

Assessing European-Levantine Relations by the Numbers

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Brief Analysis

Europe's increasing role in the Levant was highlighted recently by two high-profile events that may have a significant impact on future relations between the two regions. On December 1, Israelis and Palestinians launched a controversial unofficial peacemaking initiative in Geneva. On December 2-3, the Barcelona Process countries held their sixth conference of foreign ministers in Naples, bringing together officials from the European Union (EU), the Palestinian Authority (PA), and most southern Mediterranean countries, including the four Levant countries: Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. One means of tracing the nature and scope of European-Levantine relations is by examining data regarding their trade and diplomatic contacts.

European Relations with Israel. Of the four Levant countries, Israel conducts the most foreign trade with the EU. In 2001, Israel accounted for 68% of all EU imports from the Levant and 79% of EU exports to the region. Indeed, Israel ranked fifteenth among all of the EU's export partners worldwide, absorbing 1.7% of the union's total exports. At the time, Israel's primary trade partners in Europe were Belgium (6.2% of Israel's total trade with all countries, thanks to the diamond trade), Germany (6.1% of total Israeli trade), and Britain (5.4%); by comparison, France played a significantly smaller role in Israeli trade (3.9%). In fact, Belgium, Germany, and Britain were second only to the United States and the PA as Israeli trading partners.

On the political front, it is instructive to compare the number of visits to Israel made by foreign officials from different EU countries. For example, rough estimates show that, over the past decade, German officials have engaged in more such visits (an average of 4.1 per year) than French officials (1.5 per year). Although the French and German foreign ministers have paid a fairly equal number of visits to Israel over this time period, the German federal president and chancellor have traveled there more frequently than the French president and prime minister. Moreover, German-Israeli relations are quite extensive below the foreign minister level; for example, Germany's two legislative chamber chairmen alone have paid an average of 1.5 annual visits to Israel.

Interestingly, the opposite trend holds true for German and French diplomatic visits to the Palestinian territories. The pattern of French official visits to the PA suggests that Paris is eager to exhibit an equitable approach to Israel and the Palestinians. For instance, whenever the French foreign minister has visited Tel Aviv in recent years, he has also tended to visit Ramallah or Gaza. Although German representatives have also paid regular visits to the PA, these visits are not necessarily in parallel with diplomatic trips to Israel. In fact, the average number of German high-level official visits to the PA (1.5 per year) is slightly lower than the number of French visits (1.8 per year), despite the significantly greater number of German diplomatic visits to Israel.

Diplomatic Representation in Israel and the PA. The difficult question of diplomatic representation in Israel and the Palestinian territories. All EU member states maintain diplomatic representation in Israel, and vice versa. European embassies are based in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem. Palestinian representation can be found in all EU countries except Luxembourg; these representatives are called "Palestinian General Delegations" (except in Greece, which uses the title "Diplomatic Representation of Palestine"). Seven EU states--Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and Britain--maintain contact with the PA in the same manner that the United States does: through Jerusalem-based

consulates that report directly to their foreign ministries. As with the U.S. consuls, these EU consuls do not have full diplomatic (exequatur) status with either Israel or the PA, although both parties tacitly accord them diplomatic privileges. This peculiar situation stems from UN Resolution 181, which in 1947 partitioned Palestine into two countries and established a Jerusalem international zone that was to have a separate government (which was never set up).

Seven other EU countries--Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Portugal--have chosen other means of representation in the PA. For example, Germany established its Representative Office in Jericho in 1994 and moved it to Ramallah in 1998. Its diplomats are accredited to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and have a similar status (though no real exequatur privileges) with the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As for the ten countries joining the EU in 2004, only the Czech Republic and Hungary maintain representative offices in Ramallah. Palestinian representative offices in Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland bear the title "embassy."

European Relations with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. As mentioned previously, Israel was responsible for 72% of the EU's 2001 trade with the Levant, meaning that the other three states in the region held relatively small shares: Syria with 9.8%, Lebanon with 9.5%, and Jordan with 8.3%. These states conducted most of their EU trade with Germany, France, and Italy. Britain, which has active trade relations with Israel, did not rank among the top five trade partners of any of the other Levant states.

Syria's 2001 import levels did not indicate major preferences for any one trade partner; the United States, Germany, Italy, and Ukraine--the country's most significant import partners--were each responsible for a 6.2-6.8% share of all Syrian imports. Syria did seem to have two favored export partners, however: Italy (which absorbed 32% of all Syrian exports to the EU) and France (23%). These latter statistics were due to Syrian petroleum exports, which constituted more than 94% of all Syrian exports to Italy and France (future statistics might show whether or not some of this oil was imported into Syria from Iraq in violation of UN sanctions on Baghdad). Hence, even though Italy and France's total imports from Syria were technically greater than their imports from Israel, Syria is only a minor trade partner to the two countries, aside from oil imports.

From a political perspective, both Germany and France have conducted high-level official visits to Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon on a regular basis in recent years, averaging between 1.5 and 2.7 trips per year. The oft-cited French preference for Syria and other Arab states over Israel is not borne out by statistics regarding French diplomatic visits to the region. As it does with the PA, however, France seems to give equal diplomatic weight to the Levant Arab states and Israel. In contrast, German visits to Israel clearly outnumber such visits to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Future Perspectives. The EU has gradually been moving toward what it calls a "Common Foreign and Security Policy." In this context, the EU appointed Miguel Moratinos as its special representative to the Middle East peace process in 1996, giving member states a common voice in affecting that process. The EU's role reached a new peak in 2003 with the peace Roadmap issued by the Quartet (the United States, the EU, the UN, and Russia). At the same time, however, Moratinos's successor--Marc Otte, former Belgian ambassador to Israel--has been effectively boycotted by the Israeli government since his appointment on July 14, 2003, due to European contacts with PA chairman Yasir Arafat.

Overall EU policy toward the Levant has become more coherent in the past few years. Yet, due to a variety of historical, economic, and political factors, EU member states still have their own foreign policies and focal points that influence the quality of their relations with Levant nations. For example, just as German-Israeli reconciliation in the 1960s may still influence German-Israeli relations, France's past colonial and cultural presence in Syria may

have had a positive effect on current relations between the two countries. Indeed, historical patterns will continue to influence relations between Europe and the Levant. Although some may view this as a weakness, it can also be considered a strength. That is, unlike the United States and Russia, the EU could take advantage of its diversity, using its alternative channels to the different parties in the Levant in order to bridge longstanding gaps.

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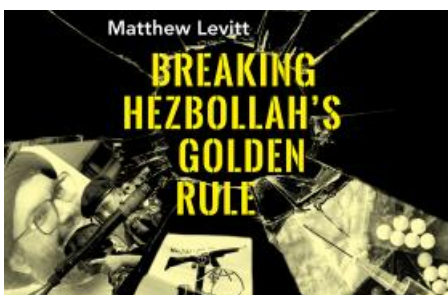
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