

MP Briefing

Attacks on Palestinian Human Rights Defenders

1. Summary

On 19 October 2021, the Israeli government proscribed six Palestinian human rights and civil society NGOs, effectively criminalising them based on unsubstantiated allegations of support for terrorism. Seven months on, the **Israeli government still has not produced any credible evidence to support its allegations**, despite repeated requests from third party states. The six targeted NGOs are prominent human rights groups in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), internationally renowned for providing critical direct service and human rights monitoring in a context of prolonged occupation and systematic violations of Palestinian rights. Israel's crackdown on these NGOs has been widely condemned by international human rights experts. The Israeli government systematically targets Palestinian humanitarian groups, human rights defenders, as well as international organisations providing support and solidarity, attempting to stifle criticism of its military occupation, expansion of illegal settlements, and other international law violations.

2. Recommendations

The UK government's [policy on Human Rights Defenders](#) (HRDs) outlines its commitment to support frontline defenders around the world. Additional obligations arise from international human rights and humanitarian law. To that end, the UK government must:

- Press Israel to revoke the arbitrary designation of human rights and civil society groups, including but not limited to the six NGOs proscribed in October 2021;
- Issue a public statement of non-recognition of the designation;
- Take active steps to support Palestinian HRDs, including the six targeted NGOs;
- End its complicity with Israel's violations of Palestinian rights, starting by prohibiting trade with illegal settlements and ceasing the trade in arms and surveillance technology with Israel.

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3. Israel's war on Palestinian human rights defenders

Palestinian human rights defenders (HRDs), both individuals and organisations, are on the frontlines of upholding their communities' rights, and defending against abuses which are endemic in the context of Israel's prolonged military occupation. Palestinian HRDs are also themselves impacted by the human rights abuses that they monitor and report on, making their work dangerous. Well before October, UN human rights experts noted particular risk for NGOs with activities focused on:

- **Collecting evidence for submission to the International Criminal Court (ICC)** which opened its case on potential war crimes in Palestine in March/April 2020. Delegitimisation attacks against Palestinian NGOs, including the targeted six, increased dramatically since then.
- **Supporting vulnerable Palestinian communities** in areas slated for Israeli annexation and/or settlement expansion; all of the targeted NGOs either document the impact of illegal settlement expansion on Palestinian communities or provide critical services to those impacted.

4. The six NGOs targeted: leaders in human rights and community care

The six NGOs proscribed by Israel in October 2021 are amongst the most effective and world-renowned Palestinian civil society organisations. All are politically independent, legally registered according to Palestinian law, and work in accordance with international legal frameworks for human rights and humanitarian law (a position that the Israeli government itself cannot claim).

These NGOs are not only calling out Israel's occupation; they also conduct leading advocacy, research, and service provision in support of women's rights, health education, climate justice, children's rights, and civil rights more generally. ***Israel's attempts to silence opposition to military occupation are thus also silencing critical voices on other pressing global issues.***

The six NGOs targeted are:

- ***Addameer***: a Palestinian non-governmental, civil institution founded in 1991 that supports Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli and Palestinian prisons. Addameer offers free legal aid to Palestinian political prisoners, advocates for their rights on a national and an international level and works to end torture and other violations of prisoners' rights such as fair trial rights through monitoring, legal procedures, and solidarity campaigns.
- ***Al-Haq***: a leading Palestinian human rights organisation founded in 1979 by Palestinian lawyers, which focuses on protecting and promoting human rights in Palestine through monitoring and documentation by way of advocacy before national and international mechanisms and by holding perpetrators of international crimes accountable. Al-Haq has special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council.
- ***Bisan Center for Research and Development***: a civil society organisation focused on enhancing Palestinians' resilience and socio-economic rights, including workers, women, Palestinian youth, and poor and marginalised communities, and to contribute to building an effective democratic civil society.
- ***Defence for Children International - Palestine***: an independent, local Palestinian child rights organisation dedicated to defending and promoting the rights of children living in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Since 1991, DCI-P has investigated, documented, and exposed grave human rights violations against children; provided legal services to children in urgent need; held Israeli and Palestinian authorities accountable to universal human rights principles; and advocated at the international and national levels to advance access to justice and protection for children.
- ***Union of Agricultural Work Committees***: an independent agricultural developmental Palestinian organisation. UAWC was established in 1986 to improve the socio-economic situation of Palestinian farmers marginalised as a result of Israel's occupation and focuses on Palestinian sovereignty over their land and resources.
- ***Union of Palestinian Women's Committees***: works to empower women to defend their socio-political and economic rights and build civil democratic progressive community free of all forms of discrimination.

5. Cyber-surveillance as a tool of repression and coercion

Human rights defenders around the world are at risk of state-deployed surveillance technology used to violate their fundamental human right to privacy and freedom of expression. In many cases, the use of such technology is followed by arbitrary arrest, torture, and/or lethal violence. Palestinian HRDs are increasingly victims of this dangerous phenomenon, as Israel routinely uses sophisticated surveillance to repress and coerce Palestinian HRDs, their families, and their wider communities

Israel's high-tech industry and military collaborate closely on the development of surveillance technology, which is tried and tested on Palestinians, and then marketed around the world for use by other repressive regimes. The Israeli company NSO Group's 'Pegasus' spyware has been used widely by states around the world against HRDs, including the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, who was targeted with Pegasus before he was kidnapped and brutally murdered.

The same technology has also been used against Palestinian human rights defenders, including from the targeted NGOs. An investigation by Front Line Defenders, Citizen Lab and Amnesty International uncovered [six cases of Palestinian HRDs targeted with Pegasus](#), including employees of the NGOs proscribed by Israel in October (from Al Haq, Addameer, and Bisan Center).

Case study:

Salah Hammouri, a French Palestinian dual national, was working as a lawyer and researcher with Addameer when his mobile phone was infected with Pegasus spyware in April 2021. Hammouri is now being held in administrative detention, with no charge or trial, and his residency in his home city of Jerusalem arbitrarily stripped by the Israeli authorities. Hammouri and his family have been repeatedly targeted by Israeli authorities over his legal work and research about violations of Palestinian rights.

6. Impacts of the attacks on HRDs

The destructive impact of Israel's designation of these NGOs cannot be overstated. They include:

- danger of arrest and detention for staff members of all the targeted NGOs;
- reputational damage that can harm their international partnerships and prevent their advocacy work from being carried out;
- disruptions in bank accounts and financial access that could result in loss of staff and force the NGOs to close.

Aside from the impacts on the NGOs, the most harmed victims will be their beneficiaries. ***For Palestinians facing increasing threats to their basic rights – settlement expansion, home demolitions, rising settler violence – HRDs, including the targeted six NGOs, are often the last barrier to these abuses.***

Update: In April 2022, directors of two of the targeted NGOs faced new travel restrictions, preventing them from exiting Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. On 29 April, Israeli authorities prohibited Ubai Aboudi, Executive Director of Bisan Center, from exiting the occupied West Bank into Jordan. On 30 April, Sahar Francis, director of Addameer, was banned from boarding a flight in Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv.

In both cases, the targeted were only informed of the restrictions upon arrival to the border crossing, and neither have been given any reason for the travel bans. Human rights groups fear that this may mark a new phase in the arbitrary crackdown on Palestinian human rights defenders.

7. A pattern of state-sponsored incitement

Israel's campaign against these six NGOs follows a pattern that exposes an alarming credibility deficit on the part of Israeli authorities.¹ This has been reiterated by EU and several European state officials declaring that previous allegations by Israel against Palestinian NGOs have not been substantiated.²

- **Inflammatory allegations are made publicly on social media platforms.** Allegations against the NGOs were first announced by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter in a highly dramatised English-language video, presented as fact. The NGOs received no notification of investigation or evidence; they heard the news through press reports.
- **Secret evidence is invoked to evade scrutiny of the relevant details.** When governments and press have asked for evidence to substantiate the claims, Israeli officials said it was “classified”. But that didn't stop the same officials from smearing the NGOs publicly. Secret evidence is often used in Israel's military courts in cases of administrative detention, a violation of internationally guaranteed due process rights. That same illegal procedure has been replicated with the NGOs - none have seen the “classified intelligence” allegedly held.
- **Information presented as evidence comes from coercion or torture of detainees.** Israel has been consistently condemned by international human rights experts for the routine use of torture and ill-treatment in interrogation of Palestinians, including children. In this case, information presented as evidence by Israel, after much prompting by European and US officials, has been a [document](#) with excerpts allegedly from interrogations of two former employees of a separate NGO.³ A lawyer for one of the former employees has stated that his client was under duress during the interrogation, meaning his statements are categorically inadmissible as evidence according to international law.

8. No legal recourse for those targeted

The designation was made according to a controversial Israeli counter-terrorism law passed in 2016 which gives the Israeli Defence Minister authority to declare any group a ‘terrorist organisation.’ The law does not require transparency in how the decision was made, and if a group wishes to legally contest the designation, the law does not require disclosure of secret evidence, making it nearly impossible to successfully argue a case.

Update: In February 2022, the targeted NGOs contested their proscription by filing a procedural objection to the Israeli Military Commander of the occupied West Bank (as a function of Israel's military occupation in the West Bank, the occupation's military commander has authority over the lives of millions of stateless Palestinians). The main [legal arguments raised in the objection](#) are the lack of due process, lack of evidence, and conflict of interest (that the Military Commander issues the decision also decides on the objection). They await a response, but have noted that there is no justice for Palestinians under a system of illegal military occupation.

¹ The pattern described here is also evident in Israel's persecution of Mohammed El Halabi, former Gaza director of World Vision, who was arrested in 2016, accused by Israel of diverting millions of dollars in aid money to Hamas. Then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the ‘results’ of the case on his official YouTube channel before any full investigation or trial had taken place, and without notifying World Vision ahead of time. Independent investigations, including by the Australian government (a World Vision donor), found no evidence that any money had been diverted. Read more about this devastating case: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/19/aid-worker-mohammed-el-halabi-gaza-israel-trial-largest-theft-aid-money-history>

² See for example: EU- <https://bit.ly/3DVEVO7>, Belgium- <https://bit.ly/3DPwbt3>, Ireland- <https://bit.ly/3GIB0pU>, Sweden- <https://bit.ly/3GMwtm3>

³ A detailed analysis of the document can be found here: <https://www.972mag.com/shin-bet-dossier-palestinian-ngos/>

9. Non-state actors propagate disinformation

Whilst the Israeli state has launched this campaign of attack against the six NGOs, several politically motivated non-state actors have also been smearing Palestinian NGOs with disinformation.⁴ These include **NGO Monitor**, a right-wing Israeli group which publishes inflammatory reports about Palestinian NGOs, and ‘monitors’ hundreds of international groups supportive of Palestinian rights (including the United Nations, which NGO Monitor considers to be anti-Israel). NGO Monitor actively lobbies governments, UN bodies, and international donors to cut off ties with Palestinian human rights and humanitarian groups. NGO Monitor’s work has been thoroughly discredited in a [detailed report](#) by Israeli former diplomats and academics, and has been criticised more recently by a Dutch Foreign Minister who described its NGO Monitor reports as based on "[selective citations, half-facts and insinuations](#)".⁵ ***In this context, silence from the UK government leaves open space for disinformation to circulate, creating conditions of ever-increasing danger for Palestinian HRDs.***

10. Persecution of anti-apartheid campaigners

In 2021, Israel’s foremost human rights group [B’tselem](#) and the international human rights group [Human Rights Watch](#) both published detailed reports showing that Israeli authorities have committed the **crime of apartheid** in their policies and treatment of the Palestinian people. In 2022, three more independent reports were published reiterating that Israel commits the crime of apartheid, by [Amnesty International](#), the [UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the oPt](#), and the [Harvard Law School](#) (co-authored with Addameer, one of the targeted NGOs). These studies added to already existing analyses authored by Palestinian, South African, and other international legal and human rights experts on the topic.

The crime of apartheid is specified in international law as particular **inhumane acts** committed within the **context of systematic oppression** by one group over another, where there is an **intent to maintain the domination** by one group over another, including but not limited to:

- Arbitrary arrest and illegal imprisonment;
- Expropriation of landed property;
- Restrictions on the right to leave and to return to their country;
- ***Persecution of organisations and persons, by depriving them of fundamental rights and freedoms, because they oppose apartheid.***

It is no surprise that the most outspoken organisations with the best track record of documenting Israeli officials’ crimes of apartheid are subsequently the ones targeted by the incriminated regime. The historic South African apartheid regime similarly cracked down on South African anti-apartheid campaigners.

⁴ For more on disinformation attacks on Palestinian NGOs and their international partners, see: <https://charityandsecurity.org/csn-reports/the-alarming-rise-of-lawfare-to-suppress-civil-society-the-case-of-palestine-and-israel/>

⁵ This was in the context of the Dutch government’s refutation of NGO Monitor’s attacks on another Palestinian NGO: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israels-disinformation-campaign-suffers-setback-netherlands>

I I. Key statements from international human rights experts and politicians

- **12 UN human rights experts** called on the international community to protect and sustain the six targeted NGOs in the face of Israel's ongoing attacks and continued failure to present any credible evidence against them, saying: "Israel has had six months to substantiate its accusations and it has failed to deliver. We call on the funding governments and international organisations to swiftly conclude that Israel has not established its allegations and to announce that they will continue to financially and politically support these organisations and the communities and groups they serve." **25 April 2022**
- **9 UN human rights experts** wrote a detailed letter to the EU Head of Foreign Affairs detailing the 6 NGOs' "vital contributions to the global promotion and protection of human rights", the legal protections they must be afforded, and the wider context of shrinking space created by Israeli state authorities. The experts have called on the EU to "Continue to support the designated and other Palestinian civil society organizations, including financially, as they continue to document, and to promote, accountability for the human rights violations in the OPT". **8 December 2021**
- **US Congresswoman Betty McCollum** tabled a resolution condemning the designation, and stated that Israel's attack on the six NGOs is "a weapon to silence the work of human rights organisations and advocates who courageously represent vulnerable people living in under military occupation" and that "Israel's decision to brand these prominent Palestinian civil society groups as terrorist organisations exposes the truth that Israel's occupation is violent, immoral, and unjust, and that peaceful efforts to defend the rights of Palestinian children, women, farmers, or prisoners must be declared illegal." **28 October 2021**
- **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet** called for the designation to be immediately revoked and questioned Israel's use of the 'terrorism' label saying: "Claiming rights before a UN or other international body is not an act of terrorism, advocating for the rights of women in the occupied Palestinian territory is not terrorism, and providing legal aid to detained Palestinians is not terrorism." She further noted that "The designation decisions contravene the right to freedom of association of the individuals affected and more broadly have a chilling effect on human rights defenders and civic space." **26 October 2021**
- **17 UN human rights experts** called the designation of the six Palestinian NGOs a "frontal attack on the Palestinian human rights movement, and on human rights everywhere", noted that the Israeli government "has frequently targeted human rights defenders in recent years, as its occupation has deepened" and called on the international community to use the full range of political and diplomatic tools to press Israel to reverse the designation. **25 October 2021**
- International human rights groups **Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International** issued a joint statement condemning Israel's attack on the six NGOs, saying calling it "an alarming escalation that threatens to shut down the work of Palestine's most prominent civil society organisations". They added that Israel has been emboldened by "the decades-long failure of the international community to challenge grave Israeli human rights abuses and impose meaningful consequences for them", and that the international response to this designation "will be a true test of its resolve to protect human rights defenders." **22 October 2021**