

EU delegation cancels event in Israel over Ben-Gvir's involvement

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Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir
Itamar Ben-Gvir, an Israeli ultranationalist with anti-Palestinian views, and his Jewish Power party helped Benjamin Netanyahu return as prime minister last year [File: Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP]

Brussels, May 9 (RHC)-- The European Union delegation in Israel has cancelled its Europe Day diplomatic reception over the planned participation of far-right Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir.

“Regrettably, this year we have decided to cancel the diplomatic reception as we do not want to offer a platform to someone whose views contradict the values the EU stands for,” the delegation said in a Twitter post on Monday.

Brussels marks May 9th as Europe Day, honoring a 1950 French declaration that led to the founding of the body that became the EU. The remainder of the public event is to take place as scheduled.

The act of protest by the EU’s delegation in Israel against Ben-Gvir – a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, the most religious and ultranationalist in the country’s history – could cause a diplomatic dispute between Israel and the EU. Relations already have been strained over Israeli policies in the occupied West Bank.

Ben-Gvir, the leader of the far-right Jewish Power faction, was assigned to represent the Israeli government at the Europe Day event on Tuesday. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said on Sunday in a Kan radio interview that Ben-Gvir had been assigned by the government secretary to attend “not as a representative of the Jewish Power party ... but to represent the government of Israel.”

Ben-Gvir is a hardline Jewish settler in the West Bank with past convictions for support for “terrorism” and incitement against Palestinians. He is widely regarded as a provocateur and has called for the displacement of Palestinians.

The Israeli cabinet last month approved a plan by Ben-Gvir to form a “national guard”, whose units would to work alongside the police and military and deal with “civil unrest”, such as “disturbances” or pro-Palestinian protests. As the government’s representative at the Europe Day event, Ben-Gvir would have addressed attendees. The EU made its decision just weeks after European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was slammed for comments saying Israel makes “the desert bloom” when marking its 75th “independence” day.

The Palestinian Authority said her comment is an “anti-Palestinian racist trope” and the day instead marks 75 years of Israel’s “colonial project.”

Israel has long denied the forced expulsions of Palestinians during that time, in which the newly formed Israeli army and Zionist militias expelled at least 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and land and captured 78 percent of historic Palestine.

Netanyahu returned to office in December at the head of a coalition that includes ultra-Orthodox parties and religious ultranationalists, including Ben-Gvir’s small Jewish Power faction.

The government has made expansion of West Bank settlements a top priority. The EU, along with most of the international community, considers Jewish settlements in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem illegal under international law and obstacles to peace with the Palestinians.

Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip in the 1967 Middle East war. Palestinian leaders seek all three areas for a future independent state.

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