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Why Europe Hates Israel  
By Bret Stephens

BRUSSELS -- Yesterday, a Belgian court heard arguments from lawyers representing 23 Palestinians, survivors of the 1982 Sabra and Chatilla massacres near Beirut, that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon should be prosecuted in Belgium for crimes against humanity. Though Mr. Sharon almost certainly will never sit in a Belgian jail, the trial could hardly be freighted with more significance.

More than a half-century after the Holocaust, a Europe awakened to the importance of human rights is looking to sanction the leader of the world's only Jewish state for a crime that was actually committed by a Christian Lebanese militiaman, later employed by the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad. And yet blame for the massacres seems to be apportioned to Mr. Sharon alone. Why?

The short answer is the Belgian legal system, whose well-meaning laws lend themselves to this sort of opportunistic and sensational indictment. A slightly longer answer is that many Europeans are sincerely convinced that Mr. Sharon really is a war criminal, as a BBC documentary attempted to show last summer.

But the real answer is that European governments today are, by and large, tacit enemies of the state of Israel, much as they might protest that they merely take a more "evenhanded" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Consider a few recent examples. In April, France voted to censure Israel at the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva -- while abstaining from a vote of censure against China. During his diplomatic foray to Tehran in September, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw offered that "one of the factors which helps breed terrorism is the anger which many people in this region feel at events over the years in Palestine." The European Union has so far refused to follow America's lead by freezing the assets of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, with

the European Commission's external relations spokesman, Gunnar Wiegand, arguing that "Hezbollah could play a major role in regional stability."

That Europe today should be hostile to Israel may seem a bit of a mystery, not least given the usual sympathy of aims between democratic states. The explanation comes in several parts. First, as historian Howard Sacher points out, Europe's left sees in Israel's political evolution a betrayal of its utopian ideals. It's easy to forget that in the years following the establishment of Israel, many Europeans looked to it as a model socialist country. They admired its largely state-run economy and especially its collectivist kibbutzim. Hundreds of young European leftists, most of them non-Jews, flocked to these farms in the 1960s, looking for the kind of workers' paradise they could not find on the other side of the Berlin Wall.

This fondness, however, evaporated after the 1967 war, when Israel went from being the Middle East's underdog to its Goliath, holding a colonial-like mandate over the lands that came into its possession. Partly under the sway of Soviet propaganda, partly in keeping with the fashion of radical chic, European leftists abruptly transferred their allegiances to the Palestinians and the PLO, which in the 1970s drew the likes of current German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer to their meetings. Meanwhile, successive Israeli governments veered to the right. "The era when Yitzhak Rabin or Golda Meir could address their European counterparts as 'comrades' at gatherings of the Socialist International had passed," says Mr. Sacher.

There was also a shift of attitudes on the European right. With the exception of Britain, whose notoriously Arabist Foreign Office has dominated its Mideast policy under both Conservative and Labour governments, much of the Continental right had at one time looked on admiringly at "plucky little Israel." Thus, beginning in 1952, the conservative German government of Konrad Adenauer provided Israel with critical financial support in the form of Holocaust reparations, while Charles de Gaulle's France helped to build its nuclear reactor at Dimona.

But it was also de Gaulle who, in 1967, slapped an arms embargo on Israel for firing the first shot in the Six Day War. Thereafter, the hostility increased,

partly because France fancied itself a champion of its former Arab colonies, partly out of simple anti-Americanism. But the chief reason, of course, was Europe's dependence on Arab oil. As French President Georges Pompidou put it to Henry Kissinger during the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, "You only rely on the Arabs for about a tenth of your consumption. We are entirely dependent on them."

Since then, Europe's reliance on Mideastern oil has abated, but the habit of reflexively seeking to appease the Arabs at Israel's expense has not. In 1974, French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert toured the Middle East, seeking to earn price concessions on oil for France by mouthing a hard anti-Israel line. In 1980, the European Community formally recognized the PLO despite the fact that Yasser Arafat had neither made peace with Israel nor dropped his overt sponsorship of terrorism. Currently, the EU supplies the Palestinian Authority with the bulk of its foreign aid, even as much of that money goes indirectly to funding textbooks describing Jews as monkeys and vermin.

Given all this, many Jews have been led to conclude that what's at work here is a thinly veiled form of anti-Semitism. But while there might be some truth to this, it's easily exaggerated. Mr. Straw, of German-Jewish descent, is clearly no anti-Semite, and the one bright spot of Jacques Chirac's presidency has been his efforts to acknowledge the sins of France's suppressed Vichy past.

Underlying European policy is an uneasy sense of guilt. In the immediate postwar period, Europe's guilty conscience worked in Israel's favor. But in the postcolonial spirit of the '60s, the balance of guilt switched to the Arab side: It was they who were being oppressed; and it was Europe that, with its previous support for Israel, had helped inflict the oppression. So Europe pressures Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, heedless of the dire security consequences that such withdrawal would entail. That Israel has so far refused to accede to this pressure stands as an infuriating rebuke to modern Europe's fundamental conception of itself as the virtuous defeated, free to pass judgment while absolved of the moral responsibilities of wielding actual power.

Whatever the case, a foreign policy based on a combination of left-wing disillusionment, French

opportunism and all-around cravenness cannot yield good results. With the U.S. State Department increasingly leaning toward the European line on Israel, it's well that the basis of that policy be properly understood.

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