

EU POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL

POLITIKA EUROPSKE UNIJE PREMA IZRAELU

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the complex dynamics of European Union policy towards Israel. In recent years, the European Union has developed an array of foreign policy mechanism through which it engages with various regions and individual states. As the only liberal democracy in the region, Israel plays a crucial role for European Union relations with the Middle East. This article aims to explore and explain two major paths of European Union foreign policy involvement with Israel – Mediterranean regional cooperation initiatives such as the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process.*

Key words: *European Union, Israel, European Neighbourhood Policy, Union for the Mediterranean, Quartet on the Middle East*

Sažetak: *U radu se analizira kompleksna dinamika politike Europske unije prema Izraelu. Posljednjih godina Europska unija je razvila paletu vanjskopolitičkih mehanizama pomoću kojima djeluje prema raznim regijama i pojedinačnim državama. Izrael kao jedina liberalna demokracija u toj regiji igra krucijalnu ulogu za odnose Europske unije s Bliskim istokom. Ovaj članak ima za cilj istražiti i pojasniti dva glavna pravca vanjskopolitičkih odnosa Europske unije prema Izraelu – inicijative sredozemne regionalne suradnje poput Sredozemne unije, kao i angažman u izraelsko-palestinskom mirovnom procesu.*

Ključne riječi: *Europska unija, Izrael, Europska susjedska politika, Sredozemna unija, Bliskoistočni kvartet*



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1. Introduction

Israel is the only country in the Middle East with a liberal democratic political system. With that in mind, it is rather understandable that the European Union, as a supranational entity striving to increase its engagement in the regions surrounding it, has a special interest in furthering bilateral relations with Israel.

However, current events have cast a shadow over mutual efforts for further deepening and widening of bilateral relations. At the beginning of 2016, a trade dispute erupted, as the European Union declared that it wanted to put special labeling on products manufactured in areas the European Union views as Israeli-occupied territories (i.e. West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights). This dispute, which has already been brewing for a couple of years, is an example of the complex nature of EU-Israeli relations, that constantly moves between fundamental disagreements about security challenges in the Middle East and genuine readiness for cooperation in the Mediterranean basin [1]. In response to the advocacy of such a trade policy by the Brussels administration, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided to withdraw diplomats from regular contacts and meetings with EU institutions on issues relating to the Middle East peace process [2].

This article wishes to explore and explain two different paths of EU-Israeli relations. The first one considers bilateral relations that develop through the various regional cooperation mechanisms the European Union has set up in order to engage with their neighbors. The second one considers the role the European Union plays in the peace process negotiations, initiatives, and meetings that aim to bring about lasting peace between Israel and Palestine. When discussing the first path of EU policy towards Israel, we shall focus on the Union for the Mediterranean. Conversely, when talking about the involvement of the European Union in the Middle East peace process, we shall put an emphasis on the Quartet on the Middle East.

2. Union for the Mediterranean

In 2008, following the former Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership), the Union for the Mediterranean came into being in Paris, on the initiative of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Because of that, France has been a strong supporter of this EU mechanism of cross-regional cooperation, advocating closer relations of the European Union with the countries of Mediterranean basin.

The seat of the General Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean is in Barcelona. Its main purposes are promotion and development of economic relations between the European Union and its 15 neighboring countries in the regions of North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. The three guiding ideas of the Union are 1) the establishment of a free trade zone between member states, 2) a common financial plan (the EU contributes to more than 50 per cent of the Union's budget) and 3) cultural cooperation. Up to this point, the Union for the Mediterranean has achieved

partial completion on all these goals. The Union for the Mediterranean represents an extension and expansion of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The European Commission originally adopted this policy in 2004 and revised it in 2015 [3].

This cooperation framework between 28 EU member states and 15 neighboring countries does not only limit itself to free trade, but also includes partnership in six other fields. These include environmental issues, energy, health, migration, education, and social affairs [4].

In order to emphasize special relations of the European Union with Israel within the Union for the Mediterranean, the European Commission has initiated regular bimonthly meetings of senior officials from both sides. It is rather interesting that these bimonthly meetings of EU and Israeli senior officials, that are part of special arrangements within the Union for the Mediterranean, include Palestinian senior officials as well. This triangle of relations in bimonthly meetings shows a special role the European Union wishes to play regarding the Israeli-Palestinian question. Further analysis of the relations of this political triangle will follow in second part of this paper.

The path towards establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean was not easy neither smooth. It actually faced heavy burdens, with three major difficulties. In 2010, when a series of uprisings in the Arab world (the so-called Arab Spring) started, projects that the Union for the Mediterranean had been conducting had to be suspended for an indefinite period. The perennial clashes in the Gaza Strip also contributed to an ill development of this Mediterranean framework of cooperation. Moreover, the third, and probably the most important reason, was the fact that many of the European leaders were against the establishment of this Union, because they saw it as a potential for France to become a new leading country in the European Union. Thus, many senior officials in the EU, led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, viewed the creation of the Union of the Mediterranean with strong skepticism.

Because the Union did not develop a strong enough system to overcome all these obstacles, one could say that the bilateral relations of Israel and the EU are much stronger than their cooperation through the Union for the Mediterranean itself. Although this framework stemmed from well-meaning ideas of regional and cross-regional cooperation, and economic and social development, the aforementioned obstacles slowed down its further progress.

Thus, some projects have to close down permanently or for the time being (29 projects). Currently, the most ambitious project is the construction of a highway in North Africa, connecting the Moroccan port of Agadir over Algeria and Tunisia, with the town of Ras Ajdir in Libya, which should be completed in 2020 [5].

3. EU and Israel: Confrontation or Cooperation?

As already mentioned, apart from cooperation through the Union of the Mediterranean, the European Union has many ways of collaboration with Israel. This includes economic, cultural, scientific, technological, and political relations.

Trade relations between Israel and the European Union started in 1975, with then European Communities. As already state, Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, which naturally makes it the most compatible trading and scientific partner for the European Union. To give an example, we should point out that in 2013, the value of EU-Israel trade was €29.5 billion (equal to 13.7 per cent of Israel's GDP), with €12.5 billion imports to the EU and €17 billion exports to Israel [6]. In addition, Israel participated in the latest EU Research and Development Framework Program (FP7). In June 2014, Israel joined the latest research and innovation program developed by the European Union, Horizon 2020, and will contribute to this program's budget.

Nevertheless, the main obstacles between those two partners stem from the decades-long Middle Eastern crisis and the subsequent peace process. Considering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel and the European Union strongly disagree on many issues, such as the timetable for the achievement of peace, questions of human rights violations as part of Israel's security policy, the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, as well as EU funding for left-wing (pacifist) NGOs in Israel.

4. The EU as a Peace Broker or a Peace Builder?

When developing its foreign policy in crisis regions, the European Union faces much more than the obvious problem of coordination and regression of national foreign policies and interests of different member states into one, coherent foreign policy voice of Brussels. In addition, it has to balance between acting as an international mediator and promotor of peaceful solutions to complex conflicts, and its security and military role, which revolves both around overlapping NATO membership of most EU member states, as well as the strengthening of the military component of the Common Foreign and Security Policy [7]. This ambivalence of EU foreign policy in crisis regions is especially evident in the case of the Middle East in general and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. While the EU is involved as a peace broker and a mediator between the two conflicting sides, it also offers heavy financing to one side (Palestinians). According to the other side (Israel), this aid oftentimes serves military purposes, and not humanitarian needs.

The European Union and its predecessors, the European Communities, have had a keen interest in supporting peace-building in the Middle East and have felt a moral obligation, stemming from the experience of the Second World War and the Holocaust, to achieve a just peace settlement for both Israel and Palestine [8].

However, only in recent years has the European Union become one of the key players in the Middle Eastern peace process. Before that, the United States, the United Nations, and the Arab League were the single most important external actors in this peace process. The most important framework for EU involvement in brokering a peace between Israel and Palestine is the Quartet on the Middle East.

However, as already somewhat implied, we should point out that the perception of the European Union and its struggle for a just peace is in stark opposition to the perception of European foreign policy in Israel itself. Generally, there is a high level of mistrust among Israeli senior officials regarding the European Union as a key mediator in the Middle Eastern peace process. The Israeli view boils down to the assumption that the European Union is not a neutral stakeholder in this process, but rather shows a clear and lasting preference for the Palestinian cause [9].

This is indeed so, as the official position of the European Union, which is also reflected in its involvement in the Quartet on the Middle East, is that there should be a two-state solution, i.e. that the Palestinian National Authority should transform into a Palestinian State. In opposition to that, a vast number of Israeli politicians favors other solution, which would not necessarily include full sovereignty for the Palestinians. An additional point of disagreement is the status of Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities regard it as integral part of the State of Israel. While some other mediators, such as the United States, leave the question of the final status of Jerusalem open, the European Union, following the original 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine (General Assembly Resolution 181 (II)), views the city as a separate entity that should one day become a capital of both Israel and Palestine.

Additionally, we should highlight the fact that the position of the European Union on the Middle Eastern peace process and the quest for a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dramatically changed after Jihadist terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, Paris, and Brussels [10]. From this point on, the European Union also has an internal incentive to strive towards peace, stability, and security in that part of the world, because the burning issues of the Middle East otherwise spill over into European cities. Finally, the rising tide of the migration, especially from Syria and Iraq, serves as additional motivation for the European Union to start playing a more serious and determined role in tackling the Middle East peace process and engaging in Israel in activities which should bring about peace and security.

5. The Quartet on the Middle East

In 1996, the European Union demonstrated its decision to become a serious stakeholder in the Middle Eastern peace process by appointing its first Special Representative for the Middle Eastern peace process. European Union Special Representatives serve as quasi ambassadors of the European Union in matters of high importance for EU foreign policy.

The Quartet on the Middle East, also known as the Diplomatic Quartet, is a result of a 2002 high profile meeting in Madrid. This diplomatic format brought together representatives of two key members of the United Nations Security Council – the United States and Russia, as well as representatives of the United Nations themselves and of the European Union.

The European Union is involved in the Quartet not only through its Special Representative, but also through the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In addition, the Quartet itself appoints Special Envoys for specific tasks, such as the question of the Gaza Strip after the unilateral Israeli disengagement from that area in 2005.

The most important output of the Quartet on the Middle East is the Road Map for Peace, adopted in 2003. This peace plan in many aspects reflected the European Union position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although the United States sought to portray the final text of the plan as a product of American diplomacy, and not the work of the whole Quartet. The plan consisted of three phases. The first phase would have to fulfill certain conditions in order to prepare for the creation of the Palestinian state. The second phase would establish the State of Palestine, yet with provisional borders only. Finally, in the third phase, there would be conclusive negotiations on the permanent borders of the new state, in order to end the decades-long conflict.

However, the Israeli side showed mistrust towards such a plan, and demanded additional preconditions, which the Palestinians would have to meet. These included, among other things, disarmament of Hamas and similar organizations, and full recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. None of the Quartet members showed ability to amend the plan in such a way that it would become acceptable to both sides and it thus ultimately ended in a deadlock.

6. Conclusion

In this short analytical piece, we have tried to depict the most important aspects of the rather complex and burdensome relation of the European Union with Israel. Although both sides place their faith in liberal democracy, free trade, and common security, these two actors of the international relations system often have strained relations because of divergent opinions on aspects of the Israeli policy towards Palestinians [11].

The Union of the Mediterranean functions as an extension of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy. It also confirms a strong Mediterranean orientation of current EU foreign policy objectives. Notwithstanding the fact that the Union for the Mediterranean offers a constructive perspective for common energy, trade, and environmental projects and platforms of collaboration, it often cannot circumvent fundamental disagreements over security

and sovereignty issues. This became acutely evident in the EU-Israel trade dispute over territorial labeling of goods exported from Israel to the European Common Market Area.

In the future, EU leaders will have to show more resolve and unity in formulating a constructive approach to Israel, especially regarding the peace process, while Israeli officials will have to accommodate to some of the demands of the Brussels administration in order to reap the benefits of cooperation across the Mediterranean.

7. References

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Photo 025. Three in the snow / Troje u snijegu