

## **Netanyahu to France: Renounce the miserable actions of Orange**

By HERB KEINON, NIV ELIS, RINA BASSIST, TOVAH LAZAROFF - 06/05/2015

"I call on all of our closest allies to say in a loud and clear voice that they unconditionally oppose all types of boycott against the Jewish State."



Netanyahu to France: Renounce the miserable actions of Orange

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on the Élysée Palace on Thursday to renounce comments made by France-based Orange SA CEO Stéphane Richard expressing his desire to sever his company's ties with Israel.

"I call on the French government to publicly repudiate the miserable statement and miserable action by a company that is under its partial ownership," Netanyahu said at a memorial ceremony in Tel Aviv for the victims of the 1948 Altalena sinking.

Richard had made his remarks to an audience in Cairo on Wednesday, to whom he also declared, "We want to be one of the trustful partners of all Arab countries." Despite Richard's comments, Orange SA clarified Thursday that it intends to honor its contract with Israel's Partner Communications, set to expire in 2025. Breaking that contract could lead to tough financial repercussions for the French company, as could a lawsuit alleging that it had damaged the value of the brand.

According to Reuters, France's Foreign Ministry "reaffirmed that France is against any boycott of Israel, while viewing as illegal the settlements it has built in occupied territory, where Partner and other Israeli phone companies also operate."

Netanyahu called on Israel's allies "to unconditionally declare – in a loud and clear voice – that they oppose any kind of boycott of the Jewish state.

"The absurd drama in which the democracy that observes human rights – the State of Israel – and which defends itself from barrages of missiles and terrorist tunnels, and then absorbs automatic condemnations and attempted boycotts, this absurd drama will not be forgiven," Netanyahu added.

Orange SA, in which the French government holds a 25 percent stake, followed up on Richard's remarks with a statement saying that the group "does not engage in any kind of political debate under any circumstance," and explaining that the company "does not wish to maintain the presence of the brand in countries in which it is not, or is no longer, an operator." Israel is the only country where Orange SA has such an arrangement.

The statement also specified, however, that Orange would pursue that goal "while strictly adhering to existing agreements." Richard's announcement came as a surprise to Partner Communications, the local telecom company that has been using the Orange brand since 1998 and renewed its branding license for a 10-year period just three months ago (the original agreement was signed prior to France Telecom's acquisition of Orange in 2000).

"Partner is taking the recent remarks of the chairman of the board and CEO of France Telecom, which harm the value of the brand in Israel, very seriously, and is weighing the full range of options at its disposal," outgoing Partner CEO Haim Romano said in a joint statement with his incoming replacement, Itzhak Benveniste.

At Partner's headquarters in Rosh Ha'ayin on Thursday, employees of the company covered the Orange sign on the building with a giant Israeli flag in protest of the Orange CEO's comments. Company sources said it did not see a significant drop in its subscriptions Thursday, but had not yet decided whether to drop the Orange brand, sue for damages, or maintain the current agreement.

Despite Orange SA's Thursday statements denying that its moves were politically motivated, Richard's remarks gave a distinctly different impression to Israeli listeners.

"I am ready to abandon this tomorrow morning, but the point is that I want to secure the legal risk for the company. I want to terminate this, once again, but I don't want to expose Orange to a level of risk and of penalties that could be really sizable for the company," said Richard, expressing his desire to be "a trustful partner of all Arab countries."

He added that "the only other possibility would be to enter a dispute with the partner, and I'm sorry to say but entering a dispute when you have zero legal grounds in Israeli courts is not something I would recommend for my company.... I am not willing to pay hundreds of millions of euros just because I have to take a risk in terms of penalties."

In 2012, on his first Israel visit, Richard sang Israel's praises, saying he was enchanted and impressed with the country's warmth and technological prowess.

Culture and Sport Minister Miri Regev called on French President Francois Hollande to fire Richard, if he

does not “apologize for his anti-Semitic comments.”

Regev said that certainly in France, in light of the recent attacks there, the country must show “no tolerance for anti-Semitic comments.”

She said that “the Jews in the world have strength, and so do the Jews in France,” and that if Richard does not apologize for his words, or is not fired, then Jews worldwide should “discontinue their business with Orange.”

Ambassador to France Yossi Gal said that Israel looks “with gravity” on the comments, and was dealing throughout the day with the Élysée and other government ministries to express Israel’s position. He noted that the boycott is illegal in France.

Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely wrote a sharply worded letter to Richard, calling on him to “clarify this matter as soon as possible.”

“I must admit to have been taken aback by these reports which do not become a responsible global company such as Orange,” she wrote. “I appeal to you to refrain from being party to the industry of lies which unfairly targets Israel.”

US Ambassador Dan Shapiro said in an Israel Radio interview that the US will “never accept, support, and will oppose, any resolution in the UN calling for delegitimization, or one-sided criticism of Israel. We will not support a boycott, and will oppose it and fight together with Israel against sanctions and BDS.”

Likewise, he said the US would not support the premature recognition of a Palestinian state that doesn’t exist.

But, he added, at a time when there is no negotiation or even prospect of negotiation, it is more difficult to fight against boycotts, sanctions and delegitimization.

Meanwhile, Knesset Economics Committee chairman Eitan Cabel (Zionist Union) pointed out that Orange is a brand name, but Partner is an Israeli company with thousands of Israeli employees, and said he plans to hold a committee meeting calling to stand by the workers and the company.

“These workers are part of us, and we won’t let any foreign entity threaten their workplace,” Cabel stated.

“We won’t be partners to perverse threats by a foreign brand. Anyone who leaves Partner Israel now, because of what the World Orange CEO said, has become a tool of those who hate Israel.”

Cabel called it unfortunate that the government “has not succeeded to put together a broad international front to prevent the new war that is upon us: the boycott war.”

Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid, the former finance minister, called the Orange SA CEO’s statements “the highest level of audacity and hypocrisy.”

Lapid called on the French government to distance itself from what Richard said.

“I don’t remember him having a problem making money and taking money from the Israeli public,” he stated. “Israel is an island of sanity in the worst neighborhood in the world, and we certainly are not ready to have smug, disconnected Europeans preach to us.”

Lapid said on Wednesday night, before heading to the US for meetings, that Israel must have a better response to Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, saying the prime minister does not have a real policy for fighting the movement.

“The diplomatic war can’t wait until Likud ministers finish fighting among themselves over who is responsible for what,” he quipped.

Meretz chairwoman Zehava Gal-On said that “instead of demanding that the French government take an official stand against a private company, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should demand from himself, as prime minister, to take steps to remove the boycott threat, first and foremost to stop building

in the territories.”

“We oppose boycotts of Israel, but the person who is serving the boycott is Netanyahu, whose destructive and irresponsible policies have brought Israel to the verge of isolation and delegitimize the country in the name of narrow interests,” she added.

Richard’s statements followed a report published at the beginning of May by seven pro-Palestinian NGOs – a coalition of French and Palestinian human rights and labor organizations – on the Israeli Partner company’s alleged activities in the West Bank. The report also details its contacts with Orange leadership and letters sent to the French Foreign Ministry and Finance Ministry on the issue.

The report, titled “Orange’s dangerous liaison in the occupied Palestinian territory,” calls upon the French government to “set an example by adopting rigorous additional protective measures vis-à-vis Orange’s business relationships, and use its leverage to ensure that Orange conducts effective human rights due diligence. Consequently, the French government must take immediate action within Orange’s board of directors to ensure that the company demands Partner’s withdrawal from Israeli settlements, or in the alternative terminates its business relationship with Partner.”

The report also refers to guidelines published by the French Foreign Ministry about a year ago, warning French citizens of legal ramifications in case they engage in financial activity or investments in the settlements in the West Bank, east Jerusalem or the Golan Heights. The authors of the report claim that the French government and the European Union, together with Orange, should act in line with these instructions.

An Israeli diplomat stationed in Paris pointed out that so far, it seems that Richard’s statements won’t have any practical ramifications.

“Jerusalem together with the embassy in Paris has followed up the release of the report a few weeks ago, and will continue to follow developments closely,” the diplomat said.

The source confirmed that Gal has condemned Richard’s comments, both vis-à-vis the French Foreign Ministry and vis-à-vis the Élysée.

BPI France, which is the public entity holding part of the state-owned Orange shares, declined to comment.

Edouard Cukierman, a prominent French-Israeli businessman, said he believes Richard’s statements are the start of a growing trend.

“I see it as anti-Semitism. Others say it is just anti-Israel, but increasingly I think you can’t differentiate between the two,” he said.

The situation in his home country, he said, is dire, as evidenced by the increase in French aliya in recent months. His father, a leader in Paris’s Jewish community, has to travel with bodyguards, he said.

Still, Cukierman believes that Israel can overcome BDS efforts through education and public diplomacy.

“When people come and see for themselves what the situation is here, they understand,” he said.

*Lahav Harkov contributed to this report.*

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