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Israel-EU tension: The view from Europe

JACOB KAMARAS, ALINA DAIN SHARON, SEAN SAVAGE/JNS

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Click photo to download. Caption: Catherine Ashton, High Representative

for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Netanyahu's office in Jerusalem on October 24, 2012. Credit: Moshe Milner/GPO/FLASH90. This month some of Israel's strongest friends in Europe—Britain, France, and Germany—summoned their ambassadors to protest the Jewish state's construction decisions. As a result, then Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that European governments are willing to abandon Israel in a similar fashion to the way they gave up Czechoslovakia to the Nazis before World War II.

Gabriel Goldberg, director of youth services for the Umbrella Organizations of the Jewish Communities of the North-Rhine Region in Germany, disagrees with Lieberman's actual comparison, but told *JNS.org*, "The frustration that lies behind his statement is absolutely understandable."

At the European Union (EU), officials seem to have had a singular focus of late—and it isn't their continent's ongoing economic crisis.

The EU's 27 foreign ministers first condemned Israel's construction plans in the E1 area between Jerusalem and Maale Adumim. More recently, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton called construction plans in the southern Jerusalem neighborhood of Givat Hamatos and the ultra-Orthodox northern Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo "extremely troubling." Britain, France, Germany and Portugal—the EU's four UN Security Council members—asked the Israeli government to rescind its recent construction approvals.

EU criticism of Israel hasn't been limited to building. On its website, the EU insisted that Israel process its tax transfer to the Palestinians because of "contractual obligations." But 14 of 27 EU countries—by voting in favor of "Palestine" as a nonmember observer state at the UN—effectively approved the Palestinians' violation of their contractual obligation under the Oslo Accords to reach a final status agreement with Israel only through direct negotiations.

Not all has been sour in recent Israel-EU relations. In October, when the EU bolstered its economic sanctions against Iran, Lieberman—the same man who made the Holocaust analogy—sent a letter to Ashton thanking her for the EU's "resolute and important step, worthy of significant appreciation, especially as it has been taken in a difficult economic period [for Europe]." On Dec. 22, those strengthened sanctions officially became EU law.

Yet the EU has defied calls from both the U.S. and Israel to officially designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and has drawn criticism from Israel for underemphasizing Hamas's calls for the Jewish state's destruction (a condemnation of Hamas was clause No. 9 of 10 points published by the EU within its succession of condemnations of Israel for E1 construction on Dec. 10).

What do European Jews think of the EU's heavy focus on Israel? What are the reasons behind that focus, and what are its implications for Israel's relationships with European nations? *JNS.org* reports on the Jewish perspective from Germany, Britain and France.

Germany

The 34-year-old Gabriel Goldberg—who, as the son of Soviet dissidents who moved to Israel, has family living in the Jewish state—said that among many in German society, “the common sense is that Israel is the aggressive entity in the world.” He added that it’s “in style to have an opinion about the Middle East conflict without any facts.”

One reason for this, according to Goldberg, involves a projection of German guilt over the Holocaust onto Israeli Jews. Many Germans mistakenly believe that the Israeli Jews are “doing no better than what the Nazis have done” with the Palestinians, Goldberg said.

Stephan J. Kramer, Secretary General of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, does not believe that the EU is anti-Israel, nor is Germany. “We know that Chancellor Angela Merkel has a very positive attitude toward the State of Israel, although she has disagreements with the acting premier Netanyahu,” he told JNS.org in an email.

Kramer, however, is concerned with the danger of European appeasement of the Palestinians. Many EU members “favored or refrained from opposing the Palestinians’ [UN] upgrade because they wanted to convey the message of supporting the general idea of Palestinian statehood,” according to Kramer. Germany abstained from the vote.

Still, Kramer would not go as far as Avigdor Lieberman’s Holocaust analogy when it comes to current relations between Israel and Europe, writing “I would draw too many parallels between 1938 and 2012.” He explained that Israel today has Germany—which is rumored to supply the Jewish state with submarines—as an ally. Israel also has one of the strongest armies in the world, he noted.

“The Czechoslovakian government of 1938 would have loved to be in such a situation,” Kramer wrote.

Another indication that the broader Israel-Europe relationship is positive, according to Kramer, is that Israel participates in Europe’s scientific programs and contributes technology to European companies. “A few years ago, then minister of economy in Germany, Rainer Brüderle, said that using Israeli innovations could raise German economic growth,” he said.

Goldberg said the EU’s top political priority today should not be Israel, but the European economic crisis.

“I don’t think anti-Semitism is rising because of the economic crisis, but it’s buried inside the souls of people and it comes out when they have other problems,” Goldberg said. “[The thinking in Europe is] if you have many problems and you don’t know how to solve them, take the easy way out and condemn Israel.”

Britain

British Jewry in general “tends to avoid talking about” the issue of Israeli construction, according to Sam Westrop, director of the London-based Institute for Middle Eastern Democracy.


“Perhaps this is because they feel it really is a flaw within Israeli policy or perhaps it is because they just don’t know what to think about it,” Westrop told JNS.org. “Whether or not this is a wise course of action, I am not quite sure.”

Westrop believes that the EU’s “obsession” with Israeli construction results from two factors. Firstly, he noted the “great deal of people who feel they must apportion blame equally in the Arab-Israeli conflict,” people who “despair at Israel’s approach while strongly condemning Hamas rocket fire.” Secondly, Westrop cited individuals who “genuinely believe” Israeli construction “prevents peace.”

“We just have to look at Abu Mazen’s rejection of Israel’s peace gestures following the offer of a settlement freeze (for 10 months starting in November 2009) to realize that this just is not true,” he wrote in an email.

But Dr. Toby Greene, head of research at the Britain Israel Communications & Research Centre (BICOM), wrote in an email to JNS.org that it is “reasonable for the EU to press both sides not to take unilateral actions that prejudge the outcome of negotiations, meaning the Palestinians should refrain from trying to impose their version of a solution through UN resolutions, and Israel should refrain from trying to impose theirs via building in new areas of the territory under dispute.”

The 14 EU countries voting in favor of upgraded Palestinian UN status indicates to Westrop a decline in support for Israel among EU members that resulted from “the efficacy of the anti-Israel network in



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