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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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23.03.2023

Algeria's Gas vs. Rightwing Ideology: Will Italy Change Its Position on Jerusalem?



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When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left Tel Aviv for Rome on March 9, he was flown to Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv by a helicopter because anti-government protesters blocked all the roads around it.

Netanyahu's visit was not met with much enthusiasm in Italy, either. A sit-in was organized by pro-Palestine activists in downtown Rome under the slogan, 'Non sei il benvenuto' – 'You Are Not Welcome'. An Italian translator, Olga Dalia Padoa,

also refused to translate his speech at a Rome synagogue, which was scheduled for March 9.

Even Noemi Di Segni, President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, though unsurprisingly reiterating her love and support for Israel, expressed her concern for Israeli state institutions.

Back in Tel Aviv, Netanyahu's trip to Italy was slammed by Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid as "a wasteful and unnecessary weekend on the country's dime". But Netanyahu's trip to Italy had other goals, aside from spending a weekend in Rome or distracting from the ongoing protests in Israel.

In an interview with the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, published on March 9, the Israeli prime minister explained the lofty objectives behind his trip to Italy. "I would like to see more economic cooperation," he said. "We have natural gas: we have plenty of it and I would like to talk about how to bring it to Italy to support its economic growth."

In recent weeks, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has shuttled between several countries in search of lucrative gas contracts. Not only does Meloni want to secure her country's need for energy following the Russia-Ukraine crisis, but she wants Rome to be a major European hub for gas imports and exports. Israel knows this, and is particularly wary that Italy's major gas deals in Algeria on January 23 could undermine Israel's economic and political position in Italy, as Algeria continues to serve as a bulwark of Palestinian solidarity throughout the Middle East and Africa.

Netanyahu had other issues on his mind, aside from gas. "On the strategic front, we will discuss Iran. We must prevent it from going nuclear because its missiles could reach many countries, including Europe, and no one wants to be taken hostage by a fundamentalist regime with a nuclear weapon," Netanyahu said with the usual fear-mongering and stereotypical language pertaining to his enemies in the Middle East.

Netanyahu has two main demands from Italy: not to vote against Israel at the United Nations and, more importantly, to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Though East Jerusalem is recognized by the international community as an occupied Palestinian city, Netanyahu wants Rome to change its position, which is consistent with international law, based on the flimsy logic of the "strong and ancient tradition between Rome and Jerusalem".

Using the same logic, that of natural resources and arms exports in exchange for political allegiance to Israel at the UN, Netanyahu has achieved much success in normalizing ties

between his country and many African nations. Now, he is applying the same *modus operandi* to Italy, a European power and the world's ninth-largest economy.

Whether this strategy is an outcome of the growing subservience of Europe to Washington and Tel Aviv, or Netanyahu's own failure to appreciate the changing geopolitical dynamics around the world, is a different matter. But what is clear is that Netanyahu has perceived Italy as a country in desperate need of Israeli help. During the meeting with Meloni, Netanyahu promised to make Italy a gas hub for Europe and help Rome solve its water issues, while Meloni, for her part, reiterated that "Israel is a fundamental partner in the Middle East and at a global level".

The most enthusiastic response to Netanyahu's visit, however, came from far-right Italian Minister of Infrastructure, Matteo Salvini, who strongly backed the Israeli call to recognize Jerusalem as its capital "in the name of peace, history and truth". This response, although inconsistent with Italian foreign policy, was hardly a surprise. The leader of the La Lega party has often been criticized for his racist language in the past. Salvini, however, was 'reformed' in recent years, especially following a visit to Israel in 2018, where he declared his love for Israel and criticism of Palestinians. It was then that Salvini began rising in the mainstream, as opposed to regional, Italian politics.

But this is not Salvini's position alone. The Italian government welcomed Netanyahu's visit without making a single criticism of his far-right government's extremist policies carried out in Occupied Palestine. While this position is in line with Italian foreign policy, it is hardly surprising from an ideological point of view, as well.

Although Italian politics, in the past, showed great solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for liberation and right of self-determination – thanks to the revolutionary forces that had a tremendous impact on shaping the Italian political discourse during World War II and the country's subsequent liberation from fascism – that position shifted throughout the years. As Italy's own politics itself reared towards the Right, its foreign policy agenda in Palestine and Israel completely moved towards a pro-Israel stance. Those now perceived to be pro-Palestine in the Italian government are a few and are often branded as radical politicians.

However, despite the official pro-Israel discourse in Italy, things for Netanyahu are not as easy as they may appear, especially when it comes to recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Indeed, Meloni did not express an outright commitment to the Israeli demand. To the contrary, in an interview with Reuters last August, even before becoming Italy's prime

minister, Meloni seemed cautious, merely stating that this is “a diplomatic matter and should be evaluated together with the foreign ministry”.

There is a reason behind Meloni’s hesitation. Italy’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital would place Rome outside the consensus of international law. In an open letter to Meloni, United Nations Special Rapporteur, Francesca Albanese, reminded the Italian government that the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital would constitute a stark violation of international law.

Italy’s foreign policy is also accountable to the collective policies of the European Union, of which Rome is an integral member. The EU supports the UN’s position that East Jerusalem is an occupied Palestinian city and that Israel’s annexation of the city in 1980 is illegal.

Moreover, Italy’s recent landmark deal with Algeria’s state-owned gas company, Sonatrach, in January, makes it particularly difficult for Rome to take an extreme position in support of Israel. The delicate geopolitical balances resulting from the gas crisis, itself a direct outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, make any shifts in Italian foreign policy on Palestine and Israel akin to an act of self-harm.

For Italy, at least for now, Arab gas is far more important than anything that Netanyahu could possibly offer. The new Rome-Algiers deal would grant Italy 9bn cubic meters of gas, in addition to the gas supply already flowing through the TransMed pipeline, ‘BNE Intellinews’ reported. This vital infrastructure connects Algeria to Italy via Sicily which, in turn, flows through pipelines under the Mediterranean Sea. “The expansion of these vital routes has already been planned, aiming to augment the current capacity of 33.5 bcm per year,” the business news website added.

Meloni, although a far-right politician with no particular affinity or respect for established international norms, understands that economic interests trump ideology. “Today Algeria is our first gas supplier”, Meloni said in a press conference in Algiers after signing the agreement. The deal, she said, would supply the country with “an energy mix that could shield Italy from the ongoing energy crisis”.

Such a fact would make it impossible for Italy to deviate, at least for now, from its current position regarding Jerusalem, and the illegality of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. While Israel would find it difficult to persuade Italy to change its position, Algeria, Tunisia and other Arab countries might finally find an opening to dissuade Italy from its blind support of Israel.

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CounterPunch 22.03.2023