

How the EU could lend its weight to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process



European public support for Israel over the Palestinian issue is waning fast, although a very substantial majority of Israelis admire the EU and even aspire to membership. **Sharon Pardo** sets out his recommendations for a new EU policy stance that could help resolve the conflict

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father and first prime minister, encapsulated his country's past and what he hoped would be its future when he said: "Although we are an eastern people, we have become a European people and we wish to return to the Land of Israel only in the geographical sense. Our aim is to create a European culture here, and we are at any rate linked to the major cultural force in the world as long as the cultural basis in this part of the world does not change."

Any discussion of Israel's relations with the EU has to consider the past as well as the future. Over the last 54 years Israel has worked steadily to formalise its links to what Ben-Gurion called "the major cultural force,"

when he launched negotiations with the EEC in May 1957, before the treaty of Rome had even entered into force.

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By the following year, Israel was the third country after the U.S. and Greece to seek diplomatic relations with Brussels. Since then, efforts to forge trade, economic, political and cultural links have been designed increasingly to consolidate Israeli-EU relations. The EU is today Israel's biggest source of imports and its second largest export market. Israel, of course, is a much smaller trading partner, and ranks

29th in the EU's foreign trade list, with total trade between the two amounting in 2009 to about €24bn.

The links between Israel and Europe go far beyond trade relations. Israelis share

much of European history, tradition, lifestyle and culture. The Israeli public is favourably disposed towards Europe, and in marked contrast to the nationalist and isolationist tendencies of the Netanyahu-Liberman government, a solid majority wants to strengthen relations with the EU. Recent opinion polls showed that 60% of Israelis have a favourable view of the EU and in 2009 69% said they support the idea of Israel joining the EU. Israelis are also beginning to seek ways of acquiring European citizenship as EU enlargements now make about 40% of Israelis eligible for it, with many taking up the opportunity.

Political relations between Israel and the EU have at times been uneasy, especially of late. And no wonder as under the Netanyahu-Liberman government Israel has seen a worrisome erosion in its democratic values. The current government does not appear to share any real commitment with Europe to avoiding cultural-religious conflict and to improving relations between Islamic and western actors, let alone to resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. In other words, while Israeli and European governments may share common histories, they no longer share many interests and values.

At a regional level, it is no secret that the friction over the Arab-Israeli conflict has soured Israeli-EU relations for the past four decades. Israeli behaviour within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and European responses to this behaviour – has had a critical impact on Israeli-EU relations as well as on the ways that Israeli and European societies have viewed each other.

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By Clara Marina O'Donnell

The EU needs to woo Israel if it's to be a peacemaker

Sharon Pardo highlights a number of important ways in which the EU can support the Middle East peace process, not least by encouraging internal Palestinian reconciliation. But if the EU wants to play a larger role in the peace process it also needs to improve its image in Israel.

Barack Obama has made the Arab-Israeli conflict at top priority for his administration, and hopes the peace talks that began in early September will lead to a final agreement within a year. But by negotiating while the Palestinians remain divided, President Obama is repeating the mistakes of the Bush administration. So long as intra-Palestinian feuding persists and Hamas rules Gaza independently, President Abbas cannot say he speaks for all Palestinians. Most important of all, from Israel's perspective, he cannot guarantee an end to violence. Hamas reminded the international community of this when it killed four Israeli settlers just before the start of the peace talks. Under these conditions, the Israeli government – which relies on the support of several parties opposed to the compromises required for a viable two-state solution – has no incentive to make concessions.

There has been a growing acknowledgment across the EU that the various Palestinian factions must be reconciled if there is to be a lasting peace. But while Pardo may believe

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Europe holds that a political resolution of the Middle East conflict is imperative. The continuation of the conflict is seen as a major source of instability, and a resolution of the Palestinian question is looked upon as a critical component in addressing Muslim unrest in the wider region, and as an important element in tackling the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism. Any continuation of the Middle East conflict is therefore seen as having a negative impact on European domestic stability. Israel's occupation, together with the daily media images of the suffering and humiliation inflicted by Israel on the Palestinian people, is increasingly part of domestic politics in many European countries. European public opinion seems increasingly determined that the Middle East conflict be removed as an on-going source of international and domestic tension. Israeli policies are thus seen as to manage and contain the conflict, while deferring its resolution and preventing the emergence of an independent Palestinian

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state. In short, Israel's policies are seen as inimical to European interests, and so must be challenged.

As statements during the past two years by both Javier Solana and Catherine Ashton would suggest, the latest EU position is that the Middle East peace process explicitly demands more than just the resumption of negotiations but an urgent and comprehensive settlement – one that if the parties cannot reach by themselves will be imposed on them by the international community.

An important further point is that Israeli-EU relations have also been critically bound up with the transatlantic relationship. Ever since the collapse of the peace process in 2000, Europe and the U.S. have begun to speak increasingly with one voice on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the result that differences between Brussels and Washington have today all but disappeared.

Despite his dismal failure in this area during his first years in office, U.S. President Barack Obama has exuded a sense of urgency over resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is shared by many European leaders. The U.S. speaks, too, of the necessity for internal Palestinian reconciliation, a soft and coded message for engaging with Hamas. From a European perspective it could be argued that the U.S. has finally accepted Europe's position and adopted its preferred policies on the conflict.

And yet if Washington finally speaks with the same voice as Brussels, what then remains for the EU to do? The Union's added value could be seen on several dimensions, and European governments and EU leaders should consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Europe should promote more actively the formation of a Palestinian government of national unity. If the formation of a new Palestinian unity government requires direct engagement with Hamas, then Europe should immediately launch just such a dialogue.
2. Europe should use its historic and privileged special relations with all the Arab countries and with the Arab League to convince Israel to accept the Arab Peace Initiative.
3. Europe should continue its work in establishing a Palestinian state. To this effect, the EU should deepen its financial, institutional and political commitments to building a viable and democratic state for the Palestinian people.
4. Europe should re-establish and boost the position of the Special Representative to the Middle East Peace Process. Rather than scrap the post and create instead a new Brussels-based managing director for the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood, headquarters as the EU has just done as part of its newly-structured European External Action Service Baroness Ashton should think again. She should once again appoint an envoy and insist that this time he or she should work out of an office in the region.

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that some in the U.S. government now support engaging with Hamas, others remain opposed; as does the Israeli government. The EU can therefore play a helpful role by convincing Washington and Israel of the need to encourage the Palestinians to form a government of national unity. And as the leading donor to the Palestinians, the EU should also consider contributing more directly to the forging of such a government.

But if the EU wants to become more active in the Middle East peace process and encourage Israel to embrace bold initiatives, it needs to improve its image in Israel. Despite the close trade and cultural ties that Pardo highlights many Israelis believe that European public opinion, and several EU governments are not sensitive to their security concerns. The result has been Israel's reluctance to grant the EU a significant diplomatic role in resolving the conflict.

The EU could increase its leverage by presenting itself as a true friend to Israel whose full assistance for the peace process includes steadfast support for Israel's security. The EU's member states could offer to monitor weapons smuggling providing Israel re-opens Gaza's borders to trade. As Pardo suggests, Europeans could offer a strong peacekeeping force as part of a final peace deal.

Sharon Pardo is right to argue that the EU should try to use the prospect of deeper bi-lateral ties to encourage Israel to make more concessions. But even if its member states were to go so far as offering Israel the prospect of EU membership, it would still be hard for them to lean on Israel. Washington is by far the most influential outside player in the region, yet it,

5. European leaders should publicly declare that in the framework of a final-status agreement between Israel and Palestine, the EU will be willing 'to put boots on the ground' to assist in maintaining security. European leaders should already be planning for such a European force, both in terms of its mandate and its composition.
6. The EU should continue its firm stance on the issue of Israeli settlement construction and act to strengthen and enforce its policy with respect to Israeli exports from the Occupied Territories in line with the February 2010 ECJ ruling (the BRITA Case), in which the European Court ruled that Israeli products originating from the Palestinian Occupied Territories are not entitled to preferential treatment under the EU-Israel Association Agreement.
7. Given recent tensions in Israeli-EU relations, the Union should open a direct dialogue with Israel on a people-to-people level. This dialogue should confront such difficult issues as the overarching question of what values Israelis and Europeans truly share. The EU should not merely replicate the Barcelona Process-type dialogues that were wholly dedicated to celebrating shared values as only an open and frank exchange of ideas on what divides as much as unites Israelis and Europeans can strengthen Israeli-EU relations.

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8. Lastly, given that opinion polls suggest that over two-thirds of Israelis would like to join the EU, Europe should devise some creative forms of positive conditionality designed to induce both the Israeli people and the Israeli leadership to actively pursue a final settlement with the Palestinians. This could equally apply also to the Palestinians.

In other words, Europe could offer Israelis and Palestinians the sweetest carrot in its arsenal in the form of a European vision, including perhaps eventual EU membership. Europe would have to condition such a vision on a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and on the adoption of the Union's *acquis* by both Israel and Palestine. The very presence of such a carrot could prove to be a catalyst for positive change.

By the same token, Europe should make it clear to Israelis and Palestinians that 'business as usual' is not an option. While resolution of the conflict between them would lead to the opening of "European vision" talks, and perhaps even EU accession negotiations, negative developments on the ground would have serious repercussions for both. It is to be hoped, though, that the carrot would win over the stick. □

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too, has encountered significant difficulties over the last year in getting Israel to re-commit fully to the peace process. It's hard to see how under the present difficult circumstances the EU could be much more effective. □

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