

'Cutting the Head Off 200 Organizations': Inside Israel's War on NGOs That Aid Palestinians

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The Israeli government has announced regulations that could bar NGOs and their workers from the country. Three senior officials in the field worry the move will stop humanitarian aid to the West Bank and Gaza. 'The West should know what's going on,' says one

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Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism Minister Amichai Chikli and aid trucks headed for Gaza. Credit: Photos: Ilan Assayag; Eliyahu HersHKovitz; Emil Salman. Artwork: Anastasia Shub

International organizations that provide aid in the West Bank and war-torn Gaza are contending with a new Israeli ruling that may jeopardize their ability to work, officials in the field say.

On December 9, the Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism Ministry announced that the registration of international nongovernmental organizations would now fall under its purview. It stated that following a government decision, it would put together a team of representatives from the defense, foreign, and aliyah and integration ministries, in addition to the Shin Bet security service and police, to approve the registration of such NGOs and the entry of their employees into Israel, in accordance with defense and policy considerations.

"The team will be authorized to refuse registry to organizations or overturn a registration if the organization is found to act against the interests of the State of Israel," the statement read. "Among the considerations: denying the Jewish and democratic nature of the state, supporting armed resistance or maintaining ties to terror groups, criminal activity that endangers the public order, promoting the delegitimization of Israel or calling to boycott it."

The announcement included a quote from the ministry's director general, Avi Cohen Scali: "Transferring the responsibility to the Diaspora Affairs Ministry is intended to ensure professional, accurate and speedy handling of foreign international organizations that operate in Israel, particularly against the backdrop of security and political challenges that have intensified since October 7, 2023," he said. "The new team will enable the continuation of the humanitarian organizations' vital activities while ensuring national security."

A Palestinian carrying an aid box distributed by the UN Relief and Works Agency in Deir Al-Balah, central Gaza, last November. Credit: Ramadan Abed/Reuters

It also provided a shorter quote from Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli: “We won’t allow the entry of international nongovernmental organizations that undermine the State of Israel.”

The ministry has not given the NGOs guidelines about what is and is not considered “delegitimizing language.” Because of the sensitivity of this topic and the possibility of getting their organizations’ registration revoked, few if any officials from these groups would speak on record or have their names published, citing legal advice.

Allegra Pacheco, an international human rights lawyer who has worked in international humanitarian organizations, told Haaretz, “They want to continue working to deliver the aid, and they’re afraid that if they speak out and challenge the government, they’ll be blacklisted and shut down.”

‘A political issue’

For years, the registration of international nongovernmental organizations was handled by Israel’s Welfare and Social Affairs Ministry. The NGOs, about 200 in total, would submit their documentation and financial information each year to the ministry to ensure that they were legitimate, and the ministry would write recommendation letters for the NGOs’ employees for the Interior Ministry. The employees would then enter the country on a tourist visa and apply for work visas using those letters of recommendation. Those work visas would be valid for one year, and then extended for up to 60 months.

Our capacity for the past year has already been extremely impacted by this whole ambiguity [of visas and permits]. Now, we have an explicitly really crappy new law in its place. The ability of most of these organizations to function is going to be extremely limited.

NGO country director

The Welfare Ministry’s role in this process was the result of negotiations between the state and the organizations. The country director at one international NGO explains, “The State of Israel wishes to use ministries like the Justice Ministry and Foreign Ministry, and turn this into a political issue. And it was kind of agreed that [the Welfare Ministry] is much less a political entity.”

There had been hiccups in the process, such as during the coronavirus crisis, but NGO officials describe their interactions with the Welfare Ministry as generally helpful and pleasant. But this process was also a massive burden on an already strained, overworked ministry.

In the months preceding the Hamas-led massacre on October 7 and the war that followed, the ministry had stopped issuing letters – [a concerning development for NGO employees](#) whose visas

were about to expire.

A Palestinian man standing next to an USAID billboard in the West Bank city of Hebron. Credit: Kevin Frayer/AP

The ministry notified them at the beginning of November 2023 that because of the war and the burden on their operations, the Population and Immigration Authority (part of the Interior Ministry) would automatically extend their visas until February 2024. However, this extension did not apply to people who were not in Israel, including those who left because of the war. When those visas were nearing expiration, few were renewed.

“Essentially, since September 2023, every single international NGO staff has been without a working visa and with no way to apply for one,” says one senior humanitarian official. This left them unable to perform work that was growing more and more vital as the war raged on.

The Association of International Development Agencies, an umbrella group of organizations that provide aid to Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, petitioned the High Court of Justice against the government last October. It noted that under both domestic and international law, the state is obligated to support the delivery of humanitarian aid – an ability imperiled by the staff’s lack of visas. The government was given until December to respond to the petition.

Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism Minister Amichai Chikli clashing with another lawmaker in the Knesset last year. Credit: Noam Moskowitz/Knesset

A response came on December 9, with the government’s decision to transfer the registration of international NGOs, effective within 60 days, from the Welfare Ministry to the new interministerial committee led by the director general [of the Diaspora Affairs Ministry](#). Other state offices represented include the Defense Ministry’s National Bureau for Counter Terror Financing, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the interior, foreign and welfare ministries. The Shin Bet, police, Population and Immigration Authority, and far-right Public Security Minister [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#) will also have representatives on the committee.

New rules for registration

The new committee’s responsibilities are to “register organizations, including conditionally; extending existing registrations; canceling organization’s registrations; refusing registration applications” as well as “offering recommendation letters, including conditionally; giving negative recommendations or canceling positive recommendations for foreign staff members of organizations.” This team will be the one making recommendations for visas to the Interior Ministry, and will also transfer the information about NGO registration to COGAT, “so that COGAT can make decisions regarding awarding entry permits to Palestinian workers.”

According to the new guidelines, the committee will make its decisions via majority rule and only after every member submits their written opinion. with those decisions submitted to the Interior Ministry and COGAT no more than 45 days after an application is filed.

Organizations will now need to reregister every three years. Beforehand, this process only needed to be done once. The registration status can now also be revoked at any time.

Criticizing a party to a conflict for violating international humanitarian law is not considered political or taking a side. This is part and parcel of the basics of humanitarian advocacy ... it's advocating for the protection of civilians who are outside the conflict.

Allegra Pacheco

The committee can deny an organization's request for registration if "there is a reasonable basis to assume" that it opposes Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state, incites racism, supports armed struggle against the State of Israel, endangers the peace by being involved in crime, acts as a cover for illegal activities and/or was registered under false pretenses.

It can also deny the registration of an organization, or deregister an organization, if it or one of its employees, partners, board members or founders "knowingly publishes or published public calls to boycott the State of Israel ... or participated in such a boycott, in the seven years preceding the application for registration." Another ground for denial is if the organization "actively advances delegitimization activities against the State of Israel." Individuals applying for recommendation letters are subjected to the same criteria.

Residents lining up to get bread in Deir al-Balah, Gaza, last November. Credit: Abdel Kareem Hana/AP

This, the new ruling states, is not an exhaustive list. The committee can make its decisions "based on additional considerations that are not listed above."

'There is no aid without staff'

Soon after the new regulations were released, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs released an alert, voicing its concern about their potential implications. Scarce visas means less manpower, and it also means that the organizations whose staff are barred from entering the country will have to find new bases elsewhere, scattering them across the region.

Because the NGOs will need to reregister every few years, this will add uncertainty about their future when it comes to planning and funding, and the administrative load of repeatedly going through the process will strain their administrative burden.

"This will basically cut the head off of 200 organizations. It's going to make things much more expensive," says the NGO country director. Due to permit issues for his staff, which are also impacted, he noted that he has had to ferry documents from Tel Aviv to the West Bank because his employees were unable to do so.

"It's going to make things stickier and slow it down dramatically," he added. "Our capacity for the

past year has already been extremely impacted by this whole ambiguity [of visas and permits]. Now, when we don't have ambiguity, we have an explicitly really crappy new law in its place. The ability of most of these organizations to function is going to be extremely limited."

A boy pulling a cart loaded with a water container in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, on Monday. Credit: Bashar Taleb/AFP

OCHA also noted that the regulations "are broadly framed in ways that could make space for the unjustifiable dismissal and cancellation of international NGO registrations, or denial of visas, especially given the history of growing restrictions on humanitarian and civic space in the [Palestinian Territories]. As such, there is a concern that this decision may be employed to target INGOs that are viewed negatively by the [Israeli government]," it warned.

It added that almost all organizations working in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza "have engaged in public advocacy and communications that highlight the humanitarian impact of policies and practices" of Israel's government there, "which could be interpreted by the [committee] as fulfilling one or more of the criteria specified in the decision as warranting cancellation or rejection of their registration."

Pacheco, the international human rights lawyer, noted that a major pillar of humanitarian work is advocating "for the rights of the most vulnerable, and they do that in the framework of international law. So, here you can see the conflict that emerges when the humanitarian organization advocates under international law for Palestinians in Gaza, or even in the West Bank - because international law says settlements are illegal and settlers shouldn't be there, and settlers shouldn't be attacking Palestinians, and the army bears responsibility to protect them.

"All those [statements] are considered controversial and political by the Israeli government. But in the international framework, those are legitimate positions to have because, again, they're advocating for the rights of the vulnerable and are in the framework of international law."

I think the writing has been on the wall for a long time when we see the restrictions on access, not just in Gaza, but the West Bank as well. And we see this as part of a coordinated effort to restrict aid agencies' ability to deliver in the Palestinian territories.

Humanitarian official

She added, "Criticizing a party to a conflict for violating international humanitarian law is not considered political or taking a side. This is part and parcel of the basics of humanitarian advocacy ... it's advocating for the protection of civilians who are outside the conflict."

Many international NGOs are already preparing for deregistration and negative letters of recommendation being sent to the Interior Ministry by the committee. This would mean that most, if

not all, of their staff members – from the most senior positions downward – will no longer be able to operate in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The normal arrangement in international humanitarian organizations, Pacheco said, is that “the country director, the senior staff, all live and work in the place of conflict. They’re working alongside the local staff – in this case, Palestinian. So they’re there, they’re witnesses. They understand what’s going on on the ground, and you can’t replace that. All of that’s being challenged. It raises the question we all have: Is the Israeli government interested in supporting humanitarian aid to Palestinians? Because you can’t deliver aid without the humanitarian staff. There’s no humanitarian aid without humanitarian staff,” she stressed.

One German development worker, again speaking on condition of anonymity, said his organization was “very worried about the law, because first of all, we know that it will affect a lot of our organizations that we cooperate with that do similar work to us.”.

His organization is not registered in Israel, but does significant work on the ground with partners who are. “They will be affected, and it will in the end also affect us, in that we lose other organizations to cooperate with.”

He said his organization is trying to get [the German government](#) involved to counter these regulations. “We assume that it’s targeting all of the international NGOs that work in fields like human rights and concerning the occupation,” he added. “If we don’t manage to stop this, then it will go further – and it will affect us as well.”

On the face of it, for a country to restrict entry to entities operating against it or working to undermine it does not seem so unusual. But in this case, NGOs are concerned that the Israeli government – the most right-wing in the country’s history – is not operating in good faith.

“This is not an objective definition or an objective law,” said the country director. “We’re dealing with state institutions that are highly politicized and seeking to delegitimize these organizations, and changing definitions constantly about what all these things mean. What does ‘delegitimization’ mean? They don’t even define it now.

“We’re dealing with a state that is actively manipulating definitions or verbiage and actively obstructing aid, whether that be in Gaza or the West Bank. We can’t pretend at the end of the day that they’re objective,” he added.

A truck driver picking up humanitarian aid designated for Gaza, on the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom crossing with Israel last month. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg/AP

He pointed to the regulations about boycotting Israel, noting that calling for an arms embargo on the country – even while condemning Hamas – is considered to be part of it. Last year, “there was a big momentum among international NGOs to sign this petition calling for an arms embargo on both Hamas and Israel. So out of the 200 [NGOs], I think probably 30 or 40 signed on to it, including us. That’s grounds enough to deny us registration.”

This creates new challenges for NGOs, as well as a chilling effect on speech. “You are going to have everything you do basically be monitored from here on out,” the country director said.

The senior humanitarian official called it a gag order. “What we’ll probably see is the agencies that don’t do advocacy or agree not to make any public comment on anything will get their registration and their visas,” they said. “This is a context where I would say that NGOs are incredibly aware of their role that they have to provide an independent voice. So it’s even more serious here – the idea

that we would consider continuing to operate and saying nothing.”

‘Disappointed and ashamed’

The German development worker noted that the timing of the new regulations took many in the international NGO community by surprise - many were on vacation for the winter holidays. The country director believed the timing was no accident. Furthermore, the United States and Germany, the two countries most capable of halting this move, are in political flux, with the former awaiting a new president and the latter’s government having collapsed, leading to a February election.

“As international NGOs, we can’t stop this process - we have no power,” he said. “But states do, and the two most important states that would have the ability and willingness to potentially take this issue on are in lame duck sessions. This is not a coincidence to me at all.”

However, the senior humanitarian official warned that even when urged to take action, states are doing little, if anything, about the situation.

“I’ve been incredibly disappointed and ashamed, honestly, at the lack of action by any of our donor governments on any of this,” they said. “It’s embarrassing that they would provide all this money to NGOs, and then there’s a piece of legislation that comes through that would essentially prevent us from operating and their response is, ‘It’s probably going to be fine. Don’t worry about it.’ And that is what you’re hearing from these countries - that, or silence.

Organizations are not optimistic about what the future holds, but acknowledge that there is little they can do on their own if the government’s new regulations are fully implemented.

The sun setting over northern Gaza last week. Credit: Amir Cohen/Reuters

“We hope this isn’t going to be the case, but it’s going to be very difficult to continue to operate at all,” said the humanitarian official. “I think the writing has been on the wall for a long time when we see the restrictions on access, not just in Gaza, but the West Bank as well. And we see this as part of a coordinated effort to restrict aid agencies’ ability to deliver in the Palestinian territories.”

The German development worker added, “For us, this is clearly the intention to silence more and more of those who are witnessing what is going on in the West Bank and Gaza; settler violence; the expansion of settlements. The annexation of the West Bank is ongoing at a rapid pace, and the international NGOs are one of the last ones that are on the ground, talking about it, reporting about it, sending the news out to the world.

“It seems to us that the Israeli government is trying to shut down another voice that is talking about what’s going on. And that’s super-dangerous for Israel and for Palestine - and the West and Europe should know what’s going on.”

In response to inquiries from Haaretz about the guidelines NGOs may receive, the criteria that the committee will use to decide what constitutes a boycott or delegitimization, how the committee will look into organizations and individuals and other matters, the Diaspora Affairs Ministry responded: “The handling of the matter recently moved to an interministerial team that will be led by the Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism Ministry, and it will begin its work soon.”

Linda Dayan

P.S.

- Haaretz. Jan 13, 2025:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-13/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-west-should-know-whats-going-on-is-israel-waging-war-on-ngos-aiding-palestinians/00000194-5f82-d4d0-a1f4-ffef65ae0000>

- Linda Dayan's articles in the Haaretz:

<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da5a-d432-a77f-df5b689b0000>