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## **Foreign Policy and Diplomacy**

**Evolution of the relations between Italy and Israel**

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## Introduction

A series of political events in Italy have contributed, in the past 20 years, to strengthen its relations with Israel. From an internal point of view, the long season of governments guided by Silvio Berlusconi and the parallel *neoliberal* shift to the center of the Italian big left parties have been clearly instrumental in the relations between the two countries marking a discontinuity with previous times. In the past, bilateral relations, although always formally friendly and correct, were conditioned by the Italian position on the Arab-Israeli confrontation and the question of the Palestinians.

For the PCI (Italian Communist Party, the largest opposition party since the birth of the Italian Republic) the Palestinian situation was seen as an issue of neocolonialism, a symbol of the fight for self-determination and against oppression, and Israeli actions as a form of imperialism supported by the US.

The DC (Democratic Christians party, the historical center, moderate, and major government party) positions were less extreme but still considering the Palestinians victims of an injustice that had to be fixed in the name of peace, at the same time weighing in the catholic sensibility toward the need to access the sacred sites and for the status of Jerusalem.

## The years between the 1960 and the end of the century

Between the 60's and the 80's of the past century, Palestinian terror acts had little influence on the Italian position toward Israel, although they were increasing the sensibility toward the expectations for a negotiated solution to the issue. After 1973 and the oil shock that followed the Yom Kippur war these expectations increased and

the two invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 brought even more concern toward Israeli policy. Only minor parties such as the Republican, Liberal and Radical maintained a clear positive stance toward Israel.

In 1986 a first review of the position on Israel was initiated by whom would one day become President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, member of the PCI, based on an evaluation of the secular and left tradition present in the Zionist thought.

With the beginning of the Oslo process, in 1993, relations began to improve as the chances for peace increased. Between December 1992 and March 1995, prime minister Yitzhak Rabin visited Italy three times, and even if the process did not end well, as the killing of Rabin sadly proved, the relations continued to make progress.

The first, short, Berlusconi government in 1994/95, did not change the Italian stance toward Israel in any particular way but clearly showed the different attitude of the new leader towards Judaism, including actions to increase sensibility toward antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust. The same attitude continued also when Berlusconi became leader of the opposition to the center-left governments between 1996 and 2001.

At the same time, the combined effect of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair on the PD (Partito Democratico, democratic party, the end result of the evolution of the PCI, now transformed in a moderate center-left force) led to the embracement of the *neoliberal* model, with an higher understanding of the reasons of Israel.

## The early 21st Century

At the beginning of the current century the Italian political setting found itself much more open toward Israel and its reasons toward the Palestinian issue and the Arab world in general.

Three main international events helped this evolution: the failure of Bill Clinton's last attempt at a peace agreement in Camp David in 2000, the second Intifada, and the terror attack on the twin Towers on the 11 of September 2001.

Bill Clinton clearly blamed Yasser Arafat, president of the Palestinian Authority, for the failure of Camp David. True or not, the narration rapidly became the official one and in Italy not only the center-right parties made it their own, but also the center-left ones, probably because of their view of president Clinton as their main *neoliberal* icon. Now the lack of peace was no longer ascribed to the alleged Israeli inflexibility but instead attributed to the Palestinians, incapable of moving beyond their hostility to the Zionist project.

The second Intifada, characterized by harsh terror attacks, reinforced the idea and then 9/11 made the rest. The fight to terror became an international priority and the Palestinians actions were now also seen from an Islamic fundamentalism point of view.

Israel reasons were now viewed and evaluated under a different light and somehow approved, even by the parties of the left.

A better understanding of its reasons, coupled with the experience and information that Israel could contribute with to the global fight against terror, helped making Italy closer to the Jewish State. The Palestinians began to be gradually ignored due to their

ambiguity and to the fact that they were constantly requesting help and money that was probably ending up in their leadership's pockets.

The highest moment of this increasing improvement in bilateral relations happened in 2003 during the Italian presidency of the European Union, when Italy led the decision to include Hamas in the Union's list of terror organizations. To date, this is still considered the cornerstone in the relations between the two countries.

During the center-left coalition government led by Romano Prodi, in 2006-2008, the main event was the second Lebanon War. Italy had a major role in the ceasefire and then became the first contributor to the UN mission UNIFIL. Although Israel was not completely satisfied with UN resolution 1701, which ended the conflict, constant appreciation for the Italian leadership of UNIFIL was expressed by different Israeli governments.

Almost paradoxically, but also very significantly, the most important Italian political act in favor of Jerusalem, the recognition of Israel as the Jewish State, formalized the 13 December 2006, during prime minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Rome, was accomplished not by Berlusconi's center-right, but by Prodi's center-left.

Other important decisions showed the increasing closeness to Israel. In 2009 Italy voted against the Goldstone Report, the UN fact finding mission about operation "Cast Lead" in Gaza, and in 2010 abandoned the Durban II UN Conference on racism because an excessive emphasis was being put on Israel with the risk of equating Zionism to racism.

The last "bump" on the road to the raising sympathy toward Israel that started in 2001 has probably been the Italian vote at the General Assembly of the UN in 2012 to

recognize to Palestine the status of “non-member observer state”, but it is safe to assume that it was in fact the very last attempt from the traditional “left” to impose its views on the Palestinian issue.

### The current situation

The raise of Matteo Renzi to the leadership of the PD and to the government in 2014 has increased the positive sensibility toward Israel, eventually making it a bipartisan view. From this day forward it becomes truly difficult to find differences between the positions of Berlusconi’s right and those of PD’s left on the Palestinians in particular and on the Middle East in general. If the speeches made at the Knesset by Berlusconi in 2010 and by Renzi in 2015 were to be compared, no significant differences could be found.

Finally, after the latest political results of the 4 March 2018 elections, one would have expected two different opposing views on Israel: the one of the Lega party, meaning the traditional center-right positions of maximum support to Israel, and the one of the new Five Star Movement, somehow inheritor of the left views on the Palestinians.

At the end of the day, no tension has emerged and even significant episodes, such as Donald Trump’s decisions on Jerusalem, the tensions on the Gaza borders, or the approval by the Knesset of the Basic Law of Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, have passed through with a general indifference of the Italian political players. The Italian support to Israel today goes beyond pure geopolitical considerations and certainly beyond any concern over the Palestinian issue. Italy is one of the countries that most distinguishes itself on initiatives against antisemitism and to remember the Shoah. Also, bilateral relations on many fields like economics, culture, and science

see a great number of cooperations. In recent years the respective visits from representatives of the ministries of Culture, University, and Scientific Research have been even more numerous than those from the Foreign Affairs or the Defense departments, and cooperation in the military, cyber, and intelligence sectors has reached peaks of true excellence.

Basically, while waiting for a never emerging long lasting peace accord with the Palestinians, Italy and Israel have decided to be practical exploring all areas of cooperation.

### Conclusions

A brief review of how the bilateral relations between Italy and Israel has evolved over time has been presented.

One important point that can be extrapolated from this paper is the importance of the Palestinian issue in shaping the international consensus around Israel. Even if what illustrated above relates uniquely to Italy and its peculiar internal political dynamics, a certain trend can be observed and probably be also applied to other countries.

Clearly, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the world “left” in Europe, but not only there, has gone through an evolution that has brought to a review of the historical positions toward the Palestinians and this has clearly reflected on the Italian left parties and ultimately on the overall nation’s views toward Israel. Even if Berlusconi in Italy has likely been pivotal to the new relations, the support today is clearly bipartisan.

Also the “reduced” international interest in the Question of Palestine has helped in reaching higher levels of agreement. In fact, it must be noted how the Palestinian

issue is always one of the prime drivers for Israel's international relations, and can be seen as a "two way street." Israel tends to have better relations with countries that support its views on the territories and, vice-versa, most nations modulate their support to the Jewish State on the base of how they judge Israel's actions and decisions toward the Palestinians. But when the "Question" becomes somehow secondary then bilateral relations become easier and more relaxed.