

'European funding of Israeli NGOs isn't meddling

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The EU's funding of NGOs in Israel does not constitute meddling in Israeli political affairs, and the EU hopes the government will not place restrictions on outside funding of these groups, the EU's new ambassador to Israel told *The Jerusalem Post* on Tuesday. "There is a certain perception in Israeli society that what we are financing in Israel and in this region is unique, and that these are programs aimed at influencing public policy in Israel," Andrew Standley said. "The reality is that these are global programs, and the kind of actions that we are supporting in Israel can and are just as easily funded in places like China, India, Indonesia and even the US." Standley, a self-defined "committed European with a British passport" who took over his duties in October, said the organizations funded deal with global issues, "whether the rights of women, minorities or support for democracy. These are global programs, so there are organizations in this part of the world that submit proposals and they receive funding just as organizations do in Peru, Pakistan and wherever." The EU ambassador's comments came amid efforts by some politicians and groups to either curb or make more transparent the funding that NGOs receive from abroad. A conference on the impact and transparency of European funding to Israeli NGOs was held in the Knesset earlier this month. According to NGO Monitor, among the groups that receive or have received EU funding in recent years are Yesh Din, Peace Now, Ir Amim, B'Tselem, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and Machsom Watch. Standley said that the criteria used to fund the NGOs "are global, universal criteria. And I think that in that sense one can feel comfortable with the kind of support provided here, because it is in the context of a global commitment to universal values and human rights that these actions are being funded." Asked about funding for organizations such as Peace Now, Standley said "the funding is not provided for a political agenda, but rather in support of a universal objective such as human rights." He further stressed that these types of projects are funded not only in Israel, "but all over the planet." Asked if this type of EU involvement does not constitute meddling in Israeli politics, the EU envoy said the "funding is not provided at all with that objective. It is not meddling in terms of influencing the policies of the government. As I said, and I'll repeat it because it is absolutely the case, our support is for universal objectives in terms of enjoyment of rights in accordance with all the international declarations that guide us all." But Gerald Steinberg, the executive director of the Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, said the fundamental problem with European funding of these organizations was its lack of transparency. "If EU officials like the ambassador believe that the funding is based on global principles, and Israel is not being treated differently, why is Israel not provided documentation to verify this? It is all done in secret," Steinberg said, referring to a 1999 protocol that showed an Israeli NGO was funded in order to convince Shas voters to vote for the left wing. When Steinberg was reminded that this happened 10 years ago, he replied that the problem was that the protocols and minutes of meetings where these types of decisions are made were not made public. "The

ambassador, like other EU officials, makes broad claims about the basis of the funding, but the evidence we have, which is limited, doesn't support that the criteria are global. We don't know how the process works, it is all done in secret, and no evaluations are published [as to] why certain groups get funded year after year," Steinberg said. On another matter, Standley defended the EU's policy of issuing condemnations every time Israel announces a new housing project in east Jerusalem, even in established Jewish neighborhoods. The EU issued a statement Monday expressing "dismay" at the announcement of plans to build some 700 apartments in Neveh Yaakov, Pisgat Ze'ev and Har Homa. "Settlements on occupied land are illegal under international law," the statement said. "The plans by the Israeli government to expand such settlements contravene repeated calls from the international community, including those of the Quartet, and prevent the creation of an atmosphere conducive to resuming negotiations on a two-state solution. The presidency of the European Union thus urges the government of Israel to reconsider these plans." Asked the reason for the continuous issuing of these statements, when it was clear that Israel would continue building in east Jerusalem, Standley said, "The point is to record the fact that we stand by international law with regard to construction in territory considered occupied territory, and each time the issue comes up we are obligated to comment, simply to refer back to the international legal framework in which this is happening."