

## Israel and the European Union: Enemies, A Love Story

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### **A. One Step Forward, Two Steps Back**

Israel and the European Union (EU) have built a special, strategic relationship over decades, since the 1960s. Following centuries of war, two world wars, tens of millions dead and destruction across the continent, the EU can be declared as the most successful expression of Europeans' aspiration for peace and prosperity. With a population of 450 million, the EU is not only Israel's biggest trade partner, it is also the biggest and most generous aid donor to the Palestinian Authority (PA), without which Israel would be forced to allocate extensive budgetary resources for the PA's preservation and its commitments. Moreover, a large part of the Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora has its roots in Europe. Many Israelis aspire to the continent's standards of moral and cultural values and to its political systems. At the same time, many in Europe see Israel and the Israelis as members of the European family. Agreements on economic, trade, science, and other matters of vital value to Israel have been signed over the years within the framework of the special relationship that has developed with the EU.

However, for the past two decades, in fact since the second *intifada* broke out in September 2000 and since Israel gradually distanced itself from the Oslo Accords, these special relations have been on a collision course due to growing differences over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Europe has taken a committed stand in favor of diplomatic negotiations and an agreed two-state solution; often, it seems, Europe is a lone voice in this regard (other than lip service paid by other players). It makes an effort to preserve its standing as the guardian of the Oslo Accords. Europe sees itself as the ultimate barrier against what it views as continued Israeli efforts to erode and even bury the option of two states, Israel and Palestine, living peacefully side by side.

An additional explanation, which I heard from quite a number of sources in Brussels, attributes Europe's commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state to the same moral values and compass that explain its historic sense of guilt toward the Jewish people. In other words, some in Europe view support for the establishment of Israel to compensate for the injustice of the Holocaust as the source of deep European injustice toward the Palestinians. Europe now feels bound to atone for that injustice, too, and to strive for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Israel finds this worldview hard to digest. Some perceive it as a skewed and even anti-Semitic attitude, which intensifies the alienation and friction between Israel and Europe.

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Against this backdrop, the Israeli government constantly maneuvers between the need to improve or, at least preserve, the economic achievements and cooperation with the EU and its concerns over any European involvement in the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (or in efforts to resolve it). Israel set out to differentiate between its supporters and opponents among the EU member states, and succeeded (to a large extent) with the help of the friendliest among them in averting resolutions critical of its policies by the EU's Foreign Affairs Council (which require consensus) and often by the European Parliament, too. Countries critical of Israel also utilize that same consensus tool to prevent upgrades in the EU's agreements with Israel and to link them to progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. For example, the Israel-EU Association Council, which brings together foreign ministers from both sides, has not been convened since 2012. The goal of Association Council meetings is to set in motion working groups to discuss improvements that each side seeks to make in the relationship. The 2004 ascension of central and eastern European states to the EU, which prompted Israeli hopes of a positive change in terms of the internal European balance of power, only helped slow the Israel-EU collision trajectory to a minor extent. What is more, the weakness of center-left liberalism in Europe and elsewhere in the world over the past decade has contributed to the rise of the European far-left, which holds anti-Israeli positions.

Unfortunately, Israel deals with EU criticism in a tactical manner, mostly responding only to immediate and specific. Israeli political leaders devote too little attention to the complex relationship with EU, whereas the Israeli public is almost totally unaware of the strategic importance of Israel-EU ties and the potential that lies in them. The fact that the last Israeli prime minister to officially visit Brussels was the late Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 is uncontested proof of Israel's desire to limit diplomatic ties with the EU and its institutions to a bare minimum. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did meet in Brussels in December 2017 with the EU's foreign ministers (for an informal breakfast) as part of his lobbying campaign for President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, but he did not visit the EU institutions.

The struggle that Israel is waging to distance Europe from diplomatic influence in the Middle East blends in well with other regional and global campaigns that trap the EU in a position of international disadvantage. Among the developments undermining the EU's leadership are its attempts to overcome the 2008 economic crisis, the Arab Spring and the decline of the Palestinian issue in the eyes of key Arab states, the rise of the Islamic State, the drop in oil prices and in the importance of Middle Eastern oil for Europe, China's rising power, the migrant crisis in Europe, Trump's election and his humiliating attitude toward leaders of the continent and NATO, Brexit, and most recently the coronavirus crisis. All of the above require the best efforts, time and diplomatic energy of Europe's leaders. Given this wide array of challenges, Israel thinks it can continue enjoying the best the continent has to offer without overly risking censure.

Germany's growing power within the European block and the weakness of others (mainly France) is perceived as helpful to Israel in this regard. In the differentiation policy that Israel has adopted toward EU member states and in its identification with the most pro-Israeli among them, Israel often joins "rogue" states such as Hungary and Poland as well as far-right parties and groups. These provide Israel with support for the Greater Land of Israel and annexation ideas, and in return, Israel provides them with legitimacy despite their anti-democratic, anti-European, racist and even anti-Semitic positions. Such is not the case, obviously, regarding Israel's alliance with Greece and Cyprus. Here, the severe crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey and the discovery of natural gas reserves in Israeli waters are the key factors in these states' openness toward Israel and their cooperation with

it. In addition, the shared values of these three states are presented as one of the foundations for the cooperation among them. However, what is perceived and presented in Europe as the distancing of Israeli governments under Netanyahu from the two-state vision necessarily leads to a widening diplomatic gap, deepening mistrust and lack of sympathy toward Israel among some EU members, especially the Western ones.

## **B. That's Just the Way It Is! Indeed?**

Such was the “reality” I encountered upon my arrival in Brussels in August 2012 as Israel’s head of mission to the institutions of the EU and NATO. It reflected the prism through which Israeli politicians, even the most senior ones, viewed the EU. Regrettably, many Israeli diplomats share this view (most are imbued with an American orientation from their initial days as foreign ministry cadets) as do many in Israel’s security establishment. In their eyes, Europe (the EU, Brussels) is an anti-Israel body that is best distanced from every focal point of influence over Israel and allowed only the minimal role (accepting EU membership in the Quartet, ignoring some uncoordinated EU aid to the Palestinians in Area C, and more) needed for Israel to benefit from relations with it. This, sadly, is a very narrow prism that precludes a fundamental examination of the entire array of Israel’s relations with Europe, the tremendous benefits they yielded for Israel in better days (such as the 1995 association agreement during the Oslo process), and the potential that lies ahead if Israel decides to warm up relations with the EU and not just with some of its member states.

Throughout my four years in Brussels, I was invited regularly to meetings of “regional groups”, such as the Visegrad and Nordic groups, held several times a year. Our access to these frequent sessions allows Israeli representatives to understand what is “cooking” in terms of issues of interest and to inform our friends of our positions and requests, which they in turn pass on to their home countries, briefing their foreign ministers prior to the monthly EU foreign ministers’ meetings, for example. Often, when the issue is sensitive or sufficiently important, this discourse is conducted at the foreign ministers’ level or even the heads of state level.

The negative image of the EU in Israel leads to disinterest and reluctance on the part of Israeli decision makers to invest in relations with it, as proven by the limited number of Israeli ministers and Members of Knesset who visit the EU institutions. Faced with this disinterest, we have been witnessing attempts by far-right Members of the European Parliament in recent years to hold meetings and seminars about “support for Israel”. They mostly invite representatives of the settlements (e.g. the Yesha Council) and largely deal with “Israel’s right to the entire Land of Israel”. Most participants at these meetings are members of European Parliament groups as well as staunch Palestinian supporters who show up to challenge the speakers. Sadly, perhaps because of their political weakness, Israel’s Labor and Meretz parties rarely hold meetings with the Socialists & Democrats Group in the European Parliament. Endless attempts on the part of the Israeli embassy in Brussels to promote discourse between Likud party representatives and representatives of the center-right majority in the European Parliament have yielded few results.

Avigdor Liberman, who served as the Netanyahu government’s foreign minister from April 2009 to December 2012 and again from November 2013 to May 2015, correctly identified the focal points of criticism toward Israel in Brussels (and Strasbourg). Liberman appointed me to my post despite, and perhaps because, of my known political views. My previous posting as head of the Ministry’s Center for Policy Research required quite a few meetings with the minister, including one-on-one. At a meeting prior to my departure for Brussels,

Lieberman said that in his view, the greatest challenge facing Israel lies in the EU. With his approval, the Foreign Ministry accepted our request and significantly beefed up the embassy department tasked with ties with the European Parliament. Unfortunately, 2019 cuts affected the embassy's operating budget, doing away with the parliamentary liaison's slot (already in the 1980s, the Israeli mission in Brussels suggested that its staff be augmented ahead of every European Parliament session with Israeli diplomats posted in European member states).

### **C. Wanted: A Broader Prism and A Strategic Israeli Policy on Europe**

In early 1994, ahead of the scheduled December summit in Essen of the EU Council under Germany's presidency, Chancellor Helmut Kohl asked Israel's then-Ambassador to Germany Avi Primor, "What do you want?" The Chancellor, a friend of Israel, also sought to take advantage of the positive climate in the region and told then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, "I am willing to serve as the engine to advance Israel's relations with Europe. Tell me what you want". The Israeli government had a hard time answering the question of the depth and extent of closeness we wanted with the EU. Would we want full membership in the EU (probably not possible)? Would we want a model similar to the EU's relations with Switzerland? With the EFTA states (the trade bloc consisting at the time of Austria, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Iceland and Lichtenstein)? Or a model of our own?

This was not the only time the question was put before the Israeli government. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fisher once told his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres, half-jokingly, "Make peace and we will accept you and the Palestinians into the EU". Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi proposed that Israel be accepted into the EU without linking the Palestinians to such a move. These proposals generated very little interest within Israeli government circles, the media and public. Unfortunately, the Israeli public is exposed to our relations with the EU mostly through negative reactions of Israeli politicians to critical remarks by European officials on the settlements, violation of Palestinian rights and, more recently, the annexation issue.

As I often told senior officials in Brussels, both the EU and the Israeli establishment are not doing enough to inform the public in Israel about the potential of improved relations with the block. Israel's trade agreements with the European Community, starting in the mid-1960s and the subsequent 1975 Free Trade Agreement, have contributed hugely to Israel's shift from a largely agrarian society and economy to an advanced industrialized country. The research and science agreements with the EU have yielded billions of euros from the block's joint fund (to which Israel also contributes, obviously) for Israeli research and development. The "open skies" agreement has contributed significantly to the development of incoming and outgoing tourism, and more. The public at large knows very little about all of the above.

In December 2013, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council suggested upgrading the relationship with Israel to a special privileged partnership once Israel and the Palestinians achieve peace. A similar proposal was made to the Palestinians. The EU reiterated its suggestion in early 2016. The proposal obviously did not facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, but for the matter at hand in this article it is important to note that Israel avoided responding to the proposal and the vast majority of Israelis is completely unaware that it was presented. The European proposal generated very limited discourse among Israel's political echelon. Then-President Shimon Peres issued a favorable response, but the Foreign Ministry did not instruct Brussels (nor any other Israeli embassy in EU capitals) to examine the seriousness of the idea and what it entailed. We did so informally at our own initiative. Indeed, the Council



was wrong in issuing a general and somewhat vague proposal, but what bothered Israeli decision makers was the proposal's linkage to an Israeli commitment to a peace agreement.

## **D. Summary, Or Where Do We Go From Here?**

Europe is struggling to overcome the crisis into which it has been plunged by the developments of the past decade and more, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and Brussels' initial ineffective response that left each member state to deal with the disease on its own with very little block-wide coordination. Combined with the expected retirement of Chancellor Angela Merkel, France's weakness, and failure thus far to achieve agreement on post-Brexit relations with the UK, Europe is hard pressed to play a leading role in the global arena. Nonetheless, it still constitutes the West's largest economic bloc with a population of 450 million, and is moving toward deeper integration by seeking to jointly raise investment capital for a coronavirus recovery fund. The EU is a close, accessible and familiar neighbor to Israel and Israelis.

In order to indeed be part of the European family, or at least to reduce the friction with Europe, the government of Israel must devote time and resources to understanding the European DNA. It must have an answer (or at least an opinion) to the question of "what is Europe". Are we talking about Germany, the Netherlands, France and the Scandinavian states, or perhaps Hungary and Poland? And beyond those questions, what do we want from Europe? What type of relationship do we wish to forge with it? And deriving from that answer, which EU group would we like to join, and can we count on the support of so-called rogue states and far-right groups in the long term?

We must remember that due to its long colonial history in the Middle East and its physical proximity to the region, Europe knows our neighborhood and its problems better than most international players. We must concede that Europe is very cautious and sensitive in its relations with Israel. It expresses vocal displeasure with our conduct toward the Palestinians, but is not interested in bringing things to a head. Europe is, indeed, delaying upgrades in its relations with Israel, issuing guidelines on settlement product labeling and condemnations of Israeli behavior that it views as unacceptable, but it has avoided imposing sanctions or concrete steps significantly harmful to Israel's ties with the continent. Given this state of affairs, even sanctions in response to possible Israeli annexation in the West Bank were more by the way of wishful thinking on the part of some Europeans than a realistic option.

Reality in the Middle East, the convergence of interests between Israel and key Arab states, the drop in global oil prices, the threats of Islamic terrorism and Israel's affinity for the European family create opportunities for continued development of Israel-Europe relations. Finally, Europe and its positions must be brought up for public discussion in Israel, and even more so, the government of Israel must be willing to converse with the EU and hear out its views (without committing to accept them, of course) rather than alienating Brussels and labeling it as "anti-Israeli".