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Israel On High Wire As It Charts New Geopolitical Course

Diplomatic openings in Middle East, Africa and with far right in Europe may come with costs.

By STEWART AIN

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shakes hands Sunday with Chadian President Idriss Deby, the first president of his country to visit Israel. Getty Images

With its embrace this week of a strongman in the African country of Chad and its promise to seek more friends in the Arab world, Israel is setting out on a new geopolitical course that is at once thrilling and treacherous — thrilling because of the prospect of an embattled Jewish state gaining new friends around the globe, and treacherous for the murky moral message it sends about the political friends Israel will now be keeping.

During a press conference, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke of his surprise visit last month to Oman, said there are “great changes that are taking place in the Arab world in its relations with Israel,” and promised: “There will be more such visits in Arab countries very soon.”

Israeli media reported that efforts are underway to normalize relations with the Muslim-majority countries of Sudan, Mali and Niger. And officials

in Jerusalem are quoted as saying Netanyahu is about to visit another Persian Gulf nation: Bahrain.

But some argue that Israel is making a mistake in its outreach to some Arab nations (notably Saudi Arabia after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was linked to the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi), to Chad and to other African nations with questionable human rights records, as well as to some European nations that have seen the rise of populist, right-wing and far-right parties in reaction to the influx of migrants and refugees. Many of these countries have responded by advancing anti-Islamic policies and rhetoric, causing some to question whether new anti-Semitic laws are on the horizon.

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“If a party is intrinsically racist, bigoted against large parts of society and intolerant of minorities, if Jews are not the target now, they will be in the near future,” warned Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, the primary association of Orthodox European rabbis.

Speaking two weeks ago to Israeli lawmakers, Rabbi Goldschmidt insisted that Israel should not engage with political parties if they endorse racist rhetoric and policies.

“It is not worth short-term endorsement or for Israel to receive political support, only to put the Jewish community at risk,” he insisted.

Although Israel officially boycotts Austria’s Freedom Party due to its Nazi past and xenophobic policies, the party is now part of the country’s governing coalition and has in recent years adopted strong pro-Israel positions.

Israel, said David Makovsky, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “is faced with a balancing act on a high wire. It has to find the right equilibrium between its interests and its values. It doesn’t have too many friends and therefore beggars can’t be choosy.

“When it comes to outreach to Asia and Africa, there is only an upside for Israel,” he said. “It is also driven by Israel’s desire not to be too dependent on its largest trading partner, the European Union.”





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Regarding Israel's outreach to Arab countries, Makovsky said it is "operating in a split screen reality where there is what goes on above the table and below the table. Below the table there are commonalities among Arab states and Israel to thwart Iran's regional hegemonic aspirations and a belief that Israel's technological edge could help these countries. But here, too, there is a kind of glass ceiling in terms of what is done publicly. There have been some cracks in that ceiling, like the visit to Oman and talk of relations with Bahrain, but it is too soon to know if they could be expanded and how the killing of Khashoggi could impact the aspirations of Israel for more above-the-table relations ... that the Palestinians fear would only come at their expense."

On the other hand, Hady Amr, a visiting senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who served as U.S. deputy special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from 2014-2017, said he believes "the best thing for the Jewish people is that the Jewish state build relationships with good people around the world. Building rapport with despots in Africa and the Middle East or with the far-right in Europe is not in the long-term interests of the Jewish people or the State of Israel."

But Israel has been "fighting for its existence for 70 years, fighting isolation imposed by Muslim countries, and it is absolutely right for Israel to be seeking the widest possible network of relationships," insisted Elliott Abrams, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Normal countries have diplomatic relations and their heads of government visit back and forth. What Israel is doing with eastern European and African countries is having normal relationships."

He added, "I think people take it too far when they say Israel should not have warm relationships with right-wing parties in power. But Israel has to be careful that no one uses their relationship with Israel to defend itself against accusations of anti-Semitism that are actually warranted."

Amr argued, however, that despite Israel's "long-held desire to be welcomed and accepted, particularly by Arab-majority countries, building rapport with authoritarian leaders who are deeply unpopular in their own country will build antipathy for the Jewish nation by the peoples of those nations when they are eventually free. ... I think you have to ask the Jewish communities in Europe about this and if they are uncomfortable with the prime minister of Israel reaching out to the far-right, maybe they ought to be listened to."

Oskar Deutsch, the president of the Jewish community of Vienna, had joined with Rabbi Goldschmidt in asking Israel to shun the Freedom Party and its officers. The party's current leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, now Austria's vice chancellor, visited Israel earlier this year at the invitation of Netanyahu's Likud Party and vowed that his party would be "an essential partner in Europe's fight against anti-Semitism."

Netanyahu faced criticism this year after he praised Poland for eliminating criminal — but maintaining civil — penalties for those who violate a new law making it illegal to accuse Poland of complicity in the Holocaust.

Dan Mariaschin, executive vice president and CEO of B'nai B'rith International, said that both his organization and Israel called out Hungary and Poland for Holocaust revisionism.

"You use the platform you have to raise issues where you disagree," he said.

Netanyahu had a "difficult choice," observed Gerald Steinberg, a professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University. "He is aware of anti-Semitism in Poland and Hungary and the far-right in Austria, but the government needs to be realistic and Netanyahu has made the decision that it is important to get the broadest support even though some of the regimes have a history of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish practices. It is a carefully weighed decision and implemented systematically."

"Critics are being asked, 'What do you have as an alternative? What can you bring to the table to stop the condemnations of Israel at the United Nations and the BDS [boycott, divestment and sanctions] movement? That is part of the dilemma Israel has. It is aware that these are uncomfortable partners and allies. A rabbi in Europe and Jewish community leaders who have to live with anti-Semitism have a different constituency."

Although there were many who were uncomfortable with Netanyahu calling Hungary's authoritarian ruler Viktor Orban to congratulate him after his election in April despite what observers described as its anti-Semitic tone, Aaron David Miller pointed out that the U.S. has relations with such countries as Russia, China and North Korea, none of which are free and open societies.

"Why should Israel be any different?" asked Miller, a vice president at the





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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “A country like Israel – you take your friends where you can get them. ... There may well be a cost with respect to Israel’s image and its self-identification as a state that looks at itself in a way that reflects tolerance, pluralism and human rights.”

Simply establishing diplomatic relations “does not signal approval – not by Israel nor any of the other countries in the world that have relations with many of the world’s worst regimes,” pointed out Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. “I do believe there has to be a moral component and Israel has to consider what message it sends when it establishes diplomatic relations.”

Mariaschin noted that in the mid-’90s, several Arab and Muslim countries had a presence in Israel, including Oman, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania.

“Now, 25 years later, we are seeing a renewal of some of those ties in a much more open way,” he said. “There is no question that Iran and the challenge it presents has moved the relationships forward.”

African nations are seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Israel because of their interest in Israeli technology to obtain clean water and learn agricultural skills, noted Sharon Nazarian, senior vice president of international affairs at the Anti-Defamation League.

“It’s a door opener for Israel and it makes perfect sense to establish those ties,” she said, adding that Israel’s diplomatic outreach in Europe is designed to counter the criticisms against it from the United Nations and the European Parliament.

