

## **EUROPE AND ISRAEL: WHAT WENT WRONG?**

*In analysing the Euro-Israeli relationship, the author takes up the historical, cultural, and strategic perspectives, as well as the the various policy-making constituencies (executive, legislative, media, or business) and the complex, and often diverging processes of formulating official policy and public opinion at the national or the E.U. level. Finally, the United States' role as a dominant global player and evolving relationship with both Europe and Israel are taken into account. Keridis analyses the perceptions of the involved parties and the potentials that lie ahead in this article which concludes that the EU's assistance is infact of vital importance for the benefit of the region as a whole including first and foremost Israel.*

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With the Arab-Israeli peace process stumbling, a growing malaise has been inflicted on Euro-Israeli relations as expressed in Europeans' fierce criticism of Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians and in Israel's distrust of Europe's motives and actions. While most Europeans condemn terrorism and suicide bombings against innocent Israeli civilians, they remain sympathetic to the plight and national aspirations of the Palestinians.<sup>1</sup> For many Israelis, Europe is morally confused and hypocritical, constantly verging towards appeasement and anti-Semitism.

When talking about the Euro-Israeli relationship, one needs to keep history in mind in order to distinguish between cultural preferences and strategic choices or, as is often said, between values and interests, as well as between the various policy-making constituencies (executive, legislative, media, or business) and the complex, and often diverging, processes of formulating official policy and public opinion at the national or the E.U. level. Finally, given the United States' role as a dominant global player, it would be interesting and helpful to be fully aware of this nation's evolving relationship with both Europe and Israel.

Europe is taken here to mean both the individual European nations comprising the European Union and the Union itself as a quasi-transnational federation in the making. In other words, this analysis does not include Russia, which during Soviet times played a very distinct role in Middle Eastern affairs, although recently its views and role have converged with the European mainstream. While this mainstream is primarily expressed by official policy and by the statements of European leaders, news reports, commentaries, and opinions presented in the "respectable" media remain very important.

Israel's relations with the three major West European nations were close and critical to the development of the young nation in the first two decades of its independent existence. France in particular emerged as the main provider of military hardware to "courageous little Israel." Throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, Israel's air force and nascent nuclear program, the very cornerstones of its deterrence, were based on French technology. Strategically, Israel provided France with a useful constraint on Nasserism and its fire-brand anti-colonialism in Algeria, while culturally, socialist and egalitarian Israel appealed to the French Left, who had maintained a pro-Jewish sympathy since the Dreyfus affair and who shared with the French Right a common antipathy against Arab nationalism and Nasserite populism. West Germany under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, bearing heavy guilt for the Nazi atrocities and alarmed by Soviet advances worldwide, offered Israel generous financial assistance and some armaments. Britain, the previous colonial master of Palestine and much of the Middle East, was more cautious due to its protracted

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<sup>1</sup> While the European Union continues to call on Israel to withdraw its military forces and stop extra-judicial killings, to lift the closures and all restrictions imposed on the Palestinian people, and to freeze settlement activities, it has condemned, in the clearest terms, all acts of violence and terrorism, which have led to such tragic loss of life for both people. In this respect the EU has pointed out the Palestinian Authority's responsibilities in fighting terrorism and continues to press the Palestinian Authority, as the governing body responsible for maintaining law and order in the Palestinian territories, to do everything possible to prevent terrorist acts, bring to justice perpetrators of criminal acts and dismantle all terrorist networks.

economic and security engagement in the Gulf and its dependence on the Suez Canal. Nevertheless, Israel remained a useful, if independent-minded, tool for the implementation of British policy in the Middle East, which was guided by the goal of securing regional influence while keeping the Soviets out. As British policy became increasingly frustrated with the toppling of pro-Western monarchies by nationalist and socialist-minded military officers (in Egypt in 1952, in Iraq in 1958, in Libya in 1969), dependence on reliable Israel increased.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, the pinnacle of Anglo-French cooperation with Israel occurred during the 1956 Suez crisis and the resultant joint military operation against Egypt. In light of later developments and the current situation in the Middle East, it is good to remember that it was the United States who opposed Israel and the Anglo-French initiative and defended Egypt's sovereignty and national integrity. The critical turning point in the Israeli connection with Western Europe was the six-day war in June 1967. Already De Gaulle had resisted Israel's appeal for association with the burgeoning European Community and Algeria's independence in 1961 had weakened much of France's rationale for a close strategic connection with Israel. But it was Israel's stunning victory in 1967 and the subsequent occupation of vast Arab lands in the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Gaza and Sinai that transformed the Jewish state in the eyes of many Europeans from a "gallant sanctuary" for a persecuted people into an aggressive, even imperialist, Goliath upsetting delicate balances in the increasingly volatile Middle East. Since 1967, Europe and Israel have been set on diverging paths. With the exception of some brief periods of rapprochement, the most notable of which began following the Madrid conference in 1991 and lasted until Benjamin Netanyahu's election to the Israeli premiership in 1996, Euro-Israeli relations have rapidly deteriorated as a result of a chain of events that include Europe's refusal to grant transit access for U.S. aid to Israel during the Yom Kippur war in October 1973, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the period following the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987, and, more recently, the period immediately following the second Intifada in 2000.

The reasons for this divergence can be traced in culture as well as in strategic thinking, two realms that are often tightly interwoven and closely interacting. In Europe, a value-laden discourse emanating, more or less, from the Left and the Right's priority for interests have converged towards a certain alienation from Israel and current Israeli policies, a phenomenon which has evolved in a kind of a mirror opposition to what has happened in the United States, where a grand coalition of Jewish-friendly liberals and traditional Democrats united with Republican neo-conservatives and Christian fundamentalists in support of Israel. Gradual, but cumulative, cultural transformations in both Europe and Israel over the past 40 years have resulted in a dramatic cultural divergence, thus further straining the Euro-Israeli relationship.

Europe's cultural alienation from Israel should be attributed to Israel's alleged militarism and readiness to use force; to the perceived decline of secularism and egalitarianism in Israel and the concomitant rise of Jewish religious extremism and exploitative market

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed overview of the history of Euro-Israeli relations see Sachar, Howard M., A History of Israel- From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

practices; to Israel's closeness to the U.S., replete with its radical, unilateralist anti-U.N. wing<sup>3</sup>; and to Israel and the United States' different approach to terrorism, which insists on viewing terrorist acts out of their historical and political context.

Since 1945 Europe has evolved into a space where the use of force in inter-state relations has not only become illegitimate but virtually unthinkable. Out of the devastation of two world wars, a strong peace camp emerged in all West European nations. While particularly strong among the Left, the peace camp encompasses the whole political spectrum in West Europe and no counter-balancing war camp exists, unlike in the United States. Nowhere is this dramatic and historical transformation more pronounced than in Germany, which has shed all vestiges of its long Prussian militarist tradition and has concentrated most of its energies on economic and social development. With this transformation has come a certain "liberal" vision of international relations devoid of power politics and dominated by trade, cooperation, and inter-dependence. Over the past decades, Europe has gone "soft," under-investing in defense and withdrawing from foreign commitments in order to support an expanding social welfare state at home under the benign protection of the U.S. This is the fundamental policy choice upon which the whole project of European integration rests, thus generating the thorny problem of how Europe will manage to develop a robust international voice. Law and an intricate web of regulations have taken the place of force, negotiations have supplanted the role of coercion, and cooperation and trust in international institutions have replaced unilateralism. This set of trends is increasingly putting Europe at odds with the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

On the contrary, to many European eyes, Israel, a nation confronted with a pronounced security threat, remains a militarized society as evidenced by the following realities: Israel's long-term conscription for males and females; its regular training for reservists until their late 40s; its aggressive military doctrine based on preemption and even prevention<sup>5</sup>; its world class defense industry with exporting achievements in stark disproportion to the size of the country; its defense budget, which is several times bigger in GDP terms than that of the average European budget; its hyper-active intelligence service with global reach; and its military, which has continuously provided the political leadership and most of the premiers of the country.<sup>6</sup>

If Europe lives in the world of Venus as Robert Kagan claims, Israel can ill-afford the luxury of letting its defenses down as it continues to be immersed in the harsh geo-

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<sup>3</sup> This unilateralism has been further boosted after September 11<sup>th</sup>. According to the eminent scholar of international relations Joseph Nye "present-day unilateralists in the U.S. claim that the nature of the threat—rogue states, transnational terrorist groups, "democratization" and globalization of technology and the privatization of warfare, is such, that the U.S. cannot afford to be held back by the UN and related international institutions and regimes." This is a very unpopular argument in Europe where adaptation rather than elimination of multilateralism remains the mainstream opinion.

<sup>4</sup> For a powerful analysis of this antithesis, despite all the annoying irony and arrogance involved, see Kagan Robert, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order, New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> As evidenced in the destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981.

<sup>6</sup> For an informed overview on this subject see The Military Balance, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

political realities of what is probably the most unstable region in the world. This difference might make Europe insensitive to Israeli security anxieties and overcritical of Israel's harsh treatment of the Palestinian civilian population. But for many Europeans, especially those on the Left, Israel is a Sparta-like military republic with the Palestinians as its Helotes in an age of heightened emphasis on human rights and self-determination.

The arrival to power of a new European generation, marked not by the experiences of the Second World War and the Holocaust but by the revolutionary 1960s, has put a distance between Israel and the European consciousness. This reality, when coupled with Israel's victories in battle and its present overwhelming military superiority, makes it hard for Europeans to justify Israeli militarism. Currently, Israel's military is no longer engaged in "gallant" wars of survival like in 1948, 1967, or 1973. On the contrary, its operations in Lebanon in 1982 and against the Palestinians possess all the dirty aspects of counter-insurgency and have galvanized vehement opposition even within Israel itself, let alone within Europe.

Moreover, while Europe is economically extroverted, being by far the largest trader in the world, it is, with the exception of Britain and France, strategically introverted, having jettisoned most of its strategic commitments worldwide. Even Britain and France, however, more or less transferred their commitments in the Middle East to the U.S., a departure that was further pronounced with the 1956 disaster in Suez. This strategic retraction has been further justified by the collapse of the Soviet empire and the concentration of Europe's attention into German unification and E.U. enlargement eastwards. Thus, Europe is not in need of strategic allies but of economic partners. In this regard, the Arab world offers a huge, untapped market of close to 200 million people and an infinite source of much needed energy supplies. If Europe is to tame the flow of migration into the European heartland, the development of the Arab world must be a strategic priority.

The conquest of the West Bank in 1967 has transformed Israeli politics in all sorts of ways. The passing away of the first generation of Zionist pioneers, who were European in origin and culture, secular and socialist in preference, and elitist in outlook, was coupled with the occupation of the historic lands of "Judea and Samaria" and the annexation of the old city of Jerusalem, marking a radical departure from the original Zionist project. Oriental Jews gradually increased their share of the total Israeli population and by 1965 they reached parity in numbers with European Jews. Since then, the number of Oriental Jews has rapidly expanded, as this group maintains a family size and a growth rate double that of European Jews. Today, despite the massive influx of Soviet Jews after 1989, Oriental Jews constitute a clear majority. Middle Eastern in origin and culture, conservative in preference, and religious, populist, and nationalist in outlook, the Oriental Jews' political emancipation revolutionized Israeli politics and led to the demise of the old Labor hegemony and the rise of Likud and its right-wing coalition. This change has distanced Israeli politics from the European mainstream, which remains elitist, secular, and fundamentally anticlerical. The average European has no sympathy or understanding for the cultural wars currently waged inside the Israeli (or the American for that matter)

body politic. In sum, Europeans could better understand the old, Labor-dominated politics than they can the new Likud ones.

Finally, Europe and Israel look at terrorism in general, and Palestinian terrorism in particular, in somehow different ways. For Europe, terrorism is never simply a security problem and should be understood in its historical and political context. Palestinian terrorism is a political problem demanding a political solution. This should not be confused with justifying terrorism. Europeans are well seasoned in the devastation caused by terrorism and, in the past, they have responded robustly to the challenge presented by terrorism in their home countries. In addition, Europeans themselves have often been the victims of Palestinian terror. Yet, combating terrorism means defeating it not only militarily but politically as well. For Europeans, Israelis have a shallow, self-serving, and counter-productive approach to Palestinian terror that is supported by the Americans. However, sharing with the Europeans a certain distinct sense of history and political sophistication, the Israelis should know better.

To Israelis, the European view is unacceptable and tantamount to excusing terrorism. They feel that Europeans, secure in their post-Realist utopia, are morally confused and looking for shades of gray in a situation where there clearly is a stark contrast between black and white. Fundamentally, the Europeans, blinded by their own modernity, are incapable of understanding the extremism emanating from the Hamas machinery and its likes, and they project instead their "rationality" onto something that operates under completely different codes. For Europeans, even Hamas is a political organization prone to certain bargains and compromises; otherwise it would not agree to ceasefires nor would it develop a whole network of social and political activities above and beyond the simple use of terror.

On top of all these differences lie the politics of gestures and symbols. Put simply, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is for Europe a non-exportable commodity. His abrasive, provocative, and insensitive style, his arrogance—especially towards European officials, and his past record as a military officer and defense minister, make him a hard sell. The same could be said for many European leaders, president Jacques Chirac coming first to mind. Whatever one thinks about the merits of each particular leader, the truth is that the current leadership on both sides of the Mediterranean is more interested in pleasing its domestic constituency than in building international bridges across region, a problem that Europe has encountered with the Bush administration across the Atlantic as well.

To many Israelis, Europe is hypocritical and anti-Semitic. The latter is a very serious accusation given the continent's history. It should not be made lightly and it should be taken seriously. For Israelis, Europe's concern for human rights is selective, politically motivated, and thus hypocritical. Europe is ready to blow out of proportion every image of a suffering Palestinian while simultaneously ignoring the plight of Chechens and other persecuted minorities and courting rulers in Africa and elsewhere with despicable human rights records. Israel has become the much-needed villain for a European Left that is in search of a *cause celebre* beyond any balanced reading of the situation at hand. Deep down, the European body politic remains infected by anti-Semitism as repeated incidents

against Jewish symbols and monuments testify. Hypocrisy and anti-Semitism are actually inter-connected: over-examining and exaggerating every Israeli action and holding Israel to an inhumanly high standard is equivalent to an anti-Semitic bias in the sense that no similar scrutiny is applied to the Russians, the Chinese, or the Africans, let alone the Arabs themselves.

Irrespective of the sporadic and isolated incidents that occur in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere around the world as well as a few provocative statements made by marginal political figures, anti-Semitism remains as politically incorrect and unacceptable for the European mainstream as ever.<sup>7</sup> Europeans readily distinguish between legitimate criticism of Israel and unacceptable anti-Semitism. As for the former, it is true that there have been and surely still are worse human rights abuses than those occurring at present in the West Bank. However, the one does not excuse the other. Nor is it only Europe's fault that the spotlight is on Israel. It is true that Jerusalem has the largest number of foreign correspondents in the world after Washington and that the greatest proportion of these correspondents are American. The spotlight has always been on the Arab-Israeli situation and the conflict captured the world imagination like no other event long before Euro-Israeli relations became strained. The current troubles continue to fascinate the world public opinion. A simple tally of the foreign news stories about the conflict appearing in the world press is enough to prove the point.

For all these troubles, in many respects the Euro-Israeli relationship is strong and growing. Trade is booming and comes close to 24 billion dollars annually or some 2/5 of Israel's total foreign trade, making Europe Israel's most important trading partner. Human and knowledge exchanges between Europe and Israel flourish.<sup>8</sup> The relationship is structured around the E.U.-Israel association agreement signed in 1995 and ratified in 2000. The association agreement provides for free trade and close technological cooperation. It was part of the larger Barcelona process established in November 1995 in support of a wider Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, as initiated by the E.U. with most non-E.U. countries of the Mediterranean littoral in order to relieve the accumulated pressures of insecurity, migration, and environmental degradation. The dialogue has moved forward on both the multilateral and the bilateral level despite the diversion of attention and resources involved in the E.U.'s eastward expansion.

Europe is fully aware of its secondary political role in the Middle East and it understands its contribution in support of, and not in competition with, U.S. efforts. Europe will never be a credible interlocutor for the Israelis nor does it have the necessary resources to lead. But Europe does play a significant and probably unmatched role in one important respect. The E.U. is the largest non-military donor in the area, especially to the Palestinians. For all the present frustration caused by the destruction of E.U.-funded Palestinian infrastructure, Brussels is expected to make a very substantive contribution in support of

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<sup>7</sup> For more see "Anti-Semitism in France-Confusing signs", *The Economist*, Apr. 4<sup>th</sup> 2002; "Anti-Semitism in Europe-Is it really rising?" and "Anti-Semitism-Europe and the Jews", *The Economist*, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2002; "How sick is Europe?", *The Economist*, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2002; and "Anti-Semitism-An enduring virus", *The Economist*, Nov. 20<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For more information visit [www.europe.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/israel](http://www.europe.eu.int/comm/external_relations/israel)

the viability of a future solution including a Palestinian state. Europe has a long and quite successful record in democratization, starting with Southern Europe in the 1970s and extending all the way to East-Central Europe in the 1990s. If Washington is truly committed to "regime change" in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East as a way to stabilize the region, it has a lot to learn and gain from collaborating with the Europeans. Europe's current engagement in Turkey should not be underestimated. A successful, democratic, and ultimately European Turkey at peace with itself and all its neighbors will have a tremendous positive impact on the whole of the Middle East, Turkic Asia, and the Muslim world, setting a powerful example for all would-be modernizers.

All in all, there is a fundamental convergence among Europe, Israel, and the United States towards the long-term strategic goal of a stable, liberal, democratizing, and developing Middle East with a two-state solution in historical Palestine at its core.<sup>9</sup> Reformist forces closely follow developments there and in Iraq. Failure on either front will set the course of reform back. Success requires the cooperation of all those who can be of assistance and, in this respect, Europe's assistance is of vital importance for the benefit of the region as a whole, including first and foremost Israel. For a democratic and prosperous Israel at peace with its neighbors, Europe cannot be but its closest partner.

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<sup>9</sup> For an articulate presentation of such a vision see the lecture of former Israeli foreign minister Schlomo Ben Ami "The Roadmap to Nowhere" delivered on Sep. 29<sup>th</sup> 2002 at the Kokkalis Foundation, [www.kokkalisfoundation.gr/events](http://www.kokkalisfoundation.gr/events).