

The Year that Israel Considered Joining the European Economic Community*

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Abstract

The history of Israel–EU relations has received considerable scholarly attention. The conventional starting point for this history is almost invariably April 1958, when Israel became the third country in the world to request the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Brussels. The background and the lead up to that request, however, have been largely neglected. The article seeks to fill this scholarly lacuna by relating the hitherto untold story of Israel's exploration in 1957 of the possibility of obtaining full economic and political EEC membership. A centrepiece of the article is the revelation of the 1957 clandestine meeting(s) between Shimon Peres, then director general of the Israeli Ministry of Defence and special envoy of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, and Jean Monnet, in which the two discussed possible full Israeli membership in the EEC. The article is based on some newly revealed archival documents and interviews with former high-ranking Israeli officials.

Europe can exist without us, but we [Israelis] cannot exist without you. (Dr Ya'akov Arnon, director general of the Israeli Ministry of Finance, 1967)

Introduction: Israeli Views of European Integration in the Late 1950s

The history of Israel's relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC), and later the European Community (EC) and European Union (EU), has received in recent years considerable scholarly attention.¹ The conventional starting point for this history is almost invariably April 1958, when Israel became the third country in the world, after Greece and the United States, to request the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Brussels, the 'capital' of the newly established European Communities. The background and the lead up to that request, however, have been largely neglected.² This article seeks to fill this scholarly lacuna by relating the hitherto untold story of Israel's exploration in

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¹ See, for instance, Cronin, 2010; Del Sarto, 2006, 2011; Del Sarto and Tovias, 2001; Harpaz, 2006, 2007, 2008; Harpaz and Shamis, 2010; Magen, 2012; Miller, 2011; Munin, 2003; Musu, 2010; Nathanson and Stetter, 2005, 2006, 2007; Pardo, 2009; Pardo and Peters, 2010, 2012; Sachar, 1998; Shepherd, 2010; Shindler, 2011; Tovias, 2003, 2007; Tovias and Magen, 2005.

² The only notable exception to date has been Michael Rom's book in Hebrew (Rom, 1998) on Israel's path to international commercial policy, which covers the debate within the country's economic elite about the benefits of Israeli association with the European integration project between 1956 and 1976. Rom's overview of the developments covered in this article, however, is greatly lacking.

1957 of the possibility of obtaining full EEC membership. A centrepiece of the article is the revelation of the clandestine meeting(s) in 1957 between Shimon Peres, then director general of the Israeli Ministry of Defence and special envoy of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, and Jean Monnet, in which the two discussed possible full Israeli membership in the EEC. The article is based on some newly revealed archival documents as well as interviews with former high-ranking officials in the Israeli government.

From the time of Israel's establishment in May 1948, the country's leaders were concerned with seeking recognition and legitimacy in the world and with breaking out of the political and diplomatic isolation that the Arab states were imposing, to varying degrees of success, on the nascent state. To this effect, Israel explored joining major international organizations, including even the Commonwealth of Nations (the Commonwealth).³ Although Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was ultimately most interested in developing a security alliance with the United States – especially following the Suez War of 1956 – other frameworks were considered as well, including the European Defence Community (EDC) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato).

Israel's interest in the EDC was short lived, primarily on account of the difficulties European countries were encountering in establishing such a community. Israel's overtures to Nato, however, were more serious. In 1957 Ben-Gurion asked Shimon Peres and Reuven Shiloah (Ben-Gurion's personal adviser and the first director of the Mossad) to visit several Nato allies to explore the possibility of Israel's membership in the alliance. The two met with Paul-Henri Spaak, then Nato's secretary general, and with other European foreign ministers, but soon realized that Israel would be hard-pressed to win the support of *all* Nato allies in its quest for membership. The failure in the European military-security arena appears to have only strengthened Israel's interest in Europe's economic and political arenas (Peres, 1970, pp. 121–2).

What has not been known until this day is that among these frameworks was the EEC. In fact, Israeli engagement with the EEC began even before the Treaties of Rome entered into force. On 1 May 1957, less than two months after the treaty establishing the EEC was signed, the document was already translated into Hebrew and published in three parts in the *Foreign Trade News Journal* of the Israeli Ministry of Commerce and Trade. This in itself suggests a level of interest and seriousness on the part of Jerusalem which has not been fully appreciated to date. And yet the most illuminating insight into how the Israeli government related to the newly established European framework may well be evinced from a memorandum that Shimon Peres, perhaps Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's most trusted aide and political and diplomatic adviser, wrote at the time to all members of the Israeli cabinet.

I. The 1957 Government Memo

Background

Sometime in early 1957 a ten-page memorandum landed on the desks of Israel's cabinet ministers, as well as various high-ranking government officials. The memo, a copy of

³ The key supporter of Israeli membership in the Commonwealth of Nations was Member of Knesset Meir Argov, chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, 1949–63.

which I first discovered in Israel State Archives in 2011, offered a detailed analysis on the European integration project and made a compelling case for why Israel should seek to join both the European common market and the political 'unification of Europe'. While the contents of the memo, I felt, merited scholarly attention in their own right, its full significance, I knew, depended on its context – not least the identity of its author. Unfortunately, there was nothing in or on the memo to betray that identity. That it was distributed to Israel's cabinet ministers and other top officials I could fairly confidently surmise after I found additional copies of this memorandum also in the archives of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Ministry of Defence. The fact that the copy I found at the Ministry of Defence, moreover, was classified as 'Personal' – a classification requiring a special authorization process before the document can be viewed, and which usually applies to documents drafted by high-level government officials – led me to conclude that it was drafted not only by a senior official, but that it was someone who probably worked at the time at the Ministry of Defence.

And yet the authorship of the memo was crucial in order to determine whether it reflected official thinking at the time, and if so, whose exactly and to what extent. For as Edward Hallett Carr (1961, p. 22) famously instructs us: '[W]hen we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains, but with the historian who wrote it'. To my great delight, further research in the archives in early 2013 led me to find the original handwritten copy of that memorandum. Although the document, like its typed copies I had discovered in the various archives, did not carry the name of its author, various factors had led me by then to suspect that it might be Shimon Peres. What other senior official in the Defence Ministry in the late 1950s had such an interest in Israel's foreign affairs, in general, and Europe, in particular? Armed with a copy of the original handwritten document, I contacted President Peres' office in early 2013. Although Peres himself declined to be interviewed, his staff referred me to the former director of his archives at the Peres Center for Peace who confirmed my suspicion: the handwriting was that of the young Shimon Peres.⁴

The fact that the document was authored by Peres was significant. For one thing, Peres himself, though 34 years old in 1957, was already a powerful political figure, serving as director general of the Ministry of Defence. His appointment to that office reflected his trusted relationship with the man who appointed him to that post – David Ben-Gurion, who served as both prime minister and defence minister at the time. As Ben-Gurion's protégé, Peres not only acted with the full backing of the prime minister; in many ways, he reflected Ben-Gurion's vision (Golan, 1982, 1989; Bar-Zohar, 2007).⁵

Peres, like his mentor, truly believed that defence and foreign affairs are interwoven and many of his initiatives were actually in the field of foreign affairs (Golan, 1982, 1989; Bar-Zohar, 2007). In a meeting of senior Defence Ministry officials in May 1957, Peres admitted that he knew that members of his staff criticized him for 'spending too much time on politics'. 'But', Peres asserted, 'defense and foreign affairs go hand in hand. The fact that the Defense Ministry did not deal with these matters in the past does not prove that it was right' (Golan, 1989, p. 85). When Golda Meir was appointed foreign minister

⁴ Meeting with Ms Hanna Kochavi, former director of the Shimon Peres Archives at the Peres Center for Peace, 30 January 2013.

⁵ It was said that Israel's founding father had divided his legacy between two young men – Moshe Dayan, to whom Ben-Gurion had sought to give the leadership, and to Peres, to whom he gave the vision (Bar-Zohar, 2007, p. 88).

in June 1956, she learned this first hand. As Bar-Zohar puts it: '[I]n name she was Israel's foreign minister, but in practice foreign policy was managed by Ben-Gurion, who sometimes used the foreign ministry [and sometimes] used Shimon Peres and the defense ministry' (Bar-Zohar, 2007, pp. 204–5).

If Shimon Peres, the author of the 1957 memorandum, was Ben-Gurion's key instrument for crafting and implementing Israel's defence and foreign policies, it can be surmised that the document reflects the perceptions of Ben-Gurion and perhaps also of the wider Israeli leadership at the time towards the European integration project and Israel's potential of joining it.

The Memorandum

Peres' memo reveals an Israeli leadership that was interested in the European integration project to 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 (Peres, 1957): cultural affinity, values and geography; economic advantages; geostrategic concerns and the cold war; a tripolar world; and wider geostrategic and regional interests.

In terms of *cultural affinity, values and geography*, the memo makes clear that the general attitude of the Israeli leadership toward the European integration project was an exceedingly favourable 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 whose combination 'has gained Israel the attention of the countries of Europe'. Among these are a 'sense of proportion', 'sound judgment', 'democracy' and military power.

As regards *economic advantages*, while noting that 'the idea of the unification of Europe is fundamentally a political one that outsights economic considerations', the memo goes on to argue that despite received opinion that the European economy was 'stagnant', it was actually experiencing new development and increasing dynamism. And although it admits that 'it is still not clear what are the economic advantages or economic limitations that would be associated with Israel joining the European economic system', it postulates that the economic benefits are likely to outweigh the costs. 'After all', the memo notes, 'Israel does not market its oranges to Asian countries that are starving for bread but to European countries that enjoy the fruits of a higher standard of living'. And Peres asserts: '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 the train as it speeds away'.

On the subject of *geostrategic concerns and the cold war*, Peres highlights the concern within the Israeli leadership over Israel's marginal position in the context of the cold war. The problem for Israel, the memo says, is that neither the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics 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', the memo notes, and then elaborates: '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 the Arab countries; both of them would like to win their

favour, each in its own way'. The implication, therefore, is that Israel should look toward Europe.

In *a tripolar world*, Europe is not just Israel's default of the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Peres makes clear that the Israeli leadership envisioned Europe as a world power – economically, 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', the memo concludes, '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, means 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 identifies Europe as a major source of qualitative weapons: 'At present, 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 are 'in practice the only countries that manufacture modern arms with any balance. But the day is not far distant when these sources will be reduced to three – America, Russia, and Europe'. This, the memo concludes, 'is a self-evident conclusion'.

In terms of *wider geostrategic and regional interests*, a consideration is Israel's interest in deepening its ties in Asia and Africa. If Israel were to join the European common market and the political 'unification of 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 expansion of Nasserism, pan-Islamism or communism. These include Sudan, Ethiopia, Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon. Israel can 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 assesses the likelihood of a favourable European response and makes a few observations about how the Israeli leadership understood the country's appeal to Europe. The chance that the European club would welcome Israel, the memo argues, is fair. Noting that any decision about accepting a new Member State must be taken unanimously, the memo evaluates Israel's standing among the members of the EEC and estimates that it can reasonably expect a favourable hearing from the Netherlands, Belgium and West Germany. Peres was less certain about Luxembourg's attitude, but there were grounds to assume that it would not vary from that of its Dutch, Belgian and West German neighbours. The main obstacle lay with Italy, whose president, the memo notes rather diplomatically, 'has a somewhat different attitude'.

The observations about how the Israeli leadership understood the country's appeal to the European integration project are noteworthy, not least for what they do not include – namely, Europe's recent history with the Jews. Instead, the memo frames 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 is attractive to Europe for its conduct and values:

Israel may have won additional respect as a result of its behaviour. Of all of 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.

II. Two Israeli Takes at the European Integration Process

Take One: The Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee

In April 1957, less than a month after the Rome Treaties were signed in March 1957, Pinhas Sapir, Israel's minister for trade and industry, appointed an inter-ministerial committee and tasked it with examining the implications of the establishment of the EEC for Israel.⁶ A working sub-committee was subsequently formed and charged with outlining and assessing the various options available to Israel, including that of full economic and political membership in the EEC. In August of that year, the sub-committee submitted its preliminary report (Sub-committee, 1957a).

Naturally, full economic and political EEC membership was the most far-reaching option that the preliminary report examined. Surprisingly, however, not only was this option not dismissed offhand, it was given serious consideration. In fact, the preliminary report outlined the series of reforms that Israel's socio-economic system would have to make in order to meet the European economic requirements. Thus, for instance, as the sub-committee noted, EEC membership would require Israel to introduce major changes to its foreign trade policy, its wage structure, to the general level of prices for goods and services, and to currency exchange rates. To be sure, all these changes were neither easy nor necessarily welcome. Indeed, the sub-committee expressed concern over the implications for Israel's socio-economic welfare of the cancellation of the supervision mechanisms over trade and foreign currency. And yet the conclusion of the sub-committee was not entirely discouraging. If Israel were to apply for EEC membership, the preliminary

⁶ The members of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee were: Moshe Bartur (committee co-ordinator) and Moshe Bors – both representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Dr Ya'akov Arnon, Dr Shmuel Gottlieb, Arnon Gafni, Dr Nadav Halevi and Dr Zvi Dinstein – all representatives of the Ministry of Finance; Michael Tsur and Michael Rosenberg (Rom) – representatives of the Ministry of Trade and Industry; Major General Mordechai Limon – representative of the Ministry of Defence; Professor Dan Patinkin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and David Kochav and Dr Micha Michaeli – representatives of the Bank of Israel. For all the deliberations of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee, see the file of the Economic Committee for Europe, *Israel State Archives – The State of Israel*, 414/4204/GIMEL TAMAS.

report concluded, the EEC would likely be open to negotiating with Israel special arrangements that would go some way in meeting Israel's unique needs.⁷

And yet, when the inter-ministerial committee convened on 30 September 1957 to review and discuss the recommendations of the sub-committee's report, it concluded that there was no possibility for Israel to join the EEC at the present time. First, the changes that would have to be effected in Israel's economic control regime, including the export premium arrangements and levies that the government imposed on imports, were clearly too radical for the protectionist economy of the new state. As the minutes of that meeting reveal, while the committee members thought that even if the damage to Israeli industrial exports to EEC Member States would on the whole be tolerable, there were certain exports that Israel was not ready to subject to EEC market rules – chief among them was Israel's citrus fruits. Even the most accommodating EEC arrangement, it was judged, would likely have been unacceptable when it came to Israel's prized citrus fruit export industry.

There was another political obstacle that even the most pragmatic Israeli policies would not be able to overcome. As the representative of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and co-ordinator of the committee, Moshe Bartur, reported, his conversations with key figures in EEC Member States (mainly in France) had made it clear to him that there would be considerable political hesitation about admitting Israel to the European common market and to the political 'unification of Europe' (Inter-ministerial Committee, 1957a), not least because of worry over possible angering of the Arab states (Sub-committee, 1957b).⁸

With the option of joining the EEC examined and ruled out, the inter-ministerial committee decided to explore the possibility of seeking admission to – or at the very least, some kind of association with – the Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which was established in April 1948.

In December 1957 the recommendations of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee were presented to the ministers of foreign affairs, finance and trade and industry. The ministers formally put an end to this official act of exploring the feasibility of Israel joining the European common market and to the political 'unification of Europe'. In the language of the minutes from that meeting:

[W]hen it was explained to them [the ministers] that from an Israeli economic perspective there are no chances to join the common market, they did not oppose (on either economic grounds or political grounds) this conclusion. On the other hand, the ministers agreed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would begin its clarifications with OEEC Member States on their reactions to a possible Israeli application to join the Organization. (Inter-ministerial Committee, 1957b)

During the entire period between April and December 1957, however, neither the Israeli cabinet, with the exception of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, nor the members of the Sapir

⁷ Interestingly, the sub-committee also examined the question of membership within a Middle Eastern framework. While noting that Israel's long-term strategic objective should be full economic integration of the country within the Middle East, members of the sub-committee agreed that for geostrategic reasons this was not a realistic option within the foreseeable future (Sub-committee, 1957a). The idea of a Middle Eastern economic and political community would resurface from time to time in Israel's diplomatic discourse. Among the proponents for such a framework were Israeli cabinet members Yigal Allon (1964; see also Brecher, 1972, p. 349), Abba Eban (1977, pp. 480–81, 601) and Shimon Peres (1993).

⁸ While this report of the sub-committee is not dated, from the deliberations of the inter-ministerial committee it seems to be that the report was submitted in early October 1957. See also Bartur (1957).

Inter-ministerial Committee, were aware of yet another act that was unfolding in Israel's exploratory efforts to gauge the prospects of joining the EEC.

Take Two: Shimon Peres' Clandestine Channel with Jean Monnet

On 7 June 1957, barely two months after the formation of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion entered the following in his diary:

Came Shimon [Peres] (returned from Paris). On the issue of United Europe. Jean Monnet, Chair of the Council of United Europe, is afraid that there will be an opposition to a political unification, but they will agree to an economic unification. Suggests to Israel to join the 'European Community'. Currently there is: 1) a free trade area of 13 (or 15) countries, 2) a free market with no customs that was not yet ratified in the parliaments. Monnet suggests to join the free association as well as a currency agreement (?). (Pardo and Peters, 2012, p. 9)

The telegraphic nature of the entry establishes two facts: that Shimon Peres had met with Jean Monnet, and that, according to Peres, Monnet 'suggests' Israel joins the European Community.

The meetings between Monnet and the 34-year-old Peres were known at the time only to few. Indeed, nothing in the files of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee suggests that any of its members was aware of these meetings, let alone of their contents. Indeed, had anyone known of the meetings, it stands to reason that the committee report might not have categorically ruled out the idea of full Israeli EEC membership on, among other grounds, European political willingness.

And yet it was not only the members of the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee who were left in the dark about the Peres–Monnet meetings. Israel's foreign minister, Golda Meir, was also left in the dark – at least at first. To her deep dismay, she learned about it from a report in the Israeli daily newspaper *Davar* a short time before she was scheduled to meet with Monnet on her visit to Paris in early July 1957.

The story of her discovery is itself noteworthy, for it suggests not only that *Davar* knew far more than the foreign minister, but there was a certain 'buzz' around that time about the Israeli integration into certain European frameworks. Reporting on Meir's visit on 9 July 1957 under the title 'G[olda] Meir Opens in Paris Discussions on Israeli Accession to the European Market', *Davar* reported that Meir's agenda included meetings with several European leaders – among them Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury, Christian Pineau, Paul-Henri Spaak, René Mayer and Guy Mollet – and went so far as to claim that they focused 'on possible Israeli accession to European programmes'. The reference to Peres' meeting with Monnet appeared in the sub-headline of that article, which referred to recent meetings of senior Israeli officials with French politicians, such as the meeting between 'Shimon Peres, director general of the Ministry of Defence, with Jean Monnet, the father of the European idea' (Gali, 1957).

Told about the report in *Davar* shortly before her meeting with Monnet, Meir was so furious to learn that Peres had already met the French diplomat and done so unbeknown to her, that she promptly called off her own scheduled meeting with Monnet. As Asher (Artur) Ben Natan, who served as envoy of the Ministry of Defence to Europe at the time, relates, Meir was extremely upset that she summoned him to a meeting that soon 'turned

into a vast emotional outburst' (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108; 2011; see also Bar-Zohar, 2007, pp. 203–4; Golan, 1989, p. 85; Goldstein, 2012, p. 373).

It is hard to determine who else, except for Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, was in the know about the Peres–Monnet meetings, but the Israeli ambassador to Paris at the time, Jacob Tsur, seemed to be better informed than his foreign minister. In a secret cable he dispatched to the director of the Western Europe Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as to Foreign Minister Golda Meir and the director general of the Ministry on 17 July 1957 (about a week after Meir's visit), Tsur writes as follows:

In recent weeks, the press and radio in France have been going on at length about Israel's 'new policy', oriented towards rapprochement and inclusion in the plans for unification of western Europe. Every communiqué and speech in Israel are interpreted in this vein, even if they have no direct relevance to the matter at hand. [. . .] They also draw conclusions from appointments and changes in our foreign service: one newspaper in Paris linked Gideon Rafael's appointment [as Israel's first ambassador] to Brussels with our plan for incorporation into Europe. [. . .] The guesses and punditry reached their zenith when the foreign minister visited Paris.

I do not know how our government sees the matter, but through the lens of Paris it is clear to me that if we want to achieve a real link with a united Europe – which is only at the very beginning of its career – we must be discreet and not make a premature racket. This is the opinion of every French politician I have spoken to. In the past, I reported to you what René Mayer said; Jean Monnet cautioned Shimon Peres when he spoke with him. (Tsur, 1957a)

Tsur goes on to quote an Israeli editorial, which I have been unable to find, that reports about an 'Israeli political figure' that briefed the newspaper and explained that:

Israel believes that the link with this organization will not be forged until some time has passed, because the advice of persons such as Jean Monnet has persuaded the Israeli leaders that they must progress slowly, step by step, in order not to arouse opposition.

Tsur concludes his secret cable by reminding his superior at the Ministry that 'Jean Monnet explicitly asked that every conversation with him remain confidential' (Tsur, 1957a).⁹

Tsur's cable stands out not only for its explicit reference to a meeting between Peres and Monnet, but also for not ruling out full Israeli EEC membership. Indeed, in July 1957, Foreign Minister Meir herself ruled out any discussion on Israeli membership in the EEC. In a secret cable to the Israeli Embassy in Rome, referring to Italian complaints that Meir had discussed with French and other European politicians during her recent visit to Paris the idea of full Israeli membership in the EEC, Meir opines that 'it would be absurd to speak of this. Israel itself is still studying the matter. If and when we will decide to approach there is no doubt that we would also talk with them [with the Italians]' (Elissar,

⁹ Ambassador Tsur continued to explore the idea of full Israeli EEC membership. Six days after issuing this cable, on 23 July 1957, he reported to Foreign Minister Meir about another meeting which he held, this time with Jacques Donnedieu de Vabres, secretary general of the French Inter-ministerial Committee for the Questions of European Economic Co-operation. Donnedieu de Vabres explained to Tsur that 'there is no chance [. . .] for Israeli membership in the common market which is aimed by its very nature to unify and co-ordinate between neighbouring countries with similar economies [and the common market] would not be able to accommodate countries that are living in different climate, social and economic conditions' (Tsur, 1957b).

1957). A week later, Meir expressed these views publicly in a speech to the Israeli Knesset. Noting that ‘we have the option to come and talk with them [EEC Member States] and get information’, Meir declared that: ‘It is still far away from official negotiations on yes to accession or no to accession’ (Meir, 1957).

In short, while the Sapir Inter-ministerial Committee examined the idea of full Israeli membership in the common market and in the political ‘unification of Europe’ and ruled it out, while Israeli diplomats got from their European counterparts clear messages that Israel stood no chance of joining the EEC, and while Israel’s foreign minister herself declared that ‘it would be absurd to speak’ of Israeli EEC membership, one Israeli senior official, with the backing of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, refused to recognize this ‘absurdity’ and discreetly promoted full Israeli membership in the EEC.

The Peres–Monnet Meetings

That it was Peres who promoted this idea is not surprising. From the outset of Israel’s independence, Peres rejected the vision of integration in the Middle East.¹⁰ In his view, Israel’s connection to the Middle East was no more than a geographical detail, and its real place was in Europe. ‘I am not an ardent admirer of the Middle East culture’, he once said. ‘We should follow the world’s big blocs and the only natural place for us – distance-wise – is Europe’ (Bar Zohar, 1964, p. 233; 2007, p. 169).

There are several different versions of the number of times that Peres actually met Monnet, let alone what was the content of their meetings. In fact, Peres himself offers several versions. In his 1965 book, he states that he met Monnet only once,¹¹ but in a later book, from 1970, Peres implies that he held several meetings with Monnet: ‘At my first meeting, in May 1957, with Jean Monnet, the “father” of a “united Europe”’ (Peres, 1970, p. 148; see also Golan, 1982, p. 61). This version is also confirmed by Jean Monnet’s agenda, according to which Monnet met Peres both on 28 May 1957 and on 6 June 1957. Monnet himself does not appear to have left any record of the contents of these meetings either in his agenda or in his writings.¹² Also, I was not able to find any reference to these meetings in any publication on Jean Monnet or indeed in any other source on EU–Israeli relations.¹³

President Peres was unavailable for clarifying his different versions and referred me to his long-time friend and former adviser, Asher (Artur) Ben Natan,¹⁴ the person who helped facilitate Peres’ first meeting with Monnet. From what I could piece together on the basis of Monnet’s agenda, Bar-Zohar (1964), the Ben-Gurion Archives, Ben-Gurion’s diary,

¹⁰ Note, however, that in the mid-1990s Peres advocated exactly this vision in his blueprint for a reconstructed ‘New Middle East’ (Peres, 1993).

¹¹ This is also confirmed by Ben Natan (2007, p. 108) and Bar-Zohar (2007, pp. 168–9, 176–7, 203–4, and 1964, pp. 232–3).

¹² Jean Monnet’s Agenda, Fondation Jean Monnet pour l’Europe, Lausanne, Switzerland.

¹³ During the ten years I have been studying EU–Israeli relations, I examined in European and in Israeli archives thousands of documents. But for the sources mentioned in this article, not one referred to the Peres–Monnet meetings. Likewise, all the former senior officials of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including figures key to the history of Israeli–European relations, whom I interviewed for this article have claimed to me to have been unaware of the Peres–Monnet discussions on Israeli EEC membership. Some of the senior officials even argued that ‘these meetings must be Shimon’s illusions’ (Personal interview with a former Israeli ambassador to the European Communities, Jerusalem, 23 December 2010).

¹⁴ Personal communication with members of President Peres’s Office, 2011, 2013.

Ben Natan (2007, 2011), Golan (1982, 1989) and Peres (1970, 2001), Peres and Monnet met most probably both on 28 May 1957 and on 6 June 1957.¹⁵

According to Ben Natan (2011), the May 1957 meeting focused on full Israeli membership in the common market and in the political ‘unification of Europe’. Indeed, this was the issue that Peres planned to raise in the meeting from the outset. In the preparatory discussion that Peres held with Ben Natan, Peres proposed the idea that the two men ‘would ask Monnet for the full monty right off the bat’. Peres, Ben Natan wryly adds, ‘was a farsighted man. But for that you need the correct context which sometimes Peres lacked’.

Monnet received Peres and Ben Natan in his office in Paris. The three men plunged into an absorbing conversation. ‘Monnet who was a very courteous man, described his plans in detail’ (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108; 2011), and emphasized that ‘the common market is only an economic instrument for achieving a political objective, that is – the unification of Europe’. He explained that ‘were he to present only the political objective without emphasizing the economic instruments – that would have brought immediately fierce opposition to the program, and the two objectives would have been destroyed’ (Peres, 1965, p. 168). But Monnet ‘expressed his deep conviction that Europe would become totally united’ (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108).

According to Ben Natan and to some of Peres’ own versions, it was at this point in the May 1957 conversation that Peres began describing to Monnet ‘Israel’s ambition for establishing connections with Europe’. Monnet ‘listened intently to Peres’ (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108), who ‘presented the idea to him, brash and rash as it was, meaning the prospect of Israel joining a United Europe’ (Golan, 1982, p. 61). At first Monnet was ‘startled by what he must have thought was a bizarre idea. “What has Israel to do with Europe?” he asked. “They share no common frontier, no common past and no common future,”’ (Peres, 1970, p. 148; see also Golan, 1982, p. 61).¹⁶

Monnet’s incredulity at what he was hearing did not discourage Peres, and soon ‘the discussion turned to exploring another option – that is, full Israeli association with the common market’ (Ben Natan, 2011) and to Peres’ great delight, Monnet ‘promised his full support to such an association’ (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108). Peres appears to corroborate this turn of events in one of his own versions of the meeting when he writes that ‘later in the talk M[onsieur] Monnet agreed that Israel’s association with Europe would help her escape from her isolation in the Middle East and would promote peace in a region to which Europe could not remain indifferent’. But the framework was to be an economic one: Israel should ‘choose the economic path’, Monnet concluded. ‘The political path is full of obstacles and barriers for you’ (Peres, 1970, p. 148).

According to some of Peres’ other versions and to Monnet’s agenda, the two men had a subsequent meeting, probably on 6 June 1957, in which Monnet ‘began to grasp the notion’ of Israeli membership in the common market ‘and said that if we can work quietly,

¹⁵ Note, however, that Peres (1965, p. 168), Golan (1982, p. 83) and Bar-Zohar (2007, p. 176) – all of which are based on personal interviews with Peres – report that a meeting between Peres and Monnet was held ‘in early 1957’ (Bar Zohar, 2007, p. 176), possibly in March 1957 (Golan, 1982, p. 83). According to the most recent biography of Golda Meir, the reported meeting between Peres and Monnet took place in April 1957 (Goldstein, 2012, p. 373).

¹⁶ According to other versions that Peres has provided over the years, it was actually Monnet who ‘told Peres that Israel should try to join the Common Market’ (Bar Zohar, 2007, pp. 176–7). See also Ben-Gurion Archives (<http://bgarchives.bgu.ac.il/archives/english/archion-en/collections.htm#cl>) and Ben-Gurion’s diary in Pardo and Peters (2012, p. 9).

he would be prepared to investigate the best way to have Israel join' (Golan, 1982, p. 81; see also Bar-Zohar, 1964, pp. 232–3).¹⁷

Regardless of whether the June 1957 meeting took place or not, the May 1957 meeting apparently yielded practical recommendations about how Israel should proceed. Indeed, both Peres and Ben Natan relate that, among other matters, Monnet stressed specifically 'the importance of expanding relations between Israel and Germany and claimed that Germany, as one of the prime motivators in the process of the unification of Europe, would be able to help Israel in its attempts to approach European institutions' (Ben Natan, 2007, p. 108; see also Bar-Zohar, 2007, p. 177). According to Peres, Monnet even went on to openly ask 'what is the nature of your relations with Germany? Will you be able to develop there a diverse relationship?' Monnet emphasized that Charles de Gaulle was probably one of the only leaders who 'realized the political importance of Germany and [Monnet] was interested again and again whether Israel says – and could – participate in the same project' (Peres, 1965, p. 168). Six months later, in December 1957, Peres was already on his way to Bonn in order to promote and develop the relationship between Israel and the newly democratic Germany that Ben-Gurion called 'the other Germany'.¹⁸

Whatever transpired in Peres' meetings in Bonn, it did not move Israel closer to joining the European project. Yet such initiatives did leave their mark, if only on Peres' reputation. For Pinhas Sapir, who formed the inter-ministerial committee for examining the implications of the establishment of the EEC on Israel, Peres was '*der Zigeuner*' (Ben Natan, 2011) – a Yiddish epithet that is best captured perhaps by the term 'the wheeler dealer'. Reflecting many years later on his European initiative, Peres ventured that he may have 'exceeded his authority and had gone too far by meeting Monnet' (Bar-Zohar, 2007, p. 169).

Conclusions

While Israel was one of the first countries in the world to request in 1958 the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Brussels, it was probably also the first Middle Eastern neighbouring country to rule out, as far back as 1957, the idea of full Israeli EEC membership, both on economic and political grounds. And yet, as the story unfolded above reveals, there were those in the Israeli establishment who resisted this approach and worked hard to develop Israel's initial relationship with the EEC into a possible full economic and political membership. Indeed, such was Israel's enthusiasm to get closer to United Europe that then director general of the Ministry of Defence met in the dark with Jean Monnet, the father of the European integration project, in order to explore with him the idea of Israeli economic and political accession to the EEC.

Peres acted with the full knowledge of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who never lost sight of the crucial importance of the EEC for the future of Israel. As told by Gideon Rafael, who on 4 February 1959 became the fourth foreign ambassador to be accredited by the European institutions to the EEC, Ben-Gurion was passionate about forging close

¹⁷ Bar-Zohar (2007, p. 204) also implies that Peres met Monnet more than once. Note that, but for what is related above, I have not been able to find any additional information about the 6 June 1957 meeting, and Peres himself was unable to answer questions about this second meeting (Peres, 2001; Personal communication with members of President Peres' Office, 2011, 2013). The main reason to believe that the June 1957 meeting indeed took place is that it appears in Monnet's agenda.

¹⁸ For a full account of Peres' activities and initiatives in developing Israeli–German relations since 1957, see Bar-Zohar (2007, pp. 175–91) and Peres (1965, pp. 168–75).

relations with the EEC. Paying a customary farewell visit to Ben-Gurion prior to taking up his new assignment in Brussels (also as Israel's ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg), Rafael was astounded to hear Ben-Gurion explaining to him that:

the European countries – allies and former enemies alike – had embarked on their own road, leading through economic co-operation to political unity. [. . .] Their future economic well-being and social progress required the establishment of a closely-knit community which would become a central force in world affairs. Brussels was the centre of the community. Israel must forge close links with it. The task of the ambassador was to promote them. (Rafael, 1981, p. 100)

More astounding to Rafael still was that Ben-Gurion's appreciation for the newly formed European alliance took on an inspirational dimension. 'Tell the Europeans that they have inherited their spiritual values from that little but enduring people which you are going to represent among them', Ben-Gurion instructed him. 'We have not only horrible memories of the recent past in common, but also a bright future ahead of us' (Rafael, 1981, p. 100).

It did not take, however, long for Israel to understand its economic and political limitations and to adapt its positions to existing European realities. If in 1957 the Israeli political leadership had seriously considered full economic and political membership in the EEC, one year later, in 1958, Israel displayed a greater degree of political realism and started to advocate for an 'associate member' status. In 1964 the parties signed a three-year non-preferential trade agreement which developed into a free trade agreement (FTA) in 1975 and into a full association agreement in 1995. Jerusalem's long-standing desire for a formal and a meaningful upgrade of its relations with the EU was finally met in 2008 when the parties agreed to intensify their relations and 'upgrade' them within the framework of the European neighbourhood policy (ENP). Although this 'upgrade process' has been put on hold following Israel's Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in the winter of 2008–09 in response to the breakdown of the ceasefire with Hamas and the failure of the government of Benjamin Netanyahu to advance the peace process, Israel and the EU have drawn closer together since 1957.

Whether the future of EU–Israeli relations has proven to be bright remains a matter of perspective. It is my hope that the story unfolded in this article should render the origins of that future clearer, if not brighter.

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