

# Once upon a time Israel wanted to join the EU

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Regardless of the outcome of the EU referendum, consider that of our other identity. In 1966, just a few years before the UK became a member, Israel also applied to join, alongside Austria and Spain. The official note, highlighting Israel's strong links to the then-European Economic Community was circulated and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol led a political campaign.

Today, Israelis see America as its best friend, yet in the early years that role was sturdily played by French support of the courageous underdog and guilt-laden German arms and money. It was Paris that supplied both the Mirage aircraft that gave Israel aerial superiority and its nuclear weapons and know-how, the broker of that deal being one Shimon Peres. It was France and Britain in 1956 that Israel conspired with to bring down Nasser, Egypt's radical nationalist leader. They were resolutely opposed by Eisenhower's America, which strongly rebuked Israel and used its financial muscle to force the abandonment of an otherwise-won war. Startling archives show that in 1967 the US still had a contingency plan (Critical Incident No. 14) to invade Israel on the Arabs' behalf if necessary.

Suez though was the last hurrah for that old order. By 1967 the French were moving over to the Arab camp. The fifty F4 Phantom jets that helped win the six day war were American. As goes France, so went broader European relations. The main driver was the OPEC-precipitated oil crisis after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, with Israel considering Europe's reaction a stab in the back that Foreign Minister Abba Eban characterised as choosing "Oil for Europe" above "Peace for the Middle East". Though Israeli aspiration to join Europe by then was long-dead, in parallel to wooing the Arab states though, the

Common Market also concluded a Free Trade Agreement with Israel, giving it a valuable special status, which continues to today in the incarnation of the EU-Israel Association Agreement of 2000.

Punctuated by lows, notably Lebanon in 1982, EU-Israel relations fitfully progressed over these decades to a tacit warmth, with the period between the 1991 Madrid Conference and Netanyahu's 1996 election probably the brightest. The EU though is a "soft-power" trade-orientated broker with a habit of lowest common denominator foreign-policy, so its rules-based, multilateralist approach is a mismatched Venus to the Mars of Israel's unilateral use of hard state power in its tough neighbourhood. Israeli Prime-Ministers visit Washington several times a year, but you can fruitlessly Google for visits to Brussels.



*Bauhaus - the European influence on Tel Aviv, Emil Zola*

From an objective viewpoint though, there are real connections of history and geography that make this status quo strange. Israel lies just 160 miles from the EU and in stark contrast to the countries between and surrounding them, shares cultural and social values, not least a commitment to democracy. More

than a third of Israel's population has European roots; indeed there is a growing niche of Israelis tracing back their roots to apply for a passport in Member States such as Lithuania and Poland. Given that Israel's massive Sephardi immigration came after the State's creation, it is no exaggeration to say Israel was initially built almost entirely by Europeans, including the Mandated Brits. This is as true for its physical structures as its institutional ones: Tel Aviv is a world-class Bauhaus showcase, built by a clutch of leading German architects. Israel plays its football and most other sports in European leagues, sings in the Eurovision and is a member of most European economic, political and cultural clubs. The EU is still today Israel's number one trading partner, destination of about 40% of Israeli imports, in return for receiving about 30% of Israeli exports.

However, Israelis are ever more positive about America, ever less so about the EU, where European sympathy for Palestinian plight is easily mistranslated in the ever stronger discourse of a "Eurabian" continent succumbing to Islamic influence, with the narrative of its anti-semitic history ever more prominent. This growing gap is a great disbenefit for these neighbours, but shows signs only of widening as the EU's preferred two-state solution to the Palestinian issue becomes ever more remote. Ironically though, as leaving peace hostage to the whims of American administrations ever more inclined to withdrawal from faraway (for them) shores, the partners may only get closer when the EU flexes its dormant middle eastern muscles, a prospect highly-unwelcome by Israel. Better recognised as friends, it may be up to Jews of Europe like us to be that bridge.