

Two Vignettes on Israeli–European Economic Community Relations in the Late 1950s

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Introduction

The summer of 2013 was a difficult one for Israeli–European Union (EU) relations. The uproar created by the publication of new EU guidelines banning any funding of Israeli entities operating in the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights¹ has exposed some of the fundamental differences between the present Israeli leadership and the EU—differences not only over the status of the occupied territories but indeed over the future of the relationship as such. From the point of view of some in the Israeli government, the fact that the EU applied a financial instrument to its longstanding principle that the occupied territories were beyond the scope of the State of Israel (and thus are not eligible for the benefits accorded to Israel) was grounds for severing relations altogether. As Israeli Minister of Economy Naftali Bennett put it, the Israeli government should “end all cooperation with the EU” in response to the new guidelines, “even if such cooperation would boost Israel’s economy.”²

The unbearable ease with which a senior cabinet minister proposes to “end all cooperation with the EU” would have probably stunned previous Israeli governments, not least those that could only have dreamed of forging the kind of cooperation that today exists between Jerusalem and Brussels. In fact, the dreams of earlier Israeli governments are not a matter for conjecture. Newly revealed archival documents from 1957, the year in which the European Economic Community (EEC) was established, tell the story of an Israeli leadership that realized and appreciated the political and economic importance of Europe to the survival of the Jewish state, a leadership that even went as far as exploring the possibility of obtaining full Israeli membership in the EEC.³ In fact, as the following two vignettes dating back to 1957 reveal, while the sense of strategic importance was not reciprocal, there was certainly no lack of admiration on the part of Brussels for Jerusalem.

First Vignette: The 1957 Memorandum

Sometime in early 1957, a ten-page memorandum landed on the desks of Israel's cabinet ministers, as well as those of various high-ranking government officials. The unsigned memo, a copy of which was first discovered by this author in the Israel State Archives in 2011, offers a detailed analysis of the European integration project and made a compelling case for why Israel should seek to join the EEC. In early 2013, I was finally able to establish the identity of the author of this memo. It was a young Shimon Peres, then Director-General of the Israel Ministry of Defense. That the document was authored by Peres is significant. For one thing, Peres himself, although just 34 years old in 1957, was already a powerful figure in Israeli politics. As Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's protégé, Peres not only acted with the full backing of the prime minister; in many ways, Peres reflected Ben-Gurion's security and foreign policy visions.⁴

Peres' memo reveals an Israeli administration that was interested in cooperating with the European integration project, and on a level that has not been known until now. Long and comprehensive, the memo lays out the case for Israeli integration in the EEC on five main grounds:⁵

- Cultural affinity, values, and geography
- Economic advantages
- Geostrategic concerns and the Cold War
- A tri-polar world
- Wider geostrategic and regional interests

Cultural Affinity, Values, and Geography

The author of the memo made clear that the general attitude of the Israeli leadership toward the European integration project was an exceedingly favorable one. From Jerusalem's perspective, close cultural ties and geographical proximity made Europe a natural partner. The memo also attributes to Israel a number of values, the combination of which "has gained Israel the attention of the countries of Europe." Among these values are a "sense of proportion," "sound judgment," democracy, and military power.

Economic Advantages

While noting that "the idea of the unification of Europe is fundamentally a political one that outranks economic considerations," Peres went on to argue that, despite the prevailing opinion that the European economy was "stagnant," it was actually experiencing new development and demonstrating increasing dynamism. And

although he admitted that “it is still not clear what the economic advantages or limitations are that would be associated with Israel joining the European economic system,” Peres postulated that the economic benefits were likely to outweigh the costs. “After all,” he noted, “Israel does not market its oranges to Asian countries that are starving but to European countries that enjoy the fruits of a higher standard of living.” And Peres asserted: “The unification of Europe is a process that is just beginning; Israel must catch the train before it gets far from its first station, rather than run after it as it speeds away.”

Geostrategic Concerns and the Cold War

Peres highlighted the concern within the Israeli administration over Israel’s marginal position in the context of the Cold War. The problem for Israel, he posited, was that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States viewed Israel sympathetically: “Neither the Russians nor, at present, the Americans, are willing to see Israel as meriting serious political sympathy,” noted Peres, and then went on to elaborate: “This does not mean that Russia and America relate to Israel in the same way; the Russians would be willing to do without Israel’s existence, whereas the Americans see Israel’s existence as something that is important to maintain, just like that of any other state.” But the bottom line is the same: “America and Russia take a similar attitude with regard to Arab countries; both of them would like to win their favor, each in its own way.” The implication, therefore, was that Israel should look toward Europe.

A Tri-polar World

Europe was not just Israel’s choice by default. Peres made clear that the Israeli administration envisioned Europe as a world power—economically and strategically, as well as a source for Israel’s weapons supplies. “The parliaments of united Europe recently approved the creation of new European Communities: the EEC and Euratom. Thanks to these two communities,” he concluded, “in the future there will be another global economy, in addition to the vast American economy and the rapidly developing Soviet economy.” The creation of Euratom, in fact, meant that “in the atomic field there will be three monopolies instead of the two that now exist ... perhaps to the displeasure of the first two.” Finally, Peres identified Europe as a major source of qualitative weapons. “At present,” Peres noted, “Israel can acquire the arms that are necessary for qualitative balance of its military equipment from one of four main sources: Russia, America, the United Kingdom, and France.” These were “in practice the only countries that manufacture modern arms with any balance. But the day is not far off when these sources will be reduced to three—America, Russia, and Europe.” This, he concluded, “is self-evident.”

Wider Geostrategic and Regional Interests

Another consideration was Israel's interest in deepening its ties to Asia and Africa. If Israel were to integrate into Europe, it would be better poised to enhance its relations with those states that seek to strengthen their links with Europe. As Jerusalem saw it, the greatest potential in Africa lay in several states that were fundamentally pro-European and were particularly concerned by the ascendancy of Nasirism, pan-Islamism, or Communism. These included Sudan, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon. Israel could serve both as a bridge and as a guarantee—a bridge to transfer technological and economic assistance and a guarantee against total military weakness.

Finally, Peres assessed the likelihood of a favorable European response and made a few observations about how the Israeli administration understood the country's appeal to Europe. The chances that the European "club" would welcome Israel, Peres argued, were fair. Noting that any decision about accepting a new member state must be unanimous, Peres evaluated Israel's standing among the European members of the EEC and estimated that Israel could reasonably expect a favorable hearing from the Netherlands, Belgium, and West Germany. Peres was less certain about Luxemburg's attitude, but there were grounds to assume, he noted, that it would not vary from that of its Dutch, Belgian, and West German neighbors. The main obstacle lay with Italy, the president of which, the memo notes rather diplomatically, "has a somewhat different attitude."

Peres' observations about how the Israeli leadership understood the country's appeal to Europe are noteworthy, not least for what they do not include—namely, the Shoah. Instead, he framed the question in geostrategic terms within the context of the Cold War:

European unity has become a political bloc that is looking for partners in possible places and aspires to defend vital locations....Consequently ... the Middle East no longer appears to be a multihued continent of exotic people who can be purchased with trinkets, but instead as the new arena of the Russian–American conflict. Europe is looking for a living space that is not at the mercy of Russian MiGs or American aircraft carriers.

European sympathy for Israel, moreover,

stems first of all from Israel's location. Israel is in the Middle East, which is the gateway to Africa, a passage to the Mediterranean Sea. Israel is free, not occupied by America and not subservient to Russia. Israel is an alternative land link between the sea and the oil fields and the areas through which

it is transported. Israel is indeed free, but not passive. In this part of the world, Israel has military power that has won renewed respect after the Sinai Campaign.

Last but not least, Israel was attractive to Europe for its conduct and values:

Israel may have won additional respect as a result of its behavior. Of all the powers that have operated in the Middle East, Israel was the one that made the fewest errors, Israel has been fiscally prudent and restrained in a time and place where prudence and restraint were the most intelligent policy, and Israel has been bold and invested when and where investment and boldness were the only answer to the problem. The threefold combination of place, power, and sound judgment has gained Israel the attention of the countries of Europe.

Second Vignette: “Jerusalem, It’s Brussels Calling. We Have a Problem.”

On June 21, 1957, Moshe Tavor, the director of the Department of Information in the Israeli mission in Cologne, Germany, reported to Jerusalem that he had been recently introduced to André Kaminker.⁶ As is clear from the contents of his cable, Tavor had only a very sketchy idea of who Kaminker was. Indeed, he even openly speculated about whether his new acquaintance was Jewish or not.

As it happens, Kaminker was not only Jewish and the father of the film actress Simone Signoret,⁷ he was also Europe’s most renowned simultaneous interpreter — one of the very first simultaneous interpreters in history, in fact, and the chief interpreter of the Council of Europe.⁸

It was in this latter capacity that Kaminker approached Tavor. His request was simple: he desperately needed interpreters for the Council of Europe, as well as for the newly-established European Communities, and he thought that Israel offered a unique pool of qualified candidates. As Kaminker explained, the newly-founded European institutions were facing a severe shortage of translators from German to English, and especially to French.⁹ He had recently raised this concern with the highest echelons in Brussels and was asked to come up with solutions. Among his proposals, which he presented in a report he had just submitted to both Jean Monnet and Paul-Henri Spaak, founding fathers of the new communities, was that the European institutions seek appropriate candidates from Israel for translation posts. The qualifications seemed minimal: Other than a command of the languages themselves, the Israeli candidates needed to have a university education and those selected would have to commit to working for a period of two years.¹⁰

Tavor could not have been more elated. He immediately shared with Kaminker the high praise he had heard recently from a United Nations expert about the skills he had observed of the Israeli interpreters at the most recent Zionist Congress. Those interpreters were also there “on loan” and their period of study and training was very short. Kaminker told Tavor that the story confirmed his assumptions about the Jews’ linguistic skills.¹¹

Israel’s potential foray into the European interpretation services, however, failed to materialize. According to Tavor, Kaminker told him that he hoped to receive an answer from his superiors about the idea by the end of July, and that if the answer was positive he would immediately travel to Israel to discuss the necessary arrangements with officials in the Israeli Foreign Ministry. On August 26, 1957, Kaminker informed Tavor that he was still waiting for an answer, but that “no decision has been taken up to now and I do not know when the question will come up for final settlement in Brussels.” Kaminker promised Tavor that as soon as he knew something more precise, he would get in touch with him and let him know if Tavor “could usefully approach the Committee dealing with these questions.”¹²

The idea never took off and was apparently soon forgotten. But it suggests that Israel’s courtship of the newly established European Communities was not entirely one-sided. Back in 1957 at least, the leading figures within the European Communities appeared to have contemplated reaching out to Jerusalem in an effort to recruit individuals to help facilitate the emerging project.

A Bright Future Ahead of Us?

The Israeli leadership of the late 1950s, and above all Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, never lost sight of the crucial importance of the European integration project for the future of Israel. According to Gideon Rafael, who on February 4, 1959 became Israel’s first ambassador to the European institutions in Brussels, the prime minister was passionate about forging close relations with the European Communities. Paying a customary farewell visit to the prime minister prior to taking up his new assignment in Brussels, Rafael was astounded to hear Ben-Gurion instruct him to “tell the Europeans that they have inherited their spiritual values from that little but enduring people that you are going to represent among them. We have not only horrible memories of the recent past in common, but also a bright future ahead of us.”¹³

Almost six decades later, and especially following the political events of the summer of 2013, the brightness of that future has been cast in doubt once again.

Notes

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- ¹ European Union, “Guidelines on the Eligibility of Israeli Entities and Their Activities in the Territories Occupied by Israel since June 1967 for Grants, Prizes and Financial Instruments Funded by the EU from 2014 Onwards,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 205/9 (July 19, 2013).
- ² Jonathan Lis, “Bennett Urges Israeli Government to Cut Ties with EU over Settlement Guidelines,” *Haaretz*, August 6, 2013; Jonathan Lis, Yarden Skop, and Eli Ashkenazi, “Israeli Scientists: Cutting Ties with EU Would Seriously Damage Research,” *Haaretz*, August 6, 2013.
- ³ For the hitherto-untold story of Israel’s exploration in 1957 of the possibility of obtaining full economic and political EEC membership, see Sharon Pardo, “The Year that Israel Considered Joining the European Economic Community,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, LI:5 (2013), 901–915.
- ⁴ Michael Bar-Zohar explains that Ben-Gurion had divided his legacy between two young men—Moshe Dayan, to whom he had sought to pass on the leadership, and Shimon Peres, to whom he gave the vision; Bar-Zohar, *Shimon Peres: The Biography* (New York, 2007), pp. 88, 204–205.
- ⁵ Shimon Peres, “An Israeli View of European Unification—An Inter-Ministerial Memorandum,” Israel State Archives—The State of Israel, ISA/RG 130/MFA/29, (December 1957).
- ⁶ Moshe Tavor, “Letter to Deputy Director, Western Europe,” Israel State Archives—The State of Israel, ISA/RG 130/MFA/3111/29, June 21, 1957.
- ⁷ Simone Signoret, *Nostalgia Isn’t What It Used to Be* (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 12; Susan Hayward, *Simone Signoret: The Star as Cultural Sign* (New York, 2004), pp. 1–2.
- ⁸ Jesus Baigorri-Jalón, *Interpreters at the United Nations: A History* (Salamanca, 2004), pp. 46–49; Francesca Gaiba, *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial* (Ottawa, 1998), pp. 29–30, 37; Signoret, *ibid.*, pp. 27, 51–53, 101.
- ⁹ Tavor, see note 6; André Kaminker, “Letter to Dr. Moshe Tavor of the Israeli Mission in Cologne, Germany,” Israel State Archives—The State of Israel, ISA/RG 130/MFA/3111/29, August 26, 1957.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Tavor, see note 6.
- ¹² Kaminker, see note 9.
- ¹³ Gideon Rafael, *Destination Peace: Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy: A Personal Memoir* (New York, 1981), pp. 100–101.