



Time to Change: The European Role in Jerusalem

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Author's Note:

This article was written prior to the passing of Mr. Faisal Abdel Qader al-Husseini. The staff at the Orient House vow to continue the legacy of Mr. Hussein and to maintain the Orient House as the PLO Headquarters in East Jerusalem.

European governments have raised their voices in response to the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Belgium has called for a complete boycott of Israeli products and other nations, such as Denmark and Sweden, have issued strongly worded statements calling for an immediate settlement freeze. Yet no recent criticism or

condemnations included one crucial item: a clear position on Jerusalem. Certainly Europe's official political positions reflect the statutes of international law even in regards to Jerusalem. However, on the ground, its positions are far from translated into concrete action as Europe's ambiguous support of the 'peace process' primarily is reflected by the provision of financial support to both parties. The al-Aqsa Intifada has made the need for reforming European policy towards the Middle East more urgent; as America keeps its distance as the broker of the peace process, Europe has an opportunity to change its policy and make up for lost time. To do so, it is important to take stock of lessons learnt in the past.

Over the past 10 years of carrying the European File at the Orient House, I have observed Europe's position on Jerusalem as expressed both in principle and practice. In assessing the European positions regarding the Palestinian issue, one must stress the developments since the early 1980s, notably the Venice Conference during which Europe recognized the Palestinian right to self-determination and affirmed UN Resolutions 242 and 338 as a framework for the peace process. This position was maintained until the Madrid Conference in 1991, when both the Israelis and Palestinians accepted it as the basis for the peace talks.

The Madrid Conference led the way to a period of initially positive and amicable relations between Europe and Palestinians in East Jerusalem. During preparations for the Madrid Conference in October 1991, the Portuguese Prime Minister Anibal Cavaco Silva was the first to visit the newly refurbished Orient House. Silva dedicated the building as the headquarters of the

Palestinian peace conference delegation, emphasizing that Europe had and would continue to reject the Israeli annexation of occupied East Jerusalem. This cleared the way for more visits by European prime ministers and other high-ranking officials to East Jerusalem. During such visits, they would meet with prominent Palestinian Jerusalemites, headed by PLO Executive Committee Member Faisal al-Husseini, and often issue explicit political statements condemning the Israeli occupation.

In this context, European Union foreign ministers decided in September 1996 to pursue this policy by stressing the importance of having European officials visit the Orient House, the PLO's official political address, when coming to Jerusalem. For a time, this position was adhered to and dozens of European officials, including several foreign ministers visited the Orient House over the following years. Official delegations, like the Irish-led Troika Delegation in 1996, insisted on visiting the PLO headquarters in East Jerusalem despite Israel's fierce opposition and accompanying threats.* The European stance was principled on the need to remain impartial in dealing with both the Israeli and Palestinian sides; such a policy would help facilitate the peace process.

Following Europe's firm position, Israel withdrew its initial hard-line position and accepted the European decision. Subsequently, the Israeli foreign minister at the time, David Levy, repealed the call for a boycott of Troika Delegation upon its final decision to visit the Orient House.

* The current European Union President heads the European Troika Delegation, which includes the past and future president. The presidency rotates to a different nation every six months.

Indeed, Europe implemented several policies in line with its political position *vis-à-vis* Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Most noteworthy, in 1996 the European Community threatened to refuse to ratify a preferential trade agreement signed with Israel in October 1995, unless Israel would implement its agreements with the PA and move forward with the peace process. Such a move was particularly persuasive with Israel as Europe is its largest trade partner, with Israel selling some 60% of its industrial and technological products to Europe compared with 17% to the U.S.

However, in 1996, upon the emergence of the Israeli right wing led by Binyamin Netanyahu, a European school of thought developed that called for wooing the right-wing Israeli government. By pursuing a policy that avoided criticizing Israeli policies in the occupied territories, Europe had hoped that it would cultivate a stronger field of influence over Israel, and thus be better able to curb Israeli expansionist policies in favor of the peace process. This belief proved to be misguided, however, as Israel continued to expand its settlements and pursue other policies, consolidating its occupation with little international condemnation.

During this period, the Orient House and the Palestinian demands for political sovereignty in Jerusalem began to be undermined. European officials started fabricating excuses for, first, not visiting the PLO's headquarters and then avoiding East Jerusalem all together, even when meeting with Israeli officials in West Jerusalem.

From the outset, the Palestinian side warned against dealing softly with the right-wing Israeli government. The Palestinian side felt that such a policy would give Israel free rein

to commit unilateral acts and would allow extremist elements in Israel to act with impunity. Despite communicating such reservations, European governments, instead of sanctioning Israel for its accelerated settlement policy, increased their support of Israel on all levels. Such support gave Israel the much-desired preferential trading status and opened the door to increased technological trade. As the Palestinians expected, Israeli settlement activities increased throughout the West Bank and Gaza, and even in Jerusalem; the peace process came to an almost complete halt.

Moreover, after Netanyahu's election, it became increasingly difficult for the Palestinian side to convince official European delegations to visit East Jerusalem, let alone the Orient House. This aversion to visit East Jerusalem arose despite the Berlin Declaration of March 5, 1999, which reiterated the political position that East Jerusalem is part of the occupied territories.

When visits did take place, they only transpired after lengthy negotiations and then often would take place under bizarre circumstances. Normally, formal diplomatic meetings with the Palestinian side occur in the Orient House and would follow appropriate diplomatic protocol. Today, however, these meetings take place in different locales, such as East Jerusalem hospitals under the guise of discussing assistance to the health sector. The PLO Headquarters' descent into increased isolation followed a steady chain of disappointing meetings, prompted to a large extent by European short sightedness:

Visit of the European Troika, January 2000

During the first visit of the European Troika Delegation in 2000, which was headed by the Portuguese Foreign Minister Mr. Gama, the delegation only agreed to meet with the Jerusalemite Palestinian delegation at the American Colony Hotel after extensive discussions. This meeting was cut short; first from a scheduled one-hour meeting to 45 minutes and then to 30 minutes. Finally, in a coup de grace, the European delegation apologized at the last moment and headed directly to West Jerusalem to meet with Israeli politicians, including Ehud Barak.

Visit of the European Parliament President, February 2000

Another diplomatic visit that indicated Europe's abandonment of its hitherto evenhanded policy towards Jerusalem was that of the European Parliament President Ms. Nicole Fontaine, who visited the region on February 21-22, 2000. After initially requesting a visit with Mr. Faisal al-Husseini, the PLO Committee Member in Charge of Jerusalem Affairs, Fontaine's delegation suddenly developed reservations about the meeting due to the controversy it caused on the Israeli side. Only after long and intensive talks between an array of Palestinian officials and the European delegation did they agree to meet in East Jerusalem at the French Consulate. However, even this meeting came into jeopardy after Fontaine called the Israeli foreign minister, David Levy. He convinced her to cancel the meeting with the Palestinian side. This decision was an insult against Mr. Husseini and all Palestinians in that it essentially negated Palestinian rights to Jerusalem. Only after the

Palestinians united in boycotting the European delegation in all the Palestinian Territories did Fontaine agree to keep her appointment; when the meeting did occur, it amounted to little more than a brief, and reserved, courtesy visit.

Visit of the EU Commissioner for External Relations, April 2000

During his visit to Jerusalem, the EU Commissioner for External Relations, Christopher Patten, participated in the ceremonial laying of a wreath on the holocaust memorial in West Jerusalem. Prior to his visit, Patten had also agreed to participate in the commemoration of the Deir Yassin Massacre, which symbolizes the cumulative suffering of the Palestinian al-Nakbe. However, the scheduled time was delayed. Once again, the Europeans yielded to Israeli pressure; after much ado, Patten agreed to participate in a short commemoration ceremony at 9 PM that evening.

Visit of the President of Greece, May 2000

In another incident, the Greek President, Constantinos Stephanopoulos, accompanied by a large delegation, paid a visit to the region in May 2000. Historically, the Palestinian people consider Greece a friendly state. After committing himself to visit East Jerusalem, Mr. Stephanopoulos simply cancelled all appointments, providing no explanations. However, he then agreed to visit the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the Israeli Mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert. This caused outrage amongst Palestinian leaders in Jerusalem, and Mr. Stephanopoulos was met with a hail of

eggs, thrown from the rooftops while he walked through the Old City. Olmert called the cancellation of visits with Palestinian officials a victory in that the Greek President bowed to Israeli pressure.

Visit of the Head of the European Commission, August 2000

If anything, the deteriorating relationship between Europe and Palestinians in regards to Jerusalem cannot be blamed on Palestinian inflexibility. Compensating for European fears of Israeli pressure, the Palestinian leadership in Jerusalem agreed to meet with the Head of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, at the Ecole Biblique, a French theological institute in East Jerusalem, which was considered a more neutral setting. However, even this meeting was delayed until 9 PM, again avoiding any "embarrassing" press coverage. Not only did the Europeans avoid press coverage but also any productive discussion, as Mr. Prodi arrived exhausted and unable to concentrate.

Visits of the European Envoy to the Peace Process

As the EU's special envoy to the Middle East peace process, Miguel Moratinos should remain in contact with all parties on both sides. However, in regards to East Jerusalem, Mr. Moratinos has been noticeably absent: since his appointment in 1996, he has not visited the Orient House. Instead, Moratinos has chosen to meet with Faisal al-Husseini in the more discrete setting of the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem where they can keep a low profile. In West Jerusalem, his visits are conducted officially where no

effort is made in concealing them. Given such conduct, one must question the European envoy's ability to mediate effectively between the two parties.

Europe's policy towards Palestinians in Jerusalem can be characterized as following the line of least resistance. Over the past three years, Europe has slowly regressed in its willingness to meet Palestinian officials in Jerusalem during diplomatic visits and to maintain a balanced position *vis-à-vis* the Israelis and Palestinians. European financial contributions to Jerusalem and its institutions have also been largely symbolic. This lack of support comes in spite of the letter from Shimon Peres to the former Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Holst, dated October 11, 1993, in which the Israeli Foreign Minister stated that support for East Jerusalem institutions should be "encouraged." Financial assistance to East Jerusalem has also dropped off despite the growing needs in the city after Israel imposed the military closure in 1993.

Europe's unwillingness to implement policies that might effectively deter Israel from consolidating its status quo on Jerusalem's final status and to support Palestinian institutions only contributed to the unequal power balance. Such inequality created the setting for Camp David where the Palestinians were forced into a lose-lose position: the Israeli stand on Jerusalem, based on 34 years of creating facts on the ground, was presented to the Palestinian side in a "take it or leave it" manner. As the Israeli ideas only allowed for the creation of distinct Bantustans and did not satisfy the Palestinians' minimal strategic demands for developing East Jerusalem, the Palestinians naturally expressed their reservations. While

the Palestinians did not wholly reject the Israeli ideas, they were subsequently condemned for not accepting the proposal in its entirety.

Europe has erred in interpreting the past flexibility of the Palestinians, particularly in regards to Jerusalem, as a willingness to make concessions on the city; this has become a costly misinterpretation. On paper, Europe continuously calls for the adherence to international law and UN resolutions on Jerusalem; yet in practice international laws are not enforced. Israel thereby is given the leeway to issue inflammatory statements, such as the recent one issued by the Israeli Security Minister Uzi Landau calling for the shutting down of a dozen Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, including the Orient House. The ability of Israel to make such provocative declarations with no recrimination from the international community only encourages the Israeli right wing.

Europe must reconsider its passive policy towards Palestine and Jerusalem in particular. Its failure to play a strong role in the Middle East has contributed to today's destabilized environment. Europe cannot afford to remain locked into a cycle of having to compensate the Jews for its role in their past suffering; instead it must recognize today's requirements and set out to curb injustice where injustice thrives. Not doing so will diminish Europe's stature in Palestine and the entire Middle East. As Faisal al-Husseini would always reiterate, "If the Palestinian secular and moderate leadership loses the flag of Jerusalem and the Palestinian state; if it is unable to fulfill the promises made at Madrid, then other radical nationalist movements will pick up the flag." If this occurs and Europe

cannot curb Israeli violations in the occupied territories then extremism will spread, destabilizing not only the Middle East but also possibly Europe itself. Europe has reached another crossroads in its history with the Middle East and now has the opportunity to right the wrongs of the past.

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