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“A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall?” State and Perspectives of EU-Israeli Relations Brussels, 16-17 June 2015

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The Annual meeting of the Israeli-European Policy Network (IEPN) in Europe was intended to present several ideas as to the direction Israel is heading after the March 2015 elections and learn more about the manner in which the election results affect Israeli-European relations, including future elections. Furthermore, achievements, limits and shortcomings of the EU's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were discussed, focusing in particular on convergence among EU member states policies and the complex dynamics of EU-US relations in the Middle East.

After the 2015 Israeli Elections

Minutes and Conclusions of the Seminar

The recent elections, held in Israel in March 2015, left many in the social-democratic and progressive camp with a bitter taste of disappointment. Traditionally, it is thought that there are two main factors that influence public opinion in Israel and cause people to vote a certain way: 1) the political-security factor 2) the socio-economic factor. The more the discourse in Israel is inclined toward the political-security factor; it will be easier for the right-wing camp, and vice

versa in favour of left-wing parties.

Despite the relatively decent macroeconomic situation, Israel has many social problems such as inequality, high cost of living and high housing prices. However, the electoral achievement of the Likud Party, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, can be attributed to an additional surprising factor that is often not emphasised enough, namely the ethnic-cultural factor, often directly related to the state of origin of Jewish immigration, which is a substantial issue in Israeli society since its establishment. Many believed that with the passage of time and generational changes, this issue will become less significant, but it seems this is not the case. In the last days prior to the election, there was a behavioural shift that caused people to base their vote more on ethno-cultural considerations and less on political-security, socio-economic, or leadership considerations.

How are, against that background, the relations between Israel and Europe affected in the present and how will they be affected in the future, in light of the results of the Israeli elections?

There are two motives that at first sight might seem to facilitate a more useful and fruitful dialogue between Europe and Israel: First, a partial US withdrawal from the region for strategic reasons that might create new spaces/interests for cooperation that were previously not considered. Second, Israel is highly integrated into



the global economy and has particularly close cultural linkages with Europe. But notwithstanding these two factors, there are two main challenges that make it difficult to improve the relations between Israel and Europe:

1. Underlying divergences in European foreign policy – The European Union too often depends on consensus of all EU countries, which is on some issues hard to achieve. Too often the shared platform is based on low common denominators.
2. Israel, which in the past was known as a vibrant and lively democracy, is no longer perceived as such in large parts of European public opinion. Although there is a sense of political and social changes taking place in Israel (e.g. the shift to the right in public opinion; greater awareness of socio-economic issues since the social protests in the summer of 2011; alleged negotiations with Hamas for a long-term truce in Gaza; or the Prime Minister's statement on readiness to resume negotiations with the Palestinians without preconditions), aside from security matters, the impression is that they are led by short-term political interests. There are many narratives and rhetoric being heard for internal political parties purposes where some politicians express themselves in a certain way in order to improve their status in future primaries, rather than generating a real discussion about the future of Israel fifty years from now. There are voices in Israel calling for strengthening ties with countries in the Far East, such as China, to make Israel less financially dependent on Europe. While China has an essential

role in the global economy, one should ask the Chinese whether Israel is so important to them that the Far East really is a substitute to Europe.

No one can discuss Israeli-European relations without addressing the Palestinian issue, and of course the peace process, or rather the lack of a peace process, which is currently the main obstacle in further intensifying EU-Israel relations. In this context, the Israeli-European relations are directly affected by the unique 'Israeli triangle' of a Jewish state, a democratic state and a state holding occupied territories. It seems to be that the hope of the current government in Israel and many previous ones is to try to keep all the vertices of the triangle. However, the European leadership does not accept at least one of these vertices – which is occupation, but there is also a cultural gap (see paper by Peters) about Israel's definition as a Jewish state, which is perceived by some in Europe as not really reconcilable with being a democratic state.

Although Europe has and is confronted with multiple internal crises itself and Israel has experienced significant political and social changes, - as mentioned above - as for Israeli-European relations, not much has changed compared to the situation 15 years ago. Europe is still manoeuvring in the confined space between the desire to have a stronger influence in the Middle East and on the peace process with the Palestinians on the one hand, and its growing frustration due to the limits this encounters, on the other hand. On the Israeli side, there is a growing lack of confidence and questioning of the importance of




Europe as an ally. In addition, there is also a certain kind of hostility towards Europe for what is perceived by parts of the Israeli public as 'taking a side' in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (with the Palestinians). The perception in Israel that Muslim communities in Europe have a growing influence on policymaking are not conducive to improving the image of Europe in the eyes of the Israeli public.

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing for decades and the stalemate in the peace process prevailing since some time, it is becoming increasingly clear that this status quo is not really tenable. In terms of European public opinion, it is becoming more delicate to support both Israel and the aspirations of a Palestinian state. Supporting one, for many, seems to imply not being able to support the other. This is particularly problematic for Israel, as it pushes the Israeli diplomacy to constant defensiveness and ultimately raises doubts about the government's political initiatives. Although Israel still maintains good bilateral relations with several European countries, the risk of international isolation is increasing. In addition, in light of the transformation of US-Israeli relations, if the US decides to downscale its role as a mediator in the region, a vacuum may be formed due to lack of mediation.

Despite the regional component, Israel has already adopted European standards in certain fields. This is reflected in the close cooperation between Israel and Europe in socio-economic relations under the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, scientific and cultural collaborations and participation in a number

of EU programmes. Europe should continue to have the courage to develop powerful ideas and to state clearly that it is interested to deepen the cooperation even more. However, this should be a clear perspective accompanied by a clear political choice for the people of Israel that progress in deepening relations is linked to progress in attaining a lasting peace agreement between Israel and Palestine. Europe has made several political proposals in the past, nevertheless, at a time when the EU's positive image is undermined in the eyes of parts of the Israeli public because of its critique of the occupation and related policy proposals, such as labelling of settlement products, it is advisable that Europe, even it follows these policies, also generates proposals to improve its image in Israel by being sensitive to Israel's legitimate security needs. A just, fair and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is integral part of Israel's long-term security. That is why Europe should continue its calls for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On the other hand, Israel should continue strengthening the further development of Israeli-European cooperation and adoption of European standards, which are, of course, linked to moves towards a permanent agreement with the Palestinians. It should also take concrete actions on the ground towards the realization of that vision. For Israel, the relationship to Europe, as well as the pursuance of a lasting peace with the Palestinians are strategic choices requiring strong political leadership.

Below are three executive summaries of articles written by some of the distinguished participants of the meeting. Visit www.iepn.org for full versions.



Israel and Europe: Flashpoints on the Horizon

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Executive Summary

Over the past forty years, Israel and Europe have developed an ever-increasing network of economic, scientific and cultural ties. Those relations, however, have been marked of a number of conflicting trends leading to the emergence of a troubled and, at times, volatile relationship. A thriving economic partnership, yet a relationship, at the political level, that has been marked by tensions, disappointment, bitterness and, at times, anger. Most significantly, those relations have been marked by sharp differences over the peace process with the Palestinians, and have been most prominent when Israel has been led by right-wing governments committed to pursuing policies aimed at maintaining, if not expanding Israel's control of the occupied Palestinian territories.

The formation of the current Israeli government, a narrow right-wing government with a wafer-thin majority of one, does not necessarily signify a dramatic turning point in Israeli-European relations. But differences between the positions of the European Union and the policies of new Israeli government are likely to lead to sharp differences and conflict of interests in a number of policy areas.

This paper highlights five policy areas where tensions between Israel and the European are likely to rise in

the coming year:

1. The intent of European Union to develop more stringent guidelines for the labelling of goods produced in Israeli settlements.
2. The possibility that more European parliaments will recognize Palestine as a state, and that some European countries might follow Sweden's lead in formally recognizing Palestine.
3. That the European Union, led by France will initiate the tabling of a UN Security Council resolution which mandates the parameters of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
4. That the Boycott Disinvestment Sanctions (BDS) movement will gain increasing support amongst various European activist and civil society organizations.
5. The reintroduction of legislation in the Knesset which targets the activities and specifically the funding by European government of NGO and civil society groups in Israel.

How these potential flashpoints are mediated, at both the practical and rhetorical levels are crucial for the future direction of Israeli-European relations. It is the role therefore of those parties who are interested in fostering closer Israeli-European relations to develop strategies (short-term and long-term) to manage the crises that loom on the horizon, so as to mitigate the potential fallout and the long-term consequences for this relationship. Proponents of Israeli-European relations, both within Israel and Europe, have allowed the Israeli right-wing to dominate the discourse on Europe and Israeli-European relations. This paper



argues that Israeli civil society groups, NGOs, academia and those media interested in fostering closer ties between Israel and Europe need to be more assertive in highlighting the importance and depth of Israeli-European relations and suggests a number of areas where a new Israeli-European dialogue might be developed.

For the full-text article: <http://goo.gl/ZRZIGO>



Tensions on the rise: Israel's right-wing government and the EU

Muriel Asseburg | SWP Berlin

Executive Summary

This paper analyses the 2015 coalition negotiations and the formation of the 34th Israeli government. It gauges some of the anticipated developments with regards to domestic policies as well as with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (or the Middle East Peace Process, MEPP). In addition, it explores how these developments are likely to impact Israeli-European relations. In this, it takes a European perspective and focuses on those issues that are of particular concern to Europeans.

On the domestic scene, three major developments should be expected as a consequence of the coalition negotiations and the set-up of the current government and its parties' priorities:

1. Further restrictions to liberal democracy.
2. A strengthening of the Jewish over the democratic identity of the state.
3. The rolling back of measures adopted under the 'sharing the burden' approach advanced mainly by the former Minister of Finance Yair Lapid in the previous government. With regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Prime Minister will have to find a balance between international demands for a revival of the MEPP, his own interest in avoiding substantial negotiations, the risk of a renewed conflagration, and his coalition partners' demands for an even more aggressive settlement drive.



At the same time, European officials from member states and the EU alike have shared the frustration about the lack of progress towards a two state arrangement since Oslo, an arrangement in which they see the interests of both parties to the conflict best realized. They are also embittered about the lack of fruit that the investment of considerable sums of European taxpayers' money in the Palestinian state-building exercise and economic development has born, and the ever larger sums they have had to make available for humanitarian aid and budget support to keep the PA afloat. And they are concerned about a two state settlement fast becoming unfeasible, the looming risk of renewed violence and destruction, and the potential collapse of the PA. They are likely to exert renewed efforts to revive the MEPP, to engage in conflict management with regards to the Gaza Strip, and to take steps aimed at 'keeping the two-state option on the table'. These measures, with the exception of European engagement in mere conflict management, will likely be seen as antagonistic or punitive steps by the Israeli government. Israeli government representatives have already stepped up their rhetoric against international 'efforts at de-legitimization' by dismissing all such measures and criticism of Israeli policies along with the BDS movement as being driven by anti-Semitic motives rather than aimed at ending the occupation and upholding the possibility of a two-states approach. Yet, such rhetoric is likely to further increase tensions between Israel and the EU with the latter set on a path of clearly distinguishing between its dealings

with Israel and with the occupied territories. In light of the measures prepared by the Israeli government that will restrict liberal democracy and, more specifically, target NGOs that receive financial support from European donors or the EU, these tensions are set to augment further.

For the full-text article: <http://goo.gl/r06t79>



Recognition politics, regional approach and strategic review: three challenges to EU-Israel relations

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Executive Summary

In the aftermath of the 2015 national elections in Israel, and against the backdrop of tightened EU-Israel relations during the last few years, this paper tackles the following questions: Will the EU or additional Member States recognise Palestine as a state? Will the EU reach out to the League of Arab states for regional solutions to regional conflicts and, if so, could this affect EU policies towards Israel? Will the ongoing reviews of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EU security strategy alter EU-Israel relation or the EU's role in the Arab-Israel conflict?

The author argues that at least four different sets of factors will shape EU-Israel relations in the months and years to come. The first of them is Israeli political dynamics. Neither the composition, nor the policies of the current Israeli government are likely to increase support for Israel in the EU. The author highlights some initiatives such as the open letter by retired European politicians denouncing Netanyahu's stance on Palestine and calling for a different European approach as an example of this trend.

The second is the dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The growing support in Europe for unilateral recognition of Palestinian statehood is a response to the deadlock in the peace process. This article analyses

the implications of the Swedish recognition, the parliamentary votes on Palestine in several Member States and the changing voting-patterns in UN bodies since 2011.

The third is the broader regional situation, including the proliferation and escalation of conflicts, diversification and intensification of threats and shifting regional alliances. The EU is directly affected by security degradation in its Southern neighbourhood and is increasingly willing to engage in regional cooperation to face some of these challenges. The article evaluates which could be the implications for EU-Israel relations of a more structured cooperation between the EU and the League of Arab States.

Finally, the direction and intensity of EU-Israel relations will also depend on the EU itself, on its ability to overcome its multiple crises and to be more active in international affairs, starting with a much-needed update of its European Security Strategy and its policies towards the Southern Neighbourhood. Among the issues raised in this paper, the author points at the need to observe whether the new strategic document of the EU will still consider it the cornerstone of conflict for peace in the Middle East or one among the many focus of instability.

For the full-text article: <http://goo.gl/twqdyo>





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