EU blasts Israeli minister: You feed disinformation and mix BDS, terror

The EU's Federica Mogherini penned a sharp-worded letter to Israel's Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, accusing him of making 'unfounded and unacceptable' allegations that the organization supports terror

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The European Union’s foreign minister, Federica Mogherini, sent a personal, sharply worded letter to Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan, asking him to provide proof of his ministry’s “vague and unsubstantiated” allegations that the EU is financing terror and boycott activities against Israel through nonprofit organizations.

In her letter, which was obtained by Haaretz, Mogherini responds to a report issued in May by the Strategic Affairs Ministry titled “The millions given by EU institutions to NGOs with ties to terror and boycotts against Israel.”

In the letter Erdan sent to Mogherini along with the report, he wrote, “An indepth research study conducted by my ministry has revealed that in 2016 the EU funded fourteen European and Palestinian NGOs which openly and clearly promote BDS.” He also charged that, “Several of the BDS-promoting NGOs that receive direct and indirect EU funding are linked to EUdesignated terrorist organizations.” Erdan added that such funding undermines the EU-Israel relationship and “also undermines the chances for peace.”

Subsequently the report was leaked to the Israel Hayom newspaper, which reported it under the headline, “Millions of euros of hate.” On the day the report came out, Erdan tweeted, “The EU continues to finance BDS organizations, some of which are linked to terror organizations, with tens of millions of shekels a year.”

In her letter, which was sent to Erdan on July 5, Mogherini writes, “Allegations of the EU supporting incitement or terror are unfounded and unacceptable. The title of the report itself is also inopportune and misleading; it mixes terrorism with the boycott issue and it creates unacceptable confusion in the public eye regarding these two distinct phenomena.”

She added that the EU strongly objects “to any suggestion of EU involvement in supporting terror or terrorism,” and that “vague and unsubstantiated accusations serve only to contribute to disinformation campaigns.”

Mogherini also claims that the report in question contained errors. “For example, of the 13 organizations listed in the report, 6 do not receive EU funding for activities in Palestine and none of them receives EU funds for BDS activity,” she wrote. She also noted, “In addition, as reported widely by the Israeli press in recent weeks, a number of the organizations referred to in the report also receive funding from other international donors including the United States.”

With regard to the alleged support for the BDS movement, Mogherini writes to Erdan, “The European Union has not changed its position regarding the so-called ‘Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions’ (‘BDS’) movement. While it upholds its policy of clearly distinguishing between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied by it since 1967, the EU rejects any attempts to isolate Israel and does not support calls for boycott. The EU does not fund actions that are related to boycott activities. However, simply because an organization or individual is related to the BDS movement does not mean that this entity is involved in incitement to commit illegal acts, nor that it renders itself ineligible for EU funding.

“The EU stands firm in protecting the freedom of expression and freedom of association in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Freedom of expression is also applicable to information or ideas, ‘that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.’ Any action that has the effect of closing the space in which civil society organizations operate by unduly restricting freedom of association should be avoided.”

With regard to the claims of support for terrorism, Mogherini writes, “The EU has very strict rules to screen and vet the beneficiaries of EU funds. We take any allegation of misuse of EU funds very seriously and are committed to investigate all those presented with substantive evidence. We are confident that EU funding has not been used to support boycott of Israel or BDS activities and certainly not to finance terrorism.”

At the end of the letter, Mogherini invites Erdan to Brussels to present proof of his allegations. “You and your officials are welcome to come to Brussels at any point and present evidence you may have to substantiate these allegations,” she writes. “In the meantime, we invite your government to pursue a productive dialogue on civil society issues with us, as foreseen by the EU-Israel Action Plan, in a spirit of open and transparent cooporation rather than through unsubstantiated material being publicized without prior dialogue and engagement.”

In the report issued by the Strategic Affairs Ministry, it was claimed that in 2016 the EU had transferred more than 5 million euros (nearly $5.9 million) to organizations “that promote delegitimization and boycotts against Israel.” Though the report was described as “in-depth,” most of its claims were based on a small number of cases from open sources.

Haaretz examined some of the claims the report made and found that the interpretation of some of the incidents described deviated from the information they were based on. For example, a boycott of the settlements alone is occasionally interpreted as support for BDS, even though the organizations in question don’t necessarily support, or even do specifically oppose, applying the movement’s principles to Israel proper. This interpretation dovetails with the way the Israeli government in recent years has been trying to blur the distinction between the two.

However, for the EU the distinction is significant. While the EU doesn’t directly fund activities that promote a boycott of the State of Israel – not including the settlements – it sees the ideological support of the movement as legitimate freedom of political expression. The EU can monitor the use of its funding, since it is generally allocated in advance for specific activities and there is ongoing supervision.

In other cases, the ministry’s report defines as “support for terror” specific instances in which Hamas or Popular Front operatives took part in other activities that were supported by NGOs that got EU funding. On that basis Israel is accusing the EU of indirectly funding terror. A reading of the report also shows that a large number of the allegations are reminiscent of claims made by right-wing organizations, primarily NGO Monitor.

Erdan responded to this report by stating: “It’s sad that the European Union’s foreign minister has once again chosen to hide her head in the sand and ignore the clear evidence that the BDS organizations which receive funding from it, either directly or indirectly, are linked to or cooperate with terrorist organizations like Hamas and the Popular Front. Mogherini admits that most of the funded organizations which appear in my ministry’s report indeed promote boycotts of Israel, yet she employs the ridiculous excuse that the money is given to the boycott organizations but used for other purposes, and not for their activities aimed at boycotting Israel.

“Regrettably, excuses like these also represent the European Union’s policy on other issues, such as its attitude toward Iran and Palestinian terror,” he continued. “On these issues, too, the EU has chosen to act like an ostrich and behave as if it were blind to the hatred, incitement and boycotts.”

The EU commented for this news report by saying, “We usually do not comment on leaked correspondence with our partner countries, but on the question of allegations contained in the recent report published by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs government ministry, our headquarters thoroughly examined the report and came to the conclusion that allegations presented in the report were unfounded.

“The EU has strict rules to screen and vet the beneficiaries of EU funds. We are therefore confident that EU funds have not been used to finance terrorism.”

Our fight against terrorism has never been stronger and we have always maintained clear positions on terrorist organisations. We are also confident that our funds have not been used to support boycott of Israel, in particular not BDS activities," the comment read.

"The EU rejects any attempt to isolate Israel and does not support calls for a boycott. At the same time, the EU stands firm in protecting freedom of expression and freedom of association in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

As always, the EU investigates any serious allegations made related to such activities and funding. Should there be any evidence to substantiate such claims Israeli authorities will always be welcome to present this to us as part of an open and transparent dialogue."