

# Israel's Economic Relations with the US: "Are you willing to cut commercial ties with Europe?"

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*In an openly-confrontational appearance with leading American supporters of Israel in Washington this weekend, Israel's economics minister, Naftali Bennett, dismissed global threats of boycott criticisms of Israel, referring to "a little thing called the rest of the world." He said that if Europe cuts Israel off, Israeli products might stop working and Europeans will have heart attacks.*

The warning about heart attacks came in a defiant response to a concerned question from Haim Saban, a huge supporter of Israel who has funded the Clintons [Video below, Minutes 59 and 1:01].

Saban: "Are you willing to cut commercial ties with Europe, because this is what's going to happen if you have your way in annexing Area C [most of the occupied West Bank]. Can you afford disconnecting from Europe?"

Bennett, the leader of the rightwing Jewish Home Party, who is thought to have a real chance to become Israel's next Prime Minister, said that he does not envision annexing Area C tomorrow.

Things take time. I'm not suggesting overnight... We have to change the direction. It's already working in Israel, now we have only a little thing called the rest of the world. But you have to start somewhere.

Regarding cutting commerce? Look, if today you pressed the button, and you stopped using Israeli products, you wouldn't wake up in the morning because the chip in your cell phone doesn't work because it's made in Israel. You wouldn't get to work because you don't have [Waze](#). You might have a heart attack because the stent in your heart doesn't work. The vegetables you eat would be lousy because you're not getting Netafim [\[irrigation system\]](#). Your account would be hacked and I could go on and on. Israel needs to be indispensable, and it is. And what we're good at, we're not good at selling products. We export innovation.

It wasn't clear just what Bennett meant by these threats, but he implied that Israeli-made stents and chips that are now working would cease to work the morning after "you pressed the button" of boycott. Bennett dismissed the threat of European boycotts. "We've had boycotts since our inception... [When he was a boy] we didn't have Pepsi in Israel... If anyone boycott us, they're anti-semitic."

Bennett spoke at the Saban [Forum's annual conference on the US and Israel](#). The

conference is part of the special relationship between Israel and the U.S.; it is funded by Saban, an ardent Zionist and Democratic Party giver [who lately palled around with Republican warchest Sheldon Adelson](#), musing about buying the New York Times together to support Israel.

Bennett has opposed the creation of a Palestinian state and was often harshly treated in the appearance. Martin Indyk, a longtime Israel supporter, opened the talk by saying he was going to “kick Naftali’s ass,” audience members expressed open discomfort with Bennett’s defiance of the world, and another longtime Israel supporter, Dennis Ross, said Bennett was not talking to Palestinians. While Brookings Institution fellow Khaled Elgindy said that Bennett was trampling Palestinian rights.

What in the last 100 years of this conflict and the history of the conflict would suggest to you or lead you to believe that Palestinians would accept the money, the roads, establishing their own curricula [that you are offering them]... as opposed to something more fundamental such as their rights? You don’t want Palestinians as citizens of Israel. There’s only one other way for Palestinians to have the right to self determination, and that is through a state of their own... Can you make the case... for why the Palestinians are the only group of humans in the world that do not have the right to self-determination?

Bennett responded that the situation was tragic, but that Palestinians deny the existence of a Jewish state, thereby threatening his children’s survival- and said that there was enough land on the highway medians from Atlanta to Columbus GA to give Palestinians a state 17 times over, but not enough in the West Bank for them to have a state.

Saban thanked Bennett for serving in an elite unit of the Israeli army, but he also said, “You and I live in different bubbles and in different realities.”

Bennett is having a rough trip in the United States. He was sharply questioned by Joe Scarborough this morning on Morning Joe, and the [Israeli press is highlighting](#) his differences with former peace processor Martin Indyk.

If you watch Bennett’s performance at the Saban Forum, he seems to swagger even as the audience is dead silent; and he seems not to notice the audience’s discomfort. For instance, speaking of his qualifications to be prime minister of Israel, Bennett emphasized contempt for the world’s opinion as a prerequisite for the office.

I think in our very difficult situation there is one quality that is almost more important than the rest. And that is that internal spine. I’d buy even less on intelligence.... The immense pressures- like Martin is presenting, the whole world is going to be against us... When you look at Israel’s history, ultimately, the big distinction was the people having that inner spine.

He also defended the highly-controversial bill to define Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. This bill has been widely opposed by American supporters of Israel. As Bennett spoke in favor of the bill, you could hear a pin drop.

He said that basic laws giving rights to all citizens of Israel were passed in the dead of night during the Shamir government (86-92) and with these laws “you only have the human-rights piece and not the Jewish piece.” Under those laws, Bennett said, Palestinians could sue to

be included on the free Birthright trips to Israel, and they might win the case; and Palestinians could demand to exercise the right of return to their homes, as Jews exercise the law of return to move to Israel.

He went on to deride former Supreme Court justice Aharon Barak, a hero of liberal Zionists, for knocking down a host of laws that denied Palestinian rights.

Bennett's appearance will surely catalyze the growing distance between American supporters of Israel and the rightwing political establishment of the state. Even Haim Saban is uncomfortable with Bennett, along with Establishmentarians Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk. If as seems likely the Israeli government continues to lurch rightward, we're going to see some real tumult inside the special relationship, leaving room for politicians to be openly critical of Israel. Maybe almost as critical as the members of the Israel lobby who spoke up at the Saban Forum.

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