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The EU and Israel as Genuine Strategic Partners

by Florin Pasatoiu and Christian Nitoiu



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 179

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Cover image: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu shakes hands with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini in Jerusalem, May 20, 2015, photo by Gil Cohen-Magen via EU Flickr CC

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The EU and Israel as Genuine Strategic Partners

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Time and again the relationship between the EU and Israel has been marred by bad language, subsequent remorse to varying degrees, and tepid reassurance. Bewilderment, annoyance, and disappointment in both directions have characterized the relationship for many years, and have led to deep structural fault lines in the EU.

One must judge the success of the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) by the impact it has had, the postures taken in its regard by the Union's member states, and the traction it has gained among the populations of those states.

A substantial 45% of Israelis think the EU is a [foe](#) versus 27% who view it as a friend, and most believe the US should remain Israel's main interlocutor. The EU continues to be perceived by Israelis as a partisan mediator in the Middle East peace process.

The EU-Israel Association Council, which was supposed to convene annually, has not met since 2012. That is despite solid cultural, scientific, and economic bilateral relations.

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The EU cannot convene Association Councils with Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt almost yearly, repeatedly describe Israel as a [strategic partner](#), and simultaneously apply an understanding of international law to Israel that is completely different from the understanding applied to those other countries. An example of that hypocritical double standard is the EU's labeling policy regarding products manufactured in Jewish communities in the West Bank.

In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a "carrot and stick" approach has failed to produce the desired results, setting aside the fact that the EU was not committed to applying it.

If the EU continues to link the upgrading of bilateral relations with Israel on its compliance with EU demands regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its foreign policy will end up in a dead end. And not only that: the EU may prove itself a complete flop and lose its status as a relevant actor in the region.

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The EU in the Middle East region: Missing in action

When it comes to the Middle East, the UN Security Council remains paralyzed by the veto power of its members, as each has its own distinct interests in the conflicts in the region. Yemen is a textbook example of the lack of relevance of international organizations at resolving crises in the region.

The EU needs to respond to the region's quickly deteriorating security environment, as its transformative agenda has failed to produce encouraging results. The attempt to apply a trans-Atlantic embrace—a so-called “ring of friends”—in the service of social engineering was a failure. It is now time to incorporate *realpolitik* into the EU's foreign policy toward the region.

The Middle East has changed drastically in the past decade or so, but the EU's strategy toward it has not changed since 2004. That was when the Union first proposed the “EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East.” The EU's position toward the Mediterranean in 2008 did not become part of the strategic dimension of its foreign policy toward the overall region, a policy that has run out of steam.

The EU has always preferred functional cooperation to high politics. It has tried to apply that mindset to its southern and eastern neighbors but succeeded only in demonstrating its own ineffectiveness.

In its 2003 European Security Strategy, the EU mistakenly assessed the Arab-Israeli conflict as the key stumbling block that lay in the path of progress in the Middle East. Making its foreign policy toward Israel conditional on Israel's compliance with EU dictates, the Union sidelined potential avenues toward strategic convergence. It did so even though the EU relies to a significant degree on Israel's cutting-edge intelligence and warfare technology.

The multitude of instruments, policies, and structures created by the EU for its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (started in 1995), also called the Barcelona Process, as well as its overarching European Neighborhood Policy (started in 2004), herald the advance of multilateralism in a conflict-torn region. These initiatives were intended to ensure a more stable and prosperous region, but they have all have fallen short.

The EU currently assesses the region as dominated by instability, lack of security, and social and economic backwardness. How does it expect to be a relevant actor in the region as a whole when its impact on Libya, Yemen, and Iraq has been zero?

The EU is adrift in the Middle East, and may become jobless

President Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century," which proved that the current US administration unconditionally supports Israel, appears to have turned the European states against one another. The EU was not able to issue a unanimous statement in its regard, despite the Union's unequivocal and long-lasting support for the two-state solution, other than to say it would "[study](#)" the proposal. Hungary blocked anything more conclusive. France, Poland, and Austria "welcomed" the US plan, and Britain said it finds it a "serious proposal."

That was not the first time the EU was fractured in its response to a US move in the Middle East. In May 2018, when the US moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania blocked a statement of condemnation by the EU Foreign Affairs Council. In other fora, too, such as the UN General Assembly, quite a few EU member states—Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania—[abstained](#) on a resolution to protect the special legal status of Jerusalem.

Their responses were muted by the EU's inconsistency and general lack of interest in international relations in the Middle East. Apart from France, Germany, and Britain, the rest of the EU member states lack both the capabilities and the political will to engage in multilateral formats in the region.

The EU boasts of being one of the largest donors to the Palestine Authority, and it has close economic and scientific relations with Israel, with which it also shares a religious and cultural heritage. In view of these facts, one would have expected the EU to take a strong interest and do what it could to gain major leverage with which to influence the state of affairs between Israel and the Palestinians. Yet the EU has been largely irrelevant with regard to almost every item on its Israeli-Palestinian agenda: Israeli control of an undivided

Jerusalem, the retention of Israeli communities in the West Bank, Israel's consideration that it might extend its sovereignty to include parts of Area C, and the consequent inclusion of the Jordan Valley into Israel.

Nor has the EU done anything about the countless Palestinian violations of the Oslo Accords, to which they had been legally bound since 1993: from continued acts of terrorism, to rejecting Israel's right to exist, to anti-Israel and antisemitic incitement in the official media and education system, to walking away from the negotiations table a decade ago, to illegal construction in Area C (which was placed by the Oslo Accords under Israel's exclusive control)—indeed, the EU has even helped the Palestinians flout that last stipulation, as it has by supporting Palestinian NGOs implicated in anti-Israel incitement and even terrorism.

The linear logic that the EU has projected via the ENP and its instruments has raised false expectations that once a country embarks on a democratization process it will lead directly to economic [prosperity, stability, and security](#). The expansion of this zone of prosperity has scarcely achieved even an intermediate stage.

There is still a huge gap between the EU and the Arab world, with the former continuing the European tradition of patronizing the latter. The Arab world is embroiled in power struggles in which the various actors battle one another for the benefits the EU is able to offer. The application of Western "standards of civilization" to the region needs to fit not only the global hierarchy but also regional power politics, which are so fragmented that they render the EU's CFSP largely impracticable.

Whatever the validity of the "universal values" the EU would like to promote, norms and mores are constantly constructed, deconstructed, contested, and defended in different historical and cultural contexts.

The post-colonial legacies that would have entitled the EU to play a paternalistic civilizational role in the Middle East are past their expiration date. The advent of Asia as a global economic powerhouse gradually caused some regional countries to shift their dependence from Europe to Asia. In an inversion of roles, the EU's foreign and security policy will be dependent on intraregional dynamics in the Middle East. The refugee crisis and the radicalization of Islam are only the beginning.

The “geopolitical commission” takes the stage

As great power competition intensifies in the region, the resort to multilateralism as a means of foreign policy will diminish drastically. The EU therefore has no choice but to acknowledge that international relations are growing ever more dominated by confrontation and adjust its foreign and security policy accordingly.

Former president of the European Council Donald Tusk was [blunt enough](#) in February 2019 to underline that the EU is entering into geopolitical competition in the Middle East. While he praised the strengthening of cooperation, he did not say a word about human rights.

While the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) has been largely dismissed, it warrants a second reading. Although the language is dull, a reading between the lines reveals clear signs that the EU is turning a page in its foreign policy toward its eastern and southern neighbors.

The EU launched the EUGS by clearly defining a framework of cooperation with those neighbors and particularly with the “repressive states” that might not share the EU’s normative construct. For them, the EU wants “tailor-made policies” that are not geared toward human rights conditions but will endure in the form of “long-term engagement.”

The EUGS sets out a roadmap for strategic decisions the EU will make in the medium and long term. It therefore has to be factored in when trying to get a sense of the EU’s long-term foreign policy.

From the outset, the new leadership of the EU Commission has looked with favor on a “[geopolitical](#) commission.”

Geopolitics means a refocusing of the EU CFSP from an almost exclusive normative drive that favors international law as the compass toward more of a contextualized interpretation and application of EU external affairs, which feature in power politics.

Geopolitics will translate into a readiness to work even with totalitarian regimes in order to retain a presence in the region’s tense power competition. This amounts to a modus operandi of “principled pragmatism.”

The geopolitical commission means the EU will not only learn to “speak the language of power” but will project its long-term views onto a region that it

would otherwise strategically lose. Otherwise, it risks destabilizing the entire system of international relations in the region, which sooner or later would spill over into Europe with serious long-term consequences.

Hence, while other “seasoned revolutions” may remain the postmodern reading of marrying selfish human interests with civilizational values, the EU needs to formally embrace stability in the region.

Israel: The EU’s “[strategic partner](#)” without a strategic partnership

Traditionally, the EU has acted on two main dimensions of its foreign policy—trade and aid—in both a bilateral and a multilateral format.

Therefore, in order to live up to expectations and become a relevant political actor capable of playing geopolitics, the EU seems to be acknowledging the resurgence of power politics to reorder international relations.

The EU has signed 10 strategic partnerships with a variety of countries including Canada, South Korea, Japan, China, India, Brazil, and recently Russia. Australia, Turkey, and Indonesia are waiting in the wings. Yet the EU does not have a consistent and clear set of criteria explaining with whom it is willing to develop such partnerships. It appears that liberal, illiberal, and even autocratic regimes qualify for such privileged international cooperation.

In 2008, during the evaluation of its European Security Strategy, the European Council called for more “[strategic thinking](#)” in EU actions worldwide. The EU should not find it difficult to make the case for a new strategic partnership. It is part of its DNA to pursue interests, not only norms and values.

The EU and Israel share several fundamental and enduring interests and have a solid functional cooperation. The EU has handled some tactical maneuvers well, meaning in a manner that satisfies international law, albeit while appeasing the Palestinians. But it is missing opportunities to be had through a deep strategic convergence with Israel.

If the EU is to pursue “[effective multilateralism](#),” it will need a reliable and capable partner. Israel is by far as the strongest candidate.

A strategic partnership with Israel does not mean turning against other regional powers.

Some may claim that pursuing a strategic partnership with Israel could weaken the EU’s regional approach and narrow the opportunity to further its regional integration agenda. This argument is theoretically flawed, as it fails to reckon

with evidence from current regional dynamics. It also misjudges the capacity of the region's countries to pursue courses of action in international relations that have little or nothing in common with the EU's modus operandi and might even completely disregard EU policy in the region.

The EU got sidelined in the conflict in Syria and with Iran. For both these international relations dossiers, which are losing steam, the EU needs Israel if it is to plan for the long term.

On the question of how realistic it is that the EU will upgrade its relations with Israel to "strategic partnership," the odds continue to increase despite bumpy bilateral relations.

Ever since Catherine Ashton's [reference](#) in 2010 to proposals to reach a "special privileged partnership," EU-Israel relations have remained trapped in the same functional rationale.

In 2016, the EU referred to its offer to Israel of a "[special privileged partnership](#)" and noted the lack of results on the peace process. The lack of progress is mainly because the Israeli government recoiled from serious discussions in view of the EU's insistence on linking the partnership to advancements in the peace process without doing anything to prod the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table, let alone make the necessary concessions for progress.

The EU has not taken sufficient account of Israel's interests, which the Jewish State deems existential. The EU and Israel thus have divergent perceptions of the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be solved. They have also clashed on the EU dossier on the Iran nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, both parties are sufficiently resilient to pursue consolidated bilateral relations in an incremental and pragmatic fashion. That could become the basis for a strategic partnership as a new institution to further regulate bilateralism as a dynamic expression of their interdependence. It could stay abreast of the latest transformations in the region with the understanding that the EU needs to continuously adjust its position toward critical partners.

There may be roadblocks, but we bet on an organic "natural convergence" — meaning the EU and Israel share culture, history, and religious mores that make them good candidates for partnership.

Israel stands as the single country in the Middle East with natural correspondences with the EU's values and mission.

Hence, there are *structural* variables that make their bilateral relations qualify for a *strategic* partnership. For that, one needs to take the “natural convergence” as mandatory. The EU insists in all its documents that all partners must recognize EU values and norms, which Israel does.

The cleavages between the two have occurred due to *circumstantial* factors involving third parties and due to divergences between *political* priorities and objectives of Israel and the EU.

It is this upper layer of decision making that needs to be brought into line between the two, and a strategic partnership might do just that.

While in the case of the EU there is (at least in theory) a perfect overlap between its *raison d'être* and its foundational values/norms construct, the *national interest* has always trumped its values/norms system when a deviation from such a course results in fault lines arising among member states when it comes to Israel.

Therefore, some sort of *rational choice* seems to prevail in the case of the EU's CFSP and less its values/norms foundations that at least in declaratory positions seems to have a monopoly on the EU's room to maneuver.

The dynamic between the EU and Israel at the level of *sectoral policies* seems to demonstrate a substantial harmonization on both sides that has always been premised on their historic, religious, and cultural legacies. The compatibility of their value systems has no equal in the region.

Time to move on

The *de facto* EU foreign policy has not been shaped by its values system, as its pragmatic cooperation with autocratic regimes in the Middle East region shows. While the EU understands that there are no quick fixes and it needs to engage with other actors, it needs to engage in *strategic planning* if it is to more accurately and reasonably define goals, milestones, and mutually accountable roadmaps so real-time adjustments can be made.

The EU may become even more marginalized in the Middle East unless it urgently alters its foreign and security policy. The adoption of a strategic partnership with Israel to further regulate bilateral relations may be a valuable tool with which to resume the projection of European influence.

If not, global powers “[far from our region](#)” will take the lead.

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