

# Israel's European Dilemma

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Europe has always been a source of controversy in Israel. In the 1940s, Palestinian Jews argued about whether and how to fight the British. In the 1950s, Israeli society was torn over the reparation agreement with Germany. In the 1960s, France progressively mutated from Israel's strongest ally to its prime castigator. In the 1970s, an oil-sensitive Europe caved in to Arab demands, and Israeli leaders lashed out at their European counterparts. In the 1980s, with the Lebanon War and the first intifada, Israel was often accused by European media of committing crimes reminiscent of World War II. In the 1990s, Europe welcomed the Oslo agreements but soon blamed Israel for their failure. In the 2000s, Ariel Sharon was the *bête noire* of Europeans who nevertheless canonized him as a new Charles de Gaulle after he ended Israel's presence in Gaza.

In recent years, the controversy over Israel's relations with Europe has been infused with a new dimension and has produced new dilemmas. European society is going through an identity crisis and is becoming increasingly polarized, both side effects of the 2008 financial crash and of the mass migration from North Africa and the Middle East that began in 2011. Millions of Europeans accuse their elites of failing them, and they blame the European Union for the loss of jobs and national sovereignty. Hence the surge of nationalist (or "populist") political parties that want to retake control of their countries' economic and migration policies. Israel is unwittingly part of this European feud, because Europe's nationalists happen to admire it for symbolizing what they want to restore: an economically successful and religiously traditionalist nation-state that has no qualms about defending its borders, defeating terrorists, or aggravating Eurocrats.

How should Israel handle this mutating Europe: by embracing pro-Israel nationalists despite their antisemitic past, or by faithfully sticking to the "liberal order"

supposedly embodied by Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and Federica Mogherini? While the Israeli left warns against aligning with what it calls the “non-liberal” regimes of Eastern Europe,<sup>1</sup> some on the right have lauded Brexit as a welcome step toward the breakup of the EU.<sup>2</sup> Yet both approaches are ideological, and therefore neither is based on realpolitik. Israel should leverage its economic power and take advantage of the EU’s inner divisions, but it would not benefit from a divided Europe ruled by economic nationalists and anti-globalists aligned with Russia. To defend its national interests, Israel must develop ties with “rebellious” European governments, but only as a divide-and-rule tactic meant to break the Brussels consensus, not as a bond with forces that threaten to undermine free trade and the Atlantic alliance.

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Zionist diplomacy began in Europe. The 1840 Damascus Affair sparked the coordinated activism of European Jews (such as the Rothschilds, Moses Montefiore, and Adolphe Crémieux) to rescue their Ottoman-ruled coreligionists from a blood libel. Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat* in Paris and he convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel. Chaim Weizmann lobbied for the Balfour Declaration in London, and the Middle East became a European domain after World War I. When the Zionists fought for partition at the UN in 1947, they found a tacit ally in Britain’s old colonial rival: France. Having just lost its Syrian and Lebanese mandates (a loss de Gaulle blamed on British meddling), France was eager to give *la perfide Albion* a taste of its own medicine in Palestine by voting for partition. In Israel’s early days, vital military and economic resources came exclusively from Europe: weapons from Czechoslovakia during the 1948 War of Independence; financial support from Germany from 1951 onward; and a de facto military alliance with France (that supplied Israel with Dassault fighter jets and built its nuclear plant in Dimona) from 1956 to 1967.

Israel’s strategic alliance with France eventually came to an end, however, and this had a lasting impact on Israel’s relations with Europe. The Franco–Israeli alliance had been engendered by a common enemy: Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who supported the Algerian independence movements against France and who was the de facto leader of the Arab world’s war against Israel. In 1956, two years after the beginning of the Algerian War and one year after Egypt’s military alignment with the Soviet Union, France and Israel went to war (together with Britain) against Egypt. What began as a military victory ended up a diplomatic debacle. France and Britain had decided to handle Nasser as if they still were great powers, but they were painfully reminded that the international system was now dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union—both of which demanded the immediate withdrawal of French and British troops from the Suez Canal.

Britain and France drew opposite conclusions from their common humiliation: Britain decided to firmly align itself with the United States so as to become an influential “number two” in the Western alliance; France decided to reduce to a minimum its dependency on Washington and to partially restore its former clout. With de Gaulle’s return to power in 1958, France became openly confrontational toward *les Anglo-Saxons*, and it downgraded its military relationship with Israel.<sup>3</sup> With the end of the Algerian War in 1962, the Franco–Israeli alliance lost its *raison d’être*. It was around the same time that the US reassessed its Israel policy. While Dwight Eisenhower considered Israel a liability, Lyndon Johnson thought that the Arab world was lost to the Soviets and that, for the Americans, Israel had become the only game in town.<sup>4</sup> De Gaulle now had two good reasons to end the alliance with Israel: France needed to rebuild its ties with the Arab world after the disastrous Algerian War, and, since Israel was now on America’s side, it had become a legitimate target of French ire and Gaullist rebuke.

The alliance with the US and the divorce from France crystalized with the 1967 Six-Day War. In singlehandedly defeating two Soviet allies (Egypt and Syria), Israel confirmed its strategic value to America, and by humiliating the Arab world with French fighter jets, Israel horrified a livid de Gaulle, whose warning to Abba Eban (“*Ne faites pas la guerre!*”) had been ignored. The Six-Day War, de Gaulle claimed in November 1967, had been the inevitable by-product of the Jews’ very nature: They had, after all, always been “an elitist, self-confident, and domineering people.” From then on, France would only have “an Arab policy,” as French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de Murville explained.<sup>5</sup>

This “Arab policy” was French but not European. Despite its diplomatic clout, France could not convince other European countries to endorse its agenda. The 1973 oil embargo enabled France to rally the rest of the European Economic Community (EEC) to its cause. Even European countries traditionally supportive of Israel, such as the Netherlands and West Germany, could not withstand the Arab League’s oil blackmail. Hence, after 1973, the EEC started issuing joint resolutions that made demands of Israel but not of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Instead of welcoming the 1979 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, which had been brokered by the US and had sidelined Yasir Arafat, in 1980 the EEC published its Venice Declaration calling for recognition of the PLO. After France was humiliated by America in 1956, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer told French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau: “Europe shall be your revenge.”<sup>6</sup> That prediction materialized after 1973.

The end of the Cold War threatened France’s influence in Europe. French President François Mitterrand hopelessly tried to prevent the reunification of Germany. “I’m so fond of Germany,” quipped French author François Mauriac, “that I’d rather have two.” The common currency (eventually called the “euro”) was

conceived by Mitterrand to tie the German Gulliver to a new “European Union” that was meant to become a geopolitical counterweight to the now-dominant US.<sup>7</sup> President Jacques Chirac was outspoken in blaming Israel for the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit and absolved Arafat of any responsibility. In 2003, he vehemently opposed the Iraq War but failed to rally Europe behind France. As the EU expanded eastward after 2004, however, France’s influence became diluted. To Chirac’s dismay, the new eastern members of the EU were supportive of Washington, including on the Iraq question, and sympathetic to Israel. From a club of six countries originally established by France to keep Germany in check, the EU was now an organization of twenty-eight members in which France had lost most of its influence.

Yet it took the financial and the refugee crises for Eurosceptics to “rebel” against the EU. The decision of the British people, in a 2016 referendum, to leave the EU confirmed that the post-WWII European project may be under threat. This dynamic creates both risks and opportunities for Israel, and they must be carefully evaluated in order to preserve Israel’s national interest.

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There are good reasons for Israel to resent the EU and its Brussels bureaucracy (embodied in the European Commission and the EU’s foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini). The European Commission donates money to Israel-based NGOs that promote BDS (though the EU officially opposes the boycott of Israel) as well as the so-called Palestinian “right of return” (which is incompatible with the two-state solution endorsed by the EU). The Commission refuses to apply its trade and scientific agreements with Israel anywhere beyond the 1949 Armistice line, although UN Security Resolution 242 does not demand an Israeli withdrawal to this line. In 2013, the Commission agreed to renew Israel’s membership in the EU flagship research and innovation program only after Israel acquiesced to the exclusion of the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and east Jerusalem from the agreement. In 2015, the Commission instructed member states to label Israeli products manufactured beyond the 1949 Armistice line. The EU does not apply such restrictions to other disputed territories such as Western Sahara or Northern Cyprus. Finally, Mogherini is a staunch supporter of the nuclear deal with Iran, and she recently expressed pride at having set up a mechanism that shields European companies from renewed US sanctions on Iran.

Israel has developed strategies to neutralize unwelcome EU policies. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has successfully broken the EU consensus on Israel by nurturing and upgrading ties with East-Central European countries. Thanks to those relations, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania recently blocked an EU resolution (initiated by France) meant to condemn President Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Israel’s strong ties

with the Visegrád Group or V4 (the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) have weakened Brussels' foreign policy machine, including on the issue of Iran. This is a welcome development for which Netanyahu deserves credit.

Those who accuse Netanyahu of selling Israel's soul to the "illiberal" and allegedly antisemitic governments of Eastern Europe are both disingenuous and mistaken: disingenuous, because there is no reason that Israel should be the only country in the world not to conduct its foreign policy based on its national interest, and mistaken because the antisemitism charge is overblown. Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, has denounced Georges Soros because he meddles in Hungarian politics, not because he is Jewish. (Are Soros' many critics and detractors in Israel also antisemitic?) Orbán has correctly pointed out that there is less antisemitism in Hungary than in Western Europe.

Undoubtedly, the Israel-friendly governments of Eastern Europe should not be exempt from criticism for their policies and legislation. Hungary has passed a law that criminalizes assistance to illegal immigrants, and the Polish government has sought to undermine the judiciary. It has also passed a law that seeks to stifle discussion of any local Polish culpability for the Holocaust. It would be senseless, however, to boycott the Hungarian and Polish governments because of policy disagreements. Israel does not boycott the autocratic governments of China or Russia, because doing so would do a disservice to Israel's national interest. Those who called for the cancelation of Orbán's visit to Israel in July 2018 did not boycott Putin's visit in 2012, and they generally praised Netanyahu's apology to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2013 in the name of political realism. Realpolitik must be consistent, and self-righteousness cannot be selective.

The anti-Brussels rebellion serves Israel's interests only to a point, however, and Israel would not benefit from the collapse of the EU. The EU is Israel's largest trade partner. Israel has a free trade agreement with the EU, and is part of its lucrative Horizon 2020 program. The disastrous outcome of the Brexit negotiations is likely to topple Theresa May's government and bring Jeremy Corbyn to power. A Corbyn government would ruin the British economy; weaken NATO; support Iran and Hizbullah; turn a blind eye to Russian irredentism in Eastern Europe; recognize a Palestinian state; and prosecute dual British-Israeli citizens who served in the IDF. Most Eurosceptic leaders are economic nationalists who are hostile to NATO and admire Vladimir Putin. A mercantilist and divided Europe aligned with Russia would be far more damaging to Israel's economic and geopolitical interests than the mostly harmless antics of the European Commission.

Those who claim that Brexit and Euroscepticism are in Israel's interest are mistaken not only on a practical level but also on a conceptual one. The EU is not a post-national project nor an insidious plot against the nation-state. The original

visionaries of the “European project” were conservatives and free-marketers. Winston Churchill called for a “United States of Europe” in September 1946 to neutralize the German threat. For him, a united Europe was the only way to prevent a return to the historical dynamics that had produced two world wars. Classical liberal economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises supported the idea of a single European market after World War II because they considered it a condition for the promotion of free-trade among protectionist-minded nations.

The founding fathers of today’s EU were Christian Democrats (i.e., conservatives): Robert Schuman (France), Konrad Adenauer (West Germany), and Alcide De Gasperi (Italy). They wanted to keep both radical nationalism and Communism at bay. Margaret Thatcher was admittedly opposed to Jacques Delors’ federalist moves and to Mitterrand’s single currency, but like Hayek and Churchill, she was in favor of a “European Community” that would promote free trade and keep Germany in check. Indeed, Thatcher campaigned for Britain to remain in the EEC during the 1975 referendum.

Today, Vladimir Putin is trying to undo the geopolitical achievements to which Thatcher contributed, namely the expansion of the EU and of NATO to Eastern Europe. What started with Chechnya, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine will continue with the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania if Europe does not display resolve and unity. It is no coincidence that Putin encourages Europe’s populist parties that call for the dismantling of the EU. Brexit constitutes a victory for Russia and a setback for the legacy of Churchill and of Thatcher.

Russia provided nuclear technology to Iran; it is the guardian of the Shi’a Iran–Assad–Hezbollah axis; and it aspires to dominate Eastern Europe again. Europe’s populist parties supported by Putin are against free trade and against the pro-American foreign policy of European conservatives. Brexit and continental populism hardly constitute an achievement for conservative politics and for Israel’s national interest.

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The euro, which had been conceived by France as a response to Germany’s reunification in 1991, nearly collapsed with the financial crisis of 2008 and the rescue of the Greek economy. Germany became the ultimate savior and arbitrator of a currency that was supposed to dilute its economic might. Merkel was vilified for imposing Teutonic fiscal rules on profligate “Club Med” economies, and even more so for letting a million Syrian refugees enter her country in 2015. No one has made a greater contribution to Euroscepticism than the ultimate believer in European integration. Israel emerged as a global economic power precisely as Europe sank into economic depression: In 2009, Israel discovered huge natural

gas reserves that will eventually turn it into an energy exporter, and as Europe was hit by massive terrorist attacks, Israel's military and intelligence expertise was in high demand.

The balance of power between Europe and Israel, in other words, has been transformed. Israel is no longer the piñata of a French-dominated and oil-dependent Europe. It has become a major power and a global star whose technological edge and intelligence expertise are needed even by its foes. Energy, which used to be a liability in Israel's foreign policy, is now an asset. Europe, on the other hand, has yet to recover from the financial and refugee crises that have produced economic misery, social tensions, and political discontent. Israel has cleverly played the divide-and-rule card in the EU thanks to its special ties with Eastern Europe. Yet Israel should not overplay that card by encouraging or even welcoming a Brexit domino effect. For all its failings, a unified European market aligned with the US is more in Israel's interest than a divided continent ruled by pro-Russian mercantilists.

Precisely because it has become a great power, Israel can maximize its global clout by playing by the rules of political realism. A realistic foreign policy toward Europe should disregard both the disingenuous moralism of the starry-eyed left and the misguided Brexit-cheering of the misinformed right. It is time for Israel to take a page out of the book of European realism — after all, *raison d'État* and *realpolitik* are European words. In foreign policy, making ungenerous assumptions about human nature in general, and about Europeans in particular, is always a safe bet. As former Italian Premier Giulio Andreotti used to quip: "When you assume the worst about people, you commit a sin; but you generally get it right."

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "Shame! Opposition MKs cry foul as Hungarian PM visits," *The Times of Israel*, July 18, 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Ariel David, "Why is an Israeli Pro-Settler Group Campaigning for Brexit?" *Ha'aretz*, June 19, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires d'Espoir* (Paris, 1970), p. 285.
- <sup>4</sup> Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 359.
- <sup>5</sup> Yohanan Meroz, "Europe in the State's Foreign Policy System," Yosef Govrin, Aryeh Oded, and Moshe Yegar (eds.), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The First Fifty Years* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 336.
- <sup>6</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, 1994), p. 547.
- <sup>7</sup> Frédéric Bozo, *French Foreign Policy Since 1945* (New York, 2016), pp. 134–35.