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The Anti-Pressure-Over-Settlement-Expansion League?

By Leonard Fein

The tag line above the Anti-Defamation League's Web site reads, "To stop the defamation of the Jewish people, to secure justice and fair treatment for all." Its mission statement, unchanged since it was founded in 1913 and prominent on the home page of its Web site, is straightforward: "The immediate object of the League is to stop, by appeals to reason and conscience and, if necessary, by appeals to law, the defamation of the Jewish people. Its ultimate purpose is to secure justice and fair treatment to all citizens alike and to put an end forever to unjust and unfair discrimination against and ridicule of any sect or body of citizens." And so, for nearly a hundred years, it has sought, often brilliantly, to do precisely that.

In fiscal year 2001, the ADL spent \$54 million; in 2007, \$71 million. (By way of comparison, the American Jewish Committee in 2007 spent \$51 million, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee \$60 million, Human Rights Watch in 2008 \$42 million.) It is not entirely self-serving for the ADL to describe itself, as it does, as "the nation's premier civil rights/human relations agency."

Yet neither its tag line nor its mission statement hints at the ADL's mission creep. These days, there is no better example of how much American Jewish organizations have come to depend on Israel to juice their members. Perhaps because the ADL's traditional domain — the "defamation of the Jewish people" or, more broadly, antisemitism — has by now become more a vague memory than an urgent problem here in America, the ADL has turned increasingly to involvement with Israel's ongoing conflict with its neighbors. It is almost as if, like the March of Dimes after polio was defeated, the ADL has become an agency in search of a fresh purpose.

True, Israel needs all the help it can get. So why dump on the ADL for lending Israel a helping hand? Try this: The help Israel needs is not the tedious repetition of alibis and excuses, but a sober assessment of its current situation. But nothing in the ADL's recent interventions suggests it has the desire or the competence to offer such an assessment.

Thus, on July 27, a full-page ADL ad appeared in *The New York Times* under the blaring headline, "MR. PRESIDENT, THE PROBLEM ISN'T SETTLEMENTS, IT'S ARAB REJECTION." And then, "We all support peace in the Middle East. But pressuring Israel is not the right approach. The obstacle to peace is not Israel. The settlements are not the impediment. The issue is simple: the Arab and Palestinian rejection of Israel's right to exist... The path to peace is clear. With recognition, Israel has said again and again that everything is on the table without preconditions. Mr. President, it's time to stop pressuring our vital friend and ally."

Innocuous? Hardly. A major American Jewish organization goes public in its criticism of the president, and does so with contempt for the intelligence of its audience (including, presumably, the president): It asks the reader to believe that the issue at the heart of this enervating conflict is "simple," that all that has to happen is for the Arab world to "recognize" Israel and then Israel will put everything "on the table without preconditions."

But the ADL must know that the issue is not "simple" at all. It must know that Jordan and Egypt have already recognized Israel, and that the Arab League has promised to recognize Israel if Israel negotiates what the Arab League regards as an acceptable conclusion to the conflict. Does that mean there are preconditions? Yes, but no more disruptive than the preconditions Prime Minister Netanyahu insistently put forward during his major policy speech at Bar-Ilan University on June 14. And the ADL must know, as well, that Israel's call for recognition is not quite the innocent demand it is made out to be. Instead, it is a demand that Israel be recognized as *the Jewish state*. Some believe that the only purpose to be served by such recognition is to preempt any discussion of the Palestinian "right of return." Others feel that it is demeaning for the Jewish state of Israel to require that others acknowledge its core ideological principle. Simple?

And the ADL surely knows that settlements are, in fact, very much a problem. In a piece on *The Huffington Post* of July 24, the ADL's national director, Abe Foxman, acknowledges that Israel has confiscated property to establish new settlements, has provided financial incentives to

Jews to relocate to the West Bank, has failed to remove illegal outposts. He himself prefers, as does the Israeli government, that settlements be treated as “a matter for final status talks between Israel and the Palestinians.” Yet, inexplicably, he wants America now to praise Israel for once again promising to address these matters. But he must know that the only thing that may now bring them to fulfillment is American pressure.

In the meantime, between the long-since stale promises and final-status talks, Israel has built more and more housing in the settlements, until recently established new settlements, indulged the construction of new illegal outposts, planned for the major development of Area E-1, which would connect Jerusalem to Ma’aleh Adumim. Is all this construction merely a charade, its true destiny to be negotiated at the end of the day? Or is it an effort to establish “facts on the ground” that will ensure an endless night?

Here’s an idea, a way to test the ADL’s commitment to its stated mission: Let the panoply of American Jewish organizations that have genuine expertise on the Israel/Palestine conflict do their thing, while the ADL, in line with its stated purpose of securing “justice and fair treatment to all citizens alike,” takes a full-page ad in The New York Times endorsing major reform of our health care system.