

With Brexit, Israel Loses a Major Asset in the European Union

By Barak Ravid

Israel has lost a significant asset in the European Union, according to a senior official familiar with Foreign Ministry discussions on the U.K.'s EU referendum. Israeli diplomats believed before Thursday's referendum that Britain leaving would not serve Israeli interests, especially on the Palestinian issue.

In the weeks before the British voted on whether to remain in the EU, the Foreign Ministry held a series of discussions on what it would mean for Israel if the "leave" camp won. Despite a flood of reports from the Israeli embassy in London that included political analyses, polls and conversations with people on both sides, none of those taking part in the discussions was able to predict the referendum outcome.

Prime Minister David Cameron, who met leaders of the Jewish community in London a few days before the referendum, expressed what many in the Israeli Foreign Ministry were thinking. "Do you want Britain – Israel's greatest friend – in there opposing boycotts, opposing the campaign for divestment and sanctions, or do you want us outside the room, powerless to affect the discussion that takes place?" he asked.

As a key member of the EU, and with a large Jewish community and Israel-friendly government, Britain had exerted a positive influence regarding Israel in recent years. On several occasions, it helped to moderate and balance EU decisions about the peace process, blunt criticism and even harness the member states against anti-Israel moves in UN institutions.

"Without Britain, the voices of states more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, such as Malta, Ireland, Sweden and Slovenia, will be more dominant," a senior official said.

However, quite a few of the participants in the discussions argued that Britain's leaving the EU would actually serve Israel's interests. The official cited one argument to the effect that Britain's leaving

would considerably weaken the EU and its institutions, reduce its international influence, and take the sting out of its Israeli-Palestinian decisions.

Another argument was that Britain's leaving the EU would strengthen the bilateral relations with Israel and give Britain more maneuvering space, without depending on the EU and its positions. A third argument said Britain's leaving would undermine the EU's stability and require its institutions and members to direct their energy toward unifying the ranks, rather than toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, the opposite could also happen: The EU could look for consensual issues among its members, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one such issue, the official said.

On Friday, after learning of the referendum results, the Foreign Ministry prepared a draft outlining Israel's response. The draft didn't make a decisive stand about the referendum results, but referred more generally to the fact that Israel respected the British people's wishes and hoped to continue the cooperation between the two countries.

This statement was eventually scrapped, and instead a statement was made in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's name. This consisted mainly of issuing a warm farewell to the resigning Cameron, without ever mentioning the referendum even once.

The statement expressed Netanyahu's "great appreciation" for Cameron, "a respected leader and a true friend of Israel and the Jewish people.

"Throughout his premiership, the security, economic and technological cooperation between the United Kingdom and Israel has greatly expanded. Together we laid a strong foundation for continued cooperation."

Israel's lack of an official response to the referendum doesn't mean that it's indifferent to it. But at this stage, Israel has no clear policy for the post-Brexit era.

A senior official in Jerusalem said the Foreign Ministry believes that relations with Britain won't be harmed, but one of the missions will now be to map out all the agreements Israel will have to sign with Britain to ensure this happens – mainly the free trade agreement.

For now, Israel prefers to tread lightly in its response to the referendum. It doesn't want to anger those who supported leaving the EU – one of whose leaders, former London Mayor Boris Johnson, may well become the next prime minister. Also, it doesn't want to annoy the EU leaders who are furious with Britain, or the White House – which did all it could to make Britain stay, but failed.

Just a few hours after the referendum results were announced on Friday, the new Israeli ambassador in London, Mark Regev, was on his way to present his credentials to the Queen. As of this weekend, the referendum headache is also his.

Courtesy: Harretz