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Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki speaks during a debate about the controversial Holocaust bill in the lower house of parliament in Warsaw on Wednesday. (Photo by: REUTERS)

Foreign policy expert: Israel needs to recognize its power and leverage

By HERB KEINON
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Prince William came to Jerusalem, Poland reversed its Holocaust bill and Indonesia allowed in Israeli tourists. Not exactly a weak Israel.

In an interview this week about how Israel should react to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's sweeping electoral victory on Sunday – a victory that does not bode well for Israeli-Turkish ties – international relations lecturer Emmanuel Navon said it is time Israel recognizes its own power and leverage.

"Israel is a very powerful country," said Navon, a fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies and a lecturer at Tel Aviv University and the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. "It has a very powerful economy; it is a very strong geopolitical player, with ties with the US and elsewhere. We are not in the '60s anymore, and it is about time we realized that. We are a hi-tech economy, we are an economic power, an emerging natural gas exporter. We don't have to put up with that anymore."

The "that" Navon referred to was the kind of threats and bullying Israel has been subjected to over the years by the stridently anti-Israel Erdogan.

Erdogan, who triggered a crisis with Jerusalem in May by [kicking out Israel's ambassador](#) following violence along the Gaza border fence and recalling his own envoy to Jerusalem, threatened before the campaign to reconsider all economic ties with Israel after the election.

Navon scoffed, saying that Turkey – because of its hunger for Israeli natural gas – needs Israel economically more than Israel needs Turkey. This is preelection campaign nonsense, Navon said of Erdogan's threats.

Navon also praised Israel's reaction to Turkey expelling Israel's ambassador, which was to [expel Turkey's consul-general](#) in Jerusalem, a man important to Ankara because through him Ankara funnels money to east Jerusalem organizations and institutions that have significantly enhanced Erdogan's influence and stature in the city.

Countries that treat Israel poorly, Navon said, should pay a price.

A NUMBER of disconnected events this week show the degree to which Jerusalem and others have internalized, at least to a certain degree, Navon's basic message: this is no longer your Aunt Goldie's Israel.

The first proof of this was [Prince William's pleasant visit](#), the first official visit by a member of the British royal family to Israel.

Amid all the pomp and ceremony, amid all the smiles and handshakes and carefully choreographed events at Yad Vashem, in Jaffa, on the Tel Aviv beachfront, with Netta Barzilai on Rothschild Boulevard, even at the Western Wall, one question that hovered over everything was, "Prince, what took you so long?" Why did it take a member of the well-traveled royal family 70 years to grace this country with a visit? Or, more importantly, why do it now?

This is where Navon's thesis about a radically different Israel comes into play.

William did not come calling this week at the British government's bidding – after the royal family snubbed Israel for seven decades – to do us any favors. Israel is not any closer to an accommodation with the Palestinians – the official reason for a lack of a visit in the past – than it was five, 10 or 25 years ago. If anything, such an accommodation is further away. He came because it is good and important for Britain to develop strong ties with Israel – it is in Britain's interests.

His visit was also good for Israel, in that it "normalizes" the country in the eyes of the British public, who for at least a couple days saw a side of Israel – a sunny, relaxed, smiley side – that they generally are not exposed to in The Guardian or on the BBC.

We benefit as well from ties with the UK, but they also benefit from ties with us.

As Britain is on the verge of Brexit, its stature on the world stage will take a hit – going from being one of the big three inside the EU to being a midsize North Atlantic country with a so-so economy, albeit with a nuclear arsenal and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It is also going to have to develop independent trade ties with non-EU countries for its economic well-being.

Britain now needs investments and technology, and will need all of that even more when it leaves the EU.

The prince's nondescript visit here this week, where he adroitly managed to avoid any serious political faux pas in a region ripe with chances to make them, showed that Britain wants both to retain its stature as a major player in the world – and there is no better place on earth to burnish those credentials than to be seen traipsing around the Middle East – and to encourage trade with Israel.

British Ambassador David Quarrey said the visit was to "celebrate" UK-Israel ties, ties that he said are at an unprecedented level in terms of investment, trade, scientific cooperation and security cooperation.

William himself said as much in his brief comments at a reception in Ramat Gan on Tuesday: "The ties between our two countries have never been stronger, whether in our record levels of trade and investment, our cooperation in science and technology, or the work we do together to keep our people safe."

And that is the bottom line. Israel has what to offer, and William is here because Britain – as it embarks on a new EU-less chapter in its long history – want to take advantage of that.

THE SECOND occurrence this week that proved Navon’s point of Israel as a strong country with leverage was Poland’s unexpected announcement that it was reversing itself on its controversial law making it a crime punishable by jail time to say that Poles or the Polish nation were complicit in Nazi war crimes, or to use terms such as “Polish death camps” rather than Nazi ones.

For Israel and many Jews the world over, this law was obscene, a travesty, an attempt to whitewash history and the roles many Poles had in the murder and plunder of Jews during and even after the Holocaust. For Poland’s right-wing government, however, the law was a bone thrown to its constituents, a point of “national pride,” a way for Poland to aggressively go after those it feels have conflated Poland with Nazi Germany.

Israel let it be known already in January that the law – which went into effect in February – was completely unacceptable and needed to be changed. Jerusalem made clear to Warsaw that its relations with Israel would not be the same with this law remaining on the books.

Granted, Israel would also lose by a deterioration in ties with Poland, since Poland – currently a member of the UN Security Council – is one of the countries Israel has turned to in recent years in the EU and other international forums for support when others are ganging up on it. But Poland had what to lose as well.

Poland’s Minister of Entrepreneurship and Technology Jadwiga Emilewicz was here last week, looking for areas where the two countries could cooperate in innovation and technology. Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi let her know that things would not return to normal until the law was changed. He told The Jerusalem Post that Israel would honor all existing agreements with Poland, but would not be entering into any new ones with it while that law existed.

Does that matter to the Poles? Yes, or else Emilewicz would not have come to visit in the first place. But is that what forced Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s hand? Obviously not.

And this is where Navon’s talk of Israel as a strong geopolitical player with leverage comes into play. Poland altered its law not because of what it would lose in its ties with Israel – though this had something to do with it – but because of what it stood to lose in its ties with the US.

This is leverage, because one of the things that would result from a further Polish deterioration of ties with Israel, would be – because of Israel’s special relationship with the US – precisely a deterioration in ties with Washington.

Poland is looking for increased security and economic ties with Washington, and did not need this issue to stand – as it had over the last four months – as an obstacle. Or, as Morawiecki indicated himself in the debate in the Polish parliament, the law had become counterproductive to Polish interests.

One could argue, therefore, that it was American – not Israeli pressure – that forced a change of Poland’s heart. Yes, but that US pressure was born of the special ties between Jerusalem and Washington – or, as Navon called it, Israel’s position as a strong geopolitical player.

THE FINAL proof of Navon’s point about Israel’s stature was a relatively minor issue, tucked – unlike William’s visit and the Polish reversal on the Holocaust legislation – into the back pages of the newspapers. This was Israel’s decision to lift a ban on Indonesian tourists in the country, a decision that was taken in parallel with Indonesia lifting restrictions on Israelis who want to visit

that country.

In early May, Indonesia – the world’s most populous Muslim country – sent signals that it would open up its borders to Israeli tourists. Two weeks later, after the violence along the Gaza fence and fiery demonstrations in Jakarta against the US move of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Indonesians backed down.

Israel had to decide what to do. It could just accept this as par for the course and move on, or it could respond in kind – which is it exactly what it did. The Foreign Ministry let it be known that if Israelis could not visit Bali or Komodo National Park, Indonesians would not be visiting Jerusalem or Bethlehem, and said it would restrict tourist visas.

While at this point only a relatively few Israelis travel to Indonesia, some 36,300 Indonesians visited Israel last year. Closing the gates to Indonesian tourists would obviously hurt those in the tourist trade in Israel who cater to them, but it would also hurt Indonesia – since a certain segment of the population obviously wants to visit here. (The number of Indonesian tourists here increased a whopping 60% from 2016 to 2017.)

Since the two countries do not have diplomatic ties, discreet talks were held through various unspecified “international channels” which led both countries to rescind restrictions on the other’s nationals. Again, this was not a case of Indonesia taking this step because of any newfound friendship for Israel, but because it benefited from something Israel had to offer.

Israel, Navon said, should leverage its not insubstantial power when countries treat it poorly or hurt its interests. “We should fight back, we can fight back,” he said. “We have the means to do so.”

This past week showed it is possible. The trick, of course, is in calibration: not going overboard, not letting it go to your head, not overestimating your strength, power and leverage. But this week, at least, the calibration seemed just right.



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