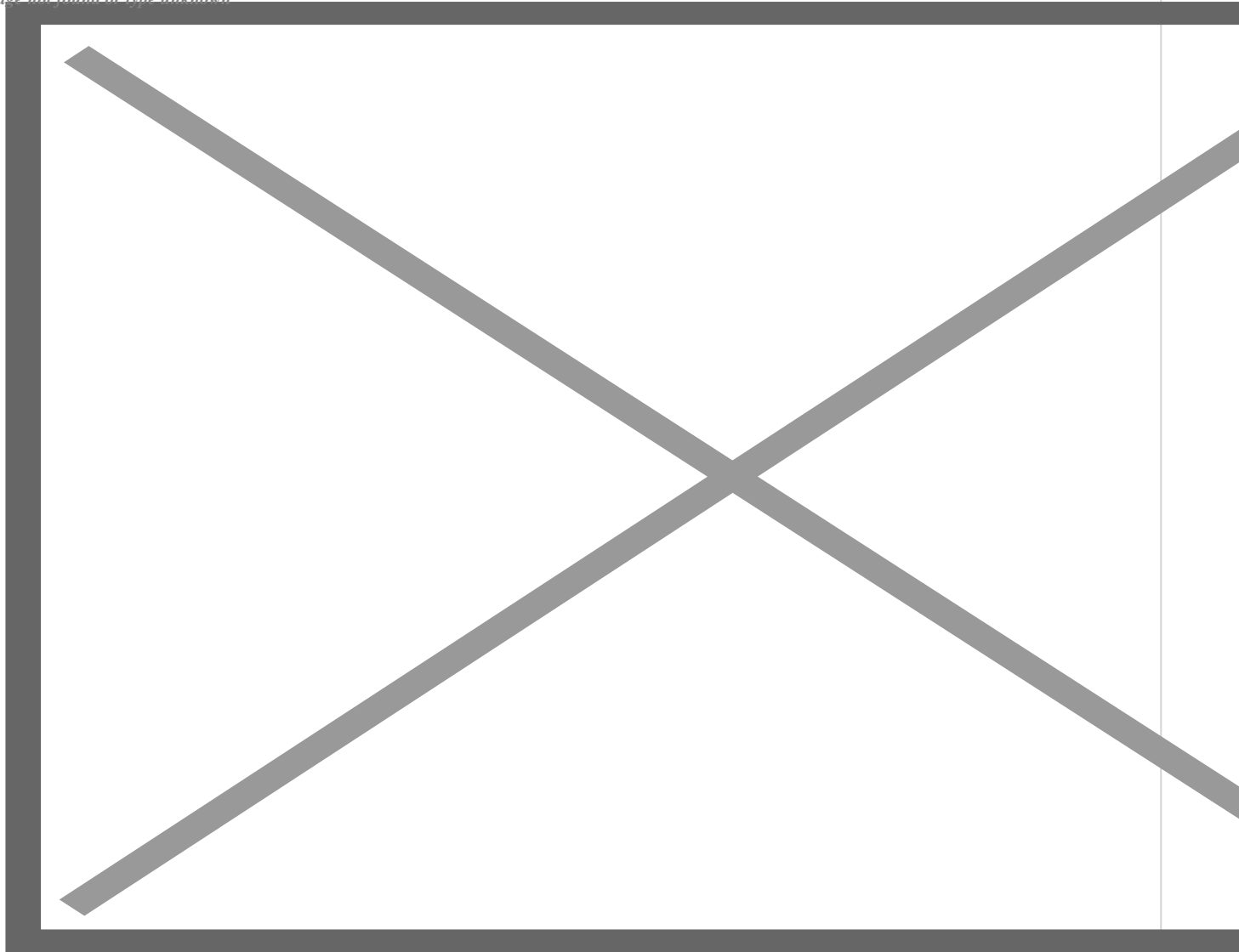


Israel reins in rights groups over use of ‘apartheid state’

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Education minister says groups calling country ‘apartheid state’ will be banned from lecturing at schools.

Tel Aviv, January 18 (RHC)-- Groups that call Israel an “apartheid state” will be banned from lecturing at schools, Israel’s education minister has said. The move targets one of Israel’s leading human rights

groups B'Tselem after it began describing Israel and its control of the occupied Palestinian territories as a single apartheid system.

Late on Sunday, Israel's Education Minister Yoav Galant tweeted he had instructed the ministry's director-general to "prevent the entry of organizations calling Israel 'an apartheid state' or demeaning Israeli soldiers from lecturing at schools."

In a report released last week, B'Tselem said that while Palestinians live under different forms of Israeli control in the illegally occupied West Bank, blockaded Gaza, occupied East Jerusalem and in Israel itself, they have fewer rights than Jews in the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

On Monday, the group said it would not be deterred by the announcement and that it gave a virtual lecture on the subject to a school in the northern city of Haifa. "B'Tselem is determined to keep with its mission of documenting reality, analyzing it, and making our findings publicly known to the Israeli public, and worldwide," the group said in a statement.

"Education minister ... while ordering schools to ban B'Tselem, claims that he is against 'lies' and for a 'Jewish and democratic' Israel. But it is Minister Galant who is lying, as Israel cannot be considered a democracy, for it works to advance and perpetuate the supremacy of one group of people, Jews, over another, Palestinians, within a single, bi-national polity," the statement read. "This is Israel's apartheid regime. No one can censor reality."

Adalah, an Arab legal rights group, said it had appealed to the country's attorney-general to cancel the directive, saying it was made without the proper authority and that it was intended to "silence legitimate voices." It was not immediately clear whether Galant had the authority to ban speakers from schools.

In 2018, Israel passed a law preventing lectures or activities in schools by groups that support legal action being taken against Israeli soldiers abroad. The law was apparently drafted in response to the work of Breaking the Silence, a whistle-blower group of former Israeli soldiers who oppose policies in the occupied West Bank. It was not clear if Galant's decree was rooted in the 2018 law.

Israel has long presented itself as a thriving democracy and purported that its Palestinian citizens, who make up about 20 percent of its population of 9.2 million, have equal rights.

However, these Palestinians suffer from being treated as second or third-class citizens at the institutional level, with some 60 laws that actively discriminate against them in the housing, education and healthcare sectors among others.

B'Tselem and other rights groups argue that the boundaries separating Israel and the occupied West Bank vanished long ago, at least for Israeli illegal settlers, who can freely travel back and forth, while Palestinians require hard-to-obtain permits to enter Israel.

Israel adamantly rejects the term apartheid, saying the restrictions it imposes in Gaza and the occupied West Bank are temporary measures needed for security.

Most Palestinians in the occupied West Bank live in areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, but those areas are surrounded by Israeli checkpoints and Israeli soldiers can enter at any time, with Israel having full military control over 60 percent of the area.



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