

Persecution as policy

It has become routine for Israel's extreme right to malign civil society organizations. A small, relatively new group — the Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research — recently joined the ranks of the persecuted. The persecution of Akevot became official government policy after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu adopted a series of baseless claims that appeared in a report by the right-wing group Ad Kan. As a result, he asked Switzerland to stop funding Akevot (Chaim Levinson and Noa Landau, Oct. 12).

Most of Akevot's activity involves efforts to expand public access to historical documents that have been collecting dust in state archives for years, without reason and in violation of the law. Some of these documents deal with important, albeit painful and unpleasant, chapters in the history of the state. To stymie these activities, Ad Kan issued a report, filled with errors and inaccuracies, accusing Akevot of being a tool of the Swiss and Norwegian governments in gathering intelligence and stealing Israeli secrets.

Akevot's staff and board of directors does include some left-wing individuals, but the organization's activities as a research institution are apolitical and strictly nonpartisan. The best proof of this is its fruitful collaboration with the Israel State Archives, a government organization that is subordinate to the Prime Minister's Office. The Chief Archivist is Yaacov Lozowick, who can hardly be suspected of wanting to compromise national security.

Over the past several years, researchers at Akevot have mapped out the obstructions to public access to documents in the state archives. Their research showed that the archives fail in their mission, opening for public scrutiny — by historians, journalists and ordinary citizens — only a negligible fraction of the documents in their possession. In the past the state, through its archive, was responsive to claims made by Akevot. Now it is showing its ugly and paranoid face.

It turns out that the Foreign Ministry has become an arm of the right-wing nonprofit organization Ad Kan. The prime minister gave credence to a baseless document, to the point of appealing to Switzerland's foreign minister.

The Netanyahu government is expanding and deepening the circle of politically persecuted organization from week to week. It seems that most of its energies are devoted to identifying and damaging domestic enemies. Instead of helping to support Akevot, an important and dynamic research institution that acts on behalf of the public interest, it is trying to close it down while relying on questionable sources.