

ADL – A History of Disinformation and Intimidation

Al Akhbar

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which describes itself as a civil rights organization, has been in the forefront of an ongoing attempt to label legitimate American-Arab and American-Muslim charitable, political, and informational organizations as fronts for terrorism. This attempt is part of a long-standing ADL policy of discrediting any individual or organization opposed to Israel or supportive of Palestinian rights. The ADL's strong political loyalty to Israel as well as its acknowledged ties to Israel's external intelligence agency in addition to its past practices of spreading disinformation and intimidating those who have spoken out against Israeli policies should however serve as a warning about the ADL and the nature of its claims.

When the ADL was founded in 1913 it defined its mission as opposing the defamation of the Jewish people. Over the years, the organization won respect for its active support of civil rights and its opposition to segregation and white supremacist groups. However after the founding of the State of Israel and the 1967 Middle East War, the ADL significantly altered the way it defined its mission. In a 1974 ADL publication entitled "The New Anti-Semitism," then-ADL National Director Benjamin Epstein argued that any "criticism of Israel reflects insensitivity to American Jews and constitutes a form of anti-Semitism." This change in the way it defined its mission meant that the ADL would no longer be engaged in merely civil rights work but would rather take on a very strong political stance in defense of Israel. The main goal of the ADL became to counteract any criticism of Israel and to promote Israel's interests regardless of other considerations. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, for example, the ADL was in the forefront of an effort to keep documents underscoring Israel's sinking of an American naval ship confidential. Such efforts cannot be understood in the context of the ADL's former civil rights agenda. Similarly, in November, 1994, ADL's Executive Director Abraham Foxman personally appealed to President Bill Clinton to commute the prison sentence of Jonathan Pollard, an intelligence analyst for the U.S. Navy who sold what the New York Times described as "suitcases full of military intelligence" to Israel.

Foxman's appeal to President Clinton can only be understood in light of the ADL's new mission of promoting Israeli interests.

The fact that the ADL has become a pro-Israel interest group is, of course, not in itself problematic. The entire United States political system is based on the freedom of interest groups to compete with others in promoting their often conflicting agendas. However the ADL has overstepped the bounds of legitimacy on a number of levels. The organization has engaged in illegal domestic spying activities, has worked with foreign intelligence agencies to undermine the rights and endanger the lives of American citizens, has undertaken disinformation campaigns slandering and intimidating numerous academicians, politicians, journalists, church officials, and Arab-Americans.

ADL's transgressions were most notably exposed in January 1993 when San Francisco newspapers broke the story of ADL's extensive domestic spying network. The San Francisco Police Department discovered that under the cover of fighting anti-Semitism, the ADL had gathered and sold to intelligence agents of the Israeli and South African governments information on thousands of American individuals and groups. In addition to nearly all Arab American organizations, those whom the ADL targeted included House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ron Dellums, former Congressman Pete McCloskey, Los Angeles Times correspondent Scott Kraft, the board of directors of public television station KQED, the Rainbow Coalition, a number of labor unions, Greenpeace, as well as numerous other journalists, professors, members of Congress, and activists who the ADL suspected had "anti-Israel" leanings. The information which the San Francisco police department confiscated from the ADL offices included illegally obtained confidential police material. The manner by which the ADL obtained such information as well as the fact that they sold it to foreign governments are both felonies.

The ADL's ties to the Mossad, Israel's external intelligence agency, had been known even before the scandal broke out in 1993. During the court proceedings concerning a 1970 lawsuit against the ADL, an internal letter was disclosed in which ADL's Epstein bragged about the close intelligence relations between the ADL and Israel. Furthermore, in his 1988 autobiography, ADL general counsel Arnold Forster described the close connections between the ADL and the Mossad. The Mossad connection is especially disturbing because of the Israeli intelligence agency's long record of engaging in political assassinations of opponents of Israel throughout the world.

Like the Mossad, the ADL has not been content with just gathering information on those who have spoken out against Israel or in favor of Palestinian rights. The ADL has also actively engaged in discrediting them through disinformation campaigns which are aimed at both distorting the records and intimidating those opposed to Israel. While in the 1970's and 1980's, the ADL often falsely labeled such individuals as being connected to the PLO or in the pay of Arab Gulf states, since the 1990's, the ADL has begun labeling them as being connected to Islamic terrorist organizations. The ADL's allegations, while couched in a matter-of-fact style, nearly always falls far short of providing any real evidence. However such allegations have had far-reaching effects. After the ADL accused seven Palestinians and a Kenyan woman in California with ties to a PLO terrorist group, for example, the eight individuals were arrested and deportation proceedings were begun. When it was later discovered that no real evidence existed against the eight individuals except for the fact that they had distributed anti-Israeli magazines, the media sharply criticized the government.

One of its first salvos in the disinformation war was its 1975 report entitled "Target U.S.A.: The Arab Propaganda Offensive," in which the ADL distorted the images of nearly all mainstream Arab-American groups. The ADL followed up that report with its most controversial book of all: *Pro-Arab Propaganda: Vehicles and Voices*, an enemies list of 31 organizations and 34 individuals which was published in 1983 and was largely aimed at countering opposition to Israel from University professors and student organizations. The publication intentionally takes statements of those on the list out of context, accuses them of Anti-Semitism, and falsely accuses a number of academic scholars of being part of a PLO support network or of having been paid by Gulf Arab countries. The report calls upon Jewish leaders in Universities throughout the country to boycott and intimidate those appearing on the list. Those who appeared on the list later found themselves ostracized by the academic community with some losing their jobs or denied promotions. S.C. Whittaker, the former chairman of the Political Science Department at Rutgers University admitted, for example, that political reasons, rather than academic ones, prevented Dr. Eqbal Ahmad from obtaining a regular teaching appointment after his name appeared on the ADL list. Dr. Noam Chomsky, who also appeared on the list, says that since the book was published, protesters have appeared at every one of his speaking engagements and have distributed distorted ADL reports containing fabricated quotes that he was alleged to have made in an attempt to intimidate him and his listeners. On Nov. 30, 1984, the Middle East Studies Association passed a resolution protesting the "creation, storage, or dissemination of blacklists,

enemy lists” or surveys that call for boycotting individuals or intimidating scholars. Similar intimidation campaigns have been waged by the ADL against reporters and journalists who have criticized Israel.

Throughout the 1980’s, the ADL also accused liberal church officials, church groups, and religious organizations which called for peace and justice for all in the Middle East as being connected to the PLO. The Reverend Don Wagner and the Presbyterian Church had especially been accused by the ADL of having connections to the PLO, though no evidence was ever presented backing up such contentions. On the other hand, after a 1994 report on the religious right, the ADL was accused by religious conservatives of going after people for their political views and of taking numerous quotes of religious leaders out of context. Also on May 25, 1994, the ADL’s Jerusalem office released a sensationalist story which appeared the next day in the New York Times and other newspapers which alleged that the Vatican had admitted to being responsible for the Holocaust. The Vatican later totally denied the story. The ADL’s blatant misrepresentation of facts was sharply criticized.

The ADL’s credibility has been severely shaken by its long record of disinformation. While the ADL has every right to continue advocating pro-Israel policies, its real agenda should be exposed and it must be made to end the illegal spying, harassment, and intimidation of political opponents. More importantly, U.S. law enforcement agencies, the media, and political circles need to see the ADL for what it is: a pro-Israel group more than ready to distort the truth to further the Israeli agenda. While in retrospect, it now seems very clear that the ADL’s wild allegations against alleged PLO support networks in the 1980’s were baseless, it must be remembered that at the time they were seen as credible and led many people to lose their jobs and others to be imprisoned. The ADL’s current crusade against alleged Islamic terrorist networks is almost identical to its earlier one against so-called ties to the PLO. Both campaigns are based on general stereotypes and fears and are devoid of evidence and fact. To repeat such allegations without further investigating them, as some in the media have done, is unprofessional and unethical. To act upon them, as some law-makers and law-enforcement agencies have done, is dangerous and threatens the freedoms and civil liberties Americans have grown to expect.

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