

UN List of Firms Aiding Israel's Settlements Was Dead on Arrival

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After lengthy delays, the United Nations finally published a database last week of businesses that have been profiting from Israel's illegal settlement activity in the West Bank.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, announced that 112 major companies had been identified as operating in Israeli settlements in ways that violate human rights.

Aside from major Israeli banks, transport services, cafes, supermarkets, and energy, building and telecoms firms, prominent international businesses include Airbnb, [booking.com](#), Motorola, Trip Advisor, JCB, Expedia and General Mills.

Human Rights Watch, a global watchdog, noted in response to the list's publication that the settlements violate the Fourth Geneva Convention. It argued that the firms' activities mean they have aided "in the commission of war crimes".

The companies' presence in the settlements has helped to blur the distinction between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. That in turn has normalised the erosion of international law and subverted a long-held international consensus on establishing a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Work on compiling the database began four years ago. But both Israel and the United States put strong pressure on the UN in the hope of preventing the list from ever seeing the light of day.

The UN body's belated assertiveness looks suspiciously like a rebuke to the Trump administration for releasing this month its Middle East "peace" plan. It green-lights Israel's annexation of the settlements and the most fertile and water-rich areas of the West Bank.

In response to the database, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to intensify his country's interference in US politics. He noted that his officials had already "promoted laws in most US states, which determine that strong action is to be taken against whoever tries to boycott Israel."

He was backed by all Israel's main Jewish parties. Amir Peretz, leader of the centre-left Labour party, vowed to "work in every forum to repeal this decision". And Yair Lapid, a leader of Blue and White, the main rival to Netanyahu, called Bachelet the "commissioner for terrorists' rights".

Meanwhile, Mike Pompeo, the US secretary of state, accused the UN of “unrelenting anti-Israel bias” and of aiding the international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.

In fact, the UN is not taking any meaningful action against the 112 companies, nor is it encouraging others to do so. The list is intended as a shaming tool – highlighting that these firms have condoned, through their commercial activities, Israel’s land and resource theft from Palestinians.

The UN has even taken an extremely narrow view of what constitutes involvement with the settlements. For example, it excluded organisations like FIFA, the international football association, whose Israeli subsidiary includes six settlement teams.

This week it also emerged that Amazon was aiding the settlements, though it is not named on the list. The online retail giant delivers for free to addresses in West Bank settlements, while imposing large shipping charges on Palestinians living nearby.

One of the identified companies, Airbnb, announced in late 2018 that it would remove from its accommodation bookings website all settlement properties – presumably to avoid being publicly embarrassed.

But a short time later Airbnb backed down. It is hard to imagine the decision was taken on strictly commercial grounds: the firm has only 200 settlement properties on its site.

A more realistic conclusion is that Airbnb feared the backlash from Washington and was intimidated by a barrage of accusations from pro-Israel groups that its new policy was anti-semitic.

In fact, the UN’s timing could not be more tragic. The list looks more like the last gasp of those who – through their negligence over nearly three decades – have enabled the two-state solution to wither to nothing.

Trump’s so-called peace plan could afford to be so one-sided only because western powers had already allowed Israel to void any hope of Palestinian statehood through decades of unrelenting settlement expansion. Today, nearly 700,000 Israeli Jews are housed on occupied Palestinian territory.

On Monday European Union foreign ministers met to respond to the plan, but predictably they agreed to postpone a decision until after Israel’s election on March 2. Tepid opposition is probably the best that can ultimately be expected.

The actions of several European states continue to speak much louder than any words.

Last Friday, Germany followed the Czech Republic in filing a petition to the International Criminal Court at The Hague siding with Israel as the court deliberates whether to prosecute Israeli officials for war crimes, including over the establishment of settlements.

Germany does not appear to deny that the settlements are war crimes. Instead, it hopes to block the case on dubious technical grounds: that despite Palestine signing up to the Rome Statute, which established the Hague court, it is not yet a fully fledged state.

So far Austria, Hungary, Australia and Brazil appear to be following suit.

But if Palestine lacks the proper attributes of statehood, it is because the US and Europe, including Germany, have consistently broken promises to the Palestinians.

They not only refused to intervene to save the two-state solution, but rewarded Israel with trade deals and diplomatic and financial incentives, even as Israel eroded the institutional and territorial integrity necessary for Palestinian self-rule.

Germany's stance, like that of the rest of Europe, is hypocritical. They have claimed opposition to Israel's endless settlement expansion, and now to Trump's plan, but their actions have paved the way to the annexation of the West Bank the plan condones.

Back in November the European Court of Justice finally ruled that products made in West Bank settlements – using illegally seized Palestinian resources on illegally seized Palestinian land – should not be labelled deceptively as “Made in Israel”.

And yet European countries are still postponing implementation of the decision. Instead, some of them are legislating against their citizens' right to express support for a settlement boycott.

Similarly, Europe and North America continue to afford the Jewish National Fund, an entity that finances settlement-building, “charitable status”, giving it tax breaks as it raises funds inside their jurisdictions.

The Israeli media is full of stories of how the JNF actively assists extremist settler groups in evicting Palestinians from homes in East Jerusalem. But Britain and other states are blocking legal efforts to challenge the JNF's special status.

Soon, it seems, Europe will no longer have to worry about its hypocrisy being so visible. Once the settlements have been annexed, as the Trump administration intends, the EU can set aside its ineffectual agonising and treat the settlements as irrevocably Israeli – just as it has done in practice with the Israeli “neighbourhoods” of occupied East Jerusalem.

Then, the UN's list of shame can join decades' worth of condemnatory resolutions that have been quietly gathering dust.

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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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