

**Dear HRF,**

You know me as a friend, ally, and confidante, and as a prominent member of the OsloFF community. It is hard for me to overstate how important this platform and community have been for me, and how much they have shaped my life and my activism. I send this out of deep concern, arguing for an urgent need to change policy towards Israel-Palestine. I fear that if such a change is not made soon, the consequences will be dire.

As you well know, this is not the first time the topic of Israel-Palestine has been raised. The explanation we have typically received relies on the crucial difference between democratic systems and undemocratic ones. The former have self-correcting mechanisms for accountability and peaceful change; the latter have none. "HRF is dedicated to working on the problem of dictatorship; it does not work on democracies. Israel is a democracy. Therefore, HRF does not work on Israel." This has been the explanation.

I wholeheartedly accept the deep difference between democratic systems and undemocratic ones, but applying that to Israel-Palestine has never been palatable to me. Between 2017 and 2022, however, a sea change in both Israel-Palestine and in the MENA has made this position completely untenable. This sea change included two main developments: (1) The end of the so-called "two-state paradigm"; and (2) the rise of a new regional authoritarian order centered around Israel.

### **A Single Political Order**

Allow me to explain. The common view had been that Israel-Palestine are two distinct entities existing side by side, with Israel temporarily occupying Palestinian territory. According to this view, Palestinians may be oppressed by Israel, but a process existed through which they were to gain independence. Ultimately they will have a state and a government through which to seek redress.

This view is now untenable. It is now the stated policy - and the deeply entrenched reality - of the Israeli political order that a Palestinian state does not and will not exist. At the same time, there is now a rising consensus among the world's foremost human rights organizations that Israel-Palestine is not two political systems, but a single one. To quote Hagai El-Ad, executive director of B'Tselem, Israel's largest human rights organization: "It is a one state reality. It is a single regime between the river and the sea".

If there is a single political order in Israel-Palestine, and if Israel completely dominates this order, then what is the nature of this order? Is it democratic - given that Israel's citizens can vote? Or is it a dictatorship - given that 5 million Palestinians who are living under permanent Israeli military domination are expected to live without rights?

Hagai El-Ad continues: "...It is a single regime between the river and the sea, and that regime is apartheid. This is the correct analysis, and with that in mind, we have a fighting chance to actually take the correct action in order to move against this injustice and end it."

B'Tselem isn't the only organization that has come to this conclusion. Amnesty and HRW - the world's foremost human rights organizations - concur, each releasing their own detailed, deeply researched reports. Meanwhile, Palestinian human rights activists have been saying this for decades. There is a single political order in Israel-Palestine; this order is dominated by Israel; and this order is an apartheid regime.

## **Apartheid & Autocracy**

The second factor I mentioned is Israel's deepening ties with the region's autocrats. These ties are no longer subtle - Israel provides crucial and deep support to some of the region's worst dictatorships - including the regimes of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan. The visible part of this support already includes advanced technology, cyberweapons, disinformation, intelligence, lobbying, and sensitive security projects. Some regime figures have even boasted that they've become immune to local uprisings, thanks to their Israeli allies.

Indeed, this has been one of the main findings of our MENA Retreat - Israel is a common denominator in so many Arab people's struggles against their dictators. A decade ago, it seemed like Israel was *only* oppressing the Palestinians; but in 2022, Israel has become an oppressor of a large proportion of the MENA's population - from Sudanese activists battling a coup or Libyan activists battling a military strongman; from Saudi activists opposing MBS, to Bahraini activists working for prisoner release, to Moroccan activists working for LGBT rights.

Far from being purely motivated by profit, these Israeli activities are part of a rising geopolitical strategy, one that has deep popular support in Israel. Unfortunately, this extends beyond the Arab region as well. Israel has been providing support to dictators from Rwanda to Azerbaijan; it's been working with right-wing populist movements in India, Poland, Hungary, and the United States. Its cyberweapons have even been weaponized against pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong and Russia.

Gone are the days when Israel could pose as a tiny democracy surrounded by hostile dictators, working desperately to forge a peace treaty with a Palestinian population it reluctantly controls. The growing consensus of the human rights community is that Israel is an apartheid regime which sits at the center of a rising autocratic order in the MENA and beyond. It is simply untenable for HRF to continue to treat Israel as just another normal Western democracy.

## **Our Community**

But let's look beyond the political analysis. As you know, the community is the spirit and soul of the OsloFF, and is HRF's largest asset. Once trust leaves, the community follows. It pains me to say that HRF's current position is harming the credibility of the platform and eroding trust within the community.

To start, it's creating the *appearance* of a culture of silence around Israel-Palestine. I heard a lot of this during this year's event - activists from Rwanda to Iran, from Egypt to Iraq; from Syria to Yemen walking up to me and wondering what the matter is, why the conference doesn't even mention the word "Palestine". It's even excluded in songs and tributes to children; "censorship" was a word I heard often. When pushed, HRF staff members do not know how to answer these criticisms, because the usual rationale is no longer tenable and sounds cruel and out of touch.

Additionally, it's causing HRF's programs to seem contradictory, leaving community members wondering where its heart really is. For example, HRF invested deeply into the NSO/Pegasus Israeli spyware affair; but it wouldn't say two words about the targeted murder of veteran American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh. HRF invested deeply in activism for Jamal Khashoggi and against MBS, but it considers the state that is most deeply assisting MBS to be beyond its mandate.

All of this risks making HRF seem to pose as a friend to Arab activists, even as it turns a blind eye to their real oppressors. I had many conversations during our MENA Retreat with activists who were genuinely confused. I've always loved how HRF has never cared about the haters - but it is indeed painful when HRF's credibility is questioned not by regime shills or privileged woke leftists, but by some of the most credible and respected rising stars in our human rights movement, some of whom are members of our very community.

I caution that communities don't always die quietly. Allow me to share that there have been multiple attempts to publicly take HRF to task on this; I intervened several times, convincing people that it's best to engage. But if a change doesn't come soon, my position will be untenable. Campaigns will start and will gather steam, and they'll be loud. Sign on letters will be written, they'll be public, and they'll gather thousands of retweets. Among the names will be some of the most highly credible activists - including some members of the community itself.

## **The Upside**

I love HRF and the OsloFF. I do not want to see the platform viewed with suspicion, seen as out of touch, or distracted with a series of campaigns against it from within its own community. I do not want to see the amazing work and deep investments it's done into its programs threatened.

But I also don't want us to be motivated only by fear. The amount of work that HRF can invite, should it effect a change in strategy on Israel-Palestine, is enormous. Already, from our community MAPS and Rick Doblin are doing great work with Israelis and Palestinians. Our own Alex Gladstein has done great work on Palestine and Bitcoin. And our MENA Retreat has already placed Israel-Palestine work at the center of regional coordination and future work.

With further investment into this, HRF will not only be a hero to Palestinians; it'll also be a hero to Israeli liberals, who have been decimated after the country's rightwards lurch and are now a movement in deep crisis. HRF can become a prime platform for these voices - from LGBT activists such as Eitay Mack to peace activists such as Hagai El-Ad.

HRF can quickly play a leading and crucial role in getting Arabs and Israelis to mingle under the premise of freedom - instead of cynical deals with dictatorships. Without being too loud or too woke or too shrill, and without virtue signaling, HRF can get the best of many worlds - it can regain the trust of its community, take a far-sighted position on one of the most crucial struggles for freedom in the world, and become one of the most visionary and influential actors in this field.

There's another matter worth mentioning, which is that this change in policy, while urgent, is also inevitable. The situation in Israel-Palestine is only getting worse. This isn't going to become *less* of an apartheid regime in a year or two; and the consensus of the human rights community is also going to move further in that direction. The choice is ultimately not about *whether* to change policy but *when*. I strongly argue that the time is now - before the costs mount.

Should this decision be taken, I'm willing to walk this walk with you as long, rough or steep it may get. We can talk about easy first steps, or about ambitious plans; we can talk about the consequences, the difficulties, and how to navigate this change. But for any of this to even happen, a serious and brave decision must be taken. The decision is not only a policy choice but a moral choice. And I never knew HRF to shy away from moral choices. I just worry that we're running out of time.

**Sincerely,**

**Iyad El-Baghdadi**