

Polarization in the European Union and the Implications for Israel: The Case of the Netherlands

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Results of the European Union parliamentary elections of May 2019 show that European voters are moving away from the center toward the far right and left. This essay uses the case of the Netherlands to illustrate how political polarization influences the position on Israel in both EU discourse and EU politics. While left wing parties are progressively more critical of Israel, the far right has arguably never been closer. Navigating this shifting political landscape across the EU poses several strategic and moral challenges for Israel's politicians, with repercussions for the present and the future. The analysis suggests that the Israeli government incurs a risk by identifying closely with Europe's far right parties due to their controversial character, as this could, in the process, alienate Europe's Jewish communities as well as Europe's center and left wing voters.

Keywords: EU parliamentary elections, EU-Israel relations, Netherlands, polarization, Dutch Jewry, European Jewry

The current decade has seen a significant erosion of support for traditional, centrist parties across the EU, leading to more votes for previously marginal parties on the left and far right. This essay uses the case of the Netherlands to explore how the shifting political landscape influences both the current Dutch and EU positions on Israel, and the future implications of these changes. In recent years, several member states have seen the establishment and election of entirely new parties. On the European far right, relative newcomers such as the AfD in Germany and the FvD in the Netherlands

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are united by their goal of reducing globalism, leaving the European Union, halting immigration, and returning to nationalism. On the left, Dutch parties such as BIJ1 and DENK run on a platform of supporting multi-culturalism and ethnic minorities. Given the polarization of the political debate, these new far right and left wing parties have become part of the mainstream and increasingly dominate political and public discourse. Due to their newfound prominence in the EU's national and union-wide politics, Israeli policymakers can no longer ignore these parties, and engaging with them poses a significant challenge that carries long term implications.

Israel and the Netherlands: A History of Good Relations

Although in recent years Israel has become a divisive topic in Dutch politics, historically, the Netherlands was one of Israel's most ardent supporters in Europe. After Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, the Netherlands formally and de jure recognized the new state in 1949,¹ and it was the first and only Western country to send its diplomatic representation to Jerusalem instead of Tel Aviv.² At the same time, most Western powers had many other diverging interests in the Middle East. The British were allied with Egypt during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, causing Anglo-Israeli tensions to rise. The United States was initially pro-Israel, but the Suez crisis of 1956 soured these relations. The French were pro-Israel until President Charles de Gaulle changed course and imposed an arms embargo on the country just before the Six Day War. The Netherlands, by contrast, had very few other interests in the Middle East, and the Dutch could relate to Israel: a small country surrounded by much larger, aggressive neighbors. This was, after all, only a few years after the Netherlands was invaded and occupied by Germany. When the European Economic Community, the precursor of the EU, proposed a declaration demanding that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories in 1973, the Netherlands vetoed it, putting the country at odds with its European neighbors.

There are three main reasons why the Netherlands was Israel's most supportive European ally during the first decades of Israeli independence. First, the PvdA (the Dutch Labor Party), at the time one of the Netherlands' most popular parties, was an ardent admirer of Israel's socialist ideals and supported Israel wholeheartedly.³ Second, Christian parties held a dominant position, and traditionally these parties have been outspokenly pro-Israel due, among other reasons, to Christians' emotional and religious ties to the land of Israel. Third, the Netherlands was pursuing a policy of

Atlanticism, pivoting toward the US and away from France and the UK. This intensification of relations with the US would see the Netherlands cooperate with the US in supporting Israel on several occasions.

However, the political landscape in the Netherlands has changed over the past decades, and a favorable Dutch attitude toward Israel is no longer self-evident. Dutch support for Israel has moved from tacit and broad-based among the general population to more vocal, niche-based, and focused on the right of the political spectrum.

Dutch Contemporary Political Parties and Israel

Despite the current polarized landscape with respect to the Israel debate, the Netherlands and Israel continue to enjoy good relations. The two countries trade extensively: the Netherlands was Israel's most important export market in the EU in 2006-2009,⁴ and both countries are world leaders in fields such as water technology and agriculture and enjoy considerable cooperation between them.⁵ However, despite these good relations, criticism of Israel is on the rise, and when the EU voted on the possible recognition of Palestinian statehood in 2014, more than half of Dutch parties voted in favor.⁶ Not surprisingly, support for Palestinian statehood came mostly from the left: the Socialist Party, the Labor Party, the Greens, BIJ1, and DENK. Parties that voted overwhelmingly against recognition were on the right: from the conservative Christian party SGP to the far right PVV and FvD.

Due to the increasing erosion of the center parties, the Dutch stance toward Israel is more fragmented. This has caused the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to become a heated, controversial topic in Dutch politics and society. For years, the main square of Amsterdam has been the backdrop of weekly protests in favor of a Palestinian state, organized by pro-Palestinian demonstrators. Recently, a group of Israel supporters has staged counter-protests, giving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more exposure in political and societal discourse. In another recent public display of "pro-Palestine versus pro-Israel," a Dutch woman chastised the supermarket chain Hema on Twitter for selling Efrat wine under an Israeli label, although, she wrote, it comes from the territories. Interestingly, this led to a shopping craze for the wine, causing it to sell out within hours due to pro-Israel advocates engaging with the campaign and buying the wine en masse. These two recent examples show that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become progressively more visible on a societal level, with the Dutch becoming more divided on the issue. Politically, these diverging positions can be

observed in the voting patterns of the parties, as illustrated by the EU-vote on Palestinian statehood, with centrist parties seen to switch sides on a case-by-case basis.

Dutch political parties can roughly be divided into three groups: the supportive far right, the critical left, and the largely neutral center.

The Far Right and its Support for Israel

The two main far right parties in Dutch politics are the PVV and FvD. Geert Wilders, a controversial politician within and outside of the Netherlands, established the PVV in 2006. He gained notoriety due to his anti-Muslim rhetoric, and in 2016 he was convicted of inciting discrimination based on hate speech.⁷ Nonetheless, his party was the second largest in the Dutch national elections of 2017, mostly due to a strong stance on immigration.⁸ The FvD, headed by Thierry Baudet, was founded in 2017 and has many parallels with the PVV; it is tough on (non-Western) immigration and advocates leaving the EU and returning to nationalism and “self-determination.” During the local elections of March 2019, the FvD became the largest party despite having only been in existence for two years. The party is unapologetically outspoken in its support for Israel, citing shared Judeo-Christian values and a fear of Islamization as the main reasons.

Despite the fact that both parties are passionately pro-Israel, they have come under scrutiny for using anti-Semitic rhetoric and tropes. In late 2018, *De Volkskrant*, one of the main Dutch newspapers, published a lengthy report on the increasing presence of anti-Semitism in online forums and groups linked to the FvD and its supporters.⁹ Similarly, research commissioned by the Amsterdam-based Anne Frank Institute has shown that both the PVV and FvD are linked to anti-Semitic and otherwise xenophobic conspiracy theories.¹⁰ This dichotomy poses a challenge for Israel and its politicians; while on the one hand these parties can be regarded as natural allies due to their pro-Israel stance, their failure to tackle anti-Semitism and other types of xenophobia poses problems and puts them at odds with local Jewish communities.¹¹ Accepting and encouraging support from Europe’s far right risks tarnishing Israel’s reputation among moderate Dutch and European voters, as well as with the local Jewish communities. Parallels can be drawn with the current situation in the US, where Trump’s support and praise for Israel goes hand-in-hand with more vocal criticism of Israel from within the Democratic Party.

The Left and its Criticism of Israel

While in Israel's first decades of independence the biggest party on the left, the Dutch Labor Party, was a staunch supporter of the Jewish state, this changed toward the end of the 20th century, and for several reasons: Israel became stronger in military and economic terms and was no longer perceived as the underdog; Israel's society slowly moved from socialist ideals toward a closer embrace of capitalism; Dutch society secularized rapidly, and firmly traditional Christians – who are generally more supportive of Israel – declined in numbers. Toward the late 20th century the Dutch Labor Party began a slow but steady decline and went from being a broad-based party, with approximately 30 percent of the votes in the 1980s, to a much smaller party on the left, with a mere 6 percent of votes in 2017. The majority of the party's supporters ultimately switched to the VVD (Conservative-Liberal), which is currently the biggest party.¹² What this means is that the remainder of the Labor Party is more leftist than before and more critical of Israel. The other main parties on the left are GroenLinks (the Greens) and the Socialist Party (SP), which are all outspoken in their criticism of Israel. To illustrate the current left's criticism of Israel, one merely needs to observe their voting records: all three parties voted in favor of the recognition of a Palestinian state and against the adoption of the internationally recognized IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in 2018.¹³ The reason they did not agree with the IHRA definition is that they believe that criticism of the Israeli state would be branded "anti-Semitic" under the definition.

The left's critical stance toward Israel also has to do with the changing demographics in the Netherlands. Due to immigration patterns of the past decades, around 5 percent of Dutch citizens have a Muslim background, with mostly Moroccan and Turkish roots. An analysis of voting patterns among Dutch Muslim citizens in 2012 showed that a mere 7 percent voted for a party on the right, while 72 percent of respondents voted for one of the leftist parties.¹⁴ For a host of reasons, Dutch Muslims feel a strong connection with the Palestinians and are more vocal in their opposition to Israel. This opposition to Israel can trickle down to some of the left wing parties' politics and policies. As demonstrated by the British Labor Party, the left's opposition to Israel can border or double as anti-Semitism.

On a societal level, research by the Dutch foundation CIDI notes a 71 percent increase in reported anti-Semitic incidents in 2014, likely in response to the Israel-Gaza conflict.¹⁵ This shows that to a certain extent anti-Semitism in the Netherlands – and the wider EU – and the political

situation in Israel are linked. Furthermore, a report by the Anne Frank Foundation has shown that there is a correlation between the level to which Dutch Muslims identify with their religion and how negative their perception is of Jewish Israelis, the Israeli government, and Zionists.¹⁶ In March 2019, the German Agency for Domestic Security released a report on Muslim anti-Semitism in the country, showing that German Muslims are overrepresented in anti-Semitic acts, and the right wing no longer holds a monopoly on anti-Semitism.¹⁷ Whereas Dutch and European Jews historically voted predominantly for left wing parties,¹⁸ the left's failure to tackle anti-Semitism has estranged Jewish voters, many of whom now vote for more center or even center-right parties.¹⁹

The Center and its Case-by-Case Position on Israel

The center consists of several Christian parties (CDA, CU), the Liberal Democrats (D66), and the conservative liberal (VVD) party, the party of the current Prime Minister. In the 80s and 90s, the CDA, VVD, and the more center-left Labor Party (PvdA) would regularly represent 80-85 percent of all votes, whereas in 2017, these three parties together accounted for a mere 40 percent of the vote. In other words, the (broad) center has declined by more than half in favor of more extreme parties on both the left (the Greens, the Socialist Party) and the right (PVV, FvD).²⁰ The position of these centrist parties toward Israel is harder to predict. Concerning the 2018 vote on the adoption of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and the recognition of Palestinian statehood, some of the centrist parties voted not to recognize either Palestinian statehood or the IHRA-definition of anti-Semitism. Others voted to recognize both the IHRA-definition and Palestinian statehood, thereby creating a situation in which the parties voted both for and against Israel. Europe's Jewish voters are increasingly abandoning the left in favor of the center-right, a trend that can be observed in the Netherlands as well. In the last national election of 2017, around 45 percent of Dutch Jews voted for a center-right party.²¹

While the center has lost many voters overall, in absolute numbers centrist parties still constitute a majority. However, according to data by the market research organization IPSOS, a growing gap in voting patterns is starting to emerge between generations. Older generations are more likely to vote for traditional, centrist parties, while younger voters are overrepresented in both the left and right wing parties.²² Younger voters, who are apparently more divided and more disillusioned with traditional

parties, land on two opposing sides of the political spectrum – and of the Israel debate. Consequently, Dutch support for Israel risks becoming more unpredictable in the future.

Parallels with the Broader EU

Since political parties across the EU also form part of the alliances in the EU parliament, their stance toward Israel will influence politics and policies on both a national and EU level. As the European parliamentary elections of late May 2019 showed, the trend of an eroding center in favor of the left and right is an EU-wide phenomenon. For the first time in over forty years, the parliamentary groups that represented the center lost their majority in the EU parliament, while support for far right and (Green) left wing parties surged.²³ Researchers have shown that EU member states can also be divided into three groups based on their voting records with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁴ The group of countries that is most aligned with the Israeli government are primarily in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Poland, and Romania, as well as Austria and Greece. The countries most critical are primarily West European such as Sweden, Ireland, France, and Denmark. The countries in the third category, called “balancers” – including Italy, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands – have tried to maintain a middle position, at times acting as a bridge within the EU.

Internally, then, the EU is divided in its approach to Israel. Similar to the domestic Dutch situation, these diverging positions on Israel are bound to become more pronounced with a larger far right and left party presence in the EU parliament. Although a possible increase in support from right wing parties in the EU parliament could be beneficial for Israel, this might be offset by a more passionately critical group of counter-supporters from the left. Although the far right has made huge electoral gains over the past decade, many of their politicians and parties remain controversial among the general public, including Europe’s Jewish communities.²⁵ This situation is not unlike the US example of the Democrats’ increasing opposition to warm relations between Israel and the Trump administration.

Conclusion

As both the domestic situation in the Netherlands and the EU parliamentary elections have shown, the traditional center parties have lost their dominance, and the political landscape across the EU has become more fragmented and polarized. The erosion of the center in favor of the left and far right has several

consequences for Israel's position in Dutch and EU-wide politics, as well as among local Jewish communities. Regarding the far right, their supportive stance toward Israel could make them a natural ally of the Israeli government, but this could arguably have negative longer term consequences for Israel, on both the strategic and the moral level. Strategically, legitimizing the far right by accepting its support leads to a further alienation of Europe's left, a particular danger given demographic trends on the continent. Morally, engaging with parties that are overwhelmingly shunned by Europe's Jewish communities can lead to a deterioration of Israel-diaspora relations, which puts a central component of Israel's vocal support in jeopardy. Israeli politicians might therefore do well to consult with local Jewish communities and take their concerns and recommendations into consideration. Unlike the far right, Europe's left has become increasingly critical of Israel, showing broad based support for the Palestinian cause. As seen in both Dutch and EU elections, the (far) left was able to increase its share of votes and seats in government significantly. Israeli political leaders should therefore consider how they might reengage with left wing parties in the West, potentially basing this cooperation and reengagement on non-ideological similarities such as environmentalism, democracy, and LGBT rights.

Notes

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