

Labeling Israeli Settler Goods Misses the Mark

We were informed this week of Germany's decision to back European Union labeling of products from Israeli settlements in the West Bank so as to distinguish them from Israeli goods produced within the pre-1967 armistice lines.

The labeling has been touted by European officials as a "service" to the consumer. Apparently, the idea is to enable consumers to boycott produce from the said areas if their conscience so dictates. This assumes that products originating in the territories are somehow legally or morally tainted. Is this assumption true? Does one have to be a supporter of the settlements to view such boycotts as wrong-minded?

Advocates of the boycott put forward three main arguments for refusing to buy goods from the settlements. The first is that settlements are illegal under international law, namely Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring its own population into occupied territory. The second is that settlement industries unfairly or unlawfully exploit the human or natural resources of the "occupied territory." The third is that Jewish settlements in the territories are an obstacle to the implementation of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Regardless of the merits of the above propositions, none are relevant to the question of whether it is acceptable to buy goods produced in the territories.

As far as international law is concerned, while settling in occupied territory may be problematic (this is itself hotly disputed, as is the question of whether Judea and Samaria are even "occupied" in the first place), there are no prohibitions

whatsoever on economic activities, such as investing in occupied territories or running a business there. Certainly there are no restrictions on providing gainful employment to the local residents. Far from being prejudicial to the people living under occupation, such activities contribute positively to the economy of the area.

What about the argument that these businesses should be boycotted because they benefit the settlers? The problem here is that the people running these enterprises or profiting from them are not necessarily settlers. The reality is that many of these businesses are owned or run by people who live inside the Green Line.

This is not surprising, since most settlements are within a 10- or 20-minute drive from major population centers in Israel proper. Moreover, these businesses frequently employ Palestinian residents of the territories who will lose their source of livelihood if their employers are forced to relocate.

As for the complaints about unfair or illegal exploitation, this is neither an inherent nor necessary feature of such enterprises. That certain businesses may be accused of such exploitation does not justify a blanket penalty aimed at everyone.

About the claim that settlements are an obstacle to peace, this too has nothing to do with the factories, farms and other businesses located in the territories. If anything, these enterprises are conducive to peace, since in addition to providing employment opportunities for Palestinians and contributing to the local economy, they provide islands of normal interaction and goodwill between Israelis and Palestinians. They also have the potential to be building blocks of a future independent Palestinian economy.

For those who want a speedy and peaceful resolution to the

Israeli-Palestinian impasse, boycotting products from the few locations that actually give hope for future coexistence hardly seems the way to go.

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