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Israel's Right-wing Populists: The European Connection

Dani Filc and Sharon Pardo

In February 2019, during a visit by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a clear message from Jerusalem to Brussels by declaring that a strong bond exists between Israel and Orbán's Hungary, one based on the 'many things' that these two countries 'have shared in the past' as well as in the present. According to Netanyahu, Israel and Hungary 'are both small nations, democracies, that share common values and common interests'.¹ The partnership between Netanyahu's Israel and Orbán's Hungary is indicative of the enormous change that Israel has undergone during Netanyahu's era. Israel has become, much like Orbán's Hungary, a right-wing, populist, illiberal powerhouse. And it is not above joining forces with a European far right with anti-Semitism in its lineage.

Populism in Israel

Populism is a contested concept.² It has been understood as an ideology, a discourse, a disease of liberal democracy, a mobilisation strategy or a political style. Most researchers of populism tend to view it as a 'thin' ideology, or a discourse.³ Under this interpretation, populism is an ideology that loosely connects a set of recurrent themes, among them a conviction that the common people are a source of virtue, nostalgia for a mythical heartland,

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anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism and a lack of confidence in liberal democracy.⁴ For Cas Mudde, populism promotes two main beliefs: that society is divided between the pure people and the corrupted elites, and that democracy is solely the expression of popular sovereignty. This characterisation has been widely accepted. However, it could fit some illiberal or limited democratic movements other than populist ones.⁵ Moreover, the characterisation of populism as an ideology or a discourse does not discriminate between clearly distinct movements, such as European right-wing populism and Evo Morales's indigenous movement in Bolivia.

Others consider populism the antithesis of liberal democracy.⁶ By their lights, populists oppose liberal democracy, since its emphasis on civil processes as well as individual and minority rights limits popular sovereignty. For these critics, liberalism is 'good democracy' and populism 'bad democracy', and they tend to disregard historical cases in which populist movements enhanced and broadened democracy. A third group sees populism as a political strategy whereby a charismatic leader uses a direct, quasi-personal manner to approach a heterogeneous mass of followers, bypassing intermediary links. Yet populism may also be highly institutionalised, and develop intermediate associations (like, say, Peronism) as well as mobilising discrete sectors of society.⁷ In addition, populism can be construed as a political style, defined as 'the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations'. The populist political style is distinguished by its appeal to the people, a sense of crisis or threat, the use of 'bad manners' and a coarsening of political discourse.⁸

For our purposes, populism most crucially consists of political formations that emerge in situations of conflict over the inclusion or exclusion of certain social groups, mobilising people by stressing elitist antagonism. Such movements see society as polarised between a presumptively homogeneous people and its enemies, which consist of elites and their foreign allies.

The people can mean the whole political community, the plebs as opposed to the ruling elites, or an ethno-cultural closed community (the *volk*).⁹ Inclusive populist movements stress the notion of the people as plebeians, thereby allowing, at least partially, the political integration of

excluded social groups and, in the process, enlarging the boundaries of democracy.¹⁰ In contrast, exclusionary populism emphasises the organic understanding of the 'people' as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit. This is a nativist perspective, which promotes the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the nation widely held to be the native group and that non-native persons and ideas represent a threat.¹¹

Populism is prevalent in Israeli politics because conflicts concerning the inclusion or exclusion of subordinate social groups have marked Israeli society since its inception. Such conflicts stem from the interplay of several factors: the tension between the conceptualisation of the Jewish people as a religious unity and its heterogeneous character; the enduring conflict with the Palestinian people; and the ongoing Israeli colonialism in the occupied territories. Israel is marked by persistent clashes over the place in Israeli society of different social groups, among them Israeli Arabs, Jews who emigrated from Muslim countries (*Mizrahim*) and immigrants from the former Soviet Union or Ethiopia. The lack of a territorial definition of 'we the people', and the conflation between *demos* and *ethnos*, explain why most populist movements, including contemporary Israel's, are essentially exclusionary. Scholars have defined Israel as a limited democracy, an ethnic democracy or an ethnocracy.¹² But there is a consensus that Israel is not a full liberal democracy. Almost two million people are living under Israeli occupation without civic and political rights; there are legal differences between the Jewish majority and the Arab-Palestinian minority; and there is no separation between state and religion. Hence, populist movements have emerged whose conception of democracy is illiberal.¹³

In a divided society, the signifier *people* has become a major reference point for the constitution of political identities, and populism a central feature of the political system. In the late 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, the currently dominant party, Likud, developed as an inclusive populist movement under Menachem Begin's leadership. As such, it reached power in 1977. The party developed a narrative of Israeli history that symbolically included *Mizrahim* in the common 'we', implemented economic and social

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policies aimed at their material inclusion, and politically included *Mizrahim* by opening the party to a young *Mizrahi* political leadership that emerged at the local level and achieved national standing.¹⁴

Today, there are three parties in Israel that can be considered populist: Shas, an ultra-orthodox religious *Mizrahi* party; Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), a party led by former minister of foreign affairs and minister of defence Avigdor Lieberman; and Likud. In the March 2021 elections, the three parties combined received almost 37% of the vote, reflecting the centrality of populism in Israeli politics. With 1,066,892 votes, Likud, led by Netanyahu, was Israel's most popular party. Under Netanyahu's leadership, Likud has become an overtly exclusionary party, with an anti-liberal conception of democracy. Netanyahu has turned to nativism and xenophobia, mostly in the form of Islamophobia. He has fomented opposition to purportedly elitist institutions such as academia, media and the judicial system, and encouraged an anti-liberal understanding of democracy.

Ernesto Laclau argued that for populist purposes, the people is constructed through a chain of equivalences between the claims of different social groups.¹⁵ For Netanyahu, however, the identity of the people is crystal clear: 'us' means the Jewish people, which Netanyahu tacitly defines, in accord with the Orthodox religious view, as those born to a Jewish mother. The 'anti-people' is marked by anti-Semitism: 'I have a message to all the antisemites out there – whether they live in modern Persia, in the palaces of Tehran or the bunkers of Beirut; whether they march through the streets of Charlottesville or murder worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh; whether they voice their hatred in political parties in Britain, or Europe, or the United States.'¹⁶ Netanyahu turns Laclau on his head, building a chain of equivalences in which the Islamic State (ISIS) is like Iran, Iran is like Hizbullah, Hizbullah is like Hamas, Hamas is like Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Palestinians in the occupied territories are like Israeli-Arab citizens, and Israeli-Arab citizens are like the Israeli left. All the links in the chain are enemies of the 'true people'.

An example of this chain of equivalences is his statement during the 2015 election campaign after the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court opened a preliminary examination into the situation in Palestine. 'Israel

totally rejects the scandalous decision of the International Court prosecutor', said Netanyahu.

Following her absurd decision Hamas already declared that they will sue the state of Israel. I won't be surprised if we will hear similar things from Hezbollah, ISIS and Al Qaeda. A few days after Islamist terror committed a massacre in France, the prosecutor decided to investigate Israel that [*sic*] defends its citizens from the extremist Islamic terrorist organization Hamas that aims to massacre Jews. It is the same Hamas that has a pact with the [PA].¹⁷

Netanyahu's chain of equivalences was not limited to Muslims but included the Israeli left and centre-left (all of them referred to as 'the Left'), since the 'leftist elites' were not part of the 'true' people. Commenting on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, which reaffirms that the settlements in the West Bank are illegitimate, Netanyahu stated: 'Left parties, politicians and TV journalists were extremely pleased with the Security Council's resolution; almost as [much as] the [PA] and Hamas.'¹⁸ Leftists, for Netanyahu, are not really Jews. As he explained to Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri in October 1997, 'the Left has forgotten what it is to be a Jew'.¹⁹ Commenting on Israeli Members of Knesset (MKs) visiting Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Marwan Barghouti in jail, Netanyahu declared: 'The news about leftist MKs' visits to terrorists convicted for murdering Jews show how perverted and dangerous the Left's way is.'²⁰ In the April 2019 elections, Likud's electoral campaign extended the chain of equivalences even further. Likud claimed that Benny Gantz, leader of the centrist Blue and White party, would 'form a government with the Arab parties'. This, Likud argued, was 'proof' that Gantz was not a legitimate alternative and that such a government would be supported by Tehran.²¹

The demonisation of Arabs and Muslims is central to Netanyahu's chain of equivalences. During an 'emergency meeting' called to help prevent the election of a centrist government supported by the United Arab List, Netanyahu declared that if such a government were established, 'Teheran, Ramallah and Gaza will celebrate'. Moreover, for Netanyahu,

the enemy is not really human, at least not to the extent that the people and its allies are:

After a terrorist attack, we mourn. They make the terrorists their heroes. They name streets and squares after them ... He who indiscriminately kills innocent citizens does not struggle for human rights or for liberty, he aims at extermination and tyranny ... as in Iran, Gaza or under ISIS ... The time has come for the civilized world to build a united front against this barbaric fanaticism. We in Israel understand this well, since we fight terror for already 100 years.²²

In this apocalyptic view, confronting the definitive evil is the Jewish people – a people defined biologically and facing eternal threats of extermination. For Netanyahu, Israel is destined to ‘live by the sword’ forever. As he expressed in May 2019: ‘During the last 100 years our enemies tried to exterminate us once and again, but they failed. We will continue to fight against those who want to kill us, and we make our roots deeper in the motherland.’²³

Likud’s nativism has distinctive characteristics. It is not territorial – Arabs born in Israel are not native in the eyes of exclusionary populists – but defined by the boundaries of Judaism. The non-native ‘other’ is represented by Israeli Arabs, migrant workers from developing countries and asylum seekers (mostly African). Likud went from allowing the inclusion of *Mizrahim* to excluding Israel’s Arab citizens, whose citizenship the party considers conditional. In 2014, Netanyahu said that he ‘would instruct the Minister of the Interior to deny citizenship to those who call for the elimination of Israel’.²⁴

On the day of the 2015 elections, Netanyahu called Jewish citizens to come and vote because ‘the Israeli Arabs are galloping to the ballot boxes driven by buses paid by leftist Non-Governmental Organizations’.²⁵ In November 2016, Israel suffered several serious wildfires. Likud’s leadership – with no proof at all – claimed they were the result of ‘fire terrorism’ perpetrated by Arab citizens.²⁶ Official investigators later refuted the claim. During the September 2019 elections campaign, Netanyahu’s chatbot warned: ‘Israeli Arabs want to exterminate all of us, men women and children.’²⁷

Politicians such as Minister of Transportation Miri Regev promoted legislation aimed at banning specific Israeli-Arab MKs, and Likud MK David Bitan declared that he would be happier if Israeli Arabs did not vote at all. Recalling Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's approach to Kurdish members of parliament, Regev called Arab MKs 'Trojan Horses'.²⁸ In both the April and the September 2019 elections, Likud promoted an initiative to forbid Arab MKs from running for parliament. They also put forward legislation advancing the installation of video cameras in polling stations in Arab villages and cities – purportedly to avoid fraud, but in fact to intimidate Arab voters. The Likud government passed a bill allowing for an elected MK to be expelled from parliament if such action were approved by three-quarters of MKs, clearly targeting Arab MKs.

Likud also expressed its nativism in attacks against asylum seekers. Regev, when not yet in her ministerial role, called Sudanese refugees 'a cancer in the nation's body'.²⁹ Danny Danon, former minister of science, technology and space, and former Israeli ambassador to the UN, wrote: 'The influx of undocumented men ... did real damage to the social fabric of our society ... The Likud government ... will work tirelessly until there are no more infiltrators crossing our borders.'³⁰

The cultural elites are depicted as leftist and attacked as enemies of the people and accomplices of non-Jews. When the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled against a law to imprison asylum seekers, Regev declared: 'The court is disconnected from the people. The Court's decision is essentially calling everyone in Africa to come to Israel, because infiltrators can move around freely. The Court didn't think of the good of the Israeli public in its decision and will make the situation intolerable.'³¹ Yariv Levin, speaker of the Knesset and former minister of tourism, directly accused the High Court of Justice of being a nest of left-wingers.³² Like Levin, Netanyahu dubs journalists who criticise him and his government 'ultra-leftists', and has attempted to close the public broadcasting corporation for being 'infiltrated by leftists'.³³

Over the past decade, Likud has developed an anti-liberal conception of democracy according to which democracy is mostly about the major-

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ity rule of the Jewish people. Likud opposes core elements of liberal democracy such as judicial review, the independence of the judiciary and individual rights, deeming them inimical to the people's will. Human-rights groups and anti-occupation non-governmental organisations have been tagged anti-Israeli, anathema to the common people's interests and hospitable only to 'infiltrators'. In the words of Regev, then chairwoman of the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee: 'Thousands of infiltrators ... are helped by human rights organizations, leftist human rights' organizations ... There are no organizations caring for the human rights of the [Israeli] citizens, of those that pay taxes and serve in the army ... Human rights are only for infiltrators.'³⁴

The Israeli right and the eurosceptics

In line with the morphing of its domestic identity, Israel has become a soft eurosceptic country, developing strong political alliances and institutional connections with populist and eurosceptical political actors that do not support the norms informing European Union policies.³⁵ From the time of Israel's establishment in 1948, the country's leaders were concerned with gaining international recognition and legitimacy, and breaking out of the political and diplomatic isolation that the Arab countries were imposing on the nascent state. Over the years, in order to break this isolation, to save Jews from persecution and to secure the future of the Jewish state, Zionist underground groups in Mandatory Palestine and the Israeli leadership were willing to cooperate with certain dubious actors in Europe and elsewhere.³⁶ Although Israel denounced apartheid for years after its establishment, and during the 1960s formed alliances with the newly independent African countries, following the Arab–Israeli War of October 1973, many African states severed diplomatic ties with Israel. In turn, Israel established unabashedly close relations with South Africa that continued well into the 1980s.³⁷

When Netanyahu first came to power in 1996, Jews were not persecuted in Europe and Israel was no longer an isolated country. Yet, like some of his predecessors, Netanyahu and the Likud party were still anxious to cooperate with radical-right populist parties and governments. And these new partners were quick to return their diplomatic appreciation.

A case in point is Belgium's Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party. The party, whose founders collaborated with the Nazis and whose past leadership cast doubts on the reality of the Holocaust, is today an enthusiastic supporter of Israel. Filip Dewinter, its former leader, notes that its closeness with Israel has prompted some to say that 'we are the accomplices of international Jewry and that we betrayed nationalism in return for Jewish money, that we kowtow for international Zionism'.³⁸ This suggests that an equilibrium of joint legitimation is emerging: since the early 2000s, notes Mudde, 'the party has only rarely been accused of anti-Semitism' and has been perceived as a defender of the Jewish community.³⁹ In fact, according to Dewinter, 'there is a common interest between Jewish and Flemish people in the struggle against Islam in Europe'. Hence, Dewinter called on Jews to join in the battle against Muslims: Jews 'are our brothers-in-arms in the battle against extremist Islam ... [They] are part of European culture. Islam is not.'⁴⁰

Perceiving itself as Israel's 'ally against radical Islam', in December 2010 the party joined a delegation of other European populist parties on a trip to Israel. They visited the Knesset and met with a deputy minister, as well as with the leadership of the Jewish settlers in the occupied territories. During the trip Dewinter and his colleagues issued the 'Jerusalem Declaration', a manifesto in which they announced their commitment to the 'existence of the State of Israel' and to Israel's right 'to defend itself against any aggression, especially against Islamic terror'.⁴¹

Since the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, or AfD) party was founded in April 2013, it has stormed national politics and is today the largest opposition party in the German Bundestag.⁴² Elements of the AfD are openly racist, unabashedly anti-Semitic and supportive of neo-Nazi movements, and its co-founder and former co-leader Alexander Gauland has questioned Germany's special relationship with Israel.⁴³ Yet some in Israel have voiced sympathy for the party and are advocating closer relationships with its leadership. Thus, Rafi Eitan, a former minister for senior citizens and minister for Jerusalem affairs under Netanyahu, and an influential voice on Israeli security until his death in early 2019, vociferously advocated closer Israeli relations with the AfD. In 2018, on the occasion of

International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Eitan filmed a video message of support for the AfD, which the AfD posted on its social-media accounts. In his message, Eitan offered greetings to the party's leadership and stated that 'we all in Israel appreciate your attitude towards Judaism'. Eitan further advised the AfD that 'if you work wisely, strongly, and most important, realistically ... instead of "Alternative for Germany," you might become an alternative for all Europe'. On his personal Facebook page, Eitan further explained his support for the party: 'The Muslim world and its culture are very different from those of the West', he said. 'Anywhere there are Muslims today, in any European country, one can expect violence and terror because

of these differences.' Eitan also expressed confidence that the AfD would 'help Israel with anything we'll ask of them'.⁴⁴

Yair called for the death of the EU

In August 2019, *Israel Hayom*, an Israeli daily closely associated with Netanyahu, campaigned for an official dialogue between Israel and the AfD, calling on Israel to 'take care of its own national interests and look at where it can find those who will help promote them', and observing that the 'AfD has already tried to promote a few pro-Israel initiatives'.⁴⁵ More recently, in May 2020, Yair Netanyahu, the prime minister's son, literally became a poster boy for the AfD. After Yair called for the death of the EU and the return of a 'Christian' Europe in a tweet, Joachim Kuhs, an AfD member of the European Parliament, turned the tweet into a graphic featuring a picture of the young Netanyahu.⁴⁶

Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's far-right Lega party, has called Israel 'a fortress for the protection of Europe' and a 'bulwark of Western rights and values', and has been critical of the EU for its 'unbalanced' position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its condemnation of Israel 'every 15 minutes'.⁴⁷ He is one of Netanyahu's closest allies in the EU, touting himself as 'a friend and brother of Israel', while Netanyahu calls Salvini 'a great friend of Israel'.⁴⁸ Gilad Erdan, the Israeli ambassador to the US and the UN, has said of Israel and Lega that 'we are partners in the fight against radical Islamic terror, which threatens Europe and Israel'.⁴⁹ Salvini conflates anti-Semitism with hostility to Israel and ascribes anti-Semitism in Europe to

Islamist extremists. He has promised to 'take it upon himself' to fight 'anti-Israeli bias' at the EU.⁵⁰

Netanyahu's Israel has also developed a special relationship with Geert Wilders and his anti-Islam, anti-immigrant *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands. Unlike other far-right parties in Europe, this one is not perceived in Israel as an anti-Semitic party with a fascist past. Wilders himself, who in his youth lived in Israel for 18 months and volunteered at an Israeli settlement, has visited Israel dozens of times and openly admires the country as 'a shining light in the Middle East's darkness'.⁵¹ Even so, the relationship is ambiguous. Publicly, although Israel does not boycott Wilders and his party, it refrains from hosting him at the highest levels. Unofficially, Wilders is a welcome guest in Israel. Privately, top Israeli officials, including Lieberman and the foreign ministry's director general, have met with Wilders regularly.⁵² For Likud's leadership, Wilders is a strong ally because he believes that the conflict between Islam and the West, and between Israel and the Arabs, is deeply ideological. For Wilders, Israel is a model state: 'I wish we in the Netherlands would have half the courage that you have to fight the Arabs ... We must learn from you. To be tougher.'⁵³

Likud's links with Austria's *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria, or FPÖ) – founded by a former Nazi SS officer – are complicated but on balance positive. In 1999, Israel recalled its ambassador to Vienna after the party first joined Austria's coalition government. Over the years, however, Israel has warmed to the FPÖ. What seemed to temper Israel's attitude were former party chairman and Austrian vice-chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache's views on Islam and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.⁵⁴ In a 2017 letter to Netanyahu, Strache asserted that 'Israel possess the right to build wherever is required in the Land of Israel', including in the occupied territories and East Jerusalem. Strache further committed himself to do all in his power to move the Austrian Embassy to Jerusalem.⁵⁵ Immediately after being appointed Austria's vice-chancellor in December 2017, Strache said that Vienna was 'striving for an honest, sustainable and friendly contact with Israel', and vowed that his party would be 'an essential partner in Europe's fight against anti-Semitism'. The 2017–19 Kurz–Strache government was probably the most Israel-friendly in

Austria's history. On the day of its inauguration, the government committed itself to advancing legislation granting citizenship to the descendants of Austrian Holocaust victims, which was enacted and entered into force in September 2020. Vice-Chancellor Strache and his party's foreign minister, Karin Kneissl, have repeatedly stated – on the record – that they are in full support of the new legislation.⁵⁶ A year later, in September 2018, Netanyahu expressed his appreciation.⁵⁷

Strache has visited Israel several times, often as a guest of settlers or of Likud. Despite an official diplomatic boycott, Likud's top leadership, including Netanyahu, have all met with Strache. Indeed, former Likud MK Yehudah Glick, who for many years had advocated closer relations with the FPÖ, confirmed to us that the informal embrace of Strache came from the very top: 'Every time that I traveled, I informed Netanyahu. He encouraged me and gave me his blessing.'⁵⁸ Similar voices can be heard in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Talya Lador-Fresher, former Israeli ambassador to Austria and current head of the Bureau for European Affairs, is also a strong advocate of Israel–FPÖ relations. In February 2017, she became the first Israeli ambassador to Vienna to establish direct contacts with Strache.⁵⁹ Since then, Lador-Fresher has staunchly supported the relationship.⁶⁰ Furthermore, under the Kurz–Strache government the Austrian Cultural Forum strengthened and deepened its cultural activities in Israel. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Netanyahu and Chancellor Sebastian Kurz closely cooperated in the fight against the pandemic. In May 2020, Kurz hosted the leaders of the countries at the forefront of the pandemic response for an exchange of ideas and courses of action. Netanyahu was among the invited leaders, alongside the prime ministers of Australia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Norway and Singapore. The leaders agreed that the Israeli cyber directorate would lead consultations within this group regarding databases.⁶¹ In March 2021, the two countries, together with Denmark, agreed to join forces in investing in research for and rolling out COVID vaccines.⁶²

The Netanyahu government's relationship with the Visegrad Group of countries (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – is overtly friendly, and increasingly so.⁶³ In July 2017, when Netanyahu was visiting Hungary for a V4 summit, he could be heard during a closed-door

meeting with V4 leaders over a 'hot mic' sharply attacking the EU and asking the V4 countries to help erode the consensus among EU members regarding Iran and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.⁶⁴ His larger goal is to establish a new diplomatic alliance in which Israel would provide the V4 with aid in different fields, such as security, cyber, high tech, medicine and agriculture, in return for the group's support of Israel in the EU and the UN.⁶⁵ He appears to be succeeding. In February 2019, Jerusalem was to host the first-ever V4 summit outside Europe. While the event was ultimately cancelled due to a diplomatic row between Israel and Poland over comments by the acting Israeli foreign minister about Polish anti-Semitism, Netanyahu did host the Czech, Hungarian and Slovak prime ministers at his residence. In the months bracketing the aborted summit, in violation of official EU policy, Slovakia announced the establishment of a cultural and trade office in Jerusalem, Hungary opened a trade office there and the Czech Republic opened a diplomatic office in the city.⁶⁶

Strong relationships with the Jewish state insulate the V4 – especially Orbán's Hungary – against criticism that they are pushing anti-Semitic and xenophobic discourses and policies.⁶⁷ Moreover, as supporters of ethno-nationalism at home, V4 leaders genuinely admire Netanyahu for his tough position in advancing Israel's diplomatic and security interests, and for the internal policies he has enacted to ensure the ethnic character of Israel. During his visit to Jerusalem in March 2021, Orbán said to his Israeli audience: 'In Hungary, not just your country, but your prime minister, has a very high reputation as the friend of Hungary, which is not just expressed by culture and political gestures ... I just congratulate you [Netanyahu] and your government for [a] successful decade. What I can do is nothing else ... just try to copy it for Hungary.' Andrej Babis, the Czech prime minister, was equally admiring. After inaugurating the Jerusalem office of the embassy of the Czech Republic in Israel, Babis called Netanyahu a 'great leader', adding that 'the reason why I came here to Israel is to learn about your experience. Under the guidance of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, [a] great leader, the State of Israel has become the example to follow.'⁶⁸ These European leaders do not share the EU's official criticism of the Israeli government's stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and sympathise

with Israeli viewpoints on issues such as migration, security and regional threat perceptions that tend to clash with the EU's.⁶⁹ Like Wilders, Orbán has voiced the belief that 'the biggest common adversary to our common civilization is the force of militant Islam'.⁷⁰

Israel has reciprocated with material support to the V4 countries. During 2017–19, Israeli imports from the V4 countries surged.⁷¹ While available data for 2020 indicates a sharp global decline in trade growth of about 8%, largely due to the pandemic, trade between Israel and Hungary, for example, grew about 1% that year.⁷² Israel supplied both Hungary and the Czech Republic with Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, and assisted them and at least one other V4 country in acquiring Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines.⁷³ The diplomatic affection between Netanyahu and the V4 has also made for closer cultural ties. In November 2018, Czech President Milos Zeman inaugurated the new 'Czech House' cultural centre in Jerusalem, and in 2019 Hungary launched 'The Hungarian Culture Year in Israel' to win over the Israeli public with a cavalcade of cultural events and Hungarian cuisine.⁷⁴

Under Netanyahu's premiership, Israel has operated and behaved as a populist, soft eurosceptic country for whom relations with the V4 members, as well as other Eastern European countries, are a strategic tool for modifying EU foreign policy. In August 2019, Netanyahu visited Lithuania to attend the summit of the Baltic states. Like his visit to Hungary two years earlier, this was the first visit to Lithuania by an Israeli prime minister, and as such a historic opportunity to underscore the deepening relations between the two countries. In the event, he revealed a pan-European strategy. 'I want to achieve a balance in the [EU's] not always friendly relations with Israel in order to maintain fairer and genuine relations', he said upon arriving in Vilnius. 'I am doing it through contacts with blocs of [EU] countries, Eastern European countries, and now with Baltic countries.'⁷⁵

* * *

Since 1967, the Arab–Israeli conflict has defined the contours of Israeli–European relations.⁷⁶ Israel has viewed European positions manifesting sympathy with the Palestinians as inimical to its security and as uncritically

reflecting the positions of the Arab world. During the 1990s, Europe launched a series of multilateral initiatives, most notably the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, through which it sought to manage relations between Israel and the Arab world. The EU's linkage of these multilateral efforts to the Arab–Israeli conflict has only further undermined Israel's confidence in the EU.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Israel's isolation within these arrangements may have encouraged it to seek political shelter in European radical-right populist parties and governments.

To a significant degree, the relationships between Netanyahu's Israel and European radical-right populist parties and governments are based on transactional calculations and a fairly straightforward quid pro quo: the European players forgive Israel for its expansion in the occupied territories and are even willing to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in return for which Netanyahu's Israel forgives them for their historical and ideological links with neo-Nazism, and even their present-day anti-Semitism at home. As a senior diplomat at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained to us:

The EU has different shades of democracy. With Hungary and the other V4 countries, we share interests, we understand democracy in a similar way and we have the same analysis regarding the Middle East and the Muslim world. We get all the support we need from them and they are always open to our arguments. As for anti-Semitism, none of them is anti-Semitic. We simply have different narratives regarding the Holocaust. Above all, we share common values with them.⁷⁸

The rationalisation is quite obvious and confirms an equilibrium of joint legitimisation.

Yet, on a deeper level, the convergence between the European right and Israel aims to weaken core liberal EU norms that are contested within the EU itself.⁷⁹ The convergence thus subverts Brussels's efforts to construct normative internal and foreign policies, as well as its ability to exert meaningful pressure on Israel.⁸⁰ Like European right-wing populists, Netanyahu perceives the European left and the Arab and Muslim immigrant

communities as the main problem for the continent, and the key European threat today to Israel and to European Jewry. For Israel, European populists are ideological allies, harnessing ethnic nationalism in an overarching struggle against global Islam.⁸¹ They oppose both immigration in general and Arab and Muslim immigration in particular. As Netanyahu and Orbán declared in 2018 in Jerusalem: 'We both understand that the threat of radical Islam is a real one. It could endanger Europe ... By being here, at the frontline of the battle against radical Islam, in many ways Israel is defending Europe.'⁸² Cementing the relationship, both Netanyahu's Likud and his European partners of the populist radical right despise multiculturalism, detest political correctness, have little respect for international organisations and international law, and abhor probing and uncooperative media. Netanyahu's Israel is not merely instrumentalising the European right to alleviate external pressures on Israel or to blackmail and divide EU member states and institutions; his government and its European partners share deep ideological affinities and common values, and hostility to the EU project itself.

Notes

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