

Relations between Israel and the Czech Republic: From Sentiment to Pragmatism?

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Relations between the EU and Israel are currently marked by growing misgivings. On both sides, a lack of trust and different perspectives concerning the realities in the Middle East seem to be the main obstacles to a deeper relationship. Yet on a bilateral level Israel has a very strong relation with some EU countries, and these countries play an important role in balancing EU countries that promote rather one-sided anti-Israeli positions. One of the most Israel-friendly countries is the Czech Republic. Not always definitive in its foreign affairs, the Czech support for Israel remains one of the few stable features of its foreign policy. Czech politicians repeatedly support Israel when it faces strong international pressure and criticism. Diplomats, both in the Czech Republic and Israel, consider the mutual relations to be strong and friendly; the Czech diplomats would not hesitate to call them special.

This article analyzes the importance of strong Israel-Czech relations from the Israeli perspective; the roots of the Czech “special relationship” with Israel; and the future of Israel-Czech relations.¹

Israel-Czech Relations

Notwithstanding existing animosities, relations with Europe are important for Israel. Economic, scientific, and cultural relations between them flourish, even as the political cooperation is marked by distrust and frequent misunderstanding on both sides. Nonetheless, there is a group of countries that do not universally embrace critical positions toward Israel.

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These countries prevent the EU from adopting policies that could have a significantly negative impact on Israel and resist an attempt to delegitimize Israel in international organizations, or via the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement. Active in this group is the Czech Republic. Similarly, in the United Nations, the Czechs generally vote against resolutions that single out Israel.

In Israel, the Czech Republic evokes primarily positive connotations. In the minds of Israelis, and certainly in comparison to other Central and East European countries, it is not connected with the Holocaust. The Czech nation is considered friendly toward both Israel and Jews. Israel's intellectual elite is familiar with the name of the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, for whom streets, squares, and cafes in major Israeli cities are named. Among the older generation of Israelis the term "Czech rifle" still resonates, as they remember the Czech military assistance that contributed to Israel's victory in the War of Independence. Václav Havel, leader of the Velvet Revolution and the first Czechoslovak post-Communist president, was also a popular figure in Israel after 1989.

Even during the Communist era, when Czechoslovakia adopted an anti-Zionist position, there was an understanding in Israel that this position was taken under the pressure of Moscow, to which Czechoslovakia, as a Soviet satellite, was subject since the late 1940s. Consequently, Israelis were very emotional about the Prague Spring in the 1960s, during which they hoped Czechoslovakia would be able to free itself from the Soviet tutelage. After the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact ended these hopes, legendary singer Arik Einstein composed a song "Prague," which became a hit in Israel.

The Elements behind the "Special Relations"

While the positive Czech approach toward Israel is rooted in a series of mutually reinforcing factors, it is the historical legacy that largely defines the Czech position. The pro-Zionist approach of key Czech (Slovak) leaders and the trauma of the Munich Agreement are two notable elements in the Czech history that represent the formative experience influencing the Czech perspective. Combined with its non-colonial past and Communist heritage, history is thus the key for understanding the Czech position. This stance is bolstered by pragmatic factors, among them economic interests and a common security threat perception.

History

In Czech lands, Jews and non-Jews coexisted relatively well.² The Czech Jews were usually highly assimilated and were an integral part of the business, cultural, and scientific elite of Czechoslovakia. Intellectual philo-Semitism was quite strong and influential among the Czechoslovak leadership of the First Republic (from 1918 until WW II). The first Czechoslovak president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, was a strong supporter of Zionism and was the first head of state who, in 1927, at the age of 77, visited the Jewish state in the making.

From the end of WWII until the Communist coup in 1948, Czechoslovakia was able to practice rather independent foreign policy. Under the foreign minister Jan Masaryk, son of the first president, Czechoslovakia supported the division of Palestine in the UN and recognized the State of Israel on May 19, 1948. The diplomatic support to the new state was accompanied by military aid. Despite the international embargo, Czechoslovakia sold the state, both before and after its independence, rifles, machine guns, ammunition, and Avia S-199 and Spitfire aircraft. Israeli pilots, among them future president Ezer Weizmann, as well as military technicians, were trained in Czechoslovakia.

After 1948, Czechoslovakia began to adopt the Soviet approach in its relations toward both Jews and Israel. As in the USSR of the 1930s, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia staged trials against “disloyal” members of the party. Jewish defendants, among others, were accused of a Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy, thus underlining an anti-Semitic element of the trials. In reaction to the anti-Semitic character of the 1952 Slansky trial,³ Israel recalled its ambassador; Czechoslovakia had done so already the previous year.

The process of de-Stalinization reached its peak in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s. The disagreement with the official authorities over its anti-Israeli position became part of the protest against the Communist regime. Especially after the Israeli military victory in the Six Day War, many Czechs did not hide their admiration for the Jewish state. Indeed, the fact that in reaction to the Six Day War Czechoslovakia cut off its diplomatic relations with Israel proved to many that notwithstanding the partial liberalization, the Czechoslovak Communists leadership still closely followed the Soviet doctrine.

After the Prague Spring was crushed in 1968, Czechoslovakia remained hostile toward Israel. It supported the UN resolution in 1975 that equated

Zionism with racism. The Czechoslovak Communist regime also maintained close relations with the PLO, which maintained an official representative office in Prague since 1976. Yasir Arafat was a frequent guest of the Czechoslovak Communist leaders.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 opened a new chapter in Czechoslovak-Israeli relations. In his New Year Address President Václav Havel expressed his desire to renew diplomatic relations with Israel. The restoration of relations, which occurred in February 1990, was a clear expression of the Czechoslovak foreign policy free of the Soviet control.

Identification with Israel

Czechs tend to see some historical parallels between the Czech and Israeli situations. The trauma of the Munich Agreement of 1938 remains the formative experience influencing the Czech understanding of the Israeli position. The fact that Great Britain and France betrayed a small state in the middle of Europe in order to placate an aggressive Nazi regime left the Czechs with a bitter feeling of abandonment. Many Czechs understand the Israeli doubts and skepticism when advised by friends and foes to cede control over territory in order to reach a lasting peace. The Czech diplomats also recognize that it is the legacy of Munich that consciously or subconsciously prevents them from joining those who see a clear connection between the lack of peace in the region with an Israeli presence outside of the Green Line. They do not want to be a partner to a policy that was so detrimental to the Czechs.⁴

Many Czechs, including the intellectuals, see Israel as a democratic island surrounded by a sea of instability and oppression. The ability to defend itself against the more powerful enemies strengthened the popularity and admiration of Israel among Czechs who live with the trauma of surrender, first to the Nazi occupation and later, during the Prague Spring, to the armies of the Warsaw Pact. Israel's readiness to protect its territory and its emphasis on self-reliance is not, as is often in Western Europe, interpreted as aggression and stubbornness, but is understood by Czechs. The fact that in the first Arab-Israeli war Czech arms contributed to the survival of Israel even strengthens these sympathies.

Non-Colonial Past and Communist Heritage

Lacking a colonial past, historically the Czechs do not have "special relations" with any of the Arab countries of the Middle East. Moreover, though

because of its Communist past Czechoslovakia had no choice but to conduct friendly relations with the Arab authoritarian countries, the Czechs are not sentimental about the Arab world. They are quite realistic when assessing the events in the region. For example, during the Arab Spring, many Czech politicians and commentators refused to compare it with Eastern Europe of the early 1990s. They also warned against overly optimistic predictions concerning the quick democratization of the Middle East.

The Communist experience has left a significant impact on Czech intellectuals. Whereas in most of the Western universities and media concepts such as post-colonialism, post-nationalism, and multilateralism dominate the discussion and left-leaning intellectuals prevail, the situation in the Czech Republic is still rather different. Czech intellectuals are often quite conservative in their world view, less prone to adopt the postmodern and relativist positions of their Western colleagues. As such, many of them understand and respect the willingness of Israelis to use force when protecting the country's security and sovereignty and refuse what is often hypocritical pacifism of their Western colleagues.

Foreign Policy Stances

After the fall of Communism, one of the main goals of Czechoslovak and later Czech foreign policy became membership in the Western security, economic, and political structures. A pro-Atlantic position was not only a strategic choice, but a natural reaction to forty years during which Czechoslovakia lived in the Soviet sphere of influence. Reflecting on its historical experience, it was the US, rather than the West European countries, that was the preferred source for security guarantees not only of the Czech Republic, but of the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe. Part of this pro-US position was a friendly stance toward Israel. Notwithstanding the desire to join the EU, the Czech Republic has always been considered to be rather Euro-skeptic. The critical approach toward Brussels is especially strong among some in the center-right and conservative spectrum of the Czech politics. As the anti-Israeli position in EU institutions grows, this Euro-skepticism is also a factor for the Czech distinctive position within the EU.

Economic Interest

Israel is the Czech Republic's sixth largest export market outside the EU, and since 1993 the trade between the two countries has risen almost consistently. The Czech economy profits from Israeli investments as well

as tourism.⁵ The Czech Republic also faces the challenge of transforming its heavy industry-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. Israel, with its developed hi-tech sector and experience in successfully translating the results from primary research into practice, is seen by many Czech scientists, hi-tech experts, and businesspeople as a very positive model.

Fight against Terrorism

In the Czech Republic Islamic terrorism is considered one of the major threats to domestic security as well as to international security.⁶ As a member of NATO and the EU; a dispatcher of soldiers to Afghanistan; a host of the US-financed Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which broadcasts to many Muslim countries; and a state with strong relations with both the US and Israel, the Czech Republic is a potential target for terrorism. Israel is seen by many as a frontline where Western culture collides with radical Islam. The Israeli and the Czech interests in fighting radicalism emanating from the Middle East are therefore seen as identical.

Small Muslim Community

The Czech Muslim community is small and not significantly engaged politically, and does not represent a voting factor. Many Muslims who live in the Czech Republic came as students in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the Soviet-sponsored program of cooperation among the socialistic countries. Most of those who stayed married Czech citizens. Another group is represented by those from Muslim countries who currently study at Czech universities, yet their number is very small and most do not promote radical Islam.⁷ Moreover, these Muslims often do come not from the Middle East, but from the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Lack of Support for anti-Israeli Initiatives

Activities familiar in West European countries, among them BDS – often supported by both leftist and Muslim students – are almost non-existent in the Czech Republic. Even among students, the anti-Israeli activities promoted by Czech branches of notoriously anti-Israeli NGOs⁸ did not command significant support. This can be explained not only by the small number of politically active Muslims, but also by a lack of enthusiasm among the Czechs to support activities of this kind. A generally negative approach by Czechs toward Arabs/Muslims contributes to a lack of public support of anti-Israeli initiatives.

Legacy of the Holocaust

Czechs were not active instigators of the destruction of the Jewish nation in Europe, but the tragic fate of Czech and European Jewry is a factor that contributed to the positive approach of the Czechs toward the Jewish state. For many it has been a moral duty to support the nation, which was almost destroyed during WWII. Even today, when there are only a small number of those who witnessed the events, Holocaust remembrance and memorial books that remember the Czech Jews who were murdered during WWII are part of Czech culture and education.

Bilateral and Multilateral Forums

An example of good relations is the series of meetings among the Israeli and Czech high level officials. Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Prague in 2011 and in 2013, and Czech President Zeman went to Israel shortly after being elected to office in 2013. In 2014 Czech Prime Minister Zaorálek visited Israel, and a presidential visit by Reuven Rivlin was planned for late 2015. In 2012, 2013, and 2014 the Israel-Czech government summits took place both in Prague and in Jerusalem. Prague is also a popular venue for public as well as private meetings and conferences that aim to promote discussion and cooperation among Middle East countries. As much as the Czech Republic cannot and does not aspire to be a key moderator in the Middle East conflict, the long term interests of Czechs to be involved in this backstage diplomatic effort is acknowledged by both the Israelis as well as the Arabs.

Examples of the Czech Positions

Over the last decade, Czech diplomacy took positions toward some events in the Middle East that were in clear contrast with EU mainstream opinion. Among the staunchest supporters of Israel is Czech President Miloš Zeman, who, notwithstanding his social-democratic affiliation, became known for a hawkish position when addressing topics related to the Middle East, especially Islamic terrorism. He raised attention already during his visit as Prime Minister in 2002 when he compared Arafat to Hitler and Palestinians with Sudeten Germans, who by supporting the Nazi regime in large numbers in the 1930s played an active part in the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1938.

Operation Cast Lead took place in Gaza during the Czech presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2009. In the context of the Czech

presidency, a neutral position calling for an immediate ceasefire would be considered an appropriate reaction for Czech diplomacy. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister's spokesperson stated that in the context of the latest developments, Cast Lead cannot be seen as an offensive, but rather as a defensive action.⁹ Similarly in 2006, Czechs did not join the majority of the EU countries, which condemned Israel's offensive against Hizbollah in Lebanon. The Czech position toward the *Mavi Marmara* affair in 2010 was also different from that of many other European countries. Přemysl Sobotka, head of the Senate, the second chamber of the Parliament, said that to send the ships to Gaza was a provocation, and he recognized the right of Israel to act against Hamas, including in the blockade of Gaza.

The latest example of the non-EU mainstream position was the Czech "no" in the UN vote on an upgrade of Palestine to a nonmember observer state. The Czech position was, however, strongly influenced by the dynamic within the EU. The Czechs first agreed to join the other EU member states and to abstain. Once it became clear that there were countries that wanted to break this unity and vote in favor of the proposal, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg, exasperated that the member states could not agree on a united position, chose to balance the countries, which decided to vote in favor. Officially, the Czech diplomacy defended its position on the pretext that it supported the direct negotiations rather than diplomatic initiatives taken by one side of the conflict. The real motivation, however, seemed to be to balance the anti-Israeli position within the EU.

The Future of Czech-Israel Relations

Both Israeli as well as Czech diplomats agree that the current relations are not balanced. Whereas for the Czechs the strong pro-Israeli affiliation is partially based on rationalism, more important is the sentimental feeling that reflects values and historical experience. The practical results stemming from the friendly relations toward Israel are less important. For the Israelis, pragmatism and realism define their relations toward the Czechs. The Czech Republic is important as a friendly country in a rather unfriendly international environment.

The Czech diplomats are somewhat frustrated in not receiving even symbolic gratitude from Israel. They do not expect a reciprocal level of affection or anything specific in return, but they would appreciate that the Israelis not take the Czech position for granted.¹⁰ One of the examples of a lack of sensitivity from the Israeli side was the low-level official delegation

sent to the funeral of President Václav Havel, who remained active in a struggle against the delegitimization of Israel even after he left the office.¹¹ A sign that Israel is now paying more attention to the relations with the Czech Republic was the visit of Benjamin Netanyahu after the Czech “no” vote in the UN, as well as reception of the participants of the Israel-Czech Forum by President Shimon Peres in 2013.

Europeanization?

Czech diplomacy is becoming increasingly Europeanized, as diplomats and political leaders are exposed more and more to mainstream EU positions and opinions. In the long term, it may become less convenient for the Czechs to espouse positions that remove them from the majority. Especially Czech Social Democrats, inspired by West European leftist parties, may start to adopt rather critical positions toward Israel.

However, as proved by recent events, this process may take longer and may not be straightforward. After the electoral victory in 2013, new Social Democratic foreign minister Zaorálek assigned the important post of first deputy to Petr Drulák, an international relations theorist and a well-known critic of some of the basic pillars of the Czech foreign policy of the last decade.¹² It took only a little bit more than one year until Drulák, who as a deputy minister openly questioned Václav Havel’s legacy in the Czech foreign policy – which included strong Atlanticism and special relations with Israel – was relegated to a less prominent position of political secretary.¹³ Instead, the young cohort of Social Democrats took over the positions of the deputies at the Foreign Ministry. Being in their thirties, they not only lack experience, but also well-defined foreign policy positions. As such, they seem to be much less willing to challenge the existing foreign policy orientation.

The best example of the prevalent status quo in the Czech foreign policy is the new “Foreign Policy Strategy.”¹⁴ Drulák’s suggested innovations did not pass the scrutiny of the Office of the Prime Minister and of other ministries, and the document, approved by the Czech government in July 2015, does not suggest any major shifts in Czech foreign policy. It stresses that the strategic partnership with Israel, characterized by joint meetings of Czech and Israeli governments, and cooperation in the fields of science, research, investments, security, economy, and culture, remain the Czech policy priority.

There may be another possible reason for the endurance of the Czech pro-Israeli stance. After the departure of Václav Havel, the international reputation of the Czech Republic weakened considerably. On the diplomatic level the Czech Republic is searching – without much success – for a topic that would help distinguish it from other European middle-sized countries. Support for Tibet and dissidents in authoritarian regimes, promoted by Havel, somehow dissipated under the new generation of political leaders. As suggested by an Israeli diplomat, it is the strategic relations with Israel that make Czech diplomacy special.¹⁵ Particularly on the EU level, only few countries have such a close relationship with Israel.

Israel's Course and Strategy

To what extent the pro-Israeli coalition within the EU will remain strong also depends on Israeli policies. Should the nationalist-religious-pro-settlement trends in the Israeli politics dominate the political arena, the European countries with a strong positive approach toward Israel will find it hard to maintain their positions. These countries may start to distance themselves from Israeli policies. This trend is already apparent in the case of Germany. Without an Israeli policy that aims to reach some sort of settlement with the Palestinians, ideally a two-state solution, the Czech determination to at least slow down the process of increasing criticism of Israel in the EU may start to wane.

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Czech diplomats would also find it helpful were the Israeli positions toward the EU better defined.¹⁶ Israel often does not pay not enough attention to the processes underway in the EU when Middle East positions and policies are formulated. This reflects Israeli frustration with the EU – which is considered overly biased – and Israel's consequent loss of interest in investing too much energy in the mutual relations. As much as the Czechs understand this frustration, unclear Israeli positions concerning certain EU policies complicates their job. In some cases it is not apparent to the Czech diplomats to what extent they should be active in seeking changes

in the proposed policies and statements, if even Israel is not clear about its position.

Finally, historical experience on both Israeli and Czech sides is an important factor for the mutual understanding and trust. Yet for the new generations of Israelis, terms like the “Czech rifle” or Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk are largely unknown. Similarly on the Czech side, the post-Communist generation is more exposed to West European values, including the post-nationalist and post-modern ones. Different experience and values will present a challenge for the future of Czech-Israeli relations.

Conclusion

Czech-Israeli relations remain friendly and strong. For Israel, the main value of this relationship is stable support of the Czech Republic within international institutions. This support is important especially within the EU, where the anti-Israeli sentiments are growing. The Czechs seem to understand the Israeli position and perspective better, thanks to their historical experience, interests, values, and partially idealism.

Nonetheless, this empathy and affiliation may weaken in the future. With the generational change, some of the sentiments will fade. Therefore, for the relations between the two countries to remain strong, they must be grounded in a more practical, pragmatic base. Economic cooperation and a share of know-how should be the building blocks for durable relations. The conditions for solid mutual cooperation in various fields are already in place. Practical cooperation, together with the positive approach of Czechs toward Israel, would be the best assurance for the long term duration of the close relations.

At the same time, the depth of the mutual relations also depends on the policy of the State of Israel. If its policies lead the country to international isolation, it will be increasingly hard for the Czech Republic to maintain its existing diplomatic line. The future Czech position toward Israel can be expected to be more rational, rather than idealistic. Nonetheless, since great potential for cooperation on different levels exists between Israel and the Czech Republic, both countries should be interested in maintaining strong relations for the future.

Notes

- 1 For this paper, I conducted interviews with current and former diplomats and Ministry of Foreign Affairs figures, both in Israel and the Czech Republic. I spoke with the ambassadors, attachés, deputy ministers, directors general, heads of departments, and desk officers. We agreed

- that they would not be quoted in this paper, which enabled them to speak more openly. In addition, this paper draws from interviews and analyses presented in the unpublished study by Jan Fingerland, *Israel and the Czech Republic* (2008).
- 2 The short historical overview is based mainly on the following books: Moshe Yegar, *Czechoslovakia, Zionism, and Israel: Shifts and Turns in Complex Relations* (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1997); Petr Zidek and Petr a Karel Sieber, *Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in Years 1945-1989* (Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2009); and Miloš Pojar, *Israel* (Prague: Libri, 2009).
 - 3 The Slansky trial included two Israeli witnesses, Shimon Orenstein and Moredechai Oren, a leader of Mapam. His sentence to 15 years by the Czechoslovak Communist regime caused a deep shock among the Israeli left.
 - 4 Interviews at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013.
 - 5 "Summary of Territorial Information Israel," Czech Embassy, Tel Aviv, April 1, 2014 (Czech), <http://www.cisok.cz/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/STI-aktualizace-%C4%8Derven-2014.pdf>.
 - 6 Czech Security Information Service, *Annual Report 2012*, January 15, 2014 (Czech), <http://www.bis.cz/n/2013-11-07-vyrocn-zprava-2012.html>.
 - 7 Ibid.
 - 8 International Solidarity Movement, <https://www.facebook.com/ismcz>.
 - 9 "Israel Launched a Ground Offensive in Gaza, Mobilizes Reservists," *Novinky.cz*, January 3, 2009 (Czech), <http://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/blizky-a-stredni-vychod/157920-izrael-zahajil-pozemni-utok-na-gazu-mobilizuje-zalozniky.html>.
 - 10 Interviews at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013.
 - 11 "Havel will Participate in Campaign against Boycott of Israeli Goods," *IDnes.cz*, September 14, 2010 (Czech) http://zpravy.idnes.cz/havel-se-zapoji-do-kampane-proti-bojkotum-izraelskeho-zbozi-pl4-zahranicni.aspx?c=A100914_074421_zahranicni_aha.
 - 12 "Havel's Politics was Wrong and Harmful, Claims the Czech Diplomat," *Lidovky.cz*, May 30, 2014 (Czech), http://www.lidovky.cz/havlova-politika-byla-chybna-a-skodлива-fci-zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A140530_111312_In_domov_jzl.
 - 13 "Drulák Ends as the Deputy Minister. He will Become a Secretary," *Lidovky.cz*, July 1, 2015 (Czech), http://www.lidovky.cz/drulak-konci-ve-funkci-namestka-ministra-zahranicni-bude-tajemnikem-1fp-zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A150701_111918_In_domov_ELE.
 - 14 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Policy Strategy," July 13, 2015 (Czech), http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/analyzy_a_koncepce/koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_cr.html.
 - 15 Interview in Prague, September 2015.
 - 16 Interviews at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013.