



The EU and Israel - Partnership and the weight of history

Toby Vogel

Fifty years ago, in June 1967, a short but fierce war between Israel and its neighbours changed the map of the Middle East and transformed both Israeli politics and its relations with the wider world in ways that are still felt today. The Six-Day War created an enduring cycle of Israeli occupation, Palestinian resistance, terror, and Israeli repression. The Arab defeat of 1967 also led to the formation of a Palestinian national movement, at the time embodied by the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The most immediate outcome of the war was Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, all condemned in UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967. Israel later handed Sinai back to Egypt and withdrew from Gaza and some of the West Bank, but still maintains an iron grip on both territories, which have also witnessed accelerated settlement construction under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has not only flouted countless UN Security Council resolutions, it has also committed widespread human rights violations and war crimes, notably during the war in Gaza in August 2014.

David Ben-Gurion, the country's founding prime minister, said a few months after the Six Day War:

If I have to choose between a small Israel, without territories, but with peace, and a greater Israel without peace, I prefer a small Israel.

In pursuing a hardline course, Israel's leadership dismissed Ben-Gurion's views as out-of-touch sentimentality. Ben-Gurion's position was not an expression of human kindness: he was seeking to preserve Israel as a Jewish homeland, which would be impossible with a large share of Arabs on its territory. But he also understood that the permanent occupation of Gaza and the West Bank would undermine Israel's security and its democratic institutions.

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Mutual incomprehension

Netanyahu's terms in office – he was prime minister in 1996-99 and again after 2009 – saw a sharp deterioration in relations with the EU. Seen from Jerusalem, the EU appears to be siding with the Palestinians; it is the Palestinian authority's largest donor, and some member states, including France, were early champions of Palestinian statehood.

Seen from Brussels and member state capitals, the Israeli government appears to be doing all it can to torpedo accommodation with the Palestinian leadership and to make life miserable for ordinary Palestinians. Despite Israeli claims, however, the EU's sympathy for the Palestinians does not extend to the Islamists of Hamas who control the Gaza Strip.

The start of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 created a strategic environment that was even less conducive to a peace deal between Israel and Palestine and to the two-state solution that had been the basis of the Madrid conference and the Oslo accords dating back to the early 1990s – a peace process that today exists in name only. Israel's sense of being under threat from its neighbours increased dramatically with the civil war in Syria. Syria had fashioned itself as the leader of the resistance against Israel, but both Hafez al Assad and his son Bashar acted as rational and restrained, if hostile, neighbours to the Jewish state. (Syria's ageing, Soviet-era hardware was also no match for Israel's state of the art armour, including, most prominently, the Iron Dome missile defence, deployed in 2011.)

By contrast, the prospect of Islamists taking control of southern Syria, or indeed of all of the country, alarmed the Israelis, who are also fearful of turmoil in Jordan and Egypt. Here, too, European perceptions diverge sharply from those in Israel: the EU's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, the first (and so far, only) freely elected president of Egypt, was seen in Israel as further evidence that Europeans were soft on terrorism. At the same time, the war in Syria and anarchy in Libya – a gateway for migration to Europe – made pursuing an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal less pressing for the Europeans, even as the war in Gaza was raging. The international community has in effect made an accommodation with the status quo in the occupied territories, however uneasy it may be.

The EU: still punching below its weight

In a broader sense, the Israel-Palestine issue is an example of the EU's inability to translate close trade and cultural relations into diplomatic clout. The EU keeps rebuilding infrastructure in the occupied territories only to see it destroyed, time and again, by Israel. It keeps buying goods from Israel – for a total of €13.2 billion last year – but has very little political influence in return (trade excludes goods produced on occupied territory). It keeps protesting against the illegal occupation or the building of new settlements, yet its appeals go unheeded by the Israeli leadership. Israeli researchers and students take part in EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020, but that does not seem to temper Israeli hostility towards the EU, which is especially pronounced in the current government.

At the same time, however, the relationship is undeniably close, and strong – just not in political terms. The Union’s insistence on excluding goods from the occupied territories and its calls for Israel to end the occupation are preventing the upgrade of an Association Agreement that took effect in 2000.

The mutual lack of understanding between Israel and the EU is no surprise. The EU is a community of law that views the promotion of international norms and values as a core tenet of its diplomacy. Israel is a robust democracy domestically, with fiercely contested elections and a lively, pluralistic media, although recent years have seen illiberal developments. Among other things, traditional print titles are being squeezed by the freely distributed *Israel Hayom*, a mouthpiece of the Netanyahu government; and a law imposing special reporting requirements on non-governmental groups that receive foreign funding is clearly targeted at leftist human-rights groups. But if Israel’s democracy looks healthy on the inside, it has for decades been flouting international law in the knowledge that it would be protected by the Americans in the UN Security Council.

The EU, by contrast, is in some respects founded on post-national principles, while Israel defines itself as the state of the Jewish people and is deeply attached to its sovereignty, which it will defend by force against the Palestinians’ national ambitions. Despite these basic incompatibilities, strong ties have grown even stronger over the years, turning Israel into one of the EU’s closest neighbours.

Change in sight?

It is hard to see how this fundamental dynamic is going to change, even as the Netanyahu government pursues its hardline agenda. And with the support of the Trump administration the two-state solution is being asphyxiated. With Israel’s domestic politics having shifted dramatically to the right over the past decade or so, a loss of power for Netanyahu’s Likud party or the prime minister’s removal over an ongoing corruption investigation would change little with regards to attitudes towards the Palestinians, and hence relations with the EU. At the same time, the regional setting, with wars ongoing in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq; low-intensity conflict in Libya; and increasing competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, shows little sign of improving.

The EU, for its part, cannot compromise its founding values, such as respect for international law for the sake of a close ally – nor should it.

In fact, all signs point towards the status quo – the continuation of a close but unhappy relationship between Israel and the EU, tainted by realities that were created half a century ago.