

# Israel and the New ‘Old Europe’

<https://jiss.org.il/en/navon-israel-and-the-new-old-europe/>

Dr. Emmanuel Navon

The new German government and the upcoming elections in France create challenges and opportunities for Israel's foreign policy, which must adapt to Europe's evolving political map.

---

25.11.2021

---

The end of the Merkel era raises open questions about the foreign policy of the next German government. Olaf Scholz was confirmed as Germany's new chancellor, and a coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals will lead the country in the next four years.

This is not the only significant political change in Europe. In April 2022, the French will go to the polls to elect their president. While Emmanuel Macron is expected to keep his job, he is no shoo-in: the maverick Éric Zemmour might defy statistics and conventional wisdom, just as Macron himself did in 2017.

If re-elected, Macron will be unbound by the future wrath of voters and, therefore, will likely initiate ambitious policy projects both domestically and internationally. In other words, foreign policy changes are to be expected in 2022 and onward from the European Union's two most powerful and influential countries.

What former U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once dubbed "Old Europe" (i.e., the EU's founding members who had opposed the war in Iraq in 2003 – Rumsfeld had France and Germany in mind) is going through major political changes. Israel must try and anticipate the most likely outcome of those changes and adapt its foreign policy accordingly.

\*\*\*

## 1. Has Israel's European Policy Reached Its Limits?

For two reasons, 1973 marked a watershed in Israel-European Economic Community (EEC) relations. First, the Yom Kippur War and the ensuing oil embargo enabled France to cease EEC support for its Middle East policy (s

Privacy - Terms

for the PLO and demand a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines). And second, three countries joined the EEC (Britain, Ireland, and Denmark), with two (Britain and Ireland) supporting Arab demands.

The EEC's subsequent enlargements (to Greece in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986) further widened the political rift between Israel and the EEC (neither Spain nor Greece had diplomatic relations with Israel at the time).

Under Jacques Chirac's presidency (1995-2007), France redoubled its criticism of Israel and its support for Yasser Arafat, especially during the Second Intifada (2000-2005). Chirac led Europe's opposition to the United States during the 2003 Iraq war, and he castigated the governments of Eastern Europe (dubbed "the New Europe" by then-U.S. Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld) for being supportive of the United States

France's historic clout dissolved with the enlargement of the EU (which replaced the EEC in 1992) to Eastern Europe from 2004 onward. Its ability to impose its critical views of Israel weakened.

Although the 2007 Lisbon Treaty established a High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy, the EU (by then a club of 28 members) did not and does not have a common foreign policy. Since decisions of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council (or FAC, the common foreign policy executive body made up of EU foreign ministers) requires unanimity, Israel had in recent years been able to block hostile decisions thanks to its close ties with Eastern European governments from the Visegrád

Group (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), and Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia).

For example, some of the pro-Israel governments of Eastern Europe denied the FAC its required unanimity to condemn President Trump's decision to transfer the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, as well as Trump's "deal of the century" peace plan.

Israel's ability to use "divide and rule" tactics in the EU has been boosted in recent years by a rebellious mood shared by certain member states. In addition, the 2009 financial crisis (which seemed to threaten the Euro) and the 2015 refugee crisis (which flooded Europe with Syrian and other Middle East migrants and refugees) undermined the policies of monetary integration and open borders, thus increasing the popularity of Eurosceptic parties and governments.

Britain voted to leave the EU in a 2016 referendum and officially left the club in 2020. The governments of Hungary and Poland openly challenge Brussels (without turning down its money, however).

In October 2021, for example, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled that some articles of EU treaties were incompatible with the Polish constitution and that the latter should prevail in case of contradiction. This ruling undermines EU law and jurisprudence by the European Court of Justice. The European Commission has threatened Poland with economic sanctions for this ruling, and Poland might be denied access to €36 billion of EU funds for post-COVID-19 economic reco

In private conversations, EU officials often express their annoyance at Israel for torpedoing FAC decisions thanks to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. They warn Israeli diplomats that Israel must choose between Brussels and Budapest. This “warning” seems to be both disingenuous (why should Israel be asked not to play by the rules of realpolitik?) and hollow as Israel has, so far, been able to enjoy the best of two worlds in its relations with the EU.

Yet Israel’s privileged ties with Eastern Europe are reaching a crossroads. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid created a diplomatic crisis with Poland in August 2021 over a law limiting property claims by Holocaust survivors. At this point, Israel can hardly count on the Polish government in EU votes.

Moreover, two Israel allies in Central Europe have recently lost their jobs or are about to. Czech prime minister Andrej Babis (who may not survive the recent election of October 2021), and Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who recently resigned over corruption charges (which he denies). An upcoming election in April 2022 might threaten even Viktor Orban’s premiership: an unlikely coalition spanning from right to left has coalesced around a 49-year-old conservative – Peter Marki-Zay – to unseat the increasingly authoritarian Hungarian leader.

Israel’s membership in the new Horizon Europe program (the EU’s €95.5 billion R&D budget for 2021-2027) has recently been confirmed, and Israel is lobbying the EU to renew the Association Council (a yearly meeting between

EU and Israel leaders inaugurated by the 1995 Association Agreement but suspended since 2012).

Publicly embracing Orban to poke the EU in the eye would be counterproductive at this point (not that Lapid has any intention of doing so). While Israel should continue to discreetly nurture its relations with Central and Eastern European governments to block future undesirable FAC decisions, it should also consider the evolving political map in the EU – especially in Paris and Berlin.

- **Macron 2.0?**

Emmanuel Macron set a precedent, and a surprise, when he was elected France’s president in 2017. Besides his youth (he became president shortly before turning 40), his exploit was to get elected without an established party’s backing and obtain a parliamentary majority with a political movement he created from scratch shortly before the election.

Therefore, no scenario, even the most unlikely one, should be ruled out for the April 2022 presidential election. That includes the prospects of Éric Zemmour, the new rock-star of the French right. A long-time journalist and columnist for the conservative *Le Figaro*, Zemmour is a prolific writer and a talented debater who became a household name in France with his 2014 book *Le suicide français* (“The French Suicide”).

This political essay accuses the May 1968 Left of having lost the battle but won the war by eventually imposing its politics via academia, the media, and the judiciary. As of this week Zemmour has yet to officially throw his l



the ring. Yet even before announcing his candidacy, polls predict that he would place second after Macron in the first round of the presidential election and face Macron in the runoff.

So far, the center-right adamantly refuses to endorse Zemmour. But were the center-right to support him in a runoff, he might win. This is still an unlikely scenario, but one that cannot be ruled out.

Zemmour defines himself as a Frenchman of Jewish religion. His wife and children are Jewish, and he occasionally attends services in an Orthodox synagogue. However, he seems to endorse the model imposed by Napoléon Bonaparte in 1807 that Jews could become full citizens by abandoning the national component of their identity and only retaining their religious one.

In other words, French Jews could observe their religion, but they had to embrace the French nation. They could pray in their synagogues but had to replace Jerusalem with Paris.

Hence, Zemmour does not define himself as a Zionist (since the only nationalism he endorses is French), though he supports Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state and defend itself.

A Gaullist, Zemmour resents the U.S., advocates for French sovereignty within the EU, though he does not support leaving the bloc. Instead, he says he would pull France out of NATO's military command (as de Gaulle in 1966). He recently declared in an interview with *i24*

News that de Gaulle's abandonment of

Israel in 1967 might have served French interests back then but should be reassessed today considering Israel's strategic value.

As for a second Macron presidency, it might offer new opportunities for Israel. Under Macron, the French navy has contained Erdogan's irredentism in the Eastern Mediterranean. Macron has also maintained France's military operations against jihadists in the Sahel.

Macron's opposition to Iran's nuclear program has been consistent and firm. And he has denounced anti-Zionism as a new form of anti-Semitism. Macron could go further if re-elected.

A senior French diplomat who is very close to Macron declared off the record in a private venue in August 2021 that, if re-elected, Macron would fundamentally reverse France's traditional Gaullist approach to Israel and the Middle East. France's "Arab policy," he explained, has become outdated in light of the collapse of the Arab world, the Iranian threat, and the post-oil economy.

France's hard and soft power in the Middle East (it has both a naval base and a Louvre in Abu Dhabi) could be usefully complemented by Israel's military might and technological prowess. The same diplomat even declared that France would likely join a military operation against Iran were diplomacy to fail.

Israel would be well-advised to closely follow French politics in the coming months, invest in its ties with France, and eventually appoint an ambassador with the required language skills and cultural background to upgrade a relationship ripe for significant changes.

[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

- **Germany after Merkel**

The new German government is a coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Liberals (FDP).

Historically, Germany's social democratic party has been less faithful to NATO and the U.S. than the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU) alliance.

Social democrats are more eager than the conservatives to engage Russia. Indeed, the German language even has a word to designate politicians (mainly social democrats) willing to engage Russia: *Ruslandversteher* – “one who understands Russia.” The right incentives can help such “understanding.” For example, former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder is on the Kremlin's payroll to chair the consortium that built the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, which increased German and European dependency on Russia's natural gas.

The Greens' diplomatic platform raises serious concerns about the party's future influence on German foreign policy. It calls for a “feminist foreign policy,” which would also be “post-colonial” and “anti-racist.” The party's platform also advocates “gender analyses for individual country contexts” and “binding guidelines for a feminist foreign policy for the federal government.”

On specifics, such as relations with Russia and China, the Greens and the FDP sometimes have similar stances. For example, both parties want to maintain EU sanctions against Russia. The Greens call for halting its construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, primarily for environmental reasons.

At the same time, the FDP wants a moratorium until Russia allows an independent inquiry into the attempted murder of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny. The FDP, the Greens, and the SPD criticize China's human rights record and policies vis-à-vis Taiwan and Hong Kong.

How would an SPD/Green/FDP coalition impact Germany's foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East? The Greens define the close relationship between Germany and Israel as a “central interest.” The FDP wants to send “innovation ambassadors” to high-tech cities such as Tel Aviv. The SPD opposes Israeli settlements in the West Bank and deems them a “violation of international law.”

The Greens explicitly express their opposition to “unilateral measures such as annexing occupied territories or the ongoing construction of settlements.” At the same time, all three prospective coalition partners strongly reject anti-Zionism and the BDS movement.

For the Greens, “the existence and security of Israel” as the nation-state of the Jewish people is “non-negotiable.” The SPD defines Israel's existence and security as part of Germany's *raison d'être*, condemning those who “reject Israel's right to exist.” The SPD has supported a ban on the Hamas flag. The FDP sees in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism as a point of reference for acting against “anti-Semitic and anti-Israel business practices, such as those that occur in air travel.”



Some politicians from the SPD and the Greens have expressed reservations regarding German military sales to Israel. Since Germany supplies Israel with advanced submarines and navy ships, military ties between Israel and Germany might encounter some obstacles.

At the same time, the co-Chair of the Green party, Annalena Barbock, came in support of Israel and of its right to defend its citizens during the May 2021 escalation between Israel and the Gaza Strip. She has also criticized the disproportionate condemnation of Israel at the UN. The FDP submitted a bill to the Bundestag in 2019 limiting the number of German votes against Israel at the UN, but the bill did not pass.

Germany and Israel's disagreement on the Palestinian issue will likely not be emphasized in the coming years, not least because Israel's heterogeneous coalition is avoiding controversial moves in this intractable conflict.

At the same time, Israel can and should leverage its added value on two issues dear to the upcoming German coalition: renewable energies and Internet connectivity. With the Greens in the coalition, Germany will speed up its *Energiewende* (energy transition) with renewable energies.

Technological innovation is a crucial factor for improving reliability and reducing the cost of renewable energies, and Israeli technology has what to offer Germany. Moreover, Israeli technology can also play a key role in upgrading Germany's relatively backward Internet connectivity.



While Israel should maintain special ties with East European governments to counter the FAC unanimity it needs to pass resolutions on the Middle East, Israel's "divide and rule" tactics may have reached their limit. Too many bridges have been burnt with Poland, and the Orban era might end in Hungary. There has been a change of guard in Austria, and there may be one soon in the Czech Republic.

By contrast, political changes are taking place, or are about to take place, in "Old Europe" (mainly France and Germany) and can be turned to Israel's advantage. If Macron is re-elected in France, he might significantly modify his country's Middle East policies and participate in a military operation against Iran. Israel will need an able ambassador with the required language skills and political knowledge to build a new partnership with France.

As for Germany, its upcoming coalition will not fundamentally alter its policy toward Israel, though it might raise some difficulties on military exports. With Germany, Israel's current government can and must leverage Israeli technological excellence to contribute to Germany's energy transition and infrastructure upgrade.

Significant political changes are occurring in Europe. Therefore, Israel's foreign policy would be well-advised to take advantage of these changes by updating its reading of Europe's political map.

---

JISS Policy Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family

