Democratic Backsliding and Securitization:

Challenges for Israel, the EU and Israel-Europe Relations

Edited by Muriel Asseburg & Nimrod Goren

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Table of Contents

PREFACE 5
Anna Timmerman

INTRODUCTION 6
Muriel Asseburg and Nimrod Goren

DEFINITION OF TERMS 11

CHAPTER 1 14
Democratic Backsliding: Challenges to Domestic Order and Foreign Relations in the European Union and Israel
Eyal Ronen

CHAPTER 2
Democracy and Foreign Affairs in Israel 28
Ehud Eiran

CHAPTER 3 40
Europe: The (Increased) Role of the Security Discourse and its Impact on the European Project and on Member States
Kai-Olaf Lang

CHAPTER 4 54
Leaving Illiberalism Behind: An Opportunity to Establish a New Liberal Foundation in EU-Israel Relations?
Toby Greene and Stephan Stetter

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 70
Muriel Asseburg and Nimrod Goren

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 74

ABOUT THE PARTNER ORGANISATIONS 78

Preface

The report "Democratic Backsliding and Securitization: Challenges for Israel, the EU and Israel-Europe Relations" analyses the illiberal trends and democratic backsliding that can be seen in both Europe and Israel. Experts from Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs) as well as external experts reflect on the implications these developments have. The authors offer highly relevant recommendations and insights for anyone interested in EU-Israel relations, eroding democratic trends and securitization policies.

The report specifically highlights the relationship between the EU and Israel and how these have adapted in light of the illiberal trends. Also showing the impact and lack of prospect in light of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking and advancement towards a resolution of the Palestinian struggle.

The relevance of this report however goes beyond the specific relations between the EU and Israel and also shows global tendencies. It demonstrates the eroding democratic trend and impact on liberal values. Therefore, this report is not only a research but also a call to action to counter the negative trend in order to protect the liberties we have.

PAX wants to thank Dr. Muriel Asseburg, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Ehud Eiran, Dr. Toby Greene, Dr. Kai-Olaf Lang, Dr. Eyal Ronen and Dr. Stephan Stetter for their comprehensive analyses, profound reflections and commitment to this project.

Anna Timmerman
General Director PAX

Introduction

Muriel Asseburg and Nimrod Goren

The last decade has witnessed a global trend of democratic backsliding. An array of populist and illiberal forces and leaders has called into question, and in some countries actively dismantled, key institutions of liberal democracy, such as independent judiciaries and civil liberties. They have often done so in the name of national security and/or to promote national, and at times volkish (i.e., ethno-national) ideas. What is more, the liberal international order has been under attack, not only by those who seek an adjustment of its governing institutions and rules for today's balance of power but also by those who challenge its very foundations of international law and multilateralism. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is but one example. Pro-democracy actors are seeking ways to effectively push back, and in some countries (including the United States, Israel and the Czech Republic) have recently achieved political gains.

This volume analyzes these global processes, how they play out in Europe and Israel, and what they mean for Eufropean-Israeli relations.[1] In this context, it identifies key drivers of democratic backsliding and the increased prevalence of securitized and identity-focused discourses. It also investigates the interrelation between democratic backsliding and foreign policies, including stances and actions that challenge the liberal international order. More specifically, it zooms in on the connection between democratic backsliding in Europe and Israel, on the one hand, and European-Israeli relations on the other. This compilation also examines opportunities presented by the change of leadership that took place in Israel in June 2021 and the normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab countries concluded in

1 For a definition of key terms see box on p. 11.

2020 and 2021. Last but not least, it puts forward a set of recommendations on how Europeans and Israelis can help each other stop and reverse democratic setbacks and strengthen liberal democracy, as well as how they can cooperate to strengthen their bilateral relations based on liberal-democratic values.

In the first chapter, **Eyal Ronen** analyzes the recent global phenomena of democratic backsliding and authoritarian entrenchment. Democratic erosion has also taken place in European countries, such as Hungary and Poland, as well as in Israel during the Netanyahu-led governments between 2009 and 2021. Ronen identifies the most important drivers of the populist upsurge as processes of wealth re-distribution linked to globalization, migration flows, the effects of and the debate over climate change, as well as fractious geopolitics, in particular the great power competition that fuels polarization. In Europe, Euroscepticism has been propelled in particular by the debt and refugee crises and by European institutions and policies perceived by many as distant, bureaucratic and non-responsive. Illiberal governments have not only infringed on citizens' rights, civil society, academia, and media freedoms, they have also dismantled important checks and balances on executive power. They have also engaged in polarizing, delegitimizing and "othering" discourses, and identity politics. What is more, populism, illiberalism and volkish ideologies have increasingly left their mark on political culture across Europe, albeit to varying degrees.

While European illiberal populists are all Eurosceptic, and by and large united in their rejection of immigration as well as of economic and cultural globalization, their foreign policy positions differ considerably when it comes to relations with Russia, China, and the United States – depending on geography, history, and economic interests. In the EU and globally, increased nationalism and emphasis on sovereign decision-making have hampered diplomatic processes, negatively affected multilateral approaches, and impeded international crisis management and problem-solving. The international failure in mobilizing solidarity and dealing effectively with the Covid-19 pandemic is but one case in point here. At the same time, as Ronen points out, there is a significant correlation between a country's state of liberal democracy and its diplomatic engagement and soft power practices. The erosion of liberal democracy domestically thus also reverberates in international politics.

In the second chapter, **Ehud Eiran** starts with an assessment of the state of Israel's democracy. He analyzes a set of historical, demographic and identity-related challenges to Israel's democracy, such as critical security threats, lack of democratic experience among Israel's founding elite and population, conservative religious (Jewish and Muslim) population groups that do not believe in equality, and the definition of Israel as a Jewish state that relegates its Arab/Palestinian citizens to inferior status. Still, Israel's democracy became more liberal in the 1990s as civil liberties were enshrined in law and the Supreme Court assumed the power of substantial judicial review, against the backdrop of the Oslo Accords heralding a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Eiran also identifies democratic flaws, primarily the legal inequality of Palestinians in the Palestinian territories under Israel's military occupation that after some 55 years can hardly be considered temporary any longer. In addition, he traces democratic setbacks under the successive Netanyahu governments: the efforts at weakening the Supreme Court, the prime minister's populist leadership style, anti-democratic legislation, the de-legitimization of political opponents and civil society organizations, and increasing corruption.

Eiran investigates the connection between Israel's political system and its foreign policy in a number of ways. First, Israel's foreign policy making has traditionally been remarkably centralized, with the prime minister taking the lead and a strong influence by the security establishment. Parliament, civil society, and think tanks did not play any major role in these processes. What is more, during the Netanyahu years, the ministry of foreign affairs was downsized and sidelined – a trend that has since been reversed by the "government of change". Second, in keeping with Israel's strategic culture, security issues and the commitment to world Jewry have triumphed over normative considerations, such as democratic values. Israel has adopted a realist foreign policy perspective, but in its interaction with other countries, it has also used soft power as "the only democracy in the Middle East" as well as hard power of military capabilities to achieve foreign policy goals. The democratic erosion that Israel witnessed in the Netanyahu years affected its relations with progressive US Democrats and with Europe. But overall, Eiran assesses Israel's current standing in the world as considerably improved not least due to the Abraham Accords, the remarkable increase in relations and support among formerly antagonistic countries in the global south, and an enhancement of relations with neighboring Egypt and Jordan.

In the third chapter, **Kai-Olaf Lang** conceives of today's EU as an "ambitious, partially interwoven, but fragmented security community", in addition to being an economic community and a community of rules and values, He traces how security and identity discourses in Europe have been transformed over the last two decades due to changing threat perceptions and security challenges, such as the return of threats to territorial integrity, irregular immigration, disinformation, and cyber-attacks. Crises like the financial and public debt crisis, migration and the Covid-19 pandemic have served as catalysts of even deeper European integration, but at the same time fostered re-nationalization and calls for de-Europeanization. Euro-skeptics, in particular, have called for the dismantling of supranational elements of the EU and of what they see as meddling in their societies.

According to Lang, "sovereignist" parties have gained ground across the EU. These parties, for example the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) and the Hungarian Fidesz, have shown a strong commitment to national identity, sovereignty and security, rejected progressive lifestyles and liberal values, and aimed at fostering traditional institutions such as the family, church, and nation. The rule of law and LGBTQ* policies, in particular, have become highly controversial issues between the EU and sovereignist governments. What is more, in contexts where national identity is built on traumatic historical experiences, politics of memory have become embedded in sovereignist governments' national security discourses and policy approaches, generating harsh conflicts with other states, for example between Russia and the Baltic states, or Poland and Israel.

Europe has developed its security and defense policy in an incremental and multi-framework manner in recent decades, but a number of factors have hampered closer integration in this policy field. These include differences among member states in terms of strategic culture, threat perceptions (from Russia, for example), emphases on European sovereignty vs. an Atlanticist orientation, security conceptions (hard vs. soft threats), and confronting "ontological security," which addresses anxieties arising from uncertainties, for example by strengthening collective identities. As a result, by early 2022, European security policies were characterized by a focus on resilience within the EU in addressing challenges beyond hard

security; the primacy of stability and security (over values) in the immediate neighborhood of the EU; a considerable divergence among EU member states on hard security threat perceptions and orientations regarding the main security provider; and considerable support for sovereignist, and partly illiberal, parties across Europe (albeit to varying degrees) that reject the evolvement of the EU into a political union. The latter have also posed a particular challenge for joint EU action in foreign affairs as they have instrumentalized special relations with outside powers, such as the United States, Russia, and Israel, to buttress their standing within the EU.

In the fourth chapter, **Toby Greene** and **Stephan Stetter** scrutinize how EU-Israel relations have changed in the context of illiberal trends in the global arena, as well as in Israel and EU member states. The Netanyahu years witnessed a growing divide between Israel and mostly liberal elites in EU institutions, member state governments, and European publics. The divide focused first and foremost (albeit by no means exclusively) on the Palestinian issue, with the EU aiming to at least maintain the option of a two-state settlement by introducing policies that differentiate in the dealings between Israel proper and the territories it occupies. At the same time, Israel's then-prime minister established close relations with populist, right-wing leaders (in and beyond Europe) and far right movements that have come to see Israel as a model of a strong and defensible nation-state, successfully fending off perceived threats linked to Islam and uncontrolled migration. One effect of these policies was an EU Council divided with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Also, while a formal upgrade of EU-Israel relations was shelved, closer cooperation did take place in a number of areas, such as Open Skies and Horizon 2020. At the same time, the EU's image suffered immensely in the eyes of the Israeli public, not least due to being deliberately depicted as hostile and/or anti-Semitic by Netanyahu and his supporters.

Greene and Stetter also point out new opportunities for EU-Israel relations stemming from the pluralist – and decisively more EU friendly – Israeli "government of change" formed in June 2021, the Abraham Accords, and the changing of the guard between the Trump and Biden Administrations. They see comparable challenges in Europe and Israel of building cohesive societies and forming inclusive identities, as well as overlapping interests in the context of waning United States influence and with regards to addressing climate and environment related challenges. They also stress that while there is little prospect for tangible diplomatic progress on the Palestinian question, it cannot and must not be ignored. In this regard, they see opportunities for a more pragmatic Israeli-Palestinian dialogue than under the successive Netanyahu-led governments, for projects aiming at sustained socio-economic progress in the Palestinian territories, and for an improvement of the EU's image in the eyes of the Israeli public. In addition, they suggest that progressive Europeans and Israelis think jointly about ways to confront populism and illiberalism and promote a sense of shared identity that encompasses all segments of society.

The volume concludes with a set of recommendations by **Muriel Asseburg** and **Nimrod Goren** for European and Israeli pro-democracy actors. Europeans and Israelis should work together to stop and/or reverse democratic setbacks and strengthen liberal democracy. In this endeavor, European and Israeli pro-democracy actors on the level of governments, EU institutions, parliamentarians and civil society representatives should join forces. On the level of governments, Europeans should, for example, emphasize the relevance of strengthening

Israeli democracy rather than turning a blind eye to domestic developments in Israel. Israelis should, in turn, go beyond purely pragmatic and transactional foreign policies emphasizing their interest in strengthening liberal democracy in Europe rather than allying with illiberal forces.

Europeans should also highlight the interrelation between democracy, peacemaking and shared society. They should point out that without a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and equality between Israel's Jewish and Arabs/Palestinian citizens, Israel will continue to suffer from a democratic deficit. In this vein, Europeans should also seek a more active and effective role in efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. They should, for example, explore the potential inherent in the Abraham Accords to strengthen Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, support constructive steps in that regard, and mitigate negative side-effects, such as Israeli sales of surveillance technology used against activists, journalists and dissidents in the region.

Furthermore, Europeans and Israelis should engage to strengthen Israel-Europe relations based on liberal democratic values. In this regard, they should focus their cooperation under the current European Neighborhood (ENP) Action Plan on advancing cooperation around liberal democratic values and negotiate corresponding future priorities for their partnership. They should avoid security becoming the dominant theme of the EU-Israel partnership, and focus instead on cooperation in the fields of science, education, environment, tourism and culture. On the level of political parties, civil society organizations and cities, actors committed to liberal democracy should seek to establish meaningful partnerships or give existing partnerships new impetus and direction.

This volume is a result of a research project carried out in 2020-2022 by Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, in cooperation with PAX. Contributions were finalized before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. While the analysis of past dynamics remains valid and the policy recommendations remain timely, Europe has since witnessed a profound transformation uniting it around common security interests and shared values, as well as indicating an ability to act under pressure that has surprised many observers.

We are thankful for PAX's support, specifically for Simone Remijnse and Thomas van Gool's trust, input, and feedback to the chapters. Thanks also go to Ruth Sinai for her language editing and translations, and to Gil Murciano, Roee Kibrik and Victoria Solkovits of the Mitvim Institute for their contribution to the conceptualization and preparation of this volume. We are also grateful to Claudia Zilla and Peter Lintl of SWP for their helpful comments. This project comes in the frame of a continued cooperation and exchange among researchers of SWP and the Mitvim Institute.

Definition of Terms

Liberal democracy characterizes a political system based on popular sovereignty, equality, and majority rule as well as the constitutional protection of individual and minority rights. Empirically, it has been realized as representative democracy in which political parties mobilize public opinion, participate in free and fair elections, and alternate in power to ensure accountability. This system combines so-called liberal institutions (providing a framework of checks and balances that limit both majority rule and executive power) with a reinforcing political culture and pluralistic civil society that together guarantee the rule of law while ensuring that policy follows the considered preferences of public will. Liberal democracy thus operates as both a political culture for regulating behavior within the system and an institutional framework for governance.[2]

The liberal international order connotes a world system that is open and rule-based, structured by norms and principles, such as multilateralism, by regimes, such as treaties and conventions (on different issues from international humanitarian law, to non-proliferation. and climate change), and by institutions, such as the United Nations and the International Financial Institutions. The system was developed after the second World War and mirrors the power balance at the time, for example when it comes to Security Council privileges and voting rights in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Liberal in this context refers to political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberalism as a theory of international relations. However, not only are the three components characterized by constant tensions, the system no longer mirrors the current global balance of power – and is therefore contested.[3]

2 See also W. Merkel and A. Luhrmann, “Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges,” *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021), pp. 869-884; M. Cas and C. Kaltwasser, “Populism and (liberal) democracy: A framework for analysis,” in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, eds. C. Mudde and C. Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1-26.

3 See also H. Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order?,” *German Marshall Fund of the United States* 3, no. 5, 2017.

Definition of Terms (cont.)

Illiberalism is a strain of political culture, a set of institutional reforms (such as assaults on an independent judiciary) and broader societal processes (such as declining trust in liberal democratic institutions) that, over the past two decades, has emerged in response to liberalism as experienced by various countries. Only few adherents of illiberalism call themselves illiberal. They argue that in the face of a liberalism that has "gone too far" it is time to reassert the rights of the collective, or of an alleged silent majority, by restoring national sovereignty in various spheres: politically, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favor of the nation-state and preferring a strong leader with broad powers over a parliamentary system (or a strong, independent judiciary); economically, through at least partial protectionism; culturally, by rejecting multiculturalism and minority rights in favor of an essentialist definition of the nation, its members, and its "genuine" cultural attributes. While illiberal democracies are comprised of democratic elements, such as elections, plebiscitary features, such as the (unlimited) re-election of heads of state and governments and referendums, erode institutional checks and balances on the executive authority. Often, media freedom and civil society space are curbed, endangering the protection of citizens' rights and liberties. Illiberal theorists and protagonists claim that such measures make a system more rather than less democratic by ensuring majority rule.Illiberal attitudes are manifested on both the left and right of the political spectrum.[4]

Populism connotes a way of political leadership in which the leader (of a party, a government, or movement) claims to represent the common people. Populists often depict "the people" as a morally good force and contrast them with "the elite", who are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving. Characteristically, they describe the political, economic, cultural, and media establishment as "the elite", depicted as a homogeneous entity and accused of placing its own interests (and often the interests of other groups, such as large corporations, foreign countries, or immigrants) above the interests of "the people". Populist parties and social movements are often led by charismatic, dominant figures who claim to be the voice of the people. Typically, populist approaches include the promotion of political polarization and social mobilization, the personalization of politics, the concentration of power and the dismantling of institutional checks and balances, as well as the restriction of pluralism, of opposition and minority rights, while emphasizing the importance of majoritarian rule. Populists can be found along the left-right political spectrum; there exist both left-wing populism and right-wing populism.[5]

4 See also M. Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction"; J. Dozier, "What exactly is 'illiberal democracy?'," 28, no. 5, 2016; F. Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6, 1997, pp. 22-43.

5 See the definition for populist governance (in German) in: K. Lang and C. Zilla, "Kein Aufwind für populistisches Regieren in Corona-Zeiten," *Internationale Politik unter Pandemiebedingungen, Tendenzen und Perspektiven für 2021*, eds. B. Lippert, S. Mair, and V. Perthes (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2020). See also C. Mudde and C. Kaltwasser, *Populism, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); C. R. Kaltwasser et. al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); J. Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

The **political right** is a body of political thought based on the view that certain social orders and hierarchies are natural or the result of traditional social differences or of the competition in market economies, and thus inevitable, normal, or even desirable. Right-wing theorists and politicians nowadays usually advocate free enterprise and private ownership, typically favor socially traditional ideas, and have a nationalist rather than internationalist outlook. The far right or extremist right typically is illiberal, volkish (i.e. ethno-national), and at times critical of capitalism. It also aspires to a new social order rather than being conservative in its approach. In Israel, while right-wing refers also to socially conservative politics, it is less aligned with stances on the economy but rather with views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Right-wing politicians prefer hawkish policies towards the Palestinians rather than territorial concessions in a land-for-peace context.[6]

6 See also N. Bobbio, *Left and Right, The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); T. Bale and C. Kaltwasser, eds., *Riding the Populist Wave, Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); K. Blee and K. Creasap, "Conservative and Right-Wing Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, no. 1 (2010), pp. 269-286.

Chapter 1

Democratic Backsliding: Challenges to Domestic Order and Foreign Relations in the European Union and Israel

Eyal Ronen

Introduction

Democratic backsliding has been gaining momentum in the past two decades, taking a heavy toll on the global order, civil societies, rights and liberties, as well as foreign relations of nations. It has also hampered nations' efforts to effectively cope with worldwide crises, conflicts and other mounting challenges. First, the article seeks to portray the driving forces behind the rapid expansion of illiberal democratic regimes and explore the extent to which they are manifested both on the domestic and external affairs fronts. The setup in the European Union (EU) and the state of Israel is explored to exemplify the findings. The article uncovers similar trends among illiberal regimes adversely affecting the rule of law, human rights and civil society organizations, as well as the public discourse. Second, it reveals the firm and worrisome linkage between the upsurge of illiberal regimes and the decline in international diplomatic cooperation. Finally, the article warns that the continued strengthening of these processes could damage the democratic fabric within countries and external relations with other nations. Furthermore, it has already and may further jeopardize the world's ability to deal effectively with global challenges, in turn contributing to the rise of more illiberal movements, thus triggering an irreversible snowball.

Democratic Backsliding

The optimism spurred by many, including Fukuyama, over "a third wave of democratization" three decades ago was apparently premature.[7] Liberal democratic values since then are under

7 S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

constant attack by various populist political forces, mainly, but not exclusively, from right-wing parties and their leaders. The rise of these political actors represents not only a short-term win in an ideological battle nor a slight deviation from the existing "liberal order". It marks an incremental erosion of the foundations on which the universal democratic system had rested since the second half of the 20th century. Interestingly, many of these radical actors accessed positions of political power in the first place only due to those core democratic principles. Moreover, illiberal leaders actively seek to consolidate unprecedented state power in their hands while contesting the rule of law and judicial systems' independence. They dedicate efforts to the shrinkage of independent media channels and the freedom of civil society organizations while violating fundamental rights and liberties that have been laboriously achieved over decades.

Evidence of the accelerating pace of autocratization has been piling up in recent years. It provides an opportunity to analyze how democratic backsliding is gaining momentum and explore its influence over various political and social domains. Predominantly, accumulated data validates the disturbing state of democracy worldwide, which is at its worst status since 2006.[8] Nowadays, elected and closed autocracies are home to 68% of the world's population.[9] Sadly, this situation prevails not only in countries with weak democratic foundations, but likewise exists on a broader scale as "electoral autocracy" remains the most common type of regime. The democratic erosion affects many countries considered developed, including the United States, Japan, EU Member States and others. The mounting public interest in "democratic backsliding" as identified in the number of mentions in Google Scholar results and in academic research serves as an additional confirmation of its prevalence.[10]

Nonetheless, a comparative analysis of the state of liberal democratic values and norms in the EU highlights the heterogeneity amid EU Member States. The erosion is found mainly among new EU Member States from Eastern and Central Europe (Figure 1). Yet, the weakening of liberal democracy characteristics over the past two decades is a worrisome trend. This trajectory demonstrates how democracies do not collapse in one stroke, but rather decline gradually. The sharpest drop in democratic quality, according to Freedom House, is found in Hungary which was downgraded dramatically from the category of a democracy to "transitional/hybrid regime", and Poland to "semi-consolidated democracy".[11] This trend is evident not only among new EU Member States, but also in economically developed founding members of the European bloc. Figure 2 illustrates the downturn in most EU Members States during the past two decades. The Economist provides supportive evidence for this democratic setback when identifying 18 EU Member States as "flawed democracies".[12]

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8 The Economist, "Global Democracy in Retreat," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 21 January 2020.

9 V-Dem, "Autocratization Turns Viral Democracy Report 2021," *Varieties of Democracies*, 2021.

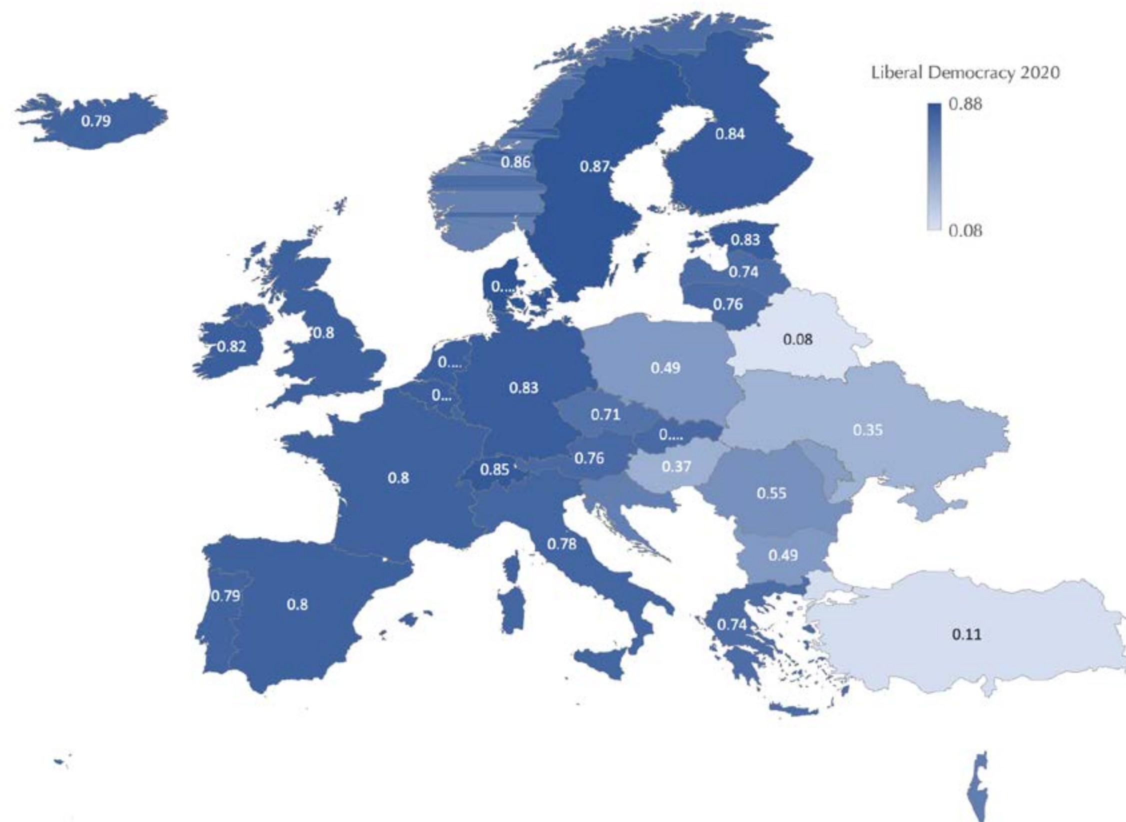
10 S. Guriev, and E. Papaioannou, "The Political Economy of Populism," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 21 November 2020.

11 The term "transitional or hybrid regimes" is used typically to represent electoral democracies where democratic institutions are fragile, and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist. The term "semi-consolidated democracies" describes electoral democracies that exhibit weaknesses in their defense of political rights and civil liberties. See C. Zselyke, "Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Façade," *Freedom House*, 2020.

12 The term "flawed democracy" is used by the Economist Intelligence Unit in its Democracy Index to describe nations where elections are fair and free and basic civil liberties are honored. Nevertheless, issues such as media freedom infringement and minor suppression of political opposition and critics may appear. These nations may also have significant faults in other democratic aspects, including an underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics, and issues in the functioning of governance. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020.*

The growing political influence of illiberal populist movements in the EU is not limited only to their national arenas, but also extends to the European Parliament (EP), where the number of populist members is estimated at approximately one-fifth of the chamber, particularly since the Lisbon treaty came into force in late 2009, granting the EP more co-decision powers and an equal footing with the European Council. Moreover, internal changes in the rules and in the nature of the EP have increased the roles of the political groups, compared to individual members of the EP (MEPs).[13] Thus, while radical-right populists were less successful than anticipated in the EP election of 2019, the true impact of radical right populism reaches beyond the formal institutions and dynamics of the Parliament's political groups.[14]

FIGURE 1: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX IN EU MEMBER STATES



Source: Author's calculation based on V-Dem 2021 data.

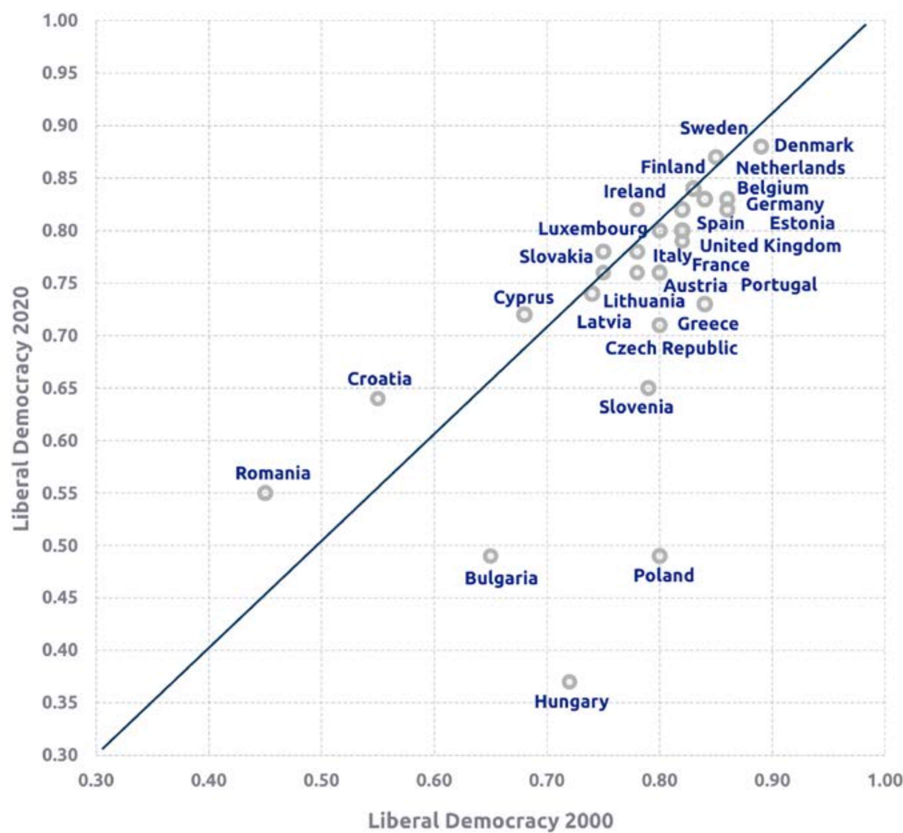
A similar trend of slow erosion of liberal democratic norms has taken place in the State of Israel during the past 12 years under Netanyahu's premiership. This trend is manifested, inter alia, by the undermining and intimidation of civil society, discriminatory legislation against minorities,

13 N. Brack, *Opposing Europe in the European Parliament* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

14 J. Kantola and C. Miller, "Party Politics and Radical Right Populism in the European Parliament: Analysing Political Groups as Democratic Actors," *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2021), pp. 1-21.

targeting the tools of protest, attacking the media and judiciary while establishing the political and legal foundation for permanent annexation of both land and people.[15] Moreover, since the criminal indictment of former Prime Minister Netanyahu, the erosion of the characteristics of democracy has become more tangible.[16] This decay is clearly demonstrated in Israel's ranking on the Liberal Democracy Index, which has dropped significantly during this period. Following four decades during which Israel's score hovered around 0.65, a gradual decline over the past decade left the country with a score of 0.57. A noticeable fact emerges when Israel is compared to other developed countries. For many years, up to the early 1990s, Israel was ranked significantly higher than the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in the Liberal Democracy Index. Yet, Israel's recent democratic setback led to a trend reversal and the formation of a "relative deficit" in its democratic values compared to advanced countries with which it associates.[17]

FIGURE 2: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN EU MEMBER STATES, 2020 VS 2000



Source: Author's calculation based on V-Dem 2021 data.

15 D. Scheindlin, "The Logic behind Israel's Democratic Erosion," *The Century Foundation*, 29 May 2019.

16 D. Horovitz, "The Weakening of Israeli Democracy," *The Times of Israel*, 27 February 2018.

17 E. Ronen and R. Kibrik, "The Toll of Democratic Regression on Israeli Foreign Policy," *Mitvim Institute*, February 2021.

Determinant Factors

The triggers for the global democratic recession and proliferation of illiberal populist forces and regimes, attracts increasing scholarly attention in recent years. The existing research identifies multiple driving factors affecting these processes, among them the inequality in distribution of income and wealth due to globalization,[18] global climate change, migration flows, as well as the erosion of civic values resulting in a cultural backlash.[19] Moreover, ethnic conflicts and fractious geopolitics, particularly the tectonic shift of balance by dominant great powers such as the United States, China and Russia. are further fueling these trends.

In the EU, the rise of illiberal populist and Eurosceptic parties has occurred mainly in the context of the European debt and migration crisis.[20] Yet, a strong correlation is also found between the likelihood of voting for a populist party and key motives such as negative attitudes towards European integration as well as the lack of confidence in EU political objectives and institutions.[21] Whereas the success of illiberal populist parties is found across many EU Member States, it seems that certain countries like Poland and Hungary de facto diverge from the EU's democratic norms compared to others. Nonetheless, Eastern and Central European parties have some unique characteristics which distinguish them from their Western European counterparts. Among these differences are their historic left-leaning economic positions, the linkages between identity and political opening leading to the association of minority policies with democratization, and the coexistence of right-wing parties with radicalized mainstream parties.[22]

The ebb of liberal democracy is a result of many global crises and challenges. Yet, has the upsurge of illiberal political forces made it easier to deal with universal challenges or has it proposed more effective solutions to tackle these matters? Unfortunately, the world has become more divided than ever, and erosion of mutual solidarity among nations has deepened even further. Moreover, evidence from the past two decades shows that the world's most urgent problems have only been intensified. Various examples can be put forward. Climate change has generated more severe natural disasters than ever,[23] yet sufficient measures were hardly put in place. Economic inequality among countries, and particularly within populations, has risen. Anti-globalization trends and protectionism seemed to prevail even before the COVID-19 crisis broke out.[24] Moreover, although China was accused by the Trump Administration of unfair trade practices, the trade war that Trump initiated eventually caused greater economic damage, mostly for its own supporters.[25] Security and stability, as shown by the Global Peace

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18 D. Rodrik, "Why does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2020.

19 P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

20 M. Kneuer, "The Tandem of Populism and Euroscepticism: A Comparative Perspective in the Light of the European Crises," *Contemporary Social Science* 14 (January 2018), pp. 26-42.

21 C. Dustmann et al, *Europe's Trust Deficit. Causes and Remedies* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2017).

22 L. Buštíková, "The Radical Right in Eastern Europe," *The Oxford handbook of the Radical Right*, 2018.

23 World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Global Climate 2020*, 2021.

24 I. Douglas, "The Pandemic Adds Momentum to the Deglobalization Trend," Peterson Institute for International Economics, 23 April 2020.

25 P. Fajgelbaum et al., "The Return to Protectionism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 135, no. 1 (2020), pp. 1-55.

Index, has also deteriorated during nine of the past 12 years.[26] Another proof of the erosion in mutual solidarity is found in the decline in the level of global foreign aid contributions to developing countries.[27]

The COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a litmus test for examining the repercussions of the populist approach. With millions of people dying from the virus and nearly the entire world at risk, populist leaders were among the worst performers in fighting against the spread of the virus.[28] The waning international cooperation highlighted the adverse effects of the pandemic on global resilience and public health. While the rapid virus spread hit virtually all nations simultaneously, there was hardly any multilateral joint effort to solve the crisis. On the contrary, national border closures and temporary restrictive measures were put in place, while countries began competing for medical protective equipment and later to develop or be the first to purchase vaccines. Inseparably, the pandemic also hit the global economy, and states chose to use protectionist policies. Along with financial incentives for local companies, countries placed various trade restrictions on shipments of medical goods, including masks. When ultimately vaccines were approved, the acquisition competition between countries intensified, leaving emerging countries with a minor share of the vaccines.[29] Recent data show that while over 60% of the world population has received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, fewer than 10% of the people in low-income countries have received one dose of the vaccine.[30] The world's handling of the pandemic seems like a race in opposite directions arising out of conflicting interests and without a responsible adult in charge.

In Europe, despite dramatic damage by the virus in many Member States and a relatively slow start in providing vaccines to its citizens – EU solidarity still outweighs national interests. The Eurobarometer survey shows that more than 90% of Europeans think that their country should provide help when a disaster strikes in another EU country when the disaster is too big to deal with on their own.[31] It also provides evidence of high confidence in EU crisis management. Particularly when it involves EU measures to increase living and working security in times of pandemic crisis, the rise of trust in EU institutions is accompanied by a drop in the confidence in national governments.[32]

Domestic Challenges

The illiberal agenda and populist values are promoted in the national sphere through various channels. First, constitutional amendments are carried out mainly against the judicial systems, media freedom and academia, or other institutional checks and balances essential to an effective system of democratic governance and the rule of law. Often, these measures are complemented

26 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World* (Sydney: The Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020).

27 T. Heinrich et al., "Populism and Foreign Aid," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 4 (May 2021), pp. 1042-1066.

28 M. McKee et al., "Are Populist Leaders Creating the Conditions for the Spread of COVID-19?," *International Journal of Health Policy and Management* 10, no. 8 (July 2020), pp. 511-515.

29 G. Selam and M. Apuzzo, "Rich Countries Signed Away a Chance to Vaccinate the World," *New York Times*, 21 March 2021, Updated 25 March 2021.

30 "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations," *Our World in Data*, accessed 20 January 2022.

31 European Commission, "EU Civil Protection," *Eurobarometer*, 2021.

32 Eurofound, "Living, working and COVID-19," (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020).

by efforts aimed at the deconstruction of public administration systems.[33] Second, a great effort is directed at suppressing civil society space, which is perceived as a threat to the government and the norms it seeks to promote. Third, dissemination of emotion-driven populist discourse, which blames the opposition “elites”, migrants, and “the other”, in general, is another avenue of action common to illiberal regimes. It allows attacks on political rivals but also undermines election legitimacy and preserves leaders’ dominance over time.

Constitutional reforms are intentioned to deconstruct the old institutional order, develop a substantive project rooted in a critique of that order, and consolidate power in the hands of populist leaders.[34] In turn, these changes undermine the rule of law and undermine trust in the democratic system and institutions. While some efforts are directed towards the justice systems, others jeopardize media pluralism or academic autonomy. In EU Member States, these reforms take many forms. For instance, both the Polish and Hungarian governments took steps to diminish judicial independence through measures that lowered judges’ mandatory retirement age and controlled judicial appointments. Other efforts, for instance in Hungary, are directed at limiting independent media freedom and creating national media monopoles to control the political narrative. Consequently, since Prime Minister Orbán came to power in 2010, Hungary has dropped from the 23rd place in the Annual Press Freedom Index, to the 89th place (Reporters Without Borders).[35] In April 2021, the Hungarian parliament voted to transfer 11 public universities and cultural institutions to the control of public foundations led by government-appointed boards of trustees.[36]

The space granted to civil society organizations (CSO), especially those that promote liberal values, protect human rights, or challenge state policies, is increasingly constrained by governments.[37] Restrictive laws on CSO and foreign donors are increasingly gaining traction. Anti-NGO laws, arbitrary inspections, harassment, and criminalization all strike at the roots of civic action.[38] Not only the measures themselves, but the underlying mindset that depicts CSOs as enemies rather than allies of the state represent an “ideological pandemic”.[39] Moreover, local civil society often depends on foreign donors, and a withdrawal or even aid reduction heavily impact their activities.[40]

Populist rhetoric by illiberal leaders has become more pronounced in public discourse over the past two decades. Rather than confronting competing ideologies or political opponents, illiberal regimes require constant combat against “enemies”, both internal and external,

33 M. Bauer et al., *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration: How Populists in Government Transform State Bureaucracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

34 D. Landau, “Populist Constitutions,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 85 (2018), pp. 521-43.

35 E. Zalan, “Szájer 'Sex Party' Coverage Shows Orbán's Media Control,” *EUobserver*, 3 December 2020.

36 J. Spike, “Hungary’s Parliament Overhauls Higher Education amid Outcry,” *Associated Press*, 27 April 2021.

37 T. Sultan and A. Rubin, “The Shrinking Space of the Third Sector in Israel and Turkey,” in *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, eds. A. Sever and O. Almog (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 39-59.

38 A. Buyse, “Squeezing Civic Space: Restrictions on Civil Society Organizations and the Linkages with Human Rights,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 8 (2018), pp. 966-988.

39 “Lawful Civil Society Groups Are Not Enemies of Democracy, But Key Allies, Says UN Expert,” *UN News*, 26 October 2015.

40 C. Pallas and M. Sidel, “Foreign Aid Reduction and Local Civil Society: Recent Research and Policy Guidance for Donors and International NGOs,” *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 11, no. 1 (2020).

together with the forces they represent.[41] The strategy is manifested in a sustained flexibility with the truth, and in identifying friends and enemies of "the people".[42] This rhetoric is used to smear media reporting as "fake", academic scholars as "elitist", immigrants as violent and illegal, and in general "the other" as the source of all evil. Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic terms like "raid", "conquest" and "penetration" are often used in Poland and Hungary.[43] This rhetoric is particularly powerful when promoting emotion-oriented discourse based on social anger, moral satiety, and distrust of elites and the establishment.[44] This is in part because being elected to office and becoming the country's governing elite risks undermining the core anti-establishment message.[45] Often, illiberal leaders deliberately employ such identity politics to turn latent attitudes among citizens into votes.[46]

The COVID-19 emergency provided the opportunity for authoritarian powers to exert increasing influence and gain excessive power by curtailing human rights, weakening the rule of law, diminishing the role of parliaments, limiting media freedom, inciting against minority groups, disinformation campaigns that target pro-EU reforms and values, and harming international cooperation.[47] Yet, illiberal and authoritarian practices used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were not correlated with better public health outcomes.[48] Moreover, when danger strikes as it did in the current pandemic, citizens tend to support extraordinary government measures or provide their leaders with "regulatory carte blanche".[49] Political authorities of an illiberal democracy usually react faster, and their citizens' attitude toward new restrictions is more accepting. Still, in some cases, such action also triggered pushback against illiberalism, mobilizing citizens in defense of democratic resilience, as was the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.[50]

Israel's previous government introduced anti-pandemic measures primarily through an unprecedented number of emergency measures that bypassed the Knesset (parliament).[51] These measures include authorization for Israel's internal security agency to track citizens by using cellphone surveillance developed for counterterrorism. By tracking people's movements, the government could punish those who defied isolation orders with up to six months in prison. Moreover, by ordering the closing of the nation's courts due to the pandemic, former

41 W. A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018), pp. 5-19.

42 A. Vachudova, "Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe," *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020), pp. 318-340.

43 E. M. Goździak and P. Márton, "Where the Wild Things are: Fear of Islam and the Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Hungary and in Poland," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 7, no. 2 (2018), pp. 125-151.

44 E. Block and R. Negrine, "The Populist Communication Style: Toward a Critical Framework," *International Journal of Communication Systems* 11, (2017), pp. 178-197.

45 D. Cadier, "How Populism Spills Over into Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Europe*, 10 January 2019.

46 T. A. Börzel and T. Risse, "From the euro to the Schengen crises: European integration theories, politicization, and identity politics," *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 1 (2017), pp. 83-108.

47 European Parliament, *EU REPORT on the Foreign Policy Consequences of the COVID-19 Outbreak*, 2020.

48 A. B. Edgell et al., "Pandemic Backsliding: Violations of Democratic Standards During COVID-19," *Social Science & Medicine* 285 (2021), pp. 114-244.

49 K. Brzechczyn, "The Coronavirus in Liberal and Illiberal Democracies and the Future of Globalized World," *Society Register* 4, no. 2 (2020), pp. 83-94.

50 P. Gausti, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe: The Rise of Autocracy and Democratic Resilience," *Democratic Theory*, 7, no. 2 (2020), pp. 47-60.

51 R. Noah, "Using Counterterrorism for Fighting the Pandemic: Israel During the Days of COVID-19," Oxford University Criminology Center, 19 June 2020.

Prime Minister Netanyahu managed to delay his own scheduled appearance in court.[52] In addition, although Netanyahu made a significant contribution to Israel's phenomenal success in vaccinating most of its residents, pandemic restrictions were used for his political survival efforts.[53] Moreover, attempts to introduce constitutional changes to narrow the judiciary's independence, as well as frequent elections, were aimed at strengthening the continued control by national right-wing governments. They added to the steadily shrinking space for Israel's civil society and human rights organizations.[54] The public discourse, which was characterized by populism and de-legitimization of liberal-democratic values, permeated the education system.[55] Nationalist CSOs that promote aggressive political and media campaigns against human right organizations benefitted from firm support by the Israeli government.[56] Netanyahu claimed he was a victim of a conspiracy by the press, law enforcement and the legal system to unseat him.[57]

The inauguration of the "Government of Change" in June 2021 after 12 consecutive years of Netanyahu's premiership marked a new era of hope and opportunity for a fundamental change of direction from the prevailing illiberal path. Nevertheless, the new government under Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid's shared leadership also raises many concerns and questions. First, it is unclear whether its fragile structure will even hold up for long. This is mainly due to the narrow support for Prime Minister Bennett in parliament and the lack of common denominator across the wide range of coalition parties other than the anti-Netanyahu sentiment holding them together. It also raises the question of whether Prime Minister Bennett, the leader of Israel's right-wing Yamina party, has undergone a political or ideological transformation. More importantly, it begs the question of the extent to which the new government can implement a more liberal policy that reflects the position of broad sections of its coalition rather than simply avoiding controversial issues and maintaining the status-quo. Another unknown is how the change of government affects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's relations with global partners.

A few matters became apparent in the past few months since the formation of the new government. First, Israel's coalition is significantly more heterogeneous, spanning the political spectrum and comprising both far-right and left parties, and even for the first time, an Arab party. Another source of optimism stems from the increase in women's representation in the current government to nine of the 28 ministers. Second, the implementation of policy measures follows multiple consultations reflecting broad consensus rather than narrow political considerations and personal legal concerns. The new government has also bolstered the role and status of the civil service and public administration. The use of populist rhetoric by leading

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52 S. Gebrekidan "For Autocrats, and Others, Coronavirus Is a Chance to Grab Even More Power," *New York Times*, 30 March 2020, Updated April 14 2020.

53 A. Harel, "Israel's Ambitious Vaccine Drive Is Set for Success as Netanyahu Seeks Election Campaign Boost," *Haaretz*, 29 December 2020.

54 M. Asseburg, "Shrinking Spaces in Israel: Contraction of Democratic Space, Consolidation of Occupation, and Ongoing Human Rights Violations Call for a Paradigm Shift in Europe's Policies," (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2017).

55 H. Pinson, "Neo Zionist Right-Wing Populist Discourse and Activism in the Israel Education System," *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 2021, pp. 1-14.

56 A. Jamal, "The Rise of 'Bad Civil Society' in Israel: Nationalist Civil Society Organizations and the Politics of Delegitimization," (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2018).

57 "As his trial begins, Netanyahu rails against 'attempted political coup'," *The Times of Israel*, 24 May 2020.

political figures against institutions, civic organizations, and individuals has also declined, as the political discourse becomes less divisive than in the previous governments. These positive signs, along with others, may offer a sense of relief, but the path to rectifying failures deeply rooted in the Israeli democratic system is still paved with considerable challenges.

Foreign Affairs

The extent to which erosion of domestic liberal democratic values spills over into the foreign policy domain and multilateral governance is dynamic. Naturally, foreign policy decision-making is derived from internal political processes and interests. In countries where political leaders govern in a populist fashion, they often have a more significant foothold in shaping foreign policy.[58] Moreover, overprioritizing domestic politics usually indulge in "undiplomatic" strategies that can lead to more confrontational approaches in addressing global challenges rather than a more collaborative path.[59]

Nevertheless, illiberal populist leaders in power are not necessarily more belligerent or less willing to engage globally than their non-populist predecessors. Some cases prove the opposite, i.e. rather than changing course entirely, they reinforce existing trends, especially a tendency towards diversifying international partnerships.[60] Frequently, political leaders employ instrumental approaches rather than conflictual strategies, similar to other world leaders.[61] Moreover, it has been proved that although certain EU illiberal populist leaders can be vocal and conspicuous in rhetorically aligning with external powers that contest the international liberal order, they rarely translate these positions into a concrete and determined policy at the EU level.[62]

The policy positions of European illiberal populist parties span a wide range of topics, based on their ideologies and values. These include the opposition to immigration, a national sovereignty focus, rejection of economic and cultural globalization, Euroscepticism or policies on Russia, China and America. European populist parties can be divided into three categories based on their stance on major foreign policy issues. Atlanticist nationalists are often hawkish with regards to the United States, Russia, and China (British UKIP, Polish PiS, Estonia's EKRE, Netherlands' FvD and PVV). The Continental nationalists are critical of NATO and Western militarism, tend to be pro-Russia, but do no share positions on China (Hungary's FIDESZ, France's RN, the Italian Lega and Austrian FPÖ, Germany's AfD and Finland's Finns). The Anti-imperialist internationalists group, which subscribes to left-populist approaches, tends to distrust NATO, military interventions and the United States, but is more sympathetic to Russia (Greece's SYRIZA, Spain's PODEMOS and La France Insoumise).[63] Two additional major factors affect pan-European foreign policy. One is the alliances between political regimes that share

58 B. Özyuksel, "Populism in Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process," *Avrasya Sosyal ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8, no. 1 (2021), pp. 146-160.

59 D. Cadier, "How Populism Spills Over into Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Europe*, 10 January 2019.

60 S. Destradi and J. Plagemann, "Populism and International Relations:(Un) Predictability, Personalisation, and the Reinforcement of Existing Trends in World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019), pp. 711-730.

61 Ö. Özdamar and E. Ceydilek, "European Populist Radical Right Leaders' Foreign Policy Beliefs: An Operational Code Analysis," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (2020), pp. 137-162.

62 D. Cadier, and C. Lequesne, How Populism Impacts EU Foreign Policy, *EU-LISTCO Policy Paper Series*, no. 8 (2020).

63 A. Chryssogelos, "Is There a Populist Foreign Policy?," *Chatham House*, 2021.

political ideological proximity, as in the Visegrád Group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia).[64] The second factor involves the affiliation between national political parties and European Parliament groups, boosting their political leverage in the external arena, too.[65]

A different approach was recently developed to exploring the relationship between democratic characteristics and various indicators representing inputs and outputs related to OECD members' foreign affairs policies.[66] Using a comparative analysis that covers a time span of two decades, it finds significant correlation between the state of liberal democracy and nations' performance in the global foreign affairs sphere. This underlines the diminishing likelihood of illiberal democracies engaging in diplomatic endeavors, as shown by the Political Globalization Index depicting the distribution of national embassies and representatives, actions to promote bilateral and multilateral agreements and more. Likewise, the probability of deploying soft power practices, contributing to foreign aid, and advancing peace or achieving desired security objectives increases with the ranking on the Liberal Democracy Index.

In Israel, the past decade's regression in liberal democracy is particularly found to be associated with indices representing major foreign policy inputs. The deliberate weakening of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in recent years also contributed greatly to this outcome. Israeli foreign policy was steered almost exclusively by then-Prime Minister Netanyahu without appointing a full-time minister for several years. When a foreign minister was finally appointed in May 2020, Netanyahu left him out of the loop of the Abraham Accords until they became a done deal.[67] Foreign policy hardly attracts attention in Israel's political sphere. In the four consecutive elections held within two years, Israel's most urgent challenge, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was barely present in political discourse. Political parties rarely offer a coherent policy in this area and on issues concerning Israel's international status or the quality and scope of its relations with countries of the world.[68] That is also the case with Israel's position on relations with the United States, China, Russia or on collaboration with regional partners. Sadly, there are almost no voices or discussions heard on these issues. Unsurprisingly, such developments have an adverse impact not only on Israel's reputation and international standing, but on prospects of achieving a diplomatic breakthrough in the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians.

The post-Netanyahu era and particularly the formation of the new government could also offer a new horizon in terms of Israel's external relations. Although ideologically polarized, the government can restore foreign relations with countries key to its future and prosperity. The Biden Administration, which marks a change of trend in democratic erosion in the United States, may also provide a tailwind for a new form of partnership between both countries. This could possibly also reverse the alliance with populist authoritarian regimes with which the

64 E. Ronen and N. Goren, "Divisive Policies. Israel's Foreign Policy towards the EU and its Member States. Israel's Foreign Policy towards the EU and its Member States," in *Divided and Divisive: Europeans, Israel and Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*, eds. M. Asseburg and N. Goren (Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs & PAX, 2019).

65 S.C. Hofmann and B. Martill, "The Party Scene: New Directions for Political Party Research in Foreign Policy Analysis," *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021), pp. 305-322.

66 E. Ronen and R. Kibrik, "The Toll of Democratic Regression on Israeli Foreign Policy," *Mitvim Institute*, 2021.

67 "Netanyahu Said Forced to Scramble for Ashkenazi's Okay to Sign UAE Peace Deal," *The Times of Israel*, 15 September 2020.

68 R. Kibrik, "Foreign relations in Israel's election campaigns," *Haaretz*, 3 March 2021.

previous leaders allied their two countries. It can also support efforts to restore and establish better relations between Israel and the Palestinians. The first signs of a shift from the approach of previous Israeli governments are beginning to appear gradually, as reflected in the vision set forth by Foreign Minister Lapid in his public speeches and his intentions to strengthen the Foreign Ministry's standing.[69] Lapid's efforts to restore ties with the EU, and his decision to hold his maiden European visit in Brussels, calling for renewal of the Association Council between Israel and the EU that has not convened for over a decade, support this trend.[70] Major efforts are also being made to significantly recalibrate Israel's ties with Jordan, including a meeting between Defense Minister Gantz and Jordan's King Abdullah in Amman.[71] This complements Gantz's announcement of a series of gestures vis-à-vis the Palestinians when he hosted PA President Abbas at his home in what was the Palestinian leader's first meeting in Israel in over a decade.[72]

Conclusion

In the past two decades, the erosion of global democracy has intensified while liberal democracy values face an unprecedented onslaught. The upsurge in the popularity of illiberal movements alongside the rise to power of autocratic leaders, and the manner in which they conduct domestic and foreign policy, are key manifestations of this trend. Various global challenges serve as driving factors responsible for this trend, including climate change, economic crises, geopolitical conflicts, health epidemics and others. In practice, these challenges contribute to the rise of illiberal actors and often are exploited to fortify these leaders' dominance and act against political opponents. To that end, specific measures are implemented, including constitutional reforms affecting mainly the judiciary system and the foundations of the rule of law; the shrinkage of civic society space and media independence; attacks against human rights defenders and the usage of populist rhetoric against "the other". Naturally, these actions are taken within the national sphere. Nonetheless, efforts are also expanded internationally beyond domestic borders via the implementation of foreign policy, which consists of more confrontational strategies. Consequently, these actions only exacerbate democratic decay within countries and adversely affect foreign relations among nations. The article provides several examples from the EU and Israel to demonstrate the dwindling of liberal democratic norms and its manifestation across domestic and external fronts.

Yet, the worldwide challenges have not disappeared; rather, they have deepened and threaten to escalate in the absence of collaborative efforts to find effective solutions, particularly for the most vulnerable parts of the globe. Thus, the emergence of illiberal actors contests the world order and even more worrisome, poses a significant hurdle to confronting urgent global challenges. Solving such problems requires even further consensus-seeking solutions among country leaders in the multilateral arena. Otherwise, the international political system risks a descent into turmoil. In other words, the same global challenges that contributed to the rise of illiberal political leaders often generate a spillover from the national sphere back to the

69 "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hand-Over Ceremony," *Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs*," 14 June 2021.

70 L. Berman, "Stressing New Coalition's Liberal Values, Lapid Looks to Revive Ties with EU," *The Times of Israel*, 12 July 2021.

71 A. Ahronheim, "Benny Gantz met with Jordan's King Abdullah II," *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 January 2022.

72 A. Boxerman and J. Magid, "Gantz Announces Series of Gestures to Palestinians After Meeting Abbas," *The Times of Israel*, 29 December 2021.

international arena. That, in turn, gives rise to more anti-democratic forces, inevitably forming a snowball more challenging to stop. Therefore, global challenges should be reminders of the urgent need to strengthen solidarity among countries, elect leaders who seek the unifier rather than inciting populist discourse, protect human rights and avoid further undermining of the fragile world governance.

Chapter 2

Democracy and Foreign Affairs in Israel

Ehud Eiran

Introduction

The following paper explores the relationship between Israel's democracy and its foreign policy. The paper begins by describing the current state of Israel's democracy and its foreign relations. It then investigates the effect and role of Israel's internal democratic makeup on its foreign policy, concluding that Israel's internal democratic make-up traditionally had a limited effect on Israeli foreign policy. This is, in part, because of Israel's institutional make-up in which the legislature is usually aligned with the preferences set by the executive because of the coalitional structure. The section also shows that Israel's realpolitik approach to foreign relations further limited the effect of a democratic ideational framework on the nation's foreign affairs. In the fourth section, the paper investigates the opposite direction of the causal arrow: how Israel's interaction with the world feeds back into the quality of its democracy. The section offers a complex picture. Initially, Israel was affected to a large degree by democratic-leaning international norms, such as the ones embodied in the UN Charter and the UN partition resolution. Moreover, Israel's choice to align itself with democratic great powers – France and then the United States – might have contributed to this approach. At the same time, the paper shows that significant aspects of Israel's democracy draw on internal sources rather than external interactions. The section also shows the changes in Israel's approach over time.

The State of Israel's Democracy

Israel has been a democracy, albeit not a perfect one, since it gained independence in 1948. Leaders are replaced through regular elections that are held on time (with two wartime

exceptions of short delays in 1948 and 1973). The judiciary is independent and provides decent protection to civil liberties. The Israeli Supreme Court awarded itself in 1995 the power to strike down legislation, or parts of it, passed by the Knesset (judicial review). This was in line, and affected by, the approach advances in the liberal democratic courts of the United States and Canada. With the Supreme Court's liberal-democratic approach, this power was seen as strengthening Israel's march in this direction. Moreover, the Israeli Supreme Court has a strong check on all activities of government agencies through the unique procedure of *Bagatz* (an acronym for the High Court of Justice) that allows petitions to the court by all persons affected by Israeli policies (including non-citizens), to challenge administrative actions of all state, and state-like bodies. For most of its years the legislature had a low electoral threshold (1-1.5%) that allowed diverse voices to be heard in the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). Though the electoral threshold is now higher (3.25%),[73] it still allows for effective representation of minorities.

The 2020 Freedom House Index defines Israel as "free", giving it a score of 76/100, with political rights graded 33/40 and 43/60 in civil liberties. This places it above most states in the international community, and in the medium to low end of the OECD ranking.[74] Israel's democratic political makeup is mostly a result of the path pursued by the Zionist institutions that preceded the state. The external environment created an incentive for the Zionist movement to become inclusive and collaborative through openness and coalitional arguments between Jewish factions that supported the general idea of creating a Jewish homeland in what is now Israel. Specifically, operating as a minority among world Jewry, and without the coercive power of the state – both in the Diaspora and in Israel/Palestine until 1948 – Zionists shaped a system that focused on representation and coalitional arrangements between diverse political parties. This allowed parties to attract participation, as membership was open to all Jews (men and women) and only entailed payment of a small fee to vote. Women could vote for the Zionist institutions since 1898. The structure further allowed parties with radically different visions for the state to bundle resources and bridge fundamental differences to work together to secure the common goal of creating a state.

The democratic political development, with all its limitations, was not a forgone path. Indeed, several variables should have led Israel to develop away from democracy. The Jewish proto-state, and later Israel, faced severe internal and external security challenges, including six major wars with neighboring Arab states, and multiple armed clashes with the Palestinian national movement. The state's security organizations play an outsized role in the decision-making process, enjoy limited parliamentary supervision, and a high level of public trust and support. The Israeli military (IDF) has been for many years the most trusted state institution with 90% of the public trusting it by 2019, though the figure declined to 81% by 2020.[75] Such limitations and external security concerns led in many other countries to sub-optimal conditions for democracy. Indeed, in some of Israel's neighboring states, such as Egypt and Syria, the

73 Between 1949 and 1992, the electoral threshold was 1% of the votes. Between 1992 and 2004 the threshold was 1.5%, and since 2014 it is 3.25%. See: The Knesset, *The Knesset Lexicon*. The change was initially critiqued by liberal circles as meant to block the representation of the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian minority. However, the net result was a unification of a number of Israeli-Arab-Palestinan parties and the communist party into a larger block (the Arab Joint List). The list survived even when the Islamist party Ra'am left it in the 2021 elections.

74 "Freedom in the World 2020," *Freedom House*.

75 "IDI's 2020 Democracy Index: Public Trust, Social Solidarity and Democracy in Danger," *Israel Democracy Institute*, 11 January 2021. The report does not explain this steep decline.

civilian leadership was replaced in military coups d'etat. In Israel, while securitization takes a toll, the military leadership is generally committed to democracy and the idea of civilian control. Indeed, the majority of generals who continued their public service in politics (after retirement) over the years chose to join left of center parties.

Another challenge is the fact that Israel's political elite and much of its population had no experience in democratic governance. Yet, the functional needs of the Zionist movement, the state's birth at a moment of global democratic triumph, and its alliance with global democratic powers (first the UK, then France and finally the United States), set Israel on a democratic path.

Beyond the historical and security vectors that could have challenged democracy, Israel's internal make-up posed, and indeed still poses, challenges for democracy, at least in the liberal sense. First, substantial portions of the Israeli public belong to religious (mostly Jewish and Muslim) traditional groups. Many of them hold world views that generally oppose equality for women. Most notably, Israel's ultra-religious Jewish parties, Yahadut Ha'Tora and Shas, that hold together 16 (out of a 120) seats in the 24th Knesset (elected in March 2021) never had a woman member of Knesset. The Islamist party Ra'am that is represented in the Knesset since 1996 and holds four seats in 24th Knesset (elected, as noted, in 2021) sent only one woman for a short time (in 2020-2021) to the parliament. Indeed, family law – mostly marriage and divorce – is still handled mainly through religious institutions which, generally speaking, discriminate against women and the LGBTQ* community. The important political role of ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties explains, in part, this lack of separation between church and state in Israel. Second, Israel is home to a large Israeli-Arab-Palestinian minority, which now comprises 21% of its citizenry.[76] The country's history of internal and external conflict with the local Palestinian population and with the greater Arab world, as well as its self-identification as a Jewish state, have led to an uneasy relationship between the Jewish-Israeli majority and Arab-Israeli-Palestinian minority. Though Israeli-Arab-Palestinians are formally full members of the political community, they were exposed to a higher level of social control by the state, are under-funded, and rarely had parliamentary representation as part of a governing coalition.[77] Indeed, between 1948 and 1966, large portions of Israel's Arab-Palestinian citizenry were kept under military rule within Israel's territorial boundaries.

Yet, despite these challenges, Israeli democracy took on more pronounced liberal colors in the 1990s. The decades-long conflict with the Arab world was easing, as sectors of Israel's elites turned more liberal. Israel's left - once socialist with a commitment to a collectivist ethos – moved closer to American liberal democratic values. The Israeli Parliament introduced legislation in 1992 and in 1994 that enshrined some fundamental civil liberties. The Supreme Court - already the leading champion of civil liberties in Israel - became even more active, and in 1995 it assumed, as noted, the powers of substantial judicial review (the power to repeal legislation). Armed with this power and status, the Supreme Court moved to protect a larger set of civil rights, becoming increasingly effective in constraining the executive branch.

76 "Israel's population on the eve of 2021," *Central Bureau of Statistics*, 31 December 2020.

77 In the 1950s to 1970s, many coalitions included small Arab parties that were seen as being controlled by the largest Jewish party, Mapai. Only in 2021, for the first time in the nation's history, an independent Arab party (Ra'am) became a formal member of a governing coalition.

However, by the 2010s, Israel's democracy was under strain. First and foremost, Israel's rule over the West Bank was not easing, contrary to the 1990s. The area was occupied in 1967 by Israel, but not legally annexed to it, as it was largely assumed that parts or all of it would be traded as part of a peace deal. The region is held under "temporary" military control and is governed by the laws of war and the legal doctrine of belligerent occupation,[78] such as the Geneva Convention. The 1990s saw an agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which has a semi-autonomous status in parts of the West Bank. It was assumed that the process would lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state, ending the legal inequality in the area. However, the parties failed to reach agreement. Between 2001-2004, a round of violence known as the Second Intifada left some 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians dead. Seen from 2021, there is no indication that Israel is moving towards relinquishing control over the region or awarding the local population full citizenship. Still, most international indices, and indeed many Israelis, see this challenge as external to Israeli society and therefore not a democratic deficit, perhaps akin to the temporary American occupations in Iraq or Afghanistan, which did not affect the quality of American democracy, generally speaking.[79] At the same time, Israel maintained control of the territory, leading in some sectors to a re-reading of Israel's history, suggesting that its democracy has been flawed for a far longer time.

Others argue that since the same government exercises its authority both in Israel and in the West Bank (albeit shared to an extent with the PA), the whole region should be seen as a single political unit. Seen from this perspective, Israel is no longer a democracy, as a large portion of the population under its control has limited political rights, while others (Palestinian citizens of Israel) enjoy some rights, but are still discriminated against.[80] This state of affairs is justified by many Israelis as a security necessity. The memories of the 2001-2004 violence, which included over 100 suicide bombing attacks on Israeli streets, are still shaping current political preferences. Another justification of this reality is Israel's self- reference as a Jewish state. A 2018 Basic Law (a law considered quasi-constitutional), defined Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and is seen by critics as enshrining non-democratic Jewish supremacy in the land.

A second challenge for Israeli liberal democracy is the weakening of the Supreme Court. Following its dominant role in the 1990s, conservative voices argued against it and tried to curb its influence. By doing so, Supreme Court opponents are adopting a majoritarian interpretation of democracy, suggesting that the Court is in fact challenging democracy as it forces the majority to accept liberal values that protect the minority.[81]

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78 A set of rules under international law that govern the conduct of an occupying force in an occupied land. The fundamental idea is that the physical occupation does not confer sovereignty and that the occupier is constrained in the powers that it can use in the occupied area.

79 The comparison is, of course, problematic due the length of the occupation, and the expansionist designs of sectors in Israel as manifested, among other things, by the settlement project. Nevertheless, it is illustrative of the mindset of those in Israel who believe that Israeli democracy is not compromised in any serious way by the occupation.

80 B'Tselem, "*A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid*," January 2021; Human Rights Watch, "*A Threshold Crossed*," April 2021. The two reports go further, stressing the discriminatory nature of the regime not only in the West Bank but also in Israel.

81 E. Eiran, "Revolution and Counter Revolution: The Israeli Supreme Court from the 1980's onward, 1980-2004," in *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, eds. I. Rabinovich and J. Reinharz (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), pp. 484-487.

A third challenge is the legacy of former Prime Minister Netanyahu. In power between 2009-2021 (following a first round as Prime Minister between 1996 and 1999), the Prime Minister adopted a semi-populist stance, attacking state institutions, especially the police and state prosecution. This, as part of his effort to deflect the political costs of a corruption trail he is facing. Moreover, between March 2019 and March 2021, Israelis went to the polls four times as the Prime Minister was unable to create a sustainable coalition. As part of his efforts to deal with the quagmire, Israel's Basic Laws (its de-facto constitution) were amended a number of times. Constitutional constraints on executive power were turned, therefore, into a tool by politicians to resolve immediate political crises. The former Prime Minister's corruption trials also revealed his role in trying to influence the media markets and shape them in a way that advances his political and personal goals, further weakening constraints on the executive's power.

Finally, Israel's democracy is also corroded by corruption. A 2011 Gallup poll showed that 85% of Israelis believe "there is corruption" in the country's business sector.[82] In a 2016 poll, 72% of Israelis believed that Israel is a corrupt country. Almost a quarter of these thought Israel is highly corrupt.[83] Scholars suggest that corruption erodes democracy: It diverts "resources from disadvantaged people [...] damages the rule of law, social justice and lowers the trust of citizens in political institutions and processes".[84] In 2014, for the first time in Israel's history, a former prime minister, Ehud Olmert, was convicted of corruption and sent to jail. In 2020, then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was put on trial for charges of corruption.

The State of Israel's Foreign Affairs

Against the backdrop of a challenged democracy, Israel's stature in the world is probably at its zenith. In a recent academic study on Israel's foreign policy, Amnon Aran suggested that "the end of the Cold War ushered in a new period in Israeli foreign relations, situating Israel in an unprecedentedly strong strategic situation".[85] After decades in which Israel was shunned by a large number of states, by spring 2021, it had diplomatic relations with 164 states and is represented abroad by 108 embassies and missions.[86] It is a member of the most relevant international institutions that emerged after the Second World War, such as the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the same time, Israel further felt strong enough to reject pressures to join international conventions and institutions that it felt would constrain it, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, and the International Criminal Court. Israel also joined the emerging economic institutions created more recently by China, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Israel, once under severe Arab economic boycott, is now an active participant in the world trade system. As of 2018, exports and imports accounted for some 60% of its GDP.[87]

82 F. Mualem, "85% of Israelis think that there is corruption in the business sector," *Globes*, 12 May 2012.

83 "72% of Israelis: The country is corrupt," *Mako*, 8 January 2016.

84 I. Kubbe and A. Engelbert, "Corruption and the Impact of Democracy," *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 70 (July 2017).

85 A. Aran, *Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 1.

86 "Israel's Diplomatic Missions Abroad: Status of relations," *Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. The list excludes four regional actors that recognized Israel in 2020: Bahrain, UAE, Sudan and Morocco.

87 "World Integrated Trade Solution: Israel trade statistics," *World Bank*.

Since its pre-state era, the Zionist movement, and later the state of Israel, attempted to secure a close alliance with a great power. Initially, the alliance was deemed crucial for securing international recognition for the Zionist endeavor and then for securing the existence of the state. Indeed, a 1917 British declaration, and the following British rule in the land, served as the political and institutional foundations of the state before the right was recognized by the UN in 1947. Following independence, by the mid-1950s Israel developed a close alliance with France, which seemed to have included French transfer of nuclear know-how that allowed Israel to develop a nuclear arsenal. As relations between the nations cooled by the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel was able to develop a close alliance with the United States. Boosted by strong domestic support, and shared regional goals that date back to the Cold War, Washington provided military, financial, and political support for Israel over the years. Indeed, Israel is the largest recipient of United States foreign aid since the Second World War. By 2020, it had received USD146 billion.[88] The two countries' close relationship does not include a formal treaty of alliance, such as the ones the United States has with Japan or South Korea. Nevertheless, both countries signed dozens of agreements that have institutionalized various aspects of the relationship.[89] In the security arena, for example, both nations signed Memorandums of Understanding in 1975,[90] 1981,[91] 1988[92] and 2016.[93] Since 1988, Israel has been designated by the United States as a major non-NATO ally.[94] American political support manifests itself, among other arenas, in steadfast assistance at the UN. American vetoes in the Security Council have shielded Israel from international pressures, among other things over the issue of Israel's control of, and conduct in, the West Bank.

Israel further maintains close relationships with major European actors, most notably, Germany. Berlin's commitment to support Israel is tied to the Holocaust. Although the EU has been, at times, critical of Israel's conduct in the West Bank, on the whole it took limited steps to support its criticism. This, in part, due to effective Israeli mobilization of its allies in the EU, such as some of the Eastern European and Hellenic nations, to hamper a European consensus on the matter.

Despite its close relationship with the United States, Israel is effective in maintaining close relations also with America's current global challengers, China and Russia. China is a major trade partner. Indeed Chinese-Israeli trade has grown from USD10.9 billion in 2014 to almost USD14 billion in 2018. The number of Chinese visitors to Israel almost tripled between 2015 and 2018 from less than 50,000 to 139,000.[95] Israel also maintains close relations with Russia. In part, the relations are built on a cultural affinity as over a million Israeli citizens immigrated from the former Soviet Union since the early 1970s. The relationship is further driven by

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88 J. Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

89 "U.S.-Israel Relations: Formal Agreements (1950-Present)," *Jewish Virtual Library.*

90 "US and Israel, Memorandum of Agreement Between the Governments of Israel and the United States," *Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum*, 1 September 1975.

91 B. Gwertzman, "U.S. and Israel Sign Strategic Accord to Counter Soviet," *The New York Times*, 1 December 1981.

92 "U.S.-Israel Formal Agreements: Memorandum of Agreement on Security Cooperation," *Jewish Virtual Library*, 21 April 1988.

93 "Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel," *The White House*, 14 September 2016.

94 "U.S.-Israel Formal Agreements," *ibid.*

95 "China-Israel relations enjoy sound momentum of growth: Chinese ambassador," *Xinhuanet*, 26 September 2019.

strategic realities. Since 2015, Russian forces have been based in Syria, in effect serving as a possible check on Israeli military activity in the region. This reality forced Israel to coordinate closely with the Russian forces on the ground, as well as with the leadership in Moscow. One manifestation of this is Israeli silence over Russian steps that anger the United States, such as the Russian invasion of Crimea and tension with Ukraine. Israel also experienced improved foreign relations in its immediate environment. Massive gas discoveries in Israel's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Mediterranean since 1999 serve as a basis for Israel's greater engagement with the maritime domain, its "turn to the sea".[96] The gas alliance holds the potential for improvement in Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian relations. Both countries signed peace accords with Israel, but relations remain limited with almost no interaction between the civil societies of Israel and these two Arab nations.

Israel developed a close alliance with the Hellenic states of Greece and Cyprus, which includes, among other things, military cooperation and plans for a joint gas pipeline from Israel via Greece to Italy. Egypt also joined this axis, and indeed led the creation of a new regional organization, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. This is the first regional organization in which Israel has taken a leadership founding role.[97] But the "turn to the sea" in the west did not come at the expense of Israel's broader engagement with the Middle East. Joint concerns about Iran, the decline in the intensity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, coupled with pressures from Trump's Washington, led to closer relationship between Israel and Arab actors that traditionally shied away from it. The last few years saw a quiet security dialogue as well as business relations between Israel and some Arab countries. A portion of this came for the public eye with the fall 2020 Abraham Accords, in which Israel embarked on diplomatic relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This was followed by similar moves with Morocco and Sudan. These withstood a first major test in May 2021, when Israel clashed with Hamas in Gaza.

Israel's Democratic Makeup and Its Foreign Affairs

Although scholars[98] highlight the significance of domestic factors in shaping Israeli foreign policy, it seems that its democratic makeup is not part of this effect. In the most basic sense, the public and its representatives in the Knesset (Israel's parliament) are generally left out of the foreign policy process. The Knesset plays a very limited role in shaping foreign policy, or in supervising it. Indeed, the Israeli parliament does not even have a separate committee for foreign relations and the issue-area is folded into the security committee. The Knesset did develop some of its own foreign activities, mostly in inter-parliamentary exchanges, but these are marginal at best in affecting Israeli foreign affairs. This is both a result of structural features of the Israeli political system, as well as the values that guide the country's conduct in the international arena. Structurally, Israeli foreign policy making is rather centralized and much of it is handled directly by the Prime Minister and his staff. In the broader bureaucracy, core aspects of foreign relations are led by security organs: Israel's external intelligence agency, the Mossad, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).[99] These institutions are less exposed to public

96 Y. Teff-Seker et al., "Israel's 'turn to the sea' and its effect on Israeli regional policy," *Israel Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2019), pp. 234-255.

97 "East Mediterranean states formally establish Egypt-based gas forum," *Reuters*, 22 September 2020.

98 A. Aron, *Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 4.

99 U. Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2020), p. 5.

scrutiny compared to other elements of the executive. The Foreign Ministry, an organ that might have been more open to the public, has been marginalized in foreign policy processes. It has a small staff of about 1,000 diplomats, out of which only 400 serve abroad. It operates with a tiny budget that after deducting fixed costs was less than USD40 million in 2012.[100]

Moreover, most top diplomatic positions, such as Israel's ambassadorships in the United States and the UN, were reserved for the Prime Minister's or Foreign Minister's political appointees. The Knesset could have been in theory a channel for democratic participation in shaping foreign policy, as is the case, for example, with the United States' Congress. However, this is not the case. In order to be elected prime minister in Israel, a person needs to secure a coalition representing the majority in the Knesset. As part of the coalition agreements, many members of Knesset also assume roles in the executive as ministers and deputy ministers. Under these conditions, the Israeli Knesset is always aligned with the ruling government. Moreover, most party Knesset candidates are named by their party leader, further weakening the independent status of lawmakers. The Israeli experience shows that Knesset candidates elected via party primaries (as was more common in the past) were generally more independent, as compared to members of Parliament appointed by a party leader. Moreover, the members of Knesset enjoy only limited institutional support. They have very small staff, and for many years did not have an independent ability to assess information until a small research center was set up to help them. Civil society also has a limited role in foreign policy. There are very few think tanks that challenge government policy, and the matter has rarely attracted public interest in a way that could lead to collective action. There are a few exceptions, such as activists Eli Yosef[101] and Itay Mack[102] who seek greater transparency, public oversight, and limitation on Israel's largest export industry – arms. Both activists oppose arms sales to governments that oppress their population. To date, however, these efforts have had no substantial effect on the shaping of Israeli foreign policy.

The lack of any major effect of Israel's democratic make-up on its foreign policy is further a result of Israel's strategic culture and approach.[103] While diplomacy was central to the early Zionist efforts, the reality of security challenges meant that diplomacy had become, in the words of scholar Charles Freilich, "an instrument of defense policy".[104] As such, much of the strategic considerations are realist, based on raw power, rather than a normative and diplomatic perspective. Israel was willing to support whoever assisted it in its defense. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Israel felt especially isolated in the world, it cooperated with blatantly non-democratic regimes, such as apartheid South Africa, Pinochet's Chile, and Argentina under the Junta.[105] Cooperating with these autocracies was justified by another feature of Israel's

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100 C. Freilich, *Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 266.

101 N. Hasson, "A Settler's Quixotic Battle Against Israeli Arms Exports to Murderous Regimes," *Haaretz*, 10 May 2018.

102 A. Shani, "Israel Would Be Embarrassed if It Were Known It's Selling Arms to These Countries," *Haaretz*, 7 August 2015.

103 I follow Ken Booth's classic definition of strategic culture as "traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force." In this paper, I also refer to strategic culture as it also refers to foreign affairs. See: K. Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed," in *Strategic Power: USA/USSR*, ed. C.G. Jacobsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

104 Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, 265.

105 For a critical review of this approach see: K. Svetlova, "The Democracy Component in Israel's Relations with Arab State," *Jerusalem Post*, November 2019.

foreign policy: its commitment to world Jewry. Argentina and South Africa had sizable Jewish communities, and their governments had a history of antisemitism. The rationale in Jerusalem was, therefore, that closer relations with these governments would allow Israel to better protect local Jews.

Even if one underplays the role of security in shaping foreign policy, Israeli diplomacy has been driven by the need to work with whoever was willing to do so. Uri Bialer argued recently that the "supreme goal" of Israel's foreign policy was to "build a state and secure its existence".[106] Under these conditions, normative considerations of advancing democracy or including moral considerations in foreign policy were marginalized, or deemed less important.

Interaction with Democratic Countries

Foreign relations are an interactive process. While Israel's democratic make-up has a limited effect on the shaping and conduct of its foreign policy, we need to ask what is the effect of other countries who are democracies, on Israeli policies? Here, the picture is more nuanced.

Since the early days of Zionism as a political movement, and the state it begets, were highly sensitive to the position taken by great powers. For most of its years, the Zionist movement and then Israel's great power allies – Britain, France, and the United States – were democracies. Israel's closest ally since the late 1960s, the United States, is also the primary advocate of liberal democracy in the international system, President Trump notwithstanding. Moreover, Israel's creation, or at least the international legitimacy for its creation, occurred in 1947-1948: a moment in time in which democratic values, and global institutions, seemed to dominate the world stage. A triumphant United States, holding the monopoly on nuclear weapons, was home to the newly created UN, ushering in hopes for a world that would be democratic and protect civil liberties. Indeed, the 1947 UN partition resolution, the international instrument that led to the creation of the state of Israel, stipulated that it draft a democratic constitution that would, among other things, "guarantee [...] to all persons equal and non-discriminatory rights in civil, political, economic and religious matters and the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion, language, speech and publication, education, assembly and association".[107]

Israel's declaration of independence from 14 May 1948 mirrored the UN's democratic stipulations. It included multiple commitments for the creation of a liberal democracy. It stated, for example, that the future state "will be based on freedom, justice and peace [...] it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture [...] will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."[108] Indeed, the jurist who wrote the first drafts of the declaration of independence, Mordechai Ba'ham, initially used direct quotes from the American Declaration of Independence and the UN Charter.[109] Despite

106 Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy*, ibid, p. 5.

107 "Resolution 181 (II). Future government of Palestine," *UN General Assembly*, 29 November 1947.

108 "Proclamation of Independence," *Knesset*, 14 May 1948.

109 Y. Shachar, "The Early Drafts of the Declaration of Independence," *Iyuney Mishpat* 26, no. 2 (2002), pp. 523-600.

Soviet support of Israel during the 1947-1949 War, and the United States arms embargo on Israel (and other warring parties) during the fighting, Israel's leaders chose to align with the United States as the Cold War evolved. In a 1953 meeting between Israel's Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the Israeli Prime Minister stated (according to the American note takers) that "Israel historically, culturally and spiritually [is] part of free world; was only country in area besides Turkey willing and able to fight for freedom and determined (to) defend its democratic way of life regardless prospects of victory."[110]

American immigrants also played a role. University of Chicago-trained Chief Justice Shimon Agranat led the Supreme Court in the early 1950s to secure civil liberties, most notably freedom of expression. In this early phase, Israel supported some progressive (though not necessarily liberal democratic) global causes, most notably in Africa. It offered significant civilian assistance to the newly created African nations, and even military training to ANC operatives fighting the South African regime.[111] Yet, this streak of Israeli "norms-based" foreign policy had retreated by the 1970s. This was due in part to Israeli disappointment with the behavior of African nations, which swiftly cut diplomatic relations with it under Arab threats and promises between 1967 and 1973. Israel also learned that its foreign relations were affected much more by its power and material capabilities, as opposed to normative preferences and ideological commitments. Only once it demonstrated its military prowess in the 1967 war, and in light of Soviet support of its main Arab foes (Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) did the United States launch a closer relationship with Israel. More recently, Israel scored progress with a number of Arab states, based on its military and political power, its strong posture against Iran, its alliance with the United States, and its ability to contain by force the conflict with the Palestinians. The pattern could also be understood as stemming from power relations. When the Zionist movement and then Israel were weak, they sought support from the international system. As the international system was led by democratic countries and values, Israel adapted and highlighted its commitment to liberal democracy. Once it had become stronger, it could rely more on material capabilities, such as military power, to attract allies, and it was its foes – mostly the Palestinians – who turned to liberal-democratic arguments in their efforts to secure international support.

Yet, Israel still uses its democratic make-up as a tool of soft power when interacting with other democratic nations. Israeli leaders routinely refer to their country as "the only democracy in the Middle East'', and highlight the values it shares with West European nations and the United States. Internationally, Israel made efforts to be counted as part of the liberal democratic camps. Such was the case with its efforts to join the Group of Western European and Other States in the UN in 2000 (on a temporary basis) and in 2014 as a full member. Similarly, Israel highlights the common democratic values it shares with Greece and Cyprus to signal the depth of this trilateral regional alliance.

The signs of democratic decline in Israel are taking a certain toll on the nation's foreign relations. Perhaps most notably, the progressive flank of the US Democratic Party is becoming more vocal in its opposition to Israeli policies. In growing circles, including progressive Jewish

110 United States State Department, Office of the Historian, "*Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954, the Near and Middle East Volume IX, Part 1, Memorandum of Conversation*," *The US Embassy in Israel*, 14 May 1953.

111 H. Sherwood, "Nelson Mandela received weapons training from Mossad agents in 1962," *The Guardian*, 20 December 2013.

groups, Israel's approach to its Palestinian citizens and the Palestinians and Gaza and the West Bank is understood through the lens of race relations and the struggle for democracy in the United States. This American progressive perspective clashed sharply with Israel in the May 2021 round of violence between Israel and Hamas. In one of history's ironies, members of the EU were less critical of Israel's behavior in the May 2021 clash with Gaza. The EU is Israel's largest trade partner and plays a crucial role in other areas such as academic research. In the past, many of the member states were critical of Israeli policies, mostly in the West Bank. However, and as the chapter on this topic shows, many European actors now show a greater understanding of Israel. In part, this is a result of the changes in the EU itself. Right-wing governments, such as those of Hungary and Austria, side with Israel as it serves their need for legitimacy, and perhaps because they believe they share similar politics with Israel's right-wing government that has been in power since 2009. Other explanations suggest that the region is now understood differently in Europe, where civil wars and regional instability eclipse traditional concern with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A third set of explanations points to Israel's allure in terms of business and security know-how, including in the growing cyber industry.[112]

One arena in which external pressure has affected Israeli policy in recent years is corruption. As noted above, part of the corrosion of Israeli democracy is the public sense that the country is corrupt. At least in part, sectors of the Israeli economy are deploying policies that are intended to curb business practices of Israeli individuals and corporations that pay bribes as parts of their overseas operations. Much of these efforts are due to global pressure by the United States on financial institutions for greater transparency. In 2002, Israel adopted anti-money laundering legislation and by 2005 it had set up a specialized agency to deal with the problem. Israel also investigated and prosecuted a number of businesses that were suspected of bribing foreign officials. While some of this effort is directed at curbing the financing of terrorism, the overall effect is a contribution to limiting corrupt global practices, thus indirectly strengthening democracy.

Conclusion

Israel views itself as the "only democracy in the Middle East". However, this self-identification, which is generally confirmed in international indices, is under severe strain mostly, but not exclusively, as Israel's control over the West Bank strengthens. Increased corruption cases and the rise of a majoritarian interpretation of democracy among ruling elites further challenge Israel's democracy. At the same time, Israel's stance among nations is probably at its zenith as reflected in a close alliance with the United States and an unprecedented level of legitimacy in the international community. Against this backdrop, the paper asks what role Israel's democracy plays in its foreign policy.

The paper shows that Israel generally takes a realistic approach in which material interests, such as security, take precedence to democratic commitment. The features of Israel's internal policy making - in particular the limited involvement of the legislature and civil society in foreign policy - further exacerbate the disconnect between Israel's (strained) democratic make-

112 B. Haddad, "How Europe Became Pro-Israel," *Foreign Policy*, May 2021.

up and its foreign policies. At the same time, Israel sees itself as part of the democratic camp. As a practical matter, Israel uses its democracy to cement its relations with the United States, and European partners by pointing not only to material interests but also to a shared ideological commitment.

A further possible decline in the quality of Israel's democracy may therefore prevent it from making these ideological arguments in the future, but is not expected to lead to any substantial change in its foreign policies.

Chapter 3

Europe: The (Increased) Role of the Security Discourse and its Impact on the European Project and on Member States

Kai-Olaf Lang

Introduction: Security and European Integration

Since its initiation after the Second World War, European integration has pursued three major objectives: the furthering of prosperity, the strengthening of peaceful cooperation and negotiation-based conflict resolution, and the advancement of democracy, rule-of-law and common values. Hence, European integration from its outset was a triple community: an economic community, a community of rules and values, and a community striving for more security. In practice however, for a long time it was economic issues that were in the center of European affairs. In the Cold War era, the United States and NATO were the ones that provided protection and the promise of defense against the Soviet threat for Western Europe. Moreover, national interests and a lacking consensus about relations with the United States complicated the emergence of a strong security component of European integration from the very beginning. It is coincidence that following a failed early attempt at the beginning of the 1950s to create a so-called "European Defense Community", the name of the core project of the European integration founded in 1957 was the "European Economic Community".[113] European integration achieved its most remarkable success and intense mutual cooperation in the realm of economic and financial cooperation, giving rise to the creation of a single market, a common budget or an economic and monetary union with a common currency.

Nevertheless, security never disappeared from the European agenda. Particularly, after the end of the bipolar world, new debates arose about the need for more capabilities in the field of

113 Together with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) the European Economic Community (EEC) was bound together to form the European Communities, from which the EU evolved.

foreign and security policies and even defense in what has since 1993 been known as the EU. The resulting Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) were ambitious in their objectives, rather modest in their outcomes. In spite of having brought into being new security policy documents (e.g., a Global Strategy), new capabilities (so-called EU battle groups), additional resources (a European Defense Fund) or new institutions (a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy or a European Defense Agency), the decision-making process in the field of foreign affairs is still ponderous, as it requires unanimity and as member states often pursue quite different interests.

Irrespective of these shortcomings, new threats, tectonic shifts in the global power balance, doubts about the cohesion of transatlantic relations and growing instabilities in the direct and indirect vicinities have generated growing awareness that the EU is an entity, which has to intensify its efforts in security affairs in a general way. This is a back-to-the-roots development, although the current drivers are considerably different from the motivation immediately after the Second World War. At that time, the overall idea was to establish a framework, which would prevent European countries from aggressively interacting against each other. Now the intention is to buttress Europe's own ability to better protect its interest against challenges from outside – whether hostile actions in a world of increasing Great Power rivalry or disorder in its neighborhoods at a time of doubts about US commitment to Europe and an increasingly "fuzzy" threat environment, which encompasses a broad sample of risks and is not confined to the military domain. This makes the term "security community"[114] particularly apt for the EU. Obviously, it might be asked whether the notion of the EU as a "tightly-coupled mature pluralistic security community"[115] is appropriate, as it appears that the EU is rather loosely-coupled and undeveloped when it comes to security affairs. Terming the Union an ambitious, partially interwoven, but fragmented security community would perhaps fit better.

The EU's difficulties in creating a momentum for its security policy have been subject to extensive research and political debate and they are usually described as a result of heterogeneity and diversity among member states.[116] More particularly, the following factors have been identified to explain European limitations in security and defense. First, there are differences in strategic culture - with member states open to issues like the use of "hard power", increased defense spending, the role of armed forces or international stabilization missions (France, Poland, UK as a member state), and member states being reluctant in this regard (Germany, some neutral, non-NATO states). Second, there are member states for which the main external threat is Russia (many Central Eastern and Southeastern European States, some Northern European countries), whereas others have a rather pragmatic posture towards Russia (e.g., France, Italy). The latter

114 Cf. on the concept Adler, E. and M. Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); A. J. Bellamy, ed., *Security Communities and their Neighbours* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

115 "Progressively built upon the desire to put an end to the succession of wars on the continent, the EU is today the institutional embodiment of the creation of a common identity for European states and populations. Integrated more and more deeply since World War II, the latter do not use, or threaten to use, collective violence to resolve their disputes, thus making the EU a 'security community'. It is a 'pluralistic' one because it is not governed by a single government and a fully shared set of rules. Moreover, the EU security community is in the 'mature' phase of its development because of the extent and nature of the interactions among its members. Finally, it is a 'tightly-coupled' one because of the existence of an over-arching security-related policy cooperation. As a result, the EU itself can be classified as a 'tightly-coupled mature pluralistic security community'." V. Laporte, "The European Union - An Expanding Security Community?," *College of Europe*, EU Diplomacy Paper 6, 2012, p. 4f.

116 For an overview e.g, S. Blockmans and P. Koutrakos, *Research handbook on the EU's common foreign and security policy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018); for the older debate: B. Tonra and T. Christiansen, eds., *Rethinking European Union foreign policy* (Manchester: Manchester Open Hive, 2004); H. Ehrhart, "What model for CFSP?," *Chaillot Papers*, Paris: EUISS, no. 55, 2002.

often tend to emphasize European sovereignty in terms of security, whilst the former are working towards close relations with the United States and a strong NATO. Third, and related to the other two factors, security discourses and threat perceptions differ. Some member states have been emphasizing external "hard" threats (military threats, energy security), others have a more comprehensive understanding, which includes "soft" threats (financial stability, environment).[117] This all has implications for attitudes of member states towards EU defense in general, i.e. regarding its strategic orientation, but also with respect to more palpable projects. Thus, some traditionally Atlanticist countries fear that by upgrading EU efforts, the United States might feel encouraged to divert its attention from Europe or that some European allies are aiming for a political and security-related emancipation of Washington. On the other hand, rather Europeanist countries argue that given the reorientation of the United States towards Asia, Europe cannot take its support in case of future crises as a given and has to assume more responsibility for its own security.

Whereas it is important to bear in mind and analyze these determinants shaping and to a considerable extent restraining European security discourses and European security policy, it is increasingly important to take a look at another highly relevant but often neglected aspect of security and European integration: the development of the security discourses and the consequences of the rising significance of security for the EU and the European project. In other words, public debates in many member states of the EU have undergone growing securitization. But securitization is a multidimensional process, with varying drivers, determinants and directions in European countries. These diverging dynamics and the underlying causes have to be analyzed carefully, asking how the security identities of European countries are changing and how domestic factors, particularly nation-oriented and polarizing parties and leaders, are influencing this process.

Therefore, the major concern of this paper is to examine possible implications for European politics resulting from the way security is perceived, discussed and transformed into political actions, particularly considering the domestic policies in EU member states. In order to shed light on these questions, more recent developments of threat perceptions, security discourses and security policies are examined. On this basis it is asked whether the topic EU security has gained more relevance and an increasing securitization has occurred in member states or whether the areas of assumed insecurity are simply changing. Finally, the paper explores consequences of possible changes of security discourses and preferences of European politics and integration in a broader sense and, more particularly, for external affairs and relations with partner countries.

117 Here, "hard" and "soft" threats are used as threats emerging from the use of "hard power" and (malign) "soft power" respectively. According to the most important advocate and theorist of the concept of "soft power", Joseph Nye Jr., this notion means "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment". It is opposed to power based on coercion by economic or military means (J. N. Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), x; see also Joseph Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011). "Soft power" in a broader sense however, does not necessarily equal passive attractiveness solely, it can also entail the use of "soft" instruments to exert power. Therefore, we understand "soft threats" as all kinds of possible activities, which are neither military nor economy-related (in the sense of sanctioning or using money as a direct benefit), e.g., propaganda, disinformation, use of corruption.

New Uncertainties and Old Threats: Recent Developments of Security Discourses and Risk Perceptions in the EU

There is no doubt that traditional security perceptions strongly related to threats connected with the destructive action of external actors are still highly salient in many European states and societies, although with huge differences. On the one hand, in the post-Cold War era there are also countries, which have felt at least the possibility of being intimidated by a state. For many countries in central and southeastern Europe, the legacy of four decades of forceful belonging to the Soviet block or experiences dating back to earlier periods have upheld distrust vis-à-vis Russia after 1989 or 1991 (when the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact broke apart) and led them to seek effective reassurance by being integrated into NATO. On the other hand, other EU member states never had a similar threat assessment (like some southern European states) or (like Germany), changed their geopolitical mindset from being a "frontline" state to having a strategically consolidated position with limited military vulnerability. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 this divide seemed to deepen because given new risks unrelated to Russia, United States pressure for a global NATO and operations outside the North Atlantic region (so called out-of-area missions) increased, whereas central and southeast European countries were still advocating classic security and defense policies of Western structures such as NATO, solidly focusing on Art. 5-commitments (i.e. the obligation to mutual solidarity and defense in case of an attack against a member state) and territorial defense. It was mainly the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 and thereafter, which mitigated this divergence, as allies in Western or southern Europe and the United States itself shifted priorities back to collective defense.[118] Of course, now the threat assessment had transformed, emphasizing much more new risks and dangers of "hybrid" nature, like disinformation or cyberattacks.

The example of Russia demonstrates that traditional patterns of threat perception are quite stable and kept their formative effect for the foreign and security policies of many European countries. But looking back to what has happened during (more or less) the last two decades, i.e since the 2001 events and the double enlargement of NATO (1999, 2004 and later) and EU (2004, 2007 and later), a number of developments have modified the strategic posture and the security discourses all over Europe and are to a high degree rooted in domestic affairs of the member states.

Migration: The Growing Relevance of Security and the Shift from 'Ethics of Conviction' to 'Ethics of Responsibility'

Migration has long been a heavily securitized area. Since the 1980s, when migration became a salient domestic issue in some member states, the subject began to generate increasing debate on the European level.[119] This also resulted from the ongoing and planned steps of deepening integration, e.g., the introduction of the free movement of persons and labor. The arrival of asylum-seekers among others from the war-stricken Western Balkans was one of the reasons why the system of the Dublin convention (1997) and the subsequent Dublin regulations (2003,

118 M. Michelot, "NATO's Moving Goalposts Between Wales and Warsaw," *GMF*, May 2015; M. Drent and D. Zandee, "A reborn Alliance in a Troubled World? NATO after Wales," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 38, no. 7 (2014), pp. 15-19.

119 T. Givens and A. Luedtke, "The Politics of European Union Immigration Policy: Institutions, Salience, and Harmonization," *The Policy Studies Journal* 32, no. 1 (2004), pp. 145-165.

2008) was established, trying to reduce misuse of the right to asylum, but also setting up a system with more hurdles for refugees to come particularly to the wealthy states of Northern and Western Europe. One of the core elements of the Dublin system is that the country where refugees first reach EU soil and register their application is responsible for the asylum procedure. Since 1993, the Treaty of Maastricht placed immigration and asylum – areas which remained predominantly in the domain of member states – in the so-called Third Pillar of the EU, e.g. in the area of justice and home affairs, where the logic of police cooperation, immigration control and border protection prevails. On the European level, this aspect became additionally important due to the founding of the Schengen Zone: member states belonging to the related treaty implementing a no-control policy on internal borders, which means that they have to rely on an effective protection of external borders and travels to and from the Schengen Area.[120] As a result, a sophisticated form of security governance dominated by "securocrats"[121] has emerged in the EU's sphere of justice and home affairs.

The main drivers of this process were obviously domestic trends. In many member states, immigration has been increasingly seen as a threat and a destabilizing factor: to public security, to the demographic balance, to cultural coherence, but also to welfare systems.[122] After September 2001, all these doubts multiplied. Election results showed that political parties opposed to an open concept of borders and society achieved growing support. For that reason, mainstream parties tended to adopt a more restrictive rhetoric out of fear in order to prevent further losses of voters to anti-immigration or nationalist groups.

In this context, the migration crisis of 2015 was another caesura. The influx into the EU of considerable numbers of refuge seekers, many of them having left their homes due to the civil war in Syria, caused massive friction in and among member states. Whereas Germany and some northern European states pursued a humanitarian approach, Eastern European member states (as well as some Western European states, but in a more nuanced way) took a restrictive posture. In the EU this led to massive conflicts about solidarity, since the countries of destination for the majority of asylum-seekers were calling for support and burden-sharing from other member states. Countries like those of the Visegrád-group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) heavily opposed that approach, arguing that the EU has no competence to impose the EU-wide distribution of refugees, as migration belongs to the core of national sovereignty. The Visegrád-countries subsequently came up with an alternative approach, which they called "flexible solidarity": The four states declared that they were ready to assume solidarity, but not by accepting obligatory redistribution quota for asylum-seekers, rather by giving resources and political support to a security-first approach in migration, emphasizing the control of external borders or cooperation with third countries.

Germany or Sweden, which had for a long time pursued a values-based policy, also adapted their course. Public opinion changed and elections showed that nationalist parties gained ground. Voices

120 In the course of the migration crisis of 2015 and due to the Covid pandemic, controls were temporarily reintroduced at many borders in the Schengen system.

121 P. Pawlak, "The Unintentional Development of the EU's Security Governance beyond Borders," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 17, Special Issue (2012), pp. 87-107.

122 J. Dennison and A. Geddes, "A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe," *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (January-March 2019), pp. 107-116.

from the populist, but also the mainstream debate, pointing at possible risks as a consequence of a growing number of immigrants grew louder. In Germany, the public discourse which at the beginning of the 2015 crisis called for help and a "culture of welcome", now shifted to issues like crime, risks of terrorism or the social and financial costs of an asylum policy that gives priority to human rights standards and support for refugees. Therefore, the German government began to stress the importance of secure borders and made a "deal" with Turkey to bring down the number of possible migrants to the EU. Using the famous notion of the sociologist Max Weber, one could say that even Germany and Sweden moved their policies from "ethics of conviction", giving priority to a humane approach by accepting huge numbers of asylum-seekers in their territory, to more pragmatic considerations, balancing normative politics and the increasing unwillingness for such a policy on the domestic political scenery. So did the EU as a whole. This coincided with a decline in the number of migrants coming to the EU and the main target countries, but also a growing number of human tragedies, for example in the Mediterranean.

A direct nexus between security and migration emerged for the EU during the second half of 2021, when growing numbers of migrants (mainly from the Middle East, later on also from Afghanistan and Africa) crossed the borders of Lithuania, then of Poland and Latvia with Belarus. The countries affected and the EU accused the regime in Minsk of organizing migration flows, since the Belarusian airline had established new direct flight connections to Iraq and enabled people from various parts of the world to travel to Belarus as tourists. Once in Belarus migrants were brought to the borders of Lithuania, Poland and Latvia, where they wanted to apply for asylum or to move further to Germany or other Western European countries. From the point of view of the EU, and particularly of Poland or Lithuania, this was seen as a hybrid attack, aiming at destabilization as a response to Western sanctions imposed on Belarus after the botched presidential elections of August 2020 and massive regime repression of the Belarusian protest movement. Although the numbers of migrants were considerably lower than in 2015, for countries like Poland or Lithuania, which have little experience with the handling of asylum-procedures and where societies have taken a rather disapproving posture against accepting refugees, the uncontrolled influx of migrants, obviously supported by the authorities of an unfriendly neighboring regime, caused major concerns. In the course of the autumn, the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border escalated. As Poland began to protect its borders and to pursue a very restrictive policy against migrants, the number of illegal border crossings increased. Some major incidents with groups of hundreds of migrants trying to force their way through a border crossing, including videos of migrants destroying the fence Polish border guards had built, or unidentified persons in uniforms moving to and from Polish territory, bolstered the Polish government's opinion that the situation along its eastern border was not a migration crisis, but "a political crisis, evoked by [Belarusian leader] Alexander Lukashenko in order to destabilize the EU" and even an act of "state terrorisms".[123] Leading EU representatives adopted this view, calling the crisis a "hybrid attack".[124]

All three countries took restrictive measures to protect their eastern borders, which also serve as the EU's external borders (and those of the Schengen Zone). Poland's national-conservative government was particularly consistently trying to prevent migrants from entering its territory,

123 "Prime Minister: what we are dealing with is a manifestation of state terrorism. This is a silent revenge on Lukashenka," *News Agency PAP*, 10 November 2021.

124 E.g., the president of the European Council Charles Michel, cf. "Belarus migrant crisis: EU Council chief visits Poland," *Deutsche Welle*, 10 November 2021.

even when they were prevented from moving back to Belarus by security forces there. This led to dramatic humanitarian tragedies, with people trapped between border guards on both sides without access to shelter, food or medical aid. The Belarusian side used relevant photos in its propaganda war or tried to show that only Belarus could help people survive. Human rights organizations accused Polish authorities of carrying out illegal “push-backs” and blocking people from applying for asylum. Nevertheless, Poland continued to close the borders and fend off migrants, thus trying to weaken Lukashenko’s attempt to exert pressure on his neighbors and the EU in order to ease sanctions or to obtain a similar arrangement as Turkey did in the context of the 2015 developments. Together with diplomatic efforts (the German chancellor talked to the Russian president and the Belarusian leader and countries of origin agreed to take their citizens back), the restrictive policy at the borders led to declining border crossing attempts at the end of 2021.

The border crisis with Belarus contributed to the securitization of migration issues at least in three respects. First, the tough approach of Poland (and partly Lithuania and Latvia) was basically accepted and backed by the EU. Although the EU did not turn a blind eye to the human situation and aspects of asylum law and human rights, criticism was modest and the Union as well as the member states supported the politics of deterrence and closure. Second, the EU and member states experienced and recognized a new type of destabilization by talking about a “hybrid attack” or the “weaponization of migration”. In this context, the EU initiated temporary exemptions for asylum procedures for the three countries (e.g., extended registration procedures, simplified return procedure).[125] Hence, the EU might embark on a road to limit the possibilities of refugees for the sake of border security. And third, at least the countries at the border saw a nexus between hybrid and hard threats. When the crisis escalated, a growing militarization of the region took place. Poland and the affected Baltic countries also deployed troops in the border region to support police and border guards. Belarus called this a concentration of offensive forces near its borders and warned it would take appropriate steps, if necessary, with its Russian ally. Therefore, military aspects in NATO’s “frontline states” and tough security measures were closely linked with the situation at the border, especially because the region is a strategically sensitive and also vulnerable part of NATO territory.[126]

Security and the Upswing of Sovereignism and Identity Politics

The unfolding European crises, e.g. the financial and public debt crisis, the migration crisis, and most recently the Covid-pandemic, seem to have furthered renationalization and de-Europeanization. It is true that the pandemic also nurtured a “demand” for more Europe, greater solidarity, better coordination of border control regimes and in some aspects, even a push for integration. But the locus of political action and decision-making appeared to move back to capitals, either because the EU had limited competencies (as in the case of health policy) or because member states wanted to maintain control (regarding the mandatory distribution of refugees) or due to national states having to decide about the allocation of financial resources

125 European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Decision on provisional emergency measures for the benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland*, Brussels, COM(2021) 752 final, 2021/0401(CNS), EUR-Lex - 52021PC0752 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu), 1 December 2021.

126 Russia’s enclave Kaliningrad is close. Belarus and Russia have been organizing common military exercises on a regular basis in the region. The so called Zapad exercises took place in September 2021 close to the Lithuanian and Polish borders.

for partners in need (during financial crises with their rescue packages and fiscal assistance schemes). Moreover, political parties promoting a more consistent defense of national interests have directed their attention to European integration, which they have singled out as a threat to the survival of the national state. These increasingly popular Euro-skeptical or – as they sometimes call themselves Euro-realistic groups – are fighting for a less tightly-knit EU by questioning the supranational element of European integration, calling for a retransfer of powers from the EU to member states or at least for a containment of the "community method" and community institutions like the European Commission.[127]

Of course, reality has been more differentiated and it would be a simplification to regard renationalization as an overarching megatrend in the EU. Alongside a trend of decelerating and hampering efforts of closer integration, the crises have acted as catalysts of deepening integration. The crises were drivers of "more Europe" rather than "less Europe" especially in the Eurozone and with regard to the EU budget. In the Eurozone, new mutual support mechanisms (like the European Stability Mechanism) assisting countries with huge fiscal imbalances were set up. During the pandemic, a finance instrument (Next Generation EU, also called Recovery Fund) was created: The 750 billion Euro fund, which is to help particularly those EU countries grappling with the economic fallout of the pandemic, will receive its money from new EU revenues and from bonds, which are to be issued collectively. Both are clear steps of deepening integration, which earlier had been opposed by many member states. The EU's common vaccination purchase program was also an attempt to generate solidarity during the crisis. However, it remains to be seen whether the new financial instruments will create spill-over effects resulting in more political integration. Member states reluctant to accept fiscal integration, and those opposed to more political closeness, might take an attitude to hedge additional stimuli for deepening. And the experience with the EU vaccine policy has shown that in both wealthier and poorer member states, governments or parts of the public tended to blame "Brussels" for an ineffective procurement policy instead of acknowledging the advantages of a coordinated approach.

One can explain this tension between renationalization and reinforced integration as a process of cyclical development, with a stronger quest for maintaining sovereignty as a process of generating counterweights to balance additional interdependence (or integration through the backdoor) on the European level. Irrespective of the further development of this competition, it is quite obvious that more or less powerful sovereignist discourses and sovereignist parties have gained impetus in most member states. Among the hallmarks of their appeal is the triple commitment to national identity, sovereignty and security. Instructive examples of the implications of sovereignist policies are the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) or the Hungarian Fidesz parties, both of them in government since 2015 and 2010, respectively.

127 Pointing at the advantages and comparing it to the way "classical" international organizations and intergovernmentalism work, the European Commission (back in 2002) described the "community method" as follows: "The Community method is a decision-making procedure that allows for a transparent, effective and democratic functioning of the European Union. It is based on the interplay between three autonomous institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Ministers (also called the 'institutional triangle') [...] The Community method allows Member States to share sovereignty in a democratic way and to work in the general interest of the European Union." "Explanatory note on the "Community method"," European Commission, 22 May 2002. However, in practice there is no sharp division between intergovernmentalism and a strict community method. Helen Wallace already a decade ago identified five modes of decision-making for the EU, e.g. "intensive transgovernmentalism"; cf. H. Wallace, "An Institutional Analysis and Five Policy Modes", in *Policymaking in the European Union*, eds. H. Wallace et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 69-105; cf. also: P. Schoutheete, "The European Council and the Community Method," *Notre Europe*, Policy Paper 56, , July 2012.

Apart from an economic modernization agenda, this interrelated triple commitment is at the core of these parties' programmatic platform and their self-definition as traditionalist and conservative groupings. Of course, the emphasis and the particular context of the identity-sovereignty-security-nexus differs between countries. Poland has an explicit threat perception related to Russia, and therefore the government has pursued a policy of deterrence directed towards the East and a close alliance with the United States. This holds also for PiS-governments. In Hungary the situation is different; Fidesz has initiated a policy of "opening to the East", which on the basis of its membership in the EU and NATO includes pragmatic economic cooperation with countries like Russia or China. What unites both parties (and similar groupings in the EU, most of which have not been in power) is their criticism of liberal universalism and the quest for strengthening traditional communities (such as the classic family or religious communities) and values as a precondition for the consolidation of their societies and nations. That is why both parties and the related governments oppose the diffusion of modernist or "progressive" lifestyles and values, which they consider as eroding long-established communities like the traditional family, the churches or the nation as such. Hence, the solidification of national identity is seen as a precondition for national security.

Against this background it comes as no surprise that Poland's most recent national security (adopted in May 2020) strategy defines "strengthening national identity and guarding national heritage" as one of the four pillars of its security. Among other things, the document describes shaping and developing "patriotic attitudes as indispensable factors in building community and national identity rooted in the Christian heritage and universal values".[128] Hungary's national security strategy from April 2020 includes mass migration as one of the main possible threats to the country. At the same time, it emphasizes the meaning of "our thousand-years-old statehood, our Hungarian language, our history and traditions, our system of values resting on Christian foundations'' and points at a "strong Hungary, based on national foundations" as the guarantee for the survival of Hungariandom.[129]

Given the rising relevance ascribed to identity politics and cultural factors for national security and strength, national-conservative parties like PiS and Fidesz aim at preventing the EU from intervening in the dominating societal values of member states. In order to ensure what they consider a necessary restoration of the socio-cultural architecture ensuring community-based nationhood, they want to contain external influence and maintain extensive spheres of sovereignty, giving enough leeway for cultural and identity politics. This is a source of conflict with the EU, because every member state has a duty to fulfill the obligations of membership, which include a set of basic values. Whereas there is general agreement about this, national-conservative groups claim that the EU has no competence to interfere in domestic affairs when it comes to issues like the constitutional order or family policies. Therefore, rule-of-law or LGBTQ* policies have turned into highly controversial issues between EU institutions and many member states on the one hand, and Poland and Hungary (as well as, though less prominently, several other central and southeastern European countries).

128 *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*, 28 May 2020.

129 "Government resolution on the national security strategy of Hungary," *Nemzeti Jogszabálytá*, 23 April 2020.

The Politics of Memory and Security

In this context, history and the politics of memory are especially sensitive in some EU member states (particularly from the Eastern part of the community), and have become part of their security discourses and security policies. Disputes between Russia on the one hand and the Baltic States or Poland on the other hand, for example, in which both sides have regarded conflicts about their common and often tragic past as elements of their national security. Moreover, applying legal instruments questioning politically determined readings of history are not only delegitimized, but even made illegal.[130] From the point of view of countries, whose national identity is built heavily on often traumatic historical experience and which at the same time strive for the acceptance of their narratives, "mnemotical security" is a key element of their national security. "Mnemotical security" is a concept, which regards intra-state or inter-state disputes about history or the legacy of the past as more than just differences in the politics of memory. Depending on the specific situation, conflicts around memory and legacy have the potential to destabilize societies (because related discrepancies can insert a wedge between parts of societies, e.g., ethnic communities) or to erode the international position of countries, if their reading of the past or their politics of memory appear to be contested or loses ground to competing interpretations of the past put forward by rival states.

In the Baltic States, a first important experience of how a historic dispute can turn into a security risk was the row about the "bronze soldier", a statue of a Red Army soldier, which had been moved from its original location in the center of Estonia's capital Tallinn to the outskirts in 2006. Violent riots ensued in Tallinn (home for a huge part of the Russian minority in Estonia) and Estonian government institutions became targets of cyberattacks. In Poland, rifts with Russia about the past are commonplace. However, with a more restive Russia and PiS-governments emphasizing the role of the politics of history and promoting what it considers the appropriate image of Poland and Polish history in the world, conflicts about issues rooted in the past have intensified. One example was the accusation articulated by Russian president Putin that Poland had contributed to the outbreak of the Second World War by colluding with Germany, and supporting the appeasement policy vis-à-vis Hitler of Western powers. Also, he exculpated the Ribbentrop-Molotov-pact as a means to protect the Soviet Union given the lacking reliability of the West.[131] This led to furious responses by the Polish government and the entire political spectrum and the public. Poland considers such statements from Russia to be disinformation attacks in order to weaken Poland's position as a proponent of a tough line against Russia in the West. However, Poland has also maneuvered itself into a conflict with the United States and Israel by amending a law, which made it a criminal offence to accuse the Polish state or the Polish nation of co-responsibility for barbarities committed by the Third Reich. This evoked harsh criticism from the United States, Israel and Jewish communities, as they feared that an open debate about Polish complicity in crimes against Jews and the Holocaust would not be possible any longer. The Polish government on the other hand, had intended to protect the "good name" of Poland. After rising pressure particularly from the United States, with which Poland maintains a sort of special relationship and an intensive security partnership, Warsaw modified the controversial amendment and tried to repair relations with Israel. In

130 M. Mälksoo, "Memory must be defended: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015).

131 S. Radchenko, "Vladimir Putin Wants to Rewrite the History of World War II," *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2020.

sum, Poland's attempt to improve its image and international reputation in order to bolster its security narrative turned out to be an issue that – at least temporarily – strained the relationship with its key security provider, i.e., the United States.

Implications for European Integration and for EU Foreign Policy

The aforementioned developments suggest that the relevance of security appears to be in the ascendency in European politics. However, it would be inappropriate and incomplete to simply state that European affairs are shaped increasingly by security. What has changed particularly over the last two decades is the emergence of new issues, new actors and new uncertainties. Therefore, we should speak not just about an EU, which is more securitized, but a community, which feels that it has to come to terms with the different faces of security – ranging from classic aspects of "hard" security to a broad spectrum of hybrid threats to cultural issues. In a way, Europe's discourses and political activities related to security are both growing and changing.

One might argue that most of the tendencies described above are known from the past. This is true only to a limited extent, because European integration, as was discussed earlier, was embedded for decades in a relatively stable bipolar environment, where security was "outsourced" to NATO (and the United States) and issues termed "soft security" had only limited impact. For example, disinformation from the Communist world played a role in targeting anti-system groups or broader protest movements with what is today called fake news. But the opportunities to generate confusion were much more limited due to a different structure of the traditional media (particularly the absence of the digital communication landscape and social media) and given a relatively stable worldview of what is good and bad in mainstream of Western European societies.

On the EU level, the multifaceted security challenges and the changes in the geopolitical environment had two major effects. On the one hand, efforts to enhance the capability to act in the area of traditional security policy and defense have materialized – with an intensive debate and declarations of intent, including the establishment of a "European army" or a "defense Union" as long-term objectives, but with rather modest results. On the other hand, basic documents, like the EU global strategy or so-called Strategic Compass, new institutions like the European Defense Agency, the European Defense Fund or centers against disinformation or cyber risks, new cooperative initiatives (including the Permanent Structured Cooperation PESCO) or a debate about security risks related to technological dependence in the digital area, all demonstrate the community's awareness of the variety of contemporary threat landscapes.[132]

Together with minilateral initiatives closely related to the EU but formally standing outside (such as the European Intervention Initiative launched by France; the Joint Expeditionary Force driven by the UK, the Framework Nations idea pushed by Germany and regional forms of cooperation like those of the Nordic states), EU states have improved their capabilities to implement stabilization missions in the broader neighborhood (like for example the

132 E.g., in the "Global Strategy: Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe," *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, June 2016.

multinational EU Training Mission Mali EUTM). Altogether, security has created opportunities for further cooperation (although not necessarily integration), but there has not been a huge security stimulus for the EU as far as traditional security and defense are concerned. What has emerged as a result is an incremental and multi-framework mode of developing European security and defense policies.

On the level of member states, another cluster of threats and uncertainties is increasingly defining security discourse in addition to the above-mentioned risk perceptions: The feeling and the fear of losing collective identity as a result of growing disorder caused by disruptions of all kinds, including cultural or societal aspects. The quarrels and struggles around these problems have been analyzed by the concept of "ontological security". Growing feelings of unpredictability and the rise of political actors emphasizing the relevance of related, often emotionally and symbolically connoted issues, have amplified the importance of ontological security, or rather insecurity. Ontological security debates in member states thus have spilled over to the EU level. Ontological uncertainties in the member states, for example with regard to migration or cultural issues, have brought about conflict in the Union. The concept of ontological security in international relations is based on the studies of Anthony Giddens and R. D. Laing, whose analyses depart from the assumption that individuals are worried not only about their physical security but also about the security of their being.[133] Hence, if people feel the erosion of certitudes and routines, they develop anxiety or fear, even if their material situation is stable. Ontological security has also been applied to international relations[134] and European affairs.[135] In this context, securitization results from the tendency of political actors to improve ontological security as an attempt to tackle the expansion of disquietudes and apprehension in societies. One key element for generating additional "security of the self" in the context of international relations is to strengthen collective identities. This mechanism can even turn the maintenance of international or ethnic conflict into a factor for stabilizing identities – thus complicating the regulation or solution of such conflicts.[136]

In any case, it comes as no surprise that times of crises, uncertainty and perceived threats open new opportunities for actors, who claim to provide for ontological security.[137] Governments and political actors with a predilection for traditional and community-based politics, in particular, have an inclination to stress ontological security issues, as they offer a perspective on the world, which aims at strengthening the collective self and which fosters a feeling of togetherness.

What does this all mean for European politics? At least four more fundamental trends can be observed.

133 R. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1960); A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in The Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

134 J. Mitzen, "Ontological security in world politics: state identity and the security dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006), pp. 341-370.

135 C. Kinnvall et als., "Introduction to 2018 special issue of European Security: 'Ontological (in)security in the European Union'," *European Security* 27, no. 3 (2018), pp. 249-265.

136 E.g., B. Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (London: Routledge, 2015).

137 Regarding "populism", see the special edition of *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and particularly the introduction: B. J. Steele and A. Homolar, "Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019), pp. 214-221.

First, the accumulation of threats and their often-diffuse nature have made the EU and member states identify new domains of security ranging from internal security, to propaganda, technology, digitalization, critical infrastructures or in the context of the Covid-pandemic questions of food or health. The new buzzword binding together the quest for improved security is resilience – a notion, which appears in many EU (and NATO) debates.[138] Enhancing resilience is an endeavor, which is undisputed and has been a factor of amalgamating security discourses despite varying vulnerabilities and threat perceptions in member states. It has particularly diversified and boosted the reflection about the EU's need for achieving "strategic autonomy" or "European sovereignty" in areas beyond the military and defense spheres, like high tech, industrial production in sensitive areas or dependence on external supply chains.[139]

Second, EU cooperation with countries and regions in its neighborhood has become more stable. The so-called European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), a framework for enhancing political and economic reforms in the east and the south of the EU, is faced with huge security challenges. As it was designed as a rather technocratic instrument, issues like the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the wars in Syria or Libya have not only overstretched the ENP, but they have also changed the view and the action of the EU regarding its neighborhoods. After a brief period of hope given the Colored Revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring, expectations that the EU could successfully advance democracy and rule-of-law in neighboring regions swiftly vanished. Instead of championing values and using mechanisms like conditioning aid to reforms, EU action (and financial support) has been increasingly guided by the primacy of projecting stability and security – the EU-Turkey agreement on migration of 2016 being just one example. This development corresponds to the above-mentioned trends of securitization in the EU.

Third, there is considerable divergence when it comes to "hard" security. Mainly countries in the eastern part of the EU have a historically developed threat perception, which is much focused on Russia. The hybrid threats in these countries are also part of their assessment, but many of them still see a robust defense, including reliable reassurance on the part of allies and deterrence against possible military aggressions as a key part of their security. That is why they are reluctant to strengthen European defense capabilities and security policy efforts without embedding them in the context of transatlantic relations. So, the Baltic States, Poland or Romania pursue a NATO-first policy, when it comes to "hard" security – although they have discovered the EU as an important security provider in areas like energy, digital or cyber security. In any case they are firmly opposed to strategic autonomy in a full-fledged "Gaullist"[140] way, which might weaken the ties with the United States.

Fourth, growing support for sovereignist and traditionalist parties, some of them with an illiberal attitude, in combination with the boost of perceived ontological insecurity has inserted

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138 E.g., in the EU Global Strategy quoted above.

139 M. E. Smith, "European security strategy: what role for the EU in its pursuit of strategic autonomy?," *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 5 (2018), pp. 605-620; P. Järvenpää et al., "European Strategic Autonomy, Operationalising a Buzzword," ICDS; Tallinn, October 2019.

140 Since the end of the 1950s, French President Charles de Gaulle, who struggled to maintain sovereignty, maintain foreign policy autonomy and restore French grandeur, saw it as a key condition in his foreign and security policy strategy to reject subordination to the US and to work for a strong Europe in security affairs. Cf. P. H. Gordon. *A Certain Idea of France: French Security Policy and the Gaullist Legacy (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

additional complexity in European integration in general, and European debates about security in particular. Regarding EU internal affairs, conservative neo-sovereignism corresponds to a preference for a rather intergovernmental EU modus operandi and with the desire to preserve or reinvigorate national identities against what is seen as liberal undermining of traditional values and communities. Conflicts about rule-of-law are not only, but also driven by the EU's desire to make "European values" and a certain understanding of these values more enforceable, whereas some member states want to maintain a form of cultural and normative autonomy in the European context. Therefore, they tend to reject the evolution of the EU into a "political union", i.e., its transformation into a more unified entity based on a self-concept, which marginalizes the dominance of national states as the key stakeholders of European politics. Apart from radical parties, such leanings are not anti-European. Neither Poland's PiS nor Hungary's Fidesz want to leave the Union, but they want to rebuild it or be able to follow their own paths in identity politics as members of the community. Looking at the debates about EU reform, e.g., in the context of the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe, parties like PiS or Fidesz oppose an institutional overhaul of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU. They particularly reject the project of introducing majority voting in this area, fearing they will not be able to block decisions pushed through by big member states like Germany and France.

With regard to foreign policy, illiberal and sovereignist groups and governments are disposed to set up relations with partners from outside the EU. These bonds can act as power amplifiers in conflicts with EU institutions or in the criticism of the perceived liberal hegemony of the West. Hence, Hungary's Fidesz entertains its relations with eastern partners, and Poland's PiS had close contacts with the Trump Administration (trying to create a special Polish-American relationship, whose hard core was security, but also EU-skepticism). The more intensive conflicts between "Brussels" and those countries are, the more important it is for them to maintain relations with external partners. This can complicate EU foreign action, e.g., when the Union wants to develop a common position vis-à-vis these third-countries. For example, despite some objections regarding the effectiveness of EU sanctions against Russia, Hungary did not block this EU policy but was critical of some resolutions reprimanding China. But whereas Hungary blocked an attempt at a common statement on China's behavior regarding Hong Kong in spring 2021, it did not veto sanctions over human rights issues in Xinjiang, although the Hungarian foreign minister called them "meaningless, pretentious and harmful".[141]

All in all, security remains an ambivalent factor for the European project. It is both glue and disconnector for member states, and both impulse and impediment for integration. With the quest for better security becoming increasingly a fight without a front, requiring comprehensive efforts in a multitude of areas, this ambiguity will intensify rather than decline.

141 "Hungary blocks EU statement criticising China over Hong Kong, diplomats say," *Reuters*, 16 April 2021; "Hungary quietly hosts Chinese minister days after EU human rights sanctions," *Reuters*, 25 March 2021.

Chapter 4

Leaving Illiberalism Behind: An Opportunity to Establish a New Liberal Foundation in EU-Israel Relations?

Toby Greene and Stephan Stetter

Introduction

How does contestation over liberalism in Israel and the EU affect the EU-Israel relationship? This paper highlights a moment of opportunity to improve EU-Israel relations created by political changes in Israel but also wider international changes in Europe and the Middle East. Of particular significance is the replacement of Benjamin Netanyahu, who exploited illiberal trends at home and abroad. Within the new Israeli government there is a greater overlap with dominant EU liberal values, enabling greater scope to identify shared identities and interests.

The years since the early 2000s have witnessed a global resurgence of illiberal trends, both in democracies and authoritarian states. In Israel and in various EU member states, but also at the EU-level, contestation over liberal values has shaped political struggles as reflected in the rise of leaders, movements and segments of the public subscribing to illiberal agendas.

These illiberal trends have challenged liberal-democratic principles within many states in different regions, including the United States, Poland, Hungary, India, Turkey and Brazil. Major challenges to the liberal international order, defined by rules and norms (in particular multilateralism and human rights), emanate from illiberal populism within democracies, but it is also challenged by illiberal powers, especially China and Russia.

It should be noted that illiberal trends in Israel and the EU are diverse, being shaped by specific national and regional contexts. In the EU context, the dominant illiberal challenge has come from right-wing populism that sees national identity and traditional values threatened by globalization, immigration, Europeanization and cultural change. In Israel, illiberalism relates

less to the value dimension associated with traditional values, although this also exists. It centers more around opposing territorial compromises with the Palestinians, emphasizing the Jewish over the democratic character and identity of the state, including by marginalizing the Arab minority.[142] A negative stereotyping of Muslims unites many right-wing movements both in Israel and the EU, even while European right-wing movements still often draw from antisemitic traditions. However, expressions of these trends in attempts to weaken institutions that check the power of the executive including the justice system, media and civil society are comparable in Israel and in some EU member states, in particular Hungary and Poland.

These trends not only shape domestic developments within Israel and the EU (to which other papers in this series relate), but also EU-Israel relations. Against this backdrop, the paper looks at four dimensions of how democracy, liberalism and illiberal trends shape this relationship: the interrelationship of liberal and illiberal trends in national and international arenas as the overarching umbrella of EU-Israeli relations; the decline of EU-Israeli relations in the decade since 2010; the renewed opportunities for EU-Israeli relations after the recent change of the Israeli government; and, finally, the impossibility of ignoring the Palestinian question in that context. A concluding section makes recommendations for how liberals in the EU and Israel might seize current opportunities.

Contestation of Liberalism at National and International Levels

The rise of illiberal trends within democracies and the endurance of illiberalism in non-democratic states have been widely observed over the past two decades. What is often less emphasized is the interrelationship between domestic trends of illiberalism and the contestation over liberalism in the international order. The latter is visible in attempts to undermine multilateral institutions (e.g., the UN, OSCE, The European Court of Justice), international law and human rights regimes. While illiberal states, in particular Russia and China as the most potent illiberal powers, play a major role, the illiberal turn of the United States under former President Donald Trump has caused additional harm within the United States and internationally. Trump's policies have not led to the dissolution of international organizations or a widespread irreversible United States withdrawal from international commitments. The withdrawal from the Paris Climate Change Accords and the World Health Organization (WHO) were reversed by President Biden. At the time of writing, the Biden Administration is also trying to rebuild the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran.

But the legitimacy of international treaties and organizations based on multilateral cooperation, international law and human rights has become more contested, from the WTO and its dispute settlement mechanisms, to the WHO and the International Criminal Court. On the European continent, the European Court for Human Rights came under fierce criticism from Russia, Turkey and others, while the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), is being undermined as a pillar of the European security architecture, most prominently by Russia's military threat towards Ukraine.

142 There is much debate on how to refer to Arab (as opposed to Jewish, both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) citizens of Israel. In recent years it has become widespread in academia to refer to this community as "Palestinian Israelis", highlighting their association with Palestinian national identity at large. However, many in this community self-identify as Arab Israelis, and this paper will refer to Arab Israelis.

To be sure, the crisis is relative. Liberal democracy, both institutionally and as an embedded political culture, is strong in many states[143] and right-wing populist movements have encountered limits in national elections throughout the EU. Multilateral institutions have also proven resilient on many levels. The EU's post-Cold War expansion has brought risks and challenges, but incorporating 16 new member states, many from the former Communist bloc, whilst simultaneously deepening integration, remains a major achievement. Eurobarometer surveys[144] show that the EU and its democratic values have strong and lasting support among the EU public, including newcomer states. NATO as a pillar of security and defense cooperation between liberal democracies has expanded even further than the EU, including Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. International law and human rights are central in many global governance arenas. From tribunals on Yugoslavia and Rwanda to the International Criminal Court, war crimes have become judiciable in a manner unimaginable decades ago. Moreover, outside the spotlight of international commentators, the daily work of many international treaties and organizations endures and thickens the institutional underpinnings of a liberal, or at least rule-based and multilateral, international order. Moreover, illiberal states do not necessarily oppose multilateralism and rule-based orders per se, as China demonstrates by attempting to increase its leverage within many international organizations.

We should not, therefore, fall into the trap of a self-fulfilling prophecy: while there are challenges to liberal orders, liberalism endures both nationally and internationally. And there are attempts to strengthen rules-based international institutions as a pillar of liberal order, e.g., the French-German sponsored global Alliance for Multilateralism formed in 2019 with the participation of 74 states.[145]

What we have seen, however, is that it is harder to develop multilateral international relationships based on rule-of-law and human rights, if those liberal principles are so widely contested in so many states. If illiberalism rules at home, leaders are often less inclined to foster multilateral institutions abroad.

This challenge has affected the EU's relations not only with Israel, but with other states in the region including Turkey, Iran and Arab states. In the case of Arab states, many have retrenched to authoritarianism after the uprisings that began in 2010 and 2011.[146] While the recourse to authoritarian rule differs in style and extent among Arab countries, it has been a general phenomenon, even when accompanied by cautious social reforms. Moreover, powerful transnational illiberal trends endure on the societal level, not least a plethora of Islamist movements including Da'esh, the Muslim Brotherhood (with its Hamas offshoot ruling Gaza), and actors with strong ideological and material ties with Iran, of which Hezbollah is the most potent.

All this defines the context for EU-Israel relations. When the EU initiated the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995, its goal was a rules-based regional order based on a deep form of multilateralism, a strong emphasis on the role of civil society and human rights, and supported by

143 R. Wike and J. Fetterolf, "Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety," *Pew Research Center*, 7 December 2021.

144 "Eurobarometer survey on Democracy and Elections," *Eurobarometer*, November 2018.

145 See https://multilateralism.org.

146 There are various ways of referring to these uprisings, ranging from the initial reference to an Arab Spring to the often-sarcastic notion of an ensuing Arab winter. We stick here to the terminology of an Arab uprising, highlighting the public calls for more open and just societies, which led to quite diverse responses ranging from war, authoritarian revival, cautious reforms, and bolder steps of transition.

the newly incepted Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).[147] The failure of this multilateral region-building was partly driven by the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process at the time, which reduced the willingness of Arab states to deepen regional integration. But even without this challenge, multilateral region-building with a strong focus on human rights was inhibited by other factors. These included EU unwillingness to open its labor market and facilitate migration, ongoing conflicts between states within and beyond EU borders (e.g., Algeria-Morocco, Lebanon/Syria-Israel, Spain-Morocco, Cyprus), but also an unwillingness of states on the southern shores of the Mediterranean to engage in real democratization. The EU faced suspicion and delegitimization of its outreach to civil society. The challenges were further exemplified by the ineffectiveness of the subsequent Union for the Mediterranean, founded in 2008.

In order to overcome these obstacles, the EU's way forward from the early 2000s was the establishment of the bilateral and less values-oriented ENP. EU-Israel relations prospered within this framework, with an extensive Action Plan for deepening EU-Israel relations signed in 2005.[148] The crisis of regional integration based on liberal ideas thus enabled much deeper EU-Israeli integration on the bilateral level.

The engine of EU-Israel relations in that period was Israel's strong economic development and capacity for integration, whilst the brake was the Palestinian issue. Thus, when Ehud Barak became Israeli prime minister in 1999 this was perceived as an Israeli convergence with liberal trends among center-left Western parties and leaders (the "Third Way"), ranging from Tony Blair in the UK to Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Bill Clinton in the United States. Barak's quest for a conflict-ending agreement led many to hope that the peace process was back on track, and coincided in June 2000 with the ratification of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which had been agreed in 1995 (and which later formed the institutional basis for the 2005 Action Plan).

The collapse of the Camp David talks, the Second Intifada, and the Sharon government, overlapping with 9/11 and the War on Terror, dashed these hopes and caused friction between Israel and many EU governments. Yet the pendulum swung again towards improved EU-Israel relations with the waning of the Second Intifada and the Israeli evacuation of settlements from Gaza, announced in December 2003 and implemented in 2005. This was the backdrop for the signing of the Action Plan.[149]

The 2007-8 Annapolis negotiations between the governments of Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas provided a context for a new announcement of upgraded EU-Israeli relations in June 2008. This despite the deteriorating situation in Gaza following the Hamas takeover, and the status quo in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) under two layers of illiberal governance: that of the Israeli occupation and of the PA leadership.[150]

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147 S. Stetter, "Cross-Pillar Politics: Functional Unity and Institutional Fragmentation in EU Foreign Policies," *Journal of European Public Policy* 3, no. 11 (2004), pp. 720-739.

148 On EU-Israel relations, see the various publications of the Israeli-European Policy Network, for example R. Nathanson and S. Stetter, eds., *The Monitor of the EU-Israel Action Plan* (Tel Aviv and Vienna: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2006).

149 T. Greene, "Can Disengagement Secure Legitimacy? The European Angle," *INSS Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 4 (2014), pp. 47-60.

150 "The European Union Upgrades Its Relations with Israel," *Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 16 June 2008. See on the Olmert-Abbas talks B. Avishai, "A Plan for Peace That Still Could Be," *New York Times*, 7 February 2011.

Despite the failure to reach a final status agreement and frequent tensions between Israel and the EU, EU-Israeli relations nonetheless reached unprecedented levels of integration in the two decades following Oslo. Israel gained an institutional anchoring with the EU that is stronger than for any other non-European state. This includes free trade as well as Israel's participation in various EU programs and funds, for example the massive Framework/Horizon research funds.

In parallel, the EU took a more visible role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, albeit in carefully designed niches. The EU became a party to the Middle East Quartet (alongside the United States, Russia and the UN), a main donor of the PA and assumed responsibility for two significant initiatives on the ground: the training of Palestinian police (EUPOLCOPS) and the monitoring of the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, which was de facto suspended after the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007.

In sum, regional and global developments during the 2000s showed that the international dimension in which EU-Israel relations are embedded was not, as liberals might have hoped in the 1990s, based on an inevitable spread of liberal democracy, regional integration and rules and rights-based governance. Rather, the structure was based on the interests and capacity of Israel and the EU to deepen their relations in economic and other fields, and a minimal overlap in their vision for an eventual two-state solution to the Palestinian question.

The Netanyahu Period: New Illiberal Alliances Challenge EU-Israel Relations

Israeli policies during the Netanyahu years from 2009 until 2021 – domestically, in the Palestinian arena, and in relations with the EU and its member states – exacerbated divides between Israel and the mostly liberal elites in EU institutions and member state governments, as well as the mainly liberal EU public.[151]

The upgrade in EU-Israel relations announced in June 2008 was shelved in 2009 following Operation Cast Lead and the subsequent election of Netanyahu, pending progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.[152] Annual meetings of the EU-Israel Association Council, the primary political framework for advancing the relationship, were suspended in 2012. This meant that no further integration of Israel into new EU projects and programs (except for those that were already in the pipeline, such as the Open Skies agreement) was foreseen as long as the stalemate in the peace process, which the EU largely attributed to Netanyahu, endured.

The same period saw Europe's political scene also being shaped by a strengthening of illiberal movements, mainly of a populist-nationalist outlook, overlapping from 2016 until 2020 with the Trump Presidency.
The rise of illiberal trends in Israel and Europe made possible a strategic alliance between Netanyahu and right-wing leaders, such as those in Poland and Hungary, the Višegrad countries as a whole (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and others (e.g. Austria, Romania),

151 T. Greene and J. Rynhold, "Europe and Israel: Between Conflict and Cooperation," *Survival* 60, no. 4 (2018), pp. 91-112.

152 "EU sketches out conditions for upgrade with Israel," *Euromonitor*, 28 May 2009.

despite the links of some of these leaders and parties with positions or messages perceived by many as antisemitic.[153]

An alliance with Israel is regarded by many radical right actors in the EU as a source of domestic and international legitimacy, a soft power asset in order to repel accusations of antisemitism.[154] This served Netanyahu in exploiting the need for unanimity in the EU Council on foreign policy interventions in order to block criticism of Israel. It was also a strategy welcome to right-wing European leaders confronted by interventions from Brussels against their anti-democratic domestic agendas.

Right-wing movements throughout the EU increasingly saw Israel in a positive light as a nation-state that had not abandoned its ethnic identity and was strong against Islamist threats and uncontrolled migration – the two unifying issues for the European radical right, especially after the 2015 migration crisis and amid ongoing Jihadist activities.[155]

Netanyahu's relations with governments in Central and Eastern Europe were therefore enhanced by shared ethnonationalism, shared interest in keeping the EU out of national politics, and shared anti-Muslim sentiments. At the same time, the escalating political assault by Netanyahu or his allies on civil society, the status of minorities and the independence of the judiciary and the press echoed the moves of populist nationalists in Europe.

Meanwhile, bilateral ties between Israel and other EU member states were driven by geopolitical and economic developments. In particular, Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus, whilst framed as a democratic alliance, was driven by a shared interest in maximizing the potential of gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean and penetrating the EU energy market, whilst balancing against Turkey.[156]

These ties have to be seen in addition to the long-standing bilateral relations between Israel and traditional supporters in the Council, especially Germany, which is the EU's largest member state and economy. In 2009, Chancellor Merkel told the Knesset that Israel's security is part of the German "reason of state". Tensions with Germany grew also during the Netanyahu period, e.g., when Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel insisted in 2017 on meeting Israeli human rights' NGOs, leading Netanyahu to cancel a planned meeting with him.[157] Nonetheless, the German government's commitment to Israel's security remained steadfast. This commitment was reaffirmed in the 2021 coalition agreement under Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

With so many EU Council members having overlapping forms of diversely motivated but often dense bilateral relations with Israel, the Council has often struggled to establish a strong

153 D. Filc and S. Pardo, "Israel's Right-Wing Populists: The European Connection," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (2021), pp. 99-122.

154 See the Mitvim Institute's video on this topic.

155 T. Greene, "Judeo-Christian Civilizationism: Challenging Common European Foreign Policy in the Israeli-Palestinian Arena," *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 4 (2021), pp. 430-450.

156 Z. Tziarras, "Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance," *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no. 3 (2016), pp. 407-427. See also A. Goldthau et al., "Leviathan Awakens: Gas Finds, Energy Governance and the Emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a Geopolitical Region," *Review of Policy Research* (2020), pp. 1-19.

157 T. Lazaroff, "Israeli NGOs after German FM meeting: We don't take orders from Netanyahu," *Jerusalem Post*, 26 April 2017.

common position on the Israeli-Palestinian arena.[158] As a result, whilst the Council often voiced criticism of Netanyahu government policies, especially settlement policies (and in different respects is critical of the PA and the Palestinians), there was rarely sufficient consensus for strong practical measures to increase pressure on Israel. Thus, measures that were taken by the EU (discussed below) did not significantly harm Israel's high level of integration and cooperation with the EU.

The main negative impacts have been twofold: failure to capitalize on the opportunity created by increasing shared interests to advance the EU-Israel relationship further, and the impression promoted by Netanyahu's political camp within Israel that the EU is hostile to Israel or even antisemitic.[159] This has served Netanyahu in his attempts to mobilize his base at home and to de-legitimize international criticism of Israel as diplomatic versions of the BDS-movement, which Israeli politicians frequently branded as antisemitic. The various clashes over the last decade provided opportunities for Netanyahu and his allies to reaffirm this message.

In late 2012, in the wake of an Israeli announcement of plans to build in the E1 area east of Jerusalem, the EU Council confirmed that all agreements with Israel must explicitly state their inadmissibility in the OPT, underlining the EU's long held position that all agreements with Israel are only applicable within the 1967 borders. This demand almost derailed negotiations for Israeli association with the Horizon 2020 funding program in 2013. Israel's participation was saved by unprecedented interventions of Israel's R&D community that overcame Netanyahu's initial intention to give up on Israel's participation in these programs, and led to Israel accepting the clause, while adding an annex to the agreement stating its objections to the EU's position.

Subsequent developments underlined the growing relevance, and politicization, of EU "differentiation" policies.[160] In 2015, the European Commission issued guidance notes that produce of Israeli settlements from the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights should be explicitly labelled as such for European consumers and not have preferential access to the EU market, to differentiate them from produce from Israel proper. In 2019, the European Court of Justice ruled that such labelling was mandatory, based on the fact that consumers had the right to know from where Israeli produce imported into the EU originated, i.e., from Israel proper or from the OPT. Israeli government and opposition leaders castigated this as an alliance of the EU with the BDS movement.[161] Netanyahu even drew comparisons with Nazi campaigns in Germany during the 1930s against buying from Jews.[162] Funding by the EU or its members for NGOs accused of promoting delegitimization of Israel was another constant source of friction building up since the early 2000s.

During attempts by Secretary of State John Kerry to re-establish final status negotiations in 2013, the EU tried to offer carrots alongside its (limited) sticks by proposing to upgrade relations

158 M. Asseburg and N. Goren, eds., *Divided and Divisive: Europeans, Israel and Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking* (Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs & PAX, 2019).

159 See for example, "The 2019 Israeli Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute," *Mitvim Institute*, November 2019.

160 A. Persson, "Shaping Discourse and Setting Examples: Normative Power Europe Can Work in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, no. 6 (2017), pp. 1415-1431.

161 M. Sion Tzidkiyahu and S. Hirsch, "On the fundamental differences between the EU differentiation policy and BDS," *Mitvim Institute*, July 2020.

162 "EU Settlement Labelling Plan Evokes 'dark Memories' for Netanyahu," *France 24*, 11 November 2015.

with Israel and Palestine to a "Special Privileged Partnership" in the case of a final status agreement.[163] However, the vaguely worded offer made little impact in Israel, which resisted linking bilateral ties to Israeli-Palestinian issues.

The establishment of a Trump-Netanyahu axis undermined EU policies further, and added to the diplomatic chasm between the Netanyahu government and the EU. This included the dismantling of the JCPOA with Iran in which the EU had invested heavily and the economic and political assault on the PA in the context of the hopelessly one-sided "deal of the century". The diplomatic bright spot in this period - the US-brokered normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab states – appeared only to further illustrate the irrelevance of the EU in regional diplomacy, though the EU is now seeking to seize the opportunity to reinvigorate multilateral regional cooperation through a new "Agenda for the Mediterranean".[164]

New Opportunities for EU-Israeli Relations: Converging Interests or Shared Liberal Perspectives?

Several recent developments might change these dynamics, creating opportunities for improving the EU-Israel relationship. These include political change in Israel, the limits populist actors face in many European countries, the Abraham Accords, the replacement of Trump with Biden, the longer-term shift in US priorities away from the Middle East, and various policy issues that urgently require intensified multilateral and scientific cooperation, including security threats, tackling climate change and battling current and future pandemics. These changes are widening the scope for EU-Israel cooperation, though the degree to which this is informed by converging liberal perspectives remains an open question.

Israel has seen dramatic internal political change from the increasingly populist-nationalist leadership of Netanyahu to an unusually pluralist and politically highly diverse national unity government. The success of the opposition in unseating Netanyahu surprised many because it required the cooperation of the most disparate coalition in Israeli political history. The outcome is an anti-Netanyahu coalition that has little choice but to make a virtue of its pragmatic pluralism. This is especially so for Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of a hard-right, pro-settlement party. Bennett's own record of staunch nationalism, his former alliances with even more extreme elements, and his vehement opposition to Palestinian statehood, cannot be ignored. Yet he has been forced, for now at least, to become a bridge builder in return for the opportunity to serve as prime minister for the first two years of a rotation agreement with the centrist Yair Lapid, who leads a decidedly liberal party.

The coalition parties from left, center, and right, and – for the first time in Israel's history an Arab party - were brought together by a shared desire to re-establish functioning government after four elections in two years, caused by Netanyahu's inability to form a majority coalition whilst under criminal indictment. They remain bonded by fear of a government collapse leading to elections, electoral decimation, and the return of Netanyahu. But they also share an agenda to dampen domestic divisions exploited by Netanyahu's camp, which exploded into

163 "A Special Privileged Partnership with the EU as an Incentive for Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *Mitvim Institute and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, June 2016.

164 "Southern Neighbourhood: EU proposes new Agenda for the Mediterranean," *European Commission*, 9 February 2021.

unprecedented inter-ethnic violence within Israeli cities in May 2021. They have routinely praised one another's pragmatism and dedication to the public good. The contrast with the populist tone of the pro-Netanyahu camp, domestically and internationally, could not be sharper.

This pluralistic government is clearly far more appealing to liberal Europeans. This is not least due to the hope that the new Israeli government will hold back the escalating assault on Israeli public institutions (in particular, the judiciary) and civil society from the populist-nationalist right; minimize public differences with the liberal-internationalist Biden Administration; and bring a more pragmatic approach to the Palestinian issue, despite an internal "agreement to disagree" on the two-state solution.

Though the new Israeli coalition's lifespan is not known, and Netanyahu and his supporters remain a determined opposition, liberal Israelis can at least begin to imagine how this development could turn Israel into a symbol of coexistence as a democratic society with a 20% Muslim minority. Taken together with the Abraham Accords (the religio-cultural symbolic framing should not be overlooked), the participation of an Islamist political party in an Israeli coalition challenges the perception in populist right-wing circles of Israel as a bulwark of what is perceived in these circles as an inevitable clash between Judeo-Christian and Islamic civilizations.

For liberal actors in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere, the Israeli coalition might be an asset in identifying mechanisms of how to trigger domestic change and unseat populists and ethno-nationalists. Moreover, Israel and Europe face comparable challenges in building cohesive societies which defy the claim of an unbridgeable difference between Western and Islamic cultures. In the European case, a comprehensive perspective on European civilization has to take note of the fact that European Muslims are not only immigrants or their descendants, but also comprise significant portions of pre-immigration Muslim minorities (or even majorities), in particular across South-East Europe.

The change in the Israeli government also brings a distinct change in mindset regarding the EU in particular, made explicit by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. Netanyahu and those around him framed EU hostility to his policies as hostility towards the State of Israel, prompting the strategic alignment with "sovereignist" EU member states. This negative campaigning against the EU has resonated in Israel. Some 46% of the Israeli public share the perception of the EU as an opponent rather than a friend (24%), according to the Mitvim Insitute's 2021 annual survey.[165]

Already Gabi Ashkenazi, the centrist foreign minister who served during the short-lived Netanyahu-Gantz national unity coalition (2020-2021) which preceded the Bennett-Lapid government, took steps towards a more positive approach to the EU. This change of approach has expanded with Lapid as foreign minister, and Netanyahu forced into opposition. On his first day in the job Lapid spoke not only with President Macron but with EU High Representative Josep Borrell, met senior EU officials, and told Israeli diplomats, "Our relationship with too many governments has been neglected and become hostile. Shouting that everyone is

165 "The 2021 Israeli Foreign Policy Index," *Mitvim Institute*, October 2021.

antisemitic isn't a policy or a work plan [...] it is time to change, to improve, to deepen the dialogue between Israel and Europe."[166]

Lapid's forthright response to a new Polish law preventing restitution of property of Holocaust victims showed a clear break from the importance Netanyahu attributed to aligning with Eurosceptic actors. His early visits to Rome, Paris and Brussels – with the EU being the first destination of all his foreign visits – signaled a desire to align with liberal-minded leaders and improve the EU-Israel relationship. This was positively received in Europe, with some signals that the Association Council could reconvene and the EU voicing only modest expectations of promoting a two-state solution.

This domestic shift comes against the backdrop of the aforementioned normalization agreements with the UAE as well as Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, which open many new potential avenues of triangular cooperation involving Europe, Israel, and its new Arab peace partners.

With a view to fostering a liberal international, the Abraham Accords have a mixed balance sheet. Whilst they offer huge new potential for inter-state and even inter-societal cooperation between former enemies, Gulf leaders of heavily securitized states ruled by a small elite can hardly be counted as full-fledged allies in the defense of liberalism. Human rights play no role in that context and the windfall from the accords might empower authoritarian leaders from Rabat to Abu Dhabi, and legitimize violations of international law, as in the case of the United States' promises to Morocco over Western Sahara, already a bone of contention between Morocco and the EU.

Nonetheless, the new Israeli government and the flowering of Arab-Israel relations increase the potential for Israel and the EU to build on overlapping interests stemming from parallel developments: the maturing of Israel into a medium-sized economic power with outsized defense, security, intelligence and technology assets; and the multiplication of European economic and strategic challenges, which increases European interest in fostering cooperation with Israel.

If Israel were an EU member, it would be its 11th largest economy and climbing, thanks to consistently higher annual GDP growth than the EU average. This is not least due to a 2% annual population growth, which is set to take the population to 20 million by 2060.[167] As well as being a market of growing significance, Israel is an important source of tech innovation and of defense equipment.[168] This at a time when defense integration and capability is one of the fastest growing policy areas within an EU striving for "European sovereignty" and "strategic autonomy", as reflected in the EU's new "strategic compass".

Meanwhile, with energy transition and the "Green Deal" heading towards the top of the EU's list of priorities, Israeli leaders are belatedly catching on to the climate agenda, and its diplomats

166 "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hand-over Ceremony 14 June 2021," *Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 14 June 2021.

167 M. Arlosoroff, "Israel's Population Is Growing at a Dizzying Rate. Is It Up for the Challenge?," *Haaretz Magazine*, 4 January 2021.

168 T. Greene and J. Rynhold, "Europe and Israel: Between Conflict and Cooperation," *Survival* 60, no. 4 (2018), pp. 91-112.

are keen to highlight the growing orientation of Israel's famed hi-tech eco-system towards climate-related fields.

The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, in which the EU is an observer (and Israel, Italy, Cyprus, France, Greece, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine are members - but Turkey is conspicuously absent), highlights this potential. Whilst hopes for building a shared gas pipeline have faded, the diplomatic infrastructure offers a forum for promoting other promising avenues for greener energy and climate cooperation. These include the proposed "EuroAsia Interconnector" to link the electricity grids of Israel, Cyprus and Greece.[169]

Given that climate change, coupled with population growth, will further exacerbate social, economic and environmental challenges across the Middle East, Israel has growing significance not only as a strategic ally for pro-Western regional forces, but also as a partner in developing the tech and infrastructure for energy transition in the region. In November 2021, Israel and Jordan signed an agreement brokered by the UAE under which Israel will provide Jordan with desalinated water and Jordan will provide Israel with solar energy, with an Emirati firm picking up the infrastructure contract.[170]

It seems, therefore, that strategic concerns of many Arab countries, and environmental and climate imperatives that shape contemporary global governance and key EU priorities have opened up new avenues for trilateral cooperation among the EU, Israel and individual Arab countries. Moreover, aspects of the wider multilateral and regional cooperation that was unattainable under the EMP of the 1990s now look more realistic, aligning to some extent the EU's security and value-based discourses, today addressing sustainability, and maybe in the future human rights.

Nonetheless, insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa, and how such insecurities are perceived by liberal EU leaders, will continue to expose the old European democracy-stability dilemma. Thus, the EU supports human rights and civil rights groups, but while fearing de-stabilization and spill-over effects of revolutions and social unrest, including migration movements, also deepens relations with autocratic Arab leaders.

In that context, Israel can be framed by both Arab states and the EU as a prop of stability for its immediate neighbors Egypt and Jordan, as well as a counter to revisionist threats from Iran and its proxies. Yet the degree to which this is helpful in overcoming regional conflicts will remain contested in Europe. Whilst there is wide consensus on the security challenge Iran poses, many European diplomats still hope for a future in which conflict in the region is calmed by incorporating Iran within a regional security architecture – a model that seems outlandish to most Israelis. The deep differences between Israel and the EU about how to cope with Iran are illustrated most clearly in relation to the nuclear deal.

Overall, however, the dynamic described above creates a set of converging interests for trilateral cooperation among Israel, the EU and Arab states.

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169 N. Tsafos, "Beyond the EastMed Pipeline," *Ekathimerini.com*, 17 January 2022.

170 M. Arlosoroff, "The Official Photo Hides the Full Story: The New Middle East Is Already Taking Shape," *Haaretz Magazine*, 9 December 2021.

In sum, the security-based discourse, rather than a shared liberal agenda, is the most potent driver of closer EU-Israel relations in the years to come, both in bilateral EU-Israel relations and the regional arena. Liberalism comes in indirectly insofar as a more liberal and pragmatic Israeli government, combined with Arab-Israeli normalization, provides a favorable atmosphere for Arab-EU-Israeli cooperation and for promoting values such as rule-based multilateralism, sustainability and green politics. However, human rights as a central pillar of the liberal (international) order remains a stepchild in any such future scenarios.

Nonetheless, for a host of reasons, strategic cooperation between the EU and Israel is likely to continue to be shaped by European concerns over Israel's liberal credentials, and especially the Palestinian question.

The Palestinian Question Cannot be Ignored

There is regular international outcry, including by the EU, against Israeli policies in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Outbreaks of violence draw routine condemnation by the EU of Israel and of armed Palestinian groups and emphasize the centrality of human rights as a core element of EU declarations. The EU is critical of how Israel's settlement policy undermines peace, and continues to emphasize its commitment to the two-state formula (even whilst criticizing illiberal trends in Palestine, under the rule of both the PA and Hamas).

Yet most leaders in the EU and its member states welcome Netanyahu's ouster and refrain from confronting the new and internally diverse Israeli government with demands for a new peace process or bold steps towards a two-state solution. Indeed, the EU currently appears to accept the notion of "minimizing the conflict" by stabilizing the situation and improving the Palestinian economy and daily life, rather than trying to reach a final status agreement.

Within the Israeli discourse, rightly or wrongly, the aftermath of the Arab uprisings further weakened the case for territorial concessions since it underlined for many Israelis that every weakly governed arena on its borders becomes a base for violent armed groups, Islamists and criminal human traffickers. The mood is captured for many by Micah Goodman's book "Catch-67", which articulates the dilemma whereby Israel's liberal democracy is imperiled by the occupation, but its security is imperiled by ending it.[171]

The potential for significant diplomatic progress has been further affected not only by this development and the broader rightward political shift in Israel, but also by the entrenchment of the rift between Hamas in Gaza and the PA in the West Bank; the ossification of the PA's corrupt and aging leadership; the failure of peace initiatives both bilaterally (Abbas-Olmert) and from the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations; and the turning of relations with Israel into an increasingly divisive partisan issue in the United States.

The fact that no immediate diplomatic solution to the conflict is in the offing, together with the change in Israeli government and the satisfaction among most EU leaders with Netanyahu's departure, has contributed to what Alfred Tovias has called a "quiet convergence of the EU and

171 M. Goodman, *CATCH-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018).

Israeli positions".[172] This convergence has put ending the freeze of the Association Council and establishing new forms of bilateral and regional cooperation back on the table.

However, it would be a mistake to think the linkage between the Palestinian issue and EU-Israel relations can be severed.

The EU and its member states remain deeply invested, financially as well as politically, in the Palestinian right of national self-determination, and human rights are likely to remain a central prism through which the EU looks at international conflicts. For example, the European Neighborhood Instrument allocation for Palestine for 2017-2020 was 1.28 billion Euro, aside from the bilateral assistance from individual member states, reflecting the continued EU commitment to Palestinian state-building as well as the EU's ambition to strengthen Palestinian civil society.[173]

This aid is premised on the assumption that progress towards two states is a prerequisite for stability in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and for exploiting the full potential of EU relations in the region. The waning hope of diplomatic progress, and the ambivalence of Israelis and Palestinians regarding a two-state solution, have however subjected this policy to criticism from within the EU that it is simply subsidizing an endless occupation.

Member states and political parties that have traditionally supported the Palestinians will continue to highlight the linkages between deepening EU-Israel relations and progress on the Palestinian question. They will be bolstered by bottom-up pressure from activists and political movements that oppose deepening EU-Israel relations because of the Palestinian question. This includes the BDS movement. Since its inception in the early 2000s, this movement has not had a major effect on Israel's standing in the international arena, despite considerable Israeli alarm at its potential effects. However, it has vitalized pro-Palestinian movements and has become a cultural force in often left-wing NGO communities, on university campuses, though more in the United States and the UK than in the EU, and among high profile cultural figures. Whilst its impact on larger political debates should not be exaggerated, it retains the potential to shape domestic political discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian issue in some EU states, and shape Israeli perceptions of Europe.

Outbreaks of violence, and indeed the lack of any meaningful diplomatic horizon for realizing Palestinian statehood, create a permissive environment for anti-Israel and at times even antisemitic protest and activism throughout the EU. Among the general public, such escalation has often led to a deterioration of public opinion about Israel (though often also about the Palestinians).[174]

The political, security and economic situation in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is very fragile, and vulnerable to both deliberate and inadvertent triggers for violent escalation. The Israeli occupation/blockade and the authoritarian rule of the PA and Hamas have

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172 A. Tovias, "EU Foreign Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Reevaluation," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2021), pp. 1-16.

173 "European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations," *European Commission*.

174 C. Hirsch and G. Coi, "Where Europe stands on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Polls," *Politico*, 21 May 2021.

devastating effects on the ground. The economic situation is also dire, the Palestinians depend on the customs envelope with Israel and there are huge difficulties with the import and export of Palestinian goods. In the West Bank, other risks include delays, reductions or cancellations in aid from international donors including the EU and its members, which perpetually threaten to bring the economic challenges in the OPT to the point of collapse. Crises in Palestinian society have the potential to exacerbate existing tensions between Palestinians and Israeli authorities and extremist settlers, unrest in East Jerusalem, and within Israel's Arab communities and neighborhoods. Moreover, these tensions are opportunities for Hamas to stoke unrest and undermine the PA, for the PA to harden its authoritarian grip in the West Bank and to empower illiberal agendas of the nationalist-right in Israel.

In the absence of significant changes, the instability will grow in the coming years. Gaza's population is growing exponentially, and could reach three million by 2030, with a massive rate of (youth) unemployment.[175] Due to the devastating political and socio-economic situation, the Gaza Strip is itself already a source of illegal migration to Europe[176] and without major improvements in the economy and infrastructure, this pressure seems likely to grow.

In sum, while the EU refrains for the moment from focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, the Palestinian issue will not disappear from the EU agenda. The EU has an interest in fostering political, economic, social and security/military relations with Israel, and this appears to be in line with public opinion. But the EU, also here reflecting broader public opinion, is also likely to stick with its long-held emphasis on the necessity of a two state-solution and the right to Palestinian national self-determination. Moreover, for all the geostrategic considerations gaining ground in Brussels, the importance the EU attaches to human rights in its foreign relations will continue to inform the Brussels perspective on this conflict. Therefore, tensions between these two principles are likely to affect the EU's approach to these issues in the years to come.

Seizing the Moment

Liberals in Israel and Europe who wish to reinforce liberal values at home and internationally and who aim, in that context, to strengthen EU-Israel relations, face a moment of opportunity. Whilst current political conditions in Israel and the OPT do not favor a renewed quest for a conflict-ending agreement, changes in Israel, the Middle East, Europe and globally are conducive to greater EU-Israeli cooperation. Whilst many of the underlying drivers are strategic interests, the new Israeli government increases the overlap of shared liberal perspectives, both regarding minority rights and liberal democratic principles, and other "progressive" policy areas such as battling climate change. However, as we have outlined, human rights as a core concern for a truly *liberal* international order is likely to remain somewhat of a stepchild not only of this renewed Israeli-EU dialogue, but also of the various normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries.

Israel's national unity government has agreed to disagree on the final status of the Palestinian question, meaning no de jure annexation and no decisive movement towards a two-state agreement. But there is a growing consensus in Israel on the benefits of pragmatic steps to

175 N. al-Mughrabi, "U.N. sees steep Gaza population growth in 30 years, with economic problems ahead," *Reuters*, 20 December 2016.

176 "Migratory Map," *Frontex Europa*, January-September 2021.

improve the economic situation in Gaza and the West Bank, backed by the Israeli security sector and assisted by the readiness, and in some cases enthusiasm, of center-liberal and left-wing ministers to rebuild cooperation with PA counterparts. The first few months of the coalition brought about a series of ministerial meetings and concrete developments, including Israeli decisions to expand work permits for Palestinians from both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a development plan for Gaza presented by Foreign Minister Lapid.

This creates a strong overlap with the agendas of international donors, including the Biden Administration keen to rebuild relations with the PA after the complete collapse of the US-Palestine relationship under Trump. It also creates convergence with the EU and its established policy of funding the PA and Palestinian civil society. For the EU and its member states - veteran supporters of Palestinian development - this may be an opportunity to push forward infrastructure projects in the West Bank and Gaza that improve movement and access; electricity and water infrastructure; and the Palestinian financial sector, with a focus on green and sustainable investments. Improvements in these areas require Israeli cooperation and international donor commitment. Palestinian development has the potential to reduce tension and risks of violent escalation that refocus the discourse on the security agenda, benefitting illiberal actors.

Against this backdrop, save a massive escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or concrete steps by Israel to formally impose Israeli sovereignty over the OPT, the EU is unlikely to put issues like a full-fledged recognition of Palestine or sanctions against either party on that table.

Meanwhile, liberal politicians in the current Israeli coalition and their EU counterparts have an opportunity to strengthen their networks and cooperation. Such contacts may help to counter the perception promoted by the Israeli right that the EU and European liberal political establishment are instinctively or institutionally hostile to Israel, as opposed to hostile to Netanyahu's policies.

This is a moment for liberals in Israel to also underline that the values of liberal democracy, which the EU champions, have been part of the glue attaching Israel to a transatlantic Western alliance broadly supportive of Israel and its interests, and to emphasize that these liberal values are central to the well-being of Jews in Western societies, from the United States to the EU.

That said, this dialogue between Israeli and European liberal politicians should also involve facing up to the vulnerabilities and tensions that liberal-democratic societies face in a globalized world, which have been successfully exploited by illiberal political actors in many arenas, including in Israel and the EU. If liberal societies do not offer a sense of ontological security for their citizens, they will remain vulnerable to illiberal political challenges from within as well as from abroad, being exploited for example by Russia and China.

Therefore, liberal Europeans and Israelis should also think together about the shared challenge of confronting populist-nationalist political agendas, which have gathered momentum in recent years. This includes a focus on how to strengthen the pluralist underpinnings of the political order within liberal societies and within the multilateral international order, whilst addressing the grievances and fears, real and imagined, off which illiberal actors feed.

They should also identify the issue of shared identity in democratic states with large Arab/ Muslim minorities as a topic to which Israeli-European dialogue, including Arab/Muslim leaders from Europe and Israel, can contribute. In this respect, both the Abraham Accords and the participation of the Islamist Ra'am party in the Israeli government coalition present opportunities to emphasize the potential for inclusive identities and prevention of Islamic radicalization.

Important drivers of political instability in the Middle East, which increase security threats to Israel and Europe, will not decline in the decades to come. These include the impacts of rapid population growth, escalating youth unemployment, urbanization, expansion of internet access and social media prevalence, and the impacts of climate change and energy transition. Reducing security threats and political extremism, and their role in driving security-based political discourses in the West and in Israel, depends in the long run on social, economic and political development in the face of these long-term challenges.

The EU, Israel and Arab states should exploit the new opportunities created by the Abraham Accords to deepen multilateral cooperation on long-term regional development. While this is easier in the field of climate change and other fields of global governance, the EU, and hopefully Israel, should identify ways of including human rights and the role of an open and pluralist civil society as a central element of such a dialogue in regional contexts, too.

Ultimately, stronger regional cooperation may also provide an improved basis for future diplomatic initiatives in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It may also help maintain a disincentive for future Israeli governments to consider de jure annexation of parts of the West Bank or other steps which might foreclose the possibility of a Palestinian state, for fear of disrupting economically and politically valuable regional cooperation.

To be sure, the lack of real engagement on the Palestinian issues remains a huge obstacle to fulfilling the potential of EU-Israel relations and Middle East regional integration. But this should not undermine the opportunities of fostering EU-Israel relations bilaterally, and in wider regional settings, not only for the purpose of exploiting shared geostrategic and economic interests, but also for fostering a liberal understanding of government at home and international cooperation in selected policy areas. If reconvened, the EU-Israel Association Council should make the identification of such shared liberal ideals in bilateral and regional affairs a central topic of conversation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Muriel Asseburg and Nimrod Goren

The global trend of democratic backsliding and the attacks on the liberal democratic order have also taken a toll on Israeli-European relations. Pro-democracy Europeans and Israelis should respond to these developments by joining hands to help each other stop and reverse democratic setbacks and strengthen liberal democracy. They should also cooperate to strengthen Israel-Europe bilateral relations based on liberal democratic values. This chapter specifies recommendations for policy directions and specific actions in that regard, which relate to policy planning, messaging, engagement, empowerment and partnerships. These recommendations call on relevant actors to speak up, emphasize interlinkages, advance peacemaking, share experiences, financially support civil society organizations, empower allies, set a new agenda, create mechanisms, prioritize social, economic and cultural agendas over security issues, create partnerships, and engage in city diplomacy.

A. How can Europeans and Israelis help each other stop and reverse democratic setbacks and strengthen liberal democracy?

Speak up – European governments, parliamentarians and civil society representatives should highlight the importance they see in strengthening Israeli democracy, whether through public statements, messages conveyed in private meetings, or regular inclusion of the issue with Israeli counterparts. Europeans should follow developments related to Israeli democracy, intervene in case an Israeli government advances (de jure or de facto) annexation or anti-democratic legislation, and actively support pro-democracy steps advanced by the Israeli leadership. The Government of Israel, Israeli parliamentarians and civil society representatives should also move beyond purely pragmatic and transactional foreign policies and highlight the importance of values and international law. In this vein, they should avoid alliances with illiberal forces in

Europe and emphasize, instead, their interest in strengthening liberal democracy throughout Europe.

Emphasize interlinkages – When supporting a strengthened Israeli democracy, Europeans should highlight the inter-connection between democracy, peacemaking and shared society. They should make the case that without a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and without equality between Jews and Arabs/Palestinians within Israel, Israel will always suffer from a democratic deficit. In line with its "more for more" approach, the EU should spell out positive benefits of democratic enhancement and negative consequences of democratic setbacks.

Advance peacemaking – Europeans should seek a more active and effective role in efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, not least as a means of supporting Israel's democracy. Even as hurdles are mounting on the way towards a two-state solution, and as more pressing issues dominate the European agenda, Europeans should increase their pro-peace engagement in a way that overcomes internal European divisions, addresses real needs of both sides to the conflict, and cooperates with like-minded international actors. In this context, the EU, European governments and European civil society should also bolster progressive Israelis and Palestinians in their struggle for peace, equality and human rights. The EU should spell out incentives and disincentives linked to Israeli-Palestinian peace-making vs. entrenchment of occupation and inequality, and EU member states should consistently align their policies with the joint EU approach, including on differentiation and international law. Europeans should also explore the potential inherent in the Abraham Accords to strengthen Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking and support constructive steps in that regard. At the same time, they should try to mitigate negative side-effects of Israeli-Arab normalization on the Israeli-Palestinian arena and beyond, for example the sale of surveillance technology used against activists, journalists and dissidents in the region. Last but not least, to play an effective role in peacemaking, the EU will need to improve its image in Israeli society. It will thus have to invest greater efforts in public diplomacy, communicating its positions and the reasoning that underlies them to the wider Israeli public.

Share experiences – The evolution of the European project and processes within EU member states provide a variety of insights and best practices on how to consolidate liberal democracy and counter illiberal trends. Such knowledge is beneficial for Israeli pro-democracy actors in politics and civil society, and should be regularly shared. A model of European consultancy on these issues to Israeli counterparts can also be of value, perhaps along the lines of the EU's Twinning Project. At the same time, Europeans can benefit from the experiences of Israel's vibrant civil society and lessons learned in Israel with regards to social change, efforts to advance multi-culturalism and shared society, including the experience of the inclusion of the Arab Ra'am party in the governing coalition and what it means in terms of addressing anti-Muslim sentiments. Progressive Europeans and Israelis should think jointly about ways to confront populism and illiberalism and promote a sense of shared identity among all segments of society.

Support financially – Israeli civil society organizations working to advance liberal democracy often lack institutional capacity to bring about the change to which they aspire. They need additional resources and financial support, and Europe – being a key donor on democracy issues

– can expand and diversify its funding schemes. Funding should be made more easily accessible to new, small and innovative initiatives, in parallel to continued support for well-established organizations that effectively promote long-term positive change. Current regulations and procedures related to European funding benefit the big organizations with a proven track record and capacity to effectively deal with the bureaucracy involved. However, these highly-institutionalized organizations do not always provide the best answers to emerging needs. Pro-democracy actors in Israel, such as organizations promoting shared society, Israeli-Palestinian peace, and human rights, have been under pressure from previous governments as well as mainstream society. Israel's current government, that includes left-wing parties, has adopted a more constructive attitude towards such organizations, and this should be encouraged. The EU and its member states should uphold their funding for these organizations, back them politically and refrain from enforcing on them conditionality, which curtails their freedom of opinion and choice of partners.

Empower allies – European officials should regularly meet with pro-democracy actors when they visit Israel, and not take them for granted. In addition, they should try to showcase the work of these actors – invite them to speak at conferences, mention their work in speeches and on social media, and act as their champions in Europe. Such tailwind is important for organizations and politicians, especially when they go against the tide. A regular forum, virtually convening high-level EU officials (such as the Commissioner for Democracy & Demography) with Israeli pro-democracy actors could serve as an additional empowerment tool and help share challenges and achievements. At the same time, progressive Israelis should help strengthen pro-democracy actors in Europe, in particular those working to confront illiberal tendencies and replace populist leaders. Lessons learned from the processes that Israeli politics have undergone in recent years that culminated in Netanyahu's removal from power, can be of value to European partners. Israeli progressives should also engage in favor of maintaining space for constructive, diverse debates in Europe when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, countering attempts to label legitimate criticism of Israeli policies as antisemitism or boycotts.

B. How can Europeans and Israelis cooperate to strengthen their bilateral relations based on liberal-democratic values?

Set a new agenda – In March 2022, the EU decided to extend its Action Plan with Israel, adopted in 2005, for another three years, to "give the parties the opportunity to take forward their cooperation for the coming years, including through the possible negotiation of partnership priorities". This step – together with the recently-adopted new EU Agenda for the Mediterranean – should be leveraged to chart new paths for Israel-EU cooperation, based on the pillars of democracy and peace. If new priorities are set, new implementation mechanisms put in place, new resources allocated, and new actors mobilized – all with a focus on advancing cooperation on liberal democratic values – Israel-Europe bilateral relations will be on a better track moving forward, and Europe's role in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking may consequently be enhanced.

Create mechanisms – In the absence of an Israel-EU Association Council, which has not held a formal meeting since 2012, a mechanism should be established for regular political dialogue between Israel and the EU. Such a mechanism will enable the sides to discuss issues related

to democracy, conflict resolution and bilateral relations without giving the impression that Europeans condone Israeli policies in the context of occupation. In addition, Europeans should encourage Israel to become part of international groupings working to advance liberal democracy, such as the Alliance of Multilateralism and the Alliance of Democracies.

Do not let security dominate – The combination of a growing securitization discourse in Europe and the strong influence of security considerations on Israel's foreign policy enhances security as a strong feature of Israeli-European cooperation. While security cooperation can be utilized to strengthen liberal democratic values, this is not always the case. Security cooperation might lead to actions and policies that serve illiberal tendencies and goals. Cooperation on science, education, environment, tourism and culture should therefore be prioritized by maximizing Israeli-European civilian cooperation through programs like Horizon Europe, Creative Europe and Erasmus +. In all endeavors, appropriate territorial clauses must be included to ensure European funds are not diverted to settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Create partnerships – Israeli and European political parties and civil society organizations that are committed to liberal democratic values should seek to create meaningful partnerships. International partnerships can help advance social and political change, but are currently not as broad as they could be in the Israeli-European context. Israeli civil society organizations mostly regard Europe as a source of potential funds, and few Israeli and European organizations pursue joint endeavors. On the political level, while like-minded parties do cooperate, the cooperation is mostly not strategic nor sufficiently effective. A concentrated effort is required, perhaps led by progressive Israeli and European umbrella organizations, to generate new partnerships and enhance existing ones.

Engage in city diplomacy – Mayors have become strong advocates for liberal democracy in recent years, challenging the nationalist leaders of their countries. This is especially evident in Budapest, as well as in other capitals of Visegrad countries, which joined hands to form the "Pact of Free Cities". In Israel, too, the mayor of Tel Aviv has emerged as a focal point for pro-democracy and human rights endeavors contrasting with the policies of Netanyahu-led governments. This trend coincides with broader trends in modern diplomacy, which grants cities – as well as other sub-state actors – a larger role in shaping international relations and domestic affairs. Cooperation between Israeli and European municipalities and mayors thus has the potential to contribute to bilateral relations based on liberal-democratic values through collaborative forums, exchange programs, joint endeavors, twin city agreements, and knowledge sharing.

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About the Partner Organisations

Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies is an Israeli foreign policy think tank established in 2011 with the mission to promote Israel's regional belonging in Europe, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, and to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. It generates new, policy-applicable foreign policy knowledge and bridges the gap between foreign policy research and practice, combining leading academics as well as former diplomats, Members of Knesset, and mediators. The Mitvim Institute works at the political, diplomatic, and civil society levels to achieve its mission. It conducts outreach activities to advance policy recommendations, shape the political discussion, and influence policy. These activities include briefings to parliamentarians, government officials, and foreign diplomats; policy dialogues with regional and international think tanks; expert-workshops and public events; media interviews and commentaries; and public opinion polls. The Mitvim Institute's website is www.mitvim.org.il/en/.

PAX is the leading Dutch NGO in the field of peace-building and conflict-transformation. It works for peace, reconciliation and justice in conflict regions around the globe, including in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. It has thematic programmes on the protection of civilians, humanitarian disarmament, activism, gender as well as natural resources and human rights. Strategies are based on a twin-track approach, in close cooperation with local partners. Promoting and facilitating civil society driven dialogue and peace-building initiatives is linked with strengthening an enabling environment for these through public campaigning and political lobby at all relevant levels: from local authorities to EU and UN headquarters. Human security and human dignity are core values. The PAX' website is: www.paxforpeace.nl.

SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs is an independent research institute. Its researchers advise the German government and parliament on questions of foreign and security policy. They also advise decision-makers in relevant international organizations such as the EU, NATO and the UN. A liaison office in Brussels presents the research in the EU's capital and facilitates cooperation and dialogue with Brussels-based institutions. With a permanent staff of about two hundred, SWP is one of Europe's largest publically funded foreign policy think-tanks. SWP's policy advice is based on the knowledge and experience of its researchers. SWP is beholden to no political party or other institution, and to no program or interest group. Roughly seventy researchers from different disciplines and with an array of perspectives cover a broad range of topics. Great importance is also placed on academic exchange with colleagues at other research institutes around the globe. SWP is also a venue for exchange and debate between researchers and politicians, where issues and ideas can be discussed freely and in confidentiality. SWP's publications, website and social media circulate the research findings to a broader audience and promote exchange with academic colleagues. SWP's website is www.swp-berlin.org.

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