

From the “River to the Sea”: B’Tselem’s Demonization Crosses the Line

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Summary

On January 12, 2021, the Israeli NGO B’Tselem launched a high-visibility international campaign, including a position paper, standalone website, outreach to sympathetic media platforms, as well as an eight-page insert in the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*. Under the headline, “A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid,” the organization escalated its political and ideological condemnations that go far beyond criticism of policies. The attack on Israel’s role as a haven for the Jewish people (the Law of Return) and the phrase “from the river to the sea” echo long-standing Palestinian terminology for the destruction of Israel. This highly destructive and polarizing program was funded and enabled by B’Tselem’s donors – primarily European governments.

B’Tselem’s language is essentially anti-Zionist, reflecting the organization’s accelerating departure from an emphasis on documenting alleged human rights violations in the West Bank to challenging the legitimacy of Israel’s existence. Phrases such as apartheid and “Jewish supremacy” repeat the canard that labels Jewish self-determination as inherently racist, and signals the embrace of a “one-state” agenda. At the end, the publication suggests the replacement of Israel with a bi-national state: “There are various political paths to a just future here, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.”

The emphasis on the “apartheid” accusation – which [B’Tselem had already deployed in 2002](#) – also advances the campaign lobbying the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch a formal investigation into Israel, and to promote BDS (boycott, divestment,

sanctions) internationally. The timing of this paper and exploitation of “supremacy” rhetoric also appears to be timed to influence policies of the incoming Biden administration and the Democratic Congress in the US.

Taken as a policy statement, B’Tselem’s “river to the sea” publication and campaign is deeply contradictory, at once castigating the possibility of Israeli annexation of portions of the West Bank as a violation of international law, while insisting that Israel establish a unified policy for all residents of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. As discussed below, the language mixes tired clichés with de-contextualized allegations that do not comport with reality.

B’Tselem’s announcement was widely portrayed in the media as dramatic and unexpected. However, as previously demonstrated in NGO Monitor research, B’Tselem has been pursuing [an increasingly radicalized agenda](#) since Hagai Elad became executive director in 2014. Human rights advocacy has been replaced with very divisive “[dissent](#)” and lobbying in Europe and the US, while partnerships are formed with repressive regimes to [demonize Israel at the UN](#), accompanied by thinly-veiled calls for international actors to impose BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) against Israel.

B’Tselem’s foreign funders – which include the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden (via the NGO Development Center), the NIF, and Bread for the World-EED (Germany) – have, to date, ignored this fundamental shift. The question remains whether they will continue to support this NGO as it becomes further marginalized. (See Appendix for details on B’Tselem funding.)

The following analysis highlights the numerous falsehoods in B’Tselem’s assertion of “apartheid,” providing missing context, exposing outdated sources, and debunking claims made in the NGO’s recent publication. (For more detailed analysis of the apartheid canard see [NGO Apartheid State Campaign: Deliberately Immoral or Intellectually Lazy?](#)) Additionally, it will describe the group’s BDS advocacy, while carefully avoiding using the term itself.

Antisemitic tropes in B’Tselem’s report

The use of the term “Jewish supremacy” throughout the publication is a transparent attempt to invoke a parallel between Israel and White Supremacy – a noxious and racist ideology. This comparison is absurd on its face, as B’Tselem distorts legitimate expressions of Jewish self-determination into sinister and racist.

Additionally, B’Tselem’s conclusion: “There are various political paths to a just future

here, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea,” suggests – at best – ambivalence about Israel’s future. The use of the phrase “from the river to the sea,” echoing a long-standing euphemism for the destruction of Israel, is highly disturbing.

In this context, the smear of “apartheid” is particularly potent, repeating propaganda from the 1970s and onwards, drawing a direct line to South Africa, and labeling the Jewish State as inherently racist. The objective of such comparisons is to delegitimize the concept of Jewish sovereign equality, regardless of borders. In this regard, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition clearly describes “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor” as an expression of antisemitism.

Noted researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that Israel does not come close to rising to the level of an “apartheid regime.” The lack of systematic, institutionalized oppression that existed in South Africa, particularly in the realm of political and civil rights that are enjoyed by Israel’s non-Jewish population, renders the analogy moot. These scholars also note that no other regime, aside from South Africa has ever been deemed to meet the international definition of apartheid, not even murderous and oppressive regimes legally imposing separation based on race, religion, and gender such as Saudi Arabia and China. This unique use of this term in the context of a political conflict also cheapens the immense suffering of the real victims of Apartheid South Africa.

Despite B’Tselem’s dodge that “apartheid does not mean an exact copy of the former South African regime,” there remains an obvious disconnect between the Israeli reality and actual “apartheid.”

“Immigration – for Jews only”

B’Tselem decries challenges faced by Palestinians in attaining residency in Israel, contrasting it to the relative ease with which Jews from around the world can emigrate to Israel: “Any Jew in the world and his or her children, grandchildren and spouses are entitled to immigrate to Israel at any time and receive Israeli citizenship, with all of its associated rights....In contrast, non-Jews have no right to legal status in Israeli-controlled areas. Granting status is at the almost complete discretion of officials – the Minister of the Interior (within sovereign Israel) or the military commander (in the Occupied Territories).”

This statement is highly offensive and blatantly false, as non-Jews born in Israel acquire citizenship at birth, just as Israeli Jews do.

Additionally, this libel fundamentally distorts the motivations and international legitimacy of policies related entry into Israel and attainment of citizenship.

Law of Return

The Law of Return grants a special track to Jews from around the world seeking Israeli citizenship. Nothing in the law discriminates against non-Jewish Israeli citizens and is not unique as other countries with diaspora populations such as Ireland, Spain and [Germany](#), among many others, that have instituted legislation to simplify emigration from members of their diaspora.

More importantly, B'Tselem deviously erases the context: the Law of Return was enacted, in the shadow of the Holocaust, to provide a safe haven for Jews who for centuries suffered persecution around the world. The sharp rise in physical violence and other forms of antisemitism around the world in recent years only highlights the need for a Jewish port of refuge.

Additionally, the Law of Return is consistent with the standards of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), which mandates the establishment of “special measures” for the “advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups” for protecting the “equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” As noted by the UN Committee for the ICERD, this provision is intended to remedy “inequalities resulting from the circumstances of history that continue to deny to vulnerable groups and individuals the advantages essential for the full development of the human personality” and to “prevent[] further imbalances from arising.”

Thus, beyond ignoring the worrying rise of violent attacks against Jews around the world, B'Tselem's highly distorted analysis is incongruous with the practice in other democracies and with international legal conventions.

Citizenship and Entry Law

The Citizenship and Entry Law referred to by B'Tselem was adopted by the Knesset on July 31, 2003, placing limits on granting Israeli citizenship to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. It was enacted due to individuals [“who were granted legal status in Israel based on their marriage to an Israeli citizen, and took advantage of their Israeli ID to pass checkpoints and carry into Israel either suicide bombers or explosives](#)

.”

Specifically, the law followed a wave of attacks in March 2002 that killed 135 Israelis and injured more than 700. According to the Israeli Ministry of Justice, prior to the 2003 amendments, [23 terrorist attacks](#), including a March 2002 suicide bombing in Haifa that killed 15, were carried out by Palestinians who had abused the prior law to gain access to Israel.

In a May 2017 Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee hearing, an Israeli security official [revealed that, from 2001 to April 2017, 49 Palestinians who had received legal status in Israel as a result of “family unification,” engaged in terrorist activity.](#)

Under international law, countries have the right to set conditions for entry. Such conditions can be made based on the nationality of those who seek to enter. Indeed, the US has a [preferred visa program](#) where nationals of particular countries may visit the US without going through the full visa procedures. The ICERD (Art. 1.2) specifically mentions that such distinctions made between citizens (Israelis) and noncitizens (Palestinians) do not constitute racial discrimination.

In addition, most countries do not grant automatic citizenship or even residency rights to non-nationals as a result of marriage to a citizen. There is in fact, no principle in international law for married persons to be able to live in whichever country they choose.

Jerusalem Residency

Incorporating the sensitive issue of Jerusalem in its campaign, B’Tselem also condemns the revocation of residency status for Palestinians claiming residency in Jerusalem who moved to the West Bank. However, the source of this claim is totally outdated, based on a citation to a [joint B’Tselem-HaMoked publication from April 1997](#).

“Taking over land for Jews while crowding Palestinians in enclaves”

B’Tselem continues to mix unrelated legal interpretations and distorted statistics to claim that “Jewish supremacy” is behind Israeli planning and building policy. For example, the NGO attributes the fact that 90% of land in Israel is state-owned to anti-Palestinian animus. In reality, according to a 2019 study from the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), Tel Aviv University, and Haifa University, [45% of land in Arab communities is privately owned](#). The same report also noted that the Israeli government adopted

resolutions in 2014 and 2015, designed specifically to simplify and increase planning and building in these areas.

B'Tselem also falsely alleges the “Israeli regime severely [restricts](#) construction and development in the little remaining land in Palestinian communities within its sovereign territory,” citing to a [2012 report by another politicized NGO \(Bimkom\)](#).

However, in [December 2015, the Israeli government initiated a 5-year, NIS 15 billion plan to develop non-Jewish towns in Israel](#), including by improving planning and building. According to the Israeli government Planning Authority, in 2020, nearly 38% of all housing approvals issued in 2020 were for homes in Arab communities – nearly double the proportion of Arab citizens in the country.

Another invented manifestation of “apartheid” is the existence of admission committees, through which small communities review applications for residency. B'Tselem fails to note that these institutions overwhelmingly affect Israeli Jews who do not conform to the stated ideals of the particular community. In recent years, [Jewish applicants have been denied residence on the basis of their dress, marital status, religious practices, concerns about their potential investments](#), and a variety of other considerations.

Major distortions also characterize B'Tselem's allegations of discrimination in building and planning for Palestinians in the West Bank, claiming that this forces them to build illegally. However, in criticizing Israeli demolitions, it ignores the layers of judicial review that such actions undergo and the regularly exercised rights of Palestinians to petition Israeli courts to appeal and prevent such enforcement measures. Similarly, the NGO ignores the variety of valid reasons for rejecting a building permit such as safety, health, and environmental considerations. (For more information on Israeli judicial review of demolitions in the West Bank, see NGO Monitor's “[Analysis of Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights Complaint Regarding JCB](#)”).

“Restriction of Palestinians’ freedom of movement”

B'Tselem misstates Israeli policy, mischaracterizing genuine security concerns as discrimination. The group claims that “Israel allows its Jewish and Palestinian citizens and residents to travel freely throughout the area. Exceptions are the prohibition on entering the Gaza Strip, which it defines ‘hostile territory’ and the (mostly formal) prohibition on entering areas ostensibly under PA responsibility (Area A).”

Israeli Jews are indeed prohibited from entering Area A of the West Bank – under full PA control – but Israeli Arabs regularly and easily enter these areas. Premised on legitimate

security concerns, Israeli policy distinguishes between Israeli Jews, who would face (and have faced) violence if they enter Palestinian towns and cities, and Israeli Arabs who face no such threat.

B'Tselem also decries the requirement of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza to receive permits to enter Israel or to travel through it to reach the other territory, claiming that "Israel treats every permit issued to a Palestinian as an act of grace rather than the fulfillment of a vested right." Israel is however, under no obligation to allow non-citizens to enter its territory. Obviously, the requirement for Palestinians to obtain permits is a practical security measure implemented to protect Israelis from terrorists; in several instances, such permits have been abused by those seeking to carry out [attacks on Israeli civilians](#).

At the same time, B'Tselem fails to mention that the Israeli government allows [100,000 Palestinian laborers to enter Israel on a daily basis](#), and the significant improvements made to crossings infrastructure and issuance of "smart IDs" to facilitate this movement.

Additionally, the NGO sees Israeli West Bank checkpoints and the Security Barrier as sinister proof of "apartheid," as opposed to legitimate security instruments. In reality, checkpoints fulfill Israel's responsibility for security in the West Bank, agreed to by the Palestinians in the Oslo Accords, and its obligation to protect its citizens from terror threats. Israeli courts have heard numerous cases relating to the barrier and have [ordered](#) the barrier [rerouted](#) in [favor of Palestinian petitions](#).

Regarding Gaza, B'Tselem repeats the tired trope that Israel controls the territory through its administration of the exit points from Gaza into Israel. This is illogical and seemingly rejects Israel's right and responsibility to maintain security and order at crossings into the country, and largely ignores the fact that Gaza also borders Egypt. Crucially, Israel's decision to forcibly expel 8,000 Jewish Israelis from their homes in Gaza in 2005, highlights the falsehood of B'Tselem's claims about "Judaizing" land to engender "Jewish supremacy."

"Denial of Palestinians' right to political participation"

In this section, B'Tselem alleges that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are disenfranchised – not because the PA has refused to hold elections since 2006 – but rather because Israel has not ceded sufficient responsibilities to the PA. It is difficult to understand how the delineation of responsibilities and rights, mutually negotiated and

agreed to in the Oslo agreements, is proof of “apartheid.” Moreover, it ignores the fact that the governing body in Area A of the West Bank is the PA and Hamas in Gaza.

Regarding Jerusalem residents, B’Tselem complains that “As permanent residents of Israel, they can vote in municipal elections but not for parliament. On the other hand, Israel makes it difficult for them to participate in PA elections.” This conveniently ignores the fact that these individuals can apply for Israeli citizenship – thus granting the right to vote in national elections – an opportunity that has been overwhelmingly rejected by Palestinian permanent residents since first afforded by Israel. Nevertheless, in 2019, [1,200 Palestinians applied and receives citizenship](#). Additionally, in November 2020, the [Israeli Ministry of Interior announced new eligibility criteria](#), which will make it easier for these residents to attain Israeli citizenship.

The discussion about Israeli interference with Palestinian political protests is embarrassingly outdated, as the NGO cites to a five-paragraph analysis it wrote in 2010.

B’Tselem also mischaracterizes Israel’s 2011 law allowing victims of discriminatory anti-Israel boycotts to recover damages from their harassers. Promoting economic boycotts can cause material harm, and those engaging in this practice should be responsible for the damage they cause.

BDS by any other name

Beyond generating headlines by demonizing Israel, the use of “apartheid” rhetoric is part of the lobbying effort encouraging the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch a formal investigation into Israel (see NGO Monitor’s analysis, “The Role of Israeli NGOs in Supporting the International Criminal Court (ICC) ‘Investigation’”) and pressing European countries to extend BDS measures.

While B’Tselem has been open about its efforts to encourage ICC intervention, it has been careful to not explicitly endorse BDS, reflecting donor policies that exclude groups that participate in this campaign. Nevertheless, a series of statements in 2018-2020 by B’Tselem Executive Director Hagai Elad clearly demonstrate B’Tselem’s active support for international sanctions against Israel:

- While discussing Israeli demolitions on a [November 23, 2020 Foundation for Middle East Peace \(FMEP\) webinar](#), B’Tselem head Elad declared, “What’s important is introducing consequences. That’s the key.”
- While addressing the European Parliament Committee on Human Rights on [November 16, 2020](#), Elad argued, “Consequences for human rights violations can

be introduced through European foreign policy, by effectively using Europe's considerable leverage. Clearly, the decision to not do so is a political choice. It undermines Europe's commitment to human rights and weakens the rules-based international order."

- In a [July 27, 2020 interview in Ha'aretz](#), the interviewer, [Ravit Hecht](#), noted "Some argue that your position inviting external pressure on Israel distances you from most of the public." Elad responded, "If someone has a better idea on how to end the occupation, I'd be happy to embrace it. It's an urgent task, which has been waiting for years already, and this is the practical, moral and nonviolent way we've identified to achieve it."
- In a [February 2, 2020 interview on Al-Jazeera](#), Elad asserted that "The question for a global audience looking at the prolonged injustice that Israel desires to perpetuate against Palestinians is, 'what are you going to do about it? Are you going to watch this being allowed to proceed, now with an American official stamp of approval, or are you going to stand up against it?'" He added that "decisive international action" is "what is needed."
- In an [April 19, 2019 editorial in +972 Magazine](#), Elad wrote, "Regardless of possible announcements of annexation, Israel's actions to date are what we need to focus on. These, in and of themselves, should be the basis for urgent global action."
- Speaking at the [UN Security Council on October 18, 2018](#), Elad said, "The Security Council must take action. In fact, it has already decided to do so, even if in a very limited fashion. However, it is a matter of record that the Secretary General has so far had little to report to the Council on the implementation of Article 5 of Resolution 2334."¹

Conclusion

Like most of B'Tselem's work, the new campaign – based on false claims and demonization – is devoid of practical solutions. Save for its ambivalence towards the existence of a Jewish State, the NGO makes no meaningful suggestions on how Israeli security could be ensured, or what it considers legitimate expressions of Jewish self-determination and sovereign equality.

Likewise, B'Tselem appears unbothered by the inherent contradictions of its insistence that annexation is illegal and that Gaza is still occupied, with its demand that there be one legal framework "between the river and the sea."

Ultimately, this campaign is an assault on the legitimacy of a Jewish State – devoid of context, facts, and with contradictory application of international legal standards.

Foreign donations based on financial reports submitted to the Israeli Registrar of Non Profits (amounts in NIS)

2016-2019 amounts based on NGO annual financial reports; 2020 amounts based on quarterly financial reports submitted to the Israeli Registrar of Non-Profits

Donor	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Bread for the World (Germany)**	815,092	822,843	913,124	1,174,934	672,766
DanChurch Aid	156,627	167,286	170,214	166,103	169,155
Norway	198,771	307,988	341,224	673,612	689,275
Switzerland	266,101	228,870	169,674		
Diakonia (Sweden)		171,077	137,020	145,929	
NGO Development Center (NDC)	2,632,058	2,243,568	1,117,288		
European Union	233,314	363,949	592,121	282,227	728,861
Trocaire	97,806	98,802	108,338	99,630	82,715
France			30,132	124,008	130,219
Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Secretariat (joint funding from Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands)*			1,444,756	2,305,029	1,419,619

Donor	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Denmark	2,284,027	2,208,931	917,944		
Netherlands			751,939	7,115	
Catholic Relief Services (US)	227,816	373,033	334,244	392,784	455,946
AECID (Spain)	39,570	19,926			
Christian Aid	409,249	272,710	330,952	286,639	168,168
UNICEF				129,836	158,237
EED (Germany)					34,010
UN-OCHA		96,519	380,954	128,728	342,928
UNDP	935,479	522,150	52,959	229,843	317,606
UN Women					234,925
Broederlijk Delen				8,694	
FIDH				12,103	
ACPP (Spain)	19,035	14,401			
Sigrid Rausing Trust		698,175	1,394,835	1,392,600	838,763
EMHRF				14,760	
SIVMO				10,724	
Open Society Foundation		485,183	544,800	541,464	472,570
Church of Scotland		17,625	14,372		

*Until 2014, NDC managed the pooled finances of Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands through its Human Rights/Good Governance program; In 2014, NDC was replaced by NIRAS and Birzeit University, which are managing the government funding under the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Secretariat.

** On August 30, 2012, Brot für die Welt merged with the Church Development Service (Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst-EED) and formed “Brot für die Welt – Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst” (Bread for the World – Evangelical Church Development Service), as part of the new Evangelical Agency for Diakonia and Development (Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung).

Footnotes

1. Article 5 “Calls upon all States, bearing in mind paragraph 1 of this resolution, to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.”

Topics in this Report

- [Antisemitism](#)
- [Apartheid Rhetoric](#)
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- [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#)
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- Sweden
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