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**A New Leadership at the European Union:  
A Chance for Better EU Ties with Israel?**

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**In late November 2019, the European Parliament ratified the appointments of Charles Michel as President of the European Council and Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission, as well as the appointments of the 27 commissioners under her responsibility over the next five years. The Commission is in effect Europe's government, responsible for implementing the strategy of the European Union and for ongoing management of various issues assigned to it by its members. The Commission presidency also takes part in crafting EU strategy by virtue of its participation in discussions held by the European Council, a forum of all heads of member states. The Commission, together with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, directs EU foreign relations and, within this framework, relations with Israel. Over the last decade, high level diplomatic ties between Israel and the European Union have been frozen, mainly because of the bloc's firm and consistent censure of Israeli policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After a new government is formed in Israel, it would behoove the Foreign Ministry and the Israeli delegation in Brussels to prepare an agenda for a first meeting between the political leadership of the EU and Israel. This agenda would do well to include an overall statement of intent regarding the Israeli-Palestinian landmine, though it is not the only one challenging relations. Furthermore, Israel should strive to nix, to the extent possible, the conditioning of bilateral ties on progress toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**

With the European Parliament's ratification in late November 2019 of the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen of Germany as President of the European Commission and a team of commissioners, all top EU institutions began functioning fully. The new Commission, like the other EU institutions, will continue to address the challenges facing the European Union in recent years. These include the political, security, and economic implications of Britain's decision to quit the Union; Russia's conduct vis-à-vis countries that were formerly part of the Soviet bloc, and especially its ongoing occupation of parts of Ukraine; the migrant problem throughout the Continent; the deterioration of ties with the United States; and China's economic penetration of Europe. All these must be tackled against a backdrop of political changes within EU countries, led by Angela Merkel's expected retirement from the leadership of Germany and in effect, the leadership of the

European Union, and the strengthening of radical parties in the European Parliament, both right and left wing, at the expense of the two traditionally dominant lists, the Conservatives and the Socialists.

For several years, the European Union has contended with a deep identity crisis. From a small founding group of six West European countries leaning on Germany and France, the organization has burgeoned into 28 countries from all over Europe's geographic and political spectrum. Once Britain withdraws, Germany and France will remain the dominant partners, but their influence is reduced. Franco-German understandings have already eroded in recent years: French President Emmanuel Macron favors reforming and bolstering European institutions, while Merkel resists this. In parallel, some of the new countries brought into the Union have not met its economic standards fully; their admission was in essence a political necessity given their transition from autocratic to democratic rule. Their absorption has unsettled the political decision making process and created a huge economic burden on the developed countries, which have been forced to underwrite their economic rehabilitation.

In a speech to the European Parliament on November 27 upon the Commission's ratification, the newly-appointed President von der Leyen said, "The world needs our leadership more than ever. To keep engaging with the world as a responsible power. To be a force for peace and for positive change," and added that the Union could shape a "better global order." Similarly, Charles Michel, the new President of the European Council, stated on the day he succeeded his predecessor Donald Tusk: "I want Europe to become global leader of the Green Economy with jobs, innovation and a high quality of life...Europe can also stand taller in the world, more self-confident ...The European Union must be at the table for these hard discussions." The vision reflects a lofty ambition, and implementation requires that the European Union overcome internal crises – chief among them Britain's departure, which will increase the budgetary burden on remaining members. The Union will have to extricate itself from disappointing economic growth of recent years – less than 2 percent annually – amid trans-Atlantic tensions and increased defense spending by European partners in NATO, which are mostly EU members. The ambitions of the heads of the main institutions in Brussels will also be challenged by the principle set out in all of the treaties underlying the Union, whereby any decision on matters of foreign affairs and security policy requires unanimous approval, which means that any member state has a veto on decisions that do not match its interests.

The main goals set by Michel and von der Leyen were a green economy, innovation, and strengthened democracy. These are clear domestic issues that reflect an a priori assumption on the part of the new EU leaders that foreign affairs are less important to the

European citizenry. Foreign policy matters remained on the periphery of the discussion, and the Middle East went unmentioned even in the discussion of the need to absorb migrants/refugees on the one hand and to safeguard the external EU borders on the other. It can thus be assumed that EU foreign policy will focus on the European Union's immediate external envelope – mainly Russia and the Balkan countries – in an effort to bolster the southeastern region with a view to reduce the flow of migrants from this area to EU territory. Note that the European Union abandoned an activist vision that was intended to reshape the southeastern Mediterranean basin in its image (Barcelona Process, 1995; European Neighborhood Policy, 2004). And now, like other central players in the international sphere, the European Union is struggling to devise an approach that suits the new reality in the Middle East.

Given the political freeze in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, the rupture between the outgoing leadership of the EU's main institutions and the Israeli leadership has lingered for a decade, while criticism of Israel in this context has only harshened. Steps taken by the US administration – recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are “not per se inconsistent with international law,” and termination of US participation in UNRWA funding – imply negative consequences for the EU approach to Israel. Von der Leyen, in her previous role as German defense minister, had no noticeable involvement in German-Israeli relations and did not take part in meetings between the governments (G to G). Josep Borrell, the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, is a former European Parliament member and Spanish foreign minister highly familiar with the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His positions on the issue reflect those of the Socialist Party, both Spanish and pan-European, which is critical, though not hostile, toward Israel.

In any event, rehabilitating relations between Israel and the EU institutions and their heads, which can be expected to be a protracted process, cannot begin until a new government is installed in Israel. If the core principles of the new Israeli government signal an intention to annex parts of the West Bank, the current frozen relations will continue. However, a new government that makes clear it strives to change the current situation by seeking a resolution predicated on the idea of two states for two peoples may be able to turn a new page in relations. At the same time, the European Union will also have to update its fundamental positions on the conflict and adopt an approach that would countenance progress toward a full resolution in incremental and partial solutions.

After a new government is installed in Israel, it would behoove the Foreign Ministry and the Israeli delegation in Brussels to prepare an agenda for a first highest level meeting. This would ideally include an overall statement of intent to dissolve, to the extent

possible, the conditioning of improved bilateral ties on progress toward a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nor is this matter the only landmine in the relations: with progress in the renewed political dialogue, there will arise a need to consider the disputes between Israel and the European Union on the Iranian nuclear file – even if at this stage it is not clear that Borrell will inherit the role of his two predecessors, Catherine Ashton of Britain and Federica Mogherini of Italy, to conduct negotiations with Iran in the name of the European Union and its three dominant members, Germany, Britain, and France.

The turmoil of the past decade, especially in the Middle East, lend additional importance to renewal of the dialogue between Israel and Europe at the highest levels. The political statecraft agenda of the European Union may have weakened, but this does not warrant Israel ignoring it or preferring to cultivate ties with groups of member states at the expense of ties with the EU main institutions. Such a policy is liable to prove fruitless and shortsighted on the day the European Union adopts a system that would allow a special majority rather than unanimity to carry out decisions on matters of foreign affairs and security policy.