

# European leverage and a new Israel-Palestine approach

By Lara Friedman

## ■ Executive summary

With their own interests challenged and growing domestic constituencies pressing for action, European leaders are asking what Europe can do to reaccredit its policies in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, notwithstanding U.S. opposition. In this context the time has come for Europe to adopt a new Middle East policy paradigm in which European leverage is identified and employed as part of a coherent effort aimed not at altering the behaviour of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but at altering the political environment in which Netanyahu and his challengers on the right operate.

The Obama administration, like U.S. administrations that preceded it, views Europe's role in the Israeli-Palestinian policy arena largely in patronising terms: Europe is expected to docilely accept whatever role Washington assigns it to play. Independent European policies and actions are denigrated publicly and privately as unhelpful and unwelcome, even when they clearly support U.S. policy and U.S.-led initiatives.

During President Barack Obama's first term in office, Europe accepted the role assigned to it by Washington without complaint, deferring to ongoing or anticipated U.S. peace initiatives. However, the repeated failure of these initiatives and the absence of any credible new initiative on the horizon, coupled with the prolonged tenure of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu – who has dramatically accelerated the establishment of new facts on the ground in the Occupied Territories and who no longer pays more than feeble lip service to the two-state solution – has altered the equation.

Today, European leaders still cannot afford to ignore Washington. However, with their own interests challenged and with growing domestic constituencies pressing for action, these same leaders are increasingly asking what more Europe can do, notwithstanding U.S. views. Accompanying this question is a mournful refrain that is heard again and again: Europe does not have any leverage.

If Europe defines "leverage" as actions or policies that can be expected to alter Netanyahu's behaviour, then it is true

that Europe does not have it. This is not purely a European problem: for the past six years the international community – including Europe and the U.S. – has permitted Netanyahu to flout its concerns with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without consequences. As a result, today Netanyahu sees himself as immune to outside pressure and is unlikely to change his behaviour unless faced with a level of coercion far beyond the will, politically, of either Europe or Obama to exert.

This does not mean, however, that Europe lacks leverage. Rather, it means that if Europe wishes to reaccredit its own policies in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and to do what it can to preserve the two-state solution, it needs a new definition of "leverage," grounded in a new Middle East policy paradigm.

This new paradigm starts with the recognition that it is virtually inconceivable that any Israeli government led by Netanyahu – or any of the political challengers on his right – will be more deferential to international consensus and international law with respect to the Occupied Territories than is currently the case. Such a recognition is based not on the demonisation of any political current within Israel, but on the statements of intent uttered by Netanyahu and other Israeli right-wing politicians, even the most generous interpretations of which are wholly incompatible with international law and with the realisation of any viable two-state solution.

What follows is the imperative for Europe to adopt policies that aim not to alter Netanyahu's behaviour, but to alter the political environment in which he and his challengers on the right operate. In this new paradigm "leverage" is defined as policies and actions that demonstrate to Israeli voters – the overwhelming majority of whom are not ideologically committed to the goal of "Greater Israel" – that there is a real cost to having a government that prioritises settlements and occupation over the interests of Israelis living within the country's pre-1967 borders. In this paradigm, Europe's leverage is exercised in the service of the eminently realistic goal of shattering the twin shields of denial and indifference that have permitted too many Israelis to believe that their government's policies vis-à-vis the occupation and settlements have no bearing on either their own lives or their futures.

European actions and policies, harnessed to this goal, can help create space in Israel for a new, healthier internal political debate to emerge, a debate that is no longer deaf to the concerns of the outside world. Out of this debate, new political actors may emerge who will be in a position to challenge the pro-settlement Israeli right in the future. In this way European leverage can play a key role, such that the continued reign of Netanyahu or his succession by someone even more right wing than he is no longer a foregone conclusion.

Acting within this new paradigm, the European Union (EU) and individual European nations should keep doing what they are already doing: putting teeth into existing policies and implementing existing laws that require them to treat the occupation and settlements as illegal, with all that this implies with respect to the various forms of bilateral relations with Israel. Likewise, they should continue to take up the issue of Palestinian recognition and Palestinian rights, including in actions by individual countries, EU collective actions and statements, and actions and votes at the United Nations.

Europe has already taken some important steps with respect to making more concrete its opposition to settlements and the occupation, albeit thus far in a piecemeal fashion, outside the context of any clearly articulated, coherent new policy or paradigm. The July 2013 landmark EU guidelines explicitly banning grants, prizes and financial instruments linked to Israeli entities operating in the Occupied Territories are the most prominent example. Since then there were the recent decisions of the Swedish, Spanish and British parliaments to recognise Palestine as a state, and it appears likely that other European countries, including France, may soon follow suit. Notably, these and other steps, like France and Britain warning their citizens against doing business with Israeli businesses operating in the Occupied Territories, come in the context of continued strong EU-Israel trade relations. These relations, grounded in preferential trade agreements, made the EU Israel's largest trading partner in 2013.

Looking ahead, Europe should look for additional, concrete ways to send a message to Israelis that for the EU as a collective, and for individual nations of Europe, support for Israel stops at the Green Line. The way in which Europe frames this message is critical. Already, right-wing forces inside and outside Israel seek to portray European pressure on the occupation and settlements as anti-Israel and anti-Semitic. With such criticism as a backdrop, bolstered by concerns about growing European anti-Semitism, a new European Israeli-Palestinian paradigm can succeed only if framed, clearly and unequivocally, neither as a punitive policy, nor as merely the implementation of international law. It must be framed, rather, as an expression of European support for a democratic, pluralistic, secure Israel. European leaders must take this message directly to the Israeli public, addressing Israelis over the heads of their leaders. By doing so, Europe will be in a stronger position to reject attempts to conflate pressure on the occupation and settlements with anti-Semitism, or to shut down debate by crying "delegitimisation".

Today, by shifting paradigms and redefining "leverage", Europe has the opportunity to set an example to the rest of the world – including the U.S. – of what a responsible, pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-international law policy looks like. Such an example would be as timely as it would be powerful. And without such a paradigm shift, Europe will find itself increasingly squeezed between two bad policy options: de facto acquiescing to Israeli policies that are anathema to European interests and law, or adopting punitive policies targeting Israel as a whole. The former would only reinforce the rightward shift in Israeli domestic politics. The latter would reinforce the circle-the-wagons narrative of pro-occupation, pro-settlement forces who want to argue that Europe is fundamentally anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic.

The proposed new European paradigm offers a compelling answer to the argument that Europe does not have any leverage. It also takes the wind out of another hard fact often pointed to by European diplomats: Europe cannot replace the U.S. as a leader in attempting to make peace, nor can it afford to clash directly with the U.S. in this arena. Adopting this new paradigm requires Europe to do neither. Rather, it permits Europe to redefine its terms of engagement, freeing it to pursue a clearly articulated, independent foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian arena – a policy grounded in European interests and laws, but framed in terms of goals that are consistent with the success of any two-state peace initiative, including one led by the U.S.

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