

INSS Insight No. 1172, June 3, 2019

Israel and the New European Parliament: No Spring in the Offing

Oded Eran and Shimon Stein

While the results of the recent European Parliament elections indicate a weakening of parties that for years have directed the course of the European Union, they also show relatively high support for a strong organization that wields power and influence. That suggests that no significant change should be expected in EU policy, including in matters of foreign affairs and security. In the Israeli context - and specifically regarding the Iranian nuclear issue and the anticipated Trump administration plan on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - this means that the roots of the disputes between Israel and the EU will remain. Even if the EU is not expected to reduce its ties with Israel, given the respective political situations prevailing in the European Union and Israel, no deepening or expansion of ties should be expected.

For some years, the European Union has faced developments that threaten its cohesiveness and ability to fulfil its role as a supranational organization that brings together the continent's nations in aspects of law, economy, policy, and security. These developments have included popular disappointment with the EU's economic success; the acceptance of former Soviet bloc countries, a decision that was politically bold but created a heavy economic burden on the founding members; strengthened centrifugal forces within member states that prefer the primacy of the nation-state over a supranational organization; and the end of the EU founding generation that rehabilitated Europe after World War II, guided the organization during the Cold War years against the Soviet neighbor, and set about gradually building a political bloc that is not solely an economic one.

Since its founding, the EU's top body has been the forum of the heads of the member states. The European Council sets overall policy and major guidelines; under it are ministerial councils in charge of various areas, including agriculture, trade and economic competition, education, culture, and youth affairs. The European Commission is in charge of routine management, legislation, and appointments, and the European Central Bank is in charge of monetary matters. The challenges besetting the EU are evident in the difficulty that these institutions have in functioning – including the European Parliament, which suffers from inferior clout relative to the other institutions, as well as from its unwieldy size – 751 members.

The European Parliament elections in late May 2019 reflect two antithetical trends that are at the heart of the European crisis. On the one hand, the political center that leans on two parties – the European People's Party (conservative) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – was weakened. On the other hand, the overall voter turnout rose from 42.5 percent in 2014 to 51 percent. In other words, contrary to the impression that the citizens are indifferent at the supranational level, greater interest on this level is evident.

Despite the ideological distance between them, the two aforementioned parties were partners in realizing the idea of a united Europe. Helmut Kohl, the conservative German chancellor (1982-1998), and François Mitterand, the socialist French president (1981-1995), guided the EU together during the crucial years of expansion and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. While in the European Parliament election of 2014 these two parties won 412 seats, in 2019 these parties took only 331 seats, and will thus be hard-put to agree on who should head the main bodies, i.e., the European Council presidency, European Commission presidency, Central Bank presidency, Parliament presidency, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron disagree over a candidate to head the Commission, and even if conservatives and socialists agree to support a particular nominee, he or she will require the backing of at least one more party. Merkel argues that the lead candidate should be Manfred Weber, head of the People's Party, the biggest party in parliament. Macron's contends that the list of candidates should reflect parties and gender, and beyond Weber, his line-up includes, Dutch Frans Timmermans of the Socialist party, Danish Margrethe Vestager of the Liberal party, and French Michel Barnier, who negotiated on the EU's behalf with Britain on the terms of Brexit, and was also France's foreign minister, a member of the European Parliament for the People's Party, and member of the European Commission. The debate will continue in the next meeting of the heads of member states, set for June 21, 2019.

While the two big parties in Parliament have been weakened, the Liberal party increased its presence from 67 to 105 seats and the Greens party grew from 52 to 69 seats. These gains by parties that favor the idea of a strong European Union clash with the common assumption before (and since) the election that the EU is under an ideological assault regarding the primacy of nation states over a union of states that have surrendered their absolute sovereignty on a slew of issues. At the same time, parties that struggle within Parliament against acceptance by nation states of legislation and resolutions passed in Brussels, the EU "capital," also made substantial gains. The Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom and the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (aligned with the British "Eurosceptic" party under Nigel Farage) together took 112 seats.

The new balance of power suggests that within the European Parliament – the EU body that most closely reflects public opinion – the decisive majority support the idea of a strong union with broad authorities over matters that affect the lives of each and every citizen within Europe. If so, what message was intended by those European voters who still backed parties that challenge the essence of the EU, or what might be understood from opinion polls in Europe? Those suggest that the European citizen thinks that the EU strengthens peace, welfare, and democratic values, and yet is troubled by the EU's efficiency lags and inability to deal with problems linked to migration to the continent and the creation of new jobs. Neither are citizens convinced that the EU can survive beyond the coming two decades. Maybe this worry spurred voters, and the younger generation in particular, to turn out, and in doing so to give voice to a hope for awakening and renewal; hence the rise of the Liberals and the Greens.

The anticipated trends in the balance of power in the European Parliament and the anticipated turnover in EU institutions will likely have ramifications for relations between Israel and European countries. This is compounded by the tensions between the United States and the EU, which were not created when Donald Trump entered by the White House but have intensified over the past two years. The widening distance between Washington and Berlin, Paris, and Brussels has direct consequences for Israel on everything to do with two main issues: the future of the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA), and the future of the political process between Israel and the Palestinians.

The United States under Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal based on the assessment – similar to the arguments of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – that the JCPOA is a bad and dangerous deal, and furthermore does not address weighty questions such the prevention of Iran from renewing its full nuclear program, when the period stipulated in the deal expires; Iran's efforts to arm itself with long range ballistic missiles; and Iran's massive support for terrorist groups active in the Middle East. This US position contravenes the approach of the European partners – Britain, Germany, and France – in the Iran negotiations, which also included the United States, China, and Russia in a team headed up by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. With the exception of the United States, all partners to the deal favor its continuation. The European countries are cognizant of its shortfalls but argue that an agreement, even if flawed, is better than the total absence of any arrangement. The European partners are also prepared to continue discussing with Iran issues that require improvement. Israel, for its part, backs the American position, which advocates direct and indirect economic pressure on Iran with the goal of compelling it to return to the negotiating table in order to reach a new, improved deal.

Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian political process, the European leadership will likely recoil from any plan promoted by the Trump administration for resolving the conflict. The current personal tension in European-US relations reduces, and perhaps denies, any willingness by the EU to voice even modest support for Trump's "deal of the century." The anticipated reservations can be expected to weaken the international political and economic support that would be required to translate the deal's clauses into reality, if Israel and the Palestinians are at all willing to consider implementing it, even in part.

For the last two decades, relations between Israel and the European Union have been linked to advancing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the ongoing freeze in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the annual meeting of the Association Council (the highest political body comprising the EU and a non-member country, in this case, Israel) has not been held for the last eight years. Consequently, all activity that might have furthered bilateral ties has been frozen. Meanwhile, in the background, the EU has maintained criticism of Israel and its conduct in this regard. It can be assumed that the strengthening of the Liberal and Green parties in the European Parliament, alongside the lack of progress between Israel and the Palestinians on the political track, will aggravate tensions in relations between Israel and the EU. At the same time, Europe has experienced negative ramifications from the upheaval in the Middle East in recent years (the "Arab Spring" events). This in turn encouraged a more sober European approach toward the Middle East in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

Furthermore, in the absence of progress toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is possible that the European Union will neither expand nor reduce its ties with Israel. Any attempt by Israel to advance legislation designed to annex parts of the West Bank will certainly invite harsh censure. However, adopting sanctions against Israel would require a unanimous resolution in the European Council, and one member state's objection would suffice to veto such a move. Presumably this is what prompts the Israeli Prime Minister to bolster relations between Israel and the East European member states and the Balkans, while circumventing Brussels.