



**MITVIM**  
The Israeli Institute For  
Regional Foreign Policies

## **Israel Should Maintain its Boycott on Far-Right Parties in Europe**

**Nitzan Horowitz\***

**December 2017**

The Austrian Freedom Party, which is known for its anti-Semitic and Nazi roots, is part of the new coalition government in Vienna. Its leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, is Austria's new vice-chancellor. In the last time Strache's party joined the Austrian government, Israel was quick to react: it called its ambassador from Vienna and lowered the level of relations. This time, the chances for a strong Israeli reaction are slim, since some Israeli politicians have already legitimized Strache and even created connections with his far-right party.

The coming out of the once taboo relations between Israeli right wing figures and extreme right wing movements and parties in Western Europe, is a source of serious concerns in European Jewish communities and by many Israelis and Europeans. Some of these parties are called "radical" or "populist", others "Euro-sceptic", and there are differences between them. The main features that distinguish them from the conservative mainstream right-wing parties, some of which hold power in various European countries, are strong opposition to immigration, Islamophobia, and loathing of the European Union.

By the end of the 1980s, extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe had expressed open hostility to Jews and Israel, as well as to the United States. The radical right, as a direct continuation of the old European and Christian anti-Semitism, regarded the Jews as a threat to European society. With the consolidation of large Muslim communities in Europe, the significant strengthening of the European Union, and the dissolution of the Communist threat, there was a slow and faltering process of change in the extreme right-wing parties, which strengthened significantly in the first decade of the 2000s. Almost all extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe chose to distance themselves from anti-Semitic views, at least according to their public statements. Some of them repressed anti-Semitism and replaced it with Islamophobia.

At the same time, there has also been a change in attitude toward Israel: the extreme-right struggles against immigrants to Europe converged with the Arab-Israeli conflict and turned Israel into a kind of ally in the struggle against Islam. With the intensification of terrorist attacks in Europe by Islamic elements in recent years, the support and identification of extreme right-wing parties with Israel has increased - especially with the Israeli right.

Initially it was done quietly, under the radar. In recent years it has intensified and became public: a growing number of right-wing Israeli entities are strengthening their ties with far-right parties and movements in Europe. Israeli right-wing ministers, Members of Knesset and party officials openly meet with representatives of neo-fascist and extreme right wing and populist parties such as the "Flemish Interest" from Belgium, "Freedom Party" of Austria,

---

\* Nitzan Horowitz is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute. He is a commentator on international affairs and a former Member of Knesset. This article was written as part of a project funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

“Freedom Party” of Holland, “People’s Party” from Denmark and even “Alternative for Germany” – the far-right party that has just entered the German parliament for the first time.

This development is well reflected and echoed by the Israeli media – right wing media in particular but also the mainstream media. It involves high profile and favorable coverage and interviews with European far-right leaders such as Strache from Austria, Geert Wilders from Holland or Marine Le Pen from France. The main focus of this rather intensive media coverage is the challenge both sides share fighting the “same enemy” i.e. “The Islamic threat”. In a well promoted interview on Israel’s main TV channel (Channel 2), just days before the French Presidential election, Marine Le Pen was even presented as “the leader of the French right”.

Officially, Israel still boycotts these movements. Not necessarily because the Israeli government today has a significant problem with these parties – generally they are quite similar to its thinking. It is rather because of the violent history of the European far-right, and particularly because of the strong opposition of the Jewish communities in Europe who fear the rise of fascists and anti-Semites.

The best example is the Jewish community in France – the largest Jewish community in Europe – who vehemently rejects any Israeli right wing political attempt to show support of Le Pen and her “Front National”. This is a rare consensus among French Jews who usually differ deeply on political issues. A Likud (the ruling party in Israel) Member of Knesset who voiced enthusiastic support for Le Pen on the eve of the French election, was quickly denounced by Israel’s President, Reuven Rivlin, who concluded that there is no room for any kind of Israeli ties with these extreme right wing elements, who are accused of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, the relationships are cultivated, and the Israeli boycott is waning.

The far-right in Europe needs Israel and Jews for a simple reason: to gain legitimacy. “Look,” they say to those who accuse them of racism and anti-Semitism, “even in Israel they support us.” And what do Israeli right-wingers look for in these European parties? First of all, they truly identify with xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the anti-democratic approach, which drives the far-right in Europe. From the Israeli right’s point of view, ties with the extreme right in Europe serve first and foremost internal political interests. Under the shell of utilitarian arguments, lies the core of the relationship, based on conservatism, social bullying, and racism. The political change that has taken place in Israel in the last generation shifts it from the side of universal values, and perception of human and civil rights to the nationalist, ethnocentric, anti-social policy. There lies the extreme right, and there lies now, more and more so, the Israeli right, which has led Israel in recent years in the same direction. Beyond that, on a more practical level, some European far-right parties are willing to support the settlements and the occupation of Palestinian territories that no other European entity is willing to accept.

This is why more and more right-wing elements in Israel are cultivating ties with the fascists in Europe, while the latter take pride in having Israeli friends, clearing themselves of accusations of anti-Semitism. They are so enthralled by each other, that it is no longer clear who is spreading the disease and who is infected by it.

This rapprochement is bad for Israel, and not just because of the moral position it should be committed to as a Jewish and democratic nation. The far-right in Europe is boycotted by most European right and left-wing parties. Turning to the far-right will not improve Israeli stand in Europe. It not only legitimizes those whose methods and ideas have caused the greatest harm to the Jewish people, but is also a severe blow to the Jews of today’s Europe.

They look anxiously at efforts of racist movements in their countries to reproach Israel and urge it to reject these attempts.

For the Israeli right and the Israeli government under the leadership of the right, the better path in the field of public diplomacy goes through the moderate political forces of Europe. This is the real challenge, because at the base, on the right and on the left, they are friends of Israel and have never turned their backs on Israel. The task should be to restore the huge support for Israel that existed in the past, especially among the Socialists and large moderate parties in the continent.

Israel is indeed being criticized repeatedly in the European arena. Not because of the European "hostile left", but because of its policy. Nevertheless, its relations with Europe are good and branched. Therefore, the way to deal with pressures and objections is not by betraying Jewish heritage, Jewish communities, and democratic values, but by cooperating with Europe in an effort to renew the peace process and reduce friction with the Palestinians. This is the proven way to gain public sympathy, as well as significant political and economic fruits, certainly vis-a-vis the European Union that has already offered Israel extensive proposals in this context.

However, granting validity and legitimacy by Israel to the far-right, which is still a marginal factor in European politics and is in a sharp conflict with the political establishment, is liable to cause substantial damage to the important relations with Europe. Much of Europe's political argument against the far-right is that its methods have already led the continent to a terrible disaster. If Israel, the state of the Jewish people, embraces parties that espouse xenophobia and discrimination, it could be seen as a "proof" that these parties have seemingly changed. This is precisely why they yearn for Israeli legitimacy, and why Israel must not grant it to them. This could seriously harm Israel's standing. It would be an unforgivable move.