

# Israel, Europe and the Peace Process

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There is a widespread perception in Israel, shared to some extent on both sides of the central political divide, that Europe has constantly tried to push itself into a mediating role in the Arab-Israeli peace process despite the fact that it has very little at stake and very little to offer. As a result, Israel has traditionally tried to exclude the Europeans, or at least to minimize their involvement.

In fact, Israel has generally preferred to pursue peace on a bilateral basis rather than encourage any outside mediation. But when the dangers of stalemate made that impossible, it accepted or even sought American involvement, while consistently rejecting any similar role for Europe. This tendency characterized every Israeli administration. But it was during the three years of the Netanyahu government that expressions of European dissatisfaction and assertive demands for a more prominent role ("to be a player and not just a payer") reached their peak. One manifestation of this was the appointment of Miguel Moratinos as special EU envoy to the Middle East peace process. Ironically, perhaps, it was also during this period that the intensity of American diplomatic mediation reached an unprecedented level, as US officials and diplomats micro-managed negotiations leading to the Hebron Protocol and the Wye River Memorandum. So if the

Europeans have played a secondary if not marginal role in Middle Eastern mediation efforts, this is only in part due to American reluctance to share this role. The major factor has been a strong Israeli disinclination to see Europe involved in this way.

Several considerations explain the Israeli preference for American auspices. Perhaps the most obvious is Israel's resentment of which is seen as a persistent "pro-Arab" posture on the part of Europe, ascribed to Europe's greater dependence on Arab oil and natural gas and on access to the markets of the oil-rich Arab countries. As a result, European policies, at least at the declaratory level, are often more sympathetic to Arab positions and concerns.

Secondly, the different institutional character of the United States makes it easier for Israel to preempt or react when similar, if less pronounced, trends emerge in American policy. Simply put, the United States is a fully coherent political-military entity, an "address" to which positions can be communicated and with which problems can be clarified and perhaps resolved. By contrast, the European Union, for all its progress towards integration, remains an association of sovereign states that have yet to articulate a common foreign and security policy.

The problem of policy coherence and authoritativeness does not, of course,

apply to individual European states. But from Israel's perspective, that constitutes a different kind of disadvantage. The unitary nature of Middle East policy-making in most European states (usually by heads of government and/or foreign ministers, often under the strong influence of the foreign policy bureaucracy) means that Israel has little ability to counteract unfavorable trends or tendencies. The United States, by contrast, has a much more pluralistic foreign policy system, providing more points of access for Israeli input. The executive is more pluralistic. Israel, for example, has been able over the years to cultivate close ties with the US defense establishment. Congress, the media, and public opinion also play a more independent and influential role than do their European counterparts, providing additional and receptive avenues for Israeli influence. Indeed, the multiplicity of contact points, not limited to the American Jewish community, underlies the "special relationship" between Israel and the United States.

Finally, and most importantly, Israel has much greater confidence in the ability and willingness of the United States to assume some responsibility for the risks and possible adverse consequences of Israeli decisions taken as a result of mediation/intervention. The United States has a proven track-



record of direct economic and security assistance to Israel and of indirect assistance in the form of greater assertiveness on security issues of concern to Israel (e.g., terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction). Since the collapse of the Franco-Israeli alliance in the mid-1960s, Europe (with the partial exception of Germany) has inspired little Israeli confidence on this score.

But however valid these reasons may be, they have often been translated into a failure to appreciate European interests, aspirations and capabilities in the region, thereby leading to unnecessary suspicions and considerable underestimation of the European potential to help promote Israeli interests. In the first place, European interest in the peace process is not gratuitous. Geographic proximity means that Europe is directly exposed to the spillover effects of underdevelopment and instability in the Middle East and North Africa, in the form of terrorism, smuggling, illegal immigration, and other sorts of "soft security" threats, as well as the "harder" implications of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range delivery systems. Progress in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is not a sufficient condition for dealing with these threats, but it is arguably a necessary one. Otherwise, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to attack the underlying causes behind these threats – such as the huge gaps between the

north and south of the Mediterranean, and between Israel and its Arab neighbors in such areas as government accountability and material well-being.

Secondly, European positions on the substance of peace agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors do not differ that much from those of the United States – even if they are expressed in more direct and occasionally more provocative ways. Thirdly, the Europeans no longer seek (if they ever did) to supplant the United



States as the prime mediator. No one seriously expects that the Europeans, individually or collectively, can provide the political-military muscle needed to power the peace process forward. Those Arabs who call for more European involvement do so largely in order to prod the United States into greater activism, and even the Europeans themselves speak largely in terms of "complementarity," that is, of supporting or assisting the United States wherever that would be useful. This has already proved useful on

several occasions. France's special relations with Syria and Lebanon, for example, have enabled it to occupy important niches in the areas of conflict management, confidence building, and humanitarian measures. For example, France made noteworthy contributions to the formulation of the understandings that ended the "Grapes of Wrath" Operation in 1996, to the creation and constructive functioning of the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group that has served as a partial safety-valve in south Lebanon since then, and to the arrangements for the return of the bodies of Israeli soldiers.

Finally, even if the potential European contribution to direct mediation is limited, the potential European contribution to the broader infrastructure of peace in the region is great. This is evident in a number of areas. First of all, there is the sheer power of the European example to strengthen the idea that peace, even among historic enemies, is both possible and worthwhile. Secondly, Europe is uniquely placed to encourage experimentation where the Europeans do have a comparative advantage: in the theory and practice of multilateralism. Apart from the European Union itself, there is a host of multilateral agencies – CSCE/OSCE, the Western European Union, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – that could be enlisted to play an even more active role in bringing to Arabs and Israelis some of the mutual benefits of cooperation in advance of peace. In



practice, this translates into an ability to promote and manage the revival of the multilateral negotiations that were meant to encourage movement on the main bilateral tracks. For the same reason, Europe can also encourage the kinds of contacts between Israeli and Arab civil societies that might strengthen the peace agreements already reached and encourage a more conducive atmosphere in which to negotiate those yet to come.

Finally, any agreement reached, whether independently or with the help of outside mediators, needs to be implemented, and contractual peace needs to be sustained and consolidated in both the bilateral and the regional settings. In these dimensions, the United States does not necessarily enjoy a comparative advantage, even from the Israeli perspective. The United States will certainly be called upon to underwrite security arrangements, either alone or as the leading element in any multilateral effort. But Europe can make a major contribution to whatever economic and technical assistance is needed to support peace. The widespread assumption that Europe has greater resources to place at the disposal of peace in the Middle East is not necessarily valid; in general, the American economy has performed better for a prolonged period of time, and this is reflected, *inter alia*, in budget surpluses and unemployment rates. Nevertheless, Europe has already established an impressive record of economic support for the post-Oslo

phase of Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Economic support for the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty has been largely an American preserve. Indeed, Europe has been the largest financial contributor to the Palestinian Authority, and in the course of its aid programs, it has amassed considerable experience in promoting Palestinian institution building. Moreover, its own experience in regional cooperation is an important asset that could be applied in two ways. At the present time, European economic and technical assistance can provide an additional safety net that strengthens the ability of leaders on all sides to show more flexibility. And in the future, such assistance will be essential to cement peace agreements and promote the patterns of regional cooperation, *i.e.*, the web of structural interdependence needed to consolidate formal Arab-Israeli agreements and transform non-belligerency into stable, durable peace.

So far, this potential has barely been exploited. Part of the reason is the sense on the part of some Europeans that such activities, for all their importance, are a mere sideline or preliminary to the main event and that they do not convey the drama or glamor that would properly reflect Europe's political stature in the world. But part of the reason lies in Israeli suspicions that ought to be reexamined. Without a change in the Israeli position, Europe will remain effectively sidelined, and the potential it has to promote changes that essentially serve Israeli interests

will remain unrealized. Moreover, friction over this issue will impede the development of Israel's relations with the European Union, which is already Israel's largest regional trading partner (larger than North America) and represents Israel's most promising economic frontier. Of course, such a reexamination is unlikely without some European effort to gain Israeli confidence. Consequently, Israel and the EU should begin to make a conscious effort to clarify the real differences that do exist, and, perhaps even more urgently, to dispel the misperceptions about differences that do not.

Israel has a number of valid reasons to prefer that the peace proceed largely under American auspices. But even if the potential European contribution to political mediation is limited, the potential European contribution to the broader infrastructure of peacebuilding in the region is great, particularly in sustaining and consolidating agreements reached and in promoting the theory and practice of multilateralism. This potential has not been properly exploited, in large part because of a failure to appreciate European interests, aspirations and capabilities in the region. Europe and Israel should therefore strive to clarify the differences that exist and, even more urgently, dispel the misperceptions about the differences that do not.