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Opinion // Netanyahu's Embrace of Ethno-nationalists Endangers Jews in Europe

Israel's right-wing is seduced by European nationalists' warmth toward the Jewish state, and their hostility toward Islam. But an illiberal Europe intolerant of minorities and pluralism is a disaster for Jews

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Benjamin Netanyahu meet in Israel, July 19, 2018. Credit: Mark Israel Salem

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This week the Israeli prime minister will hold bilateral meetings with the leaders of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in place of the freshly-cancelled Visegrad summit.

These meetings, following the recent visits to Israel by Italian and Austrian ministers and prominent members of nationalist and conservative parties, prompts us, European Jews strongly committed to the defense of democracy, pluralism and minority rights, to take a strong stand against the Israeli government's clear support for right-wing parties and movements in Europe and elsewhere.

For Israel, those parties' friendly attitudes toward the Jewish state, and their hostility toward Islam, appear to be a seductive proposition. Even when, in those same right-wing parties, there are deeply entrenched anti-Semitic views.

Israel, of course, pursues its own geopolitical interests. And there is a clear Israeli interest in dividing and fracturing the EU common positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the EU relationship with Iran, from the nuclear deal to Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East.

But beyond that, there is an evident ideological affinity between the Likud and parties in Europe which extol ethnic identities, the rejection of immigrants and intolerance of minorities.

This strategy is self-defeating, even for Israel's own economic interests. Europe is Israel's first trade partner and biggest funder of research conducted in Israeli universities and firms. A Europe beset by ethno-nationalism and dominated by Le Pen's National Rally, Orbán's Fidesz or Salvini's Lega would not be beneficial at all to Israel.





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The Israeli government often claims to represent world Jewry and seeks to protect it from discrimination and anti-Semitism. It pretends to act in the name and for the sake of the whole Jewish people, as Israeli leaders proclaimed in the wake of the hideous killings at the Jewish school in Toulouse and the Jewish Museum in Brussels.

But the same Israeli government ignores, or considers irrelevant, the opinions of Diaspora Jews. In the last two years the racist marches in Virginia and the mass killings in Pittsburgh, the anti-Jewish rhetoric unleashed against George Soros in Hungary and the rise of the extreme right in Germany were all instances which occurred against the backdrop of serious concerns voiced by Jewish organizations in the Diaspora. Yet in all these cases, the Israeli government kept silent.

As Mordechai Kremnitzer, a prominent legal expert in Israel, recently argued in Haaretz, "If Israelis want to see just how far we can go if these trends continue, [see] Hungary and Poland...The judiciary, the media, civil society groups, academia and cultural institutions have all lost their independence to an extreme degree... The government that holds aloft the banner of Israel's Jewish character is actually alienating Jews in the Diaspora by lending a hand to the anti-liberal camp, whose victims are minority groups like the Jews. At the same time, the government gives Jewish legitimacy to authoritarian nationalistic regimes with clear anti-Semitic hallmarks."

We, European Jews who fight Europe's growing illiberalism, side with Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, who stated that neo-fascism is "absolutely incompatible" with Israel's principles and values.

He went on to say: "You cannot say 'we admire Israel and want relations with your country, but we are neo-fascists...this is





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absolutely impossible...The fact that the President of Israel says to neo-fascist movements 'you are *persona non grata* in the State of Israel' is a statement that fights anti-Semitism in a concrete way...we will not compromise on for the political expediency of the State of Israel."

We agree with the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, Pinchas Goldschmidt, who in a Knesset hearing called on Israel to end its engagement with far-right parties in Europe, regardless of their position on the Jewish state. He added, "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."

A much safer strategy for the present and for future of the Jews, one that is also in keeping with the ethical and social values embedded in the Jewish tradition, is to commit to combating racism and discrimination against other weak and marginalized minorities.

We Jews have an objective interest in fighting discrimination, even when it does not hurt us directly and immediately. We have a core interest in striving toward an open and pluralistic society in which different identities, particularly of minorities, are respected and legitimized.

The troubled history of the Jewish people shows that racism, social exclusion and religious discrimination more often than not also carry with them the seeds of anti-Jewish hate.

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