



**The Jerusalem Institute
for Strategy and Security**

Israel, Europe, and the Russia-Iran Axis

With the world divided between a U.S.-led order of democracies on the one hand, and a cartel of aggressive autocracies – China, Russia, Iran and North Korea – on the other, that is challenging America and its allies, Europe has an important role to play in Israel's war against Iran and its proxies.

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Israel's multi-front war with Iran and its proxies is being fought within a wider geopolitical contest between the NATO alliance and the China-Iran-Russia axis. Hence, Israel has enjoyed the military and diplomatic support of the United States and – to a lesser extent – of Europe. At the same time, Russia and China have enhanced their relations with Iran and stepped-up hostile rhetoric toward Israel and have adopted a more anti-Israel stance in votes at the United Nations. U.S. support for Israel is irreplaceable, but relations with Europe should not be neglected.

This paper explains why, with three arguments: a. Germany, the United Kingdom and France are global military and economic powers that are important to Israel's national security; b. Europe is an indispensable complement to the United States in facing Iran and its proxies; c. The war in Ukraine has created new security synergies between Israel and Europe.

While Europe's three main powers are important to Israel's national security, some European governments and EU (European Union) representatives implement policies that undermine Israel internationally. The map of pro and anti-Israel governments and parties in Europe is dynamic, and the outcome of the June 2024 elections for the European Parliament offers an opportunity to update Israel's policy toward Europe.

1. The Important Triad: Germany, the UK, and France

As Iran benefits from the backing of China and Russia, and as these two powers coordinate their moves to undermine the U.S.-led order, Israel can only rely on the West to face Iran and its proxies. European governments are more receptive to Israel's concerns as Eastern Europe faces Russian aggression and as Russia has upgraded its military ties with Iran. The EU, France, Germany, and the UK are signatories of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran) and have some economic leverage on Iran.

Among European powers, Germany has a dominant role because of the size of its economy. Germany, the world's third-largest economy, approved

in June 2023 a €560 million (or \$615 million) installment for the purchase of Israel's Arrow-3 missile defense system developed by Israel's Aerospace Industries (IAI). The system was purchased not only to defend German skies, but also for the "European Sky Shield Initiative," a group of 17 NATO members. Finland and the Czech Republic have also ordered from Israel smaller missile-defense systems.

In August 2023, the U.S. Government approved Israel's request to sell the Arrow 3 missile defense system to Germany. The Arrow 3 was jointly developed by Israel and the U.S. and it is manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). This €3.5 billion deal is Israel's largest-ever arms sale.

The Arrow 3 system can intercept ballistic missiles outside the atmosphere from a distance of up to 2,400 kilometers (1,490 miles). Germany has been actively boosting NATO's air defense system since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its missile strikes on the country. The purchase of Arrow 3 is a pivotal addition to Germany's "Sky Shield initiative."

Germany is also Israel's largest military supplier after the United States (Germany sold €326 million worth of armament to Israel in 2023). This is the reason why Nicaragua instituted proceedings against Germany at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in January 2024, accusing Germany of "facilitating the commission of genocide." Germany responded *inter alia* that Israel's security is a fundamental element of German foreign policy.

France and the UK are permanent, veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council. The two countries are Europe's most significant military powers, and both have nuclear weapons. Their respective naval fleets are present in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. France has a large army with global reach, with military bases and overseas territories stretching from the Caribbean to the Pacific. With its 264 embassies and missions, France runs the world's third-biggest diplomatic network after China (275) and America (267). France has increased its planned defense

spending for 2024-30 by over a third, to €413bn (\$437bn), compared with 2019-25.

In March 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak held a summit in Paris to discuss security coordination. The two countries' armies work together, notably as part of a NATO battlegroup in Estonia. The Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), set up by Britain and France in 2010, has the capability to deploy 10,000 troops in times of crisis.

2. The Role of European Powers in the Israel-Iran War

Israel needs America for weapons and diplomatic support. But Israel also needs the support of the free world, first and foremost of Europe. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Hamas' Iran-backed aggression against Israel suggests that the world is divided between a U.S.-led order of democracies on the one hand, and a cartel of aggressive autocracies – China, Russia, Iran, North Korea – on the other, that is challenging America and its allies.

As President Biden said shortly after October 7: “ Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common: They both want to annihilate a neighboring democracy.” It is significant that, two days after October 7, the world's most powerful Western democracies – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy – issued a joint statement condemning Hamas and recognizing Israel's right to defend itself. No such statements came from Beijing and Moscow.

Despite China's strong economic leverage over Iran (it is Iran's largest oil importer), and a large Chinese military base in neighbouring Djibouti, it is doing precious little to rein in the Houthis. Only the navies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have thus far been active in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The warships of the U.S. and its and European allies are filling a void in the Red Sea, but the West's expensive surface-to-air missiles cannot eliminate all the Iranian drones operated by the Houthis,

and therefore major shipping companies are still avoiding the Red Sea. Striking the Houthis might therefore be unavoidable. The only countries able and willing to do that are the U.S., the UK, and France.

The involvement of British and French warships against one of Israel's enemies in the Middle East is a reminder of why Israel's relations with Europe's major powers are important. But the shared struggle against the Houthis also confirms the Middle East's geopolitical divide: not only the West, but also Israel's Arab partners oppose the Houthis. Saudi Arabia fought the Houthis, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues by backing the anti-Houthi Transitional Council in southern Yemen. Normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia may have been suspended because of the war in Gaza, but it will surely resurface.

On April 14, Iran launched over 300 missiles and drones at Israel. This was a turning point as it was the first time Iran attacked Israel directly and not via its proxies. Iran's massive assault was successfully intercepted thanks to Israel's technological excellence and to Israel's military alliances. Iran faced the combined air forces of Israel, of the United States, of the United Kingdom, of France, and of Jordan. Despite political disagreements over the war in Gaza, Europe's two leading military powers – Britain and France – are currently committed to Israel's security.

While the joint military operation of April 2024 seemed to confirm the commitment of Britain and of France to Israel's security, more recent developments raise serious questions about France's commitment. Unlike the U.S., the UK, and other Western governments, France did not criticize the May 2024 request by the prosecutor of the ICC (International Court of Justice) to issue arrest warrants against both the Hamas and Israeli leaderships. In early June 2024, President Macron decided to ban Israeli companies from the "Eurosatory" weapons exhibit in Paris, a leading international gathering for the defence industry. France continues to systematically vote against Israel at the UN. As a result of these hostile French policies, Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant rejected in June 2024

France's proposal to establish a contact group between the United States, France and Israel to diffuse tensions with Hezbollah.

As for Britain, the expected victory of Labour in the July 4 general election will likely downgrade British support for Israel.

3. The Value of Israel in the Ukraine War

Hamas is a proxy of Iran and Iran is an ally of Russia. Both Russia and Iran, as well as China, are trying to undermine the U.S.-led order and to crush neighboring democracies. The Baltic states are to Russia what Israel is to Iran and what Taiwan is to China: small and thriving democracies threatened by imperialist autocracies. Ukraine and Israel must win not only for their own sake but also for the sake of the free world. If Ukraine fails, the Baltic states will be Russia's next target. If Israel is held back, Europe will not be immune from the Iranian threat.

Hence do Israel and Europe need each other. Israel needs Europe's diplomatic support to pursue its war of self-defense against Iran's proxies, and Europe needs Israel's military technology to protect itself from Russia. Israel's strategic value to Europe is potentially increasing as Europeans contemplate the prospects of a second Trump presidency. With the war in Ukraine entering its third year, Vladimir Putin has put the Russian economy on a war footing by spending over 7% of Russia's GDP on defense

According to Denmark's foreign minister, Putin could try and invade the Baltic states within five years, thus putting to test NATO's solidarity pledge that an attack on one member is an attack on the alliance. Estonia's annual intelligence report, published in February 2024, says that "We can expect that within the next decade, NATO will face a Soviet-style mass army." Europeans know that they are under threat and that they may no longer be able to count on America. Hence their understanding that they must rearm, and fast.

French President Emmanuel Macron has called for European "strategic autonomy" (also a code-word for financing France's military industry with

German taxpayer money). But Europe's military industry is still far behind the continent's defense needs. Hence Germany decided to purchase Israel's "Arrow 3 system" to protect its airspace and that of Eastern Europe. France argues that priority should be given to European technology, but such technology has yet to be developed – and therefore Germany is giving priority to readiness. There is a trade-off between meeting Europe's defense needs quickly and building a pan-European military industry. Precisely because time is of essence, Israel enjoys a comparative advantage.

European defense spending is increasing steadily. In 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, only three of NATO's European members met the alliance's target of spending 2% of GDP on defense. Ten years later, 18 (out of 30) of them do. Poland will spend 4% of its GDP on defense in 2024. Those trends create new opportunities for Israel's defense industry.

4. Europe's Changing Political Map

Building European support for Israel is challenging because there are 27 EU member states with different agendas, because there are non-EU members with various levels of influence (such as the UK, Norway, and Switzerland), and because the EU has its own foreign policy institutions (most notably the high representative for foreign and security policy). The high representative (Josep Borrell) is supposed to express a consensus that is in fact elusive. In April 2024, *Politico* reported that the German and Austrian chancellors clashed with Borrell over his stance and statements on the Israel-Hamas war.

Some European countries have adopted policies hostile to Israel. In May 2024, Ireland, Norway and Spain announced their recognition of a Palestinian state. This decision, taken in the wake of October 7, sends to the Palestinians the message that terrorism pays. Spain also announced that it would join South Africa's case at the ICJ accusing Israel of committing "genocide" in Gaza. Spanish deputy prime minister Yolanda

Diaz declared on May 22 that the purpose of her government is the “liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea.”

In the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, the hard-right made the most gains, but the center-right European People’s Party and the center-left Socialists and Democrats remain the largest voting blocs. In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally arrived in first place with nearly 32% of votes, more than double the number of votes gathered by President Macron’s centrist party (14%). In Germany, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party arrived second, before the Social Democrats of Chancellor Olaf Scholtz.

The rise of hard-right parties in Europe is a general trend that Israel must consider because some of those parties are supportive of Israel despite sometimes having antisemitic roots.

In Hungary and Italy hard-right parties are in power. In Finland, Sweden and Switzerland they have joined government coalitions. In May 2024, AfD was expelled from the Identity and Democracy group at the European Parliament after the lead candidate for the European election, Maximilian Krah, said that the SS were not necessarily criminal. In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally has the support of a third of the voters, and Mrs. Le Pen could possibly win the presidential election of 2027.

Of the European Union (EU)’s 27 member states, 15 have hard-right parties that enjoy the support of about 20% of voters. Neither mainstream European parties nor Israel can ignore the voice of 20% of European voters in the name of democracy (37% of French voters in the 2024 European elections). Indeed, the *cordon sanitaire* around Germany’s AfD has reinforced its narrative of being the only alternative to the mainstream parties.

Moreover, some hard-right parties have become more pragmatic and moderate once in power. This has been the case with Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party was described as far-right

before winning the 2022 election. Since assuming office, however, Mrs. Meloni's policies have been mostly mainstream conservative. Her economic policy is prudent and in tune with the guidelines of the European Union. Her foreign policy is staunchly pro-NATO and supportive of Ukraine. Even on immigration, her government has toned down its rhetoric. Hard-right parties in northern Europe have shown similar signs of relative moderation: Finland's The Finns and Sweden's Sweden Democrats have mellowed once in government. Marine Le Pen's party no longer advocates leaving the EU, and she has recently distanced herself from Germany's AfD.

While Israel should be aware of those evolutions, it should also maintain three clear principles in dealing with Europe's hard-right parties: a. They should accept the IHRA definition of antisemitism and recognize (when applicable) their country's role in the Holocaust; b. They should be supportive of the EU's founding principles such as respect for human rights and the rule of law; c. They should neither identify with Russia, nor glorify authoritarian rulers or undermine Western solidarity.

Another relevant measurement for Israel is the affiliation of parties at the European parliament. The European People's Party (EPP) is center-right, and the "European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) is conservative. The Identity and Democracy (ID) group is farther still on the right. It includes France National Rally but recently expelled the AfD. Hungary's Fidesz party left the EPP group in 2021 precisely because Viktor Orbán's pro-Russian foreign policy, and judicial cronyism are incompatible with conservatism and classic liberalism.

The National Rally party is likely to win the upcoming snap election for the French Parliament (June 30 and July 7, 2024) and might therefore form the next government. The official snubbing, even boycott, of this party by Israel no longer makes sense. Mrs. Le Pen has come out very strongly in favor of Israel since the October 7 attacks. By contrast, France's far-left LFI party (which formed a political union with the Socialists ahead of the legislative elections of June-July 2024) is openly and virulently anti-Israel and

antisemitic. Israel must adapt and update its reading of Europe's political map.

Recent threats by the Biden administration to halt military supplies to Israel over the Rafah operation signaled that overreliance on the United States comes at a price. While the U.S. is Israel's most valuable ally, Jerusalem must widen and strengthen its web of alliances to face the threat of Iran and of its proxies. Israel's most likely and most valuable allies, after the U.S., are European.

This paper has focused on Germany, the UK, and France due to the size of the German economy as well as to British and French military and diplomatic reach. Yet Israel can and does rely on other European countries, such as Italy, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states, as well as Greece and Cyprus. There are, to be sure, endemically hostile European countries such as Ireland, Belgium and Spain (at least under the current Spanish government), but their importance is marginal.

Facing Iran and its proxies is a long-term struggle that requires a diversified and solid network of alliances. As the geopolitical divide widens between the free world and autocracies, Israeli diplomacy should update its reading of Europe's evolving political map and give greater priority to Europe to expand Israel's "diplomatic iron dome."