

How a right-wing NGO's agenda became Israeli government policy

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In August, Israeli Ambassador to Switzerland Jacob Keidar met in Bern with officials from the Swiss Foreign Ministry's Middle East desk. During the meeting, Keidar handed over an unsigned document containing a request that the Swiss government stop funding Akevot, a small research institution focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The document rehashed allegations by

right-wing organizations against Akevot, including some found in a report published by the group Ad Kan in July.

This story is an example of how easily right-wing organizations can reach Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and how the reports they issue become official Foreign Ministry policy. The Ad Kan report, despite being full of misleading and inaccurate statements, had come a government working paper presented to foreign gov-

Big Brother at the right's service

Editorial, Page 9

ernments within a month.

The document Keidar gave the Swiss Foreign Ministry was labeled a non-paper, which in diplomatic jargon means a nonbinding draft. It's not clear whether it was written by anyone from the Foreign Ministry

The document said that

the Swiss and Norwegian governments together provide 100 percent of Akevot's funding.

"This Institute aims to locate evidence of policies or decisions in the archives of the State of Israel that led, in the opinion of the researchers at the Institute, to human rights violations and transfer the findings to the alleged victims," it continued. "The purpose – legal warfare against the State of Israel inside Israel

See NGO, Page 2

NGO

Continued from page 1

and abroad. The Swiss governments' involvement deviates in our opinion from the accepted legitimate boundaries in relations between states and we request that this funding will be stopped immediately."

The document also gave "background" about Akevot that is reminiscent of right-wing propaganda. "Most of the founders and employees of 'Akevot' Institute worked or are currently working in Israeli political NGOs such as 'Yesh Din,' which are active in political campaigns against Israel in the international area," it said. "This is in order to achieve the desired result for them in controversial issues in Israel, which should be decided in democratic ways."

It added that Switzerland gave Akevot 734,000 shekels (\$202,000) from 2014 to 2017, and that Akevot listed this as its only funding source.

Akevot "uses foreign money to promote a political agenda in Israel. This is unacceptable and Israel asks to stop it," the document concluded.

Akevot, founded in 2014 to do historical research into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, currently has just three salaried employees. It publishes reports about the history of Israeli control over the West Bank based on historical documents.

Its founding grant of 264,000 shekels came from the Norwegian government. But today, its main funder is

the Swiss Foreign Ministry, in line with the Swiss view that human rights includes documenting the history of various ethnic groups.

Ad Kan, which published the July report on Akevot, was founded in 2015 by Aviram Zeevy and Gilad Ach. It is famous primarily for a report by "Uvda," an investigative television show, about how Ad Kan planted people in two left-wing organizations and thereby obtained information indicating that activists Ezra Nawi of Ta'ayush and Nasser Nawajah of B'Tselem were informing the Palestinian Authority about Palestinians interested in selling land to Jews, while knowing that the PA would execute these Palestinians.

Ad Kan's 38-page report on Akevot accuses the organization of gathering intelligence for the Swiss and Norwegian governments and stealing Israeli secrets by working together with state archivists and putting its own people on the Supreme Council of Archives. It compared Akevot's activities to the Mossad's recent theft of an Iranian nuclear archive from Tehran.

The report is based on a series of deceptions and inaccuracies. First, Akevot works openly with various Israeli public archives. It has no power to "expose Israeli secrets"; only the archives themselves can decide whether to make a document available to researchers.

By law, archival documents are sealed for decades, with the exact length of time depending on which agency provided the document. Some documents, like those pro-

vided by the Mossad, the Shin Bet security service and the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, are classified for 70 years. Haaretz reported last week that Netanyahu seeks to extend this term to 90 years.

But even documents whose classification has expired aren't automatically open to the public. Researchers must first request to see a certain file. The file is then reviewed and personal details and information liable to harm national security is censored. Only after that can the researcher see it.

Most Israeli archives, especially the Israel Defense Forces Archives, have a large backlog of material whose classification has expired but which hasn't yet been reviewed and made public. And no organization can obtain documents that the state has decided not to publish.

The Ad Kan report also claims that Prof. Gadi Algazi, a left-wing historian, is working with Akevot and helps them "reveal documents" through his position on the Supreme Council of Archives. But the council has no authority to order the release of documents; its job is merely to advise the archives on work procedures.

The report also says Algazi was appointed to the council at about the same time Akevot opened. In fact, he joined the council three and a half years afterward.

The Ad Kan report received considerable press coverage, especially in Israel Hayom. On August 1, a week after it was published, Netanyahu called Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis.

During their 40-minute call, Netanyahu asked that Switzerland stop funding Akevot.

Cassis said he'd look into the matter. A week later, Keidar submitted his document to the Swiss Foreign Ministry.

Last year, Netanyahu told his Likud party's Knesset members that he would submit legislation to stop foreign governments from funding Israeli organizations. Minister Yariv Levin



Swiss President Alain Berset with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Davos, Switzerland, in January. *Amos Ben Gershon/GPO*

prepared several versions of such a bill, but Netanyahu ultimately shelved the idea.

Instead, he is pressuring foreign leaders to stop funding specific organizations. A senior Likud official told Haaretz that before the next election, Netanyahu wants very much to be able to announce that foreign funding for several organizations had ended, in order to demonstrate the strength of his international relationships.

A source in the Prime Minister's Office said that action against left-wing organizations isn't based on orderly

staff work by either that office or the Foreign Ministry; rather, it's being led by Netanyahu's son Yair. The younger Netanyahu sees human rights groups as an anti-Semitic conspiracy that must be fought. "He's more extreme than Meir Kahane," a senior PMO official said, referring to the slain founder of the Kach party, which was outlawed in Israel for incitement to racism and in the U.S. for being a

terrorist organization. Yair Netanyahu is friends with Matan Peleg, director of the right-wing Im Tirtzu organization, which has become an extra-parliamentary arm of the PMO. Peleg collects information about left-wing groups like B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence and passes it on to the office.

Ofer Golan, Netanyahu's personal spokesman, declined to comment on this report. The Prime Minister's Office said the report was "thoroughly ridiculous," and

that thorough staff work had been done on this issue by the National Security Council, the Foreign Ministry and the Strategic Affairs Ministry. It said the government's actions are directed not at left-wing organizations, but at organizations that promote BDS or otherwise seek to delegitimize either Israel or the Israel Defense Forces under the guise of human rights work.

The staff work done on this issue will eventually result in formal proposals that will be submitted to the cabinet, the statement added. But meanwhile, Netanyahu has asked several European leaders over the last year "to halt government funding to organizations whose goal is to hurt the State of Israel and the IDF," said the Prime Minister's Office.

"The claim that this important activity stems from extraneous or personal considerations is ridiculous," it added.

The Foreign Ministry commented that it works with the National Security Council on such issues. Yair Netanyahu said Haaretz's report was completely false. "How unsurprising it is that Haaretz, which nurtures radical organizations like the New Israel Fund, Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem, has targeted Yair Netanyahu," he said in a statement.

The younger Netanyahu, the statement continued, is a private person who is entitled to have independent opinions. "We can't recall any such witch hunt against the children of previous prime ministers," it added.