

# Why a Big Wave of European Countries Recognizing Palestine Is Fast Approaching

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## The chasm is widening between Israeli and EU views on the Palestinians, but officials should not overlook their policy convergence on Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

In Israel, there's a clear tendency to caricature Europeans and their governments as innately hostile—legitimizing the idea Israel can afford to take little notice of them. There is indeed a growing chasm between Israel and Europe over the Palestinian issue. But foreign policy approaches in Europe and Israel actually converge in other key Mideast conflicts.

European officials believe that Israeli officials are perfectly aware of this convergence, but choose not to publicly emphasize this common ground in order to marginalize European views on the Palestinian issue.

Having just visited four European capitals—London, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels—where I met with senior officials dealing with the Mideast issues, it is safe to say that Israel has reason to be concerned about brewing European attitudes towards it. But in every meeting, it was clear there were areas of high strategic importance to Israel where its interests clearly converge with those of Europe.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has always been proud of his powers of persuasion with foreign leaders. He correctly says that his job is to represent the national interest of Israel, as he interprets it, and not to win international plaudits; however, he also wants persuade his interlocutors to come round to his position.

However, the Europeans are fixed on their policies, and the arguments of the past that might have persuaded are no longer effective. European leaders don't see Israel's current government having any of the flexibility on the Palestinian issue that even previous Netanyahu governments (2009-2013 and 2013-2015) exhibited.

They hear about new laws passing in the Knesset, and they wonder if those laws make a two-state outcome even possible. When Israel complains about Palestinian incitement, and validly, Europe isn't really listening, because those complaints are being made during a total impasse (in which they see Netanyahu deeply invested) in terms of a negotiated way out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some Europeans were hoping that Netanyahu would come to a meeting with leaders of 28 European countries in Brussels last month with a unanimous move on the Palestinians, fresh from President Trump's declaration on Jerusalem. But those officials were disappointed. Others—such as EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini—who had flagged Netanyahu's visit by twice assailing the Jerusalem decision—would have been less surprised.

Those European officials might have had optimistic expectations, but it's also possible to make the argument that European abstentions on key votes at UNESCO and the UN general assembly that omitted the Jewish historic connection to Jerusalem may have contributed to the atmosphere around the Trump decision—and Netanyahu's clear choice to discount any European criticism of it.

Some in Israel will say: So what if the Europeans are not happy about Trump's move? Yet, European countries feel strongly they still have a role to play in Mideast peacemaking. Many officials speculate that if the Europeans feel spurned and marginalized, then mainstream European countries, not just the Swedes, will say the time has come to recognize Palestine. I heard this throughout my trip.

European countries are likely to move in this direction as individual states, and not collectively as a political union. EU decisions require a consensus of all 28 member states. This limits them, not only on major policy decisions such as recognizing Palestine, but also on other decisions, such as adopting an approach that differentiates between settlements likely to be part of Israel in any final accord and those that, in most estimations, would be under Palestinian sovereignty.

Privately, all officials acknowledge that some of the settlements will become part of Israel in a land-swap agreed in final status agreements that are public knowledge and discussed over more than a decade.

Yet, as a collective, the EU cannot veer from its own policy by an iota. European Union policy is to oppose settlement activity anywhere in the West Bank and that includes Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem as well. It may explain why Europe has not been able to write new policy guidance on anything relating to Israelis and Palestinians for two years.

While differences exist on the Palestinian issue, on some key issues, Europe and Israel are actually in sync.

On Syria, Israel and Europe both fear the destabilization to which an American military withdrawal would lead.

Europeans feel confident that U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis will keep 2,000 U.S. special forces troops in the eastern part of the country even after the defeat of ISIS. European forces have been involved in the war against ISIS, and apparently, the signal for the U.S. to stay is also a signal for them to stay. Without the US, this would not have been tenable.

For Israel, a U.S. exit would have created a vacuum that would mean more Shia militias in eastern Syria, and thereby increase the probability of military escalation between Israel and Iranian proxies. Europe would have felt the destabilizing effects of an American exit at their own borders, as it would lead to more emigration from Syria. They also see the Iran's Shia proxies as destabilizing.

Despite Russian leader Vladimir Putin's insistence that the war in Syria is essentially over, and Europe should pour billions of reconstruction aid into Syria, the European officials with whom I spoke stated there was no appetite to do so until they see a clearly demonstrated intention and process of political transition in Syria. Europeans recognize Putin and Assad controlling less than 50% of the country, so they do not see the war as being over.

The question remains whether the Europeans will withhold that aid funding until the Iranian Shia proxies leave Syria. Will Europe actually use its economic leverage to distance those forces, which also threaten Israel?

Iran is trickier. On the one hand, the European low-key response to widespread Iranian protests certainly differs from that offered by the U.S. and Netanyahu. Obviously, as a signatory, the EU is emphatic about retaining the nuclear deal and actually are confident the U.S.—despite the White House rhetoric—will not scrap it either.

Despite fears in the fall in the wake of Trump's October speech announcing the decertification of the JCPoA, Americans and Europeans have continually held quiet talks about retaining the Iranian nuclear deal. But this should not obscure a growing convergence that both Europeans—belatedly and quietly—and Israel—very publicly—see as a key vulnerability of the agreement, namely the critical "sunset" clause in the Iranian nuclear deal that enables Iran to highly enrich uranium beyond the deal's 10-15 year period.

Europe and Israel don't differ on whom to root for in Saudi Arabia either. For all his personal challenges, all the Europeans I met are unambiguously backing Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to modernize Saudi Arabia. They believe over time, if successful, reform will weaken support for Saudi clerical radicalism abroad, which impacts them both domestically and abroad. For Israel, MBS has made clear that he does not see Israel as a threat, but a potential ally.

The bottom line is that it is not correct to say Israel is from Venus and the Europeans are from Mars. They share some important common assumptions about the region, as well as some key differences, namely the Palestinian issue, in which the chasm seems only to be widening.

Still, it is clearly better for Europeans and Israelis alike not to view the other as a caricature, which has been an unfortunate tendency for many years now, and to exploit common ground for agreement for both their benefits.

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