

World

Israel and Poland spat over the Holocaust heats up, spotlighting Netanyahu's awkward alliances

By [Loveday Morris](#)

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JERUSALEM — The decision to hold the annual “V4” summit in Jerusalem — the first time the bloc of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had met outside Europe — was intended to build on the growing bonds between Israel and Central European nations.

But instead, it was called off amid a spat over the role Poles played in the Holocaust, highlighting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's awkward alliances with countries accused of seeking to gloss over their history during World War II.

Poland officially pulled out of the summit Monday after comments by Israel's acting foreign minister, Israel Katz, who quoted a former Israeli prime minister as saying that Poles “[suckle anti-Semitism from their mother's breast.](#)”

This was the latest twist in a long-running diplomatic dispute between Israel and Poland after Warsaw last year introduced a new law calling for prison sentences of up to three years for accusing Poland of crimes committed against Jews during World War II, including collaborating in the Holocaust.

Israeli officials took the lead in accusing Poland's nationalist, right-wing government of trying to suppress historic inquiry and whitewashing the past.

But at the same time, Netanyahu has been keen to build ties with Central European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, with which Israel sees itself increasingly politically aligned. Israel views the countries as important allies within the European Union because of their sympathy for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

Amid criticism of the new law, Poland watered down the wording, and relations with Israel appeared to be on track again until Netanyahu commented on the subject while returning from a U.S.-led Middle East summit in Warsaw last week.

“The Poles” had collaborated with the Nazis during the war, he was reported as telling journalists on the return flight. The Polish government was enraged. Israeli officials later said the prime minister had referred only to some Poles, not to the nation as a whole.

The Jerusalem Post, which had published the comments including the definite article “the,” issued a correction. But Poland still downgraded its attendance at the event, announcing Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz would attend instead of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

That was until Katz, on his first full day on the job, went even further.

“It is really astonishing that the newly appointed foreign minister of Israel quotes such a shameful and racist remark,” [tweeted](#) Marek Magierowski, Poland’s ambassador to Israel. “Utterly unacceptable.”

Israel’s foreign ministry said Tuesday’s meeting would no longer be an official summit of the “Visegrad Four,” known as the “V4,” after Poland’s withdrawal. The leaders of the remaining three countries would still hold meetings with Netanyahu, it said.

Netanyahu has come under fire from political opponents for selling out Jewish history to advance his political aims.

“The prime minister of the Jewish state sells out the memory of the Holocaust for a dubious alliance with an anti-Semitic leader,” said Tamar Zandberg, leader of the opposition Meretz party.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also stirred controversy in a 2017 speech by praising Miklos Horthy, who collaborated with the Nazis to deport Hungarian Jews.

Hungary later clarified that Horthy had both positive and “very negative periods” and that the country had no tolerance for anti-Semitism, after which Netanyahu went ahead with a planned visit to Hungary to meet with Orbán. There are also growing concerns among Hungary’s Jewish population that a Holocaust museum in Budapest will gloss over history.

Meanwhile, Orbán was accused of using anti-Semitic tropes in his campaign against the Hungarian-born Jewish American financier George Soros, who last year announced that the university he founded in Budapest had been forced out of the country.

Emmanuel Navon, a lecturer at the Lauder School of Government at IDC Herzliya, said Netanyahu is trying to upgrade relationships with Central European nations to “neutralize” decisions by the E.U.’s foreign minister, Federica Mogherini.

Navon pointed to a recent E.U. effort to issue a statement condemning the U.S. decision to transfer its embassy to Jerusalem. The statement was blocked by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania.

He also cited their relative openness to scrapping the Iran nuclear deal as urged by the Trump administration, a move strongly opposed by France and Germany. The V4 group is making it harder for the European Commission to bypass renewed U.S. sanctions on Iran, he said.

Other analysts have pointed to a natural affinity between Israel and other right-wing governments, which have a common perspective on issues of security, borders and immigration. Navon said that Israel may serve as a model for countries like Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which are at odds with other E.U. countries, on how to deal with refugees. But he said he does not agree with the view that Orbán and Netanyahu are “similar souls.”

Ruth Eglash contributed to this report.

Loveday Morris

Loveday Morris is The Washington Post’s Jerusalem bureau chief. She was previously based in Baghdad and Beirut for