

Palestine: Amid Right-wing Attacks, Suspected Arson at B'Tselem Offices

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Headquarters of Israel's oldest human rights organization sustain heavy damage. Spokesperson says if fire turns out to be arson, 'it must be seen in the context of the wave of government incitement and smear campaigns against Israel's human rights groups, and B'Tselem in particular.'

A fire broke out at Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem's offices in Jerusalem Sunday night. Police said they suspect arson.

[Update, January 11, 2016, 11 a.m.: The preliminary results of the fire inspector's investigation indicate that the fire was the result of an electrical shortage and not arson.]

Right-wing organizations, [government ministers](#) and the media have launched seemingly concerted [attacks against human rights and anti-occupation organizations](#) in recent weeks, which many have called incitement. The government is currently [advancing a law](#) targeting human rights organizations that would portray them as serving foreign agendas.

A handful of right-wing Israelis gathered outside the building and celebrated the blaze while firefighters sought to extinguish it Sunday night, +972's Orly Noy reported from the scene.



A handful of right-wing Israelis revel at the fire that engulfed B'Tselem's offices in Jerusalem, January 10, 2015. (Orly Noy)

"We are still waiting for the findings of the fire investigator," B'Tselem said. "However, if it is discovered that this was an arson attack, it must be seen in the context of the wave of government incitement and smear campaigns against Israel's human rights groups, and B'Tselem in particular."

Video footage released by the Jerusalem Fire Department showed extensive damage to the organization's offices.

"Naturally, the damage to our offices will not stop our work of documenting and exposing the harm to human rights under the occupation," B'Tselem said in a statement.

No B'Tselem staff was in the building at the time of the blaze, which broke out around 10 p.m. Other people in the office building, which houses at least one other NGO and a

synagogue, did have to be evacuated, and one person was treated for smoke inhalation.



A firefighter stands in front of the charred door of B'Tselem's offices in Jerusalem. (Photo: Fire Department Spokesperson)

Hand in Hand, an organization that runs Israel's only Jewish-Arab integrated school system, also has its offices in the building. A Hand in Hand school was also the target of an [arson by right-wing Israelis](#) just over a year ago. It was not immediately clear if its offices were damaged in Sunday's fire.

Hyper-nationalist group Im Tirzu [published a video](#) accusing B'Tselem executive director Hagai Elad of being a foreign agent several weeks ago, suggesting that he and other human rights activists are somehow connected to the wave of stabbing attacks in recent months.

A separate right-wing organization put B'Tselem in its crosshairs this past weekend when it [published hidden camera footage](#) of one of its Palestinian field workers allegedly informing on a man who allegedly wanted to sell his family's land to Israeli settlers. Israeli politicians and right-wing organizations [used the video to smear the entire spectrum](#) of human rights and anti-occupation organizations in Israel.

Peace Now executive-director Yariv Oppenheimer lay blame for the suspected arson on the doorstep of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government, saying that next political murder is closer than ever. "The government must stop its campaign of incitement against the Left and order Israel Police to protect left-wing organizations from further attempts to harm them," Oppenheimer [wrote on Facebook](#) following the fire.

Some human rights and anti-occupation organizations have hired security guards in recent weeks in response to the delegitimization campaigns being waged against them.

Joint List chairman MK Ayman Odeh also blamed the government for the suspected arson:

"We don't know who threw the punch but the source of the fire that was set tonight at B'Tselem's offices is the government and the [prime minister] who are conducting an incitement campaign against human rights organizations," Odeh said late Sunday night.

Zionist Union MK Ksenia Svetlova responded with dire warnings about those who celebrated the fire, and those who may have set it. "We won't allow them to drag us down, into a bloody civil war," she wrote on Facebook. "We simply can't allow it."

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