The absolute political independence, the condition of the action

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A radical worldview

1. A human rights organization is inherently a radical political organization. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHRI) is a political organization, allied with no political party.

2. We are political in striving for social change, to undermine the social structure that oppresses Palestinians (in the occupied Palestinian territory and in Israel), immigrant workers, women, old people, gays and lesbians, refugees, and the poor.

3. A radical group, by definition, is outside the consensus by choice; it is not forced on us. Although PHRI enjoys diverse members with different levels of radicalism, it succeeds in creating a radical political worldview when faced with its mission to create social and political change. Thus for example, in the case of PHRI, we do not seek to resemble the Israeli Medical Association (IMA) or other groups within the consensus, and although many of PHRI are members of the IMA they were able to form an effective opposition to its stand on torture.

4. As a radical human rights organization, PHRI tries to understand the root of the evil it opposes - that's why it's radical - and then to invest its best efforts and resources in changing evil at its foundation. This is the most difficult part of the organization's activity. It is always easier and more popular to provide immediate human aid to those who are sick and suffering, that is, humanitarian assistance, than to wage a long-term struggle against massive forces.

5. A radical medical organization must follow the more difficult way: to integrate humanitarian intervention which we are professionally obliged to offer, with a principled struggle against the roots of oppression, which is our ethical and political obligation.
Another essential task of a radical human rights organization is the dissemination of alternative language and information that contradicts the regime's propaganda. As an example, if the office of the IDF [Israel Defense Force] spokesperson claims that the Palestinians are using ambulances to transport weapons and armed fighters, PHRI will address Israel’s shooting at Palestinian ambulances killing and injuring their staff while denouncing the lies told by the spokesperson’s office. Thus, we are careful to speak of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as “the occupied Palestinian territory”—and we never use the term “Judea and Samaria.” “Moderate (or severe) physical pressure,” as the regime calls it, in our alternative language is called “torture.”

Collaboration and Segregation, Is there a Golden Road?

When considering our position vis-à-vis the establishment one feels like a juggler, as there is danger both in segregating ourselves from relations with it, as there is danger in too close cooperation with it.

Developing dependency relations with parts of the regime will affect the thinking and the actions of a human rights organization, whether consciously or unconsciously. The dependency can blur the boundaries between the consensus and those engaged in struggling against it. In such a case, the consensus can prevail by swallowing up the organization or by paralyzing it.

What are the temptations of the consensus?

The sense of belonging that comes when a person or an organization is part of the collective normative agreement;

A palliative for existential loneliness—to belong, in the simplest sense, is not to be alone.

Delusions of defense—“nothing bad can happen to me”—when I am part of the mass they can’t hurt me.

A complete or partial relinquishing of the self makes life easier because it exempts us from responsibility.

Thus, for example, in a tribal society there is no room for individuality. The tribal boundaries are the boundaries of the “I”. The “exemption” is from individual responsibility because there is only tribal/national or religious responsibility. The same is liable to be the case in the army.

When there is no personal moral responsibility (in other words, when one no longer decides times and again what is good and what is bad): Then the head of state, the rabbi, or the military commander speaks—and is obeyed blindly and automatically... “I was only following orders.”

In that case, the sense of responsibility focuses on the implementation of the mission, and is not connected with the content of the mission.

Taking moral responsibility means acting only after critical thinking, employing the highest moral perspective in considering the content of the act.
The benefits of expediency; the opportunity to advance organizational or personal interests.

Contact with important people: if I am with a VIP, then I am also important. It generates feelings of heightened capacities.

Segregation?

In order to protect itself from the temptations of the establishment, a human rights organization might avoid any cooperation with it. The outcome of total isolation or segregation is liable to cut off the dialogue with reality and policy-makers, which would make it impossible to achieve the main objective: social change.

The Difficult almost impossible Golden road

The synthesis between a radical political struggle and universal humanism is difficult on the level of ideas, of actions, and of feelings. In order to create this synthesis, one must invest great effort in critical thinking and analysis. Hence, each time, one must rediscover the path of synthesis. With this synthesis, one can transform careful dialogue with the establishment into an instrument for furthering the radical goals of the organization.

Therefore, our policy must be flexible. An effective flexibility is possible only when our collective and individual identity has been thoroughly formed, both interpersonally and in terms of ideas.

When a person or an organization is in the vanguard of struggle, the risk of being tainted is greater, because:

1. More people are interested in eliminating, condemning, moderating, pacifying or co-opting them; and
2. More people would like to see them fail—including “friends” (i.e. partners in the struggle).

Walking the Golden Road Together: Partnerships between Israeli, Palestinian, and International NGOs

PHR-Israel sees joint action to be of key importance in any change-making process and engages in joint activities with Israeli, Palestinian and international health and human rights organizations, with an emphasis on advancing human rights—particularly the right to health.

Several Palestinian NGOs work with PHR-Israel to organize and execute our Mobile Clinic project in the West Bank in a different village each week. These include, among others, PMRS – Palestinian Medical Relief Society, the Palestinian Health Work Committees, the Patients Friends Society, and the Palestine Red Crescent Society.

In the West Bank, the work of PHR-Israel for the health rights of Palestinians is conducted in coordination with Palestinian human rights organisations including, among others, Addameer, Mandela, the Torture Rehabilitation Center in Ramallah, and AlHaq.
The Gaza Community Mental Health Program, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza, and AlMezan cooperate regularly with PHR-Israel on issues relating to health rights in the Gaza Strip. The organisations exchange information and publish joint press releases, as well as meeting whenever possible.

PHR-Israel has been part of a forum with other human rights organizations in Israel, including Adalah, B’Tselem - Israel Information for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, ACRI – the Association of Civil Rights-Israel, Hamoked - Center for the Defense of the Individual, PCATI, Gisha, Yesh Din, Rabbis for Human Rights and Bimkom. These alliances, which have traditionally taken the form of joint human rights petitions to the Israeli High Court of Justice, and joint publicity work, have since 2007 crystallised into a “thinking group” meeting periodically and discussing alternative strategies for tackling the “prolonged occupation,” and accountability, instruments and strategies for international advocacy, and possible action regarding the Israeli High Court of Justice and international advocacy. The forum is currently working together devise and implement common strategies for the defense of human rights following the government and media targeting of Israeli NGOs.

PHR-Israel also cooperates with “younger” organisations recently established in the shadow of the second intifada, such as Gisha and Yesh Din. The joint work of PHR-Israel’s experienced staff with smaller highly professionalised groups such as Gisha has proved effective as, for example, in focused dissemination of information on issues of access from Gaza. See, e.g., a BBC feature on Gaza, fed in a coordinated manner almost entirely by information from PHR-Israel on the one hand and Gisha on the other. In addition, PHR-Israel and Gisha participated in a joint advocacy trip to Washington DC during the attacks on Gaza in January 2009, calling for greater protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

PHR Israel has decided to strengthen its relationship with activist groups in order to provide them with solidarity and some defense. We will continue to offer first aid courses for activists on the frontline in Bilin, Sheikh Jarah, and Nabi Saleh. In addition, we plan hold a joint campaign with Activestills, a group of photographers that document social issues, illicit and over violence, etc, highlighting discrimination in the right to health between Israelis and Palestinians.

PHR-Israel maintains close ties with the local offices of the World Health Organisation, meeting regularly and exchanging information especially regarding health access issues. PHR-Israel provides regular information for a WHO publications and engage in joint presentations.

PHR-Israel maintains close ties with foreign embassies in Tel Aviv, as well as foreign consulates in Jerusalem, and provides them with briefings and information regarding health and human rights in the OPT. With the embassies and the EU Presidency, PHR-Israel has initiated a mechanism whereby it transfers individual medical cases from Gaza, who have been rejected exit permits, to the EU Presidency, and the latter relay the cases through accepted diplomatic channels to the Israeli authorities. Mutual updates are provided.

PHR-Israel provides presentation and briefings, as well as leading workshops, for members of the AIDA coalition of humanitarian international NGOs working in the OPT.
PHR-Israel works closely with the Middle East Desk and Health Department of Amnesty International in London in order to issue Urgent Actions to Amnesty members regarding issues in the OPT.