

Divided and Divisive

*Europeans, Israel
and Israeli-Palestinian
Peacemaking*

Edited by Dr. Muriel Asseburg & Dr. Nimrod Goren



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CONTENT

PREFACE	4
INTRODUCTION Dr. Muriel Asseburg and Dr. Nimrod Goren	5
CHAPTER 1. A MORE INWARD LOOKING EUROPEAN UNION <i>The Structural Limits to a more Effective EU Foreign and Security Policy</i> Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza	8
Introduction	8
1. The persistent challenge of unanimity and a weak High Representative	9
2. A more inward looking EU, despite focus on ‘European sovereignty/strategic autonomy’	12
3. Brexit uncertainty is a challenge for European foreign policy	15
4. An ‘institutional vacuum’ strengthens coalitions of (larger) member states	18
Outlook	20
CHAPTER 2. DIVISIVE POLICIES <i>Israel’s Foreign Policy towards the EU and its Member States</i> Dr. Eyal Ronen with Dr. Nimrod Goren	21
Introduction	21
1. Background	22
2. With which EU regional blocs has Israel allied itself? On what basis?	25
3. How does Israel leverage its growing bilateral ties with EU Member States to advance its interests?	28
4. The perception of Israel’s foreign policy towards the EU	32
Conclusion	35
CHAPTER 3. POLITICAL PARALYSIS <i>The Impact of Divisions among EU Member States on the European Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict</i> Dr. Muriel Asseburg	36
Introduction	36
1. Impediments to an effective European role	37
2. Three blocks within the EU	40
3. Prospects	49
Conclusion	50
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS Dr. Muriel Asseburg and Dr. Nimrod Goren	52
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	60

PREFACE

The report *Divided and Divisive* analyses the current dynamics of the relations between the European Union and Israel. Experts from Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik – The German Institute for International and Security Affairs reflect on the implications these developments have on the long-stalled Middle East Peace Process. The authors offer highly relevant recommendations and insights for anyone who seeks to contribute to a fair and sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The relevance of this report goes beyond this conflict, however. It demonstrates the European Union's (EU) increasing fragility and its growing inability to effectively protect and act upon its fundamental values of respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. These are precisely the values that have made the EU a crucial instrument in strengthening peaceful co-existence. Hence, this report is a call to action to solidify these values for the sake of the EU itself.

PAX wants to thank Dr. Muriel Asseburg, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza and Dr. Eyal Ronen for their thorough analyses, deep reflections and commitment to this project.

Jan Gruiters
Director PAX

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Muriel Asseburg and Dr. Nimrod Goren

Over the last 40 years, since the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty (that alluded to but did not solve the Palestinian question) and the European Community's 1980 Venice Declaration, Europe has been seeking ways to help advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. The task was not an easy one, mostly due to United States of America (US) dominance of peace negotiations and negative Israeli attitudes towards Europe as a mediator. Thus, while Europeans were key in shaping international language on the conflict, they have remained in the back seat when it comes to shaping dynamics on the ground. Since the collapse in 2014 of the John Kerry initiative to advance the peace process, the task has become even more difficult for the Europeans. Realities on the ground, such as a right-wing government in Israel lacking interest in advancing a peace process, expanded settlement construction, as well as the internal Palestinian split and governance deficiencies in the Palestinian Authority, make the two-state solution ever more difficult to achieve. In addition, Israel's leadership has worked to weaken and divide the EU in order to limit its role on the issue. In this endeavor, it has profited from different interests and priorities among EU Member States as reflected in discussions and decision-making processes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These trends have increasingly intensified in recent years, and it is the goal of this publication to analyze them, assess their impact on European capacities and policies, and devise recommendations to tackle and perhaps even reverse them. The publication includes three analytical chapters focusing on internal European dynamics, on Israel's foreign policy towards the EU, and on EU policy-making regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict/peace process.

In his contribution "A More Inward Looking EU: The structural limits to a more effective EU foreign and security policy", Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza analyses the short to medium term trends

challenging the EU's capacity for a pro-active and coherent foreign policy that would bring to the fore the economic and political weight of the EU and its Member States. The first obstacle lies in the institutional structure of the EU – with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) remaining purely intergovernmental policy areas, in which each decision (with very few exceptions) requires unanimity. This gives every member state a veto and makes decision-making necessarily oriented towards a low common denominator. Paradoxically, a second major factor limiting the EU's capacity as an effective foreign and security policy actor is its current debate about 'strategic autonomy' or 'European sovereignty'. This debate has created frictions between Germany, France and Poland, inter alia, weakening rather than strengthening EU coherence. The current focus is also on cooperation in military capabilities, which will take years if not decades to realize. The third major challenge for the Europeans in their foreign and security policy is the future cooperation with the United Kingdom (UK) after Brexit, if and when it occurs. The Brexit process has already diverted UK attention away from foreign policy issues, and it will further complicate cooperation in the future. The exact form of cooperation is yet to be decided, but it is clear that the UK will not be at the table when the EU makes future foreign and security policy decisions. The fourth major challenge for EU foreign policy lies in the 2019 European elections and their implications. For most of 2019, EU institutions will be in caretaker mode. With the two major parties likely to lose their overall majority in the European Parliament, and an expected rise in seat shares for EU-sceptic parties, the election of a new Commission – including the next High Representative – could well stretch into 2020. Taken together, this will continue to amplify the importance of the large member states – Germany and France, in particular – in setting the EU's foreign policy agenda.

Through numerous meetings, visits, political and economic engagements, and public statements by its political leaders, the outgoing Israeli government has validated an unconcealed agenda – to correct what it perceives as the EU's unbalanced approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In particular, Israel has sought to limit the EU's ability to act in unison by exercising its 'normative power' to apply pressure on Israel. In their contribution "Divisive Policies: Israel's Foreign Policy towards the EU and its Member States", Dr. Eyal Ronen and Dr. Nimrod Goren outline the foundations for the rapprochement between Israel and specific regional blocs of countries within the EU, and individual Central and Eastern European Member States. These determinants include, among others, ideological and political proximity; similar perception of domestic and external threats; and frequent controversies with EU institutions over policy issues. A significant number of EU Member States appreciative of Israel's military power and innovation-driven economy are thus seeking to increase cooperation with it in the fields of security, defense, energy and more. Lastly, certain far-right parties in Europe – some of them already in government – have a strong interest in exhibiting their commitment to fight anti-Semitism and protect Israel's actions against criticism in return for greater legitimacy from their own public. Israel has sought the support of these partners to influence the EU's decision-making process in a manner that mitigates or blocks initiatives perceived as harmful for Israel. Israel also wishes to bring about a change in the EU linkage between the Middle East peace process (MEPP) and Israel's relations with the EU. Other objectives include reducing the continuous criticism of Israel's policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians, improving Israel's international standing and rejecting any support for Palestinian statehood. In this vein, Israel's government has leveraged these relations to fortify the nexus between criticism of Israel's policies and anti-Semitism.

Traditionally, the Middle East peace process has been one of the policy areas where the EU and its Member States have had a well-defined, detailed and consistent stance. The EU has also been a vanguard in shaping international language on the conflict. Still, over the last few years, while Europeans were able to score temporary success on particular issues, they have failed to halt or reverse trends on the ground. To the contrary: the situation has been worsening rapidly with a concrete risk of renewed escalation of large-scale armed violence, breakdown of the Palestinian Authority and the door closing for good on conflict resolution based on a two-state approach. In her contribution on "Political Paralysis: The Impact of Divisions among EU Member States on the European Role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", Dr. Muriel Asseburg explains why the Europeans have not been able to assume a more prominent role in the Middle East peace process. First, EU Member States have refrained from challenging the US administration's position as the chief mediator. Second, EU Member States have hidden behind the EU rather than being active proponents of agreed-upon stances. Third, and most importantly, consensus has been lacking with regard to the direction forward. The Trump Administration's approach, as well as Israeli policies aimed at further splitting EU Member States, have deepened divisions among the Europeans. Asseburg argues that even if the Europeans do not consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a foreign policy priority today, they should take the associated risks seriously. In view of fast developments on the ground, hibernating until the end of the Trump Administration and pinning hopes on the next Israeli government will not be enough. Against the backdrop of the divisions among EU Member States analyzed here, progressive action will only be possible in informal coalitions. At the same time, it will be of utmost importance to maintain the E27 (preferably plus the UK) consensus on the *acquis* with regards to principles of conflict resolution.

The publication concludes with a set of recommendations geared towards the EU, its Member States, and the Government of Israel. The recommendations call for a European initiative based on several guiding principles. These include maintaining a realistic option for conflict settlement based on the self-determination of two peoples and human rights; preventing breakdown and rebuilding legitimate governance structures in Palestine; expanding the space for dialogue and communicating European policies and approaches clearly; and supporting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and providing building blocks for future peacemaking. The recommendations call upon the Government of Israel to adopt a positive political attitude and public discourse towards the EU and its Member States; strengthen relations between the Israeli and European policy elites; implement a pro-peace foreign policy, acknowledging a European role in the peace process; and be committed to liberal democratic values, even when pursuing national interests.

This publication is a result of a research project carried out by Mitvim and SWP in cooperation with PAX, and we are thankful for the organization's support and contributions, and specifically by Pieter Dronkers, Jan Jaap van Oosterzee and Thomas van Gool. As part of the research process, two workshops were held in Israel and Germany at which leading Israeli and European experts provided feedback on draft chapters and assisted in devising the concluding recommendations. We thank the staff of Mitvim and SWP for convening these workshops, especially Merav Kahana-Dagan, Dr. Roei Kibrik, Luca Mieke and Barbara Heckl, and the Israeli and European experts who participated. We also appreciate the language editing of Ruth Sinai, which helped prepare this publication for print.

CHAPTER 1

A More Inward Looking European Union The Structural Limits to a more Effective EU Foreign and Security Policy

Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza

Introduction

The traditional caricature of the EU as an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military pigmy still holds true in 2019. In international trade negotiations, the EU speaks with one voice and negotiates on the same level with the United States or China, having recently expanded its network of bi- and multilateral trade agreements inter alia with Japan, Canada or South Korea. Yet, more than 30 years since the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), 20 years since the setup of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and ten years since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the challenge of developing and pursuing a common foreign and security policy remains as acute as ever.

In the short to medium term, four main trends will diminish the EU's capacity for a pro-active and coherent foreign policy that combines the economic and political weight of the EU and its member states. They include the inherent slow-moving nature of EU foreign policy making, with unanimity voting and a weak High Representative; a debate on strategic autonomy that is primarily inward looking; the difficult Brexit negotiations, which will strain cooperation between the UK and the rest of the EU; and the 2019 European Parliament elections and their potential consequences for the EU institutions.

1. The persistent challenge of unanimity and a weak High Representative

The first and persistent challenge to EU foreign policy is apparent in its institutional structure. Although the Lisbon treaty formally dismantled the 'pillar structure' of the EU (with CFSP as the second, intergovernmental pillar), foreign, security and defence policy remains an area of special competence within the framework of the EU. Matters of national security remain a core part of national sovereignty, with member states so far rejecting any proposals for supranational decision-making in this area. In essence, CFSP/CSDP therefore is an intergovernmental policy area, where (almost) all decisions have to be unanimous, the European Court of Justice has next to no jurisdiction and member states can coordinate policy, but cannot be legally forced to uphold a common position. This limits the EU's role in foreign and security policy in five central ways:

First, it is important to highlight that for most, if not all member states, the EU is not the only, and often not the most important international forum for foreign, security and defence policy. This is most apparent in comparison to trade policy: As an extension of its single market and customs union, trade is an exclusive competence of the EU (Art. 3 TFEU). In consequence, only the EU can negotiate and sign trade agreements, and does so with a single negotiator (the EU Commission), which also represents the EU as a whole in international fora like the WTO. Even when national competences are affected, the EU negotiates as a single entity and signs so-called 'mixed agreements', which both the EU and the individual member states need to ratify, such as the CETA trade agreement with Canada.¹ In foreign, security and defence policy, however, EU countries by themselves play important roles by their direct relationships to third countries, as members of NATO, the United Nations or in coalitions of the willing. And although the CFSP provides a framework for EU member states to coordinate, for instance at the UN General Assembly, this coordination is non-binding, often resulting in opposing positions including on issues such as the UN General Assembly's vote in 2012 on whether to upgrade Palestine's status to that of a 'non-member observer state'.²

The second factor is the inherent difficulty of unanimity voting. With very few minor exceptions, all decisions in EU foreign, security and defence policy must be unanimous.³ This holds true both for the strategic decisions by the Heads of State and Government in the European Council, e.g. on how to deal with Russia during the Ukraine conflict or the adoption of the EU's Global Strategy, as well as for the more operational decisions on individual sanctions or EU military operations by the Council of Ministers. Even joint statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU have to be coordinated in advance and accepted by all member states, providing ample incentives for third countries to try to split the EU.⁴ This does not render EU

¹ See Markus Gastinger, "The tables have turned on the European Commission: the changing nature of the pre-negotiation phase in EU bilateral trade agreements," *European Journal of Public Policy* 23, no. 9 (2016): 1367-1385.

² See UN News, [General Assembly grants Palestine non-member observer State status at UN](#), 29 November 2012.

³ Exceptions to the unanimity rule in CFSP include decisions on the basis of a joint strategy of the European Council (which needs to be adopted unanimously), decisions on the basis of an initiative by the High Representative on special requests by the European Council (thus a degree of unanimity is also required) for the implementation of a Council act or for the nomination of an EU special representative (Art. 31 (2) TEU). Except for the latter, all exceptions to the unanimity rule thus require first a unanimous decision to lay the foundation for the majority decision.

⁴ Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza and Ronja Scheler, "Die Hohe Vertreterin als Stimme der EU – eine Evaluation fünf Jahre nach „Lissabon," *intergration* 2 (2015).

action impossible – the EU has after all surprisingly extended its Russia sanctions every six months since 2014 – but it results in a much slower foreign policy often based on the lowest common denominator.

Matters of national security remain a core part of national sovereignty, with member states so far rejecting any proposals for supranational decision-making in this area

Third, this dependence upon the cooperation of EU member states is even more important for all civilian missions or military operations the EU conducts. The EU member states remain fully sovereign in regards to their executive forces while the EU has neither a European army nor its own police officers, judges or training officers for civilian missions. Even if a member state approves of an EU military operation, this does not bind it to provide the necessary forces. Thus, the EU has to find an internal coalition of the willing to provide the necessary forces for every operation. This also applies to instruments such as EU battle groups, small forces of around 1.500 soldiers, two of which are on rotation for six-month each. The final decision on their deployment rests with the participating member states and often requires, such as in Germany, previous parliamentary approval before deployment. Not least, EU member states also have only a single set of forces and thus are often strained between EU, NATO and other operations. Many of these civilian missions and military operations have been small in size and largely symbolic, including the EU border assistance mission in Rafah (EUBAM Rafah, maximum 89 personnel and currently suspended) and EU Police Mission in the Palestine Territories (EUPOL COPPS, maximum 112 personnel).

The fourth limiting institutional factor is the continuous fragmentation of EU external action. The G7 meetings best illustrate the extent to which the EU remains a ‘patchwork power’. The EU is represented by its four largest countries (Germany, France, Italy and, for now, the UK) as well as by the President of the European Council (on matters of traditional foreign and security policy under CFSP/CSDP) and the President of the European Commission (on other areas of external action such as trade, climate, energy or development aid). This separation between the intergovernmental CFSP/CFSP and other areas of EU external action persists on all levels. And although the EU has made some headway by linking its external economic policies with issues such as stabilization, migration or foreign policy cooperation when dealing with third countries, it is still far from providing a coherent foreign policy linking all its different strands of external action.⁵

Finally yet importantly, this is also connected to the institutional and political weakness of the office of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Affairs. This office (originally foreseen as the ‘EU foreign minister’) aimed to bring the different strands of EU external action together by chairing the Foreign Affairs Council, coordinating external policies in the Commission as one of its Vice-President and being supported by a European External Action Service (EEAS). And although the second office holder, Federica Mogherini, indeed increased coordination, the office has so far not realized the increased visibility and coherence for EU external action for which it aimed. Structurally, the addition of different tasks in different EU institutions proved to be more of a hurdle than benefit, with conflicting loyalties and responsibilities weakening the High Representative in both Council and Commission. Politically, neither of two High Representatives managed to gain the full support of larger member states to negotiate on their behalf, for instance with the US, Russia or China, with the notable exception of the Iran negotiations. More recently, the current office holder Mogherini also lost the support of her own national government after the elections in Italy in 2018, further limiting her political capital.⁶

This does not render EU action impossible but it results in a much slower foreign policy often based on the lowest common denominator

Looking ahead, the institutional factors limiting the cohesiveness and the capacity to act for EU foreign and security policy are very likely to persist as they are deeply enshrined in the EU treaties and connected to the nature of foreign policy as a core part of national sovereignty. In addition, the EU is very unlikely to embark on fundamental treaty change in the near future. Ever since the difficult process surrounding the failed attempt to enact a ‘Constitutional Treaty’ in 2005 and the eventual adaptation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, full-scale treaty change has become a taboo at the European level. Even during the difficult crisis in the Eurozone and the EU’s migration policy, EU member states have shunned opening up the treaties. Although there are currently initiatives both by the German government and the EU Commission to move in selected areas of CFSP from unanimity to qualified majority voting, which is feasible without treaty change, these also require previous unanimous approval by all EU member states, which is not in sight.⁷

⁵ Sieglinde Gstöhl, “Patchwork Power Europe: The EU’s Representation in International Institutions,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 14 (2009): 3.

⁶ See for instance Ryan Heath, “Mogherini’s Mid-term report card”, [Politico.EU](https://www.politico.eu), April 12, 2017.

⁷ Annegret Bendiek, Ronja Kempin and Dr. Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza, “Qualified Majority Voting and Flexible Integration for a More Effective CFSP? A Critical Examination of the EU’s Options,” *SWP-Comment* 25 (2018).

2. A more inward looking EU, despite focus on ‘European sovereignty/strategic autonomy’

Paradoxically, a second major factor limiting the EU’s capacity as a foreign and security policy actor is its current debate about ‘strategic autonomy’ or ‘European sovereignty’. The election of Donald Trump and the changes to US foreign and security policy – sometimes erratic, sometimes ignoring European interest, but sometimes also outright hostile towards the EU as an organisation – have put the focus on the dependence of even the major European countries on the security guarantee of the US. Even in conflicts in their neighbourhood such as in Syria, Europeans have had neither the means nor the will to influence developments on the ground decisively, limiting themselves to calls on the US when it announced its change of strategy. In combination with an expansive China and a resurgent Russia, German Chancellor Merkel has called on Europeans to take “to some extent their fate in their own hands”, while French President Macron has called for ‘European sovereignty’ and, in the long-term, the creation of a ‘true European army’. The EU’s 2016 Global Strategy identified strategic autonomy as one of the core goals of EU foreign and security policy.⁸ At least in the short to medium term, however, the ensuing debate hampers rather than enhances Europe’s ability to act.

Efforts to achieve European strategic autonomy solely driven by Berlin and Paris combined with a US administration that is very sceptical about further European military integration could easily split the EU

First, the debate on strategic autonomy is endangering the same European cohesion that is necessary to create it. Strategic autonomy, defined as the resources and the institutional capacity to act on the EU’s interest in cooperation with third countries, or, if necessary, unilaterally, is a very ambitious concept. If thought through, it would require huge undertakings to increase the EU’s strategic autonomy, not only in the military field, but also in regards to the international financial system in order to resist secondary sanctions from the US. This would only be possible if all EU member states agreed on that goal and put their political will and resources behind it. In practice, however, the debate on strategic autonomy is focused largely on Western Europe, with Germany and France in particular.⁹

⁸ See *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe /A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016.

⁹ Barbara Kunz and Ronja Kempin, “France, Germany, and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy Franco-German Defence Cooperation in a New Era,” *IFRI Notes 141* (December 2017).

Poland, on the other hand, is drawing a different conclusion from the changes in US policy. It fears that any European efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy may be insufficient or not reliable enough to provide a security guarantee while also damaging NATO. The Polish government has therefore focused on strengthening its direct bilateral ties with Washington while at the same decreasing its engagement in CSDP.¹⁰ The recent history of transatlantic relations underlines that any serious transatlantic rifts almost invariably also turn into intra-European splits, with some EU countries aligning with the US. This was most apparent during the Iraq War of 2003, when the EU famously split into ‘Old Europe’ (inter alia France, Germany, Belgium) rejecting the US invasion and ‘New Europe’ (Poland, Hungary, but also the UK, Spain), which supported it. Efforts to achieve European strategic autonomy solely driven by Berlin and Paris combined with a US administration that is very sceptical about further European military integration – not least concerning defence procurement – could therefore easily split the EU.

Secondly, the debate on strategic autonomy has so far focused primarily on the cooperation and/or integration of EU member states, with little progress regarding a common EU policy towards the US, China, Russia or the Middle East. Since the adoption of the EU’s Global Strategy in 2016 – thus also since the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election as US President – the EU has indeed made significant advances in its Common Security and Defence Policy. These include inter alia:

- The first use of the so-called ‘Permanent Structured Cooperation’ (PESCO). PESCO is a tool that allows a group of willing and capable EU member states to work together more intensively on the development of military capabilities.¹¹ After long internal negotiations, PESCO was created in 2017 by 25 of the 28 EU member states, with only Denmark (opting out from the military aspects of CSDP), Malta (neutral and small) plus the United Kingdom (Brexit, see below) staying out. The EU member states therefore favoured the inclusive approach championed by Germany, rather than the ambitious but more exclusive approach preferred by France, which would have seen a small, more determined group of countries going ahead. Since then, more than 30 PESCO projects have been created by the participating states, cooperating for instance on the development of a European Medical Command, enhancing military mobility in the EU or the development of an armoured infantry fighting vehicle. So far, however, most of these projects are either at a very early stage, small in scope or both. It also remains unclear how PESCO relates to the ‘European Intervention Initiative’ (EI2) launched by President Macron to enhance military interoperability and bring together 10 European countries – including the UK, but notably not Poland or any other Eastern European country.
- The creation of an EU defence fund (EDF) through which the EU directly funds research, but also development and acquisition of military capabilities by EU member states.¹² Initially, the defence fund is quite small with roughly €600 million planned for 2018-2020, but set to increase substantially from 2020 onwards,

¹⁰ For a Polish view on strategic autonomy, see for instance Justyna Gotkowska, “The Trouble with PESCO, The mirages of European defence,” *OSW Point of View 69* (February 2018).

¹¹ See Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli and Thierry Tady, “Permanent Structured Cooperation – what’s in a name?” *EU ISS Chaillot Paper 142* (November 2017).

¹² For information on the EU Defence Fund, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-eu-defence-fund_en_0.pdf.

when the next EU financial framework starts. Collectively, the EU member states are the second largest defence spender worldwide after the US, but with many duplications and much lower effectiveness than the US. The Commission has proposed to reserve €13 billion for the EDF in the financial framework from 2021-2027. This can be an incentive for smaller member states in particular to enhance cooperation, but will not close gaps in European military capabilities on its own.

- The EU also established a so-called Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), a military headquarters for training operations (such as in Mali) or smaller military operations.¹³ For larger military operations, the EU still depends on either the member states or NATO.

Contrasting these concrete steps with the grand rhetoric of a 'European Army' highlights the big gap that still exists between the ambitions and the actual willingness of EU member states to cooperate in security and defence.¹⁴ For the EU, these steps are significant, requiring lengthy and difficult internal negotiations processes. In the long-term, some of the PESCO projects as well as additional funding through the European Defence Fund might indeed contribute to strengthening European military capabilities. In the short to medium term, however, they contribute little to enhancing the EU's foreign and security role but rather highlight the huge efforts EU member states would need to make if they were serious about European strategic autonomy.

The most concrete but also most controversial embodiment of European strategic autonomy can be found therefore in the financial realm, the 'Special Purpose Vehicle' setup in January 2019 by Germany, France and the United Kingdom in order to "assist and reassure economic operators pursuing legitimate business with Iran". The primary aim of the EU-3 signature countries of the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) is to defend European companies from secondary sanctions by the US after it withdrew from the JCPOA and enacted sanctions on companies worldwide that continue to do business in Iran in selected sectors.¹⁵ Due to the financial hegemony of the US and the predominance of the US dollar, this has effectively also led most European companies to pull out of Iran. By providing a protected channel for economic activities, the EU-3 therefore want to both safeguard European economic interests in Iran and the Iran nuclear deal. Although it is questionable whether this will suffice to keep the JCPOA alive, the at least equally important long-term goal of the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) is to establish the means for the Europeans to fend off US secondary sanctions if aimed at more important EU trading partners or projects, such as China or the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.¹⁶

13 Thierry Tardy, "MPCC: Towards an EU military command?" *EU JSS Brief* 17 (June 2017).

14 Ulrike Franke, "European Army - a tale of wilful misunderstanding," *ECFR Commentary* December, 2018.

15 See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/iran/jcpoa-restrictive-measures/>.

16 Moritz Koch, Torsten Riecke and Klaus Stratmann, "Secondary US sanctions: How the US could halt Nord Stream 2," *Handelsblatt Today*, January 7, 2019.

3. Brexit uncertainty is a challenge for European foreign policy

The third major challenge for the EU in foreign and security policy is the future cooperation with the United Kingdom after Brexit. The first exit of a member state, not least the second largest economy of the EU, is undoubtedly a challenge for the Union in every area. But for foreign and security policy, Brexit poses some particular difficulties for the EU.

On the one hand, the relationship between the UK and the rest of the EU is different in foreign, security and defence policy.¹⁷ While the UK is tightly integrated into the EU's single market, it accounts for "only" 16 per cent of the EU's GDP. Depending on how the Brexit process evolves, disentangling the UK from the single market and the EU's customs union will be messy, but possible. In the negotiations on the future relationship between the EU's single market and the UK, London is also without doubt the smaller partner. In foreign, security and defence policy, however, the UK, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, with the highest defence budget in the EU, close connection to the US as well as nuclear capabilities and, in comparison to other EU countries, highly deployable forces, it is in a league of its own comparable only to France and (partly) to Germany.¹⁸ In the past, EU foreign and security policy was most effective if driven by the big three together. Although the UK has always been a reluctant supporter of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, symbolically Brexit in any shape or form is a loss to the EU.

On the other hand, cooperating with the UK as a third country in CFSP/CSDP after Brexit will be as difficult as finding an arrangement for the future economic relationship between the UK and the Union. The EU's current third-country relationships rest on the formula that countries like Canada, Norway or Turkey can participate in EU operations, PESCO projects or even the EDF, but without any decision-making power. On this basis, Turkey is, for instance, currently the largest troop provider for Operation EUFOR Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but without a vote on the mandate of the operation. Equally, Norway implements (most) EU sanctions, without having a vote on them. Although London is in principle interested in close cooperation with the EU also on foreign, security and defence policy after Brexit, this role as a decision taker is difficult to envision for the UK in this area. Equally, the EU-27 will not be willing to give a third country any decision-making role or even observer status in its internal decision-making process.

The exact details of future cooperation between the EU and the UK in CFSP/CSDP after Brexit are still open. At the time of writing (March 2019), the UK government and the EU-27 had agreed on the withdrawal agreement and a political declaration sketching the future relationship, including in foreign, security and defence policy.¹⁹ However, the UK House of Commons strongly rejected the agreement, while the EU-27 have clearly rejected its renegotiation. As the exit procedure of EU treaties, Art. 50 TEU, has been extended twice already, the new deadline for Brexit is the 31

17 Claudia Major, Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza, "No 'Global Britain' after Brexit, Leaving the EU Weakens UK Foreign and Security Policy, Closer Ties Remain in Germany's Interest," *SWP-Comment* 24 (2018).

18 Bastian Giegerich and Christian Mölling, "The United Kingdom's contribution to European security and defence," *DGAP Report* (February 2018).

19 See both the negotiated Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration (as of 7 March 2019): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/withdrawal-agreement-and-political-declaration>.

October 2019. As of late April 2019, there is a majority in the House of Commons against leaving the EU without a deal, but also no majority for any of the negotiable outcomes. An orderly Brexit, further extensions, a disorderly no deal Brexit or even no Brexit are all still politically feasible.

Although the UK has always been a reluctant supporter of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, symbolically Brexit in any shape or form is a loss to the EU

EU foreign policy, as many other areas, has to deal with continuous uncertainty about the future relationship between the UK and the rest of the EU. In the short- to midterm, three scenarios are on the table:

If the UK and the EU manage to sign the withdrawal agreement either before 31 October 2019 or, with a further short extension of the Brexit negotiations, shortly afterwards, the UK will leave the EU in an orderly transition until at least the end of 2020, extendable until the end 2022. During that transition, the UK will be bound by EU laws and take part in the single market and the customs union as well have access to EU databases for internal security. However, it will not have any representation in EU institutions. One of the main benefits of CFSP is the continuous coordination and exchange between EU member states on all questions of foreign and security affairs within the EU institutions. The UK will no longer sit at the table, neither providing information nor participating in the coordination. The UK's prime minister will also no longer be at the European Council, when strategic decisions such as how to deal with Russia or the US are negotiated at the highest political level. The UK also loses access to some EU programmes like the encrypted part of the Galileo satellite navigation system.

On the upside, a negotiated outcome would ensure amicable relations between the EU and the UK. In the political declaration on the future relationship both sides have also already committed to a broad and comprehensive security partnership with flexible coordination at every level – administrative, ministerial, heads of state and government – with the possibility of inviting UK representatives to EU Council meetings where appropriate. Specific cooperation is envisioned on sanctions, EU military operations, the European Defence Agency and even PESCO projects, as long as this cooperation respects the decision-making autonomy of the EU. An orderly Brexit would also support the continuous bi- and multilateral cooperation of EU member states with the UK in other fora, such as the UN or NATO.

On the other side of the spectrum is a disorderly no-deal Brexit. If the UK leaves the EU on 31 October 2019 (or after another short extension) without signing the withdrawal agreement, it still ceases to be a member of the EU by automatic operation of the law. This has three direct consequences: First, all UK representatives would automatically leave all EU institutions, thus removing the UK from all deliberations on EU foreign, security and defence policy immediately.

Second, all rules and regulations binding the UK and its European partners together via the EU will also cease to apply immediately. In the economic sphere, this means that EU and the UK will fall back to trading under WTO rules, including the reintroduction of tariffs, potentially long controls at the border and significant negative consequences. The UK will also lose access to all the EU's third-country agreements unless it is able to roll them over to a bilateral basis. The EU and the UK will also have to establish a swath of new agreements covering sectors such as aviation, financial services, data exchanges and more.

Equally in the field of internal and external security, there is no fall back option. Consequently, the UK will immediately lose access to the European Arrest Warrant as well as EU databases, and would no longer participate in EU sanctions and EU operations. Under huge economic pressure, the UK and the EU-27 would then need to reorganize their relations from scratch, further turning the European focus inward. Thirdly, the relationship between the UK and the EU, but also the UK and major European countries would be damaged deeply and invariably. Trust in the UK government has already suffered significantly during the Brexit negotiations, and a no-deal scenario – with all the costs it entails – would further damage that. At the same time, a breakdown in relations between the UK and the EU would open the door for other global players such as the US to demand concessions from the UK in exchange for support and quick trade deals, including deviating from European standards, but also dropping support for policy such as the continuing support for the JCPOA.

London is in principle interested in close cooperation with the EU on foreign, security and defence policy after Brexit, but a role as a decision taker is difficult to envision for the UK in this area

Finally, there is also the scenario of a series of short- to midterm extensions of the Brexit negotiations. Legally, a unanimous decision by the EU-27 heads of state and government together with the UK government can extend the Brexit negotiations with no legal limits to the length or number of extensions. As of writing, the EU-27 and the UK have already extended the negotiations twice, establishing the principle that more than one extension is possible. Although some EU member state are sceptical of further extensions, notably France, no EU state currently wants to force the UK into a no deal Brexit. The UK will also participate in the May 2019 European Parliament elections. Meanwhile, for foreign and security policy, the current situation persists – the UK remains a member of the EU with all rights and obligations, and will most like continue to actively participate in EU foreign policy. As late as 31 January 2019, for instance, in the middle of the Brexit deadlock, the UK foreign minister took an active role in shaping the EU response to the crisis in Venezuela.

What all three scenarios have in common, however, is that the Brexit negotiations are an additional factor focusing European attention inward. This is most prevalent in the UK itself, where Brexit has superseded almost all other political issues. With the exception of the Skripal affair in 2018, the UK has for instance taken a much less prominent role in EU-Russia relations, leaving the Minsk negotiations to Germany and France. It also questions the durability of the E-3 format, not least regarding negotiations with Iran.

4. An ‘institutional vacuum’ strengthens coalitions of (larger) member states

The fourth major challenge for EU foreign policy in 2019 is the potential effect of this year’s European Parliament (EP) election. To some extent, it can be argued that the EP elections have only a limited effect on the EU’s foreign, security and defence policy. As shown above, CFSP/CSDP remain largely intergovernmental policy areas, with member states in the Council the main decision-makers, with only a limited role for the European Commission and an even more limited role for the European Parliament. While the EP’s competences have been extended in many policy areas, CFSP/CSDP largely remains the domain of national governments. Elections in France, Germany, the UK, Spain, Italy or Poland therefore have at least equal if not more influence on the shape of CFSP/CSDP than the EP elections.

There are, however, four ways in which the EP elections 2019 will have an impact on how and in which direction the EU acts externally. First, EU election years can generally be described as “years of institutional transition”. Due to the complex, hybrid nature of the EU institutions, the change of guard takes most of the year: The EP election campaign will kick off properly in April 2019, with several of the current EU Commissioners taking part in their national campaigns. After the EP elections at the end of May, the election of the next Commission President is planned in the summer, followed by hearings of the new Commissioners – including the next High Representative – and a vote on the full Commission by November 2019.²⁰ Thus, for the better part of 2019, the EU institutions will be in caretaker mode, with the full new Commission only installed at the end of the year. While this will not affect the day-to-day management of EU programmes, it will certainly limit the strategic direction of those parts of EU external action with a strong Commission role.

In addition, this is only if the institutional transition goes according to plan. Looking at the political dynamics in the EU, however, the process might be more difficult in 2019. On the one hand, the rise of populist, EU-sceptic parties and the erosion of mainstream parties point to a more fragmented European Parliament. Although EU elections – still essentially 27 or 28 parallel national votes – are even harder to poll than national elections, all current polling data point to the two major European parties, the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) losing their overall majority for the first time in the EU’s history.²¹ This will make finding a majority for the next Commission, the EU budget and EU legislation more difficult and time-consuming after the 2019 elections, with at least three parties necessary to form a

majority in the EP. At the same time, EU-sceptic parties in the EP are also trying to form a joint group, whereas currently they form three different groups. In consequence, although about 20 percent of EU parliamentarians can be considered members of EU-sceptic parties, they have had little influence on EU legislation or top jobs. If they are successful in forming a joint group, as promoted inter alia by Matteo Salvini, head of the Lega and interior minister of Italy, they could become the second or even largest group in the Parliament and aim to exert a stronger influence on EU policy-making. Together, these forces could gain more than 20 per cent of seats in the European Parliament – not enough to dominate policy, but symbolically important.²² Incidentally, however, EU-sceptic groups are particularly divided on foreign policy, especially on dealing with Russia. Within the EP, but more significantly within the Council of the EU, EU-sceptic parties are also shifting the EU’s foreign policy agenda, most strongly by blocking joint statements or actions on issues that would hitherto have found unanimous backing, such as the UN migration compact.

EU election years can generally be described as “years of institutional transition”. Due to the complex, hybrid nature of the EU institutions, the change of guard takes most of the year

An institutional battle over the EU Commission is also looming after the elections. In 2014, the European Parliament pushed through for the first time the so called ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ procedure, according to which the top candidate of the largest party after the elections becomes President of the Commission if he or she can get a majority in Parliament – thereby creating a direct link between EP elections and the leadership of the Commission. EU Heads of State and Government, however, who previously had control over all the top jobs, are resisting the change. The major parties have again nominated their ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ – with the German Manfred Weber as top candidate of the EPP, which, barring the formation of a joint EU-sceptic group, has the best chances to again be the largest group in Parliament. However, the European Council still has to nominate the candidate before the EP can vote. For this, the Heads of State and Government have already declared that they see no automatism or obligation to nominate the top candidate of the largest group for Commission President but only “to take into account” the outcome of the elections.²³ In short, a fragmented European Parliament might be faced with a European Council trying to wrest back control over the Commission, leading to a messy, lengthier process of installing a new Commission in 2019.

20 Ilke Toygür, “Europe’s choice: What lies ahead?” *Real Elcano Blog*, February 27, 2019.

21 For up to date polls on the EP elections, see <https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/>.

22 Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza and Felix Schenuit, “Shadows over the European Elections, Three Scenarios for EU-sceptical Parties after the 2019 Elections,” *SWP-Comment 50* (2018).

23 On the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, see Thomas Christiansen, “After the Spitzenkandidaten: fundamental change in the EU’s political system?” *West European Politics* 39, no. 5 (2016).

This, in turn, also affects the nomination and political strength of the next High Representative. Due to the hybrid structure of the EU, it is not only political parties and the outcome of the elections that define the new leadership of the EU, but a combination of negotiations between the EP and member states in the Council. In this year of institutional transition, several EU top jobs will be negotiated in parallel and as a package – the Commission President, the President of the European Council, the High Representative, the President of the European Parliament and, not insignificantly, the President of the European Central Bank. For various reasons, none of the current office holders is set to remain in office, leaving ample space for negotiations. However, previous experience in 2009 and 2014 has shown that the office of the High Representative was filled more according to criteria of parity – in terms of party politics, gender, geography and size of member states – than on merit, foreign policy experience or international network.

Taken together with the other factors outlined in this analysis, this year of institutional transition, along with the expected fragmentation of the European Parliament and the corresponding institutional vacuum will add to the re-emergence of the member states as the main players in EU foreign, security and defence policy.

Outlook

The number of times the EU – and/or its foreign, security and defence policy – have been described as being “at a crossroad” are too numerous to mention. Based on this analysis of the EU’s capacity in these areas in 2019, it can indeed be argued that the Union is no longer at a crossroad, but rather has already turned inward. With the focus on the European elections, the on-going Brexit negotiations as well as the internal divisions between member states, 2019 is destined to focus European politics inward. At the same time, the discussion about European strategic autonomy is focused equally on strengthening the cooperation and integration between EU member states, but not (yet) on which joint policies to adopt, inter alia in the Middle East. With a lame duck High Representative not running again for the EU Commission and no longer directly supported by her national government, the EU institutions also will play more of a supportive than a leadership role. In the long-term, initiatives like Permanent Structured Cooperation or a European Defence Fund might indeed contribute to strengthening European capabilities; in the short to medium term, the EU will remain a fragmented, inward-looking foreign policy actor.

The major impulses for European foreign, security and defence policy will therefore, if at all, come from the member states. Here, again, Brexit is forcing the United Kingdom to focus almost all its attention on the future relationship with the EU until at least 2020, if not longer. Germany and France have vowed to increase their cooperation with the Aachen Treaty of January 2019, for instance in the United Nations Security Council or the development of military capabilities. Recent joint diplomatic initiatives, such as the Minsk process, the EU-3 decision to set up a special purpose vehicle in regards to Iran or the meeting of the French, German, Russian and Turkish Heads of State and Government concerning Syria underline this importance of the large member state for European foreign and security policy.

CHAPTER 2

Divisive Policies

Israel’s Foreign Policy towards the EU and its Member States

Dr. Eyal Ronen with Dr. Nimrod Goren²⁴

Introduction

During the past few years of Benjamin Netanyahu’s premiership, Israel has undertaken significant efforts to strengthen its bilateral relations with individual EU Member States, predominantly those affiliated with Central and Eastern European regional blocs. Notwithstanding the various economic and defense objectives that these partnerships aim to accomplish, there is growing recognition that the Israeli government employs the rapprochement to fortify its global stance and achieve certain political goals. Notably, Israel utilizes mounting policy divisions among EU Member States to bring about a change in the EU’s approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and particularly to limit the EU’s ability to exercise its ‘Normative Power’ by applying pressure on Israel.

The article aims to explore the extent to which Israel practices this policy and the determinants to its creation. Moreover, it identifies the European partners with which Israel has strengthened relations, as well as the ways by which it seeks to leverage internal EU divisions for support on matters related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Last, the article aims to examine whether Israel believes its policy towards the EU, and particularly its alignment with certain EU Member States, truly serves its best interests.

²⁴ The authors wish to express their gratitude to all the interviewees who contributed their valuable insights. A special thanks to Ms. Lorena Hertzog for her tremendous assistance in literature research and for providing the most relevant publications and media coverage. Lastly, the authors would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants in the workshops in Tel Aviv (November 2018) and in Berlin (February 2019) for their constructive comments and suggestions, which contributed significantly to the concepts presented in this article.

1. Background

For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a constant source of friction between Israel and leaders of the EU.²⁵ Yet, the growing controversy, which mainly revolves around the deadlock in the peace process and the EU's concerns over Israel's violations of international law in the occupied territories, have deepened notably during Netanyahu's latest terms in office. The EU, which repeatedly expresses its desire to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict based on a two-state solution,²⁶ uses its 'Normative Power' along with various incentives to demonstrate its commitment.²⁷ These efforts include offering various comprehensive incentives, such as a unique status ('Essen Declaration', 1994)²⁸; an upgrade of the EU's economic relations with Israel, and a 'Special Privileged Partnership' (SPP) status in the event of a successful conclusion to the peace process.²⁹ Unfortunately, none of the initiatives has led to substantial advancement between Israel and the Palestinians. Yet, when the EU introduced the 'differentiation policy' that included the potential labeling of Israeli products made in the settlements – Israel's response was even blunter. Although Israel reluctantly signed agreements with the EU that excluded the settlements³⁰, Netanyahu called the decision "hypocritical, and constitutes a double standard... the EU should be ashamed". Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked called it "anti-Israel and anti-Jewish" threatening to look into possible legal action against the EU. Subsequently, the Foreign Ministry summoned the EU's Ambassador to Israel Lars Faaborg-Andersen for a reprimand.³¹

In addition, Israeli politicians identify an accumulation of criticism of Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians as a serious threat to Israel's interests. The criticism, predominantly directed at Israel's violation of international law in the occupied territories, is conveyed in various joint EU statements condemning Israel for its human rights record, illegal settlement expansion, and military occupation. Israel describes such declarations as hypocritical and harmful for advancing a peace process. For example, PM Netanyahu to foreign journalists: "I think it's time to stop this hypocrisy... it's time to inject some balance and fairness into this discussion... this imbalance and this bias against Israel doesn't advance peace. I think it pushes peace further away".³² Moreover, for the past decade, there is growing public sentiment in Israel that the EU is not a fair broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that its attitude towards Israel is unfavorable, at best.³³

25 See the Israeli Cabinet's furious reaction to [The Venice Declaration](#), 15 June 1980.

26 "[Middle East Peace Process](#)," The European Union External Action Service, June 15, 2016.

27 Anders Persson, "EU Differentiation as a Case of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE) in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 2 (2018): 193-208.

28 The Essen declaration. See the [European Council Meeting in Essen, Presidency Conclusions](#).

29 Raphael Ahren, "EU Offers 'Unprecedented' Aid to Israelis, Palestinians for Peace Deal," *The Times of Israel*, December 16, 2013.

30 Such as the [Horizon 2020](#) or [ENI Cross-Border Cooperation \(CBC Med\)](#), and the [EU culture program 'Creative Europe'](#). The latter was eventually rejected by the Israeli Cabinet due to the territorial provision.

31 Barak Ravid and Jack Khoury, "[Netanyahu to EU: Shame on You for Decision to Label Settlement Goods](#)," *Haaretz*, November 11, 2015.

32 "[PM remarks to Foreign Journalists](#)," The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 16, 2014.

33 This stand is reflected in various surveys, i.e. in [the 2018 Israeli Foreign Policy Index](#) of the Mitvim Institute, 55% of the Israeli participants think the EU is currently more of a foe, compared to 18% who see it as a friend. An EU poll asked Israelis to describe their country's relations with the EU, and only 45% responded they were good, far below the average of 64% and 76% in the Mashrek and Maghreb countries, respectively. [EUNEIGHBOURS.EU](#), Opinion Poll 2017. Also, [Israel's View of Europe-Israeli Relations](#) (Michael Borcard. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, September 2017) shows that a majority of Israelis think Brussels is not a neutral actor and the EU is not a strong defender of Israel's right to exist.

Israeli politicians identify an accumulation of criticism of Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians as a serious threat to Israel's interests

Furthermore, although the Europeans regard such criticism as a substantial component of their foreign policy, Israeli politicians often express strong dissatisfaction with what they view as the EU's involvement in Israel's domestic political affairs, especially in the way it conducts its relations with the Palestinians. Consequently, the EU's policy towards Israel has led key Israeli politicians to express discontent with what they portray as involvement in Israel's affairs, asserting that it is neither necessary nor desirable. For example, shortly after the French peace initiative was introduced, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said: "What I propose to everyone - the Europeans, the Americans, the Russians - is first of all not to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict...whoever wants to help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should first forget it. The over-involvement of the world powers, especially Europe, is only disrupting. They don't contribute anything to the problem's solution, they only complicate things".³⁴ Israel's position remains that the two parties should determine the outcome of negotiations themselves. Thus, the EU's attitude is considered not only a threat to Israel's sovereignty designed to impose the EU's political agenda, but also potentially detrimental to relations between Brussels and Israel. In this context, it is important to note that Israel does not reject the involvement of the US administration in the peace process, expecting President Trump's peace plan to be published shortly following the Israeli elections in April 2019.³⁵

Given Israel's frustration with the EU's foreign policy and actions, the Israeli government appears determined to act decisively to bring about change in the European approach towards Israel by attracting greater support for its stance. In order to realize this objective, Israel is tightening relations with regional blocs of countries, particularly with individual Central and Eastern EU Member States, while exploiting the existing divergence within the EU to challenge its unified front and modify the EU's unsupportive attitude toward Israel. The predominant partners in that regard are members of the Visegrád group (V4), Baltics, Balkan and the Hellenic countries (Greece and Cyprus)³⁶, but also other EU Member States that can align themselves with Israel's political position and national interests. Moreover, while the base of Israel's rapprochement with most of these EU regional blocs is often perceived as incompatible with the EU's core objectives and values, its growing ties with Greece and Cyprus seem to serve European interests. The deepening relations with these blocs coincide with the gradual deterioration of Israel's relations with the EU, but also with the growing friction with

34 At the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) conference. Raphael Ahren, "[Liberman: World Should Forget about Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)," *The Times of Israel*, January 24, 2017.

35 See "[Pompeo: Peace efforts to begin immediately following Israeli elections](#)," *The Times of Israel*, January 23, 2019.

36 Zenonas Tziarras, "[Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance](#)," *Mediterranean Politics*, 21, no. 3 (2016): 407-427.

EU Member States once considered Israel's main allies. Frequent condemnations, reprimands to ambassadors and meeting cancellations with Germany³⁷, France, but also with Sweden³⁸, Ireland³⁹ and others provide examples of this trend.

While the base of Israel's rapprochement with most of these EU regional blocs is often perceived as incompatible with the EU's core objectives and values, its growing ties with Greece and Cyprus seem to serve European interests

The Israeli approach has been validated on multiple occasions, mainly through numerous visits and meetings with leaders of EU Member States⁴⁰, as well as in public statements by Israel's political leadership.⁴¹ These statements clearly articulated Israel's preference for enhancing bilateral relations with individual EU Member States over the direct channel with the European establishment in Brussels, using it to thaw the EU's tough stance towards Israel. For instance, before his departure for the Baltic States, PM Netanyahu declared his interest in "Balancing the relations between the EU and Israel, to receive a more honest and credible treatment... I am accomplishing such a goal through making contacts with blocs of countries within the EU, Eastern European countries, and now with the Baltic states and, of course, with other countries as well".⁴² Before attending a summit alongside the PMs of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and the President of Serbia, PM Netanyahu re-affirmed his aims were: "to strengthen our ties with any country, but this is also a bloc of countries with which I want to promote my policies, to change the European Union's hypocritical and hostile approach".⁴³ Similarly, during the Romanian PM's visit to Israel in January 2019, PM Netanyahu said, "I hope you will act to stop the bad resolutions against Israel in the EU".⁴⁴

37 Raanan Eliaz, "A Momentous Test for the Germany-Israel Alliance," *The Jerusalem Post*, February, 2019. Also Ruth Eglash, "Israel's Netanyahu Snubs German Foreign Minister for Meeting Activists Critical of Government," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2017.

38 See "Israel's Netanyahu: Swedish FM's remarks 'outrageous'," *BBC News*, January 15, 2016.

39 Mark Weiss, "Israel gives Irish ambassador severe dressing down for 'anti-Semitic' Dáil Bill," *The Irish Times*, January 25, 2019. Also, "Netanyahu confronts Irish FM over support for hostile NGOs," *Ynet*, November 7, 2017.

40 Including even Israel's plan to host the first summit of the Visegrád group's outside Europe, which was ultimately [Cancelled over Israel-Poland Holocaust Crisis](#). *The Jerusalem Post*, February 19, 2019.

41 Noa Landau, "Splitting the EU: Israel's Tightening Alliance with Central Europe's Nationalist Leaders," *Haaretz*, July 8, 2018.

42 Noa Landau, "Netanyahu Expands His Struggle Against EU During Baltics Visit," *Haaretz*, August 24, 2018.

43 Noa Landau, "Netanyahu Embarks for Bulgaria Summit, Aims to Counter 'EU's Hostile Approach'," *Haaretz*, November 1, 2018.

44 See "Netanyahu Urges Romanian PM to Move Embassy to Jerusalem," *The Times of Israel*, January 18, 2019.

Evidently, it was the EU's Enlargement in 2004, with the inclusion of ten new Central and Eastern European Member States, followed by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, that provided a significant window of opportunity for the State of Israel to seek a greater support by the Brussels institutions. Yet, only in recent years did geopolitical developments provide the Israeli government with the tailwind it needed to redefine these mutual relations. Among these events were the global revival of nationalism,⁴⁵ the European debt crisis and the increasing Eurosceptic trends as demonstrated in the Brexit vote and the success of far-right populist parties⁴⁶, which moved from the margins of the political map to becoming mainstream political actors in several EU Member States. This last trend, which represents the opposition to Europe's traditional progressive values and to the centralization of its political power, is additional proof of the fragmentation process it is undergoing, which undermines its unity and solidarity. The government of Israel sees these developments as an exceptional opportunity to exert pressure on the EU to achieve its political objectives. Given these developments and the alleged threats of large-scale migration and anti-Muslim sentiment, the growing importance of cooperation among neighboring Member States through regional blocs is clearly an important explanation for Israel's policies. It highlights the fact that although these events pose serious challenges to Europe as a whole, they also provide an opportunity for Israel to accomplish its foreign policy objectives.

2. With which EU regional blocs has Israel allied itself? On what basis?

As argued above, the rapprochement between Israel and some EU Member States takes place against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Israel and EU institutions, internal division within the EU between countries and regional groups, as well as global trends. This section will identify various common interests and shared incentives that contribute to the consolidation of these relations. Despite the apparent heterogeneity among these countries, they share economic and political interests. The foundations upon which the rapprochement with Israel is based include ideological and political proximity. They also share a similar perception of domestic and external threats, while identifying mutual opportunities to increase cooperation in the fields of security, economics, energy, tourism and more. An additional mutual interest lies in combatting anti-Semitism and criticism of Israeli government policy.

These considerations allow not only the deviation of Israel's partners from the EU's stance on a range of issues, among them the Middle East Peace Process, but they also lay the foundations for tackling other future mutual political challenges that are of importance to all sides. Furthermore, despite the heterogeneity of EU Member States, the fact that many have formed coalitions within the EU, based on a sub-geographical and ideological affinity, serves as a force multiplier when advancing their political interests vis-a-vis the EU. In that regard, Israel is strengthening its relations with four predominant Central and Eastern European regional blocs. The Visegrád Group (V4) consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia; The Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; The Craiova group of Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Greece, but also Slovenia and other non-EU members in the Balkan region such as Albania,

45 Gideon Rachman, "Donald Trump leads a global revival of nationalism," *Financial Times*, June 25, 2018.

46 Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy, "The Undiplomats: Right-Wing Populists and Their Foreign Policy," *The Centre for European Reform* (August 2015).

Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, and Montenegro. Israel is also cementing its relations with the Hellenic States of Greece and Cyprus, not as a partnership with an existing European group but rather as an ad-hoc new alliance. Nonetheless, Israel's growing ties are not limited to these blocs, but may include countries such as Austria, Italy or others, based on particular objectives or mutual interests.

At the outset, we emphasize the growing political and ideological affinity in recent years between Israel and certain members of these EU blocs, particularly those led by far-right nationalist parties. These right-wing parties share a similar political agenda and aspirations to restore ethnocentric values and nationalist priorities to the center of the stage, while undermining the legitimacy of global movements and progressive liberal values.⁴⁷ To advance such political agendas, right-wing leaderships act separately but unsurprisingly simultaneously in challenging the existing order. To this end, it is claimed that Israel but also Poland and Hungary share the same views regarding the need for greater restrictions on civil society organizations (CSOs) and progressive movements, along with limitations on the freedom of the press and the judicial system. Interestingly, Israeli leaders seem to highlight democratic foundations and shared liberal values with countries governed by liberal and progressive regimes, especially in Western Europe.⁴⁸

Certain EU members appreciate Israel's military and economic power, in general, and Israel's political leadership, in particular. On the military front, Israel is seen as spearheading the struggle against the 'radical Islamic' front, while successfully combatting complex security challenges along its immediate borders and on distant fronts. In this context, Israel and some of its partners share a common perception of the need to deal with common external threats, such as the spread of extreme Islamism in Europe⁴⁹, and to deal with security and defense challenges in the face of potential threats from Russia and Turkey. Moreover, Israel is highly valued for its economic strengths and capacities.⁵⁰ Thus, there is a strong desire to expand collaboration with Israel in order to benefit in various fields such as technological innovation, cyber security, natural gas discoveries and more.⁵¹ A significant example of economic cooperation between Israel and various EU members is the promotion of energy-related interests, predominantly the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline designed for natural gas exports through Cyprus and Greece into Italy and other Europe countries. Other economic interests including the EuroAsia Interconnector and the Three Seas Initiative also promoted by several EU Member States and Israel.⁵²

Another common interest is the struggle against anti-Semitism and manifestations of anti-Zionism. Extreme right wing parties in Europe, often with roots in Nazi or Fascist movements, or supported by such groups, have been seeking to distance themselves from such affiliations and to gain renewed legitimacy from Israel⁵³. Subsequently, efforts are being extended to build a Christian-Jewish alliance against the common threat of radical Islam, with declarations on

47 Ivan Krastev, "Why Do Central European Nationalists Love Israel So Much?," *New York Times*, March 18, 2019.

48 Netanyahu's statement in the "Trilateral Meeting between Israel, Greece and Cyprus," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 26, 2016.

49 Yotam Rozner, "The Populist Radical Right in Europe," *Memorandum* 175 (June 2018).

50 Toby Greene and Jonathan Rynhold, "Europe and Israel: Between Conflict and Cooperation," *Survival, Global Politics and Strategy* 60, no. 4 (2018): 91-112.

51 Joanna Dyduch, "The Visegrád Group's Policy towards Israel. Common Values and Interests as a Catalyst for Cooperation," *SWP Comment* 54 (December 2018).

52 See more on [The EuroAsia Interconnector](#) and [Three Seas Initiative](#).

53 Herb Keiron, "Netanyahu: Matteo Salvini is 'great friend of Israel,'" *The Jerusalem Post*, December 12, 2018.

fighting anti-Semitism and anti-Israel criticism. These commitments have been demonstrated by legislative initiatives, actions, budget allocations⁵⁴ and public statements by such officials as Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karin Kneissl who vowed "to fight against anti-Zionism and to stand up for the Jewish state in international forums".⁵⁵ Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has provided additional validation for this trend: "Hungary made a mistake and sinned when it cooperated with the Nazis and did not protect the Jews... I made it clear to the Prime Minister of Israel that this will never happen again. We must put an end to the growing anti-Semitism in Europe and make it clear that we respect Israel's right to defend itself. A policy of zero tolerance for anti-Semitism".⁵⁶

Right-wing parties share a similar political agenda and aspirations to restore ethnocentric values and nationalist priorities to the center of the stage, while undermining the legitimacy of global movements and progressive liberal values

The frequent disputes and controversies with EU institutions in Brussels are another key factor that fuels Israel's cooperation with some EU Member States. These disagreements are further distancing some EU Member States from the common ideological base that characterized their partnership with the EU in the past, in favor of political principles based on a populist and nationalist approach. The V4 group, for instance, differs from the EU on matters related to the EU's normative priorities and liberal values, and is engaged in deep dispute with the EU on numerous policy matters, primarily on migration and its distribution across the continent. Furthermore, Poland and Hungary's increasingly nationalist right-wing governments view the EU's interference in their internal domestic politics as a growing threat to their sovereignty. In particular, they criticize EU punitive actions over breaches of values and principles of the EU Treaty, such as Poland's judiciary reforms and Hungary's efforts to limit the judicial system, human rights NGOs and media freedom. Leaders of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic stood firm against these pressures and declared their intention to support each other against the EU.⁵⁷ Naturally, these recent developments also caused significant erosion of public confidence in the EU.⁵⁸

54 For example, "Hungary's government earmarked \$3.4 million for combating anti-Semitism in Europe," *The Times of Israel*, November 29, 2018.

55 Despite Israel's boycott over its affiliation with the far-right Freedom Party. Raphael Ahren, "Austrian FM vows to stand up for Israel, which is currently boycotting her," *The Times of Israel*, November 17, 2018.

56 Matthew Day, "Hungarian prime minister says country 'made a mistake' collaborating with Nazis," *The Telegraph*, July 18, 2017.

57 See [Poland to veto EU sanctions on Hungary](#) and [Hungary and Poland defy EU authority](#). *Euobserver*.

58 [Eurobarometer index \(89/2018\)](#) depicts the dramatic shift of distrust in EU institutions, purpose and shared values, from 2008, when "citizens tended to trust the EU" above the EU average (SK: 67%, CZ: 59%, PL: 59%, HU: 52%), while in 2017, trust has fallen significantly (HU: 46%, PL: 44%, SK: 43%, CZ: 30%).

Given that similar sentiments against the EU exist among Israelis, too, as well as the various shared interests with certain EU Member States, it is unsurprising that political leaders find common ground for strengthening their relations. As indicated earlier, while these commonalities are designed to achieve diverse mutual interests, the next section will provide a glimpse of how Israel leverages these ties, particularly regarding the Palestinian issue.

3. How does Israel leverage its growing bilateral ties with EU Member States to advance its interests?

Strengthening Israel's bilateral relations with Central and East European Member States serves the Israeli government in achieving a variety of purposes on multiple key issues. Aside from the apparent mutual interests mentioned in the previous section, the Israeli government wishes to leverage the rapprochement with EU Member States for greater support of its political stance and to modify EU initiatives and decisions that may be considered harmful to Israel's interests. Israel seeks to achieve these goals on two central fronts, which naturally have a certain degree of overlap. The first front is the European arena, where Israel is directing significant efforts at influencing the decision-making process, especially in decisions with a direct impact on Israel. In addition, Israel is seeking the support of EU Member States in breaking the linkage between the Palestinian issue and the EU's relations with Israel, while fortifying the nexus between criticism of Israel's policy with de-legitimization of the state of Israel itself and anti-Semitism. The second front on which Israel seeks to leverage its relations with the EU Member States is the multilateral arena, calling on its EU allies to extend their support mainly in votes on various UN resolutions in accordance with its preferences. Israel's policy doctrine is based on the idea that its position in international organizations will improve as its bilateral relations with individual countries do.⁵⁹

Israel hoped the rapprochement with its old-new EU partners would influence the level of consensus in the EU decision-making process on policy related to Israel. This support has proven valuable. Such was the case in November 2015, when the EU announced its initiative to publish guidelines instructing Member States to reject "Made in Israel" labeling of products manufactured in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Predictably, the EU's 'differentiation policy', designed to exclude settlement-linked entities and activities from the EU's preferential relations with Israel, caused consternation among Israeli politicians who rigorously condemned it as an echo of the Holocaust-era branding of European Jews and their storefronts with yellow stars.⁶⁰ Eventually, in January 2016, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council reinforced its 'Differentiation Policy' but the official document was changed significantly and its criticism of Israel's colonial project was softened.⁶¹ This outcome was due mainly to behind the scenes contacts between Israel and certain EU Member States.⁶² Additionally, Israel views

59 Herb Keiron, "Analysis: Vote Shows Israel Making Little Headway at United Nations," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 2017. The change in voting patterns of Member States in favor of the Palestinian position is shown by Max Fisher in "The Growing Divide between Israel and Europe," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2012.

60 Jodi Rudoren and Sewell Chan, "E.U. Move to Label Israeli Settlement Goods Strains Ties," *The NYTimes*, November 11, 2015.

61 See [Press Release: Council Conclusions on the MEPP](#), Council of the European Union, January 18, 2016.

62 Sharon Pardo and Neve Gordon, "Euroscepticism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy," *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 4 (2018).

with significant satisfaction the fact that the EU's policy on product labeling has not been implemented by most Member States.⁶³

Israel is seeking the support of EU Member States in breaking the linkage between the Palestinian issue and the EU's relations with Israel, while fortifying the nexus between criticism of Israel's policy with de-legitimization of the state of Israel itself and anti-Semitism

Israel uses the division among EU Member States to influence and moderate the critical rhetoric in EU joint statements related to Israel's foreign policy and actions vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Since a consensus is required to issue such statements, any opposition by individual EU Member States can sink statements, soften their language, or issue them as the position of EU Foreign Policy Chief Mogherini and not of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). In May 2018, for example, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Romania, in coordination with Israel, successfully blocked a joint EU statement condemning the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem.⁶⁴ France and several other EU Member States led the original initiative for the statement, aiming to present a collective EU position against the move, as well as EU concerns of the far-reaching consequences of the Embassy move on a future peace process. Nevertheless, Israel still extended its efforts to persuade as many EU Member States as possible to deviate from the EU's position and relocate their national Embassies to Jerusalem. In this case, despite the growing support expressed by leaders of several EU Member States for Israel's request⁶⁵, there has not been much success in turning these diplomatic efforts into realities on the ground.⁶⁶

In the face of rising waves of anti-Semitism⁶⁷, and growing criticism of Israel's foreign policy

63 With few exceptions such as [Ireland](#), and [France, which later suspended the labeling requirement](#). Prior to the EU's initiative, the [United Kingdom](#) and the [Netherlands](#) issued similar directives.

64 Alexander Fulbright, "PA Blasts Hungary, Romania and Czechs for Blocking EU Censure of US Embassy Move," *The Times of Israel*, May 12, 2018.

65 For example, the [Head of the Slovak National Council Andrej Danko](#); the [President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman](#), and the [Prime Minister of Romania, Viorica Dancila](#).

66 Nevertheless, some symbolic [positive measures were taken to establish diplomatic missions in Jerusalem](#), by Hungary, the Czech Rep. that opened a cultural center and also by Slovakia.

67 The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reports that nearly 90% of European Jews feel anti-Semitism has increased in their home countries over the past five years. See more in [Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism/Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU](#). (Dec 2018). The Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs provides evidence that incidents of antisemitism are increasing, reaching record levels in many countries. See the ["Antisemitism in 2018"](#) report.

toward the Palestinians, accompanied by pressure exerted by political activists and the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions (BDS) movement, PM Netanyahu urged more EU partners to “increase their efforts to combat anti-Semitism and its modern manifestation, anti-Zionism”.⁶⁸ In that regard, Israel partnered with Austria, the EU Council President in the 2nd half of 2018, to expand the EU’s definition of anti-Semitism, issued by the IHRA⁶⁹ to include anti-Zionism and criticism against the State of Israel. Eventually, the EU adopted a new declaration regarding its fight against anti-Semitism, however, with a softened version compared to the controversial originally proposed by Austria. In February 2019, due to recent anti-Semitic incidents in France, President Macron announced that France would adopt the IHRA’s definition of anti-Semitism to include anti-Zionism as a form of modern anti-Semitism.⁷⁰ The lower house of the Czech Republic’s Parliament also adopted a resolution that recognizes a common international definition of anti-Semitism.⁷¹

Israel also wishes to leverage its growing ties with certain EU Member States to achieve a change in the EU’s financial support policy for civil society organizations, human rights activists and other critics of the of Israeli government policy, which allegedly undermine the legitimacy of Israel’s existence. These claims are validated by Israeli organizations such as NGO-Monitor⁷² and even opposition Knesset members such as Yair Lapid.⁷³ Yet probably the most prominent voice in this context is the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, which asserts that the EU provides funding for NGOs that not only promote anti-Israel de-legitimization and boycotts, but also have ties to terror.⁷⁴ To that end, in October 2018 Hungary called on the EU to stop funding NGOs that undermine the sovereignty of EU neighboring countries, such as Israel.⁷⁵ Albeit, a study by the INSS has rejected claims that a de-legitimization of Israel is promoted at the EU level, providing evidence of “the majority of the European establishment working proactively to block their effect, both in the European Parliament and on the level of national EU Member States”. In any case, it asserted, “civil society-backed efforts to delegitimize Israel have little impact on Israel’s diplomatic standing in Europe”.⁷⁶

68 Noa Landau and Ofer Aderet, “[Despite Netanyahu’s Pressure, EU Doesn’t Link anti-Semitism to anti-Zionism](#),” *Haaretz*, December 6, 2018.

69 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

70 See “[Macron Tells PM France Will Adopt Definition of Anti-Semitism Mentioning Israel](#),” *The Times of Israel*, February 20, 2019.

71 See “[Czech Lawmakers Adopt Common Definition of Anti-Semitism](#),” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2019.

72 “[NGO-Monitor: Shrinking Space - Defaming Human Rights Organizations That Criticize the Israeli Occupation. A report by the Policy Working Group](#),” *Policy Working Group*, September 2018.

73 Chair of the centrist ‘Yesh Atid’ party [called the Spanish Parliament to stop funding anti-Israel NGOs](#).

74 The Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, “[The Money Trail - The Millions Given by EU Institutions to NGOs with Ties to Terror and Boycotts against Israel - An In-Depth Analysis](#),” May 2018. Jaffe Hoffman Maayan, “[European Union Continues to Fund BDS - Israeli Report](#),” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 23, 2019.

75 Gotev Georgi, “[Hungary Takes Fight Against NGOs to EU Level](#),” *Euractiv*. October 16, 2018.

76 The Israeli Institute for National Security Studies. See Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Oreg Rotem, “[Europe and the Delegitimization of Israel in 2017](#),” *INSS, Memorandum 175* (June 2018).

The implications are not only relevant for Israel’s global standing, its relations with the European community as a whole and with other progressive nations, but also for the well-being of the Jewish communities within the countries involved

The multilateral arena (i.e. UN Security Council and other UN bodies) is the second front on which Israel conducts diplomatic efforts to harness the support of EU Member States and influence decisions concerning Israel. Specifically, Israel expands its international ties to attract greater support and motivate these allies to oppose resolutions that favor the Palestinians. In this arena, Israel hopes EU Member States vote according to their national interests and not necessarily as one or in line with the EU position. Israel accomplished its objective on several occasions in recent years, although it failed to reverse the expected outcome. For instance, 45 countries abstained in the 2015 vote on giving the Palestinians the right to fly their flag symbolically at the world body, among them Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Greece and Cyprus, but the result was 119 to 8 in favor of the resolution.⁷⁷ In the vote on the UN resolution to grant Palestine a ‘non-member state’ observer status (a semi-statehood recognition), the Czech Republic was the only EU Member to join Israel, the US and 6 other nations, while 41 countries abstained, among them Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.⁷⁸ Additionally, in December 2017, when the UN General Assembly condemned the US for moving its Embassy to Jerusalem, despite US threats to cut off aid to countries voting in favor of the resolution, the results were overwhelmingly disappointing for Israel, with 128 countries voting in favor and only nine against. None of the nays was from the EU, although some EU members were among the 35 abstentions and the 21 countries that did not vote.⁷⁹ Furthermore, similar efforts by Israel to attract EU Member States support at UNESCO⁸⁰ failed, leading it to leave the organization in October 2017, together with the United States.⁸¹

As demonstrated in this section, Israel’s success in the multilateral arena is relatively minor. Moreover, it should be noted that the EU has not stopped expressing its concerns at the UN over the situation in the Middle East.⁸² The EU also continues to voice its dissatisfaction over

77 see [State of Palestine Flag to Fly at United Nations Headquarters](#), Offices as General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Non-Member Observer States. *The United Nations*. 10 September 2015.

78 Barak Ravid, Chemi Shalev and Natasha Mozgovaya, “[Palestinian UN Bid In Historic Vote, Palestine Becomes Non-member UN State With Observer Status](#),” *Haaretz*, November 30, 2012.

79 James Masters, “[How each country voted at the UN on Jerusalem status resolution](#),” *CNN*, December 2017.

80 The UN’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

81 See, “[US, Israel leave UNESCO for good](#),” *Euractiv.com*, October 13, 2017.

82 See “[EU Statement - United Nations Security Council: Debate on the Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question](#),” *Delegation of the EU to the United Nations - New York*, January 22, 2019.

Israel's actions in the settlements⁸³ and Israel's controversial 'Nation-State' Bill of July 2018. The latter has prompted significant criticism around the world, and in Europe, leading the EU's foreign affairs chief to state that it complicates efforts to craft a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Israeli officials also admit that the Israeli government has not been successful in leveraging its growing relations to promote a meaningful breakthrough for resuming the dialogue between the parties to the conflict or even for providing humanitarian assistance to Gaza. The Cyprus seaport initiative, designed to build a hub in Cyprus for transferring goods to blockaded Gaza,⁸⁵ could be seen as one exception, yet may be insufficient to make a significant change. Sadly, this initiative does not receive adequate public recognition, thus not progressing to its full potential. It highlights the fact that despite occasional statements by their leaders, Israel's old-new partners hardly display a significant interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor do they exhibit their intention to play a pivotal role in promoting the means to achieve its termination.

4. The perception of Israel's foreign policy towards the EU

Notwithstanding its short-term political achievements, Israel's foreign policy of leveraging its rapprochement with individual EU Member States in the hope of gaining a supportive posture at the EU level may have some far-reaching implications for Israel. These implications are not only relevant for Israel's global standing, its relations with the European community as a whole and with other progressive nations, but also for the well-being of the Jewish communities within the countries involved. Therefore, Israelis expect their political leadership to conduct a rational, forward-looking assessment, one that considers the full repercussions of such policy. This section describes the controversy among the professional elite in Israel regarding the decision-making process, which led to this policy towards the EU, as well as its potential outcome. It provides some insights and perceptions, mainly from interviews conducted by the authors during the past few months with senior government officials, academic scholars and members of Israeli civil society.⁸⁶

At the outset, supporters of Israel's approach towards the EU explain the diplomatic efforts to enhance ties with EU Member States as part of a larger strategy in Israel's foreign policy doctrine to expand its ties to as many countries as possible.⁸⁷ Moreover, these efforts are seen as legitimate tools in any nation's diplomatic arsenal when it wishes to deflect pressure against its own interest. Some Israeli officials are encouraged not only by the economic and political dividends derived from cementing Israel's bilateral relations with EU Member States, but also by the decision-

making process that led to the implementation of this policy. A senior official asserts that Israeli foreign policy towards the EU is constantly being reviewed and that the repercussions, both in the international arena and the effects on Israel's relations with the EU are weighed thoughtfully and professionally. Moreover, advocates of Israel's policy see how, on top of the apparent advantages of closer ties, certain EU leaders use their influence to lobby for Israel's agenda in EU institutions. The benefit of this policy is said to lie in uncovering the mask of Europe's concealed interests and its pro-Palestinian biased agenda concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notably, it allows the breaking of the linkage between EU's upgrade of its bilateral relations with Israel and the peace process. Moreover, some of these voices express their satisfaction with the support of certain EU Member States for Israel's claim that currently there is no partner for peace negotiations on the Palestinian side, and in general the lack of interest in the MEPP. In addition, they point to Israel's efforts to identify and halt the EU's 'anti-Israeli' initiatives as the most significant achievement of the Israeli administration, which has proven effective both in the European arena and on the international stage over the past two years.

In stark contrast to these views, most interviewees express discomfort with Israel's policy towards the EU. Firstly, Israel's policy is perceived as a risky gamble on its long, solid and growing relations with the EU. These relations, including a preferential economic agreement and special status that provided Israel with great benefits in a wide range of economic, scientific, cultural fields and others – have been stagnant in recent years. Since July 2012, for example, the EU-Israel Association Council has not convened, and no significant upgrade of the relations has been promoted.⁸⁸ A retired official describes Israel's policy of collaborating with certain EU regimes as a shortsighted realpolitik position metaphorically equivalent to "walking on thin ice".⁸⁹ His view reflects rising concern that Israel's engagement with far-right political parties that increasingly contest Europe's unity and liberal democratic values will yield only short-term political achievements. Such an outcome may be a step too far from the traditional values that have linked Israel to other liberal democratic nations, and the EU as a whole. Moreover, it may further erode Israel's state of democracy⁹⁰ and undermine its claim to be "the only democracy in the Middle East".⁹¹ In addition, a CSO member emphasizes the absence of broad public discourse in Israel or sufficient debate in the Israeli Knesset about the implications of strengthening relations with certain countries⁹² and the consequent repercussions for Israel's foreign policy in general and its relations with the EU in particular.

Some of the interviewees admit that the role of the administration level at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the decision-making process related to Israel's policy towards the EU is

83 Here are examples of statements by the European External Action Spokesman in [8/2018](#) and [12/2018](#).

84 Paul Goldman, Lawahez Jabari and F. Brinley Bruton, "Israel 'Nation-State' Law Prompts Criticism Around the World, Including From U.S. Jewish Groups," *NBCNews*, July 20, 2018.

85 Michael Harari, "A Port in Cyprus for Gaza's Humanitarian Crisis," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 24, 2018.

86 In addition, perceptions of the Israeli elite of the relations between Israel and the EU can be found in Nimrod Goren, Eyal Ronen and Emir Bayburt, "Israel, the EU, and the Mediterranean: Understanding the Perceptions of Israeli Elite Actors," in Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark Kahyaoglu (eds.), *The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision: Challenging Eurocentrism with Local Perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, March 2019).

87 Support for this claim is provided by listing the many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, which have strengthened their diplomatic relations with Israel in recent years.

88 Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, "The Dialogue is Faltering and the Agreements are Stuck, but Israel Needs the EU," *Haaretz*, March 6, 2019.

89 Nitzan Horowitz, "Israel's Closer Ties with Anti-Liberal Regimes in Europe - A Discussion Among Experts," *Mitvim Institute*, July 2018.

90 [The 2018 Israeli Democracy Index](#) reveals that 45.5% of the Israeli public and 70% of Arab Israelis believe the democratic regime in Israel is in grave danger. *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 3 December 2018.

91 As validated by [The V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018, Democracy for All?](#), which downgraded Israel's democratic development status from "liberal democracy" to "electoral democracy", placing it in the 53rd place of 178 on the Liberal Democracy Index, three places behind Poland and eight ahead of Hungary. N. *V-Dem Institute*. Lüthmann A., Dahlum S., Lindberg S., Maxwell L., Mechkova V., Olin M., Pillai S., Sanhueza Petrarca C., Sigman R., Stepanova (2018).

92 Two exceptions are the debates on Israel's relations with the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). The first took place in January 2018 at the initiative of the Israel-Austria Parliamentary Friendship Group, headed by MK Amir Peretz. See "[Israeli Policy Towards the Far-Right Party in Austria - Knesset Event Summary](#)," *Mitvim Institute*, February 2018. The second debate was held in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in April 2018. "[Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Holds Heated Debate on Policy of 'Non-Engagement' with Freedom Party of Austria](#)," *The Knesset*, April 17, 2018.

relatively limited. It is no secret that in recent years the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been weakened, in terms of both its budget and its authority and responsibility. Consequently, there has not been a sufficient in-depth decision-making assessment or stakeholder consultations regarding the desired Israeli foreign policy towards the EU and potential outcomes. Moreover, the decision-making process is described as highly centralized at the political level, and a former diplomat even characterized “the ‘top-down approach’ is harmful for Israel rule of law”.⁹³ This is particularly evident as foreign policy issues are determined exclusively by PM Netanyahu, who since May 2015 serves also as the acting Foreign Minister, a post that gives him broad authority to carry out foreign policy objectives. A senior official claims that among the political echelons there is a lack of tolerance for the professional positions that seek to challenge and present policy alternatives to the Israeli government’s rapprochement with extreme right-wing regimes. Notably, there is concern over the Israeli silence in the face of anti-Semitic tactics in these countries. For example, PM Netanyahu demanded that Israel’s Foreign Ministry retracts its criticism of the Hungarian government for its campaign against the Jewish Hungarian billionaire Soros.⁹⁴

Israel’s alignment with far-right political streams known for their troubling historic attitude toward the Jewish people and their questionable current positions is perceived as harmful in many ways. It could also pose an unnecessary risk to how Jewish communities relate to Israel, and result in undesirable compromises on fundamental principles, subsequently undermining Israel’s role in representing the Jewish community in all its diversity. Israel’s diplomatic relations with political parties in EU countries should reflect its responsibility for addressing historical injustices against Jews and taking into account the Jewish community’s welfare in these countries. Moreover, it was noted that in a case that tested its position - the Polish government threat to penalize anyone blaming the Polish nation or state for their part in the Holocaust - Israel had prioritized its political interests over its responsibility. In the hope of finding a compromise solution that would enable Poland to amend the law and delete the criminalization clauses, both sides issued a joint statement saying they “reject the actions aimed at blaming Poland or the Polish nation as a whole for the atrocities committed by the Nazis”. Leading historians denounced the statement, arguing that it contains “grave errors and deceptions” and claiming, “History is not for sale”. Others added that Netanyahu, whom they blamed for the mistake, should know that “history could not be bent for transient political or diplomatic needs”.⁹⁵

Lastly, the Israeli government often links criticism of its foreign policy to new forms of anti-Semitism. Most interviewees firmly rejected this argument, calling it “a cynical attempt” to deflect criticism and to distract public opinion. Moreover, debating Israel’s policy is an essential component of any healthy democracy and a sign of the strong relations between Israel and its largest economic partner, the EU. Any individual or entity has the right to question or hold different views on Israel’s policy without being accused of hostility to the state of Israel or the Jewish people. Such views must never be considered illegitimate attacks on Israel as a whole, and certainly one cannot be considered as holding anti-Semitic views by expressing a critical opinion of Israel’s foreign policy, or any matter related to Israel.

93 Authors’ interview with an academic scholar.

94 Barak Ravid, “On Netanyahu’s Orders: Israel’s Foreign Ministry Retracts Criticism of Anti-Semitism in Hungary and Slams George Soros,” *Haaretz*, July 7, 2017.

95 Ofer Aderet and Noa Landau, “Yad Vashem Rebukes Netanyahu: Israel-Poland Holocaust Declaration Contains ‘Grave Errors and Deceptions,’” *Haaretz*, July 5, 2018.

Conclusion

Through numerous political and economic engagements, diplomatic endeavors, meetings, visits and public statements by its political leaders, the Israeli government validates its unconcealed agenda – to correct what it perceives as an unbalanced EU approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israeli government promotes its political objectives largely by means of a rapprochement with specific regional blocs of countries within the EU, and individual Central and Eastern European Member States. This article asserts that although grounded in multi-faceted economic, defence and security interests, Israel is leveraging the mounting internal policy divisions among EU members to promote its foreign policy objectives, both in the EU sphere and in the global arena. Among these goals are improving Israel’s international stance, rejecting support for Palestinians statehood, and excluding the possibility of non-exclusively direct negotiations between the two sides to the conflict. Notably, Israel takes advantage of the disagreement among EU Member States to leverage its partners’ influence on the EU’s decision-making process, which it perceives as harmful, and reduce the continuous criticism of Israel’s policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians. In addition, the article presents other Israeli objectives of these strategic partnerships, such as fortifying the nexus between criticism of Israel’s policy and anti-Semitism. Lastly, the article highlights the differences of opinion among Israelis on whether this policy truly serves Israel’s best interests. It shows that despite inherent advantages of the Israeli policy towards the EU, the overall sentiment is that Israel’s government has not considered fully all its implications, risking a deterioration of its standing in the global arena as well as of its ability to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

CHAPTER 3

Political Paralysis

The Impact of Divisions among EU Member States on the European Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Dr. Muriel Asseburg⁹⁶

Introduction

Since the breakdown of the last round of final status negotiations in 2014, the EU and its Member States have lowered their ambitions markedly: from contributing to the realization of a two-state solution to maintaining the option of a two-state approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the table.⁹⁷ The objectives were adjusted against the backdrop of the absence of a meaningful peace process and negative trends on the ground, such as the entrenchment of the occupation, the blockade of the Gaza Strip, measures of creeping annexation, and the consolidation of the intra-Palestinian division and two increasingly authoritarian Palestinian systems of governance. The shift is also a consequence of Israeli efforts to limit European involvement, and a US administration with an ambiguous stance on the two-state approach that has withdrawn substantial funding from the Palestinian Authority (PA), Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, Palestinian civil society as well as UNRWA, and provided the Israeli government with a shield of impunity.

In order to achieve their objectives, Europeans have stressed their adherence to a two-state approach in their declaratory politics. Since 2012, they have explicitly pursued so-called differentiation policies, i.e. dealing differently with Israel proper and settlements in the

96 This chapter is based on a review of press material, official and unofficial documents as well as a host of interviews conducted by the author with EU and Member state officials, journalists, academics, politicians and other knowledgeable persons mostly in the second half of 2018 in Berlin, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Prague, Budapest and Brussels. Two workshops, one in late November 2018 in Tel Aviv, one in early February 2019 in Berlin with Israeli and European experts respectively, have added further insights. The author would like to thank all interviewees and workshop participants. She is particularly grateful for research support from Greta Aigner and Luca Miehe.

97 For an indication of that shift see e.g. EEAS, "Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the Joint Press Point Ahead of the Extraordinary Session of the International Donor Group for Palestine," Brussels, January 31, 2018.

occupied Palestinian territories.⁹⁸ They have also upheld their offer to Israel of a special privileged partnership with the EU, first made in December 2013 as an incentive for Israeli-Palestinian peace.⁹⁹ At the same time, the Europeans have signaled their willingness for continued engagement in peace making by cooperating with the US, the UN, and Russia (the largely defunct Quartet for Middle East Peace), by endorsing the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, and by appointing a series of Special Representatives for the Peace Process.¹⁰⁰ On top of that, they have given financial support to the PA (with the aim of preventing its collapse in face of donor fatigue and US cuts rather than with the aim of institution or state building) and to Palestinian civil society, as well as to Israeli human rights, pro-peace and pro-democracy groups. Lately, they have increased their humanitarian support as well as contributions to UNRWA and devised quick-impact projects in the Gaza Strip to compensate, at least partially, for the US cuts.¹⁰¹

Yet, Europeans have not been successful in halting or reversing trends of ever-greater fragmentation of the Palestinian territory and loss of socio-political cohesion. To the contrary. The situation has been worsening rapidly with a concrete risk of the door closing for good on conflict resolution through a two-state approach. In addition, the conflict as well as the intra-Palestinian split have severely affected governance, the space for civil society and opposition, and the human rights situation in both Israel and the Palestinian territories.¹⁰² In contrast with the ambition that the Europeans formulated decades ago, they have remained a "payer" rather than a "player" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the MEPP.¹⁰³

1. Impediments to an effective European role

Why, then, have the Europeans not seen any success in their endeavors? It is a paradox: On the one hand, the MEPP is one of the (few) policy areas where the EU and its Member States have had a well-defined, detailed and consistent stance. The Europeans have also been a vanguard in shaping international language on the conflict. Such was the case with the European

98 For differentiation see Council of the European Union/Foreign Affairs Council, "Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process," 3209th Meeting, Brussels, 10 December 2012; Hugh Lovatt, "EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine," *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, October 2016.

99 Council of the European Union, "Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process," December 16 2013. While some observers hold that the main reasons lie in the vagueness of the offer, the bureaucratic language in which it was presented, and the lack of public diplomacy accompanying it, two more reasons seem to be decisive for the lack of impact: first, Israel sees its presence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a question of security, survival and identity, not as a "normal" policy issue; second, Israel witnessed ever closer relations with the EU and its Member States in many areas of cooperation even without fulfilling the condition postulated in the EU offer, i.e. "paying the price" of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. See also Bruno Oliveira Martins, "Interpreting EU-Israel relations: a contextual analysis of the EU's Special Privileged Partnership proposal," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2016): 151-170.

100 There was a hiatus of more than a year after EU Special Representative Andreas Reinicke ended his term in December 2013; Fernando Gentilini was appointed in March 2015 and served until August 2018; his successor Susanna Terstal followed in September 2018. The hiatus between Reinicke and Gentilini was a consequence of a review of the organisation and functioning of the EEAS with a view to better integrating the Special Representatives into the EEAS while retaining a close link to the Member States via the Political and Security Committee. See Stefan Lehne, "The Review of the European External Action Service in 2013," Carnegie Europe, November 14, 2012.

101 For details of the EU's support for Palestine, see European Commission, "Palestine"; Noa Landau, "EU to Add 40m Euros to Its UNRWA Financing: 'An Investment in the Two-state Solution'," *Haaretz*, September 28, 2018.

102 See also Muriel Asseburg, "Shrinking Spaces in Israel," *SWP Comment* 36 (September 2017).

103 See also Anders Persson, "Introduction: The Occupation at 50: EU-Israel/Palestine Relations Since 1967," *Middle East Critique* 27 no. 4 (October 2018): 317-320.

Community's 1980 Venice Declaration on the Palestinian right to self-determination,¹⁰⁴ its 1999 Berlin Declaration reaffirming "... the continuing and unqualified Palestinian right to self-determination including the option of a state",¹⁰⁵ and the EU's December 2012 Council Conclusions on differentiation between its dealings with Israel and the territories occupied by Israel in 1967.¹⁰⁶ What is more, beyond statements, there has not been any serious effective deviation from this *acquis* by any of the Member States to date. Still, the EU has not been able to assume a more prominent role that would have allowed it to have a tangible impact on the trends developing in the Middle East.

Three main factors have impeded the Europeans from being more effective in realizing their positions. First, they have refrained from challenging the US administration's position as the chief mediator/facilitator in the conflict. As such a role would have neither been accepted by Israel nor the USA, Europeans have not seen themselves in the driver seat. As the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini put it in February 2018: "Nothing without the United States, nothing with the United States alone."¹⁰⁷ Thus, in the course of the last few years, the EU has not taken the initiative in pushing for an alternative approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Single EU Member States initiated those forays that did occur, mainly the French peace initiative in 2016/2017. As a rule, Europeans held back as long as US initiatives – even if they did not look promising – were in the making. In this vein, they also refrained from criticizing the President Trump's policies and rhetoric that seriously undermined the PA. The delay in publication of Donald Trump's peace plan seemed to serve as an excuse for inaction. Only the December 2018 statement by the incoming and outgoing European Security Council Members emphasizing principles with which any peace initiative would have to conform in order to be successful was a marked exception in that regard.¹⁰⁸ Still, it did not lead to European action. Thus, while there are plausible reasons for the EU to cede the role of main facilitator to the US administration, as a result, the EU has little impact on the course of developments and the process remains hostage to US election cycles.

Second, EU Member States have hidden behind the EU rather than being active proponents of EU stances. They have been reluctant to follow through consistently on joint decisions and commitments, such as the correct indication of origin or labeling. Their representatives have not pro-actively propagated EU stances, e.g. on differentiation. Rather, they have mostly left it to the High Representative to explain EU approaches and defend them against slander, such as the deliberate confusion between differentiation and boycott by the Government of Israel.¹⁰⁹

104 European Council, "[Venice Declaration](#)," June 30, 1980.

105 European Council, "[Berlin Declaration](#)," March 24/25, 1999.

106 The European Union expresses its commitment to ensure that – in line with international law – all agreements between the State of Israel and the European Union must unequivocally and explicitly indicate their inapplicability to the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, namely the Golan Heights, the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Recalling its Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions adopted in May 2012, the European Union and its Member States reiterate their commitment to ensure continued, full and effective implementation of existing European Union legislation and bilateral arrangements applicable to settlement products. European Council, "[Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process](#)," December 10, 2012.

107 EEAS, "[Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the Joint Press Point Ahead of the Extraordinary Session of the International Donor Group for Palestine](#)," Brussels, January 31, 2018.

108 Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the UN, "[EU8 Statement for the Press Stakeout on MEPP](#)," December 18, 2018.

109 "[PM Netanyahu's Response to EU Decision Regarding Product Labelling](#)," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 11, 2015; "[Behind the Headlines. EU Labelling Guidelines](#)," Israel MFA, November 10, 2015.

They have also not taken diplomatic action against the sidelining of the High Representative by the Netanyahu government and have not pushed back against Israel's EU bashing.¹¹⁰

That has come in the context of Israel's efforts to discredit any criticism of its policies. In that vein, the Israeli government has pushed EU Member States into adopting the May 2016 anti-Semitism definition of the International IHRA – a rather vague definition complemented by guidelines on Israel related anti-Semitism, which has been used to delegitimize criticism of Israeli politics as anti-Semitic.¹¹¹ These efforts have been accompanied by a strong campaign by the Government as well as Israeli NGOs, such as the NGO Monitor, aimed at delegitimizing Palestinian actors and ambitions as well as their international supporters. These campaigns are a reaction to the Palestinian leadership's attempts to realize Palestinian rights through international mechanisms (UN bodies, ICC, etc.) as well as to the international grassroots BDS campaign. They have also served to distract the international community from Israel's reinforced settlement and annexation policies. In this context, the EU and its Member States have been massively attacked.¹¹² As a result, while EU-Israel relations have actually been thriving in terms of trade, Israeli participation in EU-funded programs such as Horizon 2020, and deeper cooperation in a number of areas, such allegations have fed the perception in Israel of the EU as an unfriendly, irresponsible actor which should not assume a more prominent role in conflict resolution.

Also, most EU Member States have valued their bilateral relations with Israel more than sending unambiguous signals about the European consensus on the conflict and its solution. In addition, both the EU and its Member States have allowed the PA to develop a sense of entitlement to support rather than demanding from it a clear commitment to democratic, transparent and accountable governance. European support for the PA has followed the logic of maintaining the Oslo regime of conflict management rather than building a democratic system of governance and effective state institutions.¹¹³

Third, and most importantly, while there has been consensus on the principles of a resolution to the conflict among Europeans, such consensus has been lacking on to how to move forward, i.e., how to advance conflict resolution or at least to effectively maintain the option of conflict resolution on the table. Consensus has also been lacking about the priority that the conflict should

110 Noa Landau, "[As Netanyahu Prepares to Visit Brussels, Tensions With EU's Mogherini Worsen](#)," *Haaretz*, December 7, 2017; Herb Keinon, "[PM Can't Find Time for Mogherini: EU Foreign Policy Chief Cancels Trip](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, June 10, 2018.

111 [Working Definition of Antisemitism](#) IHRA, May 26, 2016; see also a statement by 34 prominent Israeli academics and artists on the occasion of a November 2018 high-level conference organized by Austria on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism that urges Europeans not to instrumentalize the fight against anti-Semitism "to suppress legitimate criticism of Israel's occupation and severe violations of Palestinian human rights" and not to equate anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, available at: Jewish Voice for Labour, "[Israelis Warn Against Equating anti-Zionism With anti-Semitism](#)," *JVL*, November 21, 2018. In November 2018, the EU became a permanent international partner with the IHRA. EU Commission, "[Response to Antisemitism and a survey showing Antisemitism is on the rise in the EU](#)," *Brussels*, December 10, 2018. See also: Noa Landau and Ofer Aderet, "[Despite Netanyahu's Pressure, EU Doesn't Link anti-Semitism to anti-Zionism](#)," *Haaretz*, December 6, 2018. For a list of States and institutions that have adopted the definition, see "[Working Definition of Antisemitism](#)," IHRA, February 20, 2019.

112 See for example "[The Money Trail – The Millions Given by EU Institutions to NGOs with Ties to Terror and Boycotts Against Israel](#)," Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, May 27, 2018; Noa Landau, "[EU Blasts Israeli Minister: You Feed Disinformation and Mix BDS, Terror](#)," *Haaretz*, July 17, 2018; "[The Money Trail: European Union Financing of Organizations Promoting Boycotts Against the State of Israel](#)," Israeli Ministry for Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, 2nd Edition, January 2019; Andrew Rettman, "[Israeli Propaganda Attacks EU Funds for NGOs](#)," *EU Observer*, May 28, 2018; "[NGO Monitor: Shrinking Space – Defaming Human Rights Organizations That Criticize the Israeli Occupation](#)," Policy Working Group, September 2018.

113 Cf. Muriel Asseburg, "[The Palestinian Authority and the Hamas Government: Accessories to the Occupation](#)," *SWP Research Paper 3* (2018); Peter Lintl (ed.) *Actors in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, June 2018, 21-31.

have in European foreign policies. This lack of agreement has markedly increased over the last few years against the backdrop of the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis” and the Trump administration’s approach to the conflict. EU Member States, in particular from the Visegrád group, have repeatedly blocked Council Conclusions or other joint statements.

EU Member States have hidden behind the EU rather than being active proponents of EU stances. They have been reluctant to follow through consistently on joint decisions and commitments

However, the lack of consensus is older than that. For example, there has been persistent disagreement among close partners, such as Germany and France, over what kind of diplomacy should move the peace process forward (bilateral negotiations vs. international conference). Also at issue was how to deal with the parties to the conflict (incentives vs. pressure/disincentives, including the question of recognition of a Palestinian State, of negotiating a full-fledged Association Agreement with the Palestinians in preparation of statehood, of convening an Association Council with Israel, etc.). An additional unresolved issue was how to deal with the situation on the ground (e.g. dealing with the occupation authorities in Area C of the West Bank, be it about engaging in master plan processes, or claiming compensation for EU-funded projects destroyed by the Israeli army.)¹¹⁴

Consequently, there has been a marked absence of pro-active European policies, in particular for the last three years. There have not been any substantial EU Council Conclusions on the MEPP since June 2016.¹¹⁵ In addition, European differentiation policies have not seen any consistent follow-up after the agreement on the 2015 guidelines on the correct indication of origin.¹¹⁶ What is more, there have been split European votes in the UN General Assembly, e.g. in the vote on the US Embassy move.¹¹⁷ The E28 have not been able to agree, either, on joint statements on important developments, such as US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the US Embassy move, or the imminent eviction of the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar.¹¹⁸

114 For demolitions of EU funded structures see for example “[Six-Month Report on Demolitions and Confiscations of EU Funded Structures in the West Bank including East Jerusalem](#),” Office of the European Representative, August 24, 2018.

115 The June 2016 Council Conclusions reiterated the EU’s support for a two-state approach, endorsed French peace efforts and reaffirmed the European offer of December 2013 of „an unprecedented package of political, economic and security support to be offered to and developed with both parties in the context of a final status agreement“. “[Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process](#),” European Council, June 20, 2016.

116 “[Interpretative Notice on indication of origin of goods from the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967](#),” European Commission, Brussels, November 11, 2015.

117 “Resolution [A/ES-10/L.22](#),” United Nations General Assembly, December 19, 2017. For the details of the vote see [United Nations Bibliographic Information Service](#).

118 Still, a statement by the EU as well as incoming and outgoing European Security Council Members apparently led the Government of Israel to suspend the displacement. The statement is available at Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the UN, “[EU Members Press Stakeout on Khan al-Ahmar](#),” September 20, 2018.

2. Three blocks within the EU

EU Member States have split unevenly into three major blocks: one of states most critical of the Government of Israel’s policies, one of states most closely aligned with Israeli government policies, and one in the middle in which states see themselves mainly in the role of balancing the divergent European positions and achieving consensus. Yet, there are remarkable differences even within the three blocks. EU Member States have also shown different levels of activity toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – with Ireland most active in criticizing Israel, France most engaged in pushing for international peace efforts and Hungary most energetic in blocking joint EU statements critical of Israel and pushing for V4-Israel cooperation.

MEMBER STATES MOST CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ISRAEL’S POLICIES

The most critical block has been comprised mainly of states from “old Europe” and two other states that joined the EU in 2004: Malta and Slovenia. Sweden (the only EU Member State that has recognized the State of Palestine and extended full diplomatic relations)¹¹⁹ and Ireland (where legislation is currently under discussion outlawing the import of settlement goods)¹²⁰ have been among the EU Member States most critical of Israel’s policies. Sweden, which has had a long history of mediation in the conflict and whose policies have traditionally been strongly informed by international law and human rights concerns, has been sidelined by the Government of Israel as a consequence of the recognition of Palestine.¹²¹ Ireland, sympathetic with the Palestinian cause due to its own history,¹²² has lately been one of the most active EU Member States to follow up on differentiation – be it with respect to its own legislation, or to pushing for international condemnation of settlement policies, such as the December 2018 UNGA resolution that it put forward.

France has been the state most active in pushing for a stronger European political role in the peace process and has proposed a host of initiatives over the years for bringing the parties to the conflict together and restarting peace negotiations, such as its June 2016 ministerial meeting and January 2017 international conference in Paris.¹²³ Against the backdrop of Israeli rejection and a change of guard in the US and in France, but also because it essentially followed the same approach as earlier failed initiatives, the move did not yield success.¹²⁴ France has also been pushing for disincentives for Israeli occupation and annexation policies.

Spain – with its historical connections to both Jews and Muslims and as the host of the 1991 Madrid Conference – has remained committed to conflict resolution and engaged, in particular,

119 “[Sweden Officially Recognises State of Palestine](#),” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2014 (amended on 9 December). Eastern European countries – Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania – as well as Malta and Cyprus recognised the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence without establishing full-fledged state-to-state relations with the PLO at the time. For a list of countries having recognized Palestine to date see Permanent Observer Mission of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, “[Diplomatic Relations](#)”.

120 Itamar Eichner, “[Ireland Edges Closer to Banning Israeli Settlement Goods](#),” *YNET News*, November 29, 2018.

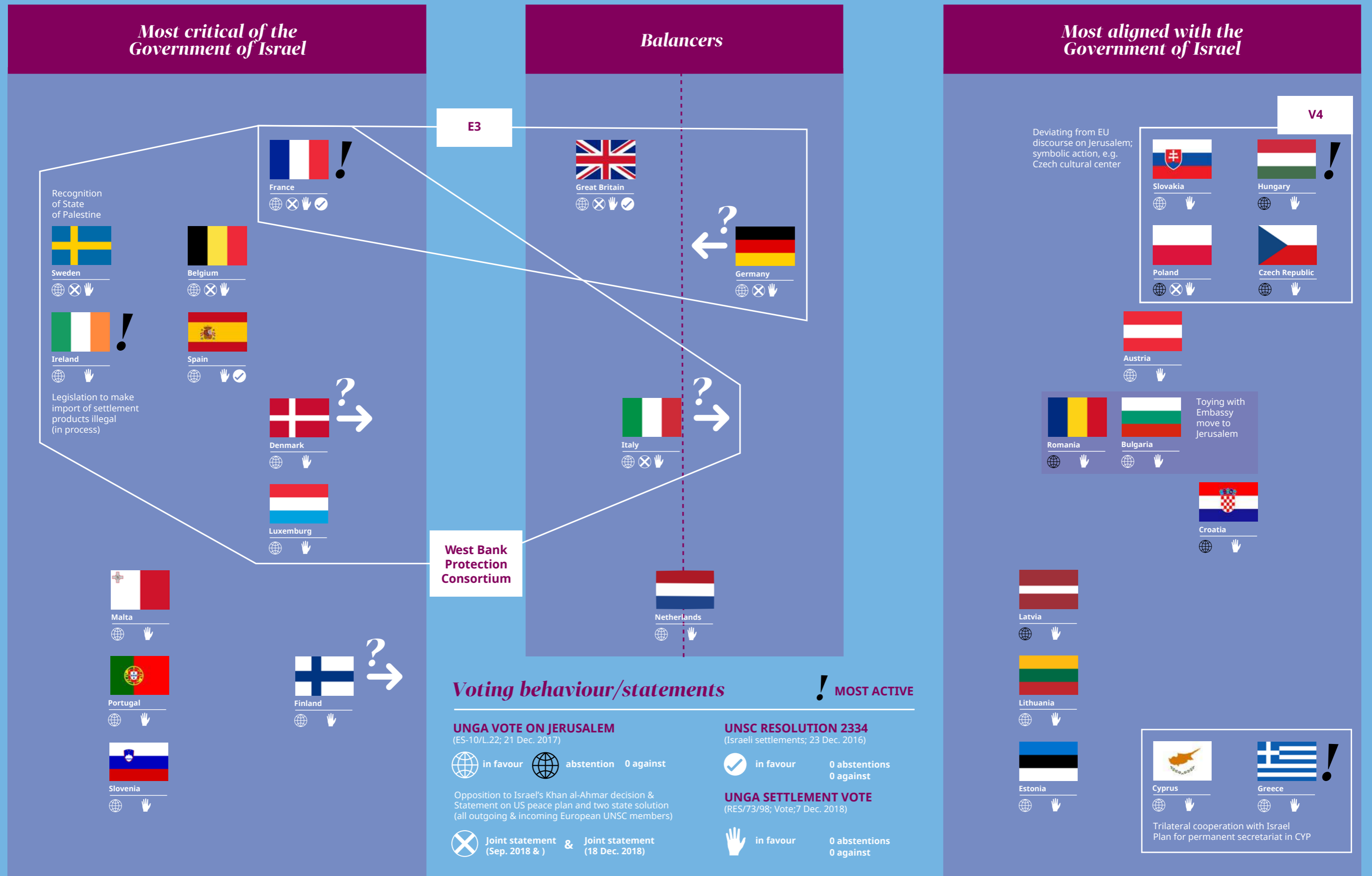
121 See Daniel Schatz, “[Sweden’s Middle East Policy at a Crossroads](#),” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 12 no. 1 (July 2018): 65-80.

122 See, for example, Creede Newton, “[The unbreakable bond of Ireland and Palestine](#),” *Middle East Eye*, January 27, 2015.

123 “[Israel/Palestinian Territories – Middle East Peace Conference \(January 15, 2017\)](#),” *France Diplomatie*, 2017.

124 Herb Kainon, “[Analysis: What Paris Mideast Peace Conference?](#),” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2017.

European Union Member States' Positions on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict



in development support for the Palestinians.¹²⁵ With the ascendance of the left-wing Podemos movement, criticism of Israel has become much more prevalent: In 2017, Podemos pushed for a vote in the Lower House recognizing the right to BDS as freedom of speech.¹²⁶ In addition, some fifty Spanish municipalities have passed resolutions in favor of the BDS movement in recent years and actively engaged in boycotts, thus making Spain the EU Member state where BDS has gained most traction.¹²⁷

BALANCERS

Other “old Europe” states have tried to maintain a middle position. Above all, Germany, which for a long time considered itself the “good ambassador of Israel” in the EU, has assumed a moderating or bridging role between the far sides of the spectrum since the 2004 enlargement. While Berlin has become more critical of Israeli politics in reaction to the positions and policies of the current Netanyahu government on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has maintained an overall Israel-friendly position.¹²⁸ Even for Germany, a country in which the political class has persistently emphasized its special responsibility for Israel and its security,¹²⁹ relations with Israel have been anything but smooth over the last few years. The then-foreign minister’s row with the Israeli prime minister over meetings with the Israeli NGOs Breaking the Silence and B’Tselem during his April 2017 visit clearly reflected the German government’s apprehension towards the Netanyahu government’s policies.¹³⁰ The open confrontation might still have been more an expression of Sigmar Gabriel’s personality than an indication of a substantial change in Germany’s approach to Israel. Yet, even before, Chancellor Angela Merkel had postponed the regular G2G talks due to “timing difficulties” in reaction to the Knesset adopting the so-called Regularization Law in February 2017.¹³¹ The law was supposed to pave the way for the legalization of settlement outposts erected without government authorization, even those built on private Palestinian land. While Merkel’s move was understood by the government of Israel, it could have had more of an impact in the domestic debate in Israel, had it been accompanied by a clear political statement. In general, over the last few years, Germany has been more willing to align its positions with EU Member States critical of Israel, e.g. in voting in the UN. A case in point was the abstention on the November 2012 UNGA vote elevating the status of Palestine to non-member observer state.¹³² Still Berlin has remained reluctant to back measures that the government of Israel could perceive as confrontational.

125 “Near East and Maghreb, Spain and the Middle East,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, n.d.

126 “Congress approves our proposal to recognize the right to BDS as freedom of speech and assembly,” Podemos, June 27, 2017.

127 Eliana Rudee, “Spanish Courts Deal ‘Significant Blow’ to BDS Movement in Spain,” *Breaking Israel News*, January 8, 2018.

128 German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas also promised that Germany would represent Israeli interests in the Security Council during its two-year stint as a non-permanent Member in 2019-2020. “Germany vows to support Israel if it gets on UN Security Council,” *The Times of Israel*, May 5, 2018.

129 Chancellor Angela Merkel has consistently maintained that the security of Israel is a central element of Germany’s *raison d’état*. See for example [Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem](#), 18 March 2008. That stance has been shared to a great extent by the political class across the political spectrum. See for example Deutscher Bundestag, “[Bundestag verurteilt antisemitische Übergriffe - 70 Jahre Gründung des Staates Israel](#),” *Plenarprotokoll*, April 26, 2018.

130 Peter Beaumont, “Israel Snubs German Foreign Minister in Row Over Human Rights Talks,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2017.

131 Bethan McKernan, “Angela Merkel Angrily Cancels Israel Summit over New Settlement Law, Reports Says,” *Independent*, February 14, 2017.

132 “Foreign Minister Westerwelle: Germany Will Abstain in Today’s Vote,” Federal Foreign Office, November 20, 2012.

The Netherlands, which like Germany are committed to transatlantic relations and to Israel against the backdrop of the Holocaust, find themselves in the middle of the spectrum, too.¹³³ So does the UK, which has traditionally tried to balance its relations with Israel and Arab States. Lately, it has been oscillating between positions and voting behavior in line with Israel and critical of its settlement policies.¹³⁴ It has also been emphasizing the indispensability of US leadership for achieving a solution.¹³⁵

MEMBER STATES MOST ALIGNED WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF ISRAEL’S POLICIES

The third block of states, i.e. those most aligned with Israeli policies, comprises mostly States from “new Europe” – but also Greece and Cyprus. In this block, the Visegrád States (V4) – Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia – have positioned themselves most outspokenly on the side of Israel.¹³⁶ In 2017, they invited Israel’s Prime Minister to their V4 summit in Budapest. In February 2019, a V4 summit was planned to take place in Jerusalem. Each of the four states have different motivations for deepening ties with Israel. However, they share grievances over EU decision making and foreign policy priorities, EU proceedings on breaches of European rule of law norms, an admiration for Israel as a strong security actor (against radical Islam, among others), and an interest in good relations with the US. Therefore, in 2017/2018, the US Embassy move to Jerusalem generated tensions among EU Member States with the four.¹³⁷ Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, in particular, deviated from EU language on Jerusalem and took symbolic action in support of the Trump administration’s decision to move the US Embassy and to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, such as abstaining in the UNGA vote on Jerusalem (December 2017),¹³⁸ the opening of a Czech center in Jerusalem in November 2018¹³⁹ and the opening of a Hungarian trade mission there in March 2019.¹⁴⁰ Romania also abstained in the UNGA Jerusalem vote, and both Romania and Bulgaria have been toying with a move of their embassies to Jerusalem.¹⁴¹

In August 2018, Israel’s Prime Minister was invited to join a summit of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) in Vilnius and the four states decided to deepen their cooperation. Previously, Netanyahu had invited himself via Lithuania for a meeting with EU Foreign Ministers in Brussels,

133 “Middle East Process,” Government of the Netherlands, 2019. For details see Toby Greene and Jonathan Rynhold, “Europe and Israel: Between Conflict and Cooperation,” *Survival* 60, no.4 (August 2018): 91-112.

134 For example, the UK blocked the final statement of the Paris conference in January 2017. “We have particular reservations about an international conference intended to advance peace between the parties that does not involve them - indeed which is taking place against the wishes of the Israelis - and which is taking place just days before the transition to a new American President when the U.S. will be the ultimate guarantor of any agreement,” a Foreign Office statement said. Quoted in: John Irish, “Britain has ‘reservations’ about Paris Middle East peace talks,” *Reuters*, January 15, 2017. See also Henry Mance, John Reed, Arthur Beesley, “UK Faces Criticism for Apparently Shifting Stance on Israel,” *Financial Times*, January 16, 2017; Noa Landau, “In Era of Brexit and Tory Power, Israel Sees Shift in Relations with Britain,” *Haaretz*, June 3, 2018;

135 Speech by Ambassador Jonathan Allen, “Reaffirming UK commitment to a two-state solution which ends the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” *Security Council Briefing on the Middle East*, February 20, 2018.

136 Georgi Gotev, “Visegrad Leaders Say EU Must Show More Support for Israel,” *EURACTIV*, July 20, 2017; see also Joanna Dyduch, “The Visegrád Group’s Policy Towards Israel,” *SWP Comment* 2018/C 54 (December 2018).

137 John Irish, “Trump’s Jerusalem Plan Revives Tensions in EU Diplomacy,” *Reuters*, December 8, 2017.

138 For details on the vote see: <http://papersmart.unmeetings.org/media/2/18271141/vr-1.pdf>.

139 “Grand Opening of Czech House Jerusalem,” *Ceske Centrum*, November 27, 2018.

140 Raphael Ahren, “In First for EU State, Hungary Opens Diplomatic Trade Office in Jerusalem,” *The Times of Israel*, March 19, 2019.

141 Alistair Walsh, “Romania to Move Israel Embassy to Jerusalem, says Government,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 20, 2018; Herb Keinson, “Bulgaria to Put ‘Honorary Consulate’, Not Embassy, in Jerusalem,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2018.

circumventing Mogherini. To further Israel's interests in cooperation with this bloc, Netanyahu has sought to rely on the grievances of Baltic States against EU foreign policy priorities, their special closeness to the US in the face of perceived threats from Russia, and similarities of "small democracies". Yet, the joint statement following the summit illustrates that the Baltic State leaders and Netanyahu did not see eye to eye on a two-state solution.¹⁴² As a result, the Baltic States have been less willing to deviate from the EU line than their V4 counterparts have.

Greece and Cyprus have engaged in trilateral cooperation with Israel, which has become ever closer over the last few years. A permanent secretariat of that cooperation is to be established in Nicosia to oversee implementation of trilateral projects and institutionalize the relations.¹⁴³ In contrast to the V4-Israel cooperation, mostly displayed by Hungary taking the lead in blocking joint EU positions, the Hellenic group's cooperation with Israel has been much more dynamic and constructive, driven by shared interests in energy cooperation (i.e., gas in the Eastern Mediterranean), economic cooperation and bandwagoning against Turkey. In that context, an Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum that brings together Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinians was established in January 2019.¹⁴⁴ While the EU and other Member States perceive V4-Israel cooperation largely as a nuisance, the EU has supported sub-regional cooperation initiated by the Hellenic countries, e.g. by funding a feasibility study for the gas pipeline.¹⁴⁵

SHIFTING POSITIONS, CROSS-CUTTING COOPERATION

These blocks are by no means set in stone. On the one side, while most EU Member States have "traditional" leanings in the conflict due to their specific histories and national interests, their stances and positions shift, in particular with changes in the composition of government.

As a rule, the ascendancy of extreme right-wing parties in EU Member States and their participation in governing coalitions has led to a closer alignment of these governments' positions with those of the government of Israel. For right-wing governments, coalitions, and parties, close relations with Israel and pro-Israeli government stances primarily serve the purpose of whitewashing, i.e. clearing themselves from allegations of anti-Semitism, thus making themselves domestically and internationally acceptable.¹⁴⁶ On top of that, European right-wing leaders like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán tend to share with Netanyahu and his ilk illiberal attitudes, anti-Muslim sentiments, leadership styles, and foes, such as George Soros and his Open Society Foundation.¹⁴⁷ They also engage in "authoritarian learning"

142 Joint Press Statement, "On the occasion of the summit of the Prime Ministers of the Baltic States and the Prime Minister of the State of Israel," Vilnius/Lithuania, August 24, 2018; "PM Netanyahu meets with Baltic prime ministers," Embassy of Israel in Finland, August 24, 2018.

143 "5th Trilateral Summit Declaration," Israeli Embassy in Greece, December 24, 2018; Herb Keiron, "Israel-Greece-Cyprus Friendship Flourishes with Creation of 'Secretariat' to Oversee Ties," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 10, 2018.

144 Keith Johnson, "Club Med: Israel, Egypt, and Others Form New Natural Gas Group," *Foreign Policy*, January 15 2019; Amr Emam, "Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum a powerful new global player," *The Arab Weekly*, January 20, 2019.

145 Noa Landau, "Splitting the EU: Israel's Tightening Alliance with Central Europe's Nationalist Leaders," *Haaretz*, July 8, 2018; "Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy agree on \$7b. East Med gas pipeline to Europe," *The Times of Israel*, November 24, 2018.

146 Nitzan Horowitz, "Netanyahu's Dark Deal with Europe's Radical Right," *Haaretz*, July 9, 2018; Dominique Vidal, "Netanyahu's Flirtation with the Far Right," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 12, 2018. Israel's President Reuven Rivlin has repeatedly criticized the embrace of European right-wing actors; at times, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also taken a critical stance.

147 Luke Baker, "Israel backs Hungary, says financier Soros is a threat," *Reuters*, July 10, 2017.

from each other, for example, on restriction of space for civil society.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, a trend of historical relativization or revisionism in Central and Eastern Europe has remained a serious obstacle to closer relations with Israel. The February 2019 row between the Polish and Israeli governments over Poland's role in the Holocaust, which led to the cancelation of a V4 summit in Jerusalem, illustrates that point.¹⁴⁹

Austria has positioned itself firmly in the pro-Israel camp since the far right Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), officially shunned by the Government of Israel due to its anti-Semitic past and present, joined the governing coalition. Together with representatives of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, an Austrian diplomat attended the ceremony held by the Israeli MFA marking the US Embassy move.¹⁵⁰ Italy seems to be moving in the same direction since the League party (former Lega Nord) joined the government. Its Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has refrained from explicitly endorsing a two-state solution and has strongly criticized the EU's alleged pro-Palestinian bias.¹⁵¹ In Germany, the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which embraces racist and revisionist trends, promotes itself as the only true friend of Israel and echoes the NGO Monitor's defamation of organizations, such as ECFR, Open Society Foundation, and the New Israel Fund. Its representatives were also among the founders of the pro-settler caucus "Friends of Judea and Samaria in the European Parliament" and have aimed at shifting the discourse on the occupied territories in the German Parliament.¹⁵²

The ascendancy of extreme right-wing parties in EU Member States and their participation in governing coalitions has led to a closer alignment of these governments' positions with those of the government of Israel

On the other side, while there has not been any consensus among EU Member States allowing more progressive EU28 statements and moves, there have been joint positions across the blocks: The E3 (UK, France, Germany) and the Quint (E3 plus Italy and Spain) have aimed at closely coordinating their stances and moves. The EU and eight Member States have been cooperating in the West Bank

148 "Very Concerned By Growing Collaboration of PMs Netanyahu and Orbán," Amnesty International Israel & Hungary, July 17, 2017.

149 Noa Landau, "Visegrad Summit in Israel Cancelled After Poland Pulls Out Over Holocaust Row," February 18, 2019; for background also see Irena Kalhousova, "What should Bibi know before landing in Budapest for the V4 summit?," July 11, 2017.

150 Raphael Ahren, "Four EU Envoys to Attend Israeli Event Feting US Embassy Move," *The Times of Israel*, May 13, 2018.

151 David Lerner, "Italy's Far-Right Leader Salvini Visiting Israel to 'Whitewash' Record, Critics Say," *Haaretz*, December 10, 2018; Raphael Ahren, "Hosting Italy's deputy PM, Netanyahu urges stronger action against Hezbollah," *The Times of Israel*, December 12, 2018. However, the League's coalition partner, the Five Star Movement, leans more towards the Palestinians.

152 Lizzie Dearden, "German AfD Politician 'Attacks Holocaust Memorial' and Says Germans Should Be More Positive About Nazi Past," *Independent*, January 19, 2017; Yarden Schwartz, "Frauke Petry, The New Face of Germany's Anti-Immigrant Right," *Tablet Magazine* Interview, February 7, 2017; Beatrix von Storch, "The German Government Goes After Friends of Israel, Not Anti-Semites," *Arutz Sheva* 7, January 31, 2019; Petr Bystron, "Exposing German Funding for Israel's Enemies," *Arutz Sheva* 7, December 4, 2018; see also the website [Friends of Judea and Samaria in the European Parliament](#).

Protection Consortium on humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable communities in Area C, mainly Bedouin communities, in accordance with the humanitarian imperative.¹⁵³ They have done so without requesting permits from the occupation authorities and without regard to master plans. This group of donors has also put forward a demarche for compensation of European-funded projects in the West Bank destroyed by the Israeli military.¹⁵⁴ Another group (the EU, Denmark, France, and the UK) are financing the EU Area C Development Program, which provides development assistance to communities in Area C based on master plans. The focus is on “social infrastructure” projects: kindergartens, water networks, roads, playgrounds, and additional classrooms. In doing so, they assume consent by the Israeli Civil Administration to master plans handed in and not rejected within 18 months, rather than waiting for explicit approval – which is the approach that other Europeans, such as Germany, have been taking.

The EU and its Member States are very unlikely to become effective players in the conflict

All European Security Council Members voted in favor of Resolution 2334 in December 2016.¹⁵⁵ The resolution condemned Israeli settlement activities in the occupied territories as well as all acts of violence, reconfirmed a two-state approach to the conflict and called on all UN Member States to “distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967”.¹⁵⁶ In September 2018, all incoming and outgoing European Security Council Members put forward a joint statement on Khan al-Ahmar, urging Israeli authorities to reconsider their decision to demolish the structures.¹⁵⁷ In December 2018, in view of the pending presentation of a US peace plan, the same group presented a joint statement on the principles of conflict resolution, stating in an unusually frank manner: “Any peace plan that fails to recognize these internationally agreed parameters would risk being condemned to failure.”¹⁵⁸ EU Member States from each of the three blocks supported both statements: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the UK. What is more, all EU Member States voted in favor of a December 2018 UNGA resolution put forward by Ireland condemning settlement construction as well as on a US-proposed resolution strongly critical of Hamas.¹⁵⁹

153 The eight Member States are Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Spain, and Sweden.

154 Barak Ravid, “In Unprecedented Move, Eight European Countries to Demand Compensation from Israel for West Bank Demolitions,” *Haaretz*, October 19, 2017.

155 EU Members in the Security Council at the time were France, the UK and Spain. For details on the vote see [United Nations Bibliographic Information System](#).

156 “Resolution 2334,” United Nations Security Council, December 23, 2016.

157 “EU Members Press Stakeout on Khan al-Ahmar,” Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the UN, September 20, 2018.

158 “EU8 Statement for the Press Stakeout on MEPP,” Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the UN, December 18, 2018. EU Member States from all three blocks - Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the UK - supported the statement

159 For the resolution on settlements see “Resolution RES/73/98,” United Nations General Assembly, December 7, 2018; for details on the vote [United Nations Bibliographic Information System](#); for the resolution on Hamas see “Resolution A/73/L.42,” United Nations General Assembly, November 29, 2018; for details on the vote [United Nations Bibliographic Information System](#).

Because the EU Council’s Maghreb-Mashreq (MaMa) working group and the Foreign Affairs Council have been paralysed since 2016 over divisions about Israel/Palestine, the EU has tried to work around them by relying on statements by Mogherini and/or European Security Council Members’ representatives in New York rather than in Brussels. While the latter has helped to reassert the EU *acquis* on principles related to the conflict and its resolution, it has not allowed the Europeans to play a more active and progressive role, which would have been of the essence in view of the fast deterioration on the ground. In addition, against the backdrop of EU divisions and Israeli policies, the EU High Representative has taken a rather timid approach, and EU Special Representatives have not used their mandate to push for policies that are more active. In September 2017, the EU initiated “a comprehensive review of the modalities of EU engagement on the ground” (rather than a review of EU policies) in support of a two-state solution. Yet, to date, EU Member States have not endorsed the conclusions on how to send a strong signal of enhanced EU engagement.¹⁶⁰

3. Prospects

In the short to mid-term, the EU and its Member States are very unlikely to become effective players in the conflict for several reasons. First, this is linked to developments related to the workings of the EU that have nothing to do with the Middle East. These include a more inward-looking EU, uncertainties over Brexit and future foreign policy cooperation with the UK, an “institutional vacuum” linked to the upcoming European Parliament elections and subsequent staffing of its institutions, as well as a lame-duck High Representative.¹⁶¹

Second, active policies by the Government of Israel aimed at driving a wedge between EU Member States are likely to keep posing obstacles to stronger EU unity on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁶² In this, even an Israeli government that shares less with European right-wing leaders in terms of policy styles, value orientation and personal friendships, will be able to bank on grievances of the V4 and the Baltic States with regard to specific policy areas and/or a perceived dominance of the E3, or bank on shared interests, e.g. between Israel, Greece and Cyprus.

Third, despite Mogherini’s declarations about Israeli-Palestinian peace being a top priority,¹⁶³ the issue has not been and is unlikely to become a foreign policy priority for the EU and its Member States in the near future. Rather, the conflict is considered well contained and not a direct threat to European interests through spillover effects. Even when the conflict re-imposes itself on the agenda through violence, such as during the military confrontations in Gaza in the summer of 2014, the attention span is getting shorter and shorter. Not only is the conflict not seen as an immediate threat warranting attention by many EU Member States, it is also not seen as an issue worth engaging in – as conflict resolution has become so remote.

160 Review of modalities of EU engagement on the ground in support of a two-state solution. State of play and way forward, Non-paper, September 2018.

161 For details see Dr. Nicolai von Ondarza’s contribution in this volume. For the expected impact of Brexit also see Arie Reich. “The EU, UK, and Israel: what to “bexpect”,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 10 no. 2 (September 2016): 203-212.

162 For details see Eyal Ronen’s contribution in this volume.

163 Raphael Ahren and Dov Lieber, “EU: Israeli-Palestinian peace deal a ‘top priority’,” *Times of Israel*, March 27, 2017.

Fourth, while EU Member States have been apprehensive of a potential US peace initiative or “deal of the century”, which is expected to undermine further the two-state paradigm and ignore the legitimate interests of at least one of the two sides, they are rather unlikely to pick a major fight with the US administration over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁶⁴ Not only do Europeans not want to put themselves in the driver’s seat, they also do not agree on the way forward. In addition, the Union and its Members are already in conflict with Donald Trump about other issues (such as the JCPOA, trade, climate change, etc.), seen as more pressing because of their potential impact on global stability and/or European economic interests.

Conclusion

Divisions among EU Member States over moving beyond the European *acquis* on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in conjunction with other factors negatively affecting the European will and ability to take forceful action, have further reduced the European role and impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the last few years. Even the scaled-down ambition of keeping the option of a two-state approach on the table (rather than contributing to the realization of a two-state solution) has not been met. Europeans were able to score temporary success on particular issues, such as preventing (at least for the time being) the eviction of Bedouins from Khan al-Ahmar. However, they have not been effective in halting or reversing trends that are leading to ever-greater fragmentation of the Palestinian territory, loss of social cohesion, increased repression, and an aggravation of the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. To the contrary. The situation has been worsening rapidly with a concrete risk of renewed armed violence and the door closing for good on conflict resolution through a two-state approach.¹⁶⁵ Dramatic steps, such as Israel annexing large chunks of the West Bank or forcefully displacing Palestinians, and/or breakdown of Palestinian institutions able to speak for relevant constituencies could exacerbate the situation further. The latter is fast becoming an acute risk given the erosion of Palestinian governance structures and civil society due to anti-Palestinian campaigns, tightening restrictions, and a dramatic reduction of funding.¹⁶⁶

Even if European Member States do not consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a priority today and do not see how they could contribute to its resolution, they should take these risks seriously. In addition, there are at least two compelling reasons to engage. First, European taxpayers’ money is not spent on peacemaking, the realization of Palestinian self-determination and the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state next to Israel. Rather, it is disbursed to cover the

cost of the politically fabricated humanitarian crisis in Gaza and to uphold the current system of conflict management. It thus allows Israel to pursue the entrenchment of the occupation, the isolation of the Gaza Strip and the creeping annexation of the West Bank. It also allows the PA to uphold the intra-Palestinian division and to pursue ever more repressive measures to subdue its critics. Moreover, it allows the de facto government in Gaza to shun responsibility for the well-being of its own citizens. European funds are thus spent in a way that absolves local actors of their responsibilities rather than how they were originally conceived, that is to help build Palestinian state institutions, induce economic development and contribute to resolving the conflict. Second, European States (as all States) are legally obliged to deny recognition to internationally unlawful acts and to work for compliance with international law. The failure to rectify human rights violations and breaches of international law by Israel, the PA and Hamas or to prosecute suspected war crimes is tantamount to inviting the conflict parties to continue to break the law. Instead of creating the basis for peaceful coexistence, this deepens the rifts within and between the societies.

In the face of fast developments on the ground, hibernation until the end of the Trump Administration and pinning hopes on the next Israeli government are not enough. The main challenge for Europeans will be how to move forward in a manner adequate to the dramatic situation. Against the backdrop of the divisions among EU Member States analyzed here, progressive action will only be possible in informal alliances. The way forward will have to be sought through such alliances, while maintaining the E27 (preferably plus the UK) consensus on the *acquis* regarding principles of conflict resolution.

164 For background see for example Taylan Özgür Kaya, “The USA and the EU as a Third Party in Middle East Peacemaking: an Asymmetric Division of Labour,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 15 no. 2 (2017): 143-160.

165 See also “Global Action Needed on Growing Israeli Settlement Moves,” OHCHR, January 30, 2019.

166 In addition to general donor fatigue, four related developments have led to a severe funding crisis in the PA, Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, Palestinian civil society, and UNRWA: 1) Slashed US funding for the PA, UNRWA and Palestinian civil society from 2017 onwards; 2) US legislation that makes recipients of US aid prone to legal cases under the False Claims Act and the Taylor Force Act leading the PA to decline continued US support for the Palestinian security forces, and threatening international NGOs working with Palestinians (see the case of the Norwegian People’s Aid); 3) Defunding of Palestinian institutions and NGOs amongst others by EU Member States over allegations of terrorism, boycott or incitement; 4) Implementation of the “no pay for slay legislation” by the Government of Israel, deducting from its monthly transfers to the PA a sum equal to the PA’s payments to security prisoners and their families from February 2019 onwards. For details see Lara Friedman, “The Surprising New Battleground in the War Against Palestinian Rights: Your Local Court-house,” *Forward*, January 7, 2019; “Dutch Parliament votes to reduce funds to Palestine,” *PNN*, December 18, 2018; “Belgium ends funding for Palestinian schools over honoring of terrorist,” *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2018; Amos Harel, “The Ticking Time Bomb That Could Upend Israel’s Election,” *Haaretz*, February 25, 2019.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dr. Muriel Asseburg and Dr. Nimrod Goren

This is not the time for a new round of final status negotiations. Even if a more centrist government is formed in Israel, one which will be open to resuming talks with the Palestinians, it is not expected to give the issue high priority nor to agree to concessions required for substantial progress in the peace process. The Palestinian leadership is weak, divided, and has lost the legitimacy necessary to engage in trade-offs and see through implementation of an agreement. In addition, the mistrust between the parties is too high, and the gaps concerning final status issues too wide to reach compromise. Therefore, while the EU (or a group of EU member states) can help foster dialogue between pro-peace Israelis and Palestinians, it would currently make little sense for it (or them) to initiate final status talks through another international conference or even a backchannel format. While seeking to play a more active role in peacemaking efforts, EU member states also do not stand a chance when it comes to replacing the US as the main facilitator. At any rate, Europeans would not be able to shape a framework of negotiations that contradicts the US approach.

Yet, what we witness today is a fast unravelling of the Oslo arrangements for conflict management, including the existence of the PA, and a slide towards a dead end when it comes to an agreed upon solution based on the self-determination of two peoples and the realization of human rights. The approach of the US administration is pushing developments further down this road, rather than working against the trend. Therefore, an active policy is needed to address the dramatic deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Above all, Europeans need to counter the US approach to the Palestinians and rethink their own, prepare for the risks associated with the US “deal of the century” and its potential repercussions, and spell out the consequences of further de facto and de jure annexation. At the same time, Europeans should also prepare the building blocks for a future effort of collaborative peacemaking with a new US administration that would help future Israeli and Palestinian leaderships move forward.

For the reasons outlined in the contributions to this report, progressive action in that regard is unlikely to come from the EU + E27 (EU Member States, excluding the UK). Rather, the initiative will have to come from informal alliances (E3 (UK, France, Germany), Quint, incoming and outgoing European Security Council members) that carry sufficient political weight to make a difference. At the same time, it is crucial for those member states that lead such initiatives to invest considerable political capital in maintaining consensus among the EU + E27 (preferably plus UK) on the *acquis* regarding principles of conflict resolution on Jerusalem, settlements, support for UNRWA, etc. Member states would also be well advised to nominate an energetic new EU High Representative and give him or her the necessary backing to initiate steps that further peacemaking and see through such initiatives together with the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process.

The following principles should form the core of such a European initiative:

Maintaining a realistic option for conflict settlement based on self-determination of two peoples and human rights

This would encompass rethinking the wording and focus of the European approach. Rather than merely sticking to an ever hollower two-state mantra as a response to the Trump plan, Europeans should insist on a concrete set of principles and parameters and upgrade their approach to counter measures of de facto and de jure annexation. They should also no longer subordinate the realization of human rights to a negotiated settlement. Concretely, that would entail:

- **Reiterating principles and parameters** for conflict resolution as put forward by the E3 in the Security Council in February 2011¹⁶⁷ and based on the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force: a territorial settlement based on the 1967 borders with agreed upon land swaps; security arrangements that acknowledge the needs of both sides; a just, agreed upon settlement of the refugee issue (acceptable to the parties and current host states) as well as Jerusalem as capital of both states. Europeans might not be aware of it, but the lack of reaffirmation of EU policy positions leads Israeli politicians to doubt whether the EU is still committed to them and whether the Israeli-Palestinian issue is still a priority for the EU. When engaging with Israeli politicians, European leaders should make sure to raise the Israeli-Palestinian issue in a significant manner, and not allow discussions to focus only on Iran and regional security.
- **Taking a stance on positions and measures** that the Trump Administration is adopting **that are further distancing an end to occupation and peace**. While Europeans were in opposition to Trump’s statements and actions regarding Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, they have been much less vocal vis-à-vis the American de-legitimization of PA leaders, the closing of the PLO offices in the US, the cuts in funding to Palestinian civil society and Israeli-Palestinian civil society projects as well as to Palestinian hospitals, etc.

¹⁶⁷ “Security Council Fails to Adopt Text Demanding That Israel Halt Settlement Activity as Permanent Member Casts Negative Vote,” United Nations, February 18, 2011.

- The **consistent pursuit of differentiation** based on EU Council decisions and in line with UNSC resolution 2334. In this vein, EU member states should insist also on a self-commitment to reporting on implementation of measures to pursue differentiation (including the labeling of settlement products).
- An upgraded **approach countering entrenched occupation, settlement expansion, displacement and annexation policies** by focusing on supporting the Palestinian presence on the ground (in particular in critical areas such as East Jerusalem, Area C of the West Bank, the Seam Zone, Hebron and the Gaza Strip) through development measures as well as political and financial support against forced evictions. In this context, it would be key to address obstacles to support for Palestinian development on the level of governments rather than through COGAT (Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories) channels. It would also be of utmost importance to agree on steps that would follow an Israeli decision to annex legally parts of the West Bank and to communicate these steps clearly. On the other hand, a decision by an Israeli government to reverse its settlement and annexation policies, such as a return to halting settlement construction, should be incentivized through measures to deepen cooperation.
- **Highlighting the importance of human rights** by increasing political and financial support of Israeli and Palestinian watchdogs and human rights defenders, in particular in the face of delegitimization campaigns, and by insisting on accountability for human rights breaches from all sides through independent fact-finding and judicial processes rather than trying to shield parties from such processes. In this vein, it would also be crucial to elevate human rights issues in bilateral relations with Israel, the PA and de facto government in the Gaza Strip.

Prevent breakdown and rebuild legitimate governance structures in Palestine

Europeans – today by far the largest donors to the Palestinians – have a special responsibility when it comes to urging the rebuilding of effective and legitimate governance structures in Palestine. Rather than sticking to an increasingly divided, weak, illegitimate and repressive Palestinian leadership, only because the PA fulfills important service delivery and security functions, they should change their approach mainly in three areas to contribute to building a democratic, participatory, united and inclusive entity:

- **Prominently address governance deficiencies and reform needs** as well as shrinking spaces for civil society and human rights violations by the PA. And while – against the backdrop of US cuts – it is crucial to maintain current levels of funding or even increase funding, Europeans should consistently apply criteria of performance in governance and human rights (in line with a “more for more” approach) rather than criteria derived from anti-Palestinian campaigns. If reforms of fundamental issues such as separation of powers are not enacted, funds should be reallocated away from the central government.

- **Urgently engage in Gaza** by helping to maintain UNRWA employment and services as well as devising quick-impact projects that alleviate unemployment and reduce economic dependency. It is equally important to address the conditions for sustainable stabilization, thus avoiding periodical lapses into violence, allowing for economic development, and reducing aid dependency. To this end, Europeans should engage with the de facto government, at least on a technical level, insist that the PA end its punitive measures, and demand that Israel stop its collective punishment. They should also help reinvigorate efforts of Egypt and the UN to achieve a long-term cease-fire that would effectively protect the right to life of civilians, in particular in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel, and lift the blockade by weighing in politically and offering good offices and practical support, e.g. an adapted EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM).
- **Support a unified Palestinian structure** as one of the conditions for a return to the democratic process, a viable Palestinian voice in negotiations, and an authority capable of implementing future agreements. The EU should do so by clearly communicating the preference for a government of national unity committed to non-violence of all players, by offering support for the integration of Hamas employees into PA structures, and by offering political support and logistical assistance for elections based on a power sharing agreement.

Expand the space for dialogue and communicate clearly

Against the backdrop of strained EU-Israel relations, internal EU divisions and shrinking spaces in Israel and the EU, four approaches should be at the forefront:

- **Use clear and consistent language** towards Israel's government and population: Europeans should welcome the incoming Israeli government, stress the validity of the incentives package linked to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking as well as the willingness to support in practice steps towards realizing human rights, ending the occupation, and seeking peace. Rather than leaving the field to instigators, polarizers and delegitimization campaigns, representatives of EU member states should seek opportunities to explain to the Israeli government and public European positions, policies, and approaches, in particular where Europe's image has been tainted by blurring the lines between differentiation and boycott and between support for human rights defenders and anti-Semitism. In this context, they should also remind their interlocutors of the basis of Israeli-European relations as defined in the Association Agreement's “essential element clause”.¹⁶⁸
- **Invest in building ties with Israeli politicians** with a general pro-European attitude and encourage them to challenge EU bashing publicly and to view and portray the EU as a partner, rather than a foe.

¹⁶⁸ The 2000 [EU-Israel Association Agreement](#) states in Article 2 that: “Relations between the Parties, as well as all the provisions of the Agreement itself, shall be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles, which guides their internal and international policy and constitutes an essential element of this Agreement.”

- **Maintain space in Europe for open conversation** about Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and peacemaking by propagating free speech and convening fora for critical and constructive thinking about the way forward.
- **Step up support for Israeli pro-peace and pro-democracy civil society groups**, acknowledging the importance of their work for creating connections between peoples and promoting the values of liberal democracy. Developing partnerships between Israeli and European civil society organizations working for social change and conflict resolution should also be prioritized. In this context, **consider setting up an EU-Israel civil society forum** to discuss issues of mutual concern, discover and act upon commonalities and prepare input for bi- and multilateral fora.

Support Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and provide building blocks for future peace making

The more the Israeli-Palestinian arena moves into crisis mode, the greater the importance of maintaining space for dialogue and personal relations to avoid breakdown. In addition, the current hiatus in the peace process should be used to prepare for a stronger and more effective international role in peacemaking once conditions allow forward movement. Towards these goals, the EU and its Member States should:

- **Explore opportunities for Israeli-Palestinian talks** in a variety of settings, such as at the sidelines of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. The added value of the forum – which is currently set to focus on economic issues – is that its membership includes Arab countries (Egypt and Jordan), European countries (Italy, Greece, and Cyprus), as well as Israel and the PA. At the same time, Europeans should pay attention to recent US efforts to increase its involvement in Eastern Mediterranean alliances (especially the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alliance), and make sure that Brussels is not pushed aside by the Americans.
- **Establish a working group with international partners**, especially with representatives from the Arab League and Arab countries, **to prepare for a more effective international role in future Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking based on internationally agreed parameters**. Such a working group should also explore how best to reshape the now defunct Quartet (US, EU, Russia and the UN) as an umbrella for the international community's role in peacemaking and implementation, presenting Israelis and Palestinians with a global set of economic and political incentives as well as security guarantees. Europeans could be a major driving force towards the development of an international incentive package, in parallel to the EU reaffirming and further developing its own incentives (based on the Special Privileged Partnership incentive offered to Israel and the Palestinians in December 2013).¹⁶⁹

- The EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process should actively **engage with Israeli and Palestinian civil society** (together or apart) on what a way forward could look like. Europeans should also provide backing and support to those civil society organizations on both sides that share an interest in cooperation, in particular in light of the opposition they face in their own societies. What is more, the EU could serve as an enabler and host of policy dialogues between Israelis, Palestinians and representatives from Arab countries.

The following are recommendations for the Israeli Government:

Adopt a positive political attitude and public discourse regarding the EU

Israel's outgoing government has been engaged in an EU-bashing campaign, which portrayed the EU as a foe rather than a friend, and which was openly aimed at weakening and dividing the EU. This campaign has increased strains in Israel-EU relations and led to widespread negative attitudes towards the EU among the Israeli public. The new government should change course. It should refrain from attacks against the EU and from portraying it as anti-Israel. Rather, it should highlight the strategic importance of the EU for Israel, the scope and diversity of existing Israel-EU cooperation, the Israeli interest in the success of the European project, and the potential of even closer EU-Israel ties in the future. In this vein, the government should invest efforts in long-term policy planning to define Israel's desired level of interaction and association with the EU and its Member States, and to identify how to reach it.

Strengthen relations between the Israeli and European policy elites

The Israeli Prime Minister and Foreign Minister should invite the incoming President of the EU Commission and the High Representative to visit Israel. To reflect the new Israeli attitude towards Europe, representatives of the Government of Israel should also pro-actively initiate visits to Brussels, addressing their European counterparts and the European institutions. In addition, efforts should be made to improve relations between Israeli and European parliamentarians. The Knesset's parliamentary friendship committees, caucuses and delegations dealing with the EU and its Member States should be properly staffed and their members should be regularly briefed about European affairs (e.g. by think tanks as well as the Diplomatic Advisor to the Knesset) and encouraged to take constructive pro-European parliamentary action. Government ministries should be better informed about prospects for cooperation with Europe in their respective fields, as well as about the way in which the EU actually functions.

Implement a pro-peace foreign policy, acknowledging a European role in the peace process

The Israeli government should give high priority to advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace based on negotiations with the Palestinian leadership and internationally agreed parameters. It should view favorably those countries in Europe that are willing to invest time, efforts and capital in promoting a peace process, seeing them as an asset to Israel and not as a threat. In this context, the Government of Israel should also acknowledge the legitimacy of European criticism of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, refrain from unjustly portraying policy differences

¹⁶⁹ Council of the European Union, "Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process," December 16, 2013.

between Israel and the Europeans as European support for boycotts or anti-Semitism, and stop the smear campaigns against those in Europe supporting Palestinian civil society and human rights organizations. Rather, the government should engage in discussions with the EU to explore what contributions Europe can make to peacemaking with the Palestinians, as well as to improving relations between Israel and its other Arab neighbors. In this vein, Israeli government officials should regularly engage with the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process. They should respond favorably to the EU offer to establish a Special Privileged Partnership with Israel (as well as with a future Palestinian state) after peace is reached, and should assign a team to work with European counterparts on further developing the content of this offer. The Government of Israel should also reverse its course and encourage rather than discourage EU support for pro-peace, pro-democracy and human rights civil society organizations and invite European help to increase interaction between Israelis and Palestinians.

Be committed to liberal democratic values, even when pursuing national interests

The affinity between Israel and Europe has been based traditionally on Israel's belonging to the club of liberal democracies – despite the shortcomings of its democracy and the prolonged occupation. In the past, Israel was willing to engage with leaders adhering to different sets of values in order to promote its interests, bypass regional isolation, and diversify its foreign policy. In recent years, though, this engagement has been replaced with a warm embrace of anti-liberal leaders in Europe and beyond. In order to gain support for its policies, and to weaken the EU's ability to reach consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli government has developed ties with far-right European politicians, some with anti-Semitic leanings. The new government should strengthen the democracy component of Israel's foreign relations, prioritize ties with liberal democracies (including in Europe, and even in those cases where there are policy differences), and refrain from endorsing radical right-wing leaders, especially those that Jewish communities in the relevant countries reject. This approach should also be reflected in the domestic sphere, reversing the trend away from liberal democracy, allowing Israeli NGOs to develop partnerships with European organizations freely, and highlighting their legitimate right to present their case – even when not in line with government policies – before diverse European and international audiences.

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Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies is a foreign policy think tank, established in Israel in 2011, with the mission to improve Israel's foreign policy, advance Israeli-Palestinian peace, and promote Israel's regional belonging in the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean. The Mitvim Institute develops and promotes a pro-peace, multi-regional, internationalist, modern, and inclusive approach to Israel's foreign policy. It generates new foreign policy knowledge and puts it into policy use. The Mitvim Institute works at the political, diplomatic, and civil society levels to achieve its mission. Its core staff, policy fellows, and researchers produce original analysis and concrete policy recommendations. The Mitvim Institute conducts outreach activities to advance these recommendations, shape the political discussion, and influence policy. These activities include briefings to parliamentarians, government officials, and foreign diplomats; policy dialogues with regional and international think tanks; expert-workshops and public events; media interviews and commentaries; and public opinion polls. The Mitvim Institute's website is: www.mitvim.org.il.



PAX is the leading Dutch NGO in the field of peace-building and conflict-transformation. It works for peace, reconciliation and justice in conflict regions around the globe, including in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. It has thematic programmes on the protection of civilians, humanitarian disarmament, activism, gender as well as natural resources and human rights. Strategies are based on a twin-track approach, in close cooperation with local partners. Promoting and facilitating civil-society driven dialogue and peace-building initiatives is linked with strengthening an enabling environment for these through public campaigning and political lobby at all relevant levels: from local authorities to EU and UN headquarters. Human security and human dignity are core values. The PAX' website is: www.paxforpeace.nl.



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) - The German Institute for International and Security Affairs advises political decision-makers on international politics and foreign and security policy. Its services are orientated primarily towards the German government and Bundestag, as well as relevant international organisations, such as the European Union, NATO and the United Nations. SWP stands out in comparison to other policy advisers for its ability to draw on solid [academic research conducted](#) by its [own staff](#). The institute places a premium on independence. SWP is tied to no political party or other institution, nor to any programme or interest group. The researchers set their own priorities and conduct their research freely, without preconceived outcomes. With roughly 50 researchers, SWP covers a broad spectrum of regional and thematic expertise, enabling it to bring together diverse perspectives. Great importance is also placed on academic exchange with colleagues at other research Institutes around the globe. SWP is also a forum for exchange and communication, a place of (outward) calm where decision-makers can meet with SWP staff in a confidential setting to air questions and run through ideas without heed to political and party-political considerations. As well as in the German capital Berlin this exchange of ideas also takes place in Brussels. As Europe's largest think-tank in the field of international politics, SWP opened a [Brussels office](#) in 2009. SWP currently employs about 140 staff of its own. In the course of a year, another 70 or so join, for example as visiting researchers, scholarship-holders, project staff and interns. SWP's website is www.swp-berlin.org.

