Israeli Im Tirtzu organization has now demonstrated the dubious application of the terrorist label in Israel. The group has filed a police complaint demanding that Environmental Protection Minister Tamar Zandberg and Knesset Member Gaby Lasky, both of Meretz, as well as a variety of leading Israeli human rights activists, serve lengthy jail time for purportedly violating Israel’s Counter-Terrorism Law. Im Tirtzu’s claim? That these figures have displayed sympathy for the six Palestinian organizations in question and thus qualify for being designated as terrorists themselves. The absurdity is self-evident.

Gestures like Gantz’s latest declaration reduce Israel’s standing in the world, and add further evidence that Israel is leaving no room for nonviolent Palestinian resistance to the occupation. That’s dangerous and works against Israel’s security, while having no effect on the genuine terrorists out there, who are probably laughing at the discomfiture of moderate Palestinian activists.

Partners for Progressive Israel stands with the many members of Israel’s coalition government who are deeply skeptical of this latest step, and we are working with allied organizations in the U.S. to amplify our message and educate decision-makers and the general public. We hope that our actions, together with the pushback coming from Minister Gantz’s colleagues as well as the diverse voices speaking out in the international community, can help the defense minister see – or exert sufficient pressure so that he realizes – the multiple errors of his ways.

28 October 2021