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Israel and Europe: Mapping the Past, Shaping the Future

A Report about the First International Academic Conference of the European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS), held from 10–12 September 2012 at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich

From 10–12 September 2012, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich hosted the First International Academic Conference of the European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS), an organization dedicated to creating a European network of scholars in the field of Israel Studies. Chaired by Professor Michael Brenner (Munich) and Professor Colin Shindler (London), the conference marked the beginning of the EAIS's activities.

Starting Point: Israel Studies in Europe?

What is special about a European Association of Israel Studies, and why do we need one? Since 1985, an international and interdisciplinary network promoting research on modern Israel called the Association of Israel Studies (AIS) has been active. Comprising scholars from diverse fields, the AIS is affiliated with the Middle East Studies Association of North America. The great majority of its members are Americans and Israelis. European scholars, by contrast, are rarely among the speakers at AIS events.

Addressing this disparity, Professor Colin Shindler (London) and Professor Alan Pieckhoff (Paris) examined the scholarly landscape of Israel Studies in Europe. Their findings were and are remarkable. Europe is home to numerous research projects in the field of Israel Studies. Courses in Israel Studies are sponsored by diverse disciplines, including History, Political Science, and Jewish Studies, as well as Economics, Cultural Studies, and Linguistics. Not only the variety of fields, but also the geographic range of institutes involved came as a surprise. From Siberia to the Atlantic, past and present of modern-day Israel are the subject of teaching and research throughout Europe. The poor visibility of Israel Studies in Europe thus

reflects neither a dearth of European scholarship nor, as the conference was to show, the important role in Israel Studies that European scholars can and should play.

The poor visibility of European scholarship in the field of Israel Studies can largely be explained by two factors:

Most European Universities do not treat Israel Studies as a self-sufficient discipline. In Germany, for example, no university maintains a professorship in the field of Israel Studies.

Networking among European scholars pursuing Israel Studies is poor. Whereas Israel Studies are typically interdisciplinary, European scholarship still observes boundaries between individual disciplines. Interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary networking forums are rare.

The founding of the EAIS, therefore, is an important milestone both for Israel Studies in Europe and for European scholarly networks in general. By demonstrating, as Professor Colin Shindler noted in his welcoming address, "what is and will be possible in Europe," the Munich conference sent an important signal.

The Conference

As the conference statistics show, interest in creating networks among European scholars teaching and researching in the field of Israel Studies is intense. One hundred scholars and seventy other participants attended. They hailed from 20 European countries, ranging from Russia to Portugal, as well as from Israel. A few made the journey from the USA. For two days, the Historicum of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität resounded with discussions of current research topics and findings.

The conference opened in the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities with a well attended podium discussion titled "Israel, Palestine, Europe, and the Arab Spring," chaired by Professor Raffaele Del Sarto of the University of Florence. With an audience of around 200 listeners, Professor Munther S. Dajani of Al-Quds University Jerusalem, former Israeli ambassador Avi Primor (1987–1999), and Professor Rita Süsmuth, former Cabinet Minister and President of the Bundestag (1988–1998), discussed strategies for resolving the Middle East conflict. All three speakers raised the issue, in different contexts, of political promises.

For Dajani, the "Arab Spring" – or, in terms he found more fitting, the "Arab Autumn" – has its roots in a promise made

to the younger generation of Arabs, namely that education would enable them to escape social ills such as poverty, a high unemployment, and poor medical care. The promise was broken, dashing hopes of a better future. Foreign aid, including European aid, was not reaching the population. Avi Primor emphasized that Europe could play a central role in resolving the Middle East conflict: Peace is a European interest, and attainable. However, convincing Israeli society that peace is attainable requires addressing the population's increasing security concerns. Therefore, the international community must guarantee peace by means of a political promise of security. Rita Süßmuth pointed out that politicians, if they are to act with foresight, must rely on the work of scholars. She therefore made a case for joint Arab-Jewish academic projects promoting not just good programs, but also "good practice," which could even help eliminate anti-Islamic resentment in Europe.

The following morning, in the *Historicum*, the conference itself, *Israel and Europe. Mapping the Past. Shaping the Future*, began. Twenty-seven panels presented three to five papers each, with four to five panels running simultaneously.

One focus of the conference was on relations between Israel and individual European countries, in particular the post-Soviet states, Poland, Italy, and Germany. Some speakers addressed the transformations within the Jewish communities in Germany following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel. Others considered the future of relations between Israel and various European countries. Michael Wolffsohn (Munich) pointed out that German policy will not support Israel indefinitely, nor unconditionally. From World War Two the two countries drew divergent conclusions. The Jewish state holds to the maxim of never again being a victim, and thus accords the military a prominent place in society. Postwar Germany, by contrast, was built on the doctrine of never again initiating the use of military force. As a result of these historical lessons, Israel and Germany will drift apart politically. As other speakers pointed out, however, countries such as Poland are moving closer to Israel. Alla Zakharenko (Odessa) described how young Israelis traveling to Poland continue to see Poland as the "land of death" and a "Jewish cemetery." In his paper on the post-Communist Polish view of Israel, Jakub Tyskiewicz (Warsaw) presented evidence for a rapprochement of the two states. Based on his examination of Polish mass media, including the Internet, in the last

20 years, he concluded that young Poles have distanced themselves from the Communist portrayal of Israel as an enemy state, developing new sympathies for the State of Israel. Likewise, Dzmitry Shavialiou (Vilna) and Yuval Moshkovitz (London), in their examinations of emigration and remigration of Jewish Israelis to Russia and Great Britain, respectively, demonstrated shifting views on the State of Israel. Both groups of remigrants are defining themselves in “new” ways that unintentionally resemble historical Jewish concepts of Diaspora, such as Dubnow’s autonomism. Secular Jewish Diaspora concepts from the first half of the 20th century also figured in papers by Tamara Or (Berlin) and Aviva Halamish (Tel Aviv). Halamish showed a dialectic influence of Europe on Zionism and Israeli society. On the one hand, a “yearning for Europe” is becoming increasingly noticeable, while on the other hand, the widespread doctrine rejecting Jewish Diaspora existence is alive and well. According to Yair Wallach (London), Israeli society continues to perceive Diaspora nationalism not as an opportunity, but as a threat. Unlike the terms “post-Feminism” and “post-Communism,” “post-Zionism” still bears a negative connotation. Zionism, he argued, should be understood not only as a political project, but also as a category of collective identity construction.

Several papers focused on the topic of identity shaping. How do Israeli and European museums construct ethnic identities? How does Israeli cinema construct identity, and what images of women does it project? How does the lens of literature and theater shape European-Israeli relations? Anat Feinberg (Heidelberg) considered Dan Ben-Amoz’s little-known novel *Masken in Frankfurt*, recalling it, as it were, from oblivion, while Nadjat Abdulhaq discussed how Arab literature portrays Arab Jews.

The peace process in the Middle East, domestic and foreign Israeli policy, Israeli national security—the conference also focused on questions from the realm of political science. Moshe Behar (Manchester) criticized that numerous research projects ignore the fact that West Bank settlement has progressed under both left-wing and right-wing government coalitions. According to several papers on Israeli settlement policy and the role of the military, it is urgently necessary that research into the settler movement be conducted in a non-ideological scholarly context. For Marco Allegra (Lisbon) and Erez Maggor (Jerusalem), for example, the settlements are not self-contained units,

but instead reflect developments in Israeli society as a whole. This is especially true of settlements located near large Israeli cities, settlements which have hardly been studied. In the same session, Johannes Becker (Berlin) argued that the question of Israeli territorial expansion should be examined in connection with and comparison to developments in Arab states such as Syria and Morocco.

Throughout the conference, speakers pointed to the historical, political, and economic importance of Europe and the EU for the past and present of Israel/Palestine. Whereas Ruth Bevan (New York) ascribed to Europe and the EU an insignificant role in future political and economic developments in the Middle East, Shelly Gottfried (London) and Jerzy Wójcik (Krakow) made a case for more EU involvement. Despite being Israel's main foreign trade partner, the EU has never had much political influence. For both Gottfried and Wójcik, Europe's dominance in foreign trade should be put to greater political use in stimulating the peace process. In his review, during the lunch break of the first conference day, of the Israeli European Policy Network's activities over the last decade, Professor Stephan Stetter concurred with this evaluation. Subsequently, in a short speech, former Israeli ambassador Shimon Stein (2001–2007) called upon the EU to decide now whether it wants to be a "player" in the Middle East.

How European is Israel? Does Israel belong to the West or to the East? In a lecture delivered over dinner at the restaurant "Einstein" and titled "West and East: The Politics of Positioning Israel," Ilan Troen (Boston) examined arguments for both positions. On the one hand, institutions in Israel, a OECD member, are largely European in orientation, but on the other hand, Israeli political parties such as Shas maintain an explicitly anti-Western and anti-European profile. Troen emphasized, moreover, how vitally important it is that European universities establish Israel Studies as an independent academic subject, as American universities, albeit belatedly, have already done.

Europe's role for and in Israel will be decided in the future. For the debate about how that future relationship will look, it is certain that we will require non-ideological discussion and scholarly expertise in the field of Israel Studies—not just in America, but also in Europe. Future conferences should continue the discussion in more detail. For example, economics should receive more attention, and new topics such as the di-

dactics of Israel Studies should be addressed. The EAIS's founding conference in Munich illuminated the path toward establishing Israel Studies in Europe. Already now, as the conference made clear, Israel Studies throughout Europe rests on a solid foundation.