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The Tax Deductible Occupation

The FIDF runs a fundraising program that allows for donors to “Adopt a Brigade” of Israeli forces.

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When you think of the American pro-Israel lobby, it might conjure images of K Street lobbyists buttering up American congressmen, or American presidents addressing AIPAC conventions. You’re probably not imagining summer barbecues and musical performances by Lionel Richie. Nonetheless, these are some of the unusual ways that the Friends of the Israel Defence Forces (FIDF) does its fundraising. The FIDF is an American 501 non-profit that renders various forms of assistance (some mundane, others somewhat bizarre) to the Israeli military. Founded in 1981, the organisation describes its mission as follows:

"FIDF Initiates and helps support educational, social, cultural, and recreational programs and facilities for the young men and women soldiers of Israel who defend the Jewish homeland. FIDF also supports the families of fallen soldiers."

Those programs include awarding university scholarships to IDF personnel, promotion of Jewish identity through cultural events, integrating Ethiopian migrants more fully into the IDF, and providing financial assistance for ‘lone soldiers’ (military personnel who do not have family living in Israel). The FIDF ‘SPIRIT program’ provides a package week of recreation activities for weary Israeli soldiers:

“This week does wonders for the soldiers – it allows them to ‘recharge their batteries’ and to return to service with renewed strength... In 2013, 13,000 combat soldiers enjoyed weeks of rest and recreation through FIDF’s SPIRIT Program.”

Just as some charities allow people to “adopt” koala bears and baby elephants, the FIDF runs the “Adopt a Brigade Program” which gives individuals and small businesses the opportunity to sponsor specific IDF units. Brigades currently up for adoption include the Golani Brigade, the

Paratroopers Brigade, the Combat Intelligence Corps, and, for those with a penchant for heavy ordnance, the Golan Artillery Regiment.

They don't only look out for the material well being of Israel's brave boys (and girls) in uniform; the FIDF also attends to their spiritual needs. The organisation builds mobile synagogues so that Israeli soldiers in the occupied Palestinian territories have a place to worship, and fosters a more general 'Spiritual Needs Program':

"The Spiritual Needs Program uplifts the spirits of IDF soldiers throughout their service, honing in on values, faith, Jewish identity and love of Israel. The program does this through a series of activities focused on Jewish traditions and celebrations to warm the soldier's hearts and strengthen their spirits."

It's not all solemnity and prayer though. During Israel's most recent assault on Gaza (aka Operation Protective Edge) the FIDF sent a troupe of New York comedians to tour Iron Dome rocket defence facilities. The event was part of the group's 'Rocket Shelter Comedy tour', accompanied by the catchphrase, "Stuck in a bomb shelter? We'll come to you."

The FIDF humanitarian programs include dispersal of funds to families of wounded soldiers, and the building of rest and recuperation facilities for injured personnel. Amongst the recipients of that aid have been families of the disbanded South Lebanese Army – Israel's brutal proxy force during the protracted war in South Lebanon. Not content with merely aiding the Israeli occupation, the FIDF seeks to bolster the numbers serving in the Israeli military by encouraging non-Israeli Jews to join up. The FIDF sponsors chartered flights of fresh recruits to Israel and arranges welcome parties at Ben Gurion airport. According to the FIDF's figures, some 2,500 IDF soldiers are non-Israeli, with the largest contingent coming from the United States.

Friends in High Place

Between 2002 and 2012 the FIDF raised close to half a billion dollars; raising sixty-eight million dollars in 2012 alone. A significant portion of that total comes from annual donations from charitable foundations. As one might expect, many of these foundations sponsor causes close to the hearts of corporate America and the American Republican Party. One of the major donors to the FIDF is the Marcus Foundation. Founded by the former CEO of the Home Depot, Bernard "Bernie" Marcus the Marcus Foundation funds a smorgasbord of conservative-friendly institutions, including the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. If support from this corner is unsurprising, it is intriguing to note that the FIDF is also backed by many liberal organisations. For instance, the Mitzi & Warren Eisenberg Family Foundation, a major funder of the FIDF and other pro-Israel organisations, also funds Doctors Without Borders, Planned Parenthood, and the US branch of Amnesty International. For its part, another major FIDF donor, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, funds notorious partisan pro-Israel organisations such as CAMERA, the Anti-Defamation League, and

AIPAC. Yet this organisation also allocates funds to the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), the Southern Poverty Law Center, Oxfam USA, and Greenpeace.

The Jewish American scholar Norman Finkelstein has, in recent years, written eloquently on what he perceives to be the approaching collapse of the Jewish-American romance with Israel. That denouement, he argues, is the logical consequence of the contradiction between the incorrigible liberalism of American Jewry and the increasingly paranoid conservatism of Israeli political culture. The FIDF's liberal funders have thus far managed to square that circle without too much difficulty.

Most of the FIDF's revenue is raised at gala fundraising dinners. The Los Angeles chapter of the FIDF raised a tidy US\$33 million at its 2014 gala held at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills. Funds are also raised at casino and poker nights, golf tournaments, and amateur fashion shows. The larger galas attract luminaries from the worlds of business, politics, and show biz. Singers who have performed at FIDF events include Barbra Streisand, Macy Gray, Lionel Richie, Andrea Bocelli and Chaka Khan. Stevie Wonder was due to perform at an FIDF gala in December 2012 but pulled out after a number of organisations appealed to him not to (much to my relief – having to shun the composer of 'Dancing on the Ceiling' is one thing, dispensing with 'Innervisions' and 'Songs in the Key of Life', quite another).

Journalist Jeff Blankfort has noted that the FIDF does not tend to draw the high profile political guests seen at other pro-Israel events in the United States – perhaps reflecting the 'friends' desire to maintain a relatively low profile. Nonetheless, FIDF fundraisers have hosted some prominent politicians such as former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton and retired Senator Joseph Lieberman. If the American political attendees are often rather b-list, the same cannot be said for Israeli politicians and military personnel (often one and the same – a reflection of Israel's unusually militarised polity). Attendees at past FIDF events include former Prime Minister and former IDF chief of staff Ehud Barak, seven other former IDF Chiefs of Staff, former Director of the Mossad Meir Dagan, and former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu does not attend in person, he regularly addresses FIDF events via satellite link.

Although FIDF funds are not allotted to the IDF's budget (and therefore are not used to purchase weaponry), FIDF money is serving to significantly improve IDF facilities. Through provision of recreational infrastructure and R & R trips, their funds also help to prop up the morale of the Israeli army (a serious problem when an army is engaged not in defensive operations but, as in Israel's case, a brutal occupation punctuated by periodic massacres). Through its activities the FIDF is effectively subsidising the Israeli military and carrying costs that might otherwise be borne by the Israeli state - thereby reducing the costs of the occupation. Furthermore, the FIDF seeks to bolster the image of the IDF and the Israeli state - indeed the FIDF has stated that this public relations function is its most important role. That is of particular significance now as

Israel's international standing is at its nadir, and as Israel apologists seek to head off the creeping threat of 'delegitimation'.

The FIDF's identification with the policies of the Israeli government is total. Following Operation Cast Lead a number of FIDF events hosted soldiers who had been engaged in the operation (widely condemned across the world for the appalling scale of civilian casualties). And the FIDF has helped to build facilities, not just in Israel, but within the occupied territories - thereby further entrenching Israeli control. In effect then what the FIDF facilitates is tax-deductible support for the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with all the suffering that follows. In spite of its tremendous resources, the FIDF is barely known within the United States and attracts little coverage in the American media. Were the American public better informed about the organisation it might, at the very least, stimulate a debate as to whether an organisation with such a questionable *raison d'être* deserves its tax-exempt status.