



A Multi-Regional Israeli Foreign Policy



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This article is part of a publication series that introduces guiding principles for a new Israeli foreign policy paradigm, based on recommendations by a Mitvim Institute task-team. To read the summary of this paradigm, [click here](#).

Israel has come to see its geo-political location in a negative light, mostly as a result from the Arab-Israeli conflict and its subsequent regional isolation. As a consequence, it has developed a mentality of a secluded island, which is defensive and isolationist in nature and which views the world as a hostile place. And yet, Israel's unique location at the crossroads of three continents should be turned into an asset. Israel must strengthen its connection to each of its surrounding regions – the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean – recognize the interconnection between them, and define the regional belonging to which it eventually aspires. For this to happen, Israel needs to adopt a new multi-regional foreign policy approach. This article outlines guiding principles for such an approach, and includes recommendations for steps that Israel can take in order to enhance its regional integration.

The State of Israel was founded by members of the Jewish people who viewed the return to their historical homeland, and the establishment of a Jewish state, as the realization of a supreme 2,000-year-old dream. In the heart of the Middle East which, throughout history, was ruled by Muslim and Christian parties and world powers – the Jewish state was born in 1948. The state was established in borders that were determined in a violent, harsh war and in spite of the vociferous opposition of all its neighboring countries, and mainly the local Arabs. Ever since the establishment of the State of Israel, Arabs in the region deny the legitimacy of its existence and try to undermine its borders. True, the nations of the world recognized Israel; and two neighboring Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan, even signed peace agreements with it. But the thorniest issue of all, whose resolution is not on the horizon, is the struggle of the Arab-Palestinian residents to establish an independent state of their own on the exact same

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territory. Israel has faced this reality since the day it was founded. Even though it wisely developed an impressive foreign relations apparatus, the basis of this apparatus should be re-examined, especially the ramifications of Israel's policy on the countries nearby.

A. The 'island mentality' and the need to connect

For six decades, Israel developed all kinds of creative ways to cope with the regional political isolation that has been its lot since its very inception; in other words, an 'island mentality.' This mentality is based on two foundations: one is political and the other is well rooted in the history and consciousness of the Jewish people, as written in the Bible, "it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (*Numbers 23:9*).

Communities that live on islands, real or imagined, naturally tend to try to form close social connections with communities further away. In the case of Israel, the real ocean touches it only on its west while in all the other directions, the 'ocean' is illusory. Yes, Israel is connected to dry land, but the prevailing Jewish-Israeli conception is that this physical connection to Arab states surrounding it, constitutes more threats and dangers than opportunities. Thus, it should ignore these areas or, at worst, should view them with hostility and suspicion.

In addition, Israeli society has always prided itself on its Western cultural and political value system, one that is entirely different than the value systems of its neighbors. Many feel that Israeli society is a kind of extension of Western civilization in the Near East, and there are no benefits to be gained by cultivating contacts with the countries to its east.

Israel does not adopt the disengagement approach towards its neighbors simply to turn its back on its nearby surroundings. Instead, this is the direct result of the attitude of its Arab neighbors toward it, and a mindset saying that that there is no "dry land" that it is possible, or worthwhile, to connect to. Throughout numerous decades, the relations between Israel and its neighbors has been mainly military in nature, and violent. Very little has been done to develop common interests and civic activities that would profit both sides. The Palestinian nation has a very complex and restricted relationship with Israel, because it believes that the reason it does not have an independent state is because of the Israeli occupation. Usually, Arab countries are careful to avoid conducting visible, overt relationships with Israel, and they also avoid deepening their covert relationships as well. This also describes the behavior of the two neighboring Arab states, Egypt and Jordan, even though both signed peace agreements with Israel.

In light of this reality, over the years Israel developed close contacts with countries that are not its neighbors, headed by the United States and European countries.¹ Israel also tried, at various opportunities, to develop a "periphery

¹ For further details, see: Elie Podeh, "The Desire to Belong Syndrome," *Israel Studies* 4(2), 1999, pp. 121-149.

alliance” with countries and parties in the region that are not in the first circle of adjacency. This includes Ethiopia, Turkey, the Kurds and even Iran under the Shah. Several times over recent years, Israel has considered deepening its ties with countries in other regions of the world, such as in Africa and Eastern Europe.

Despite Israel’s efforts to overcome its geographic isolation by creating links with countries further away, no real disconnection has been created its immediate surroundings. Moreover, Israel’s location in the very heart of the stormy Arab world of the post-Arab Spring implies numerous dangers. Non-state actors congregate on its borders, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Syrian opposition members in the Golan, Islamic organizations in Sinai, and various Palestinian factions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Occasionally they succeed in causing Israel harm. There is no doubt that Israel must defend itself from these elements, but at the same time persevere in identifying opportunities that occasionally surface when changes take place in the region; and such opportunities do exist.² In fact, the political reality has significantly changed in recent years, both in Israel’s nearby environs as well as in more remote regions. Thus it must re-evaluate its policies and attempt to find new interlocutors.

An examination of Israel’s modus operandi show that it does not spend enough efforts in searching for opportunities to build relations. Instead, Israel mainly examines reality through narrow security lenses. It is very important to collaborate with stable elements in the region, such as Egypt headed by President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Jordan under King Abdullah II. True, Israel does work with these countries, but in most cases the cooperation is limited to security-related interests of the sides, and is usually covert in nature. There is no public expression of extensive attempts at cooperation in a variety of spheres; this is mainly because such cooperation usually involves goodwill gestures and concessions on Israel’s part.

In addition to geo-political connections with its close neighbors, Israel should also work assiduously to find additional channels of cooperation with them and even with countries further away like Turkey, Morocco, North African countries and the moderate Gulf States. Similarly, it should do the same with non-state actors such as the Kurdish minority in Iraq. When possible, Israel should take action to advance “softer” connections, civic and economic in nature, in those spheres in which Israel has an advantage due to expertise or advanced knowledge such as the use of new technologies for desalinating water, and the planning of transportation and energy networks. Finally, Israel should make various humanitarian gestures towards those in need throughout the region.

At the basis of policy change is the understanding that Israel should serve as a regional anchor in diverse fields. These include: humanitarian activity such as treating sick or wounded Arabs in Israeli hospitals, or enabling visits from Arab

² Nimrod Goren and Jenia Yudkevich (eds.), [“Israel and the Arab Spring: Opportunities in Change,”](#) (Ramat Gan: Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, 2013).

countries to holy sites such as the Al-Aqsa mosque. These may dramatically impact Israel's relationship with regional players.

This article aims to serve as a compass to Israel's decision-makers, assisting them in devising and implementing a multi-regional foreign policy.

B. The Middle East

In the second decade of the 21st century, the Middle East underwent frequent changes as expressed by the entree of new players. This included many powerful non-state actors who are able to operate violently according to changing interests and in the framework of intersecting alliances. The political reality in the Middle East today is extremely dynamic; this makes it very difficult for Israel to formulate a clear, unequivocal policy for integration in the region or for creating an Israeli sphere of influence. This reality is even likely to worsen with the ongoing drop in the prices of crude oil and natural gas in the world, and because the economies of the Arab states are not sufficiently diversified (even the wealthiest Arab countries).

Nevertheless, Israel's foreign policy must not limit itself to coping with security threats but should also address possibilities for building new alignments, which would include civic components and would improve Israel's standing in the region. Clear political statements by Israel of its intentions to promote civic engagement with parties in the region, would have significant effect for several reasons: (1) it would maintain elements of stability in uncertain times; (2) it would maintain a nucleus of cooperation that would serve as the basis for deeper strategic relations in the future; (3) it could act as a positive counterweight to forces opposing cooperation with Israel; (4) it would establish Israel's standing as a country that wants to "do good things" for the region in which it is situated.

Israel must try to become more active in the region, thus slowly getting the various local players to recognize the very fact of its existence. This kind of integration could be of assistance even during crises and when coping with security threats. One example is the efforts of Egypt - as well as other countries in the region - to attain cease-fires during the repetitive cycles of violence between Israel and Gaza.

Israel's relationships with various Middle East actors are influenced, first and foremost, by its difficult, convoluted relations with its Palestinian neighbors. Ever since the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were conquered in 1967, relations with the Palestinians have been deteriorating into rounds of violence with greater frequency. Since Israel has in principle recognized the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, it must try to resolve the conflict with them in a way that will ensure the realization of their national rights, like all the other nations.

However, since it may take a long time to reach a final-status agreement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (if ever), Israel must enable all interested countries in the region to fill more significant roles with regard to efforts for conflict

resolution, and at the same time, to found regional relationships that are not dependant on the problematic relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The involvement of regional states in managing the conflict with the Palestinians, or in a real, honest effort to resolve the conflict, will also lead to a widening of the foundation for cooperation with them. Deepening the ties with countries surrounding Israel, such as Turkey, could also help achieve understandings with the Palestinian Authority and various Palestinian non-state actors such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It may even create a restraining system for Hamas and other regional actors that use violence to achieve their political goals.

Israel may benefit from having direct or indirect contacts with countries as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar and Turkey. Israel has great interest in strengthening its connections to these states for the following reasons: achieving acceptance in the region; deepening cooperation on joint issues, including security; defeating terror and addressing civilian issues such as water and energy systems; and enlarging economic markets. Various statements of high-level Israeli figures show that those in the highest political echelons well understand this need. Note, for example, the statement made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the groundbreaking ceremony of Ashdod's new Southern Port, in October 2014: "We also have a wider vision. The day will come when trade arteries will lead to neighboring countries, and from them to us as well. Ultimately, there will be commercial relations and transportation here that will link us to the eastern expanse."³

In addition to making public statements, actions should also be taken to realize these intentions, according to the following guiding principles.

1. Strengthening peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, and links to Arab countries

It is in Israel's interests to strengthen its relations with Egypt and Jordan. While this is especially true from the security aspect, it is also true from the civic perspective as well. Israel must deepen its cooperation with the governments of these countries in order to pinpoint joint interests, such as dealing with terror threats (including from al-Qaeda and Islamic State), and exploiting energy sources and natural resources (such as water desalination and the marketing of Israeli natural gas). Israel's top obligation must be to uphold peace agreements and cultivate them in spheres that serve the interests of all the parties involved.

Along with Egypt and Jordan, there are other Arab players interested in taking a more active part in efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to engage on other regional issues. The reality created after the Arab Spring presents unique opportunities for shifting regional alliances. The following countries may have interest in intensifying cooperation with Israel regarding

³ Speech by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Groundbreaking Ceremony of the Ashdod Port, *Prime Minister's Office*, 18 October 2014.

civic domains: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Morocco and Tunisia. Israel should make efforts to fulfill this potential.

When developing cooperative frameworks and connections with Arab states, Israel must deal sensitively with national and collective Arab considerations, stemming from the historic and contemporary mosaic of denominations and religions in the region. Israel, for example, should avoid promoting a minority discourse that may be viewed as an attempt to undermine stability in the region. Israel should also be aware of the complex considerations of the region's countries and the different ethnic and religious groups, and give expression to them in its foreign policy.

2. Strengthening connections to regional Arab institutions

Israel should take action to create special connections with regional institutions, such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Today they are "beyond the pale" for Israel and the Israeli public; often, the sides are even on a diplomatic collision course. Many of the Arab institutions are weak, even more so after the Arab Spring, and are unable to create real change or agreement between the regional actors. Nevertheless, these institutions represent the Arab consensus and bestow legitimacy on various regional proceedings. Similarly, there are bodies like the GCC that is active in civil issues and even security domains that are very relevant to Israel. The GCC is relatively powerful because it operates on a pragmatic basis of joint interests, and not exalted values.

It would be wise for Israel to become familiar with these various bodies and their activities, and then attempt to interface with them. This may be conducive to improving the atmosphere in the region and testify to Israel's intentions to become part of it. Israel should already investigate what it would need to do to be given eventual observer status in organizations such as the Arab League, and receive a position similar to that of Turkey in the Arab League.

In addition, there are other non-Arab countries and bodies in the Middle East, and Israel can benefit from cooperating with them. These include veteran allies of Israel, including the Kurds in North Iraq, Turkey, Cypress (including the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, or TRNC), Southern Sudan, Ethiopia; also international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, formerly called Organization of the Islamic Conference). Israel must strive for cooperation with these organizations while taking the overall Arab position into consideration, and not with the goal of confronting the Arab establishments.

3. Raising the status of the Arab language

Israel should take action to raise the status of the Arab language in the region, and encourage recognition of it as the "Lingua Franca" of the Middle East. Israel should also showcase the artistic creations of Jews from Arab countries of origin who wrote and write today in Arabic. It should also translate Hebrew literature to Arabic, Turkish and Persian (Farsi), thus making Israeli culture

accessible to Arabic and Farsi speakers. This is similar to the *Aladdin* project which made information about the Holocaust accessible to speakers of Arabic and Persian.⁴ Similarly, Israel should be proactive in demonstrating the similarities between the sister languages, Hebrew and Arabic, because this similarity is strongly linked to the status of the Arabic language in Israel. Israel should act decisively to increase the presence of Arabic in Israel's public space, as it is the language of Israel's largest minority group.

4. Promoting an interfaith dialogue and establishing a shared monotheistic legacy

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the world's three monotheistic religions. In spite of the noticeable differences among them, they also share many similarities and a joint legacy. Israel, which views its roots belonging to a Jewish group that maintained its monotheistic religion over hundreds of years, ought to encourage interfaith dialogue so as to uncover the common denominators of the monotheistic religions and the foundations of tolerance and cooperative existence, as a basis for cooperation and shared lives in the region. Israel must promote this goal first and foremost within the country's borders, but should then enlarge the discourse beyond the borders and include in it official sources and semi-official sources.

5. Preservation of Jewish heritage and cultural sites in the Arab and Middle Eastern space

Action must be taken to preserve the religious, cultural heritage and artifacts and sites of ancient Jewish communities in Arab countries, and provide assistance to Jewish communities or to the remnants of these communities in Middle East countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Iran. For example, it is important to preserve ancient synagogues, cemeteries and other sites, as well as documents and artifacts connected to Judaism and Jewish communities or to their descendants now living in Israel.

Conservation activities must be done in coordination with, and together with, the relevant countries, as well as with the organizations created by descendants of the Jewish communities that once lived in Arab countries (these descendants may now live in Israel or other countries around the world). Conservation must be done only with the agreement of the Jewish communities or their remnants in Arab countries, not out of coercion or necessity.

The foundation of this enterprise must be the recognition that Jewish communities in Arab countries had been part of the local social mosaic in those countries, and that their long-term presence throughout the years had been unbroken and independent of the existence of the Jewish state. Preservation of Jewish heritage sites can also serve as a basis for cooperative activities surrounding joint interests of Israel and the countries of the region, and lead to recognition of the long-term shared history of Jews and Arabs. Working

⁴ For more details on the *Aladdin* project, see: <http://www.projetaladin.org/en/the-aladdin-project.html>

together to map shared cultural roots can contribute to removal of barriers between Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities in a region and lead to the understanding that Israel and the Jewish people are not an alien presence in the region, as argued by various Arab political groups. Preservation work can also encourage Arab countries to cooperate with Israel in a “protected space” involving shared interests, thus contributing to Israel’s foreign policy.

Simultaneously with efforts to preserve ancient Jewish heritage sites throughout the region, Israel must recognize that its land also holds many Arab, Muslim, Christian, and Druze heritage sites. Israel must commit to treat these important sites with respect, as well as the believers who visit these sites. Even though this issue is not directly included in Israel’s foreign policy, it has great influence on Israel’s integration in the region, thus it is important to list it together with all the other guiding principles of Israeli foreign policy.

At the top of the Arab list of heritage sites is the Al Aqsa mosque and the al-Haram al-Sharif area surrounding it, known as the Temple Mount in English and *Har HaBayit* in Hebrew. Israel must aspire to transform its activities in this holy, religiously sensitive site to a cornerstone of its cooperation with proxies in the Arab world headed by Jordan, as written in the Israel-Jordan peace agreement.

But the Temple Mount is not the only site under discussion; there are scores of other sites throughout the country that are holy to Muslims, Christians, Druze and other religions. For example, there is an important site in the Ashkelon region that is very important to Shi’ites. Israel must treat these sites as it would expect other countries to treat Jewish sites throughout the Middle East and even Europe.

As explained earlier, Israel operates in several spheres of reference; the above constitutes the first sphere of its neighbors throughout the Middle East and the Arab world. In addition, Israel also operates in two additional spheres of reference: the European and Mediterranean spheres.

C. Europe

In addition to its ongoing review of its relationships with regional countries, Israel should also examine its relations with Europe and the European Union (EU). Once Cyprus joined the EU, Europe became physically closer to Israel. However, the physical closeness between Israel and Europe is not the only reason for the diplomatic relations between them. Israel and Europe share many historical, economic, civic and communal associations and also share many values; all this serves to support the development of a deep relationship with Europe. To this we add: Israel’s history; the institutionalized history of its relations with Europe; and the contribution of physical proximity to economic relations.

Ever since the Israeli state was founded, it has actively promoted its integration with Europe and with Europe’s economic, social and cultural systems. This

tendency was accelerated by Israel's marginalization in the Asian sphere, due to pressure of the Arab countries.

In recent decades, the EU has become a very important political and economic bloc; its influence extends throughout the world. Israel must consistently and continuously work towards intensifying its relationship with Europe, in the political–diplomatic sphere as well as in the economic and social-cultural sphere. True, there is justified criticism of the EU for its weaknesses: the “bureaucratic monster” it created, and its choice of “soft power” over real power for achieving political assets. Nevertheless, the EU still fills a central role in the world and wields considerable influence. Israel must “calibrate its compass” in accordance with the positions of the EU and its decisions; in other words, it must conduct a foreign policy that is adjusted to EU values. Most important of all, Israel must meticulously share broad commonalities with the EU countries, based on liberal and democratic values. The abandoning of these values, and the adoption of national and religious values in their stead, will distance Israel from Europe.

“Israel is from Europe, but not in Europe” wrote historian Dan Diner. In many respects, the State of Israel was born in Europe despite its physical location in Western Asia, very close to Africa. True, most of Israel's population and many of the immigrants to its shores were not born in Europe, and their roots are not ingrained there but deep in the Arab space in the Middle East or Islamic countries in the region. Nevertheless, there is a strong link between the establishment of the State and the events in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. There is also a similar connection between the development of Israel's form of government and economic system of the twenty-first century, to those common in Europe.

After the Second World War, Europe took Israel's side in many instances, mainly from a sense of historical debt and obligation to the Jewish people that had to cope with the consequences of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, as time passed, the commitment of Europe's younger generation to Israel and the Jewish people has taken a turn. Europe changed dramatically and preference or sympathy for Israel has weakened greatly; they are now more prone to greater criticism and less sympathy, mainly with regard to the conflict with the Palestinians, but not only in this context. There are those who go as far as to say that harbingers of the old anti-Semitism are again rising to the surface. Whether this is true or not, Israel must be pro-active and initiate a wider common denominator with Europe which will go beyond the heavy historical dregs of the past. Instead, Israel should work in close cooperation with Europe in the future.

The relationship that Israel developed with Europe naturally reflects the European modus operandi which is bureaucratic and institutionalized. Europe recognized its ‘special relations’ with Israel many times, starting with the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1959, then the Essen proclamation in 1994 when the European Council announced that Israel would benefit from “special status in its relations with the EU on the basis of reciprocity and common interests.” Finally, agreements were signed in the first decade of the

twenty-first century between the EU and Israel giving Israel a “special status,” allowing it partial integration in the European institutions as a non-member.

In December 2013, a special proposal was introduced by the EU which would give Israel (and the future Palestinian state) a Special Privileged Partnership status with the EU. This proposal is conditional on achieving a final-status peace agreement, as stated by the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council:

“The EU will provide an unprecedented package of European political, economic and security support to both parties in the context of a final status agreement. In the event of a final peace agreement the EU will offer Israel and the future state of Palestine a Special Privileged Partnership including increased access to the European markets, closer cultural and scientific links, facilitation of trade and investments.”⁵

The EU did not clearly outline the nature of a Special Privileged Partnership, and Israel on its part did not submit a list with its preferences or needs. Thus former High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton made a rather vague declaration (in March 2014) that cooperation with Israel and with the future Palestinian state, would include *“huge opportunities in transport, energy, water, environment, people-to-people... that will benefit Israelis and Palestinians with a special emphasis on young people.”⁶*

Since, due to the stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, many official European statements on the Middle East did not include reference to the Special Privileged Partnership offer, although it was emphasized that it is still on the table.

Europe is hard pressed to define Israel’s special status. And Israel also has difficulty with providing a definition to its desired end-game relations with the EU. It is clear that Israel does not want to be a full member in the EU, because it cannot implement the four freedoms that are the basis for membership: free movement of merchandise, services, capital, and civilians. Yes, Israel and the EU could easily reach agreement with regard to most of the issues surrounding transfer of merchandise, services and capital. However, it is anticipated that Israel will not allow free movement of people, whether European citizens or others, to visit or live on Israeli territory. The geo-political situation forces Israel to subordinate its actions to security considerations. Thus, it cannot promise to implement this freedom completely.

In late 2015, the EU called for a policy of labelling Israeli products manufactured in the settlements; this decision led to a very harsh response on the part of the Israeli government. Planned consultation meetings were cancelled and Israel expressed its protest against the labelling in various ways. Nevertheless, Israel should publically announce that it views the EU as its closest point of reference

⁵ [“Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process,”](#) EU Foreign Affairs Council, 13 December 2013.

⁶ [“Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council \(Ukraine and Middle East Peace Process\) \(17/03/2014\)”](#), Delegation of the European Union to Israel, March 2014.

and take action to strengthen cooperation with it. This is in addition to the bilateral activities it conducts with individual EU member states. The EU institutions are especially important: Israel's official and semi-official bodies should intensify their contacts with the various European bodies, heighten their visibility in them, and even try to influence their decision-making process regarding specific issues. What is especially surprising is the fact that Israel is not being pro-active in updating its trade agreements with Europe and adapting them to contemporary trade and the advantages of the Israeli economy.

However, the Israeli connection to the EU is not limited to bureaucratic questions; there are also more substantive questions to be asked. As mentioned above, liberal values and ideals mark the common denominator uniting Israel with European countries. These values were very important in Israel in the first decades of its existence. They were also the ones leading to the establishment of the EU. It seems that recent years have seen changes taking place in Israeli society, changes leading to the strengthening of national and religious values over liberal ones; this is similar to processes taking place throughout the Middle East. Europe is also facing challenges in this regard. The Israeli establishment must recognize the importance of working hand in hand with Europe, and of finding ways to establish commonalities with it.⁷

Studies and polls that examined the cultural differences between Israel and Europe point to a salient difference between the positions of the Israeli public and the European public. An important study compared the opinions of teachers in Israel and Europe regarding the place of the individual in society, on an axis that ranges from autonomy/freedom to identification with/assimilation into the society.⁸ The study showed that Israeli society expects the individual to identify with it and assimilate into it to a great degree, while in Europe (especially Western Europe) the individual is perceived to have much greater freedom of choice regarding issues on the public agenda. A striking difference was found regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict/peace process: Europeans attribute great importance to the benefits that individuals in the Israeli society are likely to enjoy following a peace agreement, while Jewish-Israelis tend to focus on the great harm they believe will follow such an agreement.

As a society that seeks a greater sense of group identification among its individuals, the Israeli society assigns much greater weight to tradition and religion than publics in many European countries. Therefore, an Israeli withdrawal from territories which have great importance in Jewish history, especially Eastern Jerusalem, would encounter strong protest from the Israeli public and numerous difficulties. All of this runs counter to European expectations.

A challenge faced by all governments in Israel involves striking the right balance between social and political cohesiveness of the Jewish society in Israel on the one hand, and guarding its liberal and democratic values on the other. A public

⁷ Nadav Tamir, "[Europe is not hostile to Israel](#)," *Haaretz*, 10 February 2015.

⁸ Anat Bardi and Lilach Sagiv, "The European Union and Israel: Comparison of cultures and implications," in Klaus Boehnke (Ed.), *Europe and Israel: A Complex Relationship*, (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 2003).

opinion poll conducted by the EU in Israel (May-June 2014) shows that most of the Israeli public agrees that Israel and the EU share similar values to a sufficient degree; 75% out of the 1004 respondents agreed to this statement. By contrast, only 58% of respondents throughout the Middle East held the same opinion. About half of the Israeli respondents (49%) expressed faith and trust in the EU as an international body, a much higher percentage than their faith in the UN (23%) and NATO (39%).⁹

In early 2015, a group of Israeli academics and experts focusing on the EU published a statement that Israel must strive to improve its relationship with the EU and “choose Europe”. According to them, Israel can find great interest in intensifying its economic cooperation with Europe.¹⁰ To accomplish this, Israel should adopt European work methods, standards and legislation. Also, Israel must hope that its interests will be protected even if Europe strengthens its economic relationship with the US.

In addition to the economic domain, Israel should increase cooperation with the EU in other spheres such as athletics, science, research and development, and culture.

An important issue for Israel is the protection of Jewish minorities in Europe, their institutions, their freedom of religion, and their forms of organization. Israel must avoid publically calling on members of Jewish communities in Europe to make *aliya* to Israel; instead, Israel should work to impose responsibility on Europe for ensuring the protection and freedom of religion of the Jewish communities in their countries. For example, Israel should participate in the efforts conducted by the EU to combat anti-Semitism in Europe, and help in ensuring they are effective.

In this context, it should be noted that there is palpable concern in Israel over the continued Muslim immigration to Europe and the rise in numbers (and percentages) of Muslim citizens in populations throughout Europe. As Dr. Lior Herman formulated the problem, the (mainly Jewish) Israeli society is concerned that Europe will lose its liberal value system that characterized it, and Israel will lose an important ally.¹¹ It will take a long time for the Europeans to decide how to deal with this issue, and the final outcome and results cannot be predicted. Israel must consistently and coherently present its positions on these issues to the EU and various countries, while taking into consideration the way its positions are reflected in its dealings with its own Arab minority.

Israel must also turn special attention to security cooperation with Europe. First of all, Israel and the EU have a shared goal in fighting terror. Second of all, it must be remembered that European forces filled a role on Israel's border in recent years. The most significant force, which did not last long, was EU BAM (Border Assistance Mission) created in 2005 – which was supposed to monitor

⁹ [“Israelis see EU as important partner, with common values to cooperate,”](#) *EU Neighbourhood News Service*, 22 September 2014.

¹⁰ Arad Nir, [“Academics call on Israel to ‘choose Europe’,”](#) *Al-Monitor*, 23 February 2015.

¹¹ Lior Herman, [“Straddling the East-West divide: A subjective Israeli perspective on Muslim immigration to Europe,”](#) *Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies*, July 2015.

the Rafah crossing. When Hamas took control over the Gaza Strip in 2007, EU BAM was pushed out. Additional European forces operate as part of UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force) in southern Lebanon, and UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) in the Golan. Similarly, there are European representatives in the unarmed TIPH (Temporary International Presence) force that oversees the city of Hebron. In all these cases, Europe instructs its forces to use “soft power,” while Israel would prefer the reverse. Perhaps an Israeli-European dialogue on the issue could lead to better understanding and to changing Israel’s traditional skepticism of European forces in the region. On the security issue: Israel should also examine the option of joining an international organization as a full member, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In summary, there are several channels in which Israel should take action as part of its EU policy: (1) Israel should view the EU as a strategic partner and adopt operative steps, including bilateral security cooperation with EU countries and with the EU as a whole; (2) Israel should form a mechanism that will promote increased cooperation between Israeli institutions and their equivalents in the EU, and a greater Israeli presence in the EU’s institutions; (3) Israel and Europe should act to strengthen liberal and democratic values; (4) Israel should act to preserve the Jewish legacy throughout Europe and maintain close contact with the Jewish communities on the continent. Similarly, Israel must act to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, the destroyed Jewish European communities, and their descendants in Israel; (5) Israel should update its trade agreements with the EU and take action to strengthen its economic ties with it.

D. The Mediterranean Basin

In addition to Israel’s past and current deep ties to Europe, the country’s relations with its immediate neighbours evokes a complex picture with a long history. True, a large percentage of the Jewish population in Israel (and certainly the Arab population in Israel) originated in this region. Nevertheless, even in this seventh decade of the existence of the State of Israel, the formidable tensions between the Jewish state and its (mainly) Muslim neighbors have not been resolved. Even the changes that took place following the Arab Spring, and the disintegration of many states in the region, have not yet brought about the hoped-for transformations. Nevertheless, Israel and the other states situated around the Mediterranean Basin on the European, Asian and African section, share joint interests. These interests have been sharpened and clarified in recent years, mainly in the energy field. One example is the discovery of gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin.

The importance of the marine environment for countries lying near water, has increased immeasurably in recent years. This is mainly due to underwater discoveries of natural gas, but also because the Mediterranean Sea has become a key transit route for immigrants (or refugees) on their way from the Middle East, Asia and Africa to Europe.

Thus, the Mediterranean Sea and its challenges constitute a wealth of opportunities for cooperation, including: the need to deal with illegal emigration (perhaps the African emigration via Egypt toward Israel may be compared to the emigration-routes to Europe); the need for delimitation of maritime boundaries; the need to deal with the dangers caused by the rise of sea-level; and, finally, environmental issues such as mounting pollution, fish depletion, invasive fish species, and changes in the coasts and shores. Israel must assume an important role in the Mediterranean Basin, especially in its eastern section, and develop partnerships with European countries in the north, with North African countries in the south, and with its neighbors to the east.

Various parties in the EU are leading different programs for these areas. Following the Barcelona Process, various initiatives – such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – have been launched over the last twenty years for cooperation between the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Basin. These include initiatives for economic cooperation as well as the Union for the Mediterranean, in which Israel has a key role.¹² Similarly, the Mediterranean Games are held regularly; this is a kind of regional Olympics under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee and the Hellenic Olympic Committee. However, Israel is not invited to take part in these games.

Israel must position itself as a key player in this space. A permanent Israeli presence in this arena can positively affect its integration in the region. Cooperation in the fields of environment and energy is especially important.

1. Natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin

Large natural gas deposits were discovered on the Israeli land shelves under the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea. This strengthened Israel and jump-started its economy. Gas deposits were also discovered in Egyptian waters, but they have not yet been developed. The likelihood of finding additional gas deposits in the region, serves to raise interest among neighboring states such as Cyprus, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Turkey shares a central role in this as it is a market for gas distribution, with interest in exporting gas from diverse sources (including Israel). Thus, it is a party with direct interest in the subject of natural gas. This development obligates the formation of cooperative regional enterprises of different types and may even lead to significant changes in the relationships that have existed in recent decades between European and Middle Eastern states.

Possible spheres for regional cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean are:

Environmental protection – Countries in the region must work together to minimize harm to the marine and regional environments in the process of extracting natural gas resources. Similarly, countries must ensure that no country is damaged by the actions of its neighbors.

¹² Israel's Professor Ilan Chet was appointed to serve as Deputy Secretary General for Higher Education and Research in this organization.

Ensuring the security of the facilities in the high seas - Gas extraction facilities in the territorial seas need to be protected from hostile actors that might want to sabotage these installations in order to undermine the region's stability. Security and civilian cooperation between Eastern Mediterranean Basin countries can help resolve tensions and crises.

Profit from gas production - In order to produce and export gas efficiently, there is need to overcome the costs of necessary complex and expensive technologies, and to ensure financial viability and profitability. The countries in the region share a common interest in gas export in order to save costs. The integrated cooperation of a number of countries ('maritime clusters') would facilitate the minimizing of export costs and maximizing the profit. Israel must try to find cooperative frameworks such as these clusters, especially with Cyprus and Turkey.

2. Maritime boundaries

The work of delimitation of maritime boundaries between countries in the region is already underway. Marine laws and international law have been updated in recent years, and these laws require complex implementation in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. With regard to Israel and its neighbors, the determination of maritime boundaries may have far-reaching economic ramifications, especially with the discovery of natural gas deposits on Israel's coast. The work of determining marine borders is much more difficult when it involves hostile parties such as the sequence of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, composed of: Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

3. Emigration

Emigration of refugees to Europe has become a political issue with great importance. The emigration routes of Syrian citizens from Turkey to Europe were vastly improved, while Turkey turned a blind eye. The exit of hundreds of thousands of refugees to Europe generated a crisis within the EU – raising tensions between different member states and raising the issue to the top of the public agenda. This crisis, and the societal challenges that Europe is facing, is expected to remain a burning issue in the coming years as well. Although Israel is not physically situated on the emigration routes above, it must remain involved in this issue, because it also faces the possibility of emigrants approaching it by sea.

4. Environment

The Mediterranean Basin – waters and land alike – is constantly affected by human activity. Some ramifications of these effects are: the depletion of fish in the Mediterranean Sea and the mobility of certain fish species from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea; pollution discharged into the ocean and the waste it contains; and the effects of seawater desalination on the coasts.

These changes constitute a joint challenge to the countries in the region. The erosion of the off-shore pillar is another issue that could be dealt with through

cooperative action. When the sides seem unwilling or unable to work together on these issues, then even Israeli official statements that are supportive of cooperation can have a positive effect.

Israel should serve as an example to the countries of the region with regard to environmental protection, and should offer the resources at its disposal to help its neighbours meet challenges of these types.

E. Summary

Over the years, Israel's 'island mentality' bore fruit because it caused the country to develop independence with the help of the blocs beyond its immediate surroundings. However, this mindset has also limited Israel, as the country is still often viewed as an external element in the region in which it is situated. There is no reason to assume that opposition to Israel will change or even pass, without any initiative on Israel's part.

Israel is located at a juncture of a number of political systems and at the intersection of three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. It must strengthen its connection to each and every one of them and avoid exclusivity. For example, Israel's activities in the Middle East should be compatible with its activities in Europe and the Mediterranean Basin; these activities should even complement one another. Should the Asia or Africa become more relevant to Israel in the future, then Israel should follow these same principles and take similar action in these regions as well.

In summary, when Israel re-examines and shapes its foreign policy it should take an inclusive multi-regional approach. Israel must care not grant exclusivity in the future to any one circle of belonging. It ought to strengthen its contacts with countries and other entities in the Middle East, as well as with Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. While doing so, Israel should ensure that its activities in one circle promote – and do not harm – its standing in other adjacent circles.