EU VS and IL

How will European-Israeli relations look in 2013?

BY BENIAMIN WEINTHAL

There will be no shortage of rifts and sharp disagreements between Europe and Israel in 2013. During 2012 the EU and Israel clashed over construction of settlements, outlawing Hezbollah within the 27-member EU, Iran sanctions, and the Palestine Liberation Organization’s UN bid for statehood.

With respect to Europe’s support of a Palestinian state at the UN and its opposition to settlement construction, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has embraced a variation of former French president Jacques Chirac’s attitude toward the US. Chirac famously voiced his anti-Americanism by saying “I have one principle regarding foreign policy. I look at what the Americans are doing and I do the opposite. Then I am sure to be right.” Of course, Chirac’s inability to the United States encompassed Europe’s support for a Palestinian state at the UN.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has done the opposite with respect to Europe. His blunt comment last month, “What the UN says doesn’t interest me,” could apply to the Europeans, including Israel’s main EU partner, Germany, which abandoned him during the November 29 General Assembly vote on the PLO upgrade to non-member state status. Netanyahu directed his salty rejoinder to the UN’s (and the EU’s) permanent pastime: opposing apartment construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Tommy Steiner, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, wrote to The Jerusalem Post on December 25, “It appears Europe’s near-obsession with the peace process and the settlements stems from a belief that it has nothing to offer in addressing the other, more pressing challenges. While I personally believe that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is urgent and important for Israel’s national security, the European fixation on settlements has not only failed to yield any beneficial outcomes, it has been counterproductive.”

For Steiner, Europe’s blind spots consist of failing to confront the rise of an imperialistic Iran in the Middle East, and the growth of terror and crime networks in Sinai and in a post-Bashar Assad Syria.

“An Israeli who actually believes in the European project and in anchoring Israel in the West and enhancing EU-Israel relations, one can only hope that EU officials would acquire a more realistic, in-depth and broad understanding of the Middle East and the principal forces shaping the region,” said Steiner.

Mark Dubowitz, the executive director of the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told the Post that “2013 will be the year when the United States, Israel and Europe will be forced to decide if economic and diplomatic pressure are sufficient to stop Iran’s pursuit of atomic weapons. If European leaders want to avoid Iran reaching the critical capability that will make an Iranian nuclear inevitability, the military strikes that soon will be the only option to forestall this, they have to go far beyond the status quo.”

“Canada has set an example for Europe by designating Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, adding the Quds Force to its list of terrorist organizations, sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety, expelling all Iranian diplomats from Ottawa, and shuttering its own embassy in Tehran,” noted Dubowitz, an authority on international sanctions targeting Iran’s nuclear program and on human rights violations.

European governments, particularly Berlin, have shown no appetite to list Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity. US President George W. Bush sanctioned the IRGC as a terrorist organization in 2007. The IRGC supervises Iran’s illicit nuclear weapons program and coordinates global terror operations, including efforts to wipe out Syria’s pro-reform opposition. According to some estimates, the IRGC is believed to control as much as 75 percent of Iran’s economy. Berlin’s annual EU-Iran trade hovers around $42 billion, with powerful EU company interests combined with pro-business politicians have impeded any talk of sanctioning the IRGC.

Dubowitz advocates: “The EU should announce that, unless Iran meets its international obligations to end its atomic weapons program by the beginning of March, it will designate the IRGC and Hezbollah as terrorist entities, declare Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, and significantly enhance EU sanctions and nonproliferation regimes by prohibiting all trade with Iran except for humanitarian goods.”

He continued, “The EU designation, and sanctioning, of the IRGC and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations would significantly weaken the Middle East actors most likely to acquire sophisticated WMD, and greatly increase the isolation of Iran and pressure on it to halt its illicit weapons program.”

The EU has thus far snubbed US President Barack Obama’s counterterrorism official John Brennan, and members of Congress and the Senate, who have urged the EU to include Hezbollah in its terror list. US and Israeli anti-terrorism intelligence personnel attribute the Jubeel suicide bombing of an Israeli tour bus in Bulgaria to Iran and Hezbollah. Five Israelis and a Bulgarian bus driver were murdered in the terror attack.

Somewhat surprisingly, the EU supported Israel’s Pillar of Defense war in November against Hamas rocket attacks on civilians in Israel. The EU response to Israel’s acts of self-defense directed at Hamas could have been a line from the Cell Block Tango scene from the musical Chicago. They had it coming!”

If another war breaks out between Hamas and Israel in 2013, Hamas’s actions might very well endanger the same EU response.

With the exception of politicians such as Claudia Roth of Germany’s Green Party, who advocates “negotiating with the pragmatic part of Hamas,” most mainstream European politicians seem to have internalized that Hamas is not a peace partner.

Though Europe remains mired in a massive financial crisis, European capitals continue to fund NGOs that seek to undercut Israel’s democracy. Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg, the head of NGO Monitor who teaches political science at Bar-Ilan University, wrote in the Post, “Europeans also need to practice the values that they preach, particularly with respect to democracy and transparency. The recent confused decision of the European Court of Justice, which allowed the EU to keep all documents and procedures relating to funding of political NGOs as super-sensitive secrets, and the EU’s failure to hold a single session to hear oral arguments, highlights the gap between lofty principles and anti-democratic practice. After the Israeli elections in 2013, the conflict over EU secret funding for NGOs promoting political warfare against Israel is likely to intensify.”

Steinberg said, “Europe, taken collectively, has a highly schizophrenic, inconsistent and dysfunctional relationship with Israel, and this needs to change fundamentally in 2013 to avoid major damage on both sides. There are situations, such as during the recent Gaza conflict, in which government officials and other serious players fully understand the Israeli context and responses to deadly attacks. But in other cases, such as on admitting that Hezbollah, like Hamas, is an Iranian-backed terror group, Europe is paralyzed and confused. To be taken seriously, the EU and member states will have to make the difficult decisions that have been awkwardly avoided in the past.”