

Choosing Europe

Policy recommendations for strengthening Israel-European Union relations

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2015 is expected to be a turning point in the EU's treatment of Israel. The ongoing economic crisis in Europe and its social and political consequences, the escalating crisis in Ukraine, the rise of radical political movements and the seeping of Middle Eastern violence into Europe in the form of Islamist terror attacks are perceived by many Europeans as a "perfect storm," a series of crises that reinforce each other and threaten the political-economic order of the continent. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perceived by decision-makers in the EU as a significant factor in that storm.

EU decision-makers view Israel as part of the solution to those problems, as a democratic country that honors international agreements and human rights. Europe has tremendous respect for the Israeli economy, for Israel's ability to implement economic reforms, and for its macroeconomic discipline, its technology, its innovation and its resourcefulness. It is clear that in those respects Israel could fit in as one of the successful members of the EU. From a European perspective, it is important for Israel to act to stabilize a political settlement in its region, for example by seeking to reach a permanent solution with the Palestinian Authority, building partnerships with moderate Arab regimes, and joining forces with them, with the EU and the US to fight the extremists in the Middle East. Key parties in the EU would like to rely on Israel as a strategic partner in the struggle over the future of Western civilization. Israel must stand with the EU as a partner in such a way that prevents its positioning as a party that contributes to the threat.

From the European perspective, this situation puts Israel's decision-makers at a crossroads: the combination of the continued diplomatic stalemate, the expansion of the Judea and Samaria settlements and the recurring military operations in densely populated areas are together perceived as conflicting with the EU's interests. EU officials and politicians told us this situation could lead the Europeans to freeze all agreements with Israel, significantly damaging Israel's economy, scientific research and possibly even its citizens' freedom of movement. On the other hand, the Europeans promise that exploiting the strategic opportunity to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would enable Israel to be admitted as a special member of the EU like Switzerland and Norway (with the necessary adjustments), as the EU Foreign Affairs Council offered Israel on December 16, 2013.

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As experts on the EU who are following the deterioration of its relationship with Israel with concern, we recommend the following to Israel's decision-makers:

1. View the EU as a strategic partner. The EU's struggle against the extremist elements in the world is also Israel's struggle. Anti-terror cooperation is taken for granted but Israel must also develop a proactive rather than reactive political strategy vis-à-vis the EU.
2. Convince the EU that Israel's desire for a final settlement with the Palestinian is serious, genuine and earnest. Even the effort itself can prevent the deterioration of relations with the EU. The Israeli government must not play into its enemies' hands and reinforce Israel's image in Europe as a country that does not seek peace.
3. Do not rely solely on bilateral relations with European countries. Those relations partly go through the EU institutions in any case, and there are important matters that are decided on the European rather than the national level. An emphasis should be put on Israel's relations with the chief EU institutions: the EU Council, the EU commission, the European Parliament and the EU Foreign Affairs Council.
4. As an advanced market economy Israel must tighten its relations with the EU. The EU is the world's biggest trade bloc (in terms of economic activity), and Israel's primary trade partner; it accounts for one third of Israel's export and import.
5. Israeli policy makers must thoroughly and methodically study the EU institutions and how they work through academic courses about the EU decision-making policy, and Israel must increase its presence in the various institutions, committees and lobbies. It is particularly important for the Israeli prime minister and senior ministers to visit the EU institutions as part of that effort. The EU is a relatively open and transparent body that allows small countries to impact its policy.
6. Israel must take advantage of the legal framework of its agreements with the EU and initiate the development of the relationship as part of the existing agreements for the benefit of Israel's citizens and business sector. As a whole, the European Commission officials are not hostile to Israel and have expressed to us their wish to expand cooperation regardless of the political process, as long as the existing agreements do not need to be changed (the open skies agreement is one example thereof).
7. Treat the European Parliament just as seriously as Israel treats the US Congress, address it and build a strong lobby in it. The 7000 lobbyists operating in the European Parliament are not mistaken: the legislation in that institution is critical for business in Israel.
8. We recommend all Israeli political parties strengthen their relations with parties in the European Parliament with similar political ideologies, as much as possible. A genuine dialogue between people with shared values can help the Europeans become better acquainted with the complexity of Israeli society and prevent the conflict with the Palestinians from dominating the discourse. Israeli society is in many ways a more multicultural and diverse society than the EU countries.

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