

Taking back our national sovereignty, again  
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April 23, 2012

In a recent meeting with European officials, diplomats, and journalists, I was asked why many Israelis (including me) criticized and resented their intense efforts to advance peace with the Palestinians and democracy for Israel.

The problem, I tried to explain, was not in the objectives, but rather in the ways that Europeans, in particular, have sought to impose and force their views on Israelis, often via secret processes that manipulate Israeli democracy.

As my inner Zionist took over, I launched into a passionate lecture on the centrality of restoring Jewish national sovereignty after 2,000 years of exile and dependence. I reminded them that after finally regaining our status as a free nation, the last thing that most of us want is to have foreign governments, with their own interests and perspectives, trying to manipulate Israel's most important decisions, regardless of their good intentions. This was the thrust of David Ben Gurion's addresses to UN committees in the 1940s, and Menachem Begin's impatient meetings with Jimmy Carter in the 1970s.

As Israelis celebrate their 64th anniversary, the relationship between independence and Zionism is still insufficiently understood or accepted around the world. Yes, as our critics argue, this insistence of self-determination, in the deepest sense of the word, can seem stubborn, and, by alienating potential supporters, self-defeating. But without being able to make our decisions, while accepting responsibility for the consequences of these choices, including mistakes, we would not be a sovereign nation on the same footing as all of the others.

For the first years after the creation of modern Israel, Europeans generally seemed to accept the centrality of Jewish sovereignty, reflecting the tragic legacy of oppression ending with the Holocaust. But gradually, as the consequences of Arab rejectionism, wars and terror spilled over into Europe, this understanding was replaced by paternalism and manipulation. In the years and decades following the 1967 war, European leaders began to seek instant solutions to the conflict.

Their peace plans promote the false narrative that automatically defines Palestinians as weak victims and refugees, while blaming Israeli policies, particularly settlements, for the ongoing violence.

While using international frameworks in the effort to impose policies based on this false premise, Europe (including non-EU members Norway and Switzerland) has used funding mechanisms to manipulate Israeli politics and society on a massive scale. Both tactics negate the core principle of national sovereignty.

By funneling tens of millions of euros or pounds every year to a small group of carefully selected Israeli political organizations, European officials are in effect rolling back Jewish self-determination. They operate without checks and balances, and fail to provide details even to their own parliamentary oversight committees, giving some anonymous officials immense power to determine Israel's fate.

This creates a great deal of friction – telling Israelis that grants to Peace Now, B'Tselem, and similar groups are “for our own good” is condescending and counterproductive. Similarly, recent European Union reports on the most complex and sensitive issues such as Jerusalem and Jewish-Arab relations

are also based on the claims of these NGOs, and include recommendations that, beyond being unworkable, become additional sources of tension between Israel and Europe. As in other democracies, Israelis make their political choices at the ballot box and through elected representatives, and do not need outsiders to intervene in these processes.

In attempting to defend European intervention in Israel's affairs, some argue that the secret funding of left-wing causes is necessary to offset the private money from Jewish donors that goes to support settlement expansion. This is a weak and unsubstantiated excuse — there are plenty of Jewish donors that support the left, including the New Israel Fund and George Soros. More importantly, the decisions regarding regulations for different forms of foreign funding are issues that our democratic process must decide, and not any outside power allied with individuals claiming, without evidence, to speak in the name of Israeli society.

And then there is the issue of responsibility for outcomes, particularly when the best of intentions end badly, such as the terror wave that followed the Oslo process. For Israelis, making the wrong decision on war, peace and security is often a matter of life or death. If our elected officials make mistakes, we have ourselves to blame. In contrast, how many European officials involved in attempts to dictate these decisions to Israelis will lose sleep, their jobs or their lives if it turns out that they were wrong?

Israel's celebration of 64 years of independence is an opportunity for the leaders of Europe's democracies to reexamine these failed policies, and recognize the centrality of self-determination. However much they may disagree with our decisions, these remain our responsibility as a sovereign and equal member of the international community.