





COMMENTARY


Will the New Israeli Government Break the Diplomatic Disharmony Between Tel Aviv and Brussels?

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Introduction

Amid a neck in neck Israeli election, the incumbent Prime Minister, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, will likely garner enough support “to extend his decade-long stretch in power to become the country’s longest-serving [leader].”¹ Although the Premier’s party, Likud, failed to command a lead, “results showed [Mr.] Netanyahu would be in a much better position to form a majority governing coalition made up of nationalist, far-right and religious allies.”² The instinctive question to ask is what now? Especially for Europeans, the predicament will be more how to handle the Israeli Premier, “the controversial figure whom some perceive as Israel’s saviour, and others – as a cynical politician who will stop at nothing to retain his power.”³

To put it lightly the relationship between Brussels and Tel Aviv has been less than ideal in the past year. Ironically, one of the reasons behind the diplomatic disharmony is that the EU has persisted in its intransigence of withholding official recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. *The Times of Israel* cited an unnamed EU spokesperson maintaining that “the position of the European Union and its member states on Jerusalem remains unchanged,”⁴ while US President Donald Trump shrugged it off to be “nothing more or less than a recognition of reality.”⁵

Indeed, Jerusalem has thrown a span in the works of EU-Israeli relations, but in the grand scheme of things it constitutes just another item on the bucket list. The infighting has covered a wide range of topics, but this paper will be examining two prevailing problems – the increasingly assertive Israeli position in the West Bank and Gaza, and the proportionately deteriorating Israeli-Iranian line – as potential sources of discord in future interactions. Since Mr. Netanyahu hasn’t yet stepped into office, nothing is written in stone. Nevertheless, his election campaign has revealed a sneak preview of what is to come or more broadly what is to be expected of his renewed tenure. The cardinal rule of politics governs that political platforms rarely tell the whole story and instead offer rough guidelines. In essence, “anything that’s said or will be said in the week before the election not only should be taken with a grain of salt, but with at least two full shakers of it.”⁶

Even if often amounting to nothing more than empty populist slogans, electoral manifestos do hold sway over the direction of administrations. That is why this study intends to investigate excerpts of Mr. Netanyahu campaign (concerning Palestine and Iran) and to assess them at face value, as well as to highlight their expected impact on the EU-Israeli diplomacy. The paper would, thus, appraise Mr. Netanyahu’s projected agenda against the EU’s foreign policy objectives for the Middle East. The role of the US will also be dragged into the discussion, in order to demonstrate Washington’s impact on: Israeli politics; heightened diplomatic frictions; and international politics, *inter alia* on the Transatlantic Alliance.

¹ Holmes, O. “Israel election: voters go to polls as Netanyahu seeks fifth term.” *The Guardian*. 9 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/09/israel-election-voters-polls-netanyahu-fifth-term-gatz>>

² Holmes, O. “Israeli election: Netanyahu appears on track for victory despite tied result.” *The Guardian*. 10 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/10/israel-election-netanyahu-appears-on-track-for-victory-despite-tied-result>>

³ “Documentary Competition: King Bibi.” *The Jerusalem Film Festival*. Jul-Aug 2018, available at <<https://www.jff.org.il/en/movie/22387>>

⁴ Ahren, R. “EU reiterates opposition to diplomatic missions in Jerusalem.” *The Times of Israel*. 20 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-reiterates-opposition-to-diplomatic-missions-in-jerusalem/>>

⁵ “Jerusalem is Israel’s capital, says Donald Trump.” *BBC*. 6 Dec 2017, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42259443>>

⁶ Landau, N. “Netanyahu Talks West Bank Annexation After Election – but Thwarted All Efforts in the Past.” *Haaretz*. 7 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-netanyahu-talks-west-bank-annexation-after-election-but-thwarted-all-such-efforts-1.7091149>>

The Palestinian Question

A tale as old as time itself, or so it seems. The UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29th November 1947 is widely regarded as the origin point of the Israeli state, setting the boundaries for the Jewish and the adjacent Arab sovereign lands. The UN Partition Plan for Palestine laid the foundations for the two-state solution to the Palestinian question.⁷ Because of the complexity of the issue, scholars have gone at great lengths to analyse it from all possible angles. Irrespective of their final verdicts, most academics conclude that the deal was innately belated and uncoordinated, leaving it prone to future frictions.⁸

Historically, instability has presided over the relationship. Détente periods are not unheard of, but for the most part Palestinian and Israeli authorities have gone tit-for-tat in their confrontation, at times breaking out in all-out wars. Provocations cannot go unanswered with both sides subscribing to the Old Testament's 'an eye for an eye' principle. Just last month, March 2019, "a projectile was launched [from Gaza] at Israel [and] in response the Israeli army carried out several airstrikes in the Strip, targeting several Hamas posts."⁹ The two parties are always nervously scratching their trigger fingers, awaiting for an opportunity to set their guns off.

How does Mr. Netanyahu add to this equation? For one, he has neither been a strong proponent of reconciliation, nor of the two-state solution. Quite the contrary, in terms of rhetoric the PM has toughened his stance towards the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, indicating that "a Palestinian state will endanger [Israeli] existence."¹⁰ Commentators extrapolate that "[Mr.] Netanyahu has slowly become more emboldened to make strong right-wing statements about the possible contours of a resolution to the conflict."¹¹ Hitherto as acting defence minister, the PM championed security above everything else. His campaign certainly reflected the insatiable craving for safety, illustrating that the acrimony between Hamas and Israel was nothing short of being existential:

It is impossible to do a real deal with Hamas. They want to destroy us. There is nothing to agree about. What will we agree on – on how to commit suicide? Therefore, we are obligated to deliver blows against them from time to time. Since Operation Protective Edge [in 2014], not a single Israeli civilian was killed [in the Gaza-border region].¹²

Mr. Netanyahu has framed all military undertaking to be fundamentally of defensive character because he embraces the logic that Israel is ultimately protecting itself against external threat.

⁷ The roots of the Zionist project, however, can be traced back to the 1917 British Balfour Declaration (deriving its title from the contemporary British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour), expressing 'His Majesty's government' support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." See Mathew, W. "The Balfour Declaration, 2 November 1917: A Fateful Improbability." The Balfour Project. 14 Sep 2017, available at <<http://www.balfourproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/extract.pdf>>

⁸ For more info see Khader, B. "The Palestinian Question and the Arabs (1917-2017): Popular Support, Government Stakes" In *The Arab-Israeli Conflict Revisited*. (Mediterranean Yearbook, 2017), available at <https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/previews/IEMed_Medyearbook2017_Palestine_Question_Arabs_1917_2017_Khader_EN.pdf>

⁹ Kubovich, Y, Khoury, J Zikri, A.B., Landay, N., Peleg, B. and Brainer, J. "Israel Strikes 100 Targets in Gaza in Response to Rockets Fired at Tel Aviv." Haaretz. 15 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/rocket-alerts-blare-in-tel-aviv-1.7022326>>

¹⁰ Lazaroff, T. "Did Netanyahu Just Renounce His Support For A Palestinian State?" The Jerusalem Post. 24 Feb 2019, available at <<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Did-Netanyahu-just-renounce-his-support-for-a-Palestinian-state-581577>>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lappin, Y. "Deciphering the security policies of Gantz, Netanyahu." Israel Hayom. 10 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.israelhayom.com/2019/04/09/deciphering-the-security-policies-put-forth-by-gantz-netanyahu/>>

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Generally, Brussels and Tel Aviv (and the US for the matter) are on the same page regarding Hamas. Denoted as a terrorist organisation,¹³ Hamas has been jointly condemned “for repeatedly firing rockets into Israel and for inciting violence, thereby putting civilians at risk.”¹⁴

On the other hand, the EU hasn’t eschewed from denouncing (dis)proportional Israeli response, and it has reiterated that “while having the right to defend itself, Israel is expected to continue to exercise restraint and do everything to avoid civilian casualties in Gaza.”¹⁵ Mr. Netanyahu’s manifesto doesn’t signal any meaningful deviation from its current attitude on Hamas; therefore, as long as the PM “exercise[s] [relative] restraint” towards his neighbouring adversary, the EU capitals wouldn’t take a stab at his government. Yet, if hypothetically he becomes too lively, authorising military operation (bordering war), the EU might settle on less-friendly route.

Whilst Gaza appears to be a rather straightforward affair (at least in terms of a common contempt for Hamas), the West Bank has crystallised as the apple of discord. The latest *Six Month Report on the Israeli Settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem*, provided by the Office of the European Union Representative for UNRWA, recorded that “the total advancement of settlement units in 2018 (January-December) amounted to more than 15,800 units (9,400 units in the West Bank and 6,400 units in East Jerusalem).”¹⁶ The document further deduced that “the figures show a sharp spike in planning for future construction,” which practically endangered “two-state solution, with Jerusalem as the future capital of both states.”¹⁷

Despite not making a specific reference to the Israeli administration, the report clearly aims to echo the simple fact that “settlements are illegal under international law as reaffirmed by UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016),”¹⁸ prompting Tel Aviv to act accordingly and impose the agreed-upon accords.

Here, Mr. Netanyahu and the EU heads are miles apart. The West Bank has featured regularly on the incumbent PM’s electoral campaign. Rather than sanctioning caution, Premier Netanyahu has inexplicitly welcomed an upsurge of settlements, pledging to “extend sovereignty [over the Israeli settlements in the West Bank]” citing “each [of them to be] Israeli [as opposed to Palestinian or mixed].”¹⁹ He overruled any other arrangement because “[he would] not hand [Israelis] over to Palestinian sovereignty.”²⁰ Still, the PM stopped short of “giv[ing] the green light to unlimited settlement expansion.”²¹ For all his talk, Mr. Netanyahu has continued to cooperate with the Palestinian Authority throughout his leadership.

¹³ Hamas still features on the EU terrorist list, see “EU court rejects Hamas appeal over terror listing.” *The Times of Israel*. 15 Dec 2018, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-court-rejects-hamas-appeal-over-terror-listing/> and *EU Terror List*. Council of the European Union. 8 Nov, 2018, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/terrorist-list/>

¹⁴ Ahren, R. “Europe agrees to back UN resolution condemning Hamas terror group.” *Times of Israel*. 30 Nov 2018, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/europe-agrees-to-back-un-resolution-condemning-hamas/>

¹⁵ *Statement on the latest escalation of violence between Gaza and Israel*. EEAS. 10 Aug 2018, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/middle-east-peace-process/49322/statement-latest-escalation-violence-between-gaza-and-israel_en

¹⁶ *Six-Month Report on Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, (Reporting period July-December 2018)*. The Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA). EEAS. 4 Feb 2019, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/palestine-occupied-palestinian-territory-west-bank-and-gaza-strip/57606/six-month-report-israeli-settlements-occupied-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-reporting_en

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Netanyahu Says Will Begin Annexing West Bank if He Wins Israel Election.” *Haaretz*. 7 Apr 2019, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/netanyahu-says-will-annex-west-bank-in-next-term-1.7089387>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Lappin, Y.

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However, the Likud party “really wants him to [absorb the territory]” and in a more right-leaning coalition “he could take steps towards doing [just] that,”²² due to inter-cabinet pressure. If this were to happen, “European and non-aligned states would also be certain to oppose annexation as a dangerous violation of international law and UN resolutions.”²³ Effectively, Tel Aviv will be sliding down a slippery slope bringing it at odds with Brussels. Stripping it down to the basics, the Israeli administration will be pulling the rug out under the EU’s commitment to “advance the goal of a two-state solution, including in Gaza, which, together with the West Bank, is an integral part of a future Palestinian state.”²⁴ The parties would be increasingly finding themselves distanced; unable to compromise.

The US will have an instrumental role in any future relationship. The Whitehouse under President Trump has sought to reinstate the traditionally strong US-Israeli ties. Mr. Trump’s string of concessions towards Mr. Netanyahu have progressively amplified during the former’s reign. The apex was reached recently with American recognition of “Israel’s illegal annexation of occupied East Jerusalem, as well as the Golan Heights.”²⁵

The US President altered “[the]status quo, whereby [the International Community] ignore[d] Israel’s occupation while quietly batting away its attempts to seek recognition.”²⁶ Barring the standalone importance of the decision, it has set out an alarming precedent for the West Bank. If Tel Aviv receives a US *carte blanche* (of sorts) with respect to its immediate neighbourhood, right wing parties will probably pile on the pressure on Mr. Netanyahu to extend Israeli patronage to large chunks of the West Bank, particularly to Area C. His electoral rhetoric shouldn’t be dismissed because it has played into the Zionist nationalistic aspiration.

Thus, the cabinet partners might demand that the PM keeps true to and delivers on his promises. A lack of US sanctions or even outright support for such a narrative can be the stimulus for Mr. Netanyahu to drop his reservations. The EU has been extremely vocal in rebuking any such thinking “in line with the international law and UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 497,” making crystal clear that the “European Union does not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights.”²⁷ Hence, offensive military operations into the West Bank, would run counter to EU objectives, placing Brussels and Tel Aviv at loggerheads. Moreover, US sponsorship of Israeli annexations would further aggravate the Transatlantic Alliance, where stress is at an all times high level.

²² Estrin, D. In “Israel’s Netanyahu Makes Dramatic Campaign Pledge Ahead Of Election.” NPR. 8 Apr 2019, transcript available at <<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/08/710953464/israels-netanyahu-makes-dramatic-campaign-pledge-ahead-of-election?t=1554849269819&t=1554984576658>>

²³ Tisdall, S. “Benjamin Netanyahu’s proposal would bury the two-state solution.” The Guardian. 7 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/07/benjamin-netanyahus-proposal-would-bury-the-two-state-solution>>

²⁴ The EU consults with Israel and the Palestinian Authority on its engagement in support of the two-state solution. EEAS. 2 Jul 2018, available at <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/47765/eu-consults-israel-and-palestinian-authority-its-engagement-support-two-state-solution_en> For more information on the nature of Israeli occupation and the dangers of recognition, see Ayoub, N. and Southlea, A. “Response to Israel’s Occupation of the Golan Heights Is Illegal and Dangerous.” FP. 5 Feb 2019, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/05/israels-occupation-of-the-golan-heights-is-illegal-and-dangerous/>>

²⁵ Mackey, R. “On the Eve of Israel’s Election, Netanyahu Thanks Trump for Sanctioning Iran at His Request.” The Intercept. 9 Apr 2019, available at <<https://theintercept.com/2019/04/08/netanyahu-thanks-trump-sanctioning-iran-request-eve-israeli-election/>>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “All EU countries say no to recognition of Israeli Golan Heights.” The Times of Israel. 27 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-countries-all-say-no-to-recognition-of-israeli-golan-heights/>>

“The Iran deal is defective at its core”²⁸

The phrase uttered by US President Donald Trump in the wake of American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) enshrines regional consideration for Iran. Israeli politics has been engulfed in discussions about Tehran’s encroaching power in the Middle East. Under Supreme Leader Khamenei, the Iranian administration has steadily increased its local influence, from supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen to assisting Syrian President Assad’s fight against IS(IS) in Syria. With the bottom line of all election campaigns being security, it is no wonder that Iran evolved to be the accentuated issue.

The most absurd episode of the elections centred on the alleged hijacking of Mr. Gantz’s (the main opponent of the incumbent PM) phone by Iranian special intelligence. The rumour had it “that a sex tape was among the embarrassing material extracted from [his] personal device.”²⁹ The public indictment levied on Mr. Gantz was that he was susceptible to foreign extortion, opening up the door to external interference in Israeli domestic affairs.

Mr. Netanyahu leapt to the occasion, ridiculing his rival of being incompetent through the question: “if Gantz can’t protect his phone, how will he protect the country?”³⁰ The remarks were followed by a self-boast by the PM, underlining that “Gantz [had] supported the dangerous nuclear deal with Iran, the deal that [Mr. Netanyahu had] fought,” managing to “convince the president of the US to leave and to renew sanctions on Iran.”³¹ The incumbent effectively juxtaposed his strength with his competitor’s weakness vis-à-vis Iran. Though it’s hard to single out the news story’s impact on the eventual ballot results, it highlighted Israeli security concern over the perceived threat from Tehran.

During his campaign, Mr. Netanyahu made sure to take advantage of his anti-Iranian sentiments to the fullest. Tapping into the diplomatic row between the two states, the seasoned politician showed resolve towards Iranian threats, saying that “if the [Tehran] regime makes a mistake and tries to destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa, it will be the last day the revolution will be celebrated”³² – a statement that was delivered on the eve of the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Republic. Malignant chants of “Death to Israel, Death to America” in Iran have instilled fear into the Israeli civilian population.

Consequently, the anxiety over the Iranian regime was manifested throughout the election. According to the Guardian’s Israeli Correspondent, Oliver Holmes, voters counted on “a leader who could keep the country safe.”³³ Mr. Netanyahu came out largely unscathed from a corruption scandal (which many thought would significantly damage his campaign)³⁴ exactly through a strong emphasis on

²⁸ “Key Trump Quotes On US Withdrawal From Iran Nuclear Deal.” NDTV. 9 May 2018, available at

<<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/key-trump-quotes-on-us-withdrawal-from-iran-nuclear-deal-1849334>>

²⁹ Trew, B. “Israel elections: Ex-army chief denies claims of stolen sex tape after an Iran cyber attack.” Independent. 15 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-elections-netanyahu-sex-tape-iran-phone-hack-benny-gantz-a8825331.html>>

³⁰ Harkov, L. “Netanyahu: If Gantz Can’t Protect His Phone, How Will He Protect The Country?” The Jerusalem Post. 18 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-If-Gantz-cant-protect-his-phone-how-will-he-protect-the-country-583832>>

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Netanyahu: I Don’t Ignore Iranian Threats, But I’m Not Impressed By Them.” The Jerusalem Post. 11 Feb 2019, available at <<https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Netanyahu-I-dont-ignore-Iranian-threats-but-Im-not-impressed-by-them-580354>>

³³ Holmes, O. In Podcast *King Bibi: can anyone beat Benjamin Netanyahu?* The Guardian. 9 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2019/apr/09/king-bibi-can-anyone-beat-benjamin-netanyahu>>

³⁴ In all probability the convictions took their toll on the final results, but they were nowhere near as detrimental as was first expected.

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protection from Iran. By portraying himself as ‘Mr. Security,’³⁵ the Israeli Premier addressed voters’ primary concerns.

The PM has validated his commitment to contain the regional rival by notably “block[ing] [the latter’s] military entrenchment in Syria.”³⁶ In January, the Israeli leader publicly acknowledged airstrikes against Iranian targets near Damascus.³⁷ Similar bombing raids were common in 2018, when Iran dared to instigate provocation of its own. Back then, Brussels adopted a more conciliatory stance towards Tel Aviv and asserted that “Israel ha[d] the [legitimate] right to defend itself.”³⁸

Upholding its function of a peace facilitator, the EU has usually advocated restraint and de-escalation; however, individual cases of bombing have been judged contextually. Opinions have been situated throughout the spectrum, with Member States sometimes partially absolving Israel from the guilt and putting the onus on 3rd parties like Russia, the US, etc. Consequentially, despite inciting a short-lived ruckus, Israeli involvement against Iran in Syria hasn’t quite affected the diplomatic line between Tel Aviv and Brussels.

Ever since 2015, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, has established itself to be the substantive bone of contention, precluding a spring thawing of the accumulated winter frost along the Mediterranean channel. Opening up a short parenthesis, the international agreement between Iran and “P5+1 group of world powers”³⁹ basically consolidates a *quid pro quo* status, lifting the previous economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic in exchange for the curtailment of Tehran’s nuclear programme. The accord has extrapolated concessions from the Islamic Republic, laying down severe restrictions and specific non-proliferation targets, with corresponding deadlines. It is not up to this paper to judge if the endeavour has been a resounding success (or any success for the matter). The spotlight is instead to be shifted westward all the way to Washington, pulling the curtains to reveal Trump administration views on the JCPOA:

“Since the deal was reached, Iran’s aggression has only increased. The regime has used the windfall of newly accessible funds it received under the JCPOA to build nuclear-capable missiles, fund terrorism, and fuel conflict across the Middle East and beyond.”⁴⁰

The above cited reasons underscore President Trump’s regret over his predecessor’s unfruitful negotiation. The current White House perceives the Iran Nuclear Deal as seriously flawed, running against its purpose. Mr. Trump has voiced his criticism on more than one occasion, targeting Supreme Leader Khamenei and his regime. Needless to say, Mr. Netanyahu has strongly lobbied against the JCPOA, whose financial relaxations have allowed Iran to expand its regional influence. “Re-imposing the sanctions” has been “long advocated by Israel.”⁴¹

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gross, J.A. “In rare acknowledgement, Israel confirms strike on Iran weapons caches in Syria.” The Jerusalem Post. 13 Jan 2019, available at <<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Rare-EU-backing-of-Israeli-strike-against-Iran-in-Syria-556160>>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Benari, E. “EU: Israel has the right to defend itself.” Israel National News.com. 5 May 2018, available at <<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/245799>>

³⁹ The P5+1 powers are the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany. For more info on the Iran Nuclear Deal see “Iran nuclear deal: Key details.” BBC. 8 May 2018, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>>

⁴⁰ Gould, J. “Trump brings back Iran sanctions after exiting nuclear deal.” DefenseNews. 6 Aug 2018, available at <<https://www.defensenews.com/global/2018/08/06/trump-brings-back-iran-sanctions-after-exiting-nuclear-deal/>>

⁴¹ Gotev, G. “Netanyahu lashes at ‘hostile’ EU, but finds friends on Bulgaria trip.” Euractiv. 2 Nov 2018, available at <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/netanyahu-lashes-at-hostile-eu-but-finds-friends-on-bulgaria-trip/>>

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Moreover, “the Israeli premier has also been eager to convince European countries to exert more pressure on Iran.” Mr. Netanyahu’s efforts haven’t yielded a noticeable response, with the EU capitals exhibiting “[their] strong political commitment to the nuclear deal.”⁴² Brussels has responded to Israeli allegations of Iranian non-compliance through a reassurance that “the JCPOA is not based on assumptions of good faith or trust - it is based on concrete commitments, verification mechanisms and a very strict monitoring of facts.”⁴³ Yet, this continual Israeli insistence to step up to the podium to tarnish the Iran Nuclear Deal can be detrimental to the JCPOA’s fate; hence, to regional stability project, championed by Brussels.

Returning to Mr. Netanyahu’s electoral statements, it would appear as though he has been instrumental in “convinc[ing] the president of the US to leave [the Iran Nuclear Deal] and to renew sanctions on Iran.”⁴⁴ “On the eve of Israel’s elections” the incumbent PM even claimed responsibility for the latest US decision to label the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a powerful branch of Iran’s official army, as a terrorist organisation.⁴⁵ In a tweet, the Israeli Premier thanked President Trump for “answering another one of [Mr. Netanyahu’s] important requests.”⁴⁶

The fact that only the Hebrew version of the tweet contained the above phrase, has invoked doubt over the authenticity of the acknowledgement, because it came out to be more of a publicity stunt, intended for domestic consumption.⁴⁷ While Israel certainly occupies a central spot in American Middle-Eastern policy, Mr. Netanyahu’s influence over Mr. Trump shouldn’t be overstated.

That said, the joint US-Israeli pledge to Iranian containment does contradict the EU’s foreign policy preferences for the region. The approaches are rather dichotomous – Brussels is offering the carrot, whereas Israel and the US are relying on the stick. The US-Israeli coalition is essentially pulling the plug on the EU’s initiative. Without Washington support, the future of the JCPOA is at stake. No element in Mr. Netanyahu’s electoral campaign has suggested course adjustment towards Iran. If anything, the reconvened Tel Aviv government (backed by President Trump) might take a harder turn to the right, intensifying its pressure on Tehran. This will definitely not bode well with Brussels.

Conclusion

The 2019 April Israeli elections have solidified Mr. Netanyahu’s leviathan standing within Israeli politics. Love him or hate him, the EU must recognise the PM as a reality and modify its policy accordingly. Inevitably, this will be easier said than done. In his political acrobatics, the forthcoming administration will have to juggle between various right-wing demands, which might force it to surrender to “more extreme far-right voices.”⁴⁸ A tougher stance towards Iran and unlawful extension of Israeli jurisdiction into the West Banks will surely be a hard to swallow pill for the EU leaders, leaving them with a bitter after-taste.

Washington’s ever-closer alignment with Tel Aviv has further increased the prospects for regional turmoil. The White House has progressively abstained from condemning Israeli aspiration to the West

⁴² Geranmayeh, E. “Why the Iran nuclear deal still matters for Europe.” ECFR. 16 Jan 2019, available at <https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_why_iran_nuclear_deal_still_matters_for_europe_jcpoa>

⁴³ *Response by HR/VP Mogherini regarding Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s presentation on Iran.* EEAS. 30 Apr 2018, available at <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/43768/response-hrvp-mogherini-regarding-israeli-prime-minister-netanyahu%E2%80%99s-presentation-iran_en>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See Mackey, R.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Holmes, O. “Israelis go to the polls: what you need to know.” The Guardian. 9 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/08/israelis-prepare-to-go-to-the-polls-heres-what-we-know>>

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Bank.⁴⁹ Moreover, Mr. Trump's 'deal of the century' for Palestine might drift away from the EU-backed two-state solution. Mr. Pompeo's initial round of congressional committees has "suggested the initiative would not propose the creation of a Palestinian state."⁵⁰ The absence of any official reference to statehood has been alarming.⁵¹

Considering the prevalence of US concessions to Israel, the new coalition might feel emboldened to chase after adventurous nationalistic dreams. American (un)solicited support for Israeli annexations will widen the already grandiose chasm between Brussels and Washington, driving them asunder. Albeit being an influential actor in the Middle East, Israeli importance will be overshadowed by the US, which can ultimately decide the fate of the JCPOA and Palestine. The EU capitals will be much more concerned with Mr. Trump's policy direction because it will define the perimeter, in which Israel will be able to operate.

Mr. Netanyahu will still have to keep the more extreme elements in his government under control, if he is to establish a *modus operandi* with the EU. Despite his expediting rhetoric, the Israeli PM has exhibited restraint in his previous stints in government. "In practice, he [has] actively thwarted all legislative initiatives in [the] direction [of annexation]" resisting the backdrop of ultra-nationalistic demands.⁵² In spite of the huff and puff, the Premier hasn't dared to categorically break off the two-state solution and to instigate zealous enlargement campaigns. This doesn't completely rule out such a scenario, but if past experience is to be the example then developments of this sort are unlikely.

In the foreseeable future Tel Aviv and Brussels will surely bud heads over the Nuclear Deal (assuming it weathers the storm). The European Union and Israel can work through their difference on Iran, but it will require a sufficient desire for compromise on both sides, as well as productive American involvement. To that end, in his upcoming term Mr. Netanyahu should re-evaluate his shadow diplomacy of "embrac[ing] many nationalist populist leaders around the world, [especially in Europe]."⁵³ Israeli overtures to Hungary, Poland, Romania, etc. can extract minor diplomatic gains, nevertheless, bypassing the EU through bilateral channels will not improve EU-Israeli relations in the long term.

⁴⁹ The Oval office has previously denounced Israeli claims to the West Bank, see Landau, N.

⁵⁰ Usher, B. P. "Trumplomacy: Where are things at with the Mideast peace plan?" BBC. 12 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47913544>>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See Landau, N.

⁵³ See Estrin, D.

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