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"No Friends Here: Europe's Desire to Play a Larger Role in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Does Not Bode Well for Israel"

By Kenneth W. Stein

During my recent trip to Europe it was abundantly clear that Israel has few friends on that continent. And in the months ahead, Europe's collective adversarial relationship toward Israel is likely to worsen.

These and other conclusions emerged from meetings with Middle Eastern specialists in Europe as part of a public affairs outreach program I participated in, which was organized by some of Europe's American cultural attaches.

Public seminars, private talks, and candid interviews focusing on American foreign policy and the Middle East predominated two weeks of exchanges in Hamburg, Berlin, Munich, Brussels, Milan, and Paris. This trip resulted in extraordinarily frank discussions with civil servants, diplomats, academics, business people and journalists.

It is not clear whether anti-Israeli attitudes or pro-Palestinian feelings are European intellectual covers for deeply held anti-Semitic sentiments. What is clear is that European foreign ministries, and civil servants who deal with the Middle East, consider Israel responsible for the stalemate in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

Indeed, a Belgian Foreign Ministry official defined Israel as a "historic mistake" and Sharon's electoral victory as "disastrous." While his views were at the extreme end of an anti-Israeli sentiment spectrum, the general opinions of Israel were still problematic.

To most Europeans, Israel is Goliath facing the Palestinian David; Israel has power and the Palestinians are economically weak. Israel is an occupying force, and Europeans dislike countries that occupy other countries. Israel's 30-year presence and policies in the West Bank and Gaza are blamed for the absence of institutional and organizational development in the emerging Palestinian state.

European audiences were distinctly uncomfortable with my caustic reminder that France and England dominated the Middle East for centuries and did little to educate local Arabs or develop economic infrastructures. When reminded that Jordan and Egypt were stewards of

the West Bank and Gaza from 1949 to 1967, I drew blank stares. History for foreign ministry bureaucrats who deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict begins after the June 1967 war.

Proximity to the Middle East has always shaped European attitudes toward the region. With a long imperial presence in North Africa and the Middle East, slavishly dependent upon the region's oil and natural gas, and susceptible to labor migrations from an exploding labor supply, Europeans preach Middle Eastern stability, and, therefore, a negotiated Arab-Israeli agreement.

All this is troubling because, with an American administration unwilling to be actively engaged in Arab-Israeli diplomacy at present, most European foreign ministries and European Union policymakers are eager to play a more active role in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

The Belgian foreign minister, who rotates to the presidency of the EU in July, is already anticipating a more active European role in Middle Eastern matters. This is likely to be a nuisance to Israel. Meanwhile, a tiny few seasoned European bureaucrats who understand the complexities and uncertainties of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations are by no means joyful about jumping into the diplomacy.

In the months ahead, one can expect European economic and trade restrictions against Israeli goods and products to be implemented as response to Israeli actions taken or not taken in the territories.

Given European attitudes toward Israel and the absence of an effective Israeli lobbying voice in Europe-- the small number of Jews in Europe have little influence on public and governmental attitudes toward the Jewish state-- Israel will want to keep the center of political activity vis-à-vis Arab-Israeli diplomacy in Washington. For opposite reasons, expect the Palestinians and Arab states to urge a greater European role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

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