Senators condemn UN 'blacklisting' of US companies in Israeli settlements

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The chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday slammed a report by a United Nations human rights body for blacklisting U.S. companies that operate in the Israeli-controlled parts of the West Bank.

In separate statements, Sen. [Jim Risch](https://thehill.com/people/jim-risch) (R-Idaho), the panel's chairman, and Sen. Bob Menendez (N.J.), the committee's top Democrat, criticized the report, saying it was politically motivated and encouraged the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

“It is unacceptable that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has released this incredibly biased report which is in direct support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction movement against our close ally Israel,” Risch said in his statement.

“Today’s release of the report is a political move made by the high commissioner,” he added.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights  identified at least six U.S. companies, including Airbnb, Expedia, Tripadvisor, Booking Holdings Inc., General Mills and Motorola, as operating in “illegal” Israeli settlements.

No legal action or judicial recommendations against the companies are listed in the report. The U.N. body says it can’t determine whether the businesses are violating any laws, drawing criticism that the list is meant to publicly shame the companies.

The report stems from a 2016 action directing the body to compile a list of businesses operating under Israeli control in the West Bank and their impact on the “civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights” of Palestinians.

“I am conscious this issue has been, and will continue to be, highly contentious,” Michelle Bachelet, the U.N.'s high commissioner for human rights, said in a statement. She added that the publication of the report “responds appropriately” to the 2016 resolution.

Risch said he had spoken with Bachelet and “believed that the OHCHR had already fulfilled its mandate by previous actions.”

Kelsey Roemhildt, a spokeswoman for General Mills, said the company's manufacturing facility in the Atarot Industrial Park in the Israeli-controlled West Bank is listed in the report for its use of “natural resources, in particular water and land, for business purposes.”

The OHRCR said the report included this category over implications on Palestinians rights of expanding Israeli settlements.

Roemhildt said the company provides job security and employment for Palestinians who make up 50 percent of its workforce.

“Many of the plant’s Palestinian workers have been employed at the facility for several years, working alongside Israeli colleagues,” Roemhildt wrote in an email to The Hill.

“Every employee has full social benefits without prejudice to race, religion or nationality. General Mills stations personnel at the facility to monitor product quality and we regularly monitor to ensure safe working conditions, adequate work and rest areas, and compliance with labor and human rights laws.”

Airbnb, which allows homeowners to rent space for vacationers, declined to comment on the report. In April, it reversed a decision to remove its listings for Israeli homes in the West Bank after coming under pressure from movements to boycott Israel.

The company instead said it would donate any profits from West Bank listings to “non-profit organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid that serve people in different parts of the world.”

Inquiries to the other companies were not immediately answered.

A total of 112 businesses were identified in the report. While the majority of businesses were Israeli, companies were also identified as being registered in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, France, Luxembourg and Thailand.

Menendez criticized the publication of the list as politically motivated with the intent to isolate Israel.

“This list and its public release were driven by politically motivated actors who seek to isolate Israel and undermine its right to exist,” the New Jersey senator said in his statement. "Actions like this further fuel support for the deeply misguided broader Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.”

“Congress will continue to stand on the side of American companies and against those who seek to undermine Israel’s right to exist,” he added.

The BDS movement is a global campaign that seeks to pressure Israel with economic, cultural and educational boycotts over its policies toward the Palestinians.

In January 2019, the Senate passed bipartisan legislation giving states more freedom to refuse providing government funds to entities that participate in the BDS movement. House Democrats have held off taking up the measure over concerns it would violate the First Amendment.

The United Nations views Israeli settlements as illegal under international law.

The U.S. reversed its policy on Israeli settlements in November, announcing that it would no longer view territory occupied by Israel in the West Bank as illegal.

The Trump administration has given a green light to Israeli officials to annex territory in the West Bank identified in its January peace proposal for Israelis and Palestinians, but cautioned against implementing unilateral actions until a new government is formed after the March 2 elections.