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With Gaza War, Movement to Boycott Israel Gains Momentum in Europe

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The Tricycle Theatre in north London, after hosting a Jewish film festival for eight years, demanded to vet the content of any film made with arts funding from the Israeli government. George Galloway, a member of Parliament known for his vehement criticism of Israel, declared Bradford, England, an "Israel-free zone."

Israel proper. Goods from settlements are imported, but under different labels and tariffs. "There is no question of a boycott," the European official said.

In an agreement last December on scientific exchanges and funding, known as Horizon 2020, Brussels insisted, despite fierce opposition from the Israeli government, on keeping Israeli institutions in the West Bank, like Ariel University, out of the deal. Since European funding is so important to Israeli academic institutions, the Israeli government gave in, attaching a legally meaningless appendix opposing the distinctions.

While some Israeli companies label goods produced in the West Bank as Israeli, the Europeans have tried to crack down, insisting that permits have a physical address attached and not simply an Israeli post office box. Goods can be labeled "West Bank" or from a particular place, but cannot say "Made in Israel."

The European Union has gone considerably further than the United States, declaring that Israeli settlements over the Green Line are "illegal" under international law; the United States simply calls them "illegitimate" and "obstacles to peace."

Israel says its settlement activity is consistent with international law, although it accepts that some settlements are built illegally on privately owned Palestinian land and says that all will be resolved as part of a final deal with the Palestinians.

The United States also has no regulations requiring separate labeling of products from Israeli-occupied land.

The recent fuss over SodaStream and one of its spokeswomen, actress Scarlett Johansson, was indicative of the passions raised. Oxfam insisted she quit SodaStream, which has a factory in the large West Bank settlement of Maale Adumim, or quit her work with Oxfam; Johansson chose to quit Oxfam. SodaStream defended itself by citing the number of jobs it was providing for Palestinians, who were being paid the same wages as Israeli workers.

The debate was indicative of shifting attitudes. During the period around the Oslo Accords, in the early 1990s, when peace seemed close and economic cooperation between Israel and the new, interim Palestinian Authority was considered an important part of a future relationship built on mutual dependency and confidence, factories in occupied territory were praised.

With the failure of Oslo to produce a Palestinian state, the tone has changed, and companies once seen by many as in the forefront of economic cooperation are now being seen by some as colonial occupiers undermining a future Palestinian state. But the interconnection of Israel with the settlements is difficult to untie - every major Israeli bank has a branch in the settlements.

Some countries, like Britain, have gone further. Britain issued voluntary labeling guidelines in December 2009 "to enable consumers to make a more fully informed decision concerning the products they buy," according to the UK Trade and Investment agency, because "we understand the concerns of people who do not wish to purchase goods exported from Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories."

More troubling to Israel, in December the agency warned companies and citizens to be "aware of the potential reputational implications" of investments in settlement areas.

"We do not encourage or offer support to such activities," it said.

But even these concerns should be distinguished from the organized BDS campaign against the state of Israel itself.

Launched in 2005, the BDS campaign is supposed to last, the Palestinian BDS National Committee says, until Israel "complies with international law and Palestinian rights."

Its three goals are "the end of Israeli occupation and colonization of Arab land and dismantling the Wall," "full equality" for "Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel," and respect for the right of return of Palestinian refugees. Israelis see the first two as compatible with two states, but the third as the end of the Jewish state.

Then there is the associated effort at an academic and cultural boycott of Israel, which has attracted well-known figures like Stephen Hawking and Sinéad O'Connor. Others defend artistic freedom or the unifying nature of culture, or believe, as writer Ian McEwan said: "If I only went to countries I approve of, I probably would never get out of bed."

Galloway, in comments being investigated by the police, said: "We don't want any Israeli goods; we don't want any Israeli services; we don't want any Israeli academics coming to the university or college; we don't even want any Israeli tourists to come to Bradford."

The war in Gaza and its aftermath have inflamed opinion in Europe and, experts and analysts say, are likely to increase support for the movement to boycott, disinvest from and sanction Israel, known as BDS.

"We entered this war in Gaza with the perception that the Israeli government is not interested in reaching peace with the Palestinians," said Meir Javedanfar, an Israeli analyst at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, a private university. "Now, after the casualties and the destruction, I'm very worried about the impact this could have on Israel. It could make it very easy for the BDS campaign to isolate Israel and call for more boycotts."

Gilead Sher and Einav Yogev, in a paper for the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, warn that Gaza means Israel pays "a much heavier price in public opinion and in erosion of support for its positions in negotiations with the Palestinians."

Along with reports of "familiar anti-Semitic attacks on Jews," they said, "the movement to boycott Israel is expanding politically and among the public."

Daniel Levy of the European Council on Foreign Relations points to the debate over halting arms exports to Israel, which has been given new momentum in Britain and Spain by the asymmetry of the Gaza war.

"You're beginning to see the translation of public sympathy into something politically meaningful," he said. He noted two tracks - the governmental one, which distinguishes between Israel and the occupied territories, and the social one of academic, commercial and artistic boycotts.

But for all the new attention around the BDS movement, the economic impact has been small, experts say. The European Union, which has been looked to for leadership on the issue, does not support the idea.

Instead, the Europeans are drawing a legal distinction between Israel within its 1967 boundaries and Israeli towns and settlements that are beyond them in occupied land. Brussels regards all Israelis living beyond the 1967 lines, including those in East Jerusalem, as settlers living in illegal communities whose status can be regulated only through a negotiated peace agreement with the Palestinians.

In matters such as scientific cooperation, funding for research, import duties and labeling requirements, Brussels has sought a strong relationship with pre-1967 Israel, while demanding a different status for institutions and products from beyond the Green Line, the armistice lines that ended the 1967 fighting but did not fix borders or create a Palestinian state.

Martin Schulz, the president of the European Parliament, said before the Gaza conflict that "there is no boycott" of Israel by the European Union, citing trade and scientific cooperation. "The European Union defends the right of existence of Israel with all its means," he said. "The view that the Europeans are against Israel, I repeat it, is wrong."

Some members of the 28-nation European Union are closer to Israel than others, but the bloc is

united on Israel within its 1967 boundaries.

"Our relationship with Israel is close and one of the best we have in the region, but only with Israel in its 1967 lines unless there is a peace agreement," said a senior European Union official who spoke on condition of anonymity in keeping with diplomatic protocol. "We are clear, however, that what came under Israeli control in 1967 is not a part of Israel, so the settlements are illegal under international law and not helpful in the peace process."

To that end, the European Union has demanded that all products produced by Israelis beyond the 1967 lines be labeled differently, and they are excluded from the duty-free trade agreement the bloc has with Israel proper. Goods from settlements are imported, but under different labels and tariffs. "There is no question of a boycott," the European official said.

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