



Lobbying in EU Foreign Policy-making: The case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

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***Lobbying in EU Foreign Policy-making:
The case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict***
by **Benedetta Voltolini**
(London: Routledge, 2015), 240 pages

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For many years, B'Tselem, Breaking the Silence, Adalah, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, and similar groups have enjoyed major influence in the European Union and its member states. This network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is central in shaping European perceptions of Israel and of the conflict. The power of these political advocacy organizations has no parallel in any other conflict zone or comparable context.

At least some of this power is derived from the ability of the EU and these NGOs to keep their connections out of the public eye—protocols of their meetings are top secret, as are documents related to the generous funding they receive. While the EU has extensive transparency requirements for lobbying on internal issues, the realm of foreign policy is excluded. Now, Benedetta Voltolini, an academic at the prestigious French research institute Centre d'études européennes de Sciences Po, has placed the issues on the academic table.

Voltolini's book poses important questions about the role of non-state actors (NSAs) in EU policy-making on the conflict. Providing the answers, however, is more difficult. In reviewing the role of social interactions and relationships in political influence networks (p. 29), and on how these relationships are reflected in lobbying on foreign policy issues, she gets an "A." The secrecy surrounding the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) prevents definitive research. As a result, attempts to answer the core question of whether "NSAs have an impact on EU foreign policy" (p. 2) in general, and in the Israeli–Palestinian arena in particular, fall short.

The substance of the book rests on quotes from 109 anonymous interviews with NGO and EU officials, including some members of the European Parliament (MEPs), conducted mainly in Brussels, London, and Paris; no interviews were conducted in Israel, which is a major deficiency. Furthermore, Voltolini presents the claims of the interviewees without cross-checking for inconsistencies. The need to unspin their narratives is compounded by their anonymity, although readers familiar with the issues will recognize the views and biases of a few

longtime EU officials, as well as the handful of MEPs who collaborate closely with like-minded ideological NGOs.

The core of the analysis consists of three case studies—the 2010 battle over “differentiation” (a term invented by EU-allied political NGOs) and “occupied territories” with respect to Israeli exports under the EU–Israeli Association Agreement; EU consideration of the 2009 UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (also known as the “Goldstone Report”); and the confrontation over the EU–Israel agreement on pharmaceuticals. In the first and third cases, businesses with wide agendas sought to offset the influence of narrowly focused pro-Palestinian NGOs and their EU allies, which use trade regulations to pressure Israel. The Goldstone case study is presented as a battle for support among MEPs between “human rights NGOs” led by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), and on the other side, the European Jewish Congress (EJC) and the European Friends of Israel (EFI).

Through her case studies, the author attempts to fit political NGOs into the same framework as the EJC and private businesses—technically all are non-state actors that lobby the EU, but the parallel ends there. In addition, without access to detailed documentation, and relying on anonymous interviews, the goal of uncovering NGO involvement in EU policy-making on the conflict is far too ambitious.

Furthermore, the descriptions of the NGOs are overly simplistic. On the two trade-related conflicts, Voltolini portrays the Mattin Group, a Palestinian NGO well connected in Brussels, as a source of “technical expertise” and a consensual “dialogue-builder” (Chapters 4 and 6). Mattin’s allies used such terms in interviews, while omitting the less “consensual” dimensions, such as the fact that “senior partner” Charles Shames is also a cofounder of the Palestinian Al-Haq organization, which leads campaigns accusing Israel of “war crimes.”

On the other side, Voltolini argues that companies that work with Israeli counterparts, such as Britta (the German distributor for Soda Stream, targeted for operating a factory in Ma’ale Adumim), as well as the EFI and EJC, failed because of their confrontational tactics (p. 19). Perhaps Mattin’s “dialogue-building” explains its success, but Voltolini conspicuously excludes analysis of the close relationships between European elites and NGOs promoting the Palestinian narrative. Without testing the possibility that Mattin and other pro-Palestinian NGOs have influence because the EU and EP are predisposed to their narrative, the analysis is not convincing.

Like the wider discord between Israel and the EU, the case studies revolve around interpretations of international law and human rights. In their interviews, EU officials emphasize the normative and value-based foundations of their foreign policy, and pro-Palestinian NGOs such as the Mattin Group; France’s parallel to Amnesty International, the Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme (FIDH)

[International Federation for Human Rights]; and EMHRN display their skill at employing claims of Israeli violations of these norms, exempting the Palestinians by referring to “the occupation.” Instead of questioning these efforts, Voltolini takes their statements at face value, attributing these “shared values” to the advocacy NGOs, and thus, in her assessment, gaining EU allies among MEPs and officials. Different analyses of international law, as presented by leading jurists, are conspicuously missing, both from the consideration of EU officials and from this book.

Other issues missing from Voltolini’s research include reference to the tens of millions of euros that the EU and member states allocate annually to their favorite Israeli and Palestinian NGOs—the same ones that lobby, “inform,” and in many cases write the texts of the policy statements issued by EU officials. This NGO funding, which has no parallel in any other area of EU foreign policy, allows forty privileged NGOs to maintain offices in Brussels (note 24, p. 93) while lobbying the EU to confront the elected Israeli government. The fact that the EU is paying NGOs in order to be lobbied has recently been criticized by MEPs, but is not mentioned in this book.

In describing the three cases, Voltolini considers the NGOs at the center as the source of knowledge and expertise. Beyond Mattin, Voltolini relies heavily on the EMHRN in providing the context of the Goldstone case study, without noting that EMHRN is a network of hardcore political NGOs sharing an anti-Israel agenda. In addition, EMHRN, FIDH, B’Tselem, Adalah, and many other advocacy NGOs that lobby the EU are funded by, and work closely with, the EU and its member states, meaning that the term “non-state actor” is artificial.

The impact of NGO “soft power” in the EU is most strongly reflected in the case study on the Goldstone Report. Citing interviewees 4 and 91 (both anonymous NGO officials), Voltolini asserts that “Operation Cast Lead [the IDF response to lethal rocket attacks from Gaza] was the moment when the penny dropped and the EU (and the majority of its member states) slowly began to change their attitude towards the Israeli government ... ” (p. 122). This is an example of interviewee spin. In fact, many years prior to these events, the human rights NGO network launched a campaign promoting the “complete international isolation” of Israel. The Goldstone Report, which was largely based on NGO allegations, marked another step in this campaign, and NGOs successfully sold their version to European officials under the guise of being “experts.” But then Goldstone himself denounced the report and the unsubstantiated allegations on which it was based, and the campaign faltered. (Voltolini only references Goldstone’s retraction in an out-of-context footnote on p. 175.)

Although not part of her research objective, in a number of observations, Voltolini demonstrates how NGO lobbying reinforces friction between the EU and Israel. For example, an official (interviewee 53) presumably working for the EEAS

boasted that “she worked in close cooperation with EMHRN,” and “asked for information and analysis concerning the Goldstone Report, offering also an insider perspective to the EMHRN” (p. 132–33). Reliance on the polemicists and ideologues in the EMHRN for “information and analysis” reflects their influence. Indeed, Voltolini herself accepts EMHRN and other advocacy NGOs as “expert sources” (p. 58) on international law, human rights, Gaza, and other core issues.

In a wider sense, the strategies of using expertise and “information politics” as a means for “dialogue building” (p. 122), which is attributed to pro-Palestinian NGOs, contrasted with what is depicted as the confrontational tactics of the pro-Israel side, is subjective and unreliable. The groups that Voltolini and EU officials like, such as FIDH and EMHRN, are lauded for their “professionalism” (p. 89), while groups outside this charmed circle, such as the European Jewish Congress, are faulted for being antagonistic.

I witnessed NGO “dialogue” in June 2010, when I participated in a meeting of the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights. The EMHRN entourage marched in, greeted warmly by the MEPs with whom they were friendly, and took their regular seats. The group included heads of two Israeli NGOs funded by the EU—Mossawa and the Public Committee against Torture in Israel—and an official from FIDH. In the interaction between MEPs and the heads of highly politicized NGOs, the social contact that Voltolini cites as central to lobbying (p. 136) was clearly on display.

It is in the analysis of the use of social networks in binding EU officials and MEPs with lobbyists from EMHRN, B’Tselem, and the other groups that Voltolini makes a significant contribution, although not in the way she intended. Those who document and analyze political advocacy NGOs and European foreign policy in general, and with regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular, will be able to learn from this contribution, as well as from its shortcomings.