

EU-Israel relations in the Trump era

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EU Israeli relations have seen multiple tensions in the last decade. If one were to create a simple diagram depicting these relations, it would have to include at least three variables – volume of trade, the Iranian nuclear issue (and Iran-related affairs more generally), and of course the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Trade line would run freely and smoothly across the entire X axis, depicting a steady if minor growth in bilateral trade. The Iran-line would demonstrate dozens of slumps, some deeper than others. The Israeli-Palestinian depiction would have to be broken in so many points that it could hardly qualify as a contiguous line.

Such were already the circumstances before trump’s surprising upset of the 2016 US Presidential elections. In fact, an attempt to draw a similar diagram of US-Israel relations would not have yielded a dissimilar picture. The level of discord between the Obama and Netanyahu governments was sometimes higher than that of Israel and EU leadership. But the fundamentals of the Strategic US-Israel relations served to cushion it through that difficult period. As if by divine intervention, Netanyahu’s ultra-risky gamble on Trump during the 2016 campaign paid off, and any disharmony between the new American and the old Israeli administrations has since been virtually nonexistent. In Parallel, US-EU relations have suffered an arguably unprecedented deterioration and an all but total loss of mutual trust between top leaderships. The Transatlantic alliance has been called into question for the first time since World War II, and the depth and breadth of disagreement stretches through the moral, political, economic, social and legal domains. It also cuts across the EU itself, which is now – not unlike the American “Union” of States - much less of a “Union”. The politically-toxic convergence of terrorism, migration and nationalistic, illiberal populism has reshaped the socio-political landscape in the European continent as well as in North America. Trump’s unilateral annulment of the JCPOA served as a fatal blow to European desperate hopes of salvaging what is considered the EU’s greatest foreign Policy achievement. Faced with a dramatic US policy shift, the Europeans are still struggling to shape a coordinated response amongst the 27 members and with the “P4+1”, i.e. France, Germany, the UK, Russia and China.

History will judge the degree to which Israel, and Netanyahu personally, have influenced Trump's decision on the JCPOA. It is clear that Trump's political circle, including some of his biggest donors, have put a great emphasis on annulling the agreement, which was translated into a firm campaign promise, to be "delivered" after the elections. It is also well known that the professional echelons within the US Administration, including the then Secretary of State Tillerson and still-acting Defense Secretary Mattis have all tried to dissuade the President from his campaign promise. Netanyahu pulled all his personal and governmental levers in order to push for a US unilateral withdrawal. The overall effect of the JCPOA annulment was a new global alliances map, with the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side, and the EU, Russia, China and the rest of the world – on the other. The same regrouping has emerged on the Middle East's other historically-major policy issue – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here too, Israel and the US now stand shoulder to shoulder, with the support of major Arab countries, while the EU and "the rest" stand on the opposite side, with the remnants of the Palestinian official representative body.

If the US "pivot" away from the EU and its Quartet partners wasn't enough, the level of internal disunity within the EU has grown in parallel. While it was never easy to forge a European consensus, it has now become largely impossible, thanks in part to a concerted Israeli effort to drive wedges within the EU, especially between certain new members and the traditional key countries. Two clusters of members are increasingly deviating from core EU positions – the "Visegrad" group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and the Greece-Cyprus duo. A third one has now officially joined, the Craiova Group, which includes in addition to Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and the non-EU member Serbia. Thus, Prime Minister Netanyahu made a point of participating in the forum's recent meeting. Upon his departure from Israel, he released a message that he wants to work with these countries "to change the hypocritical and hostile approach off the EU" toward Israel. On that same trip, Netanyahu was also supposed to go to Tirana and meet the leaders of Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The event was postponed at the last moment.

The EU is traditionally unable to shape coherent domestic or foreign policies, but the Israeli-Palestinian issue used to be something of an exception, maintaining a traditional European and in fact global consensus regarding its "Terms of reference (TOR)" for a permanent settlement.

As the domestic European agenda shifted considerably in recent years and is now focused on the issues of refugees and terrorism, the EU's posture towards the Middle East in general, including the Israeli Palestinian issue, has also underwent significant changes. In close correlation to popular demand, the EU's Middle East emphasis has been put on Syria, as a main source of refugees, and ISIS, as a main source of foreign and domestic terrorism. Iran was considered a closed file, until Trump abruptly reopened it and forced the EU to devote unwanted attention to the futile exercise of "an upgraded JCPOA". Against this backdrop, the Palestinian issue was largely shelved. The EU had to come to terms with a new reality not only in Europe and in Washington, but also in the Palestinian territories. The fundamental drivers on the ground have been transformed – from a relatively unified representation by the PLO, to a deepening rift between Fatah and Hamas. From a consensual and seemingly-achievable geographic contiguity between the West Bank and Gaza – to what is now widely seen as semi-permanent divide. From perceiving Abbas as a capable and peace-seeking leader to accepting the fact that a peace agreement will not be signed in his lifetime. From an active policy of counter-measures against Israel's settlement activities – to a de-facto "license to build", and from an attempt to change Israel's policies and behavior, to an understanding that no real advancement will occur on Netanyahu's shift.

Still, an interesting gap, conceptual and operational dominates EU policy on the issue. While in private most if not all officials admit that the "Two State solution" is all but obsolete, none of them is willing to draw the necessary conclusions, and they desperately cling to the "old order" and its outdated diplomatic formulas.

It can almost be described as the Perfect Storm – from the far West, Trump and his avalanche of policy-bombs on the four most critical issues – Iran, The Palestinians, Refugees and Russia. From the Middle West – the EU and its disintegration forces working from within and from without. From the Middle East and the South – waves of refugees, seasoned Jihadi "foreign fighters", and a wounded Iranian regime seeking revenge. From the North East – an empowered Russia, having tilted the US elections, meddled in numerous European campaigns and won the Syrian civil war.

Pressed from all directions, who can blame the EU for hunkering down?

From Trump's side of the Atlantic, things look very different. He has succeeded in fulfilling his main campaign promises, according to his own loose definitions, probably accepted by most of his supporters. He delivered on the JCPOA, on North Korea, on NAFTA, on trade war with China,

and of course on the Jerusalem embassy. His “Deal of the century” is still being cooked, but the shock to the system has already been felt, with the “Two States, One State – whatever they decide” statement, and the alleged “taking off the table” of the two most critical final status issues of Jerusalem and the refugees. Trump’s aggressive posture towards the EU, policy wise and beyond - if one looks at Steve Bannon’s intensive anti-EU network-building, on the European continent – has exposed the Europeans’ vulnerability. His Israel-related policy has certainly yielded significant political dividends. However, the rift with most of the Jewish constituency has the potential of becoming a wedge issue vis a vis future Israeli government, especially if the wave of American right-wing Anti-Semitism continues to surge.

From Netanyahu’s perspective, the situation as far as the US-EU-Israel triangle is concerned, could hardly be more favorable. He is in the proverbial global driver’s seat next to Trump, with the EU maneuvering in an attempt to avoid further collisions. Furthermore, he is able to fan the flames of disunity within the EU, echoing trump and Bannon’s messaging. His rhetoric towards the “Europeans” has escalated demonstrably, and he now has no compunction branding the EU “a hostile entity”, language which was up until recently reserved for enemies, and if used vis a vis Europeans, would have been whispered anonymously and off the record. This new line against foreign liberal democrats is in full congruence with the governments’ assault on its internal political adversaries. These include human rights organizations, the independent media, the Academia and the Judiciary. All told, Israel is quickly sliding in the newly-laid illiberal-democratic tracks of Poland and Hungary, and Netanyahu – like his East-European colleagues - seems to believe it is the most politically beneficial path.

Turning to assess the EU’s vantage point, one needs to differentiate between various sub-entities. The Brussels bureaucracy is overstretched with internal challenges and has no real bandwidth to deal with Israel or Israel-Palestine. It operates under real and present danger from both the US and Russia, and is on a seemingly-permanent defense, without the necessary tools. Faced with the new global alliances map, the EU is unable to adjust, certainly not quickly enough.

Under these grim circumstances, what policy goals can the EU realistically set and achieve?

The EU should redefine its priorities and reexamine the policy tools at its disposal. While the twin issues of refugees and terrorism will have to remain at the top of the agenda, and the struggle to maintain the EU’s political integrity will not be easily won, the EU must design and build new

policies and levers to play a role on the global stage, especially towards the US, Russia and the Middle East. More than an issue of budgetary priorities or strategic policy planning, what must take place is a change of the union's collective mind set. The EU cannot continue to bring a check book to a gun fight. Trump's brut political, economic and financial force must be met with a different European posture, one that doesn't aim to please, but rather answers in kind.

With respect to the Middle East, the EU needs to cut its losses. There is simply no realistic path for renewed strategic European influence in the region in the near future. There needs to be a prolonged process of leverage-building before any leverage can be exercised. What this means for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is – unfortunately, from a Palestinian perspective – that Israel will retain its freedom of maneuver, certainly as long as Trump or Pence lead the US. The most effective step the EU can take is closing ranks around the existing TOR for a final Israeli Palestinian accord, and – if possible – to draw a line in the sand. The parties must be pushed to decisions, and the EU still has some ways and means to expedite the process. For example, the EU can officially declare that it will abandon the Two States formula within a given timeframe, if an agreement is not reached, to be replaced by a demand for equal rights to all Palestinians in the holy land within a new unitary state. If EU consensus is not reachable on such a major shift, a certain grouping within the EU can take the lead. The EU should also put an emphasis on democratic legitimacy for any future settlement. Both peoples, the Israeli and the Palestinian, must hold independent referenda on their respective (and alas mutual) futures. Such legitimacy is an absolute precondition for the success of any political scheme.

On Iran, the EU should work with all interested parties in an attempt to prevent the collapse of the JCPOA. There is no viable alternative to that agreement in the foreseeable future. While this approach puts the EU in direct confrontation with Trump, it highlights the new division between Trump, Netanyahu, MBS – and the rest of the world. Iran should be cautioned and encouraged not to abrogate the JCPOA's provisions, as well as to avoid regional provocations and proxy wars. An ad-hock coalition of the EU, Russia and China – as strange as it may sound - is capable of salvaging the JCPOA and preventing further regional conflicts.

On Israel, the EU should aspire to clarify its common positions, and in their absence, should respond to Netanyahu's wedging tactics in kind. Those members, who are able to agree on a coherent policy, should formulate and communicate it clearly. For the EU, Israel should continue

to be an important partner, one that shares most if not all of its values, and many of its strategic interests. The Trump era will come to an end, and so will Netanyahu's. Too much is at stake in order for the Europeans and the likeminded Israelis to perpetuate the current divergence.