

European funding for the narrative war

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European efforts to play a major role in Arab-Israeli peace discussions have again been overshadowed, this time by US President Barack Obama's initiative. To raise Europe's visibility, the rate of official visits has increased, and a number of academic conferences on Europe's role are taking place. For example, yesterday the Hebrew University began a three-day conference with the ambitious headline "Strengthening the Forces of Moderation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Role of the European Union After the Gaza War."

For diplomats and policy-makers, a "frank and honest exchange of views" on the problematic European track record in academic settings could be very helpful in correcting decades of misjudgments. For example, during the Oslo process, the European Union and its member states were convinced that Yasser Arafat was a "force of moderation," providing him and his corrupt Fatah cronies with suitcases of money, justified as necessary to "grease the wheels" of the peace process and Palestinian state building. Instead, the cash went to foreign bank accounts and terror.

In Europe, there have been very few independent analyses of these and other diplomatic and policy failures. Fearing embarrassment and worse, officials rejected calls for an independent investigation, until the European Parliament forced the European Commission to hold an inquiry (known as the OLAF report). But years later, this report remains top secret, meaning that few if any lessons were apparently learned.

Given this record and the difficulties that Europe has in analyzing itself, serious academic research and conferences can play a very positive role. Unfortunately, many of these discussions of European policy feature speakers and officials who prefer to preach to Israelis rather than investigating their contribution to failure. In parallel, important issues related to policy failures are conspicuously absent from such conferences.

ONE SUBJECT consistently avoided in the quasi-official research and conference framework is the massive European funding for radical nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose activities fuel the conflict instead of "strengthening the forces of moderation," as proclaimed in the title of this conference. Through the "Barcelona program" and aid schemes, the European Commission and member governments provide tens of millions of euros every year to Palestinian, Israeli and other NGOs. The ostensible objectives include promoting democracy, peace, development and human rights, but the results are often counterproductive.

These NGOs lead the demonization and delegitimization of Israel, through labels such as "apartheid" and "war crimes," based on the strategy adopted at the 2001 Durban Conference NGO Forum. For example, European NGO funding is the primary engine behind the "lawfare" assaults against Israeli military and civilian officials - a form of soft-war aggression through the courts which accompanies the "hard war" of terrorism. The current case in Spain (chosen for its lenient universal jurisdiction policies) is led by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, which is funded by the European Commission, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and other governments. Indeed, PCHR is a central force in the NGO demonization and political warfare against Israel.

These European-funded "lawfare" cases are part of the much wider process, conducted through highly political NGOs in Israel that seek to overturn the government's policies - groups like B'Tselem, Yesh Din, Machsom Watch, Bimkom, Ir Amim, Adalah, Mossawa, etc. (The EU claims to fund these NGOs under the guise of limited projects, but the amounts often constitute the bulk of the total operating budget.)

AN EXAMINATION of the activities of European funded NGOs demonstrates that they do not contribute to "strengthening the forces of moderation." Many are active in promoting anti-Israel boycott campaigns, one-state proposals (meaning the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state) and submitting tendentious claims to UN "investigatory" committees.

A serious discussion of these issues would ask questions like: How does this happen? Who guides these decisions? Why are European government funds for NGOs used to undermine compromise, mutual acceptance and the two-state solution that Europe claims to support?

The chaos in EU funding for NGOs and frequent overlaps add to these problems - there is no coordinator or central data source. European transparency regulations are ignored in this area, and no records or protocols are available for NGO allocations under European Commission programs. The names and possible conflicts of interests of the policy-makers are hidden from public scrutiny. Evaluation processes, if any, are secret, making it difficult to explore constructive changes.

When NGO Monitor was unable to obtain the most basic documents and threatened a lawsuit under the EU's own transparency rules, European officials sent a CD containing about 50 documents, most of which had all the relevant information deleted including the names of NGO partner organizations and the evaluation criteria. It was impossible to decipher the few meaningless statements and figures that remained, making constructive evaluation impossible.

These issues should be high on the agendas of discussions and conferences, such as the one taking place at Hebrew University. Unfortunately, these "difficult" subjects and conflicts are largely avoided. Comfortable but misleading headlines, such as "Strengthening the forces of moderation," take precedence over the open examination of European support for "lawfare," the "right of return" and Palestinian rejectionism.

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