Anti-Israel NGOs Are Exploiting Coronavirus to Spread Hate

March 23, 2020

By Becca Wertman

Jewish Journal

<https://jewishjournal.com/columnist-2/312605/anti-israel-ngos-are-exploiting-coronavirus-to-spread-hate/>

For anti-Israel advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which constantly attempt to demonize and delegitimize the Jewish state, the COVID-19 pandemic’s domination of the global news cycle poses a significant challenge—the world now has real problems to deal with.

Nevertheless, some NGOs have a solution. Namely, they have decided to link their agendas to COVID-19. This is consistent with previous attempts by NGOs to capitalize on the prevailing public discourse, such as manipulating narratives of climate change and LGBTQ rights as part of their anti-Israel campaigns.

Take, for instance, the offensive and anti-Semitic sentiment expressed in a tweet by Sarah Leah Whitson, the former head of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East department and now with the Quincy Institute. Not for the first time, Whitson deployed classic anti-Semitic tropes, in this case the blood libel. In response to a cynical tweet that “6 million jewish [sic] Israelis” will now understand life under “occupation” due to virus-related restrictions, Whitson lamented that it was “such a tiny taste. Missing a tablespoon of blood.”

To be sure, not all NGOs have gone that far. Some have stuck to their standard anti-Israel nonsense. One common theme is the “occupation,” where the COVID-19 virus has been appended to standard anti-occupation rhetoric and campaigns that, for some obsessed NGOs and activists, are still the most pressing global concerns. Of course, their complaints about Israeli policy in the West Bank do not seriously grapple with whether it will effectively curb the spread of disease, but rather presume Israel must be acting in bad faith, because “occupation.”

On March 10, for example, Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of Maryland hosted an event with the title, “Corona and Countering the Occupation.” According to the poster advertising the event, the issues to be discussed included “How is corona being handled in Palestine?” “How does occupation worsen the situation?” and “What is the best way to counter the occupation.”

Another example is a tweet by the American fringe group IfNotNow, claiming that “Demolishing Palestinian homes will worsen the coronavirus spread. It was already inhumane to displace people, now it’s also an urgent matter of public health. The Israeli army must stop demolishing homes and focus on the health and wellness of all Israelis and Palestinians.”

A second theme is “Blame Israel for Gaza.” For the 15 years since Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, NGOs continue to attribute a “humanitarian crisis” to Israel, based on a unique standard of international law applied to Israel alone. NGOs deny Hamas and other actors agency for diverting resources from public infrastructure and services to weapons, tunnels and terrorism. In the current context, NGOs have been using COVID-19 as an excuse to condemn legitimate anti-terrorism policies and to preemptively blame Israel for an outbreak in Gaza.

For example, on March 15, Ken Roth, Human Rights Watch’s Israel-obsessed executive director, tweeted, “The coronavirus will test the wisdom of Israel’s policies for crippling the economy and health systems of Gaza and the West Bank. As the occupying power (for Gaza, too, given Israel’s severe restrictions on movement), Israel is responsible for health care.” The Israeli NGO Gisha similarly published an article, “Crossings update: Israel to impose extensive travel restrictions at Erez Crossing over coronavirus concerns,” belittling Israel’s policy of restricting access to its borders, including Gaza’s, to curb the spread of the virus.

Palestinian terror-linked organizations are also exploiting the public health crisis for their anti-Israel advocacy. For instance, Samidoun, a group with noted ties to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) terrorist group, posted an article on its website, “Israeli apartheid, COVID-19 and Palestinian prisoners: Freedom now!” The NGO claims, “Palestinian prisoners are continuing their struggle to confront Israel’s apartheid COVID-19 response that poses a threat to Palestinian prisoners and, indeed, all Palestinians. No Palestinian prisoners have yet been diagnosed with coronavirus, but their conditions of confinement present a serious concern.”

Addameer, another PFLP-tied group, has also shared articles with sentiments such as, “at the moment, while the world is suffering from the pandemic, COVID-19, Palestinian prisoners are still suffering medical negligence.”

This cynical exploitation of a global health crisis by so-called human-rights organizations should therefore send a clear message: In times of emergency, expect the regular drumbeat of anti-Israel propaganda from organizations claiming to espouse justice and morality.