

## **Israel and the Euro-Atlantic Community: An American Perspective**

Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson\*

Over the course of the last year, a debate has started over whether and how Israel should rethink its relationship with the core institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community, namely NATO and the EU. The impetus for this rethink has originated both in Israel and on both sides of the Atlantic. At first blush, an outside observer might ask: Why are we having this debate – and why now? The answer to that question has several parts.

First, the Euro-Atlantic community itself has undergone a profound process of transformation since the end of the Cold war that is shifting its strategic focus east and south and toward the wider Middle East. That shift started fifteen years ago with an epochal event -- the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, the ensuing collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the eventual unraveling of the former Soviet Union. The delayed aftershocks of that geopolitical earthquake are still being felt today, as we can see in the dramatic events unfolding in Ukraine.

That revolutionary set of events led to a dramatic strategic response. Since the early 1990s, NATO and the EU community have expanded across the Eastern half of the continent, nearly doubling their size and members to help consolidate democracy and security across the new Europe. They have intervened beyond their borders to stop ethnic wars in the Balkans and have developed into pan-European institutions stretching across the continent as well as from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea and Turkey in the south. Today they have stretched their borders to the northern edge of the wider Middle East and are assuming new responsibilities across this wider security space.

The other seminal event reshaping the Euro-Atlantic community was September 11, 2001 and Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks against the United States. Those attacks accelerated the strategic shift of the West away from an insular focus on threats in Europe to those emanating from beyond it. They drove home the fact that the greatest threats to Euro-Atlantic security may well originate from regions such as the wider Middle East. To be sure, there is still unfinished business in Europe and Eurasia. A dictator remains in power in Belarus. Russia is moving into an anti-democratic direction. Ukraine's future is uncertain and a final settlement remains outstanding in the Balkans. Integrating Turkey into the EU and developing a strategy for the wider Black Sea region remain major challenges.

While complex questions of policy still confront Washington and Brussels, the strategic contours of a new Euro-Atlantic geopolitical system are beginning to emerge. That system has now anchored Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics; is working to

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\* Ronald D. Asmus is a Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Bruce P. Jackson is President of the Project on Transitional Democracy. They have been the Democratic and Republican heads of the U.S. Committee to Expand NATO.

consolidate peace and security in the Balkans, and is starting to reach out across the Black Sea region. It now stretches across the European continent – possibly to include a democratizing Ukraine now seeking to turn West. Despite the many painful debates that lie in front of it, the EU appears ready to embrace the full integration of Turkey which, in turn, will consolidate the Euro-Atlantic community's border on the northern edge of the Middle East. Finally, the rift across the Atlantic and within Europe created by the Iraq war is gradually being overcome and the strategic unity of the West laboriously reestablished.

One strategic question remaining from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the relationship of Israel to a Euro-Atlantic community that has now come closer and closer to its borders. Closely related to this process of strategic redefinition of the Euro-Atlantic community is what we would term the perishability of revolutionary time. For the last decade there has been a plastic or malleable quality to the process of reshaping the Euro-Atlantic community. This window would seem to offer the United States, Europe and Israel an unprecedented opportunity to reshape their own relations in ways inconceivable in previous periods. It is difficult to see how these quite extraordinary circumstances will persist indefinitely and not give way to more negative demographic, economic and political trends already evident on Europe's horizon. Therefore, a compelling reason to address this question now is that we may not have the opportunity to address it again in the foreseeable future.

As important as the residual challenges of securing peace in Europe are, the deadly threat to Western societies posed by the nexus of new anti-Western fundamentalist ideologies, terrorism and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction in the wider Middle East is pulling the Euro-Atlantic community into this region. That is why NATO has embraced its first modest missions in Afghanistan and, to a lesser degree, in Iraq. Under American prodding, the West is debating whether and how to pursue a long-term strategy aimed at the transformation and democratization of the region as a whole. And the US-European agenda is increasingly dominated by how to cooperate on questions ranging from Iran to Middle East peace. The old compartmentalization between a European and Middle Eastern security space is crumbling. And, in this context, the question of whether and how Israel relates to and is included in broader Western strategy has inevitably arisen.

The second part of the answer why the issue of rethinking and upgrading Israel's relations with NATO and the EU is now being raised has to do with events in Israel and the region. With the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the second intifada, the vision of Israel successfully integrating itself into a new and transforming Middle East has been dealt a severe setback. The vision of closer integration between Israelis and Palestinians has been supplanted by a desire for separation – on both sides. The prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons – and possibly encouraging other countries like Egypt to consider the same, is worrisome. While Israel could be a great beneficiary from a Western strategy aimed at transforming and democratizing the region, should such a strategy backfire or fail, Israel would be one of the first countries to feel the consequences.

We want to be clear on one point. Much of the recent discussion in the West about Israel and NATO has focused on a possible peacekeeping or monitoring role for Alliance forces in connection with a possible Israeli-Palestinian agreement. But what some Israeli strategic thinkers are starting to discuss – and what we are addressing in this paper -- is something different, namely an upgraded strategic relationship between Israel and institutions like NATO and the EU that would lead to increasingly closer ties and could include eventual membership. Such an upgraded relationship could become a crucial part of an overall package aimed at securing a peace settlement as well as a part of an overall reassessment of NATO and EU ties in the region. It would not exclude NATO and/or the EU assuming some role in a future peace settlement. But the strategic purpose would be different, namely to bring Israel closer to and anchor it in the Euro-Atlantic community.

These are the issues and question that some far-sighted Israelis – several of whom are on this panel with us – have also started to pose. What seems remarkable to these authors, however, is not that they are now being posed, but rather that Israelis have not been more curious and assertive in exploring such opportunities for enhancing Israel’s security and long-term viability. As discussed above, we are living through a plastic historical moment when the very foundations of the West are being recast. Now the West, in turn, is struggling to define a new strategy and approach to the region in which Israel resides. Already today we can foresee an EU and NATO that reach to the borders of the Middle East. These Euro-Atlantic institutions are, in turn, developing new outreach initiatives in the region and which are seeking to become more important actors in the Middle East.

Against this backdrop, Israel may have a unique window of opportunity in which it can seek to realign itself vis-à-vis these institutions. The current moment of historical flux will not last forever. At a minimum, both Israel and the West will need to review what kind of relationship does or does not makes sense as the European and Middle Eastern security spaces increasingly overlap. And at a time when the EU is moving to integrate Turkey, when Ukraine may be on the verge of a breakthrough to the West and NATO is debating new outreach strategies towards the Black Sea region and Central Asia, the idea of Israel developing closer political and strategic ties with the Euro-Atlantic community may be an idea whose time has come.

Should Israel reassess its relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community and seek closer relations with NATO and the EU? As the contours of the new Euro-Atlantic community start to set themselves for the foreseeable future, should Israel consider using this moment to remain outside, move closer to or perhaps even join the Euro-Atlantic community? This paper makes the case for rethinking Israel’s relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community – from the perspectives of Israel, the United States and Europe – and starts to sketch out some steps that could be undertaken to launch a dialogue along these lines.

One final point on language. In this paper we use words like “upgrading” Israel’s relations with the Euro-Atlantic community or “anchoring” Israel to the West. These words include a spectrum of relationships ranging from closer ties up to and including possible membership. We reserve judgment at this stage on the exact form such an

upgraded relationship would or should be. But what we are talking about is the creation of a new and much closer relationship in which both Israel sees itself as part of the West and aspires to have the closest possible relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community – and one in which the United States and Europe think of and include Israel as a close partner and what might be termed a member of the Euro-Atlantic community’s extended family.

### **What’s In It for Israel?**

The proper place to start such an analysis is Israel. After all, if Israelis are not interested in seeking an upgraded relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community, then there is little point in this exercise. Why might Israel be interested in such a step? It is, of course, up to the Israelis themselves to determine their national interest. Yet, an outsider might offer the following thoughts for consideration.

First, at a minimum, Israel should want to have closer ties with NATO and the EU simply because they are actors who are coming closer to Israel geographically and who are developing strategies to shape the Middle Eastern neighborhood in which Israel lives. Israel should aspire to have the closest possible relations with the actors and institutions setting those policies.

Second, a new and upgraded relationship between Israel and the Euro-Atlantic community could become a critical element in helping provide the security Israel will need if it is going to take steps to make peace with a Palestinian state in the Middle East. Anchoring Israel more closely with NATO and the EU can reduce the sense of isolation that Israel feels. In a post-Oslo political environment, such a step could be especially important in convincing a skeptical Israeli public to support such a settlement.

Third, an upgrading of Israel’s relations with the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community could play an important role in ending Israel’s political and diplomatic isolation and strengthen Israel’s position vis-à-vis other parts of the world, including its adversaries in the Middle East.

Last but perhaps most important, the American connection is a necessary but not necessarily a sufficient condition for Israel’s long-term survival and viability. It is and will remain *the* key Western anchor for Israel. But it is also clear that the country would benefit from a second European or Euro-Atlantic anchor as well. This is especially true if one views Israel’s needs in a broader strategic sense extending beyond military security and including economic markets, access to technology, currency stability, etc. The recent threat by members of the European Parliament to restrict EU-Israeli trade to force a modification of Israeli national security policy is a case in point. An “upgraded” relationship might foreclose or preclude such threats. Developing closer relations with the Euro-Atlantic community can also serve as an insurance policy in case Israel is ever faced with a rapidly deteriorating security situation in the region. In such a scenario, Israel might feel the need to seek closer strategic relations with the West. It would make sense to lay the foundation for such an option in advance and before such a crisis.

We would be the last people to question the importance of Israel's American connection. Like most Americans, we are proud of our country's track record of supporting Israel. Yet one can still raise the question of what might happen in, for example, twenty years time if the US were embroiled in a conflict in the Pacific and then also faced with a Middle East conflict to protect Israel that could expose us to terrorist attacks in the American homeland. Even if we concede that Americans see themselves as defenders of Israel (for reasons of history, faith and cultural values), it is hard to see why Israel should rely exclusively on America's assurance forever. Few states in history have relied upon a single alliance and an informal one at that. Most have sought to construct a web of interlocking relationships as a strategic insurance policy. It only seems prudent for Israel to seek a multilateral complement to a bilateral strength.

This list of potential benefits should be matched by what some Israelis could view as the possible downsides or "costs" of such a move. One set of concerns centers on the deeply-rooted Israeli belief in the need for political and strategic self-reliance and its reluctance to rely on allies. Related to this is Israel's own negative history with and distrust of multilateral institutions, especially the United Nations. Israel will think hard about whether closer relations with the EU and NATO could constrain Israel's freedom of maneuver on core issues central to its security.

A second set of concerns has to do with Israel's own identity and its relationship with Europe. The question of national identity is a vast subject that extends beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to mention several key issues. Do Israelis today see themselves as a democratic Jewish state whose values are fundamentally the same as those of the Euro-Atlantic community? Or do they view themselves as a people essentially betrayed by Europe? If the answer is the former, then there is no reason why Israel should not seek a close relationship and perhaps even inclusion in those institutions created to defend and sustain those values. If the answer is the latter, however, it is hard to see why Israelis would see a strategy of returning Israel to European institutions as desirable.

As Americans, we sympathize with feelings of Israeli exceptionalism. Yet, as Euro-Atlanticists, it strikes us as a bit odd to argue that Israel is so distinct that it does not fit in the broader Euro-Atlantic community, yet Erdogan's Turkey can and does. It also strikes us as curious that Israel see itself as a close American ally, yet at times is nervous about developing close relationship to other close American allies. The reason is clear. Israel's political relations with the United States are excellent but with Europe they are troubled. Many Israelis today doubt Europe's commitment to Israel and are concerned about growing anti-Semitic currents on the continent. Israelis fear that closer ties with Europe will generate greater pressure for a peace settlement on unfavorable terms. These are the issues and fears in Israel that need to be faced and resolved, something that will only happen in a real dialogue with Europe.

A third and final set of doubts has to do with the viability and cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic community itself. After all, why should Israel make a major move to get close to the Euro-Atlantic community if that community itself is in danger of falling apart? Are

Americans and Europeans capable of overcoming the divisions of recent years and will they undertake this kind of strategy? Even if the Euro-Atlantic community regains its footing and comes back together again, many Israelis would ask whether such an upgrade in Israel's relations with the West is really on offer.

Many of these concerns are real and need to be discussed and addressed at length. But even this brief survey suggests that there is a compelling case for Israelis to explore the option of such an upgrade and its potential benefits and downsides. But such a cost-benefit analysis also requires us to look at American and European interests and views.

### **What About the U.S?**

As the main supporter of Israel, the United States shares many of the interests and benefits listed above. This is a case where the interests of both sides potentially dovetail as Washington clearly would benefit from a strategy which would make Israel more secure and that would enhance its long-term viability as a country and nation. In addition, the following considerations should also be added to the list of reasons why this is in the interest of the United States.

First, the U.S. would acquire partners and assistance in sharing the burden of helping to secure Israel and anchor her to the West. To be sure, Europe assuming more burden and responsibility would also mean more potential influence. But it is unlikely to displace the United States as the senior partner and friend of Israel in any meaningful way barring some radical crisis in U.S.-Israeli relations. Americans can afford to be relaxed. There is no danger of American influence with Israel being marginalized.

Second, the transatlantic rift over how to deal with Israel would presumably be narrowed significantly if not overcome, thus eliminating one of the current sources of tension in US-European relations. One way to help narrow the gap between the United States and Europe is, at least in part, to force both sides to work together and develop a more common approach. It is noteworthy how deep differences often suddenly narrow when one has to share responsibility and contemplate joint action.

Third, a common Euro-Atlantic policy towards Israel would also mean that the Arab world would be less able to play on differences between the United States and Europe. Over time this could increase the U.S. negotiating leverage and position in the Arab world.

To be sure, there will be Euro-skeptical voices in the United States who will question such an approach. They will argue that ensuring Israel security through a bilateral relationship with the United States is easier, more flexible and perhaps even advantageous. They would claim that the United States is making a mistake by "allowing" Europeans to acquire a more important voice and greater influence in Israel and in the Middle East. Yet, how can we assert that Israel is part of the "West" yet also insist that developing Israel's ties with the core institutions of the West is somehow too hard or complicated? At the end of the day, if Israel makes it clear that it desires a closer

relationship with Europe, then such voices are likely to be muted and limited in their impact.

As Americans we discuss US policy toward Israel frequently with our friends and colleagues. In our view, it is clear that the opening of Euro-Atlantic institutions to Israel would help end the moral and strategic contradictions that chafe within US policy. For example, the US proposes to launch the greatest democracy program for the Greater Middle East ever conceived but cannot define the role of a democratic Israel in that program. NATO has upgraded a 26 plus 1 relationship with Russia because Moscow could assist the West on terror and proliferation but not with Israel in spite of its obvious potential contribution in these areas. Americans are overwhelmingly convinced that Turkey is an integral member of the Euro-Atlantic community but unsure or vague about whether Israel should be. We believe that US policymakers should welcome a closer Israeli relationship with key Euro-Atlantic institutions and that such a step would help resolve these contradictions.

A good deal of political legwork would undoubtedly be required on the American side as well to make this official US policy. Yet, arguably the United States would have the fewest problems adopting such a strategy. It will not be the obstacle if Israel wants to move forward.

### **And What About Europe?**

The real question lies in Europe and in European attitudes. In many ways, Europe is the key player since it not only runs the EU but has a decisive voice in NATO as well. Yet, here, too, there are arguably several ways in which Europe could benefit from such an upgrade:

First, if such an upgrade was part and parcel of a move toward peace in the Middle East, the EU would move from the sidelines to center stage in the peace process and Middle Eastern politics more generally. It could acquire the kind of major role many European leaders have long aspired to have – and give an enormous boost to European diplomatic credibility and standing in the region and beyond.

Second, Europe's own strained relationship with Israel could be mended. The current situation whereby the EU has extremely close economic and other ties with Israel but almost no meaningful political or strategic dialogue could be overcome. A Europe that is more engaged on the ground is also likely to be a more responsible one.

Third, obviously some in Europe may fear that such a move would mean abandoning Europe's policy of being "even-handed" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and undercut Europe's standing in the Arab world. One should question whether that needs to be the case. If handled correctly, such a step might actually lead pro-Western moderate Arab states to seek their own closer ties with the Euro-Atlantic community as well.

There are three big questions when it comes to the feasibility of Europeans making such a leap of strategic imagination to embrace such a bold strategy. The first is whether European leaders have the vision and courage to take this step in terms of strategic imagination with Israel and whether it is domestically sustainable given the kind of critical sentiments towards Israel one finds today in many parts of Europe.

Equally important is whether Europe can engage in what might be called the “paradigm shift”? As we have debated this issue over the last year, the initial response of many European colleagues has been that Israel and Palestine must first make peace, and then and only then should we discuss bringing Israel closer to and perhaps into our Euro-Atlantic institutions. Europeans need to move beyond this static and reactive approach and think in terms of what they and we can do and offer in advance or in parallel of moves toward peace in order to reinforce that process. Indeed, it is only by thinking in these more dynamic terms that Europe can acquire the sort of role and influence it wants

The second and perhaps equally important question for many Europeans will be whether Europe could find a way to upgrade its relations with Israel yet sustain what it views as its special commitment to the Palestinians as well as to key Arab states. As mentioned earlier, it would be too simplistic to assume that such a move would automatically lead to deterioration in Europe’s relations with the Arab world. Indeed, if handled properly, one could argue that such a move would enhance Europe’s prestige and influence in the Arab world. But this underscores that European countries will be more comfortable in upgrading relations with Europe if that step can be imbedded in a broader regional approach that also contains opportunities to step up outreach to key Arab states as well.

Finally, there is the question of whether the EU will be willing to assume the kind of added responsibility such a strategic shift would entail – and whether it would be willing to do so in partnership with the United States. Many Europeans could be concerned that they are being drawn into potential conflicts and assuming new risk in the region. At the end of the day, it may be far easier for Europe to mend its relations with Israel in a trans-Atlantic framework. Many Europeans are also aware that the problematic relationship between Israel and Europe also creates a long term strain on US-European relations which manifests itself in doubt about the reliability of the US-European partnership in the Middle East. Establishing a better Israeli-European relationship would not only serve to enhance Israeli’s security but would mitigate those doubts.

## **Where to Start?**

For the reasons laid out above, we believe there is a compelling strategic argument why Israel should explore the option of building closer ties to the Euro-Atlantic community. We are living in a moment of strategic fluidity – both across the Atlantic and in the Middle East. The future contours of the Euro-Atlantic community are likely to settle in the years ahead. The question is whether they will come to an end on the northern edge of the wider Middle East and stop with Turkey and the Black Sea region – or whether they will reach down to embrace a democratic country like Israel as well. In the Middle East itself, we may be entering a new phase of strategic fluidity as well – both in



connection with Prime Minister Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan for Gaza and the election of a new Palestinian leadership as well as in the region more broadly.

For all these reasons, this is the right moment for Israel to decide whether it wants to use this window of opportunity to redefine and upgrade its own relations with that community, develop closer ties or even seek to join it. Both Europe and Israel need to participate equally in such a rethink. And movement will be required on both sides to make progress. As a first step, it is nevertheless Israel that needs to decide that it wants to seek a new and expanded relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community.

The instruments or tools to do so already exist. In the case of NATO, Israel has only the most perfunctory relationship with the Alliance for reasons that have to do both with Israel and NATO. The Alliance is deeply engaged in Afghanistan and may become more engaged in Iraq, yet relations with the one Western democracy in the region remain largely frozen. The recent Istanbul summit, however, has for the first time opened the door to creating a separate bilateral Israeli-NATO relationship outside of and in addition to the Mediterranean Dialogue. Israel has a friend in the current Secretary General of NATO – Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. And the NATO format would seem more manageable in political terms since the US is also involved and it has a greater focus on security issues which are of immediate concern.

Israel today actually has a much closer relationship with the EU than it has with NATO in many ways, arguably one of the closest of any non-EU member. But that relationship is non-strategic, politically stunted and very much limited to trade, technology and science. Yet, here, too the offer from the Essen summit of building a special relationship between the EU and Israel is still on the table. Moreover, EU's New Neighborhood Policy offers a broader framework with which the EU can deepen ties with both Israel and other countries in the region. The history of the last decade in terms of Euro-Atlantic outreach has shown that it is possible for the receiving country to fill initiatives like the ENP with more substance than its drafters may have originally intended. From the bottom up, both the EU and NATO would have to start to build a political and strategic relationship that could grow over time as well.

All long journeys start with small steps and a strategic reorientation of the kind discussed in this paper is no different. It would require a strategy that would have a top-down and bottom-up component. At the top there are a number of political issues -- largely but not exclusively between Israel and Europe – that would have to be resolved and which would undoubtedly take time. Progress towards a peace settlement with the Palestinians and clarity on Israel's final borders undoubtedly are at the top of that list.

The scope of what is imaginable or possible varies. It will depend upon the interest of the NATO nations as well as Israel. Israel can start by turning to those NATO nations that it considers to be friends and who are likely to be most interested in developing this relationship. They can in turn take the lead in creating opportunities for Israel to deepen its relationship through the plethora of existing partnership mechanisms or by working with Israel in a subgroup of NATO allies. Over time, Israel might aspire to develop the

kind of close partnership relationship that countries like Sweden or Finland have developed over the last decade and enjoy today – a very close political relationship, close military interoperability and the de facto yet unspoken option to join if the strategic environment ever necessitates such a move.