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In the name of Palestine, Ireland is sacrificing its own interests

Proposed legislation seeks to ban trade with Israeli occupied territories, putting the nation’s economic wellbeing at risk



Irish President Higgins has previously been accused of anti-Semitism for his comments on the war in Gaza Credit: Kevin Lamarque / Reuters

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The past few weeks have seen the worst deterioration in Irish-US relations for many decades. What is widely seen as Ireland’s extreme anti-Israel obsession collided with the realities of American business and geopolitical interests.

It was the war in Gaza that changed everything. The Irish political elite, which for complicated historical reasons was never very sympathetic to the Jewish state, became hyper supportive of the Palestinian cause.

President Higgins, the grand old man of the Irish Left – cast in the mould of a Jeremy Corbyn – led the offensive. Nearing the end of his second seven-year presidential term, Michael D, as he is widely known, is hugely popular in Ireland.

Within days of the Hamas October 7 massacre, EU president Ursula von der Leyen visited Israel to show solidarity with the victims and express support for Israel in the wake of the unprovoked attack. Speaking in Rome a few days later, President Higgins called Ms von der Leyen’s actions “reckless” and said she “wasn’t speaking for Ireland.”

President Higgins continued, we cannot “ignore the long-neglected source of much of this conflict, which is the Palestinian issue.” This was interpreted by some Jews as offering a ham-fisted and very misguided justification for the Hamas invasion of ten days earlier.

Under the Irish Constitution, the presidency is primarily a ceremonial institution. Like the King, Irish presidents are meant to be above politics with no role in setting policy. In his multiple statements on Israel, Gaza, and Palestine, President Higgins has comprehensively undermined this constitutional boundary.

Other senior politicians have been equally vociferous. Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) Simon Harris boasted: “We are the first government in the European Union to say what Israel is doing is genocide.” Taoiseach Micheál Martin has also claimed repeatedly that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

As relations between Ireland and Israel continued to deteriorate, last December Israel closed its embassy in Dublin because “of the extreme anti-Israel policies of the Irish government.”

It was against this toxic background that the Occupied Territories Bill (OTB), a piece of legislation that had lain dormant for years, was suddenly revived. The proposed legislation seeks to ban trade between Ireland and the Israeli occupied territories.

Last year, Ireland exported goods to the value of €73.6bn to the US – larger than those of the UK (€64.5bn). Total US corporate investment in Ireland comes to almost half a trillion dollars – greater than the combined US investment in the EU’s four largest economies, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. US firms account for 70 per cent of Ireland’s annual corporate tax revenue, and for one in six private sector jobs.

These astonishing statistics show how Ireland’s current and future prosperity is fundamentally dependent on America. Incredibly, the Irish government now seems willing to put the nation’s economic wellbeing at risk, ostensibly because of imports from the occupied territories of mainly avocados, dates, and olives – with an annual value of just €136,000.

The considerable economic myopia of the OTB is matched only by its political naïveté. Its definition of occupied territories even includes areas that America recognises as being fully under Israeli sovereignty. Take Jerusalem. The bill compounds its US political problems by describing the area of Jerusalem where the American embassy is located as an illegal “Settlement”.

Recently, there have been many dire warnings of the potentially severe consequences of passing the OTB. Jim Risch, the Chair of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, did not pull any punches. Ireland, he said, is “on a hateful, anti-Semitic path that will only lead to self-inflicted economic suffering. If this legislation is implemented, America will have to reconsider its deep and ongoing economic ties.”

Two weeks ago, an *Irish Times* poll suggested that the Irish public is becoming increasingly concerned about the bill’s potential negative consequences. Displaying classic signs of buyer’s remorse, almost half of those polled were in favour of either not passing it, or wanted further clarification on its economic implications.

There are signs too that the government is catching up with the changing public mood. In a let-this-chalice-pass-from-me moment, a government minister said that the whole issue of the boycott “should be dealt with at EU level. Frankly that would be the best solution.” Indeed, as that would get the government off the hook on which it had impaled itself. It was a belated recognition that Ireland may have gone too far out on a limb on this issue.

With the Dail in summer recess, the government has some breathing space to assess its options before the OTB comes up for legislative review in the autumn.

But that assumes that the current resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue does not throw a wobbly over the OTB in the meantime. And with the irascible President Trump, that is always a non-trivial risk.