
The Atkin Paper Series

‘Always the bridesmaid?’
*The EU role in the Middle East
Peace Process*

Tal Dror, ICSR Atkin Fellow

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Thanks to the generosity of the *Atkin Foundation*, the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)* offers young leaders from Israel and the Arab world the opportunity to come to London for a period of four months. The purpose of the fellowship is to provide young leaders from Israel and the Arab world with an opportunity to develop their ideas on how to further peace and understanding in the Middle East through research, debate and constructive dialogue in a neutral political environment. The end result is a policy paper that will provide a deeper understanding and a new perspective on a specific topic or event.

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Introduction

The 19th of July, 2013, was an interesting day in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with major actions from both the European Union and the United States revealing their views and influence on the region and on the Middle East peace process (MEPP). The European Commission announced new guidelines aimed at preventing Israeli projects, companies and institutions operating within illegal Israeli settlements from receiving research grant funding and loans.¹ These guidelines also required the Israeli government to sign contracts that include a clause declaring that Israel's borders are on the 1967 lines, in a further demonstration of EU efforts to impose its agenda on Israel. Less than 12 hours later, US Secretary of State John Kerry held a press conference in Amman, Jordan, where he stated: 'I am pleased to announce that we have reached an agreement that establishes a basis for resuming direct final status negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This is a significant and welcome step forward'.²

Israeli responses to both developments indicated just how much they believe the EU is not on their side, nor helpful in the matter of conflict resolution. Government officials across the political spectrum criticised the guidelines; even Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, who heads Israel's delegation to the newly restarted peace talks and personally supports the evacuation of most of the settlements, declared: 'The future borders between Israel and Palestine will be decided through negotiations and not by EU guidelines'.³ Less than a week after the EU announcement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, 'I think Europe, the European guidelines by the EU, have actually undermined peace'. The guidelines 'have hardened Palestinian positions', Netanyahu said. 'They seek an unrealistic end that everybody knows is not going to happen, and I think they stand in the way of reaching a solution which will only be reached by negotiations by the parties, and not by an external dictate'.⁴ US Secretary of State John Kerry has also urged the EU to postpone the planned ban so it will not harm peace efforts.⁵

The EU and US actions, as we can see from the the US administration's response, were not coordinated, although they basically aimed for the same end result. The US got all the credit from the Israelis, while the EU received all the anger.

While this was happening, I was working as a political adviser for the British embassy in Tel Aviv. As I walked through the Knesset's corridors and heard the harsh responses – some of which went so far as to suggest severing Israeli-European relations, and ejecting the EU from conflict resolution efforts due to their bias – I thought that it would be interesting to learn more about the actual role of the EU in Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution, and the reasons behind Israeli perceptions of EU efforts.

This paper assesses the EU's role and potential in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its objective is to determine whether the EU can become a credible, impartial mediator. It is important to stress that I am writing this paper from

the Israeli perspective, which is very different from the Palestinian one. I argue that in order to be a credible player in this conflict, the EU needs to be perceived as more objective and as having sufficiently good relations with both sides.

I begin by reviewing official EU statements and policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and potential solutions, as well as the plans that have been actually funded and executed on the ground in Israel and Palestine. I then address the problem of EU foreign policy coordination and compare this to member states' own policies with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the US role. I conclude with some recommendations for the EU in their future efforts.

Official EU Statements and Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

EU position on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process

The EU's objective is a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, viable Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel and its other neighbours.

EU positions on 'final status' issues

Borders: *The EU considers that the future Palestinian state will require secure and recognised borders. These should be based on a withdrawal from the territory occupied in 1967 with minor modifications mutually agreed, if necessary, in accordance with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 242, 338, 1397, 1402 and 1515 and the principles of the Madrid Process.*

Israeli settlements: *The EU considers that settlement building anywhere in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, is illegal under international law.*

Jerusalem: *The EU considers that peace negotiations should include the resolution of all issues surrounding the status of Jerusalem. The EU supports institution building work in East Jerusalem, notably in the areas of health, education and the judiciary.*

Palestinian refugees: *The EU supports a just, viable and agreed solution on this question. They will respect an agreement reached between the two Parties on this point. Since 1971 the EU has been providing significant support to the work of agencies providing vital services to the Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). It is committed to adapting this support as appropriate, in pursuit of a just and equitable solution to the refugee issue.*

Security: *The EU condemns all acts of violence which cannot be allowed to impede progress towards peace. The EU recognises Israel's right to protect its citizens from attacks, but emphasizes that the Israeli Government, in exercising this right, should act within international law. Since 2005, the EU has been involved in supporting the development of a democratic and professional Palestinian police force.⁶*

These are the official EU positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as of 2013. Little has changed in these positions over the years; they have mostly stayed the same regardless of the size and quality of the EU's role in the MEPP. Reading EU official statements published over the last few decades shows that most of them were

premature at the time they were released, but from today's perspective they have set the tone for what is now agreed by most of the actors in the field. This is probably one of the most impressive aspects of EU policymaking: its ability to be ahead of other parties as well as global opinion in its ideas on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its resolution. Many EU policymakers and research papers do credit to EU leadership, with these brave statements serving as a catalyst for actual peacemaking on the ground.

This section describes EU policymaking on the MEPP, both in the form of official statements, resolutions, action strategies and major speeches, and in parallel its action plans and activities on the ground. I examine only the consensus policy that all EU member states have agreed on, while noting the main areas where lack of unity has led to a weakening of the EU role. As emphasised in this section, the EU is not the only actor in this arena: most EU actions and statements have been undertaken in parallel with the US or other actors. It is also important to keep in mind that as the EU has evolved over the years, so has its relations and cooperation with other major actors and with the two parties of the actual conflict – Israel and the Palestinians.

The Venice Declaration in 1980 marked the beginning of a united policy on the MEPP for the EU (which at the time was the European Community, with only nine member states). Amazingly enough, the statement included two concepts that were not at all widely accepted by the international community, nor by the Israelis and even the Palestinians themselves: the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, and the demand to coordinate negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was then still considered a terrorist organisation by Israel and the US. This bold declaration was criticised from all sides right after its publication; the Israelis were furious, the Americans did not back the EU approach (being particularly opposed to the role of the PLO), and even Palestinians who were happy with most of the declaration had problems backing it because it was not complete in their eyes.

The EU soon grasped it was a great mistake to set forward a joint policy that was not accepted by any of the relevant actors, as the declaration was 'buried' very quickly and no one took the least account of it. This led the EU to be much more reluctant to state any new policy at all, much less one that was not coordinated with the US. Nonetheless, the EU did publish at least two more statements that decade, both of which were again critical of Israeli policy and actions (over Lebanon in 1982, and over the eruption of the first intifada in 1987). While these statements were not directly related to the MEPP, they led the Israeli government and public to adopt a hostile standpoint towards the EU and its role in the MEPP.

On 6 March 1991, President George H. W. Bush announced, 'The time has come to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict'. Bush's declaration was followed by eight months of intensive shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State James Baker, culminating in the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991. The conference, co-chaired by Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, was attended by Israeli, Egyptian, Syrian and Lebanese delegations, as well as a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. For the first time, all of the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict had

gathered to hold direct negotiations—a historically unprecedented event.⁷ Although it was held in a European country, the EU was excluded from the political talks and only allowed to attend the economic cooperation committee meetings.⁸ The US preferred to draw in the Russians as new allies on the MEPP, rather than the EU and its member states. This distance continued with the 1993 Oslo accords, which were led by the US with the extensive assistance of Norway (not an EU member state). The Europeans were very frustrated to see that while some of their ideas were finally accepted by the international community, they were excluded almost completely from the diplomatic process. Nonetheless, they were still expected to be the main funder and to facilitate those aspects dealing with economic support.

Despite this frustration, the EU did take serious action on the positions and committees they were allowed to access, such as the multilateral committees they were given responsibility for. They realised they could be proactive through the economic door, and use their extensive funding and role in the economic cooperation committees as leverage on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This led the EU to announce the Barcelona process in 1995, a process that is still active today and which ties the EU to the Middle East as a whole. It provides a rare opportunity for the parties to negotiate and cooperate across various fields without necessarily talking on the MEPP directly, thereby showing them just how much they all share the same interests.

Led by President Jacques Chirac of France, the EU in 1996 sought to play a more prominent role in Arab-Israeli negotiations. One way of executing this idea was the appointment in November 1996 of an EU Middle East Envoy, Miguel Angel Moratinos, the Spanish ambassador to Israel. Moratinos' mission was hard to define, as the EU member states had different views on the potential EU role. For example, while France wanted to balance the US tilt towards Israel, the UK believed that the EU could not achieve major influence separately and therefore ought to play a supportive role to the US lead. Eventually, Moratinos' mission was defined closer to the UK approach, as 'establishing and maintaining close contact with all sides; observing the negotiations so as to be prepared to offer EU mediation; contributing to the implementation of international agreements; supervising compliance with human rights and the law; and suggesting to the Security Council initiatives to revive the peace process'.⁹ EU leaders saw this position as an important part of its entrance onto the international stage; when asked about the sudden increase in Europe's attention to the peace process, Peter Carter, an EU official directly involved in drafting its policy statements, replied that the EU was 'a new player in international relations, so we need visibility and prestige and the Middle East affords us that opportunity'.¹⁰ The eventual outcome of all these initiatives and institutional developments was that when the Clinton administration decided to play a much more intensive, hands-on role in the peace process, the EU was finally granted the diplomatic role which it had so long pursued.¹¹

This led to major progress, as the Americans understood they could use EU assistance not only in financing peacekeeping and accommodating diplomacy in

European venues, but in the actual political role of assuring the Palestinians that the US moves were good for all parties. The US thus added the EU's signature to both the Hebron agreement (1997) and the Wye River Memorandum (1999), even though both agreements were 'US-led' initiatives. Following this transatlantic cooperation, it was the EU that issued the Berlin declaration (1999), saying: 'The European Union reaffirms the continuing and unqualified Palestinian right to self-determination, including the option of a state, and looks forward to the early fulfilment of this right'.¹² This time the declaration was agreed upon quietly with the US, as a diplomatic tool to prevent Arafat from declaring a Palestinian state unilaterally. The trust shown by the US towards the EU trickled down quickly, and after the EU took part in the political and diplomatic Sharm el-Sheikh talks in 2000, Ambassador Moratinos was asked by both the Israelis and the Palestinians to mediate in the 2001 Taba talks.

Ehud Barak was elected Israeli prime minister in 1999, after several years of international frustration with Netanyahu's leadership. But Barak did not live up to expectations, and was replaced quickly by Ariel Sharon, a former general considered even more hawkish than Netanyahu. In 2000, the second intifada burst – a far more violent intifada than the first one, and occurring at the same time that the US became preoccupied with preventing its own terror atrocities after 9/11. The Israelis were smart enough to channel the new American fear into the Middle Eastern field, and thus obtained legitimacy in the US for its strong response to the Palestinian terror threat.

During these years, while US President George Bush was not interested in the MEPP and was more than usually sympathetic with the Israelis, the EU was not so quiescent. It pushed for the establishment of the Middle East Quartet, a diplomatic body established in 2002 that included the EU, the US, the UN and Russia. Its first declaration was the 'Road Map', which was shaped by the EU but also embraced by the US and other Quartet members, thus garnering massive recognition and approval by both the Palestinians and the Israelis over the next few years. While not sponsored by the EU alone, it was considered a success for EU policymaking. But it was also the last success for the Quartet as a properly collaborative body, as since then it has been used by the US to force its policy upon the other three players. The Road Map process also reflected a major weakness of the Quartet: it linked the EU with the US State Department rather than the White House, thus excluding the new forum from the most important body of American policymaking.¹³

EU policymakers cite 2006 as a low point for the EU as a member of the Quartet, when Hamas was elected with many seats in the Palestinian (and EU-sponsored) elections. The US declared on behalf of the Quartet that Hamas would be excluded from negotiations and not legitimized, while some EU politicians disagreed with this policy and believed the EU position should balance the US, while trying to move the Palestinian leadership towards reconciliation.

In 2009, Barack Obama was elected to his first term as US president. His collaboration with the EU was an improvement – not necessarily in terms of the Quartet, but in the sense that he did not take the traditional American approach of

always supporting Israel. Obama and Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the EU, managed to maintain good relations as far as the conflict in the Middle East. Obama respected the EU's potential role in a future peace, especially due to its special connections with several Arab countries (such as Syria and Lebanon) that the Americans felt were needed to give the Palestinians broad support. However, the EU, even after making the necessary changes to its structure resulting from the Lisbon Treaty, was unable to form a united policy towards the region, and its incompetence was shown time after time (for example, in the 2009 and 2011 UN votes on Palestinian state recognition).¹⁴ Returning to the case that was noted at the beginning of this paper – the EU guidelines with respect to Israeli settlements – we can easily see both of the EU's problems: no coordination with the US and, far more challenging, no cooperation among the EU member states. They do not back the EU politically, but rather let Ashton take all the blame.

In the field of non-declarative policy, the EU has established a few programs over the years, mainly to increase economic collaboration in the Middle Eastern region. A leading example, as noted earlier, is the Barcelona process initiated in 1995, which includes meetings on subjects such as the environment and energy for countries from the broader Euro-Mediterranean region – Arab countries and small European countries around the same table with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The premise of this structure was to disconnect the peace process from economic collaboration, and in fact that did happen for a few years; but despite EU hopes, the Middle Eastern players were unable¹⁵ to sustain this distinction. The EU demonstrated that if it had to choose between one of its two objectives for the region – a two-state solution and improved economic collaboration – it would prefer the second, even at the cost of losing the first. Furthermore, the EU is in a complex position economically, as its money is keeping the Palestinian Authority alive, but it also has major trade relations with Israel that benefit both Israel and the EU dramatically. It would be painful to lose either.

In sum, looking at EU policy over the years does reveal a solid and consistent path of behaviour. The EU as a whole has tried different approaches in order to increase its influence on the MEPP, and has been willing to be more creative, balance other players (even when it has taken the unpopular side) and give up the leading role to the US, even when the latter was far less interested in peace than the EU.



The EU and its Member States

The EU's greatest weakness as a participant in the peace process is its inability to work as a united actor with one voice. Even in 2009, when it finally formed a policy paper for the Middle East region, it did not include anything specific on the peace process as member states could not reach an agreement on it. In this section, I try to shed some light on the time-consuming and disorganised process of policymaking within the different EU institutions. I try to show that the fact that EU member states cannot agree on a policy towards the Middle East is not only due to an institutional tangle, but also their historic and current political relations with both Israel and Palestine. Lastly, I compare the UK and France to show just how far apart the member states can stand, and how harmful their independent policies can be to EU efforts.

For historical, geographical and cultural reasons, EU member states act according to their different relationships with Israel, Palestine and other Arab states in the region. For example, France has historic ties with Syria and Lebanon, and these close linkages affect French support for the Palestinian side of the conflict. On the other hand, Germany, due to its history in the Second World War, tends to be more supportive of Israeli interests.

The different historical and ideological interests of the member states are magnified by the institutional complexity of the EU. There are four different institutions within the EU that structure its foreign policy: the European Council, the General Affairs Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. It is not clear who really decides, controls or determines EU foreign policy, especially over the Middle East, as there are also numerous individuals in special positions – the High Representative, the special envoy to the peace process, several commissioners responsible for external affairs – as well as all the foreign ministers of the member states. The multiple agencies and individuals who represent the EU in the region not only make it impossible for the EU to decide on a united approach to the conflict, but also make it extremely difficult for the Israelis and the Palestinians to invest personally in the right actors within the EU. While this was formally abolished by the Lisbon Treaty, it is nevertheless upheld in practice, often undermining the EU's effectiveness in formulating coherent policies.¹⁶ It is no secret that personal relations are extremely important in the field of diplomacy, but this structural complexity means that actors in the region can only invest in a few personal contacts, as they do not have the capacity to invest in them all. It also makes the EU look non-transparent and confused in purpose. Furthermore, the fact that the EU chose to disconnect its economic projects – mainly the Barcelona process and trade agreements – from its foreign policy leads regional actors to believe that they do not need to invest in diplomacy as far as the EU is concerned, because they will get the economic benefits no matter what they do in other areas of diplomacy and politics.

On the other hand, the EU has managed over the years to create impressive resources that attract other actors. Many countries from around the world want access to EU resources, from external policies and instruments (for example, joining the European Security Strategy) to economic instruments, humanitarian aid and, above all, full membership. We can see the effect of such tools on Turkey and Ukraine, for example, in the last few years. Countries are willing to give up other powerful alliances in order to join the European Union. However, from the Israeli perspective, the Europeans are lacking the most important tool of all: military capabilities. Security has always been the first priority for Israel, and so as long as the EU cannot reassure Israel on that matter, it is doomed to lose leverage to actors that can provide security or at least deeply understand this issue, such as the US and even Russia. This important disadvantage, combined with the second major inability of the EU – its failure to impose economic sanctions – has severely reduced its impact on the region.¹⁷

In general, European positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict are determined by three primary motivating factors:

- (a) their relative sympathy to the positions of the core protagonists in the conflict;
- (b) the importance they attach to their bilateral relations with Washington; and
- (c) the costs and benefits of raising their profiles within the MEPP.¹⁸

For years, France was very independent in its initiatives and policy, opposing the US (and not only over the Arab-Israeli issue) multiple times from the 1980s and up until Sarkozy's presidency. Major examples include the open support they gave to Iraq in the Iraq-Iran war, their efforts to expand EU relations with the Maghreb in 1990, and the diplomacy they employed during Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996. The French were very frustrated by the American approach, which tilted towards Israel, and pursued a more balanced solution; this was broadly supported by Arab countries and made it impossible for the Americans to ignore their initiatives. President Chirac tended to express his views effectively, at the cost of embarrassing the Americans or even his fellow Europeans. Most notable was his trip to the Middle East in 1996, when he chose to visit the Palestinian Council but avoided the Israeli Knesset. Soon after that visit, he managed to embarrass the Americans by proposing a new American-European initiative, championed by France, while US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was visiting the Middle East and had to admit that she knew nothing about this new idea. This behaviour by Chirac was considered disruptive by both the US and Israel, as well as by some EU representatives.

In contrast with France, the British have assigned high importance to maintaining their special relationship with Washington since the Suez debacle. While the UK historically tended to support the Arab side, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher changed the government's stance in the 1980s, as she tended to be more hardline on terrorism and even refused to meet PLO members. Prime Minister Tony

Blair's government took the UK position a few steps nearer the US, as Blair saw the UK as an American mediator within the EU. He asked the British Foreign Office to strengthen relations with Israel so the UK could have better leverage over them, and structured the UK approach in such a way that he was the 'good cop' and his foreign minister was the 'bad cop'; in this way, he could talk to the Israelis and the Americans as a friend and let the foreign minister talk to the EU in the language they were happy with.¹⁹ He chose to support the Americans when he backed the Mitchell Report against the position of the EU, and explained it by saying he valued the special relationship that the UK had with different actors more than he valued the empty declarative policy of the EU. In addition, Blair had a close friend working in the Israeli Labor party, Lord Michael, who served as an informal connection between the UK and Prime Minister Ehud Barak, giving the UK a unique position within the Israeli government. Unfortunately for the UK, Barak chose to negotiate with Syria before he got to the Palestinians, and the close relationship with Blair did not translate into major actions in the field.

During the beginning of his second term as prime minister, Blair was in a difficult position. After 9/11, the US-Israeli alliance grew closer with their shared efforts to fight terror. The UK tried to get the Americans to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict in parallel to preparing for the war in Iraq, but Blair was rejected by the Palestinians in his 2001 visit to the region, and Bush was reluctant as he felt he could not ask the Israelis for actions he was not willing to make himself. The EU and the US grew apart even more during the Sharon term that began in March 2001, and the UK was the one who suffered the most from this split, as it lost most of its relations with Arab countries (even in the Gulf) and was perceived as the only pro-Israeli state in the EU. UK relations with Israel were good for a long time, as Israel appreciated the British efforts to assist the US, but a series of events in 2002 – notably, a terror attack in Israel executed by two British-Arab terrorists, and the killing of three British citizens who were working in the West Bank by the Israel Defense Forces – caused a severe deterioration in this relationship. Towards the end of his second term, Blair was caught at the G8 Summit asking Bush's permission to visit Israel in order to clear tensions before Condoleezza Rice's visit after the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Bush did not even look at Blair as he asked, and did not give him permission to go. This event generated criticism of Blair in Europe, as the UK was accused of being America's servant.

In sum, the different views of member states with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their independent interests and relationships with its main protagonists, have weakened the EU as a whole. Thus, we still see to this day many examples of uncoordinated policy executed by the member states themselves, as opposed to official EU policy, and vice versa. Even after the changes that have taken place under High Representative Ashton and the Lisbon Treaty, it is clear that the member states are not willing to give the EU the political power needed to accomplish its objectives.



Israeli Perceptions of the EU and its Role in the MEPP

This section explores Israeli perceptions of the EU's role in Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution over the years. Along with providing politicians' citations that speak for themselves, I examine the Israeli audience and suggest that the EU can find allies within it if it has a better understanding of its internal factions.

Lars Andersen, the new EU ambassador to Israel, stated in the Knesset in November 2013 that since his arrival in Israel a few months earlier, he 'was shocked by the negative atmosphere regarding EU relations with Israel in the media and in the political system'. According to Andersen, 'misconceptions including allegations that the Union did not care about the security of Israel; Europe obsessed with regard to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and building settlements, and that the EU become less and less relevant to Israel'. He concluded by saying to the Israeli MKs, 'What unites us is wider than what divides us'. After Andersen spoke, Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin chose not to blur the differences between Israel and the EU regarding the boycott guidelines. He claimed that harsh treatment of the EU by Israel is due to historical anti-Semitism being replaced by modern 'anti-Israelism': 'We are witnessing a widespread phenomenon in Europe in the use of "politically correct" cover of anti-Israel views, it is actually a new kind of anti-Semitism. The European Union should ask itself whether Israel is treated equally and fairly like all other countries'. Elkin further claimed that members of the EU treat Israel with double standards: 'We are at a crossroads in history, and Europe must decide whether to separate the politics from the research and science collaboration which continues to deepen or to keep the future of relations between Europe and Israel a hostage of the political issues'.²⁰

Anyone who has worked in the field of Euro-Israeli relations over the past few decades knows that the Israeli perception of the EU is far more negative than shown in the European media. Israeli politicians throughout the years have openly suggested severing Israeli relations with the EU and some of its members altogether, and removing the EU from any role in conflict resolution. Interestingly, relations with the EU is one of the few subjects where Israeli public opinion is broadly the same across the political spectrum. While attitudes towards the US role in the MEPP tend to change across the right and left wings and also over time, in the case of Europe there appears to be a broad consensus in Israel, and it is essentially a negative one.

Two days after the Venice Declaration of 1980, the Israeli government released the following statement:

Nothing will remain of the Venice Decision but a bitter memory. The decision calls on us and other nations to bring into the peace process that Arab SS which calls

itself 'the Palestine Liberation Organisation'... all men of goodwill in Europe, all men who revere liberty, will see this document as another Munich-like capitulation to totalitarian blackmail and a spur to all those seeking to undermine the Camp David Accords and derail the peace process in the Middle East.²¹

This response set the tone for Israeli distrust of Europe, and as the EU standpoint has not changed much over the years, the Israelis and the Europeans have continued to clash over nearly every declaration and visit to the region. This historical legacy of a deeply embedded Israeli suspicion of the EU's good faith has been one of the organisation's major weaknesses in its efforts to have a more prominent role in the MEPP. The Israelis believe the EU has disqualified itself from a brokering role and has done nothing to repair their bad relations over the years. For many years, Israel's main ally, the US, was not only more supportive in terms of military and security assistance, but also tended to back Israel's view regarding the essential illegitimacy of the European role.²² After another fallout between the US and some EU member states, this time over the Iraq war, Sharon's diplomatic adviser, Zalman Shoval, stated: 'The attitude of a number of European countries has proven once again to Israel that it is impossible to trust Europe... this behavior can only reduce Europe's role in relation to the United States regarding any settlement with the Palestinians'. Moreover, Haaretz reported that Sharon was lobbying the Bush administration to drop the Quartet's Road Map project altogether in response to Europe's Iraq policy.²³

The Israeli perception of the EU is driven by a few different elements that are important to understand. One key motive for the unenthusiastic Israeli position on the EU's role is the fact that the Americans like to be the only champions of the MEPP, and it is rather simple for Israel to give up on the EU for the sake of American diplomatic interests. Second, the Israelis believe that Europe is neither strong enough nor sufficiently united. It does not act like a superpower, and over the years of trying to push Israel, it has never stood firmly and let Israel suffer for its actions. Furthermore, in comparison to the US, EU countries do not have large and politically powerful Jewish populations; if anything, the growing political power in Europe is Muslim-dominated, and European politicians must take into account local Muslim sensibilities. Third, the EU tends to adopt pro-Arab positions in UN voting, while the US always votes with Israel.

Another crucial factor is the Israeli belief that the EU does not understand security, and that the EU is not strong enough militarily. For example, we saw Europe's inability to deal effectively with the Bosnia and Kosovo crises, and its need for American help – how can the EU solve other security crises when it cannot solve its own? The EU is also accused of placing economic interests above security and moral concerns, as illustrated by the cases of Iraq and Iran, and being motivated mainly by economic greed, and thus unreliable in the kind of risky security situations that Israel faces. This preoccupation with economic issues means the EU does not really appreciate Israel's security concerns. This was the Israeli understanding of the

reason why some EU countries did not sell weaponry to Israel for a long time. Finally, the Israelis came to believe that the EU just cannot be trusted. Almost all of the Israeli leaders over the years – Netanyahu among them – have said repeatedly that the Jewish people will never again place their fate in anyone else's hands. This refers not only to the European and Nazi role in the Holocaust, but also to events that have occurred since Israel's independence. It was France that in 1967 dramatically turned its back on Israel in the middle of the Six Day War, and nearly all the EU states refused the US over-flight rights for its airlifts to Israel during the 1973 war. That feeling of betrayal is the main reason for the current Israeli perception of Europe.²⁴

It is important to explain that not all Israelis dismiss the EU's role altogether: the majority of the Israeli public cannot accept the European way and style but nonetheless supports the European ideas behind it. Not all Israelis would be happy to exclude the EU from involvement in the MEPP. In fact, according to Asaf Harpaz and Guy Shamis, three different Israeli public discourses regarding the EU role can be identified: the antagonist, the ideological-supportive and the pragmatic. The antagonist approach, usually drawn from Israel's political right, are hostile towards most EU political interventions. The ideological-supportive cohort believes that Europe and Israel share common, Western values such as democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law and basic freedoms. This group, traditionally from the political left, wants to foster socio-political ties with the EU and even hopes for eventual EU membership for Israel. Professor Shlomo Ben Ami, former foreign minister of Israel and an advocate of EU involvement in the MEPP, has said: 'The EU is the first empire in history that is being created through consensus rather than occupation... Israel is endangering vital interests with its "cold shoulder" policy towards Europe'.²⁵ The third group is the pragmatists, who form a middle ground between the other two: they acknowledge the differences between the EU and Israel and are suspicious of external EU policy, yet favour enhanced relations with the EU. This last group should be the target audience for EU statements, as it is growing rapidly and can be convinced more easily if the right methods are used to speak to them.



Recommendations and Conclusion

Writing this paper was an eye-opening experience for me in many ways. I had the opportunity to examine EU policy, both declaratory and 'on the ground', and at the same time I acquired a unique view of the EU's role through American and European eyes. Thus, my conclusions and recommendations are based not only on the facts as they are perceived through Israeli eyes, but on a broader view of the complex reality.

The timing of this writing was also quite fortuitous, as in the past year actual peace talks took place between the Israelis and the Palestinians, with American mediation. Those talks, after more than four years of silence, spurred all parties to be more active. While writing this paper, I have seen the EU try all sorts of approaches in order to gain more influence, from threatening with 'sticks' to putting more 'carrots' on the table, from giving the same messages to both sides to giving discreet private messages with the opposite tone. This was fascinating to watch, especially because my assessment is that if anything, the EU role in the MEPP will only increase once an actual settlement is closer.

There are a few explanations for the political strength of the EU as a main actor in this process. First of all is its geographical proximity, relative to the US. Second, the EU is much more dependent and involved economically, as Europe is the main trading partner of Israel (as well as other Middle Eastern states) and plays a dominant role in supporting the Palestinian state and the humanitarian situation there. Furthermore, the EU is expected to be the main financial supporter for the region's reconstruction after a peace agreement is achieved. Certainly, in the shorter term, Europe's lack of political unity and military capability, and its identification with the Arab position, inhibits its peacemaking prospects. But it is important to counterbalance this with the problems the US faces in presenting itself as a neutral and honest mediator, as there is a justified scepticism of the ability of the US to apply pressure on Israel.²⁶

And so, recognising that the EU is very much needed, and any peace deal cannot be achieved by the US alone but must include international pressure, it is time to present what the EU can and should do in order to become more proactive with respect to the MEPP.

Recommendations

1. The EU needs to talk with one voice. The member states have to understand that their independent initiatives are the number-one cause of the EU's weakness as an international actor. The states have to respect the rotating positions and representatives, and make an effort to have influence within EU institutions and on the formation of policy before it is published.

2. The EU must be more realistic about its ability to be a leading actor in the MEPP. It should accept the fact that the process is led by the US and that the EU is a supporting actor, not a main one. The Europeans must understand to what extent they are really needed; it will be easier for them to focus on their strengths and not be too ambitious. They should focus on the long-term stability that will be the second stage of any agreement, and they should also maintain their good relations with Arab countries in the broader Middle East, so that they can provide imminent support once a deal is close.
3. The EU should make sure its financial support is getting to the right people and that it matches its objectives. So far, EU donations and programs are not very transparent, so it is difficult to ensure the money is going to productive causes, or even getting to the people at all.
4. Lastly, as far as internal changes needed within EU structures, the EU should make an effort not only to talk in one voice but to reduce the number of representatives and commissioners working in the region. This is essential in order to make communication easier.
5. The EU should also rethink its position within the Quartet, and perhaps push for its disassembly. It has not proven to be an effective channel for policymaking or peacemaking (other than the Road Map); it has only weakened European power and made it more difficult for the EU to be creative and independent, as the Americans have controlled the Quartet's agenda ever since its establishment. As transatlantic relations are vital for the EU as a whole, and also to every member state separately, it would be better to remove this relationship from the complexity of the UN and Russia. The EU should maintain its ability to have a different voice from the US, in order to keep the special and much-needed trust it has from the Arab world. Having the Quartet as another actor in the region only complicated these personal relations to such a degree that Israeli and Palestinian decision-makers were just too confused, and for no good reason.

As far as the EU-Israeli relationship, it is important to understand that in order for the EU to be the Palestinians' insurance with respect to the US, the EU can never be on Israel's side completely. This balance between the US and Israel on one side and the EU with the Palestinians on the other side is far too important to sacrifice just for EU relations with Israel. Nonetheless, the EU should be aware of Israeli concerns about the EU's tone and treatment of other issues, as it does affect Israeli perceptions. For example, the EU stance on the Iranian issue could send the message that the EU understands Israel's security needs and is working to fulfil them. Another example is the EU's ability to addressing radicalisation within the Muslim communities in its countries; if the Israelis see the Europeans deal with that issue effectively, this may convince them that the EU is capable of acting efficiently even with the costs of internal political pressure.

Most of the analysis I have read for this paper recommends that the EU make a sharp turn towards the Palestinians, adopting their demands altogether, as 'they've lost Israel', and the Israelis are making it hard for Europe in the legal field (occupation is a major obstacle to cooperation from the standpoint of international law). Suggestions include boycotting Israeli produce, and massive pressure to eventually make Israel accept the fact that the current situation cannot remain. The main problem with this approach is that EU trade ties with Israel work both ways. It is true that the EU is Israel's number-one trade partner, but on the same time Israel is a main exporter to the EU; Europe cannot give up those relations so easily. Second, it is unlikely that the member states will be willing to back EU policy in a way that makes them lose their political ties with Israel. We have already seen, just in the latest example of the EU guidelines, how hard it was to get full backing from all sorts of European representatives. Mutual interests between the European countries and Israel include various 'silent' fields, such as intelligence cooperation, and the military sphere. Those things will be hard to give up.

In closing, I would recommend that the EU work hard on making personal connections with Israeli politicians and decision-makers, and with the Israeli public audience – not to talk only and from the start about the conflict, but to build a friendly and hushed backchannel with various groups in Israeli society, as suggested in the previous section. The EU also needs to make smarter use of the tools it already has, such as the Euro-Med process, which could be a far more effective informal channel as well as a lively base for the multilateral relations that would be very much needed after an agreement is achieved. The current situation, where a vast majority of the Israeli public is willing to give up on relations with the EU completely, cannot be accepted and must be changed in order for the EU to have better credibility and the ability to contribute to the MEPP.



Endnotes

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