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DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

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Washington Watch

## Thank You, Ireland

By Dr James J Zogby

On Wednesday morning, I watched an amazing debate unfolding in the Irish Seanad (Senate), as members spoke for and against a bill to prohibit the importation of Israeli goods produced in settlements in occupied Palestinian lands. The legislation in question is the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territory) Bill 2018, which would "make it an offense for a person to import or sell goods or services originating in occupied territory or to extract resources from an occupied territory".

The bill had been introduced by independent Senator Frances Black and a group of co-sponsors earlier in the year. At the request of the Irish government, the sponsors agreed to delay the debate and vote until this month. The delay proved fortuitous in that it allowed supporters to mobilize broad public support for the effort.

In the months leading up to the Senate debate, Black led a delegation to the Occupied Palestinian lands. On her return she crisscrossed the country holding town hall meetings in Dublin, Cork, and Galway. The bill's supporters also hosted Palestinian farmers from the West Bank who related to Irish audiences the horrors of the occupation.

Several town and county councils passed resolutions in support of the boycott initiative. As Irish public support grew, the main opposition party, Fianna Fail, joined Sinn Fein, the Social Democrats, and the Green Party as endorsers of the bill. By the time the legislation came to the floor, its passage was assured. The vote was 25 in favor, with 20 opposed.

As delighted as I was with the outcome, it was the debate, itself, that was so impressive. It was, in a word, lopsided. Not a single voice was raised in support of Israel's policies vis a vis the Palestinians. Even those who voted against the bill denounced Israeli settlements, the US' unilateral move to open an embassy in Jerusalem, and more than one member compared the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories to South Africa's notorious "Apartheid regime."

Despite the government's opposition, they could only muster half-hearted arguments of concern and caution. Even the leading opponent, Foreign Minister Simon Covney acknowledged that he could "emotionally connect" with the bill and recognized the "deep injustice" endured by the Palestinians. He, and others from his party, made clear that their government's policy recognized that settlements were illegal and that Palestinians had rights that were denied to them by the occupation and the expansion of settlements. Their concerns were with Ireland taking a step ahead of the European Union and the possible repercussions that might follow.

**Illegal**

Senator Black's response was both forceful and eloquent. Speaking of the impact of settlements on Palestinian life and lamenting the hollow condemnation of Israeli practices by the EU, she said:

"Though these settlements are repeatedly condemned as illegal by the European Union, the United Nations, and the Irish government, they continue to extract valuable natural resources and agricultural produce. These goods are exported and sold on shelves around the world, including in Ireland...There is a clear hypocrisy here - how can we condemn the settlements as 'unambiguously illegal', as theft of land and resources, but happily buy the proceeds of this crime.

"I saw the impact of settlement expansion when I visited the West Bank this year: the restrictions on movement, the shrinking space for housing and health care, the lack of electricity. I witnessed the crushing indignity of a Palestinian community cut off from their water supply so that it could be diverted to an Israeli chicken farm. That commercial settlement, built on stolen land beyond internationally recognized borders, is a war crime. Is the moral response to condemn this illegality, but then ask 'how much for the eggs?' Ultimately, trade in settlement goods sustains injustice. We can criticize all we want, but years of empty rhetoric simply have not worked. As long as we buy their produce and they stay profitable, nothing will change."

Black and her colleagues also rebutted the charge that they were calling for a boycott of Israel, making it clear that their bill targeted only settlement goods. And in response to the charge that the legislation would put Ireland at odds with the EU, the Irish Senators presented expert legal opinion to the contrary. They also reminded the government that when similar arguments were made cautioning against banning products from South Africa, "Ireland demonstrated leadership" and the rest of Europe eventually followed.

The debate was remarkable and the final vote was historic. At the same time, the reactions from Israel and its supporters were predictable and hysterical. True to form, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is currently rushing through the Knesset a bill that would formally legislate Jewish-only communities, played the victim hypocritical condemning the Irish legislation as "violating free trade and justice."

Israel's foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman said he would not speak to Ireland's Ambassador saying, "we will not engage with Israel's oppressors. Israel should close immediately its embassy in Dublin." And some American supporters warned that the Irish effort would run afoul of proposed US legislation that calls on the US to boycott any businesses that support boycotts of Israeli settlement products.

*NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute*

## Trump portrayal of NATO carries risks

Donald Trump's portrayal of NATO as an alliance in crisis has raised concern that the US president's nagging criticism might erode US public support and risk America's commitment to collective defense, diplomats said. Allies emerged confused and shaken from a two-day NATO summit in which Trump harangued them over perceived under-spending on defence, accused Germany of being a prisoner to Russian energy and prompted an emergency meeting of leaders trying to contain the fallout from the unexpected tirade at one session.

NATO diplomats complained that the drama around Trump's forthright comments had overshadowed big decisions that the allies took in areas from defense spending to new weapons and strategies to address Russia's efforts to destabilize the West through cyber and covert attacks. "There was a gap between the Trumpian-generated idea that there is some kind of crisis and the reality that this was one of the most substantial summits for years," one senior NATO diplomatic source told Reuters.

Having questioned the value of NATO in tweets throughout the summit, Trump later told reporters that the 29-member military alliance "was not doing what they were supposed to be doing" until he came to Brussels and that he was "extremely unhappy" until his intervention. Then he claimed "total credit" for increases in defense spending, although they were in fact agreed in 2014, and warned that "NATO is helping Europe more than it is helping us," in language that did not make a public case for unity.

However, the summit also agreed on a new training mission for Iraq, an invitation for Balkan state Macedonia to join NATO and more funding for troops in Afghanistan. While Trump did let the 79-point summit declaration go through, his assertion that "I've taken over a lot of bad hands and I am fixing them," at the end of the summit left the impression there were serious problems at NATO, diplomats said. NATO may now need its friends in the US Congress and in the Republican and Democratic parties to speak out more to prevent permanent damage to alliance's image in the United States, they said.

The US Senate overwhelmingly approved a motion in support of NATO on the eve of this week's summit, and former US Secretary of State John Kerry called for more. "Enough," the Democrat said of Trump's style at the summit. "This isn't good for the United States and there are people across the aisle - as the Senate vote yesterday clearly showed - who know it and need to say it," Kerry said on Twitter.

**Perception, reality**

The summit decisions, agreed by all 29 allied governments, won hardly any sustained public attention and the underlying unity was undercut by Trump's claims he had won new pledges in defense spending, forcing the French and Italian leaders into denials that dominated post-summit news conferences. He reiterated that claim in Britain on Friday. "The concern is that this is not just noise to disregard, because perception is reality and this president may be with us for another six years," the senior source said.

NATO, founded in 1949 to contain a military threat from the Soviet Union, relies on the United States' military superiority to face down a host of threats on Europe's borders, including a resurgent, nuclear-armed Russia and militant attacks. A commitment to defend each other is the bedrock of the alliance and any suggestion that the United States would not come to Europe's aid because, as Trump has suggested, they owe "massive" sums, could be a blow to its deterrence.

"President Trump has not taken damaging actions against NATO, but his words are damaging," said Adam Thomson, a former British ambassador to NATO and now director of the European Leadership Network think-tank in London. Having lambasted NATO for failing to reach a target of 2 percent of national income on defense, Trump told fellow leaders in Brussels he would prefer a goal of 4 percent, similar to US levels, and then claimed victory for forcing countries to move. He also said he expected an easier meeting with Russian President Vladimir tomorrrow in Helsinki in remarks that contrast with the West's accusations that Moscow is seeking to undermine European democracies.

## Indictment puts pressure on Trump at Putin summit

If US President Donald Trump was inclined to be tentative when raising election meddling with Russian President Vladimir Putin tomorrow, the indictment of 12 Russian intelligence officers with hacking in 2016 has made that approach a much harder sell. A federal grand jury on Friday alleged that officers of Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, secretly monitored computers and stole data from the campaign of Trump's former rival, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

The charges put an even greater spotlight on Trump's treatment of Putin, who has denied making efforts to intervene in the US election that Trump, a Republican, unexpectedly won. Trump has called the investigation into whether his campaign colluded with Moscow a "witch hunt" and has shown an eagerness to get along with his Russian counterpart, repeatedly referring to the former KGB leader's denials of such behavior.

"Trump has maybe a little less room to maneuver if he wants to downplay the issue or pretend that it's not real," said Jeffrey Mankoff, a Russia expert at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. Trump has said he plans to raise the issue. When asked at a news conference in Britain on Friday whether he would tell Putin to stay out of US elections, Trump said "yes". But the president indicated he did not expect much progress on the issue. "I will absolutely bring that up," Trump told reporters. "I don't think you'll have any 'Gee, I did it. I did it. You got me.'"

Critics said they were skeptical Trump would press the issue at all, despite the indictments. "Even with today's news, we can expect Trump to raise Putin's attack on our democracy in a passing, perfunctory way before again taking - or at least claiming to take - Putin's denials at face value," said Ned Price, a former national security council spokesman for President Barack Obama.

Democratic lawmakers urged Trump to cancel the get-together with Putin. The president is spending the weekend at his golf property in Scotland before leaving on Sunday for Helsinki, where the meeting is scheduled to take place. The White House said the release of the charges would not affect the summit. "The announcement has no impact on Monday's meeting," said Garrett Marquis, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council.

But the meeting, and the extent of Trump's emphasis on election meddling, could highlight a divide between him and his own advisers, not to mention other Republicans, about the seriousness of Russia's activities. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and national security adviser John Bolton, at least prior to joining the White House, have both been more critical of Moscow than the president they serve.

And the administration's broader policy toward Russia is harsher than the rhetoric employed by Trump, who recently suggested that Moscow be readmitted to what is now the Group of Seven, since Russia was kicked out of the bloc of industrialized countries for annexing Crimea from Ukraine. "The administration has a pretty good policy towards Russia, just the president doesn't agree with it," said Michael McFaul, a former US ambassador to Russia under Obama. "I can't remember a foreign policy debate that had this kind of disconnect between the president and literally every other person in his administration." — Reuters

## Stuck between EU and US: UK's Brexit dilemma

US President Donald Trump's unique brand of disruptive diplomacy appears to have shattered the UK government's claim that Britain can have it all when it comes to trade once it exits the European Union. Prime Minister Theresa May probably expected a more helpful stance as she welcomed Trump to Britain this week, given that the populist leader has been outspoken in his support for Brexit. Instead, Trump scorched her policy towards the EU divorce in an interview with The Sun newspaper that shocked Britain's political establishment.

May had ignored his own advice on how best to confront Brussels, he said, while praising her departed foreign secretary. The colorful Boris Johnson quit rather than take part in turning Britain into a "colony", after May's blueprint for Brexit was signed off by her cabinet. Johnson, one of the most prominent Brexit campaigners ahead of Britain's June 2016 referendum, had said the country could "have our cake and eat it" by retaining close ties to the EU while also forging ahead with new trade deals with the rest of the world, including the United States.

May's blueprint, fleshed out in a government white paper this week, argued that it was possible through a deal with the EU that would preclude the return of a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK. Trump, however, torpedoed such thinking in his interview. He said May's plans to bind Britain's economy closely to its European partners after Brexit would "probably kill" its hopes of a US trade deal.

**Hyperbole**

Both leaders tried to brush aside Trump's incendiary language at a news conference Friday, insisting they were determined to pursue a post-Brexit pact. May stressed London could stay on friendly trade terms with both Brussels and Washington. "It's not either or," she said at the press conference. The allure of a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Washington has propped up much rhetoric by Brexiteers, and kept May determined to go ahead with Trump's visit despite opposition from thousands of protestors who denounced the trip.

That was why the government's white paper was "veiled by strategic ambiguity on trade in goods", said Hosuk Lee-Makiyama, director of the European Centre for International Political Economy in Brussels. "The problem is that FTAs don't actually go that far," he added. "There is a great misconception in the Brexit debate about what an FTA can do. Many arguments are hyperbole or even outright false."

The pound slid 0.6 percent against the dollar on Trump's interview as the rhetoric of Brexit freedom ran into the reality of Britain's economic relationships. "The UK can't afford to alienate either the US or the EU, its two largest foreign trade partners, and will not be able to choose an 'either-or' solution," commented Fiona Cincotta, senior market analyst at City Index in London. But even if Britain can extricate itself from the dense web of regulations and tariffs resulting from its decades of EU membership, a US-UK trade deal would be easier said than done.

Trump has begun a trade war already with the EU, China and others. There is nothing to suggest the hard-nosed dealmaker would go easier on Britain, and he may press hard for lower tariffs and easier access for US industry to Europe's second-biggest economy. Chlorinated US chicken has already become totemic of future rows as campaigners line up against the prospect of Britain relaxing its food-safety standards under any US deal. Defenders of Britain's cherished National Health Service have mobilized against what they see as a US plot to dismantle the NHS by opening it up to competition from US healthcare providers, and to allow higher prices for US drugs.

**Backlash**

Free-trade deals that threaten to undermine institutions like the NHS have drawn mass protests elsewhere. A long-negotiated EU-Canada trade pact is staring at political defeat in Europe. A separate US-EU agreement is on ice. So May faces an unpalatable choice. The United States may be Britain's single biggest national trading partner, but the EU as a whole is far bigger. "At first glance, Trump's disruptive approach may make some sense from a narrow 'America first' perspective. In any bilateral negotiation with any other country in the world, the US would be the stronger party," Berenberg Economics said in a report. — Reuters