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Millions Donated by UK Charities to Israeli Religious School Raise Questions Over Oversight

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Two British charities have transferred over £5.7 million to a religious school located in an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank, raising new questions about the regulatory boundaries of charitable giving. Despite the contentious status of the settlement’s location, the Charity Commission has affirmed that the donations comply with the existing legal framework governing UK charities.

Official documents reveal that the Kasner Charitable Trust (KCT), through the conduit charity UK Toremet, directed substantial funds to the Bnei David Yeshiva high school located in Susya, an Israeli settlement near Hebron. The donations, made between 2017 and 2021, significantly increased the school's budget and corresponded with a rise in student enrollment, school employment, and local population growth.

Dror Etkes, an Israeli settlement researcher, commented that the school is likely “the largest single source of employment in the settlement,” underscoring its pivotal role in sustaining the area. The existence of Susya itself is complex: the Israeli settlement was founded in the early 1980s and adjoins the historic Palestinian village of Khirbet Susiya, whose residents were forcibly displaced after Israeli authorities declared their residential area an archaeological site in 1986.

While critics have argued that such settlements contravene international law, the UK Charity Commission maintains that donations supporting education, even in occupied territories, are within the remit of lawful charitable activity under current UK regulations.

A 2016 letter from the Commission to UK Toremet affirmed that donations to educational institutions in the West Bank could be considered charitable, as they contribute to the advancement of education.

Nevertheless, political figures have expressed concern. Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, former chair of the Conservative Party, stated: “It’s appalling that any British national should be engaged in funding settlements on occupied land, and even more disturbing that taxpayers may indirectly subsidise this.” Labour MP and solicitor Andy McDonald echoed these concerns, advocating for legal reforms to block such transactions and urging the government to take decisive action to prevent charitable funds from supporting disputed developments.

The Charity Commission has previously reviewed UK Toremet's operations, issuing an “action plan” in 2016 and continuing to monitor its compliance. When law firm Hickman & Rose raised concerns in 2022 about the legality of the donations under international law, the Commission deferred responsibility to law enforcement, citing the limits of its regulatory role. The matter was referred to the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command (SO15), which assessed the information but found no basis for a criminal investigation, although it did commit to raising its concerns with the Commission.

In response, the Charity Commission emphasised its duty to operate within the legal framework established under UK law. A spokesperson noted, “We know this is a highly contentious issue,” and added that the Commission is currently seeking further advice from the Attorney General to ensure its guidance is consistent with legal obligations.

Representatives from UK Toremnet insisted that the charity does not operate based on political ideology and that all grants were made under English law. A KCT representative also defended the donations, claiming they were intended solely for religious education and not to support settlement expansion. He further asserted that the Charity Commission had cleared the transactions.

This case highlights the delicate intersection of charitable giving, international law, and political sensitivities. As public scrutiny increases, regulators may face growing pressure to re-evaluate how UK charities engage with controversial foreign activities, especially when taxpayer incentives, such as Gift Aid, are in play.