



NIF CRISIS ACTION REPORT

## **Investing in Israeli Civil Society's Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

הקרן החדשה לישראל  
**New Israel Fund**  
الصندوق الجديد لإسرائيل

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*Established in 1979, The New Israel Fund says it has provided \$300 million to over 900 Israeli civil society organizations.*





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## About New Israel Fund

In the 40 years since its founding, the New Israel Fund (NIF) has provided more than \$330 million to over 950 trailblazing organizations, building the foundations of progressive civil society in Israel. A partnership between Diaspora Jews and Israelis of every background, NIF is dedicated to actualizing the vision of Israel's Declaration of Independence, which "ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex."

Over the last decade, Israel's democratic foundations have been systematically undermined as part of an international trend toward populism and ultra-nationalism. In Israel, this "democratic recession" has included attacks on the justice system, the media, NGOs and others, as well as growing attempts to curb freedom of speech and assembly and minorities' rights. At NIF, we believe these trends further divide Israeli society and threaten the rule of law. In a constantly shifting landscape, we are working to ensure Israel remains committed to its founders' democratic ideals.

NIF takes a comprehensive approach to advancing a more just and democratic Israel using strategic grantmaking, capacity-building and organizational development (through NIF's action arm, Shatil), and public advocacy.

*Thousands of Israelis gather, socially distanced, at an anti-corruption rally in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv on April 20th, 2020.*



## Executive Summary

### OVERVIEW OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ISRAEL

#### Unequal Health and Economic Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone around the world, but it has not affected all sectors of society equally. In Israel, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and marginalized communities, including Israel's Arab and *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) communities. In the early months of the pandemic, access both to testing and timely public health information was far less readily available for communities in the so-called socioeconomic and geographic periphery.

Vulnerable communities, such as the elderly, especially residents of nursing homes and other geriatric residential facilities, faced severe shortages of critical supplies, including preventive and protective equipment that could have averted widespread community outbreak. As Israel's health-care system became consumed by COVID-19 response, secondary health impacts disproportionately affected marginalized communities, as

*On 19 March, 2020 Prime Minister Netanyahu declared a national state of emergency for COVID-19. By December over 423,000 Israelis had tested positive.*



hospitals canceled non-life-saving interventions. Those without access to the social safety net, technology, with low health literacy or high rates of chronic illness were cut off from the health-care system—with [profound negative health implications](#).

According to NIF grantee *Physicians for Human Rights—Israel (PHRI)*, the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 in Israel were not limited to disparities in health care. While, on the whole, [Israel's economy shrank](#) by 2.4% in 2020—faring better than the initial predictions by the Bank of Israel—this contraction was not felt equally. The economic burdens of the pandemic also disproportionately affected populations living at or below the poverty line, who were fired from jobs or put on unpaid leave at higher rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Israel, as in much of the world, has had a disproportionate impact on women, threatening to roll back advances in gender equality made in recent decades in the areas of higher education and employment and exacerbating violence against women, according to the *Adva Center*, an NIF grantee and Israel's leading progressive research institution that monitors social and economic development. According to a recent *Adva* report authored by Dr. Yael Hasson, Haddas Ben Eliyahu, and Dr. Hagar Tzameret, women—who are overrepresented in the informal economy (including in house cleaning, childcare, and sex work)—suffered outsized economic losses. Of those placed on unpaid leave, 70% were women, according to official Israeli Employment Service statistics.

It was clear from the start that any adequate response to this crisis would require Israel's civil society to advocate for equity in the public response—for example, by urging the government to provide adequate access to testing and culturally specific public health communications that could provide essential information to diverse communities. Achieving such equity would be critical to breaking the chain of transmission in Israel's culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse society. Similarly, as the unprecedented economic repercussions of the pandemic and restrictive public health measures reverberated throughout the country, ensuring an equitable and inclusive economic response in the immediate and long term was equally essential for underserved communities. After the advent of the vaccine and Israel's effective program of distribution, civil society groups focused on ensuring equitable access to the vaccine for marginalized populations, including asylum seekers and refugees, those incarcerated in Israel's prisons, and Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and under blockade in Gaza.

**Those without access to the social safety net, technology, with low health literacy or high rates of chronic illness were cut off from the health-care system—with profound negative health implications.**

### Pandemic and Democracy in Crisis

Beyond the public health and economic consequences of the pandemic in Israel, there was a third realm in which Israel's progressive civil society would have a crucial role to play. The pandemic struck Israel at a time of deep political crisis just before the March 2020 Knesset election. Two previous inconclusive parliamentary elections had failed to produce a stable government, and a transitional government headed by a prime minister under indictment for corruption charges posed unique challenges: The emergency soon threatened democratic governance and empowered the government to erode key democratic norms and protections for individual rights.

As PHRI documents in its comprehensive report, *A Policy of Neglect: The First 100 Days of COVID-19 in Israel's Healthcare System*, "The lack of an effective legislative authority led to a situation in which most of the actions taken to handle the outbreak, at the most critical stages, were authorized by regulations based on a standing national state of emergency, in force since 1948, rather than through primary legislation." The pandemic created an opening for authoritarian tendencies of those in government to emerge and to seek to consolidate power in the executive branch. Israel's civil society—especially its civil rights and human rights sector—would be essential to ensuring Israel's democratic resilience through this unprecedented period of challenge.

With only a transitional government and no functioning Knesset in place during the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Israel, advancing policy change toward a more equitable and inclusive crisis response was all the

*During the coronavirus emergency, NIF and our grantees have been on the frontlines of crisis response, working to ensure that the most marginalized communities have access to care and basic needs, including equitable access to protective equipment and emergency care.*



more challenging. One element of this political dysfunction was the government's failure to pass a budget for 2020 or 2021, stalling reforms and leaving government agencies unable to efficiently allocate emergency resources amid the pandemic. Even as a national unity government was formed in the middle of 2020, challenges remained, including the government's overreliance on the military to manage its crisis response as well as the Knesset's inability to carry out effective parliamentary oversight. Despite efforts to ensure appropriate transparency the coronavirus cabinet's decision-making was shrouded in secrecy. As a result of these hurdles, the significant achievements for civil society during this period often resulted from legal advocacy by civil rights organizations and grantees in Israel's Supreme Court and short-term successes achieved through public communication and the media—such as the work of the *Crisis Experts* detailed below.

### NIF Strategic Response: Crisis Action Plan

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, NIF moved swiftly to assess and address the constellation of emergencies and allocate strategic funding accordingly.

NIF's *Crisis Action Plan* was designed to address these priorities—protecting vulnerable populations, defending civil liberties, and building an inclusive and equitable economic response to the crisis—while strengthening civil society organizations positioned to address these immediate concerns and enabling them to adapt to this new reality.

The following report will provide an overview of the *Crisis Action Plan* and delve into its key strategies; spotlight grantee activities that typified these strategies; and provide a summary of key learnings and outcomes from a year of investing in these strategies, including:

- Identify Needs Early and Act Fast
- Learn from the Crisis
- Share Information Broadly
- Utilize a Loose Funding Framework and Adapt to the Environment
- Support Communities and Issues Across Multiple Points of Vulnerability
- Balance Direct Support and Sustaining Institutions
- Invest in Policy Change
- Center Diversity in Decision-Making
- A Crisis Should Reflect — Not Redefine — Who You Are

**The emergency soon threatened democratic governance and empowered the government to erode key democratic norms and protections for individual rights.**





## The Crisis Action Plan

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, the virus revealed inequities and vulnerabilities in every society it affected, including in Israel. From the very first days, the New Israel Fund, as the engine of Israel's progressive society, was aware of the central role strategic philanthropy would play during this public health emergency. Our overarching responsibility during the crisis was to provide strategic coherence across our sector and ensure Israel's civil society had the resources and tools to adequately respond. We mobilized to line up the resources necessary not only to help everyone make it through this crisis—but to ensure that Israel emerged a more equal and more free society in its wake.

NIF's *Crisis Action Plan* was designed in consultation with our grantees in Israel and our staff and board members around the world. It leveraged our collective resources, expertise, and relationships to ensure Israel's civil society could rise to meet the challenge of this moment.

*The New Israel Fund's overarching responsibility during the crisis was to provide strategic coherence across our sector and ensure Israel's civil society had the resources and tools to adequately respond.*



**Its three core strategies became the primary focus of our work during this period:**

1. Protecting the Most Marginalized and Vulnerable Communities
2. Defending Civil Liberties and Democracy
3. Maintaining a Strong and Vibrant Civil Society

In the face of urgent needs in nearly every sector, NIF was forced to consider how to direct its finite resources in a manner consistent with its founding values and that furthers NIF's strategic objectives while meeting the most urgent pandemic-related needs. This prompted a bigger question:

*Could our response to this emergency help our grantees advance a long-term vision for social change in Israel toward a more just, democratic, and equal society?*

NIF's response focused on areas where our investment could make an immediate impact while advancing our long-term goals for social change.

### EMERGENCY RESPONSE ADVANCING LONG-TERM GOALS

#### SPOTLIGHT: JEWISH-ARAB PARTNERSHIP

NIF has long been committed to fostering Arab-Jewish partnership at every level of society—a commitment that infuses almost every aspect of our work. For example, the fight against gender inequality in Israel has been furthered by grantmaking across multiple areas of impact, and ties into our long-term goal of promoting Jewish-Arab cooperation. During the pandemic, NIF distributed grants to Jewish and Arab women's organizations—including the *Israel Women's Network*, *Women Against Violence*, and *Al-Tufula Center*—to continue their joint work against gender-based violence, a crisis compounded by the COVID-19 lockdowns. We targeted grants to address this acute need arising from pandemic, namely, the spike in intimate partner violence and femicide as well as the increase in calls to domestic violence hotlines and shelters reaching maximum capacity. NIF's investment continued to build capacity while addressing this long-term challenge.

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### USING THE CRISIS TO CREATE OPPORTUNITY

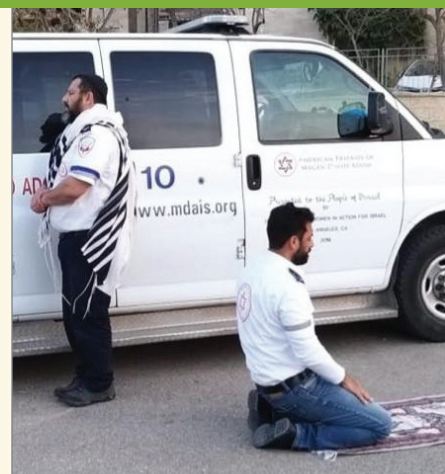
#### SPOTLIGHT: COOPERATION IN HOSPITALS

As COVID-19 placed a spotlight on Israel's public health infrastructure and hospitals, NIF identified an opportunity to highlight a unique feature of Israel's health system: It is one of the few areas of Israeli society in which Arab citizens account for a large and growing percentage of health professionals, including nurses, pharmacists, and physicians. Jewish-Arab cooperation at Israel's inundated hospitals—the epicenter of the fight against the virus—garnered widespread support and public sympathy. This enabled NIF grantees and partner organizations to advance our work in fostering support for broader Jewish-Arab partnership and leverage that public support toward introducing Jewish-Arab partnership in other arenas.

### ADAPTING TO EMERGENT TRENDS

#### SPOTLIGHT: FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The wave of anti-corruption protests that followed the indictment of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for abuses of power were spontaneous and overwhelming, and continue today. Prior to the emergence of these widespread demonstrations, NIF was in ongoing dialogue with activist groups to build a sustainable support system for civic protests. Yet as the anti-corruption protests were increasingly met with police violence and restrictive regulations, NIF convened activists and civil society leaders to identify the key needs of organizations driving the protests amid the pandemic. We began to think about how this movement that was mobilizing record numbers of Israeli citizens could be a catalyst for good government for the long term. NIF's strategic grantmaking to protect freedom of expression brought together efforts from across Israel's civil rights community, including the *Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)*, *Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel*, and *Human Rights Defenders Fund (HRDF)* with ongoing strategic support from Shatil, NIF's action arm.



*Jewish and Muslim ambulance staff at prayer.*

*NIF grantees have worked during the crisis to fostering Jewish-Arab partnership and to defend Israel's democratic institutions and civil liberties from government overreach.*



### BUILDING ALIGNMENT

#### SPOTLIGHT: PROTECTING ASYLUM SEEKERS

NIF's *Crisis Action Plan* sought to protect Israel's most marginalized communities, including the asylum-seeker community, which is cut off from the country's social safety net and excluded from its health-care system. Individual grantees such as the *Hotline for Refugees Migrants* and *PHRI* organized to protect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. NIF added strategic value to their sustained and ongoing efforts by continuing to fund a joint lobbyist working to advance the rights of asylum seekers across these organizations. In this way, NIF was able to add capacity to multiple organizations and grantees working toward a shared objective.

In the midst of a public health emergency, our grantees won a years-long battle for the rights of African asylum seekers in Israel when, in April 2020, Israel's Supreme Court struck down the so-called Deposit Law, which forced asylum seekers to place one-fifth of the earnings into a locked account to be retrieved only if they left the country. After years of legal advocacy and as asylum seekers faced the coronavirus lockdowns with no access to health care, the court ruled the law violated asylum seekers' basic right to live in dignity and ordered the state to return the withheld funds.

From the outset of this crisis, NIF knew that marginalized groups were going to be impacted hardest. In a moment of crisis, there isn't time to do a full needs assessment from the ground-up for each of these communities. You have to rely on what you know. NIF invested where we knew we could have impact and where we held strong, tested relationships with trusted partners on the ground who could rapidly identify the most urgent needs and priorities. Over many years supporting the most marginalized communities in Israel, NIF's added value in this crisis grew from the priorities we were *already* funding in that space.

At the same time, NIF had to be nimble in addressing pressing challenges as they emerged during the more than year-long pandemic. Investing in civil society and democracy during a highly dynamic emergency required flexibility and the ability to adapt rapidly without being overly committed to fixed categories of funding. This flexibility in our approach allowed NIF and our grantees to meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups as they became apparent and acute.



*Thanks to a petition from several NIF grantees, Israel's Supreme Court struck down the 2017 Deposit Law, which withheld a fifth of the earnings of asylum seekers, forcing many into poverty as a means of encouraging them to leave the country.*





## Key Strategies

### **PROTECTING THE MOST MARGINALIZED AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

NIF realized from the start the most vulnerable and marginalized communities would be affected disproportionately and most severely during the pandemic and would need special attention and care. Yet, as an organization working to correct longstanding societal inequalities, we knew that those who need help the most often do not get it. The lack of access to basic health services, economic recovery resources, coronavirus-related information, and the systemic exclusion of vulnerable populations from government planning would leave vulnerable communities at risk and hobble Israel's ability to break the chain of transmission and overcome the virus.

That is why our *Crisis Action Plan*'s first strategic pillar was to support the civil society organizations best positioned to address the specific communities left out of the government's and health system's crisis response.

*Disparities in access to real-time public health information and healthcare put the health and wellbeing of Arab citizens—and everyone in Israel—at risk.*

### INVESTING ACROSS LINES OF MARGINALIZATION

**Our grantees endeavored to ensure equal access to health care and other basic needs across linguistic, geographic, and socio-economic lines of marginalization.** It was clear that any effective national response meant that the entire society's health depends on no group or individuals being left out. That is why in the earliest days of the pandemic, we made sure our grantees had the resources to ensure that communities being hit hardest and most likely to be overlooked by the government—including African asylum seekers, Bedouin citizens of Israel, and Palestinian laborers and incarcerated people—gained access to public health information and services.

### ENABLING EQUAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION

**Access to coronavirus-related information was essential to help flatten the curve.** When Israel began to disseminate information about how prevent the spread of the disease, it became clear that critical public health information about the virus was not available in many of the languages spoken among minority communities, including Arabic, Yiddish, Tikrit, and Amharic. These communities included ultra-Orthodox Jews who often do not use the internet, asylum seekers and Arab citizens who may not read Hebrew, and others. If these groups did not have the necessary information, they would not be able to fully protect themselves and their families—or take the steps necessary to break the chain of transmission.

### ENSURING EQUITABLE ECONOMIC RELIEF

**When the scope of the economic impact of the pandemic became clear, NIF prioritized advocating for immediate relief for the most marginalized groups as well a just and equitable economic policy in the aftermath of the pandemic.** We realized that the economic implications would be enormous and long-lasting, and that government assistance would be needed to help people who had lost their livelihoods—including pregnant women and those on parental leave—get back on their feet. NIF focused on supporting its grantees as they helped shield the most economically precarious communities from the immediate effects of the crisis and worked to ensure that government policy addressing the economic impact of the crisis would be equitable and inclusive.

**The lack of access to basic health services, economic recovery resources, coronavirus-related information, and the systemic exclusion of vulnerable populations from government planning would leave communities at risk and hobble Israel's ability to break the chain of transmission and overcome the virus.**

## Reinforcing Civil Liberties and Democracy

Those seeking to erode Israel's democratic safeguards and weaken its institutions took advantage of the state of emergency brought about by pandemic to further those aims. Even before the pandemic, Israel's civil society was a bulwark against these efforts, and NIF and our grantees were already uniquely positioned to make an impact in this area. NIF was determined to ensure that amid the public health crisis, Israel's democratic institutions remain strong and civil liberties protected. During the pandemic, Israel's government tried to infringe on civil liberties by instituting a far-reaching surveillance program, by curtailing Israelis' freedom to protest, and by threatening the basic division of powers between the branches of government.

NIF and our grantees were essential in pushing back against governmental overreach that sought to roll back basic rights during the pandemic. These activities included concerted grantee advocacy and organizing to protect the judiciary from unprecedented assaults on its legitimacy and independence; to combat sweeping and unconstitutional government surveillance under the guise of contact tracing; to ensure government transparency in COVID-19-related decision-making; and to safeguard the rights of those incarcerated in Israel's prisons. During a time of massive civil mobilization, as Israelis sought to demonstrate against government corruption, NIF grantees organized to protect the freedom to protest—despite the government's efforts to curtail it.

With the growth of large-scale anti-corruption protests, demonstrators faced legal infringements on the right to demonstrate, excessive and sometime brutal force by police, as well as violence by counter-protesters. Shatil

*"A peace agreement, not an annexation deal." When Israel's emergency government sought to take advantage of the pandemic to annex parts of the West Bank, NIF mobilized to support organizations sounding the alarm about this danger to Israel's democratic future.*





and the Shatil-led *Forum for the Freedom of Protest* sought to support and educate demonstrators, who often were engaging in direct civic action for the first time. Comprising *ACRI*, *Adalah*, *HRDF*, the *Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI)*, and the *Negev Coexistence Forum*, the forum's trainings helped activists identify when their rights were violated. *HRDF*, meanwhile, negotiated the release of over 300 protesters who had been wrongfully detained. *PCATI* filed nearly 75 complaints of police brutality with Israel's police internal investigations department.

Resisting anti-democratic encroachment was fundamentally responsive—rising to meet the needs of emerging threats. Yet, NIF's longstanding relationship with civil society organizations working in the field of democratic change gave us—and the broader camp of civil society grantees—insight and instincts into identifying where these threats resided. In particular this work gave us insight into the relationship between acute efforts to defang systems of accountability for government corruption and a broader attempt to weaken Israel's independent judiciary and its system of checks and balances.

### Maintaining Israel's Strong and Vibrant Civil Society

A strong and vibrant civil society is essential for a healthy democracy. With the unprecedented disruption to everyday life and work that COVID-19 wrought, organizations that comprise Israel's civil society faced unprecedented challenges, including maintaining budgets and keeping their staff employed—even as they struggled to meet the urgent needs of those they serve. NIF's role was to provide the entire sector of Israel's progressive civil society the support to survive the short-term crisis of the pandemic, and to equip it with the tools to adapt and thrive during and after this crisis. NIF and Shatil worked directly with civil society to adapt organizations' core work, budgets, and staffing needs to this new reality and to plan for the future.

In March 2020, as the pandemic forced Israelis into a countrywide lockdown, Shatil opened its *Crisis Hotline* for organizations facing critical new challenges. Over a four-month period, Shatil provided 55 organizations with emergency assistance on issues including staff furloughs and layoffs, crisis financial management and fundraising, and the remote mobilization of volunteers. *Shatil* delivered interactive trainings virtually, and developed new trainings, tools, and approaches to address the evolving needs of civil society organizations during the crisis. In 28 emergency trainings, *Shatil* reached over 1,000 social change activists across diverse issue areas, and conducted weekly leadership forums to provide peer-to-peer support, as well as direct coaching for nonprofit directors to navigate the greatest crises of their careers. Nearly 300 social change organizations received

**NIF and our grantees were essential in pushing back against governmental overreach that sought to roll back basic rights during the pandemic.**

capacity-building consultancy services. The move to online trainings allowed NIF to broaden its reach among groups in Israel's periphery, and to develop organizational capacity in the Palestinian-Israeli sector, especially among organizations working to address crime and violence in Palestinian society.

**Building Alignment Through Regional Intervention:** Shatil used its convening power to bring together local organizations across Israel's geographic regions. In Israel's southern region, Shatil convened the *Negev Coronavirus Situation Room*, which monitored the needs of Israel's southern residents, including its Bedouin community, and successfully lobbied for increased government investment in Negev health care, including testing sites. The Shatil-led *Jewish-Arab Forum for the Promotion of Health in the Galilee (Northern Health Forum)* and the *Southern Health Coalition* secured government commitments to distribute personal protective equipment equitably among ambulance crews in Israel, when it became apparent that Arab and *Haredi* first responders weren't being provided with this life-saving equipment. The *Northern Health Forum* also successfully advocated for provision of dialysis to COVID-19-positive patients, securing establishment of a dedicated dialysis unit at the Galilee Medical Center.

**Mobilizing Civil Society to Oppose Annexation:** NIF and Shatil focused the resources and aligned activities of our grantees to ensure that, amid the pandemic, civil society possessed sufficient capacity to resist a singular threat to Israel's democratic future: the prospect of formal annexation of the West Bank. Over the course of Israel's 54-year military occupation, successive governments have passed laws that normalize settlements and incorporate them into Israel's legal system—a process of so-called “creeping annexation.” Yet, in 2020, Netanyahu pledged to move forward with *de jure* annexation, and with an effective green light from the Trump administration, brought into the mainstream of Israeli politics a once-fringe position of the far right. Following the formation of a national unity government, which allowed Netanyahu to present plans for applying Israeli sovereignty to West Bank territory by July 1, 2020, NIF advanced a multifaceted approach to opposing annexation, a disastrous development for any future of democracy in Israel, that included: mapping and convening diverse players across Israeli civil society, including human rights and activist groups, two-state-solution-oriented organizations, and security and centrists groups; funding critical infrastructure for groups fighting annexation; supporting anti-annexation campaigns in Israel; and leveraging NIF's global reach to oppose it in the international arena.

**NIF's role was to provide the entire sector of Israel's progressive civil society the support to survive the short-term crisis of the pandemic, and to equip it with the tools to adapt and thrive during and after this crisis.**



## Grantee Spotlights

### **ASSOCIATION FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN ISRAEL—ACRI**

*Promotes the universality of human rights through precedent-setting litigation, human rights education, public outreach, and advocacy.*

From the outset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Israel, the *Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)*, NIF's flagship grantee protecting the human rights and civil liberties of all people living in Israel and the occupied territories, shifted into emergency response. Their immediate goal was to ensure that the most vulnerable populations had access to vital public health information and medical care and equitable access to economic relief. As Israel's government took advantage of the crisis to encroach on civil liberties, *ACRI* fulfilled its role of protecting individual rights and democracy.

**TAKING URGENT ACTION:** *ACRI's* early advocacy, in coordination with partners in civil society, ensured that the acute economic impacts of the crisis did not fall unduly on the most marginalized communities.

*Israel's civil liberties defenders were instrumental in protecting the core rights of Israelis in an atmosphere of national emergency.*



In the early months of the pandemic, *ACRI*'s advocacy led to Israel's government acting to freeze National Insurance debts, mortgage and public housing payments, and to a court injunction that prevented those who could not pay their bills from having their electricity disconnected. *ACRI*'s advocacy ensured that bulletins from Israel's main news outlets were required to present public health information with Arabic subtitles and in sign language, and ensured that Israel's banks would remain open for pensioners and welfare recipients to withdraw their benefits. These are just a handful of the life-saving interventions attributable to *ACRI*'s persistent advocacy.

**Facing the Threat to Democracy:** At the same time, *ACRI* was among the first to recognize and respond to the threats to democracy during this global crisis. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, civil liberties organizations like *ACRI* have been at the very forefront of ensuring that the atmosphere of emergency cannot be exploited to erode the rights of Israel's citizens.

- **Protecting the right to privacy:** One key arena in this battle for democracy has been resisting the deployment of intrusive surveillance technologies to monitor citizens. In March 2020, *ACRI* petitioned Israel's Supreme Court to stop an emergency regulation passed without parliamentary oversight allowing Israel's Internal Security Agency (the Shin Bet), roughly speaking the Israeli equivalent of the FBI, to harvest data from civilians' cellphones without a warrant, including the location of those suspected to have been exposed to the virus. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of *ACRI* and fellow petitioners and found that the government held no such authority to extend this power to surveil Israeli citizens. Such authority, the court ruled, could only derive from special legislation that met the standards of Israel's *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*. *ACRI* fought and won a series of legal battles to ensure appropriate oversight and to curtail the scope of the government's surveillance programs. These sustained efforts produced a victory for the separation of powers by restoring the role of parliamentary oversight over executive action and constraining the state from exercising arbitrary power.

- **Victory:** On March 1, 2021 the Supreme Court vindicated *ACRI* other NIF grantees—including *Adalah* and *PHRI* and *Privacy Israel*—that joined their petition to the High Court by ruling that the Israel Security Agency's surveillance program targeting civilians for the purposes of COVID-19 contact tracing violated the basic rights of Israeli citizens to privacy, especially as equally effective means that did not infringe on basic rights were available to the state for epidemiological tracing.



*ACRI won a major victory for privacy rights in Israel when its advocacy in the courts to forced Israel's interim government to curb its surveillance program tracking the cell phone data of civilians and subject it to parliamentary oversight.*

- **Defending an independent judiciary:** During Israel's first lockdown in April, in the dead of night, and two days before Prime Minister Netanyahu's corruption trial was set to commence in the Jerusalem District Court—[interim Justice Minister Amir Ohana declared](#) a “state of emergency” for Israel's justice system, freezing the work of the courts and delaying the prime minister's trial by two months. *ACRI* challenged this unjustified expansion of executive power over the judiciary, immediately petitioning Israel's Supreme Court against the minister's exploitation of the state of emergency to freeze the judicial system. In the Supreme Court hearing held on April 2, 2020, the justices proposed that Knesset's legislative oversight, rather than emergency regulations issued by the Minister of Justice, should regulate Ministry of Justice procedures to avoid conflicts of interest and potential abuses of power.
- **Securing the right to protest:** As Israel's government sought to use the public health crisis to restrict citizens' ability to protest, *ACRI* was instrumental in defending freedom of expression. When, in March 2020, Netanyahu fomented a constitutional crisis by instructing Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein to prevent the Knesset from convening (and from passing legislation barring a member of Knesset under indictment for corruption charges from serving as prime minister), demonstrators from the Black Flags anti-corruption movement gathered to protest this affront to democratic governance. But when protesters gathered outside the Knesset, police stopped them without explanation. *ACRI* immediately appealed to the head of police to allow the protest to take place, and emergency regulations that were issued permitted protests and demonstrations as an exception to the emergency restrictions (so long as health precautions were maintained). *ACRI* has continued its persistent advocacy to protect the right to protest during the pandemic.

**As Israel's government took advantage of the crisis to encroach on civil liberties, *ACRI* fulfilled its role of protecting individual rights and democracy.**

## ADALAH: THE LEGAL CENTER FOR ARAB MINORITY RIGHTS IN ISRAEL

*Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel conducts litigation and advocacy efforts by and for Arab citizens of Israel to ensure the rights of this community.*

As the coronavirus pandemic began to disproportionately impact marginalized communities in Israel, including Palestinian citizens, those incarcerated in Israeli prisons, and Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, *Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights* was an instrumental voice in advocating for an equitable response for these groups. Amid this crisis, *Adalah* moved into emergency footing, monitoring for human rights violations and taking appropriate legal action to defend the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians in the occupied territories.

- Ensuring equal access to public health information for Arabic speakers:** As Israel's Ministry of Health began publishing real-time advisories and public health information on coronavirus only in Hebrew, updates in Arabic were published only after significant delays. This put the health and wellbeing of Arab citizens—and everyone in Israel—at risk, since breaking the chain of transmission required stopping the spread of the virus in every community. On March 9, 2020, *Adalah* called on Israel's Ministry of Health to ensure real-time public health advisories were accessible to all Israeli citizens, including Arab citizens of Israel, on all its communications platforms. Following its advocacy, the Health Ministry began disseminating significant Arabic-language information on coronavirus on its social media platforms

*Adalah* continues to demand health information be equally accessible in Arabic. In January 2021 *Adalah* petitioned Israel's Supreme Court to require that Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel's largest emergency medical response organization, provide urgent COVID-19-related public health information on its website not only in Hebrew and English, but in Arabic as well. In February 2021, MDA informed the court that it intends to build a new website that includes Arabic.

- Equal access to coronavirus testing and vaccination:** From the very beginning of the pandemic, it was apparent that there was a significant disparity in access to testing facilities between Jewish and Arab cities and towns. Beginning in March 2020, *Adalah* was instrumental in demanding that Israeli health officials establish adequate coronavirus testing infrastructure to serve Arab citizens—particularly in the Triangle region and Palestinians towns in the Upper Galilee, namely Jish, Fassuta, and Mi'ilya—as well as



*At the outset of the crisis, Israel's Ministry of Health real-time public health advisories on coronavirus were published only in Hebrew, with Arabic updates available only after significant delays.*



for Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. On April 8, 2020, *Adalah* along with the *Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights* in Jerusalem, filed a petition to Israel's Supreme Court demanding testing for Palestinians living in the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Kufr Aqab and Shuafat refugee camp, areas located beyond Israel's separation barrier where approximately 150,000 Palestinians with Israel-issued Jerusalem ID cards reside, yet lacked testing.

On April 1, 2020, *Adalah* [filed a petition to the Israeli Supreme Court](#) on behalf of the *High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel*, the *Arab Doctors Association in the Naqab*, the *Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality*, and the *Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev* demanding that coronavirus drive-in testing or mobile test centers be made available in Bedouin villages in the Negev-Naqab and calling for the allocation of additional ambulances in the underserved region. Since Israel's vaccination program began in the final weeks of 2020, *Adalah's* advocacy aimed to ensure that the government's plans for COVID-19 vaccinations included Bedouin residents in the Negev-Naqab region, including in Al-Qassoum and Neve Midbar regional councils, and in unrecognized Bedouin village.

- **Equal access to distance learning:** As inequities between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel were made apparent beyond public health, *Adalah* intervened to identify gaps and close them. As the lockdown forced elementary and secondary education online, *Adalah*, alongside other civil society actors, observed a vast disparity in access to education. In March 2020, *Adalah* [sent a letter to the director-general of Israel's Education](#) Ministry demanding equal access for Palestinian Bedouin students in the Negev-Naqab region to Arabic-language educational materials and distance-learning tools.

- **Defending protesters' rights:** In early months of 2021, protests by *Haredi* and Palestinian citizens increased, leading to an escalation in violent police response. At a protest in Nazareth on January 13, 2021, Israeli police employed extreme violence against residents protesting the visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu. *Adalah* lawyers provided legal assistance to individuals detained and wounded by police during the protest, helping secure the unconditional release of 12 protesters and another six with restrictive conditions. When similar incidents occurred in the northern Arab town of Umm al-Fahm and elsewhere, *Adalah* and *HRDF* were on-call to assist arrested protesters.

*Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights petitioned the Supreme Court demanding coronavirus drive-in testing or mobile test centers be made available in Bedouin villages in the Negev-Naqab.*



## PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISRAEL—PHRI

*Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) provides medical services and works to effect policy change with regard to human rights and the right to health care for Palestinians in the occupied territories, prison inmates, asylum-seekers, and other residents of Israel.*

In an October 2020 report analyzing Israel’s first 100 days of the COVID-19 pandemic, [A Policy of Neglect: The First 100 Days of COVID-19 in Israel’s Healthcare System](#), PHRI documented how the “national struggle against the pandemic laid bare the lack of national awareness of the needs of disadvantaged communities—ethnic and national minorities, and the poor—first and foremost regarding the non-Jewish population in Israel.” PHRI’s work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel has aimed at addressing these disparities, both through direct interventions with marginalized communities and through strenuous government advocacy aimed at closing these gaps.

PHRI’s coordinated advocacy aimed at ensuring equal access to testing for Arab communities in East Jerusalem, the Triangle region, the Galilee, and the Negev-Naqab region, as well as for refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. PHRI understood that access to culturally specific public health information would be critical to an effective national response to the virus, and essential in minimizing the inequality in public health outcomes among diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. Yet data obtained by PHRI through a survey it conducted in the early weeks of the crisis exposed the Ministry of Health’s lack of readiness to deliver timely messaging in multiple languages, including for Arabic-speaking residents of East Jerusalem and the Negev Bedouin. PHRI identified a shortage of Arabic-language telephone representatives on emergency hotlines, which further limited access for Arabic-speakers to health-care services during the pandemic.

- **Ensuring access to health care for African asylum seekers and the status-less communities:** From the outset of the pandemic, PHRI advocated for Israel’s Ministry of Health to provide services and treatment to African asylum seekers, who are excluded from Israeli health-care system, relying on private insurance through their employers. The asylum-seeker community is disproportionately employed in the service sectors, and the pandemic-related lockdowns and unemployment left them without access to critical care afforded to Israelis.

**PHRI demanded that Israel Prison System (IPS) issue clear, comprehensive information about the steps it is taking to protect incarcerated people under its care during the crisis.**



*NIF grantees PHRI and Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement called on Israel to uphold its responsibilities as an occupying power to provide for the public health and hygiene of those living under its control, including in the West Bank and Gaza.*

Finding that Israel's Ministry of Health website did not include information about coronavirus in Tigrine, French, or Amharic, the main languages spoken by asylum seekers living in Israel, on March 12, 2020, *PHRI* urged Israel's Ministry of Health to "take action to ensure that lack of status and health insurance is not an obstacle to testing or proper treatment." The organization called on the Ministry to provide access to critical public health information to communities who do not read Hebrew, including refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.

Meanwhile, *PHRI*'s open clinic, operated by volunteer physicians, continued to provide primary and secondary medical treatment to those living without civil status in Israel. Status-less people face increased risk, both of infection with the coronavirus and secondary health issues. *PHRI*'s open clinic ensured continuity of care to the most vulnerable. *PHRI*'s advocacy led to a commitment from Israel's Ministry of Health to cover the cost of treatment of infected individuals by emergency medical services and hospitals and guarantee that uninsured status-less individuals would not be denied treatment or charged for care.

A crucial achievement for the asylum-seeker community was Israel's High Court of Justice striking down the Deposit Law, which required refugees and asylum seekers to place 20% of their earnings in a locked account to be retrieved only if they leave Israel. While this law had been in effect since 2017, its impact was even greater due to the heavy economic toll of the coronavirus outbreak. The court ruled the law, which NIF grantees including



*PHRI* had long been opposing, unconstitutional and ordered the state to return the funds within 30 days, which (in cases where the money was indeed deposited by employers) it did.

- **Access to the vaccine:** With the advent of the COVID-19 vaccine, ensuring equal access for asylum seekers and migrant workers was a major priority for *PHRI*. As Israel began a mass-vaccination drive toward the end of 2020, *PHRI* called on Israel's government to extend Israel's public services and health insurance to those living in Israel without status. "Throughout the past year," they wrote in a statement, "we saw time and again how creating enclaves of communities that are excluded from social and health services undermines efforts to contain and fight the pandemic." Welcoming a joint initiative by the Tel Aviv Municipality and Ichilov Hospital to vaccinate status-less individuals, *PHRI* [urged Israel's Health Ministry](#) to extend the campaign across Israel.

- **Protecting the rights of incarcerated people:** From the beginning of the pandemic, it became clear, as elsewhere in the world, that incarcerated people were exposed to heightened risk of infection due to the difficulty of enacting social distancing measures in prisons and the prevalence among inmates of chronic underlying health conditions and comorbidities. *PHRI* raised awareness about severe overcrowding in Israeli prisons and the threat posed to inmates if Health Ministry guidelines were not enforced. *PHRI* demanded that Israel Prison System issue clear, comprehensive information about the steps it is taking to protect incarcerated people under its care during the crisis. On March 26, 2020, *PHRI* filed an urgent petition with the High Court of Justice, demanding that it order the Israel Prison Service (IPS) and the Ministry of Health to publicly issue directives for the delivery of medical services to inmates during the coronavirus crisis, and state what measures were being taken to prevent the spread of the virus within the prison system.

With the advent of the vaccination program in Israel, *PHRI* led a coalition of groups to fight for the rights of incarcerated people to have equal access to the vaccine. When Israel's Minister for Public Security Amir Ohana unlawfully refused to provide the vaccine—contrary to the directives of the Ministry of Health and the legal opinion of the Deputy Attorney General Adv. Amit Marari—to people incarcerated in Israeli prisons, civil society organized to demand the fulfillment of this basic right. Following a petition to Israel's Supreme Court led by *PHRI*, in January 2021, Israeli authorities began vaccinating prisoners, including thousands of Palestinian prisoners, against COVID-19.



*Early in 2020, ACRI joined PHRI in urging the government to reduce the incarcerated population to the minimum possible in order to reduce the risk of infection. Five NIF grantees petitioned the Supreme Court to make sure that prisoners would not be denied their right to the COVID-19 Vaccine.*

## HOTLINE FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

*The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants works to protect the rights of refugees, migrant workers, and victims of human trafficking.*

There are approximately 31,000 asylum seekers live in Israel, 95% of whom are from Eritrea and Sudan. 14,000 reside in the under-resourced neighborhoods of south Tel Aviv, and the remainder are scattered across Israel's geographic and socioeconomic periphery. Denied both citizenship and formal refugee status, asylum seekers maintain their residency in Israel through a 2A5 permit, which must be renewed every few weeks to every six months. That does not provide a legal right to work, or any access to the social safety net, including Israel's public health system, making asylum seekers vulnerable to poverty, violence, exploitation, and discrimination.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants* has been essential in providing direct services to refugees, migrant workers, and victims of human trafficking in Israel, as well as to increasing the capacity of civil society organizations working to influence government policy related to these marginalized communities, a critical determinant of public health and welfare for them. In addition to facilitating medical care, translation services, direct aid, and legal assistance for asylum seekers who lack status and access to Israel's social safety net, the *Hotline* chaired a coalition of organizations that the government organized to manage the needs of these communities and work toward policy change. *The Hotline* was the key interlocutor with a government that had few ways to reach this long-neglected



*Israeli human rights organizations including NIF grantee Zazim – Community Action and Kav La'Oved – Worker's Hotline fought for the rights of Israel's asylum seekers during the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

community, which had grown deeply distrustful of official agencies due to decade of harassment, abuse, and threats of deportation and detention.

- **Obtaining the release of administrative-migrant detainees:** In light of the acute danger to those held in prison service facilities, the *Hotline's* legal staff has taken on the full representation of all the detainees being held in migration custody in the Givon Prison, who do not have other legal representation, in order to win their release. The *Hotline* is working to make lawmakers and local officials aware of the impending humanitarian crisis and to promote measures that can help the migrant community.
- **Alleviating economic hardship for migrants and asylum seekers.** The *Hotline's* appeal to the Interior Ministry led to the elimination of the requirement that asylum seekers report regularly to its offices and led to the automatic extension of visas until the coronavirus crisis has passed. The *Hotline* worked to find jobs for asylum seekers who were laid off as a result of the pandemic and established an online platform to connect employers with asylum seekers.

In February 2021, the *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants*, with five other Israeli civil society organizations working on behalf of the rights of asylum seekers in Israel, released [Status Report: Asylum Seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, in February 2021](#). The report warns of an impending humanitarian crisis as asylum seekers face food insecurity and other economic threats after a year of unstable unemployment.

In addition to supporting the essential work of organizations like the *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants*, since 2015, NIF has funded a joint lobbyist who has worked to expand the policy impact of organizations on behalf of asylum-seeker rights, including: ASSAF, Physicians for Human Rights (PHRI), Kav LaOved—Workers' Hotline, African Development Refugee Center (ARDC), and ACRI. Coordinating action between organizations, the joint lobbyist assesses needs and opportunities in the field and advocates for policy change with the relevant ministries and Knesset committees. With the onset of COVID-19 that coordination and advocacy became even more urgent, and led to key successes securing healthcare for asylum seekers, elevating asylum seekers' concerns within Israel's Ministry of Health and in winning the battle against Israel's Deposit Law.

**In February 2021, the *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants*, with five other Israeli civil society organizations working on behalf of the rights of asylum seekers in Israel, released a report that warns of an impending humanitarian crisis, as asylum seekers face food insecurity and other economic threats after a year of unstable unemployment.**



## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FUND—HRDF

*Human Rights Defenders Fund—HRDF is an Israeli NGO that supports the human rights sector in Israel/Palestine, enabling organizations and activists to promote human rights, democracy, and rule of law without fear of attack and harassment by the authorities.*

On April 20, 2020, *Time* ran a headline “Israelis Just Showed the World What a Socially Distant Protest Looks Like” along with a now-iconic image of Israel’s Rabin Square, filled with socially distanced demonstrators, gathered along a matrixed, grid spaced two meters apart in order to comply with social distancing guidelines. If 2020 was unprecedented in terms of a global public health crisis, it was also a significant year in terms of social protest, which according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, saw over 230 significant antigovernment protests worldwide in over 110 countries, with a 78% increase of such civic mobilizations in authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning countries.

A key part of this story, as it relates to Israel, has been the dedicated efforts of civil society to protect the right to protest from encroachment under the guise of COVID-19, and to educate and provide legal defense to those lawfully engaging in free expression.

**Since July 2020, Human Rights Defenders Fund (HRDF) has represented and negotiated the release of over 300 protesters in the Balfour and other protests.**

While a steady, if modestly sized, protest has simmered since corruption investigations against Prime Minister Netanyahu were first opened in 2016, in March 2020, amid the lockdowns and economic dislocations of the COVID-19 pandemic, this protest grew exponentially. The specific trigger was the attempt by then Speaker of Knesset Yuli Edelstein to block the selection of a new speaker from the opposition. In the midst of Israel’s first nationwide lockdown, hundreds of protesters drove their cars to the Knesset to denounce this “constitutional coup.” At the peak of the protests, according to protest organizers, the number of Israelis protesting throughout the country exceeded 250,000 in a single day. While Israelis gathered at highway intersections throughout the country, by mid-summer 2020, the focal point of anti-corruption protest was Jerusalem—and specifically, the prime minister’s residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem.

As protests grew in size, so did the brutality of police response. Netanyahu’s Minister of Public Security Ohana applied pressure on the Israel Police to use more draconian measures to suppress the popular protests.



*Despite escalating police violence against peaceful protesters, legal defense by several NIF grantees allowed Israeli citizens to exercise their right to assembly in accordance with social distancing during the pandemic.*

Yet a significant proportion of participants at the anti-corruption demonstrations were new to direct action. As the police response to the protests grew more forceful—involving violent arrests, water cannons, and a tactic known as “kettling,” it was clear that citizen protesters exercising their lawful right to freedom of expression required training on their rights and legal aid to protect them from unlawful arrest. Through the Shatil-coordinated *Forum for Freedom of Speech and Protest* (composed of NIF Freedom of Protest grantees) and directly through legal aid, *HRDF* worked to advance freedom of expression.

***HRDF* represents activists detained by police in anti-corruption protests:** *HRDF* lawyers provided on-site assistance to protesters detained or arrested by police. On July 21 alone, *HRDF* negotiated for the release of 31 demonstrators, and the previous week, they arranged the release of 30 protesters. The most visible case was the detention of the leaders of the so-called “Black Flags” movement after a protest near the prime minister’s residence in Jerusalem, including a high-ranking Israel Air Force officer, Brig.-Gen. Amir Haskel (ret.). Attempting to deter the mounting protests, police tried to force protest organizers to sign a commitment to stay away from Jerusalem for a period two weeks. When protest leaders refused to sign—and therefore stayed in detention—*HRDF* lawyers represented them in court. The court ruled the police’s demand unlawful and should be rescinded, and they were released.

*HRDF* has also worked in partnership with the *Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality* to protest the arbitrary arrest of 15 Arab Bedouin citizens engaged in protesting state actions—specifically the practice of home demolitions in unrecognized Bedouin villages. During the demonstration against the state’s use of tractors to plough their villages’ land, which cut off a water pipe that provides clean drinking water for residents, 11 people, including a minor, were arrested and detained in a police vehicle from the early morning hours until the evening without any food or water. Four other protesters were arrested in the afternoon and taken to the police station. *HRDF* and the Forum continue to defend indigenous Bedouin citizens active in the struggle for land rights, human rights, and recognition of unrecognized Bedouin villages, from face ongoing legal and physical harassment and persecution.

*HRDF* is also on the ground defending protesters and documenting police violence at the weekly protests in the northern Arab city of Umm al-Fahm. These protests decrying police and government negligence in combating crime and violence in Arab municipalities have grown steadily, with somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 Jews and Arabs participating in the March 4, 2021 protest. The *Forum for the Freedom of Protest*, which includes *HRDF*, has been supporting demonstrators, while *HRDF* and *Adalah* have provided legal representation to those arrested.

**As the police response to the protests grew more forceful—involving violent arrests, water cannons, and a tactic known as “kettling”—it was clear that citizen protesters exercising their lawful right to freedom of expression required training on their rights and legal aid to protect them from unlawful arrest.**

## BERL KATZNESLON FOUNDATION AND SOCIAL ECONOMIC ACADEMY

*Promotes public debate challenging neoliberal policies, disseminates knowledge about social and economic issues, trains leaders, and increases public support for progressive ideas and policies.*

COVID-19 has been an event unlike any in recent memory, not only in terms of the direct public health impacts—but also in terms of the lasting economic repercussions and social dislocations. NIF's support for grantee the *Social Economic Academy at the Berl Katzneslon Foundation* was positioned to address the immediate and medium-term policy responses necessary for ensuring a full and equitable recovery in the wake of the crisis. NIF's funding of the Social Economic Academy had a secondary, long-term strategic objective: not only to promote progressive policy change, but to strengthen the entire camp in Israel by cultivating a generation of diverse progressive leadership.

The coronavirus crisis in Israel presented an opportunity to implement urgent policies to address immediate and apparent inequities in the government response to the crisis, and to promote the underlying arguments for progressive policy change necessary for a full and equitable recovery. The virus, which affected every citizen regardless of their political affiliation or background, put the policy agenda of the progressive camp squarely in front of the Israeli public. As the pandemic revealed inequities across various areas of social policy, emerging progressive policy thinkers had an opportunity to demonstrate the value of social-democratic policies to helping citizens in the long run.

This was the core of the *Social Economic Academy's Refuah Shlema* (Full Recovery) plan, which brought together a diverse cohort of public policy experts to propose urgent public health and economic policy priorities. Designed to help Israel's government cope with the economic crisis in a way that protects Israel's most vulnerable communities, the plan included proposals on essential public sector services—including health, education, social services, employee rights and pay, and special policies to address the needs of vulnerable populations. The plan included five steps toward socioeconomic recovery, including: increasing budgets for social services that have been cut for decades; ensuring safety, security, and fair pay to essential workers; adding jobs to all essential fields; making risk payments to those risking their lives to fight COVID-19; and recognizing those who work in the field of social welfare as essential workers.

The program was based on comparative research on policies of governments around the world coping with the economic repercussions of the pandemic, and focused on the measures Israel should adopt to mitigate the economic aspects of the crisis while protecting its most vulnerable communities.



*The Social Economic Academy's Full Recovery plan fought for risk payments to those risking their lives to fight COVID-19, including front-line medical workers.*



## CRISIS EXPERTS—A PROJECT OF THE ALLIANCE FOR ISRAEL'S FUTURE

*A project of the Alliance for Israel's Future to create coherent, inclusive policy recommendations to address the COVID-19 pandemic based on Jewish-Arab cooperation.*

**Legitimizing Jewish-Arab partnership in policymaking:** In April 2020, NIF provided emergency funding to the *Alliance for Israel's Future*, a grantee that works to cultivate emerging Jewish and Arab progressive leaders, to launch Crisis Experts, a “pop-up think-tank” that would generate coherent, inclusive policy recommendations to address the COVID-19 pandemic, while bringing together Jewish and Arab experts from civil society and academia. *Crisis Experts* focused on policy initiatives in critical areas such as education, social welfare, economic recovery, public health, women, and transportation—using diversity as a starting point. As it developed comprehensive policy proposals, *Crisis Experts* also coordinated advocacy strategies to advance them with a newly formed unity government, while expanding the constituency for progressive policy responses to the public health emergency and deepening practical cooperation between Jewish and Arab policy experts—a long-term goal of NIF.

In September 2020, Crisis Experts broadened its work forming an operational partnership between the *Alliance for Israel's Future*, the *I'lam Arab Center for Media Freedom Development and Research*, and Shatil, aimed at advancing a social-democratic policy outlook on the challenges presented by the public health crisis. Shatil's Center for Policy Change worked with Crisis Experts to increase media coverage of the committees' policy recommendations and mainstream the idea of Jewish-Arab partnership as critical to overcoming the multiple crises stemming from the pandemic, including highlighting the:

- Lack of Arab representation in COVID-19 crisis management forums;
- Dire situation facing Palestinian-Israeli communities;
- Inequities stemming from the crisis in Israel's education system;
- Government's policy failures and mismanagement of the health crisis.

To this end, the *Crisis Experts* published *No Going Back: An Outline for Emerging from the Crisis*, identifying areas of neglect and systemic vulnerabilities in Israeli society, the economy, public health, and climate policy that made the country especially vulnerable to the deepening crisis. The



*Though Arab Israelis make up 21% of the population, the Israeli government did not include any Arab citizens on the government's official interdepartmental COVID-19 response team—until pressure from civil society forced them to do so.*

paper, authored collaboratively by Jewish and Arab policy experts, proposes long-term measures to reduce socioeconomic gaps and address inequality.

The *Crisis Experts* project has also used digital media to produce explanatory videos designed for social media. These make the case for an expansive social welfare response and the importance of addressing the pandemic's impact on women from across sectors of Israeli society.

The research of *Crisis Experts*' environment team, led by Dr. Muhammad Allenbari, as well as that of Dr. Karni Kriegel, on gender violence during the pandemic, was quoted prominently in Israeli media. Crisis Experts' education team, meanwhile, documented huge gaps in access to educational resources between sectors of Israeli society, and its and economic team advocated for the need for a wealth tax to address the growing wealth gap in Israel, which has increased during the pandemic and is driving a concentration of political power unhealthy for democratic rule.

In February 2021, *Crisis Experts* published a jointly authored [piece on the widening of education gaps](#) during the lockdown, and Maisam Jaljuli and Watfa Jabaly, two Palestinian-Israeli women experts authored [an op-ed](#) on the role of Arab women in countering crime and violence, entitled, "Only Together Can We, Arab Women, Defeat the Crime and Violence That Are Killing Us," making the case for Jewish-Arab cooperation to defeat the scourge of violence in Israeli society. Additionally, in the first quarter of 2021, *Crisis Experts* publications covering the following topics appeared in prominent Israeli publications: police violence and negligence in Arab communities, [inheritance taxes](#) and wealth inequality in Israel; and [a critical assessment of discrimination in Israel's emergency response policies](#); new updates on the *No Going Back* report covering equity in education and health care, and a policy report, *Gaps New and Old*, analyzing socioeconomic implications of the government's lockdown and phased reopening plans marginalized communities.

**In April 2020, NIF provided emergency funding and helped launch *Crisis Experts*, a "pop-up think-tank" that would generate coherent, inclusive policy recommendations to address the COVID-19 pandemic, while bringing together Jewish and Arab experts from civil society and academia.**

## NIF COVID-19 ARTIST RELIEF PROGRAM

As a result of the nationwide shutdown surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, artists, performers and culture-makers in Israel were among the sectors hardest hit economically. NIF knows that long-term social change requires inspiration, imagination, and creativity. That is why we view the arts as essential work—for society, for change, and for our souls. Artists perform a vital function in an open society and their individual expressions and creativity are a fundamental part of democratic life.

As part of NIF's *Crisis Action Plan* and in collaboration with the Nathan Cummings Foundation, we set aside \$25,000 for COVID-19 relief for artists to support a select group of artists who are struggling during this time. This grant was made in the context of NIF's ongoing strategic partnership with the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which has been researching and exploring work in the field of culture change and remains an important area of our joint exploration.

In October 2020, NIF Israel released a nationwide call for artists with the goal of awarding \$5,000 (NIS 15,000) in artist relief grants. Within one week, NIF Israel was overwhelmed by the response, receiving over 700 applications from artists around the country across disciplines, languages, identities, genders, careers, and geographies.

*During the pandemic, artists became a newly vulnerable social group. NIF funded artists across a range of identities and media whose work dealt with Mizrahi identity, government corruption, popular protest art, refugees, the occupation, Orthodox feminism, and shared society.*





At a time when lockdowns and social distancing measures made artistic work all the more difficult to access, NIF, in partnership with the Nathan Cummings Foundation, awarded 14 scholarships to artists across a diverse range of identities and media to support their vital work. The recipients had to meet the following criteria:

- Working artist or culture-maker with ongoing projects that have been affected by the coronavirus and related economic crises;
- Artistic work is aimed at elevating narratives, identity, representation and/or story of specific communities, backgrounds, or struggles that are not often heard, seen, or felt;
- Work brings different languages, cultures, struggles, and identities together in unique ways that create cognitive dissonance or allow people to imagine a different future;
- Work relates to and/or the artist has collaborated with protest movements, social struggles, or activism related to issues such as: social justice, ending the occupation, equality and democracy, feminism, the environment, LGBTQ rights, or other social and political issues.

Recipients of the NIF COVID-19 relief grants included filmmakers, spoken word artists, dance and performance artists, musicians, fine artists and theater; both up-and-coming and established artists making work around Mizrahi identity and government corruption, popular protest art, refugees and asylum seekers, police violence and Orthodox feminism, shared society, and the occupation; and ranging across a diverse set of identities—LGBTQ and straight, Mizrahi Orthodox and secular, Ashkenazi and Ethiopian and Palestinian. The grant was an opportunity to support a wide range of artists, including:

- Israel's sole Bedouin filmmaker, the award-winning Rana Abu Fricha, whose film "After You and I" tells the story of her family, a semi-Bedouin and semi-Palestinian family living in the Jewish community of Omar, and who uses cinema as a therapeutic tool and an engine for political and social discourse;
- Bat-El Musari, a Mizrahi LGBTQ filmmaker from Bat Yam whose short film, have won Ophir awards (the Israeli Oscar) and been aired on Israeli TV;



*"I tend to believe that artists must take a side and to fill their historic role, which is to stand at the city gates and to ceaselessly shout out what is in their hearts."*

*—Yossi Zabari, poet and spoken word performer.*

- Emerging Ethiopian spoken word artist and rapper, Orit Tsuma;
- Yossi Tzabari, gay Jewish Yemenite-Israeli spoken word artist who identifies as an Arab Jew and poet laureate of a shared future for Jews and Arabs in multiracial democracy;
- Dana Yahalomi, a performance artist working at the intersection of theater, street performance, dance, and protest art.
- Dega Feder, a pioneer for Ethiopians in the dance world in Israel who founded Beta Dance, a contemporary dance company that includes Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian dancers and whose contemporary style incorporates traditional Ethiopian movement influences;
- Raida Adon, a video, performance, and fine artist whose work has been shown at the Banksy Gallery in Bethlehem and the Israel Museum;
- Durar Bakri, a fine artist and oil painter whose work features the landscapes of south Tel Aviv and the Ajami neighborhood in Jaffa.
- RamZi (Rami Spinoza), a DJ, artistic director, writer, and actor, whose record label focuses on Arabic-language and Middle Eastern identity language—not religious or state—as the uniting factor of culture.
- Tamar (Lala) Bloch, a singer and composer from the field of North African and Afro-Latin music, whose first album, released last year, is based on Ladino poems by Spanish Moroccan Jewish women.
- Ellyott Ben Ezzer, a musician, singer, DJ, teacher, sound composer and radio broadcaster—and the first openly lesbian techno DJ in Israel. Her work engages in powerful activism on Israeli-Palestinian conflict, feminism, LGBTQ identity and rights, and refugees.



*Orit Tsuma is a rapper, spoken word artist and soul singer of Ethiopian descent. Tsuma gives voice to the Ethiopian Israeli community, her art touching on issues like the difficulty of immigrating and systematic racism in Israel.*



## Key Outcomes and Learning

### IDENTIFY NEEDS EARLY AND ACT FAST

Any crisis response requires an ability to identify needs early and act fast to provide essential resources. NIF's 40-plus years of support for civil society in Israel positioned us to identify the most critical needs almost immediately. From the earliest days of the pandemic, deep relationships and continuous connections with our diverse set of civil society grantees equipped NIF and Shatil with an understanding of the needs of virtually every vulnerable group in Israeli society—from asylum seekers to Bedouin citizens living in unrecognized villages to Palestinian day laborers stuck in Israel without health insurance to *Haredi* women. Informed by longstanding grantee relationships, NIF realized that accessibility to health care and to economic resources would be a major challenge for the most vulnerable communities that we worked with. We made use of these relationships to assess needs quickly and deploy resources accordingly.

*At a rally organized by NIF grantee Tag Meir, a man holds poster depicting Iyad al-Hallaq, an unarmed Palestinian youth murdered by Israel Police in East Jerusalem.*



Even before the coronavirus crisis hit Israel, NIF had built up its capacity to respond rapidly during emergency situations. Some twenty years ago, recognizing the need for an ability to distribute funds rapidly during emergencies, NIF established a rapid response pool and in 2015 significantly expanded it. This gave NIF an advantage in responsiveness to needs during the pandemic, enabling us to respond nimbly to urgent needs as they arose, and deliver emergency funds outside the normal grants cycle.

### Learn from the Crisis

Due to austerity measures NIF put in place during the pandemic, NIF only had two Israeli staff running our entire grantmaking portfolio during the first critical months of the public health crisis. This was an immense challenge. But it also forced NIF to be efficient and adaptive. In crisis mode, whatever we did, we had to do it faster—with less time allocated to discussion and deliberation and more action and outcomes. Our team on the ground in Israel restructured the grant approval process accordingly. We streamlined decision-making by bringing top decisionmakers directly into the grants-approval process. These adaptations continue to accelerate our work now that NIF has returned to our full staff capacity.

### Share Information Broadly

Due to our longstanding relationships and networks in civil society, NIF was well positioned to ascertain needs across communities quickly and reliably. We shared that knowledge with other foundations that consulted with us and we helped them determine priorities and address needs outside the scope of NIF's own grantmaking.

### Utilize a Loose Funding Framework and Adapt to the Environment

Within a strategic funding framework be flexible enough to respond to emergent needs. NIF decided to designate a significant pool of such funds to be utilized in times of crisis.

NIF's work to secure freedom of protest preceded the massive eruption of civic mobilizations that coalesced into the so-called Balfour protests. For the past five years, NIF and Shatil worked to coalesce civil society organizations working to protect the rights to freedom of expression. Yet, in the midst of the pandemic, when these basic freedoms were threatened under the guise of restrictive public health measures, the Shatil-led *Forum for the Freedom of Protest* had already laid the groundwork for our sector's rapid response to the needs to protect citizen protests during COVID-19. NIF grantees were



*In late 2020 anti-occupation NGO Breaking the Silence held an event reading testimonies of children who experienced home invasion by the IDF.*

prepared to represent activists with legal counsel as they went out into the streets. We saw that arrests were having a chilling effect on protesters. Knowing they would benefit from legal protection in exercising their rights deflated the government strategy of violent arrest, meant to deter and discourage civic mobilization. Because NIF is nimble and always surveying the field and its needs, we were able to meet the most pressing needs of the protest movement when it faced government repression.

NIF's emergency artists grant program is a prime example of our commitment to adapt to a fast-changing environment. Prior to 2020, funding for the arts in Israel was not a core priority, since artists were not a vulnerable group in Israeli society. Yet when a huge number of performers and artists found themselves unemployed and excluded from the category of "essential workers" eligible for special relief, NIF saw an emerging need. Artists, broadly speaking, could be defined as an economically precarious community. Our artist grant program was designed to address this new and urgent need.

### Support Communities and Issues Across Multiple Points of Vulnerability

During the crisis, NIF made grants to three women's organizations—*Israel Women's Network (IWN)*, *Women Against Violence (WAV)* and the *Al-Tufula Center*—to undertake work on the issue of gender-based violence, a social crisis that spiked during the COVID-19 lockdowns. These organizations jointly advocated for the government to fund programs and shelters and achieved hard-won victories, including a government mandated program to provide psychological treatment for men convicted of gender-based violence.

Another potent example is NIF's emergency grant to *Ba'asher Telchi* (Wherever You Go), an organization that works with single and newly divorced *Haredi* mothers. NIF was cognizant of the acute hardship these women face, including food insecurity and hunger, and we allocated resources to help them. NIF normally does not provide direct service grants, but as part of the *Crisis Action Plan*, we were determined to help the most vulnerable face this crisis. The *Haredi* community is one of Israel's most socioeconomically marginalized—and single mothers within the *Haredi* community are among its most vulnerable members. *Ba'asher Telchi* was part of a network of organizations that comprise NIF grantee the *New Haredim* that worked together to address the most pressing needs within this community. Our *Crisis Action Plan* grant helped strengthen this particular organization, but our longer-term investment in the *New Haredim* provided a crucial access point to this community in a time of crisis.



*A joint digital campaign run by the Israel Women's Network (IWN) and Women Against Violence – Nazareth raised public awareness about the increased risk of violence against women during the countrywide lockdown.*

### Balance Direct Support and Sustaining Institutions

In a crisis, NIF determined to invest both in institutions and directly in the people impacted most severely. Supporting institutions that comprise civil society and directly supporting people affected by the crisis may be aligned investments—but often they are not. For example, sustaining arts institutions is an important long-term goal for society—and essential to that society remaining whole in the wake of the crisis. We wouldn't want to find ourselves at the other end of the crisis with no museum or cinemas. Yet institutional support at a time when no venue could hire performers or technicians was leaving a whole community of artists cut off from their livelihoods. Sustaining institutions is vital to weathering the storm long-term, and to sustaining the work and of artists—eventually. But that support didn't translate into aid to artists in real time, many of whom worked as gig workers with no salary or economic relief. That is why NIF launched a program that falls outside of our usual grantmaking: to address this need and deliver relief stipends directly to artists.

### Invest in Policy Change

Given our limited resources, NIF looks for maximal impact, which often means working toward policy change. NIF has traditionally focused its support on organizations that can effectively advocate to the government to provide services to marginalized groups, and this was true during the pandemic as well.

Governments and government-funded entities can transform the situations of marginalized and economically precarious groups—and likewise, government neglect and oversight can turn fortunate groups into newly marginalized ones. While small business owners and restaurateurs were in a relatively privileged position before the pandemic, the economic shutdown, compounded by the government's mishandling of reopening, which lacked a plan for economic relief for certain groups like independent business owners, freelancers and gig-economy workers, these communities came to be economically precarious. It required an intervention to ensure that a holistic government response would include economic relief to all marginalized groups—including new ones. That required building and sustaining an infrastructure for progressive policy advocacy.

### Center Diversity in Decision-Making

Diversity and cultural specificity can't be an afterthought in strategic grantmaking during a crisis. It's not just about recognizing the crucial importance of linguistic accessibility to public health guidelines—but about more broadly being able to identify and meet the needs of each population.

**Because NIF is nimble and always surveying the field and its needs, we were able to meet the most pressing needs of the protest movement when it faced government repression.**



That is why NIF grantees like *IWN* and our flagship grantee, *ACRI*, advocated strenuously for women to be properly included in the government's COVID-19 task force. It was not only a matter of gender equality and equality of rights—but about an effective and inclusive public health response, which could benefit from the expertise and insights into the unique challenges faced by women during the crisis. Organizations like *Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civil Equality* advocated for the inclusion of Arab experts in the same committee. This was the guiding idea of the *Crisis Experts* initiative, which not only produced top-level policy advocacy toward a more inclusive public response to the crisis, but did so on the basis of Jewish-Arab partnership.

**Never about us, without us.** As NIF deliberates over each of the emergency grants it issues, we strive to incorporate the views of the staff voice in every decision we make impacting a specific community—whether Palestinian staff, Ethiopian Israeli staff, board members, or partners in the field. These consultations are irreplaceable.

### A Crisis Should Reflect—Not Redefine—Who You Are

Rising to meet the rapidly shifting needs of a crisis might redefine your priorities and your timelines and workplans, but it should not redefine who you are. To be effective, you must know your limits, as much as your strengths and core values. NIF looked for moments when *Crisis Action Plan* grant-making could contribute to advancing our long-term goals and vision for social change.

For example, our funding to the *Berl Katzneson Foundation* to produce progressive social-democratic policy responses to the crisis not only met the immediate need for policy change, but was aimed at a broader goal of strengthening the progressive camp. Our strategic question amid this crisis became: how to do the work both of building the broader camp and promoting policy change on urgent issues. A stronger camp can be more effective in achieving progressive policies—and, at the same time, organizing efforts around particular, pressing issues ultimately strengthens the camp.



*Rana Abu Fraiha, winner of an NIF artist scholarship, is an Israeli filmmaker from a half-Bedouin, half-Palestinian family who has spent the last three years exploring Israel and the world with her film which documents her family's story.*

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