

[Bipartisan Congressional efforts to support Israeli settlements and expansionism](#)

Following earlier Congressional initiatives to effectively recognize Morocco's illegal annexation of the occupied nation of Western Sahara, a bipartisan effort has been launched in Congress in support of Israel's colonization of occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank and greater East Jerusalem, effectively recognizing Israeli annexation of territories seized in the 1967 war.

The expansion of territory by military force is prohibited under the U.N. Charter, and the Israeli settlements are considered illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention, a series of UN Security Council resolutions, and a landmark advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

This summer, Congress passed [a trade bill](#) that, for the first time, formally defines "Israel" as including Arab territories recognized by the international community as under foreign belligerent occupation. Part of the "fast track" legislation to help ensure passage of the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership, the clause was an attempt to force the Obama administration to pressure potential U.S. trading partners to no longer boycott products made in illegal settlements or discourage their companies from supporting the Israeli occupation.

President Barack Obama, in a signing statement, said the administration would not abide by that section of the legislation. The [State Department](#) similarly rejected the pro-settlements language, noting that "[e]very U.S. administration since 1967 -- Democrat and Republican alike -- has opposed Israeli settlement activity beyond the 1967 lines."

The main target of the bill was the European Union, which prohibits funding of any projects beyond Israel's internationally recognized borders and recently issued a clarification of labeling laws declaring products made in Israeli settlements could not be marked as having been "Made in Israel."

Subsequently, members of Congress have written [three separate letters](#) to the EU's foreign policy chief and to the [U.S. trade representative](#) claiming that the EU initiative was a "de-facto boycott of Israel" and accusing the EU of implementing "restrictive and illegal trade measures" despite the fact that the decision was only in regard to the occupied territories and did not call for boycotting any products from the settlements, much less Israel itself. Signers of this effort included such prominent Democrats as Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Ben Cardin (D-Md.), Bob Casey, Jr. (D-Pa.), Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), and Cory Booker (D-N.J.).

Ironically, [supporters of such boycotts](#) noted how "labeling the illegal products of Israeli colonies instead of banning them is seen by Palestinians as yet another EU failure to uphold European and international law."

Another recent bill, sponsored by Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.), the ranking member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, would formally put Congress on record opposing the EU's interpretive notice on products from settlements. Co-sponsored by Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as his Democratic counterpart Elliot Engel (D-N.Y.), the committee's ranking member, it places both parties' chief foreign policy leaders in the House of Representatives in opposition to the administration's efforts to curb expansion of Israel's illegal settlements. [According to](#)

[Lowey](#), such truth-in-labeling laws are designed "to extract one-sided concessions and feed into politically-motivated acts to boycott Israel," despite the fact that the initiative explicitly did not ban the actual importation goods from either Israel or Israeli settlements.

On Jan. 23, U.S. Customs [re-issued a guidance](#) noting how, according to a 1995 law, "It is not acceptable to mark [goods produced in the West Bank or Gaza Strip] with the words 'Israel,' 'Made in Israel,' 'Occupied Territories-Israel,' or any variation thereof"; that products produced in settlements should not be labeled as having originated in Israel; and that such products would be ineligible for duty-free entry into the United States as are Israeli products and thereby subjected to a 10 percent duty. In response, Senators Tom Cotton (R-Ark.)*, Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Ted Cruz (R-Texas), and Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) have [introduced](#) a new bill calling on goods produced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to be labeled "Made in Israel" when sold in the United States.

Meanwhile, a [Customs bill](#) recently passed in Congress with bipartisan support calls on the United States to prevent investigations or prosecutions by any government or international organization of U.S. citizens for doing business with individuals or entities operating from the illegal settlements.

Indeed, the legislation states prohibitions against "boycott, divestment from, and sanctions against Israel" includes not just Israel itself but "Israeli-controlled territories." It also prohibits any U.S. court from recognizing or enforcing any judgment against Americans who conduct business in Israeli settlements and requires the president to submit a report on decisions by individuals, corporate entities and state-affiliated financial institutions, "that limit or prohibit economic relation" not only in Israel but in all "in Israeli-controlled territories."

While some activists calling for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions have been criticized for blurring the distinction between the Israeli occupation and Israel itself, these bipartisan Congressional initiatives deliberately blur this distinction as well. Indeed, these efforts appear to be designed to undermine the Obama administration's efforts to end Israel's colonization drive and allow for the establishment of an independent viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

Lara Friedman of the liberal Zionist group Americans for Peace Now [notes how such efforts are](#) "not about defending Israel at all," but rather about "shielding Israeli settlements from pressure" and "seeking to codify in U.S. law the view that there is no distinction between Israel and Israeli settlements in the occupied territories."

Unlike in Israel itself, Arabs in the occupied territories are denied the right to vote in Israeli elections, are rigidly segregated, and lack the same rights as Jews. Therefore, [according to Mitchell Plitnick](#) of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, such legislation "serves no obvious purpose other than to maintain that occupation" and are effectively "siding with the most anti-Israel elements of the BDS movement who also see the West Bank, Israel and Gaza as a single state, under Israeli rule and therefore an apartheid state."

It is profoundly disappointing that well into the 21st century, both parties in Congress appear committed to rejecting long-standing international legal principles by effectively endorsing the right of conquest.

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**Cotton's party was listed incorrectly in an earlier version of this story.*