

What's More Important to the EU: Terrorism or Bananas?

Brussels, the capital of Belgium, has been on alert for several days because of fear of serious and imminent Islamist terrorist attacks on various places in the city. Schools and universities, many workplaces, and the subway system for a time have been closed, and parts of the city were sealed off.

The Belgian government is now considering making changes to improve its security against terrorism. It is now aware that the area of Brussels named Molenbeck, with a large Turkish and North African population, was the place where those responsible for the Paris massacres on November 13, 2015 had planned the attacks.

Brussels is also the capital of Europe, since it is the headquarters of the European Union (EU). In the city, those headquarters are separated geographically by a canal from Molenbeck and seemingly dwell in a different political universe. The 28-member EU entity has been less concerned with responding to the terrorists in Molenbek and to the challenge of the Islamic State (ISIS or Daesh) than with the momentous question of making sure that European consumers eat the right kind of banana – or, more strictly, that they do not eat the wrong king of banana.

On May 24, 2014, a 29-year-old French national of Algerian origin killed three people at the Jewish Museum in central Brussels. He had fought with Islamist rebels in Syria and had links to ISIS. On January 7, 2015, the massacres took place in Paris at Charlie Hebdo and at the Jewish supermarket.

These Islamist attacks were supposed to lead the EU, at a minimum, to greater cooperation among the security forces of the EU countries in order to stop further Islamist terrorism in Europe.

The Paris attacks clearly showed the deficiencies in that security cooperation and the insufficient sharing of intelligence data and information. If the EU had, for the most part, open borders, it did not have open information among European countries. The alleged mastermind behind the Paris attacks, who had evaded intelligence gathering, was an accomplice of two jihadists who had been killed by the police in the Belgian town of Verviers, near the German border, on January 15, 2015. Another of the terrorists had a Syrian passport and had entered Greece as a “refugee” in October 2015.

Shamefully, some political figures do not understand the threat, but instead concentrate their fire on Israel. The chairman of the Dutch Socialist Party, Jan Marijnissen, claimed on November 16, 2015 that it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that explains the terrorist attacks and that the conflict is “the growth medium for such an attack.”

Similarly, the Swedish foreign minister, Margot Wallstrom, on Swedish TV linked ISIS with “Palestinian frustration.” She held that the problem is that the Palestinians see no future – either accept a desperate situation or resort to violence.

One need make only four brief comments about these absurd statements. The EU politicians betray the innate obsession with and hostility toward the State of Israel, which had no connection, direct or indirect, with the Islamist massacres.

Their statements ignore the nature of the Islamist ideology of the perpetrators. They do not help, but rather hinder further response against all forms of Islamist terrorism. And they ignore the disturbing fact of continuing Palestinian terrorism that has led to more than 20 Israeli civilians being murdered and many more injured by Palestinian terrorists since October 2015 in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tel Aviv, and Netanya.

The EU is unwilling or hesitant to deal with ISIS since it has been preoccupied with the more momentous appeal of bananas.

The European Commission on November 11, 2015 adopted a notice providing interpretation of the origin of goods from the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967. It provided information, supposedly helpful to member states, businesses, and consumers about the products originating in Israeli settlements "beyond Israel's 1967 borders." The fact that there are no 1967 borders appears to have escaped the notice of the EU, or more likely the EU is inventing them.

The essence of the EU notice is that products – e.g., fresh fruit and vegetables, wine, honey, olive oil, eggs, poultry, and cosmetics – entering the EU and coming from Israeli settlements must not be labeled "Made in Israel" because that would be misleading. Since 2009, the U.K. has had, as have also Denmark and Belgium, voluntary guidelines distinguishing produce coming from Israeli settlements in the West Bank from Palestinian West Bank produce. The EU notice asserts that the indication of origin of the products from the settlements will give European consumers the possibility to make an informed choice on what banana not to buy, an otherwise difficult choice, since all bananas look alike. The choice will no doubt be important for the increasingly large Muslim minorities in Europe, especially in France, the country with the largest number of Muslims in Europe.

It is true that Israel, as defined by the EU, has by the EU-Israel Association Agreement preferential tariff treatment into the EU. It is also true that the bilateral trade amounted to 30 billion euros in 2014. EU imports from Israel were 13 billion euros, and exports to Israel were 17 billion euros.

Moreover, the EU claims that it does not support any form of boycott or sanction against Israel. But the new policy is discriminatory and can be considered supportive of the BDS movement, a movement with anti-Semitic implications. The EU should be helping to stop BDS, not moving toward it with its restrictive and probably illegal trade rules.

Two other comments are relevant. One is that the EU guidelines will be unhelpful in any attempt to bring peace to the region and to negotiate an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. They may also hinder the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and the EU over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

In contrast to the unfriendliness towards Israel, the EU has been more helpful to Palestinians in a number of ways: financial bilateral allocation, which amounts to 620 million euros in 2015; the European Neighborhood Instrument of 309 million euros; the PEGASE program of direct support to the Palestinian Authority of about 160 million euros a year to support the PA recurrent costs; and support for Palestinian refugees through UNRWA of about 80 million euros a year.

It is paradoxical and incongruous that in the same week as the November 11 guidelines, the EU issued a statement of its new funding for Palestinian refugees and vulnerable Palestinian families through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

It will provide an additional 10 million euros for UNRWA schools and services for Palestinian refugees. The EU support in 2015 for UNRWA is 102 million euros. In addition, Austria and Portugal provide 1.5 million euros in financial aid through the PEGASE scheme.

In view of the EU's lack of support for Israel, it is worth pointing out that that the EU is the largest multilateral donor of international assistance to Palestinian refugees since 1971. Between 2007 and 2014, it gave over 1 billion euros in support of UNRWA.

Surely, the EU might be equally generous towards its own citizens. Withdraw the iniquitous guideline notice and instead let the hungry European consumers know that Israeli bananas, whatever the piece of land from which they come, are delicious, very good, and healthy for you.

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