

Speaking Truth to the European Union

On October 10, 2015, a bill was introduced in the U.S. Congress to counter the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. By the U.S.-Israel Trade and Commercial Enhancement Act, U.S. trade negotiators are instructed to discourage potential trade partners from engaging in economic discrimination or participating in or promoting acts of BDS against Israel. The bill seeks to eliminate the politically motivated boycott and barriers on Israeli goods, services, and other commerce imposed on the State of Israel.

President Barack Obama and the U.S. Congress should relate this firm statement to the shameful behavior of the European Union. It is generally assumed that the EU and Israel share common values. Yet on January 18, 2016, the European Council of the European Union issued yet another of its fatuous conclusions on the Middle East peace process. It was “deeply concerned about the continuing cycle of violence” in Israel and the Palestinian territory in recent months. It recalled the special significance of the holy sites and called for the upholding of the status quo put in place in 1967 for the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Saharif.

With the moral equivalence that it illustrates to perfection, the EU urged “all parties” not to worsen the situation by way of incitement or provocation and called on all parties to condemn attacks when they occur.

The remembrance by EU ministers and officials of things past is uneven, if not schizophrenic. Absent from its memory is any note of the unprovoked Palestinian violence that has “worsened” the situation in recent months. The EU memory is steeped in the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood. There is

no hint in it of the corruption and inefficiency of Palestinian authorities and the intent of some to start Intifada III, let alone their refusal to come to the negotiating table for peace. Above all, not a word is said or thought about the Palestinians wielding knives to stab innocent Israelis to death. The EU did not point out that since October 1, 2015, Palestinians have killed, by stabbings, car-ramming, and attacks by guns, 24 Israelis and a U.S. citizen. Israeli soldiers, in defense, have killed 93 terrorists, and another 50 died in clashed with Israeli security forces.

What is present in a full way is the reiteration of EU opposition to the policy of Israeli settlements, which it considers illegal and an obstacle to peace. So is the EU "strong opposition" to actions such as building the separation barrier, which more properly may be considered an Israeli security fence, beyond the 1967 line, demolitions and confiscations, illegal outposts, and restrictions of movement.

The EU, like the U.N. General Assembly, holds Israel to a double standard. No censure applies to other territorial conflicts such as those in northern Cyprus (Turkey), Western Sahara, Kashmir (India), or Tibet (China). This is now shown in a dramatic way. The EU decided on November 11, 2015 to issue guidelines for the labeling of exports originating from Israeli settlements in the West Bank. They cannot be labeled "Made in Israel." The EU says the objective of the labeling policy is to distinguish between goods made inside the internationally accepted borders of Israel and those outside. Britain, Belgium, and Denmark already do this.

There are seven factors the EU should have considered.

The first is the humiliating analogy of its boycott with Nazi Germany, which was the last country in Europe to label Jewish products.

A second factor is that in response to the EU action, Israel on November 29, 2015, announced it was suspending diplomatic contacts with those EU bodies and institutions, though not necessarily individual states, involved in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. It would continue business as usual with EU member-states.

The third basic issue, referring to recognized boundaries, is that most of the Arab countries and certainly the Palestinians do not recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel, let alone borders.

A fourth is the fact that economically, the effect of the EU decision is minimal. The produce going to the EU from the settlements is worth about \$50 million a year – mainly grapes, dates, wine, poultry, and cosmetics, compared to almost \$300 million's worth of goods made in the settlements every year.

Also, Israel exports some \$30 billion's worth of goods and services to the EU every year – about a third of all Israeli exports.

A sixth factor is that more than 20,000 Palestinians work in the settlements at a salary considerably higher than in Palestinian-run enterprises. They may consequently become unemployed as a result of the EU proposal, which is in effect a form of boycott.

A seventh factor is that the very imbalance of the EU on the Middle East itself prevents it from playing the larger role in the Middle East peace process that it desires.

At a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on January 18, 2016, the ministers finally agreed on a joint statement on the degree to which they should stress a distinction between the country, Israel, and its occupied territories. Even the final softer text expresses that all agreements between the State of Israel and the EU must unequivocally and explicitly indicate they are not applicable to the territories occupied

by Israel since 1967.

The ministers had spent several days in heated discussion and had been deadlocked over the statement concerning Israel's actions in the territories it has occupied since 1967.

Interestingly, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Hungary were concerned that the criticism of Israel not be too strong, while Sweden, Ireland, and Malta pressed for tougher language.

It is noteworthy that the person most in favor of a stronger text against Israel was the Swedish foreign minister, Margot Wallstrom, who has already called for an investigation not of the Palestinian terrorists wielding their knives against Israeli civilians, but of how Israel deals with the knife-attackers.

President Obama and Congress now have the opportunity to implement the October 2015 bill. They should inform the EU that its boycott, call it what you will, will not be tolerated.

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