

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 18, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Avril Haines
Director of National Intelligence
Office of the Director of National Intelligence
Washington, DC 20511

Dear Secretary Blinken and Director Haines:

We write to you out of serious concern for the six prominent Palestinian human rights organizations that were declared “terrorist organizations” by Israel’s Minister of Defense Benny Gantz over six months ago. A reported lack of evidence to support this decision raises concerns that it may be a deeply repressive measure, designed to criminalize and silence prominent and essential Palestinian human rights organizations.¹

The six Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations are Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children International – Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees.² These groups work directly with Palestinian women and girls, children, low-income families, prisoners, and civil society activists, providing direct services and monitoring human rights abuses by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities.

On October 22, 2021, Israel’s Minister of Defense Benny Gantz, signed an order designating the six Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations as “terrorist organizations,” stating the organizations “were active under the cover of civil society organizations, but in practice belong and constitute an arm of the [PFLP],” a reference to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a group which has long been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department.³ The move effectively criminalized and banned their activities within Israel. Two weeks later, on November 3, 2021, Israel’s Chief Military Commander in the West Bank declared the organizations to be “unlawful associations” in the occupied West Bank under Israeli military law.⁴

¹ *Secret Israeli document offers no proof to justify Terror label for Palestinian groups.* The Intercept (2021, November 4). <https://theintercept.com/2021/11/04/secret-israel-dossier-palestinian-rights-terrorist/>; *Israel's new secret document still fails to tie Palestinian ngos to 'terrorism'.* +972 Magazine (2022, January 13). <https://www.972mag.com/israel-document-palestinian-ngos/>

² *Gantz declares six Palestinian rights groups 'terror organizations'.* The Times of Israel (2021, October 22). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-declares-six-palestinian-human-rights-groups-terrorist-organizations/>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Two weeks on, Israeli army extends Palestinian NGO terror designation to West Bank.* Haaretz.com (2021, November 7). <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-11-07/ty-article/.premium/two-weeks-on-israeli-army-extends-palestinian-ngo-terror-designation-to-west-bank/0000017f-f8e0-d460-afff-fbe6a14f0000>

The Israeli government has not produced any evidence publicly, only general allegations. According to media reports, secret documents distributed to European diplomats and some Members of Congress by the Israeli government to justify the terrorist designations of the six prominent Palestinian human rights groups fail to provide concrete evidence of connections between the groups and the PFLP.⁵ In response to this move by the Israeli government, the European Union asserted that: “Past allegations of the misuse of EU funds in relation to certain of our Palestinian CSO partners have not been substantiated... The EU will continue to stand by international law and support civil society organizations that have a role to play in promoting international law, human rights, and democratic values.”⁶

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called the move “appalling and unjust” and “an alarming escalation that threatens to shut down the work of Palestine’s most prominent civil society organizations.”⁷ In late February, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, reaffirmed that the organizations “have worked for decades to promote human rights and provide critical humanitarian assistance in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and are key partners of the United Nations.”⁸ Bachelet declared that “[t]he designation decisions were based on vague and unsubstantiated reasons” and “OHCHR was not aware of any credible evidence to support these accusations.”⁹

The criminalization of these Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations also prompted the American Bar Association, the world’s largest voluntary association of attorneys and legal professionals, to send a letter to Israeli officials raising concerns that Israeli authorities have failed to guarantee the civil society organizations’ procedural rights under international law.¹⁰

The government of Israel’s actions should be understood in their broader context: Over the past several years, Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights and humanitarian organizations have faced an increasingly difficult operating environment and shrinking civic space in Israel and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. This negatively impacts their ability to deliver assistance and advocate for human rights. With this designation, there is now a legitimate fear that these tactics will be used to criminalize Israeli and international NGOs as well, leading to a possible shutdown of essential services, as well as human rights monitoring and reporting inside Israel and the occupied West Bank.

⁵ *Secret Israeli document offers no proof to justify Terror label for Palestinian groups*. The Intercept (2021, November 4). <https://theintercept.com/2021/11/04/secret-israel-dossier-palestinian-rights-terrorist/>; *Israel's new secret document still fails to tie Palestinian ngos to 'terrorism'*. +972 Magazine (2022, January 13). <https://www.972mag.com/israel-document-palestinian-ngos/>

⁶ *Statement by EU spokesperson on the listing of six Palestinian organizations as Terrorist Organizations (non-UN document) - question of Palestine*. United Nations (2021, October 28). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/statement-by-eu-spokesperson-on-the-listing-of-six-palestinian-organisations-as-terrorist-organisations-non-un-document/>

⁷ *Israel/Palestine: Designation of Palestinian rights groups as terrorists*. Human Rights Watch. (2021, October 22). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/22/israel/palestine-designation-palestinian-rights-groups-terrorists>

⁸ *Human rights situation in the OPT, including East Jerusalem, and the obligation to ensure accountability and Justice - report of the United Nations high commissioner for human rights (A/HRC/49/25) - question of Palestine*. United Nations (2022, February 23). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/human-rights-situation-in-the-opt-including-east-jerusalem-and-the-obligation-to-ensure-accountability-and-justice-report-of-the-united-nations-high-commissioner-for-human-rights-advance-edited-v/>

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *Letter Regarding Israel's Designation of Six Palestinian Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations as Terrorist Entities*. American Bar Association (2022, April 22). https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/government_affairs_office/rol-letter-to-israeli-pm-on-designation-of-palestinian-orgs-as-terrorist.pdf

On October 22nd, 2021, following the Israeli government's designation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price stated that the U.S. will be "engaging our Israeli partners for more information regarding the basis for these designations."¹¹ To follow up on this commitment, we would like to request an inter-agency briefing, classified, if necessary, to discuss this designation and the secret evidence distributed by the Israeli government, with relevant U.S. government officials from the Department of State and the Intelligence Community.

The U.S. must always and consistently speak out against efforts by all countries attempting to undermine civil society and the necessary work of humanitarian organizations. Counter-terrorism legislation must not be applied to legitimate human rights and humanitarian activities. Furthermore, repressive tactics such as criminalizing organizations must not be used to suppress or deny the right to freedom of association, or to quash political dissent, or limit the peaceful activities of civil society. Evidence justifying this designation has not been provided publicly or to all Members of Congress, despite multiple requests. We urge you to publicly reject this decision, call on the Israeli government to reverse course, confirm a date for an inter-agency briefing with the below signatories, and provide a report to Congress on your efforts within 30 days.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

¹¹ *In rebuke, US demands Israel explain terror listing for Palestinian ngos.* The Times of Israel (2021, October 22). <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-rebuke-us-demands-israel-explain-terror-listing-for-palestinian-ngos>



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



Donald M. Payne, Jr.
Member of Congress



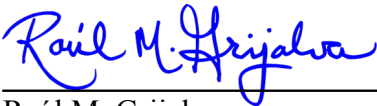
Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



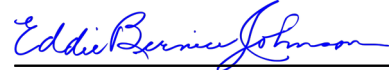
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



Cori Bush
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



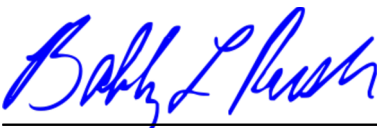
Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

André Carson

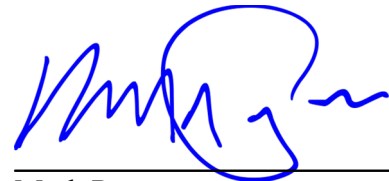
André Carson
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



Marie Newman
Member of Congress



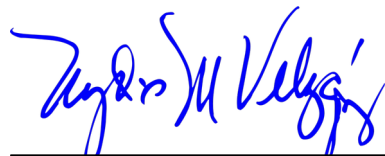
Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Maxine Waters
Member of Congress