Samuel Ghiles-Meilhac

European Jews Engaged in the Israeli-Arab Peace Process: A New Form of Jewish Internationalism?

Since 1948, the relationship between Jews in the diaspora and the State of Israel has been extensively documented, studied, and discussed.[1] There is a consensus among historians that the Six-Day War was a turning point in this respect. Jews from North America to Europe felt in their collective identity that the existence of Israel and the danger of its destruction had vital consequences for them.[2] The few weeks between May and mid-June 1967 saw the emergence of a massive phenomenon of Jewish solidarity coming from all parts of the globe with Israel. The activities of this transnational solidarity movement included transferring funds, organizing mass as well as sending volunteers and material aid to Israel. Although the majority of Jews outside of Israel had never been to the country or met any of its citizens, Jews everywhere expressed feelings of brotherhood. It became the Diaspora's moral duty to help Israel. Certain political dimensions of this solidarity movement have been the subject of numerous publications, not to mention the sharp controversies about the pro-Israel lobby and the measure of its influence on American foreign policy.[3]

[1] Gabriel Sheffer et al., "Roundtable on Loyalty and Criticism in the Relations between World Jewry and Israel," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 77–128.

[2] Eli Lederhendler, "Introduction," and Sergio Della Pergola, Uzi Rebhun, and Rosa Raicher, "The Six-Day War and Israel-Diaspora Relations: An Analysis of Quantitative Indicators," in *The Six-Day War and World Jewry* ed. Eli Lederhendler (Bethesda, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 1–9 and 11–50.

[3] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). The book has provoked a considerable reaction. The debate organized by *The London Review of Books* and moderated by Anne-Marie Slaughter gives a sense of the extent of the controversy. In addition to the Messrs. Mearsheimer and Walt, panelists included Shlomo Ben-Ami, Martin Indyk, Tony Judt, Rashid Khalidi, and Dennis Ross, last accessed 20 January 2013, http://www.scribemedia.org/2006/10/11/israel-lobby/.

Diaspora political support for Israel was one aspect of the internationalization of the conflict between Israel and the Arab states. Another one emerging in the 1970s was that armed Palestinian groups increasingly targeted not only Israeli institutions and individuals, but also the Jewish communities of Europe, thus exporting, as it were, the physical conflict to the Jewish diaspora. The attack on the rue Copernic synagogue in Paris in October 1980 is one among many such cases.

The political attitude of the Jewish diaspora towards Israel ranged widely from loyalty to indifference or criticism. In this essay, I explore some of these attitudes in this wide spectrum, addressing an aspect of the topic that until now has remained in shadow. Libraries are full of books and articles about politicians who have offered their diplomatic skill with a view to solving the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. From Henry Kissinger to Tony Blair, Nicolae Ceausescu to Denis Ross, Miguel Angel Moratinos to King Hassan II of Morocco, these initiatives are well known. Yet apart from Nahum Goldmann's famous project of meeting with Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in 1970 in order to start peace negotiations with Israel, diaspora Jewish peace initiatives have been widely ignored.[4] In this paper I analyze political dialogues between European individuals and organizations who, self-identifying as Jewish, succeeded in organizing meetings with members of Palestinian organizations and leaders of Arab countries.[5]

Why did European citizens who are not diplomats engage in dialogue with political actors of the Arab Middle East ? How did such dialogue affect the relationship between Israel and its neighbors? Can we analyze such initiatives as contributions to peace, as an unusual form of Jewish concern for the state of Israel, and as a way for diaspora Jews to participate in protecting Israel?

Secret and public encounters before the Oslo agreements

Starting at the end of the 1960s, various encounters between European Jews and members of the Palestine Liberation Orga-

[4] Meir Chazan, "Goldmann's Initiative to Meet with Nasser in 1970," in *Nahum Goldmann: Statesman without a State* ed. Mark A. Raider (Albany: Suny, 2009), 297–324.

[5] In this paper, I will not consider Jewish individuals or groups who present themselves as anti-Zionists or pro-Palestinians.

nization (PLO) took place. At first, meetings appear to have been isolated cases independent of any collective or official policy. In 1969, the French-Jewish writer Marek Halter met Yasser Arafat in Jordan and in 1972, in Lebanon[6]. According to his account, although he had been in contact with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir about the matter, he was acting only on his own behalf. The meeting remained without any political outcome.

The first time a Jewish diaspora institution was involved in direct talks with a Palestinian group was in April 1974, when the London-based newspaper *Jewish Chronicle* interviewed Said Hammami, the spokesman of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the United Kingdom. Hammami answered the questions of Joseph Finklestone, the paper's foreign editor. This interview marked the first time that a member of Yasser Arafat's organization publicly stated that the Palestinians would agree to a two-state solution as an interim status. It was also the first time that a member of the PLO distanced himself from Black September, the group responsible for the attack, two years earlier, on the Israeli delegation at the Munich Olympics. Although the interview had no immediate diplomatic impact, it was the first direct interaction between a Jewish institution in the diaspora and a member of the PLO. After the *Jewish Chronicle* received a significant number of letters protesting the fact that the paper had offered a platform to a member of the PLO, on 26 April 1974 it ran an editorial stating that the interview was in no way an endorsement of Hammami. However, the editorial also emphasized that the dialogue with Hammami had modified the interviewer's perception of the conflict. As the editorial stated, "Palestinians have developed a real sense of identity." This analysis was shared only by a minority both in the diaspora and in Israel.[7]

In the same period, individual European Jews acted as hosts for secret encounters between Israelis and Palestinians. In 1976, PLO member Issam Sartawi secretly met an Israeli politician, Aryeh Lova Eliav, at the home of the former French prime minister Pierre Mendès France. In Brussels at the end of the 1970s, Sartawi, Hammami, and Naïm Khader, the PLO's

[6] Marek Halter and Eric Laurent, *Les fous de la paix. Histoire secrète d'une négociation* (Paris: Plon/Laffont, 1994), 143–145.

[7] David Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 230.

1 The 1989 "give peace a chance" meeting in Brussels in 1989. From left to right: Abba Eban, Roger Lallemand (Belgian senator), Hanna Siniora, Aryeh Lova Eliav. Behind them stands David Susskind, founder and president of the Jewish Secular Community Center.

envoy in Belgium, started to meet privately with Israelis such as Major General Mattityahu "Matti" Peled, at the home of Simone and David Susskind, the founders and directors of the Jewish Secular Community Center. Henri Curiel, a Jewish peace activist born in Egypt, was also very active as an intermediary, arranging several reunions in Europe at which the afore-mentioned Palestinians held extensive debates with Uri Avnery, a former member of the Knesset, journalist, and Israeli peace activist.[8]

Almost all of the PLO members who had secret or public meetings with Jews and Israelis in Europe and who voiced their support for a diplomatic solution were assassinated. Hammami was killed in his London office in 1978. In Portugal in April 1983, Issam Sartawi, too, was murdered.[9]

Shortly after the outbreak of the First Intifada in the occupied Palestinian territories, a group of European Jews organized a public event in support of Israeli-Palestinian peace. From 18 to 20 March 1988, the Jewish Secular Community Center in Brussels hosted a public gathering under the motto "Give peace a chance." Debates featured Palestinians such as Hannan Siniora (a publisher and journalist in East Jerusalem), Ziad Abuzayyad, Faez Abu Rachme, and Mary Khass (a Gazan educator), as well as Israeli politicians, mostly from the Labor Party, such as former foreign minister Abba Eban, Knesset members Aryeh Lova Eliav, Moshe Amirav, and Shulamit Alo-

[8] Uri Avnery, *My Friend the Enemy* (Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987), 49–118 and 141–294.

[9] Ibid, 166, 294.

ni (of the Ratz party, officially known as the Movement for Civil Rights and Peace).

One of the first public gatherings of Israelis and Palestinians in the 1980s, the "Give peace a chance" event, made possible what seemed unthinkable in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, namely direct dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. The Belgian-Jewish organizers, it should be noted, did not claim to be neutral. Although the secular Jewish community was more critical of some aspects of Israeli policy than many other Jewish institutions, it constantly expressed its empathy and solidarity with Israel and its people. David Susskind and his wife Simone, the organizers, have explained their action as the direct consequence of their profound love for Israel. As they put it, they felt it was their duty to do everything they could to ensure Israel's future, not only by lobbying the Belgian government and encouraging cultural and economic partnerships, but also by reaching out and talking to Israel's enemies.

French Jewish Institutions and the Peace Process: An Illusion of Influence?

For many leaders of the Jewish diaspora, the handshake between Israeli prime minister Itzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat in Oslo in 1993 was a historic earthquake. Just a few years earlier, they had been extremely vocal in their opposition to the Palestinian liberation movement. The Oslo peace process, leading to direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians continuing over the course of years, changed the situation dramatically.

In 1999 and 2000, initiatives by organized European Jewry led to a new stage of public diplomacy. In March 1999, in the run-up to the Israeli elections on 17 May, hotly contested by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his challenger from Labor, Ehud Barak, the Frenchman Henri Hajdenberg saw an opportunity for a surprising political move. Head of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France (*Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France*, CRIF), the political umbrella organization of French Jewry, Hajdenberg decided to organize an unprecedented trip to the Middle East. This was to be no traditional solidarity mission only expressing French Jews' support for Israel. No, this time the French-Jewish delegation would visit Arab capitals and even the territories con-

trolled by the Palestinian National Authority after the Oslo Accords. Cairo was the first stop. At the Egyptian presidential palace, the French-Jewish leaders were welcomed by Hosni Mubarak and his minister of foreign affairs, Amr Moussa. The most spectacular aspect of the Egyptian stop, however, was the meeting with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat.[10]

At the moment of this meeting, the political context was one of complete stagnation in the peace process. The public dialogue between Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat had been on ice for weeks. In interviews given to the French press (*Le Monde*, *Libération*), Hajdenberg explained his ambitions. He believed that diaspora Jewry was now in a position to play a new role in the peace process by talking to Israel's neighbors. He went on to explain that diaspora Jews had an opportunity to exchange views with Arab leaders in a way that could help the latter better understand Israel's psychology. French Jewry, Hajdenberg insisted, was in a unique position to connect more effectively with Arab leaders because the majority of French Jews had family roots in North Africa.

After Cairo, the Franco-Jewish delegation made its way to the Gaza strip, where they held talks with members of the PA. When the delegates arrived in Israel, they were met by a closed door: Netanyahu's office regretted that a tight schedule made a meeting impossible. The CRIF delegation thus only met Ezer Weizman, the Israeli president, whose office plays a symbolic role in Israel's system of government. The CRIF delegates believed they were acting in Israel's best interests. However, there is no evidence that they defined those interests in the same way as the government of the sovereign state they were trying to help. The journey, and especially the public handshake with Arafat, provoked a fierce debate among French Jews, with numerous public figures in the community accusing the CRIF of trying to interfere in the Israeli elections.

Nonetheless, the following year Franco-Jewish diplomacy continued in the same vein.

In June 2000, leaders of the CRIF met Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Algerian president, during the latter's official visit to France. For the first time, an Algerian president met a leader of the French Jewish community. Moreover, the historical back-

[10] Samuel Ghiles-Meilhac, *Le CRIF: De la Résistance juive à la tentation du lobby* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2011), 136–137.

ground was significant. More than 150,000 Jews had come to France from Algeria after it gained independence in 1962. The Hajdenberg/Bouteflika meeting came at a time when France was starting to have public debates about French colonialism and the Algerian war. One aspect of a possible reconciliation between the former colonizer and colonized was the Jewish element. In this context the Algerian authorities saw the French-Jewish leadership as a mediator both with France and with Israel. In the 1960s and 1970s, Algiers had been a center of Arab nationalism and support for the Palestinians. Declarations made by President Bouteflika indicate that he saw meeting European Jews as a first step towards engaging in a full diplomatic process with Israel. Already in July 1999, Bouteflika had broken a taboo when he shook Ehud Barak's hand at the funeral of King Hussein of Jordan. After talking with Hajdenberg in 2000, Bouteflika said that Algeria was ready, following the creation of a Palestinian state, to establish a "special relationship" with the Jewish state.[11]

Fragility and Dependence of Non-State Actors

Legally, these European Jews were outsiders to the state of Israel. Politically, their limited influence as transnational actors, especially compared to their American counterparts, kept them outside the policy-making process of the Israeli government. Their public actions had no direct effect on official diplomacy and defense. But their outsider status did not prevent the encounters from taking place and appearing to grant diaspora Jews a status of emissaries of Israel in the peace process. In times of heated conflict, however, the initiators of such symbolically meaningful public gestures found themselves powerless. Hajdenberg has stated that he went, in coordination with the French diplomatic authorities, to the Gaza strip in the summer 2000 to meet Arafat after the failed Camp David summit. But he understood that, when it came to key diplomatic issues, he had no influence on the *raïs*.[12]

After the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the fall of 2000, European Jews could only witness, mourn, and denounce the circle of violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

[11] Ibid, 141–145.
[12] Interview with the author, Paris, 11 September 2007.

2 Handshake between Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and CRIF president Richard Prasquier, 27 September 2010, in Paris.

The non-state diplomatic overtures by diaspora Jews to public Arab figures can be considered a contemporary form of the Jewish internationalism which had its heyday in the nineteenth century. In 1840, Jewish leaders such as Adolphe Crémieux, from France, and Sir Moses Montefiore, from England, undertook public initiatives on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Damascus.[13] Such advocacy was among the key goals of the *Alliance israelite universelle*, founded in 1860 in Paris, and of the American Jewish Committee, established in New York in 1906. Both organizations engaged in diplomatic actions to protect and aid coreligionists in parts of the Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia.

The latter-day non-state Jewish diplomacy I have discussed here also highlights a pattern observable in historical Jewish political leadership: the vertical relationship to power. In seeking dialogue with Arab political authorities (who in most cases were not chosen in free elections), Diaspora leaders such as Hajdenberg were walking in the footsteps of the Jewish tradition of seeking royal alliances assuring protection of Jewish communities in exchange for loyalty.[14] The CRIF sought not to establish a dialogue with members of Palestinian or Arab society, but to influence heads of state. It will be fascinating to explore in the coming years the consequences that the Arab revolutions since 2011 are having for Jewish diplomacy. Rather than focusing exclusively on political leaders, diaspora leaders may now be inclined to enter into dialogue with the intellectuals, journalists, and political parties emerging in these societies.

At the same time, however, European Jews may also find themselves in a situation where they are used by national diplomacy as symbolic tools. After the death of Arafat in 2004 and the restart of some political negotiations between Israel

[13] Lisa Moses Leff, S*acred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 120–126.

[14] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews* (Atlanta: Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, Emory University, 2005).

and the Palestinian National Authority, meetings between European Jews and Palestinian leaders resumed. In autumn 2010, while visiting Paris, President Mahmoud Abbas met with CRIF president Richard Prasquier and with local Jewish figures such as René Samuel Sirat, former Chief Rabbi of France. French president Nicolas Sarkozy declared during a press conference that this meeting had been organized at his suggestion.[15] Because of their need to maintain good relations with their national political leaders, European Jews may thus be co-opted by state public diplomacy, only enjoying very limited autonomy. Moreover, Jews find themselves in a difficult position when the interests of the home state diverge from Israel's interests. In January 2012, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported that a meeting between Abbas and British-Jewish leaders had been scheduled on the initiative of 10 Downing Street, but had been canceled by the request of the Israeli embassy.[16]

The conflictual implications of the triangular relationship between a diaspora, the host country, and the homeland remain a central dilemma for Jewish communities seeking to reconcile their views on the Israeli-Arab conflict with the interests of the Jewish state and those of their home country.[17]

PHOTO CREDITS
1 Centre communautaire laïc juif de Bruxelles.
2 Alain Azria CRIF.

[15] The transcript of the press conference with Nicolas Sarkozy and Mahmoud Abbas in Paris on 27 September 2010 is available, in French, last accessed 20 January 2013, http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/107002056.html.

[16] Barak Ravid, "British Jews cancel meeting with Abbas in wake of pressure from Netanyahu," *Haaretz*, 23 January 2012.

[17] On the notion of a triangular relationship, see Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics. At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192–199.