

# The Mediterranean Moment in Israel: From National Borders to Geo-Political Zones

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In the following article I shall analyze the rise of the support for the Mediterranean idea in Israel. I shall investigate and interpret the debate on the emerging Israeli Mediterranean identity through interviews with public figures and writers, and through media reports. The idea of a Mediterranean identity is not a foreign, imagined notion but rather an authentic expression of people living in the Mediterranean region. In Israel, the idea arose dialectically from the weariness of the Israeli people with the political dimension of the conflict with their Arab and Palestinians neighbors on the one hand, and on the other, from an increasing recognition of the importance of regional identity.

*Key Words:* Mediterranean moment, Israel, geo-political zones

## TOWARDS A NEW GEO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

I propose to take a fresh look at the question of geopolitical borders between Israel and its Arab neighbors in a Mediterranean perspective. The question of borders has been the main issue facing the State of Israel since its foundation in 1948. Its temporary borders are not only a political matter and a problem of security with regard to Israel, the Arab states (and the Palestinians in particular), and the international community. Israel's borders are first and foremost a matter of its national identity, its place in its geographical area and its self-perception between east and west (Nocke 2009; Ohana 2011). Israel's self-definition with regard to its borders and its neighbourhood is what will determine its future (Hochberg 2011, 41–66; Ohana 1999, 81–100).

The Mediterranean option permits a new view of the Israelis' evolving spatial identity. In this article I am tracing the vicissitudes

[26] of Israel's Mediterranean option. What place, if any, has the possibilities open to the Israeli identity? Which geo-cultural group in the Israeli identity does it belong to: the Middle-Eastern, the Mediterranean, the European, the global village? Is the Mediterranean option, as a cultural and political possibility, in which Israel is not foreign to the region and not cut off from the West, intended as a programme for the future?

Borders, as formally defined, mark a clear distinction between states, set a precise dividing line between peoples. The term 'zone,' on the other hand, is liminal and less divisive than the term 'border.' 'Zone' permits one to speak of spaces, even shared spaces; there is no single demarcation line, it is not political and not unequivocal. In that context, one can speak of geopolitics, secondary spaces, common areas, and spheres of environmental, cultural and other forms of cooperation which transcend national and political boundaries (Newman 1998, 1–16). Thus, concerning the future geo-cultural map of Israel, I will speak of the Mediterranean zones that connect Israel to its neighbours rather than of divisive political borders (Ohana 2000, 48–53).

Following the intensive discussion in Israel in the last two decades concerning the Mediterranean identity, I analyze the possibility of a discourse that is concerned with zones instead of borders, a discourse which shifts the focus of the discussion from the political aspect of the Middle East, a political space defined through a colonialist discourse of the French and British (border-oriented discussion), to its geo-political and cultural aspects which rescue the area (zone-oriented discussion) from a one-dimensional definition. In other words, the Middle East is entirely Muslim, apart from Israel, which is thus isolated to its disadvantage, like a Crusader island. In the context of the Mediterranean, however, Israel is connected to the states of the Mashreq, its Arab neighbours – Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt – plus Turkey, the Mediterranean southern European states and the countries of the Maghreb.

In the last twenty years there have been three European initiatives aiming at creating a Mediterranean geo-strategic economic and cultural space transcending the political borders between the coun-



tries of Europe and the Mediterranean states, including Israel. The first initiative in 1994, was the NATO-Mediterranean dialogue; the second initiative, launched by the states of the European Union in 1995, created the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in what is known as the Barcelona Process; the third initiative, the Union for the Mediterranean, was launched by President Nicholas Sarkozy in Paris in 2008. The common feature of the three initiatives launched after the breakup of the Soviet Union was the creation of a political community which from an internal point of view would unite the forces of the European countries with those of the Mashreq and the Maghreb, and from an external point of view would challenge the new world-order. Each separate initiative emphasized a certain aspect, according to which a group of states was chosen and its aims were defined. [27]

The NATO-Mediterranean dialogue comprised five states – Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Israel – later joined by Jordan and Algeria. The dialogue was created to deal with the old problems of the cold war and the new problems of globalisation, the massive emigration of people from Africa and the Mediterranean basin to Europe, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of terrorism.

The dialogue was couched in diplomatic language (Donnelly 2004, 26):

The Dialogue reflects the Alliance's view that security in Europe is closely linked to the security and stability in the Mediterranean. It is an integral part of NATO's adaptation to the post-Cold War security environment, as well as an important component of the Alliance's policy of outreach and cooperation. The Mediterranean Dialogue's overall aims are to: contribute to regional security and stability; to achieve better mutual understanding; to dispel any misconceptions about NATO among Dialogue countries.

The participation of Israel in a regional security context with some of its former enemies was possible owing to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians signed in Oslo in 1993. The

[28] Oslo Accords created a revolutionary opening for the regional dialogue. It was the first initiative to envisage a strategic zone between former adversaries, an inspiring conception that gave rise to a new geo-political perspective, a partnership between contending parties with the mediation of additional countries. These were its guiding principles:

- *Non-discrimination*: all Mediterranean partners are offered the same basis for their cooperation with NATO.
- *Self-differentiation*, allowing a tailored approach to the specific needs of each of our MD partner countries. Particularly Individual Cooperation Programmes (ICP) allow interested MD countries and NATO to frame their practical cooperation in a more prospective and focused way, enabling interested countries to outline the main short and long-term objectives of their cooperation with the Alliance, in accordance with NATO's objectives and policies for the Mediterranean Dialogue.
- *Inclusiveness*: all MD countries should see themselves as shareholders of the same cooperative effort.
- *Two-way engagement*: the MD is a 'two-way partnership,' in which NATO seeks partners' contribution for its success, through a regular consultation process; a special emphasis is placed on practical cooperation.
- *Non-imposition*: MD partners are free to choose the pace and extent of their cooperation with the Alliance; NATO has no wish to impose anything upon them.
- *Complementarity and mutual reinforcement*: efforts of the MD and other international institutions for the region are complementary and mutually reinforcing in nature; such as, for example, those of the EU's 'Union for the Mediterranean,' the OSCE's 'Mediterranean Initiative,' or the 'Five plus Five.'
- *Diversity*: the MD respects and takes into account specific regional, cultural and political contexts of the respective partners ('Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements' 1993).



Despite the failure of the Oslo Accords that caused difficulties for the dialogue, the fact of Israel's participation with six Arab countries in a strategic framework pertaining to the area had an importance from both, the political and the conceptual point of view (Lerman 2007, 8–11). It represented a shift from hawkish attitudes to a solution of regional problems and technical cooperation. Although NATO is a western organization with its own strategic aims, one should remember that it was the body that initiated cooperation with some of the Mediterranean countries. This collaboration broadened within a year into a larger framework with additional objectives.

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The Barcelona Process of November 1995 created the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which aimed at making the Mediterranean a bridge between the countries of southern Europe and the countries of the Maghreb and Mashreq – the lands on the shores of the Mediterranean. The purpose was to create a correlation between the economic development and the progress of democracy or political liberalisation. Israel benefitted from the Barcelona Process because it was a kind of recognition on the part of Arab countries which had previously been enemies, such as Syria. The Mediterranean framework that came into being through a European initiative formed a geo-political context, in which former adversaries participated, a broader context which put the ethnic and national conflict between them into proportion. Although the Barcelona Process failed to fulfil the expectations it set itself, it should not be judged on the basis of a few years, but, to use Fernand Braudel's expression, on the basis of *longue durée* – long-term historical and political development (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014):

The Plan places emphasis on the resolution of the Middle East conflict, on the fight against terrorism, and on the need to combat anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination. It stresses the need to solve Human Rights and Common Foreign and Security Policy issues, as well as the importance of ensuring the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and encouraging the membership of international organizations. Other key

[30] points cover greater economic integration with the EU's internal market; reinforced co-operation, both on migration issues and on the transportation, energy, and science as well as technology sectors; increased emphasis on environmental issues; and closer co-operation regarding people-to-people contacts in education, culture, civil society and public health.

A trilateral EU-Israeli-Palestinian trade working group has been set up to help facilitate trade matters between Gaza Strip/West Bank, Israel and the EU, as well as internally between the Gaza Strip/West Bank, and its neighbours.

The direct result of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was to relocate Israel in a regional context, which was not one of a national political conflict, but one which lay outside its political definition. It was an attempt to break the correlation that had previously existed between the space in which Israel was situated and the conflict in which it was involved. The concept of the Mediterranean zone was not an escape from the conflict but the provision of a different perspective by bringing in new partners in addition to the previous neighbours. Thus, a change of perspective took place, and Israel was no longer a sole player in a hostile area but a participatory player in a community that included both, its close neighbours and its distant neighbours. Indeed, 'Israel cannot engage in being part of a Mediterranean region, so long as it has not sorted out what kind of state and society it wants to be' (Del Sarto 2003, 28).

If the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiative was based on economic considerations and if the NATO initiative was based on security considerations, Nicholas Sarkozy's initiative had a greater ideological ambition than the two others. It did not adapt itself to existing frameworks, but its starting-point was the spatial identity and the establishment of a regional community aimed at providing a sense of belonging and old-new identity. The Union for the Mediterranean was created by 43 Euro-Mediterranean Heads of State and Government in Paris on 13 July 2008.

The formulated aim was as follows (Lerman 2007, 14-17):



The Union for the Mediterranean is a multilateral partnership aiming at increasing the potential for regional integration and cohesion among Euro-Mediterranean countries. The Union for the Mediterranean is inspired by the shared political will to revitalise efforts to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, democracy, cooperation and prosperity. The creation of a joint secretariat is a keystone in this partnership. The Secretariat is contributing to reinforcing co-ownership of new Mediterranean relations through concrete regional cooperation projects.

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In this, Israel saw an opportunity of changing its image from that of a Western crusader-nation that does not belong to the Muslim or Arab Mediterranean. Through the Mediterranean umbrella – a new regional perspective which is not European or Arab, and not the colonialist West against the defensive East – a multicultural mosaic is revealed in which Israel and the Palestinians have a chance of finding their place. This opportunity can only be grasped if there is a de-fundamentalism among the Israelis and Palestinians, so that their common outlook will be based on a neighbourly space and not on the confrontation of civilizations or peoples. The following are the common goals of the Mediterranean countries as stated in the Paris declaration ('Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean' 2008):

De-pollution of the Mediterranean; maritime and land highways; civil protection; alternative energies: Mediterranean solar plan; higher education and research, Euro-Mediterranean University; the Mediterranean Business Initiative.

These projects were based on the following principles ('Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean' 2008):

Striving to contribute to the stability and peace in the whole Euro-Mediterranean region; maintaining the legitimate interests of any member of the UfM; taking into account the principle of variable geometry; respecting the decision of member coun-

tries involved in an ongoing project when it is subject to further development.

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About two-thirds of Israel's borders with its Arab neighbours (those with Egypt and Jordan) are borders of peace. Yet, at the same time, the conflicts with some of the Arab states and the Palestinians from the time that the State of Israel was founded in 1948; the Israeli conquest and evacuation of the Sinai Peninsula in 1956 and 1967; the settlements in Judea and Samaria from the time of the Six-Day War (1967); the separation from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and the abandonment of the Israeli settlements there; the protracted and exhausting negotiations with the Palestinians on the creation of a Palestinian state that would exist on agreed and recognized borders next to the State of Israel – all this demonstrates the fact that Israel is the only state in the world that from the time of its founding has had no fixed borders.

The Mediterranean option discussed here is not a substitute for the serious and protracted political attempt to establish permanent borders for Israel. Its purpose is to open up new horizons with regard to the future borders of the State of Israel in such a way that, in parallel with the discussion on national borders, one can envisage an original, challenging and fresh perception of geo-political areas, strategic zones, and spatial identity.

#### NATIONAL BORDERS IN THE ISRAELI MEDIA

In this chapter I will discuss three case-studies in which Israel was discussed in a practical way with regards to its borders and its Palestinian neighbors. In 1993 the Oslo Accords, officially called 'The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements,' were signed. It was the first time that an agreement was directly initiated between Israelis and Palestinians. In 2003, following the second Palestinian uprising (Intifada), the separation wall/barrier was built by Israel in the West Bank and along the 1949 armistice 'green line.'





Three years later, in 2006, the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip took place. Following the disengagement implementation law, Israel withdrew from its settlements in the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the northern West Bank.

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The Oslo Accords were an attempt to promote a long-term comprehensive solution to the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as being the first face-to-face communication between the two sides. They allowed the Palestinians to acknowledge their own self-government parallel to a future Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank in accordance with UN security council resolutions 242 and 338. Few agreements were reached following the failure of the Camp David summit in 2000 and the outbreak of the second uprising in 2002.

Following the second uprising (the Al-Aqsa Intifada) that claimed thousands of victims, both Israeli and Palestinian, the Israeli government led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided on a one-sided policy to determine the borders of the two peoples. Israel initiated the construction of a separation wall/barrier between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The construction of the wall in 2002 and 2003 aroused much opposition in the international community and brought Israel to the international court in the Hague. Many of the objections to the construction of the barrier concerned the damage to Palestinians lands and agriculture, while Israel tried to turn the allegedly temporary border into a permanent one.

The disengagement from the Gaza strip was planned almost in parallel to the construction of the wall in the West Bank in 2004–2005, and it included the evacuation of twenty-one settlements in Gaza and four in the West Bank. Prime Minister Sharon connected the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza to the empowerment of Israeli control and building of settlements in the West Bank (*Ynet*, 15 February 2005, 23 May 2005). The disengagement from Gaza was executed in the summer of 2005 and required a massive campaign of the IDF and the Israeli

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police force that were personally responsible for the evacuation of the settlers. This campaign involved a face-to-face confrontation between the IDF and the Jewish settlers, and caused a profound upheaval in Israeli society following the evacuation.

These three case-studies in which Israel engaged with its neighbors were reflected and discussed in the Israeli media. The Israeli media, as well as the whole of Israeli society, went through a significant process of privatization at that period. As a result, with the exception of one public TV channel, all the Israeli communication media are privately owned. Apart from 'Channel 1,' which is the only public TV channel in Israel, there are two commercial TV channels, 'Channel 2' and 'Channel 10,' and some other alternative cable channels. In Israel there are four daily newspapers, *Haaretz*, *Maariv*, *Israel Hayom* and *Yedioth Aharonoth*, each having an online edition. This study will discuss and analyse reports and articles dealing with the three border events mentioned above. I will explore these topics through media analysis that will focus on two newspapers: *Haaretz* and *Ynet*, the online edition of *Yedioth Aharonoth*.

*Ynet* and *Haaretz* appeal to different readers: *Ynet*, as subsidiary of *Yedioth*, addresses the consensual and mainstream public, neither right nor left. On the other hand, *Haaretz* has a clear liberal tendency and supports a leftist and dovish political agenda. After a general exploration of the coverage of the Israeli media, and especially *Haaretz* and *Ynet*, of the three border events mentioned above, I came to the conclusion that the attitude of media toward the Oslo agreements, the disengagement plan and the construction of the separation barrier, was positive, supportive and enthusiastic. This affirmative attitude of media toward the Oslo Accords and the disengagement plan, however, did not correspond to the attitude of the general public. The Israeli public was divided between supporters and objectors. Nevertheless, the media covered these controversial governmental decisions as allegedly consensual.



There was a correlation between the general public and the media only with regards to the coverage of the separation wall. With regards to the Oslo accords, the first reports revealed that there was a small majority of supporters that grew slowly from the moment the agreement was signed until the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and later became a massive majority, following the peace agreement with Jordan in 1994. The peace agreement with Jordan involved minor Israeli concessions with regards to borders. It is important to stress the fact that the media strongly supported the Oslo peace accords and Israeli concessions from the beginning for the sake of peace.

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Ten years after the Oslo Accords, the Sharon Government began to construct the foundation of the separation wall/barrier in the West Bank. There was a minor debate about the construction itself, but a major controversy concerning the determination of its path and its location in Palestinian lands. The decision was made without negotiations or cooperation with the Palestinian Authority.

Three years after the beginning of the wall construction, Israel again acted in relation to the occupied Palestinian territories not through a dialogue and agreement with the Palestinians, but through a one-sided decision of the Ariel Sharon government. The plan for disengagement from Gaza in 2005 was an Israeli governmental decision in order to evacuate the Gaza strip without negotiation, demands or expectations from the Palestinians.

The Oslo Accords represented a revolutionary change toward mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinian authority. Just a few months before the agreement, the PLO was regarded as a terrorist organization, and it now rapidly became a legitimate and representative authority. This point was reflected in the media coverage of the Oslo Accords. On August 30th, *Haaretz* reported: 'Israel will recognize the PLO if it will change its national covenant; the government will approve the "Gaza-Jericho" plan this evening.' On the Pales-

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tinian side, there was an optimism expressed in a title of August 19th, 1993: 'Arafat: the Gaza-Jericho idea will be a breakthrough.' The 'Oslo process' developed rapidly into a dialogue between two legitimate authorities that negotiated on borders and areas of control, and apportioned zones A, B and C, defining which entity exerted control in which area. The Israeli media encouraged the dialogue and expressed support for the Israeli government activities. The assassination of the Prime Minister Rabin attempted to stop this dialogue, but the media continued vigorously to speak on behalf of the implementation of the Oslo Accords, now by the government of Shimon Peres. The evacuation from all Palestinian cities in the West Bank was promoted by TV channels and newspapers.

Despite the objections of the UN and the USA to the construction of the separation wall and the one-sided Israeli manoeuvre (*Ynet*, 29 June 2003, 30 June 2003, 24 July 2003, 4 October 2003, Sharon declared on August 2nd (*Ynet*): '80% of the Israelis fell in love with the separation wall.' Sharon was right, according to the reports in *Haaretz* and *Ynet* on public opinion concerning the construction of the wall.

Concerning the disengagement plan: this particular project did not enjoy such general consensus as the media tried to present. The vast resistance of the national-religious sector spread across the West Bank and Gaza settlements and revealed substantial and determined opposition to the Israeli government policy (1 May 2005, 12 May 2005). The connection between the separation wall and the disengagement is shown in the following title in *Ynet* on February 2nd 2004: 'Sharon is planning to evacuate 17 settlements from Gaza following the discussion in the Hague about the construction of the separation wall.' The international community's support for the disengagement plan was in keeping with the Israeli public agenda. On February 13th, 2004, *Ynet* declared: '77% of the Israeli public support the evacuation from Gaza.' A year later, on February 25th, 2005, the next poll reported that only 64% of the Israeli public supported the Gaza evacuation. With



regard to its international implications, it is important to say that following the support of the international community, there was an increased involvement of Arab countries such as Jordan and Egypt in the process (3 August 2005, 13 September 2005). Following this increased involvement of the Arabs and international bodies, the Israeli government was empowered, so that it was able to make concrete decisions regarding the evacuation process (*Ynet*, 12 June 2004, 4 May 2004).

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THE AFFINITY BETWEEN CULTURE  
AND POLITICS

In the last two decades, many Israelis are calling for a new regional culture, stressing the awareness of the role and importance of the other as part of the inter-regional fabric. The Mediterranean Basin is a mosaic of interlocking influences; it has been the most important region of cultural, artistic and religious cross-fertilisation in the world. The consequences of these influences and collaborations manifest in all its sub-regions and countries. The Mediterranean as a whole comprises centres of multifaceted contact, trade routes and markets, in which commercial and cultural dialogue have flourished for thousands of years. In our own days, however, this vital dialogue does not find an appropriate expression.

The Mediterranean Sea links together three continents, three religions, and thousands of years of civilization, and has thus been a channel of mutual influences and cultural exchanges. These processes have formed the destiny of large Jewish communities. The historian Joshua Prawer drew attention to an interesting fact: 'It should be pointed out that, without any causal relationship, the period of the closure of the Mediterranean was – in relationships, in the exchange of ideas and in trade – the period of the greatness of Judaism [...]' (Prawer 1990, 9). According to the historian Shlomo Dov Goitein, the Jews lived along the coasts of the Mediterranean, and were open, mobile people that were not closed up in their own world but, in the countries where they lived, inherited the

culture of Greece and Rome and adapted it to Islamic culture. In his monumental five-volume work *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein described a Jewish society of the Middle Ages that lived within the framework of Mediterranean geography and culture (Goitein 1967–1988).

Unlike the historian Henri Pirenne, who saw a division in the Mediterranean, Goitein revealed an extensive Mediterranean trade between Christians and Muslims from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. Goitein's geographical sociology, which deciphered documents of the *genizah*, portrayed the Jews of the Middle Ages as Mediterranean people that developed their sources, disseminated their wisdom and were prominent in trade and the liberal professions in the countries of the Basin (Goitein 1960, 29–42). His research depicted a Jewish society that was pre-modern in all respects: day-to-day life, commerce, law and way of thinking. It was an exemplary model for the study by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (Horden and Purcell 2000), which added to the net-like Braudelian structure of the macro, alternative micro-networks of areas and sub-areas, in the same way as Goitein.

David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the State of Israel, called for the Mediterranean character of the state-in-the-making to be developed already at the ninth Zionist Congress in 1935. He said that throughout the period of the First Temple there was no Jewish harbor on the shores of the Mediterranean. Jaffa was the first Judean port and the only one on the Mediterranean in the late Second Temple period. In modern times, Ben-Gurion added: "The Mediterranean is the bridge between Eretz-Israel and Europe, and we must have a strong part in this. The Mediterranean does not have to be the frontier of our land but its continuation and extension, and our link with the great Jewish centers of the Diaspora and the cultural centers in Europe and America. We are returning to the east, but bringing to this country the light of western culture, and with all our efforts to be absorbed in our country in the east and



have friendly relations with our neighbors in the east, we shall preserve our connection with the centers of culture in the west' (Ben-Gurion 1972, 402).

But the borders of Israel are not only political borders but cultural borders of communities, sectors, and ethnic immigrants, Jews and Arabs, who seek a regional common denominator in the Mediterranean space. Israel is a multicultural society grappling with the ideological consequences of the melting pot. Has Israeli opened a window on the Mediterranean? The answers indicate that the connection between politics and culture is inseparable (Ghanayem 1985, 6):

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One must speak about a cultural synthesis that cannot turn into a cultural invasion, even if the result is a cultural operation that brings together worlds that are different and even opposite to each other. In this respect, Israel can provide a good example of a broad spread of civilizations if it relates on an equal basis to the cultures of the minorities within it, Arabs and Jews, Ashkenasis and Sephardis, all of whom can make up a new Israeli cultural identity that can save the region from an expected cultural desolation.

A. B. Yehoshua is rightly considered the Mediterranean Israeli author par excellence. When asked about what he regards as Israel's Mediterranean orientation, he answered:

It is not good for us to be so dependent on the US in all respects. We should try to be connected to the European identity as much as possible. This will also neutralize the issue with the Arabs that perceive us as if we were foreigners. If you perceive us from the standing point of Saudia or Iraq we seem foreign. If one perceives us from the standing point of Egypt, from Tunisia, from Lebanon and from Turkey, or Greece, we are part of all this. It means that we need to insert ourselves in the Mediterranean context as much as possible. [...] It is also very important to the

Arabs, [...] especially our close neighbors, Israeli Arabs, Lebanese, Egyptians, that they want the Mediterranean identity; including the Turks and Greeks that live in natural spaces.

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The path to the Mediterranean of the writer Amos Oz, who initially did not wish to go there, is also interesting. Oz depicted the Israeli society-in-formation as one with characteristic Mediterranean qualities: warm of heart and temperament, hedonistic, life-loving and emotional. Israel will continue to develop as a Mediterranean society, he concluded, for better or worse, if its conflict with its neighbors is resolved. Oz saw the development of the town of Ashdod, which is located on the western shore of Israel, as the national Mediterranean profile coming into being in front of his eyes. He looked at the town of Ashdod with resignation, with the sadness of a householder whose dream has evaporated like the dreams of those socialist world-reformers, the fathers of the kibbutz (Oz 1990):

I ask myself, when I travel, which part of the world reminds me more of home, and obviously Greece was closer than Germany. And the south of France more than Poland – not in terms of my ancestral heritage, but of the everyday reality. I feel more at home in Ashdod, in Tel Aviv, in Haifa, or in Arad, which are not situated by the Mediterranean, than I feel home in the north of Europe. I realized that we Israelis do not belong to an Ingmar Bergmann film but to a Fellini movie, and I like it this way. I find myself more at home. In the next phase I was asking myself: why not? I don't know where the Middle East is going, maybe it is becoming more and more fundamentalist, which in my vocabulary means less and less Mediterranean. It is not that I like the Mediterranean reality because it is a good bridge to Syria and Iraq.





POLITICAL ORIENTATION

The historian Prof. Shlomo Ben Ami, former Israeli ambassador to Spain and Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Ehud Barak, is a well-known supporter of the Mediterranean option for Israel, and is opposed by Meron Benvenisti, former deputy mayor of Jerusalem. Benvenisti sees the Mediterranean option as an escape from the bloody Middle Eastern conflict to the sunny coasts of southern Europe.

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Shlomo Ben-Ami was asked the question: *The Mediterranean reference is used in many different frameworks. What influenced the increased use of the term Yam Tichoniut (Mediterraneanism) in the Israeli public discourse?* He answered:

It is very difficult to tell you what the origins of this argument are. There are different phases and layers. There is also a historical reason that began even before the big Aliyah (the massive immigration from North Africa in the first years of the State of Israel). It was a special world of the Revisionists in the nineteen-twenties. For them it was an antithesis to the world of the *Mizrach ha-Tichon* (Middle East). They started to develop something like a maritime culture (culture of the sea), a Jewish culture which probably did not quite exist, but was something like an antithesis to the East. That's how it was born. In recent years, the Mediterranean debate has become an important issue for the intellectual elites in Israel. It is not a popular discussion, as the Israeli phenomenon is a strange one, and it is a very difficult situation where you have to define yourself. And what are we? What do we have here? New York? No, this is not New York, it is not London and not Berlin. But we don't want to be Kabul. So we are looking for some new definition.

One thing that was very popular in the days of Oslo and was spoken about with much excitement, was the New Middle East: essentially, total integration into the Semitic

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world. Shimon Peres, for example, suggested including Israel in the Arab League. I never heard anything more stupid than that. An alternative idea is a Euro-Mediterranean space that fits the structure of Israeli society and the image that Israel has in the world and the economic ties it has with the world.

*You have often mentioned your skepticism about the 'New Middle East Romanticism.' What is left of the concept of the 'New Middle East' today?*

I believe that in the Israeli reality *vis-à-vis* the Arab world there is a possibility of establishing a common market, but we do not have a common morality, a common memory, a shared culture or a shared religion. [...] Europe is a Christian continent, even without bureaucrats in Brussels. Europe is united by history, by religion, by memory, by music, by landscapes, by food. That does not exist neither between us and the Palestinians, nor the Jordanians. They have no identity problem. The Arabs are an autochthonous society. [...]

*On what basis could the different cultural codes find a common denominator?*

I am not a peace romanticist, I am not a pacifist – I am a Zionist in the simplest meaning of the word. There needs to be a Jewish State here with an Arab minority that has rights and everything. But in order to know what to do with this strange thing that we live with, we cannot deal with it seriously until we have a border. We are trying to furnish an apartment that does not have any walls. There are no walls. And the furniture is a metaphor for the inner structures of Israeli society.

*Can Mediterraneanism serve as a means of reorientation?*



In addition, when you see the structure and collective mentality of Israeli society, it is not far from Palermo. I would have preferred it to be a little closer to Milano, but it is closer to Palermo. I would also have preferred Barcelona, but maybe we will get there one day. At the present time you have a kind of cultural fusion, which makes things easier. This also applies to the Ashkenasi aliyah. [...] When I was a youngster, the Mizrachi songs were the ghetto of the ghetto of the ghetto. Today soldiers in the army love it. There is some sort of acculturation to the melodies of the surroundings.

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*Can Mediterraneanism serve as a political modus for co-existence?*

Of course. I really believe so – it was also the idea of Jacqueline Kahanoff: the idea of a Mediterranean-society culture. When there was fascism, it was also a softer fascism than the European one [Mussolini as compared to Hitler]. Something you cannot ignore is that in the Mediterranean there was some sort of softness. When I speak about multiculturalism I always think of Tangier, the city where I was born. It is an international city. I lived in a house that was an incarnation of multiculturalism. [...] That is my memory of multiculturalism, and it was a soft way of life. I really believe that this is the right model for the Israeli society and also for our relationship with our neighbours.

Meron Benvenisti puts forward positions opposed to those of Ben-Ami. He was asked: *What role does the discussion about Israel play in times of strong political confrontation? Will it regain importance?*

I am very cynical about it. [...] The EU is promoting the Mediterranean idea, I am afraid, because they want to stop illegal immigration to Europe. [...] Israel, being a Mediterranean country, is benefitting from it. [...] I don't see this as an important Israeli project. It is not going to gain importance in the political discourse. In the cultural discourse it will [...]. I am very skeptical. I do not participate in any of the programmes and I see them com-

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ing and going. This is all based on the fact that I do not believe that there will be a Mediterranean culture.

[44] *To what larger concept will the cultural orientation of Israel be linked in the future?*

Israel pretends that it is glued to the backside of Greece. For them, the Mediterranean is a geographical aberration. They believe that they are Europeans, South Europeans. [...] What they definitely don't want to be is part of the area in which they live. So what is the Mediterranean? Definitely not Arab, and if it is Arab, then it relates to the nostalgic romantic idea of Alexandria. [...] The whole situation is so complicated that the escapism to the Mediterranean is a symptom, not a solution.

*A symptom, because you want to escape the harsh reality?*

Yes. It is a situation where your culture confronts the culture of the locals, the natives. It is not unlike the situation in South Africa or other settler societies. It is very easy to say that there is an indigenusness of living on the shores of the Mediterranean. Camus had the same dilemma in Algiers. He believed in the Mediterranean because he needed something to resolve the question of who he was as a *pied noir* vis-a-vis the Arabs. So he had to invent something.

*What can serve as a concept of cultural orientation for Israeliness?*

[...] If only the Mediterranean concept had a strong element of Arabism in it, but there is none. Mediterraneanism has nothing to do with Arabs. The only relation could be the westernized Arabs of Lebanon or Egypt, but nothing else. How many Arabs belong to that Mediterranean idea? None. [...]

According to the critic Yoram Bronowski (1948–2001), a reinterpretation of Israel's place in the area is required (Bronowski 1987):



I am convinced, like many others, that the dream to which Israeli society should be directed, to which it can direct itself, is the most ancient of humanity's dreams – the Mediterranean dream. A sort of Mediterranean Scroll of Independence with Mediterranean inflections rings all the time in my ears: 'On the shores of the Mediterranean, the Jewish people arise, etc.' I think of the connections and ancient contexts – Phoenicia, Crete, Greece, all maritime countries – and those that came after them. And I dream of Israel as one of the centres of neo-Mediterraneanism, just as it was a centre and one of the sources of the ancient Mediterraneanism.

[45]

There has been a notable tendency on the part of many Israelis to develop a strategic policy of supporting a regional culture that permits a dialogue between the peoples of different countries and between the different peoples in the Mediterranean Basin, especially at its eastern end. Many people in the Israeli society have begun to call for a strengthening of the peace process in the Middle East through an expansion of the cultural links between the states of the Mediterranean Basin and through a removal of the barriers between peoples. The Mediterranean option is put forward not only as a cultural proposition but as strategic geopolitical aspiration in its own right. Have the intensification of the Israeli occupation and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism made Mediterraneanism redundant?

An early proponent of the Mediterranean Basin as the proper sphere for Israel to relate to was Abba Eban (1915–2002), the first Israeli minister of foreign affairs. Already in 1952 he discerned two distinct advantages in the Mediterranean option: the chance of breaking Israel's political and cultural isolation (for in the Muslim and Arab Middle East, Israel was the exception), and the exploitation of the commercial and cultural connections that Israel had with most of the countries of the Mediterranean Basin (Eban 1952, 7):

If the State of Israel seeks to find its own way within the area as a whole, if it wants to find itself a world that would be more fitting for the expression of its political relationships and cultural

[46]

affinities, I think the concept ‘Mediterranean’ would be the most suitable: Israel, not as a Middle Eastern country but as a Mediterranean country. The Mediterranean is the only channel of intercourse between Israel and the rest of the world. All Israel’s trade and connections pass through that sea. If this is true as a geographical fact, it is all the more true from a historical and cultural point of view.

Zionism was born in Europe, and paradoxically the main choices of identity and cultural options for Israeli society – Socialism, Nationalism, Secularism, Messianism, Canaanism, ‘Crusaderism’ – originated not in the Holy Land, but in Europe. Mediterraneanism as a cultural idea is also a theoretical model nourished by cross-fertilisation. The Mediterranean is not only a geographical or historical area but also a metaphorical entity with frontiers and a variety of cultures and identities, which came into being through an incessant discourse among them. All these have helped to preserve its unique character. The perpetual interaction between them has created a culture that is basically multicultural (Malkin 2005, 12).

The Mediterranean idea has been effectively promoted in a number of Mediterranean countries as a program of collective ethos, suggesting directions of action, formulations of policy and cultural activities. More and more Israelis as portrayed especially in the media and in the political discourse lean towards seeing The Mediterranean option as a possible bridge between Israel and its Arab neighbours, Israel and Europe.

#### CONCLUSION

David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the Israeli state, called for the Mediterranean character of the state in the making to be developed already at the ninth Zionist Congress in 1935. Ben-Gurion resisted in his Mediterranean orientation. He wrote: ‘The sea covers the part of the surface, it has no frontiers, it is free. It is not divided among the state and the peoples that are on land, there are no partitions between oceans, no barriers or confining bounds. People with a ter-



ritorial base and port may sail the world over and sound every sea, may put a girdle about the globe and seek out every folic and speech. Land serves the nations, the sea unites them and brings them close, it advances the unity of mankind, opening new horizons and spaces invisible to us that stand on shore.'

[47]

Since then, Israel became a Mediterranean state, it is not committed to the Islamic Middle-East, nor to the Christian Europe, but holds both shores together, and thus – truly belongs only to the Mediterranean sea.

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