

Israel and the European Union

Four decades of missed opportunities

Gadi HEIMANN

The history of the relationship between Israel and the European Union is one of contradictions. Israel would like closer cooperation but is skeptical of Europeans’ pro-Palestinian bias; Europe would like greater intervention in the region but wants to pursue its geopolitical agenda independently of the conflict. What could their rapprochement look like?

Reviewed: Sharon Pardo & Joel Peter, *Uneasy Neighbors: Israel and the European Union*, Lexington Books, 2009, 115 p.

For Sharon Pardo and Joel Peters, “Israel behaves more as an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean than a Mediterranean country neighboring the European continent” (p. 1). Their geopolitical analysis could be replicated when examining Israeli foreign policy research: whereas relations between Israel and the U.S. draw considerable attention from historians, diplomats, and political scientists, we find very little research regarding Israel’s relationship with the European

Union, the little that exists being limited to the economic or legal aspects. Pardo and Peter's book, then, with its focus on the political side of the relationship, is a breath of fresh air.

The book naturally focuses on the Arab-Israeli conflict, which without doubt has had more influence on Israeli-EU relations than any other factor since Israel's first contact with the European Community (EC) in the late 1950s. The authors' chosen time frame is rather limited. The period between the Oslo Accords (1993) and the present, while certainly rich, leaves out a period of more than thirty years in which Israel enjoyed excellent economic ties with the Community and established important contacts in a variety of spheres (in 1964, for example, Israel and the Common Market signed a limited tariff agreement, later extended to a Free Trade Agreement). Clearly, *Uneasy Neighbors* is not a book of historical research, and uses a somewhat policy-oriented approach. Its interest is in its up-to-date analysis of Israel-EU relations and documenting of their breakthroughs and setbacks. The book also provides a lengthy description of different projects and initiatives by both sides, including the 1995 EU-Israel Association Agreement and the Action Plan. It sheds light on the main issues of disagreement, and its final chapter sets out a model designed to bolster and formalize Israeli-EU relations.

Europe as an impossible broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict

The first three chapters of the work, and its core, describe developments in Israeli-EU relations over the decades. For Pardo and Peters, the divergences at the core of the EU-Israel relations stretch right back to the early 1970s, in the period directly following the Yom Kippur War. Israel believed at the time that the EU was biased toward the Palestinians, and saw proof of this in things like the Venice Declaration of 1980: the EC at the time called for a just resolution to the Palestinian problem noting explicitly the Palestinians' right to self-determination. The Venice Declaration led to an all-time low in Israeli-EU relations. Unsurprisingly, Israel saw Europe's insistence on greater involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict as inimical to its interests; in its eyes, a pro-Palestinian intrusion threatened to impose an undesirable settlement. As a

result, Israel took steps to lessen the European influence in the peace settlement. For their part, the Europeans, who were interested in playing a bigger role in the region, resented Israel's resistance to their participation in the peace process. The result of this estrangement was the small role of the EU in the Madrid Conference in 1991.

The 1993 Oslo Accords marked a turning point in Israel-EU relations, however, since Israel's ratification of the agreement meant its endorsement of several principles which the EU had pushed for years, most notably the Palestinian right to self-determination and the need for some kind of territorial partition agreement. At that point in its history, Israel was more ready than ever in the past to accept European involvement in the peace process, and the EU more prepared to upgrade its economic relations with Israel. This led to the signing of the Israel-EU Association Agreement in 1995 and represented the attainment of an out-of-reach goal which the Israelis had sought since the late 1950s, indeed a major leap forward in the cooperation between Israel and the European Union, and a significant upgrading of the 1975 trade agreement.

The deadlock in the peace process after 1996 and the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians during the second intifada (2000) once more undermined relations between Israel and the European Union. The EU criticized Israel's settlement expansion, its refusal to accept a formal Palestinian representation in Jerusalem, the separation fence, and the checkpoints. Later, the Europeans were also frustrated that the deadlocked peace process had torpedoed their project to establish a multi-lateral Euro-Mediterranean partnership. The Arabs, meanwhile, firmly rejected the normalization of relations with Israel, supported by the EU, as well as economic and security cooperation, until a solution to the Palestinian problem was found. EU efforts to disconnect the Arab-Israeli conflict from the Mediterranean partnership were doomed to failure. Meanwhile, Israel was furious over the EU's insensitivity to what it considered its vital security interests and over its overt support for a Palestinian state without prior negotiations. Once more, this led to repeated efforts by Israel to limit European involvement in the peace process, which naturally affected relations with Europe.

Closer cooperation via a special status for Israel?

Surprisingly, in December 2004, the differences and mutual criticism failed to impede European Union-Israel talks on the Action Plan. This agreement, the first implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) initiative, marked an important step toward closer cooperation between Israel and the EU. Pardo and Peter suggest that at a time when relations between Israel and the EU were far from optimal, what enabled this agreement was the inclusion of certain political issues – such as the Israeli acceptance of a formal UN role in the peace process and references to non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which the EU could flag as achievements and which were also vague enough for Israel to live with (p. 60-3). In 2007, at Israel's request, Israel and the EU negotiated an upgrade of their relationship together with an examination of Israel's special status with the EU. This involved three spheres: 1) greater diplomatic cooperation; 2) Israeli participation in European agencies; 3) Israeli integration into the European Single Market (p. 66). Regular senior level discussions between the parties were also planned. After the Israeli intervention in Gaza in December 2008, however, negotiations were again suspended until further notice.

Chapter Four of *Uneasy Neighbors*, based on polls, then pursues the authors' investigation of the EU-Israel relationship by discussing how the former is seen by the Israeli public and political elite. Most interesting here is the discussion of Israel's possible full membership into the EU – an idea supported by several senior right-wing EU leaders (Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi is one) as well as Israeli politicians (Benjamin Netanyahu, Silvan Shalom, and Avigdor Lieberman). Pardo and Peter convincingly argue that neither Israel nor the EU are interested in taking such quantum leap. Joining the EU might jeopardize Israel's identity as a Jewish state partly because it would force it to open its borders to free European immigration and challenge some of its laws (such as the Law of Return, which gives every Jew the right to emigrate to Israel and receive Israeli citizenship). Therefore, the authors suggest, Israel-EU integration should be tailored to fit both sides' special interests. In Chapter Five, the

authors go on to propose a framework that could accommodate both sides, based on two foundations: the European Union's institutions and the European Neighborhood Policy. They are convinced that closer partnership between Israel and Europe demands a higher degree of institutionalization than today.

While successfully explaining the complexity of the Israel-EU relationship, the book has a major shortcoming: it does not explore the parties' motives. In particular, it never examines why Israel has shown so much anxiety at the prospect of greater integration with the EU. The authors should have also looked at the economic stakes. Likewise, they do not discuss Europe's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict widely enough. Although they rightly emphasize the EU's desire to boost its international status by embracing a more leading role in resolving the conflict, there are other phenomena at play: ideological motivations (e.g., the EU's humanitarian policy) or domestic politics (e.g., the demographically significant Arab and Muslim populations in some EU countries). The decision to treat the EU as a block without discussing its constituent member states is equally puzzling. Despite the EU's ambition to speak with one voice, we find striking foreign policy differences among its members especially with regard to Israel. The new Eastern European members of the EU are generally more supportive of Israel's policy; and there is also divergence among the old members, between the relatively critical countries such as Spain and Denmark and those countries that are more supportive of Israel, such as Germany. Such distinctions would have helped nuance the book's portrayal of a relationship that has never been anything short of complex.

Published in booksandideas.net 2 December 2011.

©booksandideas.net