

Divided Europe is bad news for Middle East



Photo: Bloomberg

Israel is actively wooing populists in the EU with a view to dilute the bloc's position on the Palestinian issue.

The Middle East European Common Policy, since its formation in early 1970s, is seriously under threat. The first to be hit is the likely Europe position on Palestine and other major Arab issues. The cohesion of the current European Union (EU) has already begun to show serious signs of cracks — for the first time since its membership expansion in late 1990.

In fact, the entire EU Common Policy and unity seems to be under question since some member states are in process of splitting up from the EU. UK was the first to go down this route after the result of a referendum in 2016 on the issue. 52 per cent of voters opted out of the EU during the term of former prime minister, David Cameron. There are many other reasons for the likely threat to the EU structural foreign policy, at the top of which is the rising power of authoritarian democrats and the relatively fast decline of liberal democracy in a number of important European countries.

The Visegrad Group of four Central European states of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia is a reflection of changing attitudes. The group, also known as the V-4, was founded shortly after the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 and they all joined the EU in 2004. It was established as a cultural and political alliance with the view of advancing military, cultural, economic and energy cooperation with one another before they fully joined the EU.

V-4 carries the name of the Hungarian castle town of Visegrad on the river Danube. Visegrad was chosen as a location for 1991 summit (before Czechoslovakia was split). Visegrad was also the location of an earlier historic medieval Congress in 1335 between Kings of Bohemia (as Czech was known then), Hungary and Poland.

Netanyahu summit

However, it is highly rumoured that prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, will host a joint summit with the V-4 leaders in occupied Jerusalem in the second part of July, even though Israel is not a V-4 member. Nevertheless, in mid-July, Netanyahu is hosting his close friend Hungarian prime minister, Victor Orban, for his state visit to Israel. Netanyahu government has been trying to exploit the internal differences within the EU in recent years on immigration in an attempt to change the way the Middle East policy, particularly its Palestinian section, is shaped.

An earlier attempt to do just that was revealed in some of the liberal press in Israel reporting an incident during which a microphone was inadvertently was left open, Netanyahu was clearly heard assailing the EU in mid-July 2017 in a closed meeting with V-4 prime ministers held in Budapest. The Israeli prime minister's words were heard by many journalists before they were cut off. He said: "The EU is the only international organisation which predicates its relation with Israel — which provides it with technology — on political considerations."

He went on revealing very interesting views of other countries relations with Israel. He added: "We have special relations with China and they don't care about political issues. [India's Prime Minister Narendra] Modi told me he has to look after the interests of India, and Russia doesn't set political conditions and Africa doesn't either. Only the European Union does — it's crazy. It's contrary to European interests." Netanyahu was the guest of honour of the V-4 states known to be the flag-bearers of ultra-nationalism within the EU. It is unprecedented to see the V-4 warming up to Israel despite the dark history of some their member states with their own Jewish population.

Netanyahu's design is to push Israel's policy of creating partnership with these countries on world stage to help him achieve his target in weakening the consensus among EU member states regarding various Middle East issues, particularly on the Palestinian issue. In fact, it seems Netanyahu was clearly on a mission when he told his V-4 counterparts: "I propose that you transmit a message to your counterparts in Europe: Don't undermine the only country in the region that looks after Europe's interests. Stop attacking Israel, Europe undermines its own security when it undermines Israel, due to a crazy attempt to impose political conditions."

Orban of Hungary was the first to agree with Netanyahu's disdain of the EU before the latter continued: "Europe needs to decide whether it wants to live and prosper, or to disappear."

Netanyahu's way of thinking of Europe's future is identical to that of the right-wing world leader, namely the US President, Donald Trump. The latter has openly called the EU as "obsolete" and his views of Chancellor Angela Merkel's liberal democracy is no longer a secret. The German chancellor is rapidly losing to the likes of Orban, Trump and Netanyahu not only in Europe but also in the Middle East.

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