Israel to set up parliamentary probe into foreign gov’t funding of rights groups

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-set-up-parliamentary-probe-into-foreign-funding-of-human-rights-groups/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday he intends to establish a parliamentary committee to investigate the funding Israeli NGOs receive from foreign governments.

Netanyahu told a gathering of Christian journalists at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem that the committee will probe “organizations that operate against” Israeli soldiers.

The IDF is the most moral army there is, Netanyahu declared, and vowed to put an end to the phenomenon of NGOs that harass IDF soldiers.

According to a report from the Haaretz daily, the decision to set up the committee was taken earlier in the day at a meeting of coalition party chiefs.

At the meeting, Netanyahu stressed the need to check the involvement of foreign governments in internal Israeli politics.

Sources said that all the coalition partners were in favor of the parliamentary committee that was proposed by coalition secretary Likud MK David Bitan.

Netanyahu has in the past pressed foreign governments to end funding for left-wing NGOs and refused to meet with visiting dignitaries who meet with these groups. In particular, he has singled out Breaking the Silence, an organization that collects testimonies from former Israel Defense Forces soldiers about alleged human rights violations they witness in the Palestinian territories during their military service.

Breaking the Silence has been a frequent target of ire for right-wing parties in Israel.

Last year, Israeli lawmakers passed into law the controversial Transparency Bill, which dramatically increases transparency requirements for fewer than two dozen Israeli NGOs — Breaking the Silence among them — that get most of their funding from foreign governments.

A Justice Ministry analysis of the legislation showed that nearly all the existing Israeli organizations set to be affected by the law’s new requirements were groups that oppose Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

During the discussion Sunday, Education Minister Naftali Bennett reportedly asked Netanyahu if there is a precedent for government involvement in the matter of NGOs and if there is a precedent  an investigative committee into such an issue. Netanyahu responded by giving the example of the ongoing US congressional committee investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections.

Such parliamentary committees in Israel mostly serve as a way to shed light on a pressing public issue and tend not to have much bite.

The NGO law was opposed by the US, and condemned by various European countries.