

# A PROMISING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION AND THE MASHREK REGION

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<https://doi.org/10.47833/2023.2.ECO.004>

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## Keywords:

European Union  
Israel  
Mashrek  
Visegrad Group  
economic relations  
military expenditures  
defense expenditures

## Article history:

Received 29 October 2022  
Revised 20 April 2023  
Accepted 15 May 2023

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## Abstract

*The relationship between the European Union (focus on the V4 countries – Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary) and Israel will be examined in regard to the most relevant economic and defense policy and military indicators. The paper is focusing on elaborating the political and economic relationship between the EU-V4 countries and Israel. According to empirical studies, it is necessary for the EU and Israel to work on several fields of expertise together, as the potential crisis like migration, terrorism, drug trafficking, etc. can be solved or at least pushed back only in a framework of close cooperation. The aim of this article is to present the potential for cooperation between the V4 countries and Israel, as the next waves of international migration will be coming from the Sahel region. My hypothesis is that there is a strong economic bond between V4 and the Mashrek region and besides this connection, there is a regional (Visegrad Group) growing of military and defense expenditure. The research methodology is to examine the import and export value growth between V4 countries and the Mashrek region, as well the defense and military expenditures through the databases of the World Bank and OECD.*

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## 1 Introduction

In the Mediterranean, Israel has a very important part in combating terrorism and illegal migration. The relationship between Israel and the European Union has been very hectic and complex. Indeed, the Mediterranean is a key area for the European Union. Buzan and Wæver's regional security complex theory was re-imagined by Astrid Boening, a broader and yet narrower classification was created. A new sub-region was established, complementing the previously existing regional security complex with the EU member states at the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Besides this widening, the Middle East region was narrowed down. In the framework of the Helsinki Accords in 1975 among other important directives, it was stated that the member states should aim for European security. However, it is insufficient to maintain the focus only on issues concerning military, policy, and security policy, it is getting more important to consider other centerpieces such as economic, cultural, and societal mechanisms. The EMP, ENP, and UfM appeared in the institutionalized system of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, followed by the EU's Global Strategy in which the EU has been put back on the international map as a global actor. The Mediterranean area has been extended to the Sahel. An important area for the Union is its relationship with the Mediterranean, including Israel. In the previously mentioned security sub-region of Buzan, Wæver, and Boening, which has been already well-known in the past, political and security

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policy challenges are becoming increasingly important - a close and prosperous relationship with Israel is even more essential for the European Union. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy also highlights the progressively precarious domestic political situation in the African countries [1] in the Sahel - between Mauritania and Eritrea - and the potential migration crisis from this region. Since the foundation of the European Union, and in addition, the constant enlargement of the Union has given gradually more priority to these sources of danger. [2] Along these lines, I would like to describe the conclusions that can be demonstrated regarding the local and global involvement of the V4 countries, as the quantitative and qualitative indicators show that after the first wave of migration in 2015, the V4s convey standardized directives not only with the European Union but also with the Mashrek region. Strengthening political and economic relationships with the Mashrek region and other regional complexes in the EU could be the key to a new European order. [3]

## **2 The interest of a nation-state/EU or regional cooperation**

It is indeed very hard to determine which countries belong to Central and East-Central Europe. The most relevant and thriving region might be the Visegrad Group, it is also important to see the diversity and different national interests among the V4 countries. Poland according to its size and population might be the predominant country among V4 and it is often called the boundary line between East and the West. In the shadow of the Habsburg-era, V4 countries have decided to work and cooperate along the democratic transition and the common history and geographical location. This also meant that there was a slight isolation from the West. The question always arises, what is more important for a regional cooperation? The national interest which might be projected to the regional cooperation, or the aim of the regional complex is to formulate common goals and strategies which can be elaborated as a joint project and communicated as a one voice position in the international or regional communities such as the EU and NATO. For the Visegrad Group as a regional cooperation it is necessary to widen its connections and to formulate political and economic relationships not only with the West, but also with other parts of the world as the diversification of political and economic relationships will be more and more important in the near future.

## **3 EU/Visegrad Group and the Mashrek region**

In general, the Mashrek region is not a common trading region for the V4 countries. The migration crisis and the fragility of the region, not to mention the current war between Russia and Ukraine, forced the V4 countries to deepen their relationship with the Mashrek region. Security and economic cooperation are highly valuable. In the 90s V4 countries have decided to conduct strong bond and relationships mainly with the Western World. This, on one hand, caused a very strong dependence on the Western market, and concerning the geographical location, Hungary is very much dependent on the Russian gas supply. After the membership acceptance to the EU, focusing on the West caused less attention to the Middle East region. V4 countries need to change their perception of building an economic relationship with the West, diversifying the connections between the West and the Mashrek region can be the only way for overcoming the financial obstacles and difficulties. Also, it is very important that a V4-Mashrek policy can be very much beneficial for the European Union. [4] The European Union could benefit from a well-working regional relationship. Well-established coalitions and networks could support global development. Thinking about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which started on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, it is rightly presumed that nation-states need a local development of a defense force. Because of the constant and radical change in the world and international politics, humanity should acknowledge that a strong dependence on transatlantic relations is not anymore unequivocal. The aim of the nation-states should be to build a balance and its multipolarity should mean that besides the

transatlantic relations there is a local or a common regional defense strategy and defense policy. In the case of a regional common defense force existence, it is easier to deploy military forces for protection, and threats can be tackled much more effectively and in a more targeted way. According to my research, strong political cooperation can only be built on a strong and solid basis of economic relationships. To understand the status and the relationship of the European Union, in particular the V4 countries and the Mashrek region, it is indispensable to analyze several economic and arms trade indicators. A specific part of the Arab world can be divided into two parts. One is the Mashrek region „where the sun rises” meaning the eastern part of the Arab world, which includes countries like Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel which are necessary to be examined in my research. The other part is the Maghreb region „where the sun sets”. This part includes countries like Morocco, West-Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. It must be mentioned that going back in history to the crisis of Suez, Hungary indeed was very much connected to world politics and to the region. After the economic and financial crisis in 2009 V4 countries needed to change their perception of building an economic relationship with the West, diversifying the connections between the West and the Mashrek region was the key to overcoming the financial obstacles and difficulties. After 1989 the V4 countries have decided to put their efforts and their will to reach the European Union’s convergence criterion and reach all the expectations which were placed on the potential candidate countries. It follows directly from this that the relationship with western countries had a significant improvement not only economically but also politically. This also meant that the connections and relationship with the Middle East and the Mashrek region have shown a steady decline. At the same time, relations between the V4 and the West have deepened and there has been a degree of cooperation and interdependence in the most positive way. After the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2010 the V4 countries not only wanted the Western orientation to be important but also wanted to build their relationship in several ways, which would allow for economically and politically diversified cooperation. [5] As I have stated, after the first bigger wave of migration in 2015, there was no consensus within the V4 on the distribution of refugees according to the quota, the situation concerning the refugees in the country of origin needs to be resolved, which has contributed to the appreciation of the Mashrek region. As an outcome, this meant that a political and economic relationship with the region needed to be strengthened, this has been the potential way for a more balanced and a multilateral economic and political commitment. In the following, I am willing to provide key economic and defense policy indicators concerning V4 countries to support my empirical research.

#### **4 Research methodology**

In general, we can say that the V4 countries had no success in formulating a common viewpoint concerning the relationship between the EU and the Mashrek region. However, following the migration and refugee crisis in 2015, there has been a significant rise in a common interest. [5] It makes it even more complicated as V4 countries should step up as a regional synergy, in a very specific region, where the USA and Russia are dominating with their national political aspirations. Another question might be if the relationship with the region is going to be continuous, which does not specify if the trendline of the relationship is going to be ascending or decreasing, is it going to be addicted to the migration waves? Also, it is very important that a well-working V4-Mashrek policy can be very much beneficial for the European Union. The last years have shown that also the European Union could benefit from a promising relationship. Well-established coalitions and networks could support global development. Extensive research has been made and the economic figures have been examined. I have used the databases of the World Bank and the OECD between 2000 and 2020. The aim of the research is to prove my hypothesis, that there is a strong economic

bond between V4 and the Mashrek region and besides this connection, there is a regional (Visegrad Group) growing of military and defense expenditure.

First and foremost, I have compared the V4 government's central spending and projected the percentage rate of defense spending on the total government spending. Comparing 2010 and 2019 there are significant raising in Slovakia and Poland. Slovakia's defense spending grew by 1 %p., in 2010 the total defense spending was 3,21%, and in 2019 4,21%. For Poland the defense spending grew by 1,17%p., in 2010 the total defense spending was 5,94%, and in 2019 7,11%. To have a benchmark, the OECD (total defense spending) declined by 9%, the OECD average grew by 3% and the OECD EU members grew by 8%. The numbers are indicating that in the V4 region during the given period there has been a significant change and compared to the OECD general numbers, the defense spending increased significantly. On one hand, it means that in 2019 the examined V4 countries in total are spending more on defense than the OECD and it also means that the given nation-states and most probably the regions as well are investing more in their national defense policy not only for the fact, to have a stronger country. In my understanding, regionalization and collective defense policy could be the key to overcome the potential threats.

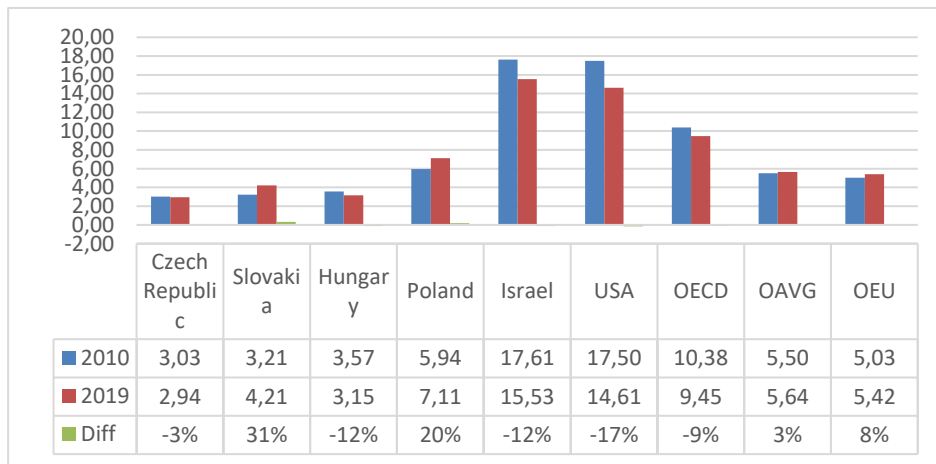


Figure 1. Central government spending – defense %

The following graph shows, that in comparison, the V4 countries are spending exponentially more on defense than the growth rate of OECD members in total. Among the Visegrad Group Poland is spending the most on defense, followed by Slovakia, Hungary and Czech Republic.

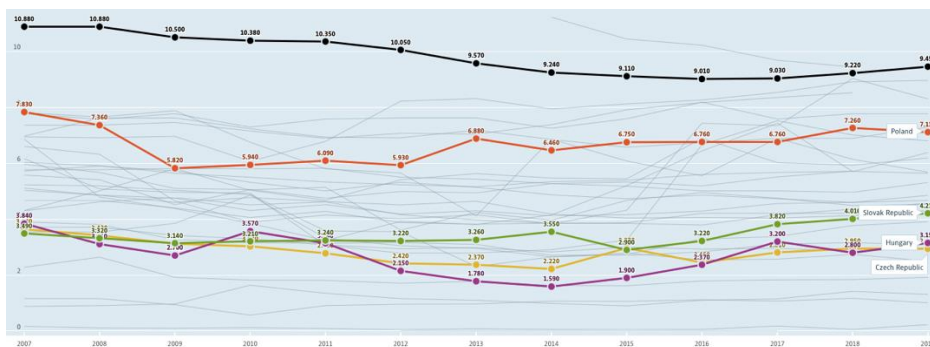


Figure 2. OECD average and V4 defense expenditures

Another good indicator of the V4 countries is the military expenditure. All the V4 countries have spent three digits percentage more on military expenditures in 2020 than in 2000. Czech Republic grew by 175% (1,18 vs. 3,25 billion USD), Slovakia grew by 369% (0,39 vs. 1,83 billion USD), Hungary grew by 182% (0,85 vs. 2,4 billion USD) and Poland grew by 259% (3,63 vs. 13,02 billion USD) The V4 countries compared to Israel show an extraordinary growth. Israel grew by „only” 155%. Also, these results support the research hypothesis that V4 countries are spending more on military and defense policy.

Table 1. Military expenditures, sources: *oecd.org*, *worldbank.org*

	<i>Czech Republic</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>Hungary</i>	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Israel</i>
2000	1,18 billion USD	0,39 billion USD	0,85 billion USD	3,63 billion USD	8,5 billion USD
2020	3,25 billion USD	1,83 billion USD	2,4 billion USD	13,02 billion USD	21,7 billion USD
Diff.	175%	369%	182%	259%	155%

## 5 Conclusion

The conducted research proved that there is a significant opening by the Visegrad countries towards the Mashrek region. Concerning the defense expenditures, it is clear, that Slovakia and Poland have a significant growth comparing 2010 and 2019. These countries have spent more on defense in 2019, but more importantly, Poland is spending more than the OECD EU average and Slovakia is spending almost the same amount. It is self-evident, that Poland needs to spend more on defense, as the security perception of Poland is mainly determined by the proximity of Russia. The total defense expenditure of all the V4 countries is more than the expenditure of USA and Israel. This might be a hint, that regional cooperation on military policy and defense policy is thriving. Concerning military expenditures, it also proves the hypothesis, because Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia was able to gain a three-digit percentage growth from 2000 till 2020. It is a massive indicator that the military expenditure growth of Israel was below all the V4 countries expenditures. It is very much needed to support my findings with the economic data as well. I have examined the V4 countries export and import growth between 2016 and 2020 and between 2019 and 2020. In general, in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel an increase in the value of imports/exports can be observed. Both short-term and long-term examinations showed that the Mashrek region is getting more popular among V4 countries. Slovakia is more determined towards Jordan and Israel. Concerning import and export value growth, Czech Republic is trying to deepen its economic connection with Jordan and Egypt. Regarding Poland and Hungary, the focus is on Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Israel. To sum up, it is clear that the Visegrad Group has decided to expand its economic relationship towards the Mashrek region [6] and it is visible that there might be an increase of the defense power. The collective increase of the military and defense expenditures might lead to a more focused regional cooperation and the possibility of a regional common defense force might arise.

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