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First eliminate the Human Rights Defenders....
An Essay on attacking dissent in Israel

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The right wing Israeli organization, “Im Tirtzu” recently published a vitriolic report inciting against human rights organizations connected with bringing prosecutions against Israeli officers and politicians in foreign jurisdictions. As someone whose name features prominently in the report, I am not ashamed of the acts attributed to me, even though some of these never occurred at all and in others I took no part. I believe and will continue to believe (as quoted in the Im Tirtzu report) that, “if war crimes were committed, and there is reason to suspect as much, anyone who participated in these should be charged, from the Chief of the General Staff who gave the orders, to the General Commanding Officer and down to the artillery battalion commander who fired cluster bombs on civilian areas”. Together with many human rights organizations, I pursue investigations of suspected war crimes in Israel and the trial of their perpetrators in Israeli courts. But if those suspected of war crimes are not investigated in Israel, they should face trial in other courts. Every supporter of human rights, every believer in democratic values and anyone whose beliefs are rooted in the centrality of the rule of law, should hold a similar opinion. It is right and just that those to whom Israeli democracy is dear will protect victims of human rights violations even—and indeed perhaps more decisively—when the violations are carried out by their own society.

Im Tirtzu’s report is callous, garbled and slanderous, but as a believer in democratic values, and especially the freedom of expression, I accept their right to publish it. Yet Im Tirtzu was not satisfied with informing the Israeli public about their ultra-nationalistic opinions and their extreme views against human rights organizations. For Memorial Day they published flyers stating, with a memorial wreath and candle as background, “We salute and they persecute! The New Israel Fund and Adalah: subversives, we’re fed up with you”. In synagogues on Saturday, they distributed copies of an ‘alternative’ version of the prayer “Yizkor” (“Remember”) in memory of fallen IDF soldiers— of both the right and left —which includes the following words of hate: “Remember, Nation of Israel, those from within it, of its own flesh and blood, who participated in prosecution of its officers and soldiers. Those who in the hour of battle for the safety of the Nation of Israel stood in protests and called its soldiers war criminals. Remember those who, in the dead of night, befriended the worst enemies of Israel in order to harm the blessed ones who devoted their souls to the good of the nation”. Im Tirtzu also distributed a clip of Amir Benayun’s hate-sowing song reinforcing the nationalistic myth describing the left as

back-stabbers of the people. The song proclaims, “After I couldn’t be killed outside / You come and kill me from the inside [. . .] I always attack forward / My back towards you / And you grind the knife [. . .] My mouth always subscribes to your safety / But you deliver me to the foreigner”.

Im Tirtzu has descended down the slippery slope from the use of blunt words and tough messages protected by freedom of expression to , violent, criminal and nationalistic incitement and vitriol, which are not worthy of such protection. The advertisements, the altered version of the “Yizkor” prayer, the words of Amir Benayun’s song, all these constitute wild incitement and preaching of hatred which cannot be justified under the principle of freedom of expression. The hidden call to violence is unmistakable in Im Tirtzu’s hate-filled message. Spreading hate and incitement against views different than one’s own cannot be considered a legitimate form of expression.

It is becoming clear that in the face of Im Tirzu and similar immorally nationalistic entities, one must use the rule of “intolerance towards intolerance”, John Locke’s suggestion as early as 1689 on the subject of religious intolerance. In the dark middle years of the last century, Kurt Levin expressed the same thought: one must not be tolerant of those who are intolerant of others. Democracy must protect itself from internal enemies as well. The time has come for all those who hold Israeli democracy dear to struggle against those who turn anyone who thinks differently into a victim of intolerance; the latter destroying democracy itself in Israel.

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