

## **Freedom of Speech and Hate Speech in Israel – together with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)**

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right, critical to the maintenance of an open and democratic society committed to safeguarding human rights and minority rights in particular. This project aimed to fortify the foundations of freedom of speech in Israel and to contend with the delicate balance between increasing free speech while combatting hate speech. At the onset of this project in 2015, Shatil convened a senior group of leading human rights organizations, with the goal of identifying and responding to the needs of human rights activists and organizations whose rights and freedom of speech and protest are threatened. This group became the *Forum for Freedom of Speech and Protest*, coordinated by the Shatil coordinator for social change. Each of the organizations in the Forum had their own areas of expertise and were able to take the lead in different ways. Organizations in the Forum include:

- ACRI – to provide assistance and legal advice to protestors, both before demonstrations and in their aftermath.
- DOCURights – a project of ACRI aimed at documenting the enforcement or abuse of protestors' rights, by education protestors on the importance and methods of documentation.
- Public Committee Against Torture – leading a project on police brutality.
- Human Rights Defenders Fund – that assists detained protestors.
- Tmura – the Anti-Discrimination Legal Center – assistance to protestors in submitting damage claims, by employing tort law with these cases.
- Adalah – legal assistance for the Arab community.
- Negev Co-existence Forum – assistance for the Bedouin community.

Throughout the project, the seven organizations in the Forum were in constant touch, and worked together in various ways to increase understanding and commitment to free speech and to combat hate speech. Evaluation indicators at the end of the project found that they worked well together in times of crisis, and that information and consultation extended to protest activists in a professional, relevant and timely manner. Among their achievements over the course of the project, include the following:

During the first half of 2017 [weekly protests](#) took place outside the home of Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit, protesting delays in his investigations into Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. Although civil society organizations believed that the Supreme Court ruling regarding these protests meant they were legal, the police had a differing interpretation, and the continued protests still resulted in multiple arrests, with one high-profile protestor having his arm broken by the police. As a result, the organizers broadened the focus of their protests to become a demonstration in support of the freedoms of speech and protest. This initially attracted as many as 800 protestors a week, including opposition MKs, in Petach Tikva (a mid-size city in Israel's central region, where the AG lives), and then expanding later in the year to tens of thousands in the heart of downtown Tel Aviv.

The Forum created a [website](#) dedicated to clearly and efficiently presenting all the information that activists need to know before planning and organizing demonstrations. The website features versions in Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian and Amharic in order to reach a larger and more relevant audience. The site also features contact information of forum organizations that can assist organizers and protestors, a form to sign-up for further emails with additional information. This was part of their very successful, multi-level public awareness campaign that included Facebook and Twitter posts and videos (several went viral), as well as dozens of print media ads and the distribution of thousands of posters across the country.

Throughout the project, Shatil led 10 intensive training sessions for organizations, activists and professionals in the field dealing with such issues as:

- Handling SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) cases
- Protestors' rights during demonstrations and in detention
- Obtaining a license to demonstrate
- The legal extent and limits on the authority of the police during demonstrations
- Documenting police brutality by using smartphones
- Tactics to reduce friction with the police during demonstrations
- Protesting strategies and tactics for disabled protesters

Since the conclusion of this project, Shatil continues to organize these workshops and trainings for protestors, while adding additional sessions on designing more effective and creative protests, and building the capacity of protest leaders to conduct outreach to new audiences and communities.