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Im Tirtzu in Goldstone's Footsteps

By Leonard Fein

By and large, I resist conspiratorial explanation of events. Most often, coincidence governs; things that seem related have arrived together from different sources, and their togetherness is curious rather than significant.

Now, however, I admit to alarm. We are witness to an escalating series of events that begin to feel cumulative, moving faster and faster to subvert Israel's democracy and transform its political and social life into a kind of Absurdistan.

As so often happens, the first steps in this new and perilous direction were barely noticed. A nip at freedom of expression here, a tuck at dissent there, another permit refused, another home demolished, another protest quashed. No big deal, except to those directly involved. The police put down a demonstration the courts have permitted, and still more people show up the following week. An opaque organization called NGO Monitor whines tediously on about the lack of transparency in Israeli NGOs, and the earth still spins safely in its orbit.

But suddenly in recent days, the dots have begun to seem connected. The precipitating event was the publication, in Israel, of a document of 69 pages (plus 43 pages of appendices) alleging that save for the support of organizations funded (in part) by the New Israel Fund, there'd have been no Goldstone Report. This utterly preposterous allegation is quite explicit. It appears, among other places, in a full-page ad by the document's publisher, an organization called Im Tirtzu ("if you will it …"): "Fact," the ad asserts in large letters: "Without the New Israel Fund, there could be no Goldstone Report, and Israel would not be facing international accusations of war crimes."

The Im Tirtzu report was immediately picked up by the Israeli press — most provocatively by Ben Caspit in Maariv, and insult was added to insult when Im Tirtzu took a full-page ad in The Jerusalem Post that featured a crude caricature of the NIF's president, Naomi Chazan.

There is for me an odd sense of familiarity as I make my way through the Im Tirtzu report and various of the documents it has precipitated. Wait, is this not a replay of the Goldstone Report? As in: The more carefully you read and review these lengthy documents, the less persuasive they become. In particular, even if we ignore the shabbiness of Im Tirtzu's effort to present its "findings" as serious research, we are left with the following problem: In almost none of its more than 50 references to the Israeli organization B'Tselem does the Im Tirtzu report allege that B'Tselem's criticisms of Israel's behavior in last year's Gaza war were mistaken. Indeed, the report's own summary of B'Tselem's "main activity against IDF" accuses B'Tselem of "Promoting the delegitimization of IDF operations by sullying the IDF's and the State of Israel's image in Israel and abroad via documentation and publicity." And so it is with almost all the other organizations that Im Tirtzu accuses of seeking to undermine Israel's legitimacy; B'Tselem is just one example.

There is a serious question here. If what B'Tselem and the others have said is true — I write here not of the conclusions some of them reach but of the facts they allege — then who is it that "sullies" the IDF's and the State of Israel's image in Israel and abroad? Is it the human rights organizations that seek to hold Israel to high standards of performance, or is it the IDF when it falls short of those standards? Is it the messenger, or is it the message?

Clarity: Saying "no" to Im Tirtzu does not mean saying "yes" to Goldstone. Reading Goldstone, you are invited to conclude that for all practical purposes the IDF treated Gaza as a free-fire zone. Thus, Goldstone: "The instructions given to the Israeli armed forces moving into Gaza provided for a low threshold for the use of lethal fire against the civilian population." (p. 228) Or: "[I]n none of the cases reviewed were there any grounds which could have reasonably induced the Israeli armed forces to assume that the civilians attacked were in fact taking a direct part in the hostilities and had thus lost their immunity against direct attacks." (p. 231)

The problem with taking such statements seriously is that the number of civilian deaths, even if every single one was part of a "disproportionate" response, does not begin to approach

numbers that would have been expected in a "free-fire" setting. After a three-week-long battle against an essentially absent foe, in congested urban spaces, from sky, sea and ground, the highest estimate of the deaths of innocent civilians comes to about a thousand. The alleged "low threshold for the use of lethal fire against the civilian population" cannot have been all that low.

In this as in other ways, Goldstone is off the mark. (Which is one reason the Israeli government should conduct the independent investigation of Operation Cast Lead that so many have called for.) At the same time, to say "no" to Im Tirtzu is not necessarily to say "yes" to all the activities of the 16 NIF-supported organizations it assaults. There are some I find disturbing. And yes, it is true that Israel is regularly singled out for behavior that elsewhere often goes unremarked. But I am among those who believe that it is the job of human rights organizations, in Israel as elsewhere, to be responsibly vociferous — not to be shy, not to be infallible, but to be ever on watch.

As to the New Israel Fund itself, an organization I have been proud to be identified with since very nearly its inception, both for years as a board member and now as a member of its International Advisory Board, the idea that it seeks anything more than or different from an Israel that behaves in all respects in accordance with the highest ideals of the Jewish people is a calumny. I have long believed and often remarked that the strength of Israel's civil society is largely a gift to the Jewish state by NIF and its supporters.

Oh yes: Those dots that connect the effort to discredit and marginalize NIF (and others), expressions in the main of a Jewish right wing that disguises itself behind an ill-fitting centrist mask? More to come.