

Resetting Europe-Israel relations

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Gerald Steinberg, THE JERUSALEM POST

In the political realm, the relationship between the European Union and Israel went from bad to worse in 2009. But with the appointment of a number of new officials, as well as recognition of the costs of conflict for both Israel and Europe, there may now be an opportunity to shift gears.

The first step in this process is to recognize the extent of the problem. A new ambassador in Tel Aviv, the entry of the Spanish government into the rotating EU presidency on January 1, a recently elected parliament and new commissioners will find a history of friction and frustration. They will be unable to avoid the scars of continuous and fierce arguments from both the distant and more recent past, under Swedish leadership, including tensions over EU proclamations on issues of war and peace, and particularly regarding Jerusalem.

These European actions were seen by Israelis as signaling strong bias in support of Palestinian positions. At the same time, Israel's justified concerns were patronizingly dismissed, along with the policies of its government officials.

These tensions were exacerbated when the Swedish foreign minister, who was expected to speak for the EU, became persona non grata, in part due to the failure of his government to condemn the "organ sales" blood libel highlighted in the prominent Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet.

As Spain takes over the EU presidency, there is a chance to start over. Without Sweden's baggage, Madrid can begin working with Jerusalem, rather than leading the opposition. Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos has spent many years in the region, including a long stint as the EU's special peace envoy during the Oslo period, and has learned to distinguish between slogans and reality.

In Brussels, the new European commissioners can learn from the record of failure in more than 30 years of initiatives related to Israel. From the 1980 Venice Declaration, in which the EU sought to overtake America as the leading peace broker in the Middle East, and through the various programs presented in 2009, these initiatives have only added to the tensions, rather than reducing them.

A more modest and realistic approach from Brussels, and unbending condemnation of terror, would create a greater willingness among Israelis to include Europe in

peace negotiations. Unfortunately, Catherine Ashton, Europe's new foreign affairs and security head, began her tenure by attacking Israel and sounding like Chris Patten, who held a similar position 20 years ago and is remembered for his hostility toward the Jewish state. But unlike Patten, Ashton may turn out to be a quick learner who can undo this damage as she discovers the complex realities.

Assuming that Ashton and her colleagues on the commission are interested in repairing relations, Israel can reciprocate and expand the role of the EU. Both the current and previous governments have shown that they can work with individual European countries and governments - indeed, there is close cooperation with leaders of the UK, France, Germany, Italy and most of the post- communist "new Europeans."

Another source of tension that must be addressed is the massive European funding provided to a small number of Israeli political groups that exploit the language of human rights, peace and development. These government-supported "nongovernmental organizations" (NGOs) are leading the campaigns that promote demonization of Israel and boycotts, using false allegations of "war crimes," "collective punishment" and "apartheid."

The EU and its member states provide millions of taxpayer euros to B'Tselem, PCHR, Machsom Watch, Adalah, Yesh Din, Gisha and many more. In addition to organizing public rallies, newspaper ads and intense lobbying in the Knesset, these instruments of European policy are also "repeat players" in the Israeli courts. NGOs funded by Europe played a leading role in branding Route 443 an "apartheid road" and erasing Israel's legitimate security concerns. But as Supreme Court President Dorit Beinisch (by no means a right- wing ideologue) emphasized in her decision in this case, the "apartheid" rhetoric is wrong and the security concerns are very real.

The changing presidency presents EU and Spanish officials with an opportunity to reevaluate the damage done in this important dimension of relations. With Sweden, the problems were particularly pronounced, as Stockholm used the facade of "development aid" transferred via church groups like Diakonia to fund NGOs that led the "lawfare" and boycott, divestment and sanctions processes around the world. Spain's record is not nearly as bad as Sweden's, although a few particularly hostile NGOs are funded by the Spanish Cooperation Office in east Jerusalem, the central government in Madrid and regional governments such as Catalonia. An examination of funding for political NGOs and ending the lack of transparency that surrounds this process may ease friction between Israel and the EU.

After 30 years of friction on many issues, a total reversal is unrealistic, and differences over EU policy will remain. But if the tone is changed, and the new European leaders engage in dialogue among equals, rather than trying to manipulate the Israeli public, important progress can be made.

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